



Taha Abd al-Rahman's Islamic Worldview and the Spirit of Modernity

Arab-Islamic thinkers voice much objection to Western thought. Yet, being in modern times faintly related to philosophy in general, they are in a weak position to systematize their criticisms.¹ An important exception, indeed a shining example of a modern Arab-Islamic philosopher, is Taha Abd al-Rahman,² a systemic philosopher with an explicitly ethico-religious worldview. The merit of introducing Taha's thought lies not only in his philosophical ability, but also in that, indirectly, he articulates the objections to modernity of most other Islamic thinkers. Taha's thought serves as a good summary of contemporary Islamic revival, without the demagogic religious tone. This is why some readers see Taha as reminiscent of the medieval scholar al-Ghazali, who attacked several aspects of classical Greek

¹ In contrast with the situation in the Arab world, in Iran and the Persian world in general, Hellenistic and medieval Islamic philosophy remained part of the religious education curriculum until modern times. See Majid Fakhry, *Dirā sā t Jadīdah fī Al-Fikr Al-'Arabī* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār lil-Nashr, 2007), 193. Yet, Iran is outside the Arab world. Hence, the generalization holds.

² In all his Arabic books and Arabic media appearances, Taha writes his name as Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān (طه عبد الرحمن). Taha personally revised Wael Hallaq's recent work, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019) and surprisingly declared that Ṭāhā is his family name, while 'Abd al-Rahmān is his given name. Here we have respected Taha's unusual usage of family name first, given name second, as it appears in all his Arabic books.

philosophy in his influential *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.³ Unfortunately, so far Taha's philosophical attack on secular modern philosophy does not seem to have an Averrosian counter-attack, as was seen in the correspondingly influential *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* by Averroes.⁴

Before presenting the specifics of Taha's Islamic response to the modern worldview, let us first contextualize his philosophy within contemporary Arab thought. Two basic questions arise: *What is 'Islamic Philosophy'?* *What has been the history of attempts to modernize Arabic-Islamic philosophy?*

I WHAT IS 'ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY'?

1.1 Some Background

It should come as no surprise that there is no consensus on what 'Islamic philosophy' is. Native medieval Islamic scholars considered philosophy (*falsafah*) to be scholarly engagement with the ancient Greek philosophical literature and the authors so engaged to be philosophers. This usage is clear in the great medieval comparative encyclopedia on doctrines, sects, and religions, al-Shahrastani's *al-Milal wal-Nihal* (lit. religions and sects),⁵ and also in al-Ghazali's aforementioned critique of Muslim philosophers, *The Incoherence of Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-Falasifah*). Of the Islamic authors whom medieval Islamic scholars saw as 'philosophers,' some of the most distinguished names are al-Kindi (801–873), al-Farabi (872–951), al-Tawhidi (923–1023), Miskawayh (932–1030), Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037), Ibn Tufayl (1105–1185), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198).⁶

Yet philosophy, as an intellectual endeavor that aims to face the Big Questions of human existence (Chap. 4), encompasses more than Hellenistic ways of thinking. One can be perfectly philosophical without necessarily following in the Hellenistic tradition. Examples in premodern Islamic culture of other philosophical traditions include those of mystical

³ Michael E. Marmura translated al-Ghazālī's work as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2002).

⁴ Simon Van Den Bergh translated this work of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) as *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2008).

⁵ Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī [d. 1153 CE], *Kitāb al-Milal wal-Nihal*, ed. Muḥammad Ibn Faṭḥ Allāh Badrān, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjū, 1956), 168.

⁶ For further information see: Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2004).

philosophy, linguistic philosophy (*al-balagha*), socio-historical philosophy (*tarikh al-umran*), and the distinctively systemic field of ethico-legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*). This means that the roster of distinguished Islamic philosophers includes many more names than commonly known and listed above. Unfortunately, the general attitude of modern Western scholarship toward Islamic philosophy emerged from 'Orientalism'⁷ and did not differ significantly from the medieval Islamic attitude.⁸ As a result, Western scholars considered Islamic philosophy to be a genre of literature dealing with Hellenistic thinking, not a self-standing intellectual endeavor undertaken by way of a variety of Islamic traditions.

This ethno-culturally narrow view removes from the list of Muslim philosophers a number of great philosophical minds. Examples include brilliant philosophers working within the mystical and theological traditions, such as Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) and al-Fakhar al-Razi (1150–1210) respectively. Others similarly ignored, despite working in fields more aligned with modern Western conceptions of philosophy, include al-Shatibi (1320–1388) in ethico-legal theory and al-Jurjani (1009–1078 or 1081) in rhetoric and the philosophy of language. Peter

⁷ *Orientalism* is a European field of research that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which continues to this day, only under different banners. It is dedicated to the study of living literate civilizations of the Orient, that is, the East. These include the civilizations of the Muslim world, India, China, and some others. In contrast with Orientalism, anthropology emerged in the same period to study the non-literate peoples of the East and of Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific islands (see Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 9–11). Many contributions of Orientalism came from British, French, Dutch, and Russian scholars who were associated with the colonial projects of their relevant empires. (German Orientalism is peculiar in this regard as Germany was not as major a colonial power). Some of Orientalism's most important achievements have been introducing the languages, geographies, and peoples of these literate civilizations to the Western audience, as well as translating several major works of their literatures and religions. The compiling of reputable dictionaries allowing Western readers to access the languages of the East is generally credited to Orientalism. However, using a racially European, religiously Christian, culturally Greco-Roman, and politically imperial outlook to describe and analyze these civilizations led to several misconceptions and errors that persist to this day. Further, "Much of the information [...] about Islam and the Orient that was used by the colonial powers to justify their colonialism derived from Orientalist scholarship." Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1994), 343.

⁸ Dimitri Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29 (May 2002), 7.

Adamson, a comparative historian of philosophy, shares this objection and formulates it as a challenge: “if Aquinas is a philosopher then so are the Islamic theologians.”⁹ In other words, since most Western philosophers would not deny the status of “philosopher” to the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), they should likewise not deny such recognition to the likes of Aquinas among Islamic theologians. That to the contrary most Western philosophers have denied them this status is a mistake of Orientalism and a disservice to the global history of ideas. Beyond Averroes and the Persian-born Avicenna (Ibn Sina), perhaps the only widely well-regarded Muslim intellect is Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). Outside Western philosophy, this philosopher is renowned in Orientalist and world history circles for his comprehensive works, particularly in sociology, history, and the philosophy of history.¹⁰

1.2 *A Modern Understanding*

In Chap. 4, we considered that philosophy is a matter of inquiry, of finding the right questions and assessing the truth of our answers, but with a view to the totality of the situation and thus to systematization. The content of philosophy is made by Big Questions, some perennial and some bound to time and place. With this in mind, we take our understanding of “Islamic philosophy” to be as *the intellectual endeavor that deals philosophically with content relevant to Islamic culture*. Correspondingly, using a simple chronocentric understanding of modernity,¹¹ “modern Islamic philosophy” would be concerned with content relevant to Islamic cultures since the nineteenth century, the time of the “shock of modernity” (for which see the next section).

These open and qualitative understandings do not involve adherence to the traditional formulation of the Islamic creeds. A Pantheist, a Marxist, or an existentialist, despite not conforming to the orthodox creeds, could nevertheless contribute to modern Islamic philosophy, by virtue of philosophizing about matters relevant to modern Islamic culture. This in the same way that an unorthodox author who calls for the demythologization

⁹Peter Adamson, “If Aquinas Is a Philosopher Then So Are the Islamic Theologians,” *Aeon*, February 10, 2017, <https://bit.ly/31addgQ>.

¹⁰See, for example, Robert Irwin, *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

¹¹See Chap. 2 for various understandings.

of Jesus of Nazareth, such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976),¹² is commonly considered a philosopher of Christianity, even if not in line with church doctrine.¹³ Be that as it may, we move on to our second question: *How did modernity come to Islamic philosophy?*

2 THE MODERNIZATION JOURNEY OF ARAB-ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

Beginning little more than two centuries ago, following a classical period that had lasted more than a millennium, Arab-Islamic philosophy began to modernize. This process can be seen as having occurred in four stages, the last still ongoing. The first involved a variety of non-theoretical reforms (1800–1945). The second focused on the translation and absorption of Western philosophy (1946–1970s),¹⁴ while the third was marked by the application of Western philosophical doctrines to Arab-Islamic concerns (1970s–1990s). The fourth and present stage, since the 1990s, is characterized by the emergence of philosophical creativity.

The impetus for this four-stage journey did not arise spontaneously within the Arab world. Instead, the modernization of Arab-Islamic philosophy was provoked mainly by the so-called shock of modernity.¹⁵ This shock was brought about by European invasions of parts of the Arab world, which was under decaying Ottoman rule at that time. These successive invasions began with Napoleon's military campaign in Egypt (1798–1801).¹⁶

Abdurrahman al-Jabarti (1754–1822), an Egyptian historian who recorded his observations of that military campaign, suggested that the shock was due not only to the military defeat of a Muslim nation on

¹² Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 92.

¹³ Maurice Boutin, *Relationalität als Verstehensprinzip bei Rudolf Bultmann* (München: Kaiser, 1974).

¹⁴ For a detailed study documenting the reprinting of iconic medieval Islamic philosophy works between 1876 and 1970, see “al-Dirāsāt al-Falsafīyah fī Mi‘at ‘Ām,” (lit. philosophical studies in a hundred year), in Majid Fakhry, *Dirāsāt fī Al-Fikr al-‘Arabī*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 1982), 223–43.

¹⁵ The “shock of modernity” is an expression popularized through the fourth volume of Adunis' work with this title: *al-Thābit wal-Muṭāḥ āwwil fī al-Turāth: Bahth fī al-Ibdā‘ wal-Ittibā‘ ‘Ind al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 1993).

¹⁶ See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*. New York: Warner Books, 1992.

Muslim land, supposedly protected by its embrace of the True Religion, but also to experiencing the culture of the French invaders. In this regard, al-Jabarti writes:

If any of the Muslims came to them in order to look around they did not prevent him from entering their most cherished places [...] and if they found in him any appetite or desire for knowledge they showed their friendship and love for him, and they would bring out all kinds of pictures and maps, and animals and birds and plants, and histories of the ancients and of nations and tales of the prophets. [...] I went to them often, and they showed me all of that.¹⁷

Observing the French in their native land during the years 1826–1831, in an extensive account of the condition of modernity in France, the insightful Muslim Egyptian cleric Tahtawi (1801–1873) noted, “most of the people of this city [Paris] are Christians in name only and do not adhere to the precepts of their religion, nor do they display any zeal for it. Here, religion is [left aside by] groups who use reason to distinguish between what is good and bad [and by libertines¹⁸] who state that *all actions allowed by reason are right*.”¹⁹ Tahtawi, in addition to translating the French constitution, described the scientific, technological, urban, and institutional modernity he witnessed in Paris. He advised his Arab readers that “the perfection of this [modern civilization] is to be found in the lands of the Franks [France], and it behooves one to follow the *truth*. By, God, during my stay in this country, I was grieved by the fact that it had enjoyed all those things that are lacking in the Islamic kingdoms.”²⁰

In the footsteps of Tahtawi some three decades later, Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi (1820–1890), the prime minister of Tunisia, aided in drafting its modern constitution and its abolition of slavery before the American attempt in 1863. Khayr al-Din, working in an intellectual style similar to that of Tahtawi, in 1867 wrote a detailed treatise comparing the political and legal systems of European countries.²¹ Still, fully fledged philosophy is not to be found in this first stage, consumed instead with the cultural

¹⁷ Quoted in Hourani 1992, 266.

¹⁸ Tahtawi uses the word *ibāḥiyyūn*, which means promiscuous people liberated from traditional morality.

¹⁹ Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris: Al-Tahtawi’s Visit to France 1826–1831* [*Takhlīṣ al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz Aw al-Dīwān al-Nafīs Bi-Īwān Bārīs*], trans. Daniel L. Newman (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 126. Emphasis is mine.

²⁰ al-Tahtawi, 99.

²¹ Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, *The Surest Path: The Political Treatise of a Nineteenth-Century Muslim Statesman—A Translation of the Introduction* [*to Aqḥam al-Masālik fī Ma‘rifat*

shock that accompanied Western military and political intrusions. The French went on to invade the Western part of the Arab world (Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881), and in 1882 the British invaded the central part of the Arab world, Egypt.²² Cultural shock reached its peak with the invasion of most of the Arab world after World War I, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1919.

The Arab world, which includes an area larger than that of Europe and today comprises over 350 million people, did not have even 20 million people in the early nineteenth century,²³ whereas in the same period, in the times of Napoleon, France alone had a population of 27 million people.²⁴ Suffering from drought, deforestation, the resulting massive desertification, and deterioration of agriculture; having a decaying government, and poorly connected urban and rural areas; all on top of a largely illiterate and disenfranchised population, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Arab world was far from a cultural peak, or even a promising cultural trend. The Arab elite allied to the Ottoman Empire did not care to establish even a single modern university, and the existing universities were for the most part teaching literary or religious disciplines. Beset with all these problems, the Arab world certainly lacked, at that time, conditions even minimally favorable for the pursuit of philosophy.

Rather than philosophical modernization, political, legal, religious, and educational reform were the dominant concerns of a number of learned figures in the nineteenth century.²⁵ Religious scholars led this reform movement, a good example being the Syrian religious scholar Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi (1854–1902), “perhaps the first Arab intellectual in modern times to theorize about democratic, secular, and socialist Arabism.”²⁶ He sought “to promote the notion of a secular Arab nationalism, claiming that Arabic-speaking Muslims, Christians, and Jews were ‘Arab’ before

Aḥwāl al-Mamālik], trans. Leon C. Brown (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

²² In addition to today’s Egypt, this territory included today’s Sudan. Together these were the most populous, and commercially and culturally most vital areas of the Arab world.

²³ Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 294.

²⁴ David I. Kertzer & Marzio Barbagli, “Family Life in the Nineteenth Century, 1789–1913”: *The History of the European Family*, 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), xi.

²⁵ See Fahmī Jad’ān, *Usus al-Taḡaddum ‘inda Mufakkirī al-Islām* (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, 1988), 580, 588, and 596.

²⁶ Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 248.

being members of their respective religious communities.”²⁷ This intellectual era extended throughout the entire nineteenth century into the twentieth up until World War II.²⁸ In this long first stage, escaping the feudalism, disfranchisement, and illiteracy of the Ottoman era, opening new roles for females in education and work, establishing modern science- and technology-based institutes, and enhancing urban infrastructures were common goals of development unquestionable for nationalist, liberal, and Islamic reformers alike.²⁹

The emergence of deeper and broader philosophical activity had to wait until the return from abroad of a generation of Arab students, who around the middle of the twentieth century came back from Anglophone, German, and French universities. This second stage includes Yusuf Karam (1886–1959), Tawfiq al-Tawil (1909–1991), and Uthman Amin (1905–1978). The common feature of this post-World War II period, up until the 1960s, was the analysis, description, comparison, and translation of the canons and doctrines of Western philosophy.³⁰ There is no such thing as native Arab-Islamic philosophizing in the systemic sense during this era, and none of these Arab scholars claimed to be a philosopher in the professional sense. The preoccupations of Arab intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s were mainly independence from colonial powers and the creation of institutions and educational curricula for the newly born states. A philosophical spirit, however, needs more than keeping oneself busy with translations and the creation of undergraduate philosophy curricula.

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, a new spirit characterized a third stage in the modernization journey of Arab-Islamic philosophy. It corresponds to the maturation of Arab states and their educational institutions.

²⁷ Ibid., 35.

²⁸ Two of the very few English-language works that tackle parts of this era are the anthology with translated original texts edited by John Donohue and John Esposito, *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in The Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²⁹ Arab nationalism, liberalism, and Islamic reformation were the philosophical concerns at the end of this stage, albeit concerns really more political and ideological than philosophical. The major figures in these three movements of some philosophical interest are as follows. (1) Nationalism: Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣārī, Michael 'Aflaq, Quṣṭanṭīn Zurayq, Zakī al-Arsūzī, Anṭwān Sa'ādah; (2) Islamic reformation: Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduḥ, Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Nā'inī, Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Rāziq, Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī; (3) Liberalism: Qāsim Amīn, Farah Anṭwān, Luṭfī al-Sayyid, and Ṭaha Ḥusayn.

³⁰ Fakhry, *Dirāsāt fī al-Fikr al-'Arabī*, 262–66.

Philosophical activity during this period—when attractive scholarships were offered to Arab students by both Cold War blocks—was correspondingly ideological and doctrinaire. It was characterized by the application of, for example, Marxist, logical positivist, Freudian, or existentialist concepts, methods, and forms to Islamic history and culture.³¹ Although this third period exhibited more creativity than the previous two, neither philosophical activity nor its products achieved the popularity witnessed in the previous two stages. Philosophy remained restricted to small circles of intellectuals, enthusiastic modernists, and graduate students in the humanities and social science.

At the same time, there was an important resurgence of distinctively Islamic thought, driven by movements advocating a return to traditional legal, theological, and mystic literatures, accompanied by a retreat from scientific and modern forms of thought. At this stage, modernization became highly questionable, for a mix of artificial and genuine reasons. They include (1) the reaction of conservative Arab monarchies to the threatening secular, republican revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s; (2) humiliation by way of the Israeli defeat of the secular nationalist Arab countries in 1948, 1956, and 1967, and identification of Israel with modernity and the West; (3) a desire to emulate the eventual triumph of the Islamist faction over the secular factions of the 1979 Iranian revolution; (4) reaction to the oppressive application of monarchic, nationalist, or socialist secularism by Arab dictators; and (5) American support of orthodox Saudi-based Islamist movements against Communism in Afghanistan. This explains the relative lack of popularity of philosophy in this stage, concerned as it was with the application of Western philosophical doctrines to Arab-Islamic culture. It is similar neither to the first stage that sought practical and non-philosophical reform, nor to the second stage, occupied mainly with analysis and translation of modern Western philosophy.

Starting in the 1990s, rather than an expansion of modern Islamic literatures and scholarship, in a fourth and ongoing stage, the number of

³¹ Major representatives of various doctrines or disciplines are as follows. Existentialism: ‘Abdurrahmān Badawī (1917–2002); logical positivism and scientism: Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd (1905–1993); Nietzscheism: ‘Abd Allāh al-Qṣīmī (1907–1996); Marxism: al-Ṭayyib Ṭizīnī (1934–2019); historical religious hermeneutics: Ḥasan Ḥanafī (b. 1935); feminism: Nawāl al-Sa’dāwī (b. 1930); structuralism: Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī (1936–2010); Freudianism: George Ṭarābīshī (1939–2016); postcolonial literary criticism: ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Misrī (1938–2009).

philosophical publications in the Arab world has been shrinking, while more generally, philosophical modernization in the Arab world is in popular retreat.³² Two main reasons for this retreat are commonly accepted by scholars of contemporary Arab thought.³³

The first is the failure of both the modernizing religious monarchies, and the secular nationalist, liberal, and socialist regimes, to defeat Israel, surpass it, or end its military interventions and overall out-sized influence in the region. Considered as part of the same problem, likewise their overall failure to counter foreign meddling, influence, and military intervention in the region; all of it, including Israeli colonization, seen together as the continuation of a Western imperialist project that did not end with mere formal decolonization. The second reason is the failure of the Arab monarchies and republics to fulfill the promises of economic development, political democracy, and social justice that had empowered them internally.³⁴ This double failure, on internal and external fronts, led Arabs to lose

³²The Head of the Arab Union of Publishers, Fathī al-Biss, recounts the complaints of Arab publishers that they were printing about 3000 copies of the first edition of every title in the early 1970s, while they print only 1000 copies of every title in the 2000s, without hoping for a second edition for the whole Arab world market. And this, even though in the same period the population of the Arab world grew from around 150 million to more than 350 million people, with greater purchasing power and a much higher literacy rate. "Al-Nāshir wal-Kātib, Fathī al-Biss Amām al-Qdā'," *Dunyā Al-Waṭan*, May 18, 2009, <https://bit.ly/3i205Ai>.

³³See George Tarabishī, *Ḥartaqāt 'an al-Ḥadātha wal-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah wal-Mumāna'ah* (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2006), 93–99.

³⁴The failure of the modernizers and secularists to achieve Arab unity is another reason. To Western observers, Arab unity may seem a far-fetched goal, but there is a modern historical precedent, in the form of the Egyptian-Syrian unity of the United Arab Republic, 1958–1961. The notable historian Arnold J. Toynbee predicted the eventual expansion of this unity to most of the twenty-two Arab countries. Toynbee drew attention to many similarities between the prospects for Arab unity and the historical circumstances of the Italian and German cases:

The eventual unification of Germany and unification of Italy turned out to be the outstanding events of nineteenth-century European history. Dating from the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the process took fifty-six years, and it is no wonder that it was so long-drawn-out, considering the formidableness of the obstacles. [...] That gives the Arabs till 1974 to achieve their unification at the German and Italian pace. [...]

The union of Italy and union of Germany were partly achieved by military force. [However,] the Arabs are unwilling to coerce each other. The very sense of brotherhood

hope in what were consequently seen as the pseudo-liberations of modernity and to seek refuge in the Islamic heritage—as presumably the best protector of Muslim lands and as the unbiased ethical countervailing force against unjust, corrupt internal dictatorships and international aggression.

This “apostasy away from modernity,” as George Tarabishi calls it,³⁵ is thus a partial result of Israel’s defeat of the combined five armies of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt in 1967 and the resulting obstacle to creating an Arab union from the Indian to the Atlantic ocean, *min al-muhit ila al-muhit*. Arab laymen went on to interpret this disastrous event as divine punishment for adopting the ideals of modernity—such as the rule of people rather than God, this-worldly rather than other-worldly orientation, and attention to women’s liberation rather than women’s modesty, and rather than overall piety. Al-Jabiri asserts, “There is no doubt that the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War in June 1967 is the contemporary Arab consciousness’ demarcation line, and the discourse representing it, from the age of revolution and hope to the age of defeat and depression.”³⁶ This led to minimization of the already fragile popularity of modern philosophy in the Arab world.

All this built on a problem that had already been inherent in the earlier third stage of the modernization journey. It had consisted in taking ready-made ideas and methods from the West, and moreover ones that were already problematic even in the West, such as existentialism, Marxism, Freudianism, and deconstructionism, without realizing that they were the products of a particular culture and mindset. Not only were they circumstantial products that could not grow naturally in a different cultural environment; they were adopted uncritically and led to questionable results. More importantly, modernity, as a project of proxy Arab governments created by imperialism, was no longer carried by organic social movements seeking self-rule and local progress.

Philosophers of the fourth stage have that background in mind. Their work is still in progress, as they try to avoid the flaws and unpopularity of the third stage. The goal is to surpass the linguistic confines of concepts

which makes them seek political unity also makes them hold back from trying to achieve it by force. In retrospect, [the peaceful dissolution of the United Arab Republic] may prove to have done much to bring eventual Arab union nearer.

In Arnold J. Toynbee, *Between Niger and Nile* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1965), 120.

³⁵ George Ṭarabīshī, *Min al-Nahdah Ilā al-Riddah* (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2001).

³⁶ Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *Al-Mashrū‘ al-Nahdawī al-‘Arabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-‘Arabiyyah, 1996), 169.

rooted more in European languages than in Arabic, metaphors and examples not familiar to Arabic speakers, and foreign styles in general. Opposed too are the philosophical confines of means and goals produced from the specific and regional Western historical experience. The third stage, beset by these pitfalls, led the typical educated Arab reader to seemingly justifiable conclusions: Arab readers associated nonsensicality with Western texts and strengthened their belief in the superiority of traditional Islamic writing. Indeed, the overall effect of the third stage was to reinforce the naivety of a convoluted image of Western modernity.³⁷

Along with the conceptual limitations of translated language, and the inorganic transfer of foreign philosophy without a social movement, a third problem that, to be blunt, contributed to the fiasco that was the third stage of modernization is the wider horizon of global history. Muslim and Arab experience and understanding of the modernization project is a story of misfortune. As the Arabs experienced it during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modernization came with the following four problems. (1) *Political disloyalty*: in several cases, a political-administrative elite was formed on the basis of allegiance to Western colonial powers, rather than domestic loyalty and representation of indigenous interests.³⁸ (2) *Economic exploitation*: economic programs were implemented based on Western extractive industries and commercial interests rather than the welfare of the native population.³⁹ (3) *Cultural eradication*: legal and ideological reforms were launched on the basis of a challenge to original

³⁷ For further examination of the Arab reception of analytic and Continental philosophies since World War II, see: A. Z. Obiedat, "Bayna Al-Falāsifah al-Qārriyyīn Wal-Anglūfūn: Al-Istiqlāl al-Falsafī al-‘Arabī Bayna ‘Ubūdiyyat al-Taqlīd Wal-‘Amal al-Istikhbārī [Lit. Between the Continentals and the Anglophones: Arab Philosophical Exploration Between the Enslavement of Imitation and Intelligence]," *Al-Mukhababat Journal for Logic, Epistemology and Scientific Thought*, no. 34 (April 2020).

³⁸ Winston Churchill (1874–1965) outlined one such case before the House of Commons, on June 21, 1921, after the British had conquered the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire: "We are leaning strongly to what I may call the Sherifian Solution both in Mesopotamia to which the Emir Feisal is now proceeding, and in Trans-Jordania, where the Emir Abdullah is now in charge." The "Sherifian solution" was to appoint the two collaborating sons of Hashemite Sharif Hussein bin Ali (1853–1931, Emir of Mecca)—that is, the Emirs Feisal and Abdullah—to rule over Mesopotamia (now Iraq) and Trans-Jordan (now Jordan). See Timothy J. Paris, *Britain, the Hashemites and Arab Rule: The Sherifian Solution* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004), 1. The Saudi kingship in Arabia, the Marionet presidency in Lebanon, and the Bourguiba presidency in Tunisia, to name a few, were also aided or appointed by British or French colonial powers.

³⁹ See, for example, Jim Loney, "Iraq Hunting \$17 Billion Missing after U.S. Invasion," *Reuters*, June 19, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-usa-money-idUSTRE75120S20110619>.

customs and religion, rather than with internal and gradual education and social conversation.⁴⁰ (4) *Psychological alienation*: the most visible elements of imported culture came from Western entertainment and the fashion industry, alienating the poor and conservative majority.

This four-pronged assault, of political disloyalty, economic exploitation, cultural eradication, and psychological alienation, exacerbated by the 1967 defeat, led the majority of Muslim Arabs to identify the whole project of modernity with a programmed Western plot for the destruction of the Muslim-Arab world. Rejecting the entire cause of modernity, many Arabs failed to understand that modernity did have real benefits, such as constitutional-democratic governance, economic-industrial development, advancement of critical thought, and humanist development of the self. Antagonism to a problematic implementation of modernity led them to over-emphasize the alleged universal and exceptional status of the imagined Islamic traditions. So, the conservative Islamic ideologue would ask, *why seek philosophical truth and virtue from untruthful and non-virtuous Westerners?* Or alternatively, *can we allow ourselves to accept any remedy from those Westerners who provided the poison?*—an objection often made by current Islamist movements. In particular, Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), the former head of the influential Muslim Scholars Council, wrote many works in this regard, such as *Imported Solutions and How They Harmed Our Nation; Us and the West: Thorny Questions and Decisive Answers*; and *Secular Extremism in the Face of Islam: The Cases of Tunisia and Turkey*.⁴¹

The popular retreat of modern philosophy that marked the third stage was though not the end of the story. The current fourth stage that began in the 1990s is in part a reaction to the third-stage popular rejection of philosophical modernization and may rightly be described as a native philosophical re-appropriation. The primary representatives of this emerging

⁴⁰For example, in “the interwar period they [the French colonial government] re-interpreted the 1881 freedom of the press law in order to be able to *ban Arabic publications* [in Algeria] based on language.” In Arthur Asseraf, *Electric News in Colonial Algeria* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 57. Emphasis is mine.

⁴¹Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *al-Ḥulūl al-Mustawradah wa Kayf Janat ‘alā Ummatinā* (Damascus: Mu’assasat al-Risālah lil-Ṭibā‘ah wal-Nashr, 2001), *Naḥn wal-Gharb: As’ilah Shā’ikah wa Ajwibah Ḥāsimah* (Cairo: Dār al-Tawzī‘ wal-Nashr al-Islāmiyyah, 2006), and *al-Taṭarruf al-‘Almānī fī Muwājahat al-Islām: Namudhaj Tūnus wa Turkiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001).

movement are the Tunisian philosopher Abu Yarub al-Marzuqī (b. 1947)⁴² and the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abd al-Rahman (b. 1944). Both write in an eloquent Arabic style, paying attention to the formation of their Arabic terminology. They make sure to carefully build their arguments within the traditions of the fifteen centuries of Arabic literature and declare allegiance to their native people, against imperialism and proxy Arab dictators alike. For them, philosophy is a matter of cultural challenge combined with universal epistemological, ontological, and ethical concerns.

The 2010 Arab spring and its aftermath have helped to advance the fourth stage. They provoked much philosophical doubt in the minds of Arab youth, in particular with regard to the alliance of Sufi and Salafi religious movements with Arab political dictatorships. This was associated with massive digitization of translated philosophy books and making them available online, whether in legitimate or pirated versions. As a result, the

⁴² Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb al-Marzūqī, known in Arabic as “Abū Ya‘rub al-Marzūqī” and in French as “Abu Yaarub Marzouki,” was born in Binzirt in Tunis. He completed his schooling and undergraduate university education in Tunis and then moved to France for his higher degrees. In France, he completed the following postgraduate works in French: *Causality According to al-Ghazali* in 1972; and in 1979, his PhD dissertation at the Sorbonne, *The Status of Mathematics in Aristotelian Scientific Discourse*. He also obtained a postdoctoral degree in Tunis, *duktūrāh al-dawlah*, on the basis of two Arabic works: *The Status of the Universal in Arabic Philosophy* (1994); and *the Reformation of Reason in Arabic Philosophy: From the Realism of Plato and Aristotle to the Nominalism of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Khaldūn* (1994). This broad education allowed Abū Ya‘rub to hold a university position at the University of Tunis I from 1980 to 2006, teaching Greek philosophy, and to head the Tunisian Center for Translation, *Bayt al-Ḥikmah*, for several years. He eloquently translates from French, German, and English. Among his translations into Arabic are Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, Husserl’s *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*, a volume of Pierre Duhem’s *Le Système du Monde*, Quine’s *Elementary Logic*, Holton’s *Unruly Americans*, Wulf’s *Anthropologie*, and the massive work edited by Hans Jörg Sandkühler, the *Handbuch Deutscher Idealismus*. After the Tunisian revolution in 2011 he was elected a member of parliament and was appointed as special advisor to the president of Tunisia, a post from which he has since resigned. He is a weekly blogger on the current affairs of Tunisia and the Arab world, a persuasive public speaker, and promoter of Ibn Khaldūn’s view on the interconnectedness of culture, power, wealth, and the environment. He is a prolific writer in Arabic. Translated titles of some of his Arabic publications are *The Conditions of Awakening for Arabs and Muslims* (2001), *the Legitimacy of Government in the Age of Globalization* (2008), and *Arabs Resuming Their Historical Destiny* (2011). Al-Marzūqī is completing a philosophical exegesis of the Qur’ān, *al-Jaliyfa al-Tafsīr*, of which five volumes have appeared so far. More at <https://abouyaarebmarzouki.wordpress.com/> and “أبو يعرب المرزوقي” *Aljazeera.net*, accessed March 29, 2020, <https://bit.ly/33SKEUu>.

readership of modern thought increased greatly, despite the decline of print publication.⁴³

Regrettably though, despite the developments of the Arab spring and contrary to any idea of a fourth-stage modernization project, the dominant components of today's Islamic discourse are these: (1) religious proselytizing that promotes rituals securing Paradise and escaping Hell, (2) sectarian polemics defending this or that correct legal school or theological doctrine of historical Islam, (3) creative but fragmentary legal and ethical pieces of advice responding to the challenges of the modern world, (4) apologetic arguments defending Islamic traditions against Western aggression and arrogance, and (5) critique of oppressive Arab regimes and their Westernized elites. During the current fourth stage, as was the case in the third stage, Islamic movements sometimes defend arguments that reject the universal applicability of rationality, and the objectivity of scientific findings, on account of their Western origin and Eurocentrism.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, there remains a small and emerging fourth stage of the modernization endeavor of Arab-Islamic philosophy. To represent this fourth stage, this stage of native philosophical re-appropriation, we consider the work of Taha Abd al-Rahman, who along with al-Marzuqī⁴⁵ is one of the two towering contributors to it.

⁴³Translations of Western literature into Arabic have been accumulating only slowly. In terms of the philosophical or proto-philosophical literature, there exist now Arabic translations of the complete or major works of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, Lenin, Mill, Weber, Durkheim, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Freud, Einstein, William James, Dewey, Robin Collingwood, Russell, Reichenbach, Wittgenstein, Popper, J. D. Bernal, Gaston Bachelard, Robert Blanché, Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty, Jean Piaget, Erich Fromm, Hannah Arendt, Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, Paul Ricoeur, Rawls, Foucault, Deleuze, Todorov, Habermas, Chomsky, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Edgar Morin, Joseph Schumpeter, Arnold Toynbee, Fernand Braudel, Eric Hobsbawm, Amartya Sen, and Zygmunt Bauman.

⁴⁴An example of this trend is the famous conference held in Egypt by the International Institute of Islamic Thought of Virginia, on 'The Problem of Bias in Western Centrisim' edited and published in 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Misrī, *Ishkāliyyat al-Ṭāḥāyyuz: Ru'yah Ma'rifiyyah wa Da'wah lil-Ijtihād* (Cairo: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995).

⁴⁵Al-Marzuqī is generally more informed about the social sciences and more engaged in political affairs than Taha. Yet, his early works until the late 1990s were hard to read for non-specialists in philosophy. Also, he does not follow the simplified style of analytic philosophy that Taha masters, which has given Taha a wider readership. For these reasons, in this work Taha was favored for the comparison with Bunge. A recent notable achievement for

3 AN INTRODUCTION TO TAHA ABD AL-RAHMAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE FOURTH STAGE OF THE MODERNIZATION JOURNEY OF ARAB-ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

3.1 A Biographical Sketch

Taha Abd al-Rahman was born in 1944, in El Jadida, a small town with a temperate climate on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. He completed his elementary education there and obtained a BA in philosophy from Muhammad V University in the capital, Rabat.⁴⁶ Taha continued his education at the Sorbonne in Paris, with a 1972 PhD dissertation entitled *Langage et philosophie: Essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, published in Morocco in 1979.⁴⁷ He completed another PhD from the same university in 1985, with dissertation entitled *Essai sur les logiques des raisonnements argumentatifs et naturels*, in 1985.⁴⁸ These two works and six additional essays⁴⁹ make for the only eight of Taha's works available in

Al-Marzūqī is his *Dawr al-Falsafah al-Naqdiyyah al-'Arabiyyah wa Munjazātuhā: Muwāzanah Tārīkhiyyah Bayna Dhirwatay al-Fikr al-Falsafiyatayn al-'Arabiyyah wal-Almāniyyah* [lit. *The Role of Critical Arab Philosophy and Its Achievements: A Historical Comparison Between the Arab and German Philosophical Summits*] (Beirut: al-Shabakah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Abḥāth wal-Nashr, 2012).

⁴⁶Taha Abderrahman, "A Global Ethic: Its Scope and Limits," *Tabah Foundation: Tabah Papers Series*, June 2008, vii, <https://bit.ly/2PaPIUa>.

⁴⁷Abderrahmane Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie* (Mohammedia, Maroc: Publications de la Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, Université Mohamed V., 1979).

⁴⁸Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān, *Essai sur les logiques des raisonnements argumentatifs et naturels* (Paris, Université Paris-Sorbonne IV, 1985).

⁴⁹Taha Abderrahmane, "Discussion entre Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī, le grammairien et Mattā b. Yūnus, le philosophe," *Arabica* 25, no. 3 (1978): 310–23; Taha Abderrahman, "Arab Dialecticians on Rational Discussion," in *Argumentation Across the Lines of Disciplines: Proceedings of the Conference on Argumentation 1986*, ed. Frans H. Van Eemeren et al. (Dordrecht-Holland: Foris Publications, 1987), 73–77; Taha Abderrahman, "A Global Ethic: Its Scope and Limits," *Tabah Foundation: Tabah Papers Series*, June 2008, <https://bit.ly/2PaPIUa>; Taha Abderrahmane, "Renewing Religious Thought in Islam: Prerequisites and Impediments," *Islam Today: Journal of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—ISESCO*, no. 25 (2008): 87–100; Taha Abderrahmane, "On the Trusteeship Critique of Modernism," *Islam Today: Journal of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—ISESCO*, no. 32 (2016): 57–70; Taha Abderrahmane, "L'esprit de Modernité et Le Droit à La Créativité," *Eikasía Revista de Filosofía*, no. 38 (2011): 84–124.

European languages (English and French), with some twenty books in Arabic yet to be translated.

Unlike most Arab scholars of his generation or younger, Taha's knowledge of French, German, English, Latin, and classical Greek enables him to tackle several philosophical issues in an in-depth, intellectually grounded way. He is able to link mathematical logic to linguistic analysis, ontological consciousness to ethical commitment, and universal humanist commitment to the concerns of the Arab world. However, his acquaintance with natural science, philosophy of science, and the social sciences is not as strong as his knowledge of ethics and logic. Taha made a career as Professor of Logic and Philosophy of Language at Muhammad V University in Rabat, from 1970 until his retirement in 2005.⁵⁰

Within the Arab world, I count more than twenty published books that deal entirely, or in part, with aspects of Taha Abd al-Rahman's philosophy.⁵¹ These books present international comparisons of his

⁵⁰ Taha Abderrahman, "A Global Ethic: Its Scope and Limits," vii.

⁵¹ Hammū Naqārī, *Manṭiq Tadbīr al-Ikhtilāf min Khilālī A'māl Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān* (Beirut: al-Shabakah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Abhāth wal-Nashr, 2014); Ibrāhīm Mashrūh, *Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān: Qirā'ah fī Mashrū'ih al-Fikrī* (Beirut: Markaz al-Ḥaḍārah li-Tanmiyat al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 2009); 'Abbās Arḥīlah, *Faylasūf fī al-Muwājahah: Qirā'ah fī Fikr Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān* (Casablanca, Morocco: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2013); 'Abbās Arḥīlah, *Bayna al-'Itimāniyyah wal-Dabrāniyyah: bayna Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān wa 'Abd Allāh al-'Urawī* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Ibdā' al-Fikrī, 2016); 'Abbās Arḥīlah, *Nazarāt fī Mashrū' al-Duktūr Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān* (N. A.: Manshūrāt al-Muqārabāt, 2008); Muhammad Shabbah, *'Awā'iq al-Ibdā' al-Falsafī al-'Arabī: Ḥasaba Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān* (Beirut: Manshūrāt Dīfāf, 2016); Jallūl Maqūrah, *Falsafāt al-Tawāṣul fī al-fikr al-'Arabī al-Mu'āṣir: Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān wa Nāṣīf Naṣṣār bayna al-Qawmiyyah wal-Kawmiyyah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 2015); Mashrūh, *Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān: Qirā'ah fī Mashrū'ih al-Fikrī*; Yūsuf Ibn 'Adī, *Mashrū' al-Ibdā' al-Falsafī al-'Arabī: Qirā'ah fī A'māl D. Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān* (Beirut: al-Shabakah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Abhāth wal-Nashr, 2012); 'Abd al-Malik Būmanjal, *Al-Ibdā' fī Muwājahat al-Ittibā': Qirā'āt fī Fikr Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Fikr wal-Ibdā', 2017); Aḥmad Kāfi and Ḥamzah Nuḥayrī, *Su'āl al-Dīn wal-Akhlāq fī al-Gharb al-Islāmī: Bayna Mashrū'ay Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān wa Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī* (Cairo, Egypt: Dār al-Kalimah lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī', 2018); 'Abd al-Nabī 'Abd al-Ḥarrī, *Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān wa Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī: Ṣirā' al-Mashrū'ayn 'alā Arḍ al-Hikmah al-Rushdiyyah* (Beirut: al-Shabakah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Abhāth wal-Nashr, 2014); Munazzamat al-Tajdīd al-Tullābī, *Dirāsāt fī A'māl al-Faylasūf Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān: A'māl al-Muntadā al-Fikrī al-Sādis* (Fes, Morocco: Jāmi'at Sayyidī Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh, 2012); 'Abd al-Qādir Mulūk, *Min Ta'addudiyyat al-Akhlāq ilā Akhlāq al-Ta'addudiyyah: Hilārī Būtnām, Yūrghan Hibrimās, Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-'Arabī lil-Abhāth wa Dirāsāt al-Sīyāsāt, 2018); Asyā 'Aqūnī, *al-Naqd al-'Itimānī lil-Unmūdḥaj*

philosophy—with those of the German Jürgen Habermas and the American Hilary Putnam⁵²—as well as comparisons with his Arab counterparts like Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri,⁵³ ‘Abd Allah al-‘Arawi,⁵⁴ and Nasif Nassar.⁵⁵ These publications are in addition to many newspaper articles and journal papers. Hence, we can speak of a growing wave of Tahaian studies in the past decade. Internationally, there is now an increasing interest in Taha Abd al-Rahman in Western scholarship. Wael Hallaq of Columbia University published the first work in English dedicated entirely to engaging with Taha Abd al-Rahman’s thoughts on modernity.⁵⁶ Mohammed Hashas of LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome provided English speakers with a detailed account of recent development in Taha’s philosophy.⁵⁷ In 2018, Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar held a

al-Dabrānī fī Falsafat Tāhā ‘Abd al-Rahmān (Amman, Jordan: Dār al-Ayyām lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī, 2017); ‘Abd al-Jalīl al-Kūr, *Maḥbūm al-Fiṭrah fī Falsafat Tāhā ‘Abd al-Rahmān* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasah al-‘Arabiyyah lil-Fikr wal-Ibdā’, 2017); ‘Abd al-Salām Bū Zubrah, *Tāhā ‘Abd Al-Rahmān Wa Naqd al-Ḥadāthah* (Beirut: Jadāwil lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī, 2011); Muḥammad Humām, “Naẓariyyāt Takāmul Al-Ma’ārif Fī al-Fikr al-‘Arabī: Dirāsah Fī Āliyyāt al-Ishtighāl al-Lughawī Wal-Balaghī Fī Mashrū’ Tāhā ‘Abd al-Rahmān” (Rabat, Morocco, Jāmi’at Muḥammad al-Khāmis, Kulliyyat al-Ādāb wal-‘Ulūm al-Insāniyyah, 2004); Muḥammad Ahmad al-Ṣaghīr, *Aqlāniyyat al-Ḥadāthah al-Mu’ayyadah: Istiqrā’āt fī Taṣkīk A’māl Tāhā ‘Abd Al-Rahmān* (Amman, Jordan: ‘Ālam al-Kitāb al-Ḥadīth, 2015); Rabī Hammū, *Madkhal Ilā Fikr Tāhā ‘Abd Al-Rahmān* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasah al-‘Arabiyyah lil-Fikr wal-Ibdā’, 2019); Sa’īdah Malkawī, *Al-Ḥadāthah ‘Inda Tāhā ‘Abd Al-Rahmān: Min al-Naqd al-Ma’rifī al-Muzdawaj Ilā Binā’ al-Maḥbūm* (Amman, Jordan: ‘Ālam al-Kitāb al-Ḥadīth, 2018); Ahmad Karrūm, *Al-Turāth ‘Inda Tāhā ‘Abd Al-Rahmān*: (Beirut: al-Mu’assasah al-‘Arabiyyah lil-Fikr wal-Ibdā’, 2018); Ahmad Mūnah, *Madākhil Tajdīd ‘ilm al-Uṣūl ‘Inda Tāhā ‘Abd al-Rahmān: Dirāsah fī al-Dalālāt al-Uṣūliyyah wal-Maqāṣid Shar’iyyah* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasah al-‘Arabiyyah lil-Fikr wal-Ibdā’, 2017); ‘Abd al-Razzāq Bal’aqrūz, *Jawānib Min Ijtihādāt Tāhā ‘Abd Al-Rahmān: Al-Ḥadāthah Wal-‘Awlamah Wal-Aqlāniyyah Wal-Tajdīd al-Thaqāfī* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasah al-‘Arabiyyah lil-Fikr wal-Ibdā’, 2018).

⁵² Mulūk, *Min Ta’addudiyyat al-Akhlāq ilā Akhlāq al-Ta’addudiyyah: Hilārī Būtnām, Yūrgban Hibrimās, Tāhā ‘Abd al-Rahmān*.

⁵³ al-Ḥarīrī, *Tāhā ‘Abd al-Rahmān wa Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī: Ṣirā’ al-Mashrū’ayn ‘alā Arḍ al-Ḥikmah al-Rushdiyyah*; Kāfi and Nuḥayrī, *Su’āl al-Dīn wal-Akhlāq fī al-Gharb al-Islāmī: Bayna Mashrū’ay Tāhā ‘Abd al-Rahmān wa Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī*.

⁵⁴ Arḥīlah, *Bayna al-‘Itimāniyyah wal-Dabrāniyyah: bayna Tāhā ‘Abd al-Rahmān wa ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Urawī*.

⁵⁵ Maqūrah, *Falsafat al-Tawāṣul fī al-fikr al-‘Arabī al-Mu’āṣir*.

⁵⁶ Wael B. Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁵⁷ Mohammed Hashas, “Taha Abderrahmane’s Trusteeship Paradigm: Spiritual Modernity and the Islamic Contribution to the Formation of a Renewed Universal Civilization of

conference on Taha's ethical philosophy, which appeared in a full volume in English.⁵⁸ Harald J. Viersen, of Radboud University in the Netherlands, is completing his PhD dissertation (at the University of Marburg in Germany), with subject the Arab world's discourse of authenticity, as seen by Taha Abd al-Rahman and two other Arab intellectuals.⁵⁹ Taha's ethics has also captured the scholarly attention of Michael L. Bevers.⁶⁰

3.2 *On Taha's Style*

This chapter is concerned with the content of Taha's philosophy. But a well-rounded treatment—that is to say in our context, a systemic one—would have to acknowledge that the content of Taha's philosophy is inseparable from its form. As Mario Bunge often says of other pairings, the two may be distinguished, but not separated.

Taha writes in the classical Arabic logico-argumentative tradition that nearly disappeared with the eclipse of the medieval Islamic golden age of humanistic creativity, sometime around the fifteenth century. The quality of his Arabic style astounded many Arab intellectuals, who were not anticipating any revival of the classical writing, with its beautiful and refined techniques. This style is strongly influenced by the Aristotelian-Arabic traditions of consistency, clarity, and originality that characterized the rich medieval Islamic scholasticism. We shall attempt to convey some idea of his style with a few translations of extended passages from Taha and a few brief considerations of what can get lost in translation. We begin with an extract of Taha's own views about translation, moreover about translation in relation to philosophical modernization.

Ethos," *Oriente Moderno* 95, no. 1–2 (August 7, 2015): 67–105, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22138617-12340077>.

⁵⁸ Mohammed Hashas and Mutaz Al-Khatib, eds., *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2020).

⁵⁹ Harald J. Viersen, "Taha Abd Al-Rahman," in *Grundriss Der Geschichte Der Philosophie: Bd. IV :Geschichte Der Philosophie in Der Islamischen Welt Des 19. Und 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Anke von Kügelgen and Ulrich Rudolph (Schwabe: Basel, 2021).

⁶⁰ Michael L. Bevers, "Taha Abderrahmane's Ethics for a Secular Age," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 1, no. 1–2 (2017), 195–202.

3.2.1 *Taha on Translation and the Path to Modernization*

Translation has to take another path in order to reach [ideal] modernization, which is what I call the explorative path. This path can guide the Muslim Arab speaker along the journey of inventing equivalents to the original [Western] text. This in turn would open the door to modernizing Arab-Islamic thought from the inside. This path requires proposing three translations [for the same text], with different types of manipulation taking responsibility for being independent from the original. These [three] in order are: logical translation, to expose the structure of the argument; semantic translation, to reveal the meaning; and grammatical translation, to uncover its linguistic structure.⁶¹ This “explorative” perspective for translation flips the transmitting perspective [of translation] upside down, for transmission makes the [language of the] original text the first priority, meaning the second priority, and the argument, the third. In this way, syntax influences meaning, and that, the argument. Conversely, explorative translation gives priority to consideration of the argument over meaning, and priority to consideration of meaning over syntax. In this way, the argument is influencing meaning, and that, affecting syntax. True [and intellectually creative modernization] would not begin except with obtaining the [structure of the] arguments from the translated texts. There is no modernization for Islamic-Arab thought except by that [first step of] creativity and its continuity.⁶²

3.2.2 *Taha on Existence*

The origin of everything is mercy, where it is the first of all things, for if thinkers took note of this amazing fact, that *in the beginning there was mercy*, they would have obtained satisfying answers to their questions about existence and existent things. This is like their question *Why is there something rather than nothing?* The answer [is because] mercy is a precursor, for were it not for mercy there would have been nothing. *I received mercy, therefore I am.* So, the knowledge of mercy is prior to the knowledge of existence.⁶³

Give mercy to others the way you are merciful with yourself; [that is,] in protection to the value of the human.⁶⁴

⁶¹ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah: Al-Madkhal Li-Ta’ās al-Ḥadāthah al-Islāmiyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 2006), 173.

⁶² Ṭāhā, 173–74.

⁶³ Ṭāhā, 250.

⁶⁴ Ṭāhā, 252.

Give mercy to the non-human the way you are merciful to the human; [that is,] in protection to the value of being.⁶⁵

Give the universality derived from mercy priority over any other universality.⁶⁶

Taha derives the centrality of mercy from contemplating God's name, *The Merciful* [*rahman*]. He sees this as a way to resolve many of the modern maladies brought about by those who insist, to the contrary, on contemplating the centrality of the human [*inasan*]. Taha further argues:

For those who practice solidarity [*mutaḍāmin*], by virtue of harmonizing their behavior with the good and natural order of things [*takhlīq*], the anxiousness to destroy the [traditional Islamic] heritage vanishes, through the consideration that one of the goals of heritage is to provide the human with the power of the past, manifested in preserving *his memory*. Preservation of memory is the value that brings to the human, permanence free of instability. For those who practice solidarity, by virtue of harmonizing their behavior with the good and natural order of things, the anxiousness to destroy nature disappears, through the consideration that one of the objectives of nature is to provide the human with the power of the future, manifested in preserving *his offspring*. Preservation of offspring is the value that brings to the human security, free of fear. For those who practice solidarity, by virtue of harmonizing their behavior with the good and natural order of things, finally, the anxiousness to destroy space [i.e., the physical domain] disappears, through the consideration that one of the aims of space is to provide the human with power of the present, manifested in persevering *his identity*. Preservation of identity is the value that brings to the human residence, free of homelessness. Said briefly, the practitioner of solidarity with all beings –or the mercy practitioner [*mutarāḥim*]– is a stable, secure, and resident human.⁶⁷

In Taha's conception, the stable, secure, and resident human is in contrast to the unstable, afraid, and homeless modern man, whose tendencies are toward financial anxiety, social alienation, and ephemeral sexual relationships.

⁶⁵ Tāhā, 253.

⁶⁶ Tāhā, 254.

⁶⁷ Tāhā, 260.

Notably, Taha relies extensively on creating new concepts and coining new terms in Arabic that have equivalents neither in Arabic traditions nor in modern Western philosophy, whether written in, for example, French, English, or German. One example will suffice. Ethics in Arabic is *akhlāq*, which is the plural of *khuluq*. This singular word refers to the quality of action or good behavior, so ethics becomes the science studying the totality of good behaviors. A sister word for *khuluq*, derived from the same root, is *khalq*, which means the world or creation. Interestingly, in Islamic traditions, good behavior (*khuluq*) is rather the behavior that meets the original nature of the human and the proper order of things, which comes from creation (*khalq*). For example, a mother breastfeeding her infant is a good behavior (*khuluq*), because it is the natural order of things, following from their creation (*khalq*). The Islamic conception of the good is therefore identical with that of ethical naturalism, in the specific form found in, for example, its Catholic version.⁶⁸ But Taha takes these nouns further and derives a gerund or verbal noun, *takhliq*, to mean acting properly, in the sense of making one's behavior meet its original nature—that is to say, the good and proper order of things. Thus Taha proposes that *takhliq* is making *khuluq* meet *khalq*.⁶⁹ Thus Taha's idea that *takhliq*, or acting properly, is making the quality of one's actions harmonize with creation would be written as: "*hadd al-khalīqati an takun [...] khalqan wa khuluqan.*"⁷⁰ This sentence and a great number of similar ones in his work, with key rhymes such as *mutaḍamin* [practitioner of solidarity] with *mutaraḥim* [practitioner of mercy], have in Arabic a musical melody that elevates Taha's philosophical writing to the level of poetry.

⁶⁸ Jacob Kohlhaas, "What Is Natural Law?," *U.S. Catholic Magazine*, July 2018, 49. <https://bit.ly/37H8CEi>

⁶⁹ In the footsteps of Taha, see this etymological philosophical attempt: A. Z. Obiedat, "The Semantic Field of Love in Classical Arabic: Understanding the Subconscious Meaning Preserved in the Ḥubb Synonyms and Antonyms through Their Etymologies," in *The Beloved in Middle Eastern Literatures: The Culture of Love and Languishing*, ed. Alireza Korangy, Michael C. Beard, and Hanadi Al-Samman (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 300–323; and A. Z. Obiedat, "Friendship in Arabic: Its Synonyms, Etymologies, and Transformations," in *Friendship in Islamic Ethics and World Politics*, ed. Mohammad Jafar Amir Mahallati (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 49–68.

⁷⁰ In full IJMES form: "*hadd al-khalīqati an takūn [...] khalqan wa khuluqan,*" which means the definition of the human creature is to be created and be in a moral manner. In Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhamah fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqī lil-Ḥadāthah al-Gharbiyyah* (Beirut, Lebanon: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2000), 54.

This is quite revealing from a communicative point of view, as well as immediately understandable for any educated Arabic ear. Yet, since Taha takes an etymological route to inventing new concepts, translating the connotations and the denotations while maintaining the aesthetics, that is to say, translating the full meaning, would be difficult without lengthy explanation—which would itself sour the aesthetic and connotative flavor. In English, the usual route to coining new terms is to use some combination of Greek, Latin, French, German, or any other roots, or else some metaphorical allusion. These would all be contingent upon different rhythms, rhymes, and coincidental associations.⁷¹

Although highly creative and original, Taha remains within the confines of Arabic grammar and logic. He can be accused neither of obfuscatory vocabulary by Arab linguists, nor of convoluted prose by logicians. Yet the communicative significance, aesthetics, and melody of Taha's writing style that the Arabic reader feels, would be totally lost to every non-Arabic reader via literal translation: instead, they would have to be created anew and differently, within the melodies, rhythms, metaphors, and aesthetics of the receiving language and culture. This is one of the difficulties of cross-cultural transfer. One might say that the situation is similar to that of a Japanese sushi or an Indian curry, which can never be eaten in the form of an American burger and fries. Rather, for the full experience, sushi, curry, and burgers and fries alike all have to be tasted as they are.

The topic of cross-cultural transfer, specifically in the context of modernization, is one of Taha's central concerns, and this takes us back from our excursion into the form of his philosophy, more specifically to its content.

3.3 *Taha on the Spirit of Modernity*

Max Weber (1864–1920), one of the founders of modern sociology, ascribed to modernity the notion of *Entzauberung der Welt* (disenchantment of the world). Weber used this expression to refer to the modern

⁷¹ This is similar to the great difficulty found in translating the German text of Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, 1927)—although some, especially Mario Bunge, argue that Heidegger's work presents the additional difficulty of being nonsensical to begin with. Bunge notes, "Not content with writing nonsense and torturing the German language, Heidegger [...] heaped scorn on "mere science" for being allegedly incapable of "awakening the spirit." In Mario Bunge, "In Praise of Intolerance to Charlatanism in Academia," in *The Flight from Science and Reason*, ed. Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt, and Martin W. Lewis (Baltimore, Md: New York Academy of Sciences, 1997), 97.

view that the world is natural in its origin and workings, rather than magical or spiritual. As such, it can be investigated and explained scientifically and, at least to some extent, controlled technologically. In his seminal *Spirit of Modernity: Introduction to the Establishing of Islamic Modernity*,⁷² Taha argues that there is also disenchantment with modernity itself: modernity is no longer seen as in effect a magical cure-all. He sees this disenchantment, which in the context of the third world and modernity becomes rather distrust and disdain, as understandable, for epitomizing (1) a widespread skepticism about the validity of the modernism project, as generated by actors such as the Frankfurt School and the postmodernists; (2) opposition in the third world to the new postcolonial age, in which globalization imposes once again a Western order on the rest of the world; and (3) a lack of faith in the naturalist, realist, humanist, and secular worldview of the Western—or Westernized—modernizers. Accordingly, Taha calls for a rethinking of modernity.

Taha explains that modernity is not simply a recent phenomenon in Western history; moreover that there is no reason to believe that its ideals have been understood or already achieved in any society. This echoes Habermas' view that "modernity [is] an 'unfinished project.'"⁷³ On the other hand, there is no reason to deny that modernity did find some, albeit imperfect, expression in various earlier and non-Western societies. Taha distinguishes between 'actually existing' modernity and 'ought-to-be' modernity, the latter being an abstract, conceptual, but potential modernity. It is this ideal version that Taha sees as the 'spirit of modernity.'

Taha analyzes different ways that might be used to grasp the spirit of modernity. First, *historical* understandings of modernity have it as a process that occurred in Western Europe, involving the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French revolution, and the industrial revolution, and that continues today with globalization and the information revolution.⁷⁴ Second, *conceptual* understandings emphasize certain orientations, such as toward the control of nature, society, and the self.⁷⁵ Taha is satisfied with neither purely historical nor purely conceptual understandings. He asserts instead that the spirit of modernity is better grasped with a synthesis of the two, as seen in his own tripartite characterization based on *maturity*,

⁷² Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*.

⁷³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), xix.

⁷⁴ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 23.

⁷⁵ Ṭāhā, 23.

criticism, and *universality*.⁷⁶ For Taha, to be modern is first of all to evolve from being in the situation of a minor or a juvenile, to being a mature person: a person suited to the rights and responsibilities that come with the “age of majority.” To attain this characteristic of modernity—being in a state of majority—is to rid oneself of custodial dependence and blind imitation of others.⁷⁷ The principle of *maturity* is thus a matter of two foundational notions, *independence* and *creativity*. Independence balances relations with the other, while creativity enables one to capitalize on one’s potential and produce what has never been produced before. The justification for the principle of maturity is historical, in that European independence from authoritative royal and clerical power, and the creation of novel ideas and artifacts, is integral to the history of modernity, as demonstrated by its unfolding in the West.

Second, to be modern is to evolve from being a believer, to being a critical thinker.⁷⁸ A believer submits with no need for evidence, while a critical thinker submits only after evaluating evidence.⁷⁹ Critical thinking subjects all phenomena to rational scrutiny (rather than obscuring or contradicting them) and identifies particularities and differences (rather than confusing or wiping them out). Therefore, the principle of *critical thinking* is based on two foundations: *rationality* and *analysis*.⁸⁰ The justification for the principle of critical thinking is the fact that subjecting natural and human phenomena to rational study is highly characteristic of modern natural science. Subjecting convoluted and vague notions and complex phenomena to analysis also historically led to freedom from traditions, religion, and superstition.

Third, to be modern is to transcend narrowness, locality, and boundaries, and so to achieve universality.⁸¹ In the context of the spirit of modernity, to be universal is to extend the modern domain to all fields and to generalize its results to all individuals and societies. Hence, the principle of universality, like the principles of maturity and criticism, is also based on two foundations, in this case those of *extensibility* and *generalizability*. The justification for the principle of universality comes from observing how modernity extends from thoughts to actions, from laws to morality,

⁷⁶ Ṭahā, 29.

⁷⁷ Ṭahā, 25.

⁷⁸ “*min ḥāl al-i‘tiqād ilā ḥāl al-intiqād*,” Ṭahā, 26.

⁷⁹ Ṭahā, 26.

⁸⁰ This is an appropriate English equivalent to *tafṣīl*, which literally means separation or differentiation. See also Sect. 4.3.

⁸¹ Ṭahā, 28.

from nature to man, and so on;⁸² while it spreads, or generalizes, the political economy and cultural reality of the West to all parts of the world. In other words, for Taha, the universality aspect of modernity reflects how the modern spirit spreads through individuals, their spiritual culture, and indeed all parts of the world, extending modern technology and ways of thinking to economic activities and the trajectory of historical development, thereby empowering those who are modern; such is the past and present of modernity.

On the basis of its hexagonal foundations—namely, independence and creativity, rationality and analysis, extensibility and generalizability—the spirit of modernity is a mature, critical, and universal one (see Fig. 5.1). Taha argues that other famous conceptions such as secularism, individualism, and capitalism are instead only possible derivatives from the hexagonal foundations.



Fig. 5.1 Hexagonal representation of Taha's tripartite principles and six foundations of the spirit of modernity. (Note: Dr. Michael Kary brought to my attention that the hexagonal structure now also suggests possibly naming the empty corners, for example, the combination of Generalizability with Rationality might be Systemicity, Extensibility with Creativity might be Optimism, and Analysis with Independence might be Impartiality or Judiciousness.)

⁸² Ṭahā, 27.

3.4 *Consequences of the Spirit of Modernity*

The previous considerations concerned what it means for Taha to *be* modern. But being modern also has consequences; that is to say, for Taha, there are consequences of the spirit of modernity. Taha reminds us that implementations (exemplifications, realizations, actualizations, or applications) of the spirit of modernity may vary and proliferate *ad infinitum*, since no single implementation will ever exhaust the ideal. The gist of his thoughts on the consequences of the spirit of modernity is that those consequences are diverse and numerous and can diverge from the current Western-based ones. For Taha, it is not difficult to recognize several independent actualizations of the spirit of modernity, in several civilizations in premodern times. This is indeed a big stretch for the concept of modernity, for Taha takes it to be in effect identical with human cultural novelty or creativity, as long as it is in step with the spirit of modernity.

Out of the many consequences of the spirit of modernity, Taha distinguishes four main ones: *plurality*, *inexhaustibility* (or *diversity*), *historical authenticity* (or *revitalization*), and *equality*.⁸³

1. *Plurality* refers to applicability to all that is human. Modernity should not have any limitations, such as any particular racial, territorial, or historical restrictions.
2. *Inexhaustibility* follows from no actualization of modernity ever being the fullest realization of its ideal. Actual modernity diverges not only from its ideal, but also within itself, as in the German and the French, the American and the Russian, the British and the Scandinavian versions of modernity. This diversity indicates that the spirit of modernity is not just a mood of 'being,' but is rather a mood of 'becoming'; indeed, for Taha it includes the evolutionary process of humankind as a whole. The assumption that the spirit of modernity emerged only today and only in the West is flawed, since it is not specifically Western or "present" in nature. Although its current actualization is Western in form, it might have been actualized in the past differently.⁸⁴ One might add, in support of Taha's view, that Western modernity would not have emerged, certainly not when and how it did, without prior Chinese technologies (gunpowder and paper), Arabic and Indian sciences

⁸³ Ṭahā, 30.

⁸⁴ Ṭahā, 31.

- (mathematics and medicine), Greek philosophy and mathematics, and the Amerindian wealth and novelties of the New World (gold, silver, potatoes, corn, tobacco, and chocolate).⁸⁵
3. *Historical authenticity* follows from the independence and creativity of the spirit of modernity: true modernity is not a transplant or an imitation, but a genuine article. This implies that modernity's spirit can be realized in diverse ways. So, the ancient Mesopotamian or medieval Andalusian modernity may be akin to the spirit of modernity as much as a future African or Indian one.
 4. The combination of the previous three consequences calls for *equality* of all civilizations within the spirit of modernity.⁸⁶ Taha acknowledges the privileges of science, economic development, and welfare that characterize Western modernity, without feeling ashamed of the Islamic culture whose worth he upholds and seeks to defend. Instead, he seeks to create a genuine realization of the spirit of modernity from within Islamic culture.

4 CONDITIONS FOR A GENUINE REALIZATION OF THE SPIRIT OF MODERNITY

The subtitle of Taha's *Spirit of Modernity* speaks of *the Establishing of Islamic Modernity*, which is the fundamental concern of the book. Within a context that we have outlined in Sects. 3.3 and 3.4, Taha poses two questions: *How might Islamic modernity be established? How should Islamic modernity differ from Western modernity?* According to Taha, the answer to these questions is to be found in the ironic fact that the Western implementation of the spirit of modernity brought about the opposite of its own proper goals.⁸⁷ The goal of "mastering nature," or dominating it, led to a population explosion, global warming, global pandemics, and weapons of mass destruction; the "will to be liberated from authority" led to unprecedented, complex, and severe authoritarian governmental surveillance and individual tracking; while the attempt to "control society" led to a form of globalization that produced uncontrollable economic, cultural,

⁸⁵ Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, 114.

⁸⁶ Ṭahā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 31.

⁸⁷ Ṭahā, 32.

and political trends.⁸⁸ Therefore, what was meant to be mastery of nature resulted in crowding, depletion, upheaval, and fear; what was meant to be individual liberty led to being at the mercy of uncontrollable influences; what was meant to be national independence was transformed into dependence on other, greater countries. These critical evaluations are similar to ones already expressed by Weber, and by the Critical Theorists,⁸⁹ such as Adorno,⁹⁰ but Taha attributes these inversions of the goals of modernity to the replacement of goals by means, and blind adherence to mottos such as “change for change’s sake,” “art for art’s sake,” “science for science’s sake.”⁹¹ For him, Islamic modernity should avoid repeating such Western mistakes.

The spirit of modernity is marked by maturity, and maturity is based on independence and creativity; thus, modernization is a creative enterprise. Attempting to modernize the developing world through a Western application of modernity is nothing but mere imitation and reproduction.⁹² These qualities are uncreative, hence counter-modern by nature. Each nation therefore has the choice of either achieving its own native, creative modernity, or having no modernity at all. Thus, to be modern means to be creative in one’s own creativity (see Sect. 4.5). Taha says that the counter-modern ignorance of creativity in today’s Arab philosophy is common to both Arab imitators of modernity, that is, agents of Westernization, and Arab imitators of traditions, that is, Islamic traditionalists.⁹³ Establishing a genuine Islamic modernity requires both avoiding

⁸⁸ Ṭahā refers to Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), Christian Comélieu, *Les impasses de la modernité* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000), and Alain Gérard, *Le cadre d’une nouvelle éthique* (Ramonville Saint-Agne: Editions Erès, 1998).

⁸⁹ “[S]ome critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Zygmunt Bauman have argued that there is a hidden logic of domination and oppression embedded in Enlightenment rationality, which dialectically pushes it towards nefarious processes of alienation, such as commodity fetishism, slavery, and the Holocaust.” In Paul Camy Mocombe, Carol Tomlin, and Cecile Wright, *Race and Class Distinctions Within Black Communities: A Racial-Caste-in-Class* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 45.

⁹⁰ “[T]he Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.” In Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, NY: Verso, 1979), 3.

⁹¹ Ṭahā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 33.

⁹² Ṭahā, 34.

⁹³ Ṭahā, 39.

the defects of the Western version and overcoming the lack of creativity common to Westernizers and Islamic traditionalists alike.

4.1 *The Falsification, or Rejection, of the Foundations of Actual Modernity*

To avoid the defects of modernization as Westernization, Taha proposes unearthing the philosophical foundations of actual modernity as advocated by Westernizers, that is, Arab scholars of ready-made philosophies such as liberalism, Marxism, positivism, and the like, who dominated the second and third stages of Arab philosophical modernization. Taha sees modernization in general as involving implicit “application premises,” concerning how to actualize the spirit of modernity. Revealing the premises underlying the Western implementation of modernity shows how they are in no way similar to the premises that underlie Islamic society, now or in the past. Therefore, according to Taha, imitating Western modernities in the Muslim-Arab world will undoubtedly yield a dull and even harmful reality.⁹⁴ By revealing these tacit assumptions of the Western case and attempting to falsify them, Taha aims to highlight what the internal and creative application premises would be—and so to suggest a substantial and genuine Islamic alternative to actual Western modernity. Taha tackles this falsification task through a detailed examination of the way the spirit of modernity’s tripartite principles of critical thinking, universality, and maturity unfolded over the course of Western history.

4.2 *Taha on Critical Thinking*

Critical thinking is one of the basic principles of the spirit of modernity (Sect. 3.3). Critical thinking subjects all phenomena to rationality and analysis, rather than obscuring, confusing, or contradicting them. In order to falsify the Western application premises, Taha suggests moving from imitative to creative rationality,⁹⁵ and from imitative to creative analysis.⁹⁶ With regard to the first move, he draws attention to the following three

⁹⁴ Ṭāhā has made a detailed analysis of what he calls “cultural interaction pragmatics” (*al-majāl al-tadāwī*) in his book *Renewing the Method of Evaluating the Heritage* (*Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth*), published in 1994.

⁹⁵ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 42.

⁹⁶ Ṭāhā, 47.

tacit principles or premises he finds underlying Western modernity: (1) “reason reasons everything,” (2) “all nature can be mastered by Man,” and (3) “everything is criticizable.”⁹⁷

4.2.1 *Taha on Reason and Rationality*

“Reason reasons everything”—or less literally, but perhaps being more faithful to Taha’s intended meaning, “reason is the basis for everything, and everything should be done on the basis of reason.” Taha sees blind adherence to this maxim as most responsible for the particular nature of actual modernity.⁹⁸ Taha sees the maxim as epistemologically problematic, because it makes reason both a means and an end: one cannot give a reason for upholding reason, such effort being circular.⁹⁹ Another of Taha’s observations is that reason is part of the whole, and as such,¹⁰⁰ it cannot encompass the whole.¹⁰¹ For Taha—in line with Weber’s views on “rationalization”¹⁰²—in Western modernity, reason as an end has meant a slavish devotion to the goal of utility (or profit) maximization, while reason as a means has meant an all-consuming technological overload. In Taha’s view, correction of these flaws lies in realizing that the supposedly rational ends have led to irrational means, while the supposedly rational

⁹⁷ Ṭahā, 43.

⁹⁸ Ṭahā, 43.

⁹⁹ Nicholas Rescher has a pragmatic response. We have only reason to judge anything, including reason itself. Otherwise, people would resort to other criteria not subject to agreement and comprehensibility and, in this way, subvert objectivity. Consequently, in order to maintain rational, universally recognizable, and objective criteria, we have to resort to reason. So, Rescher notes, “it seems to say: ‘If you are going to be rational in your beliefs, then you must also act rationally, because it is rational to believe that rational action is optimal in point of goal attainment.’ But this sort of question begging is simply *unavoidable* in the circumstances. It is exactly what we want and need. Where else should we look for a *rational* validation of rationality but to reason itself? The only reasons for being rational that it makes sense to ask for are *rational* reasons.” Nicholas Rescher, *Rationality: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature and the Rationale of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 43. Ṭahā does not seem to realize that there is such a pragmatic justification.

¹⁰⁰ Ṭahā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāth*, 43.

¹⁰¹ This is not tenable since one of the functions of reason is to reflect on the grand scheme of things, despite the process of reasoning occurring in someone’s individual mind. If reason could address only particulars and individuals, it would hardly be of much interest.

¹⁰² Weber “identifies bureaucracy with rationality, and the process of rationalization with mechanism, depersonalization, and oppressive routine. Rationality, in this context, is seen as adverse to personal freedom.” In Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1958), 50.

means have led to irrational results. This realization suggests instead a dual process, aiming rather than for the most purely rational ends, for only the best ends that are achievable; and discovering, rather than the most purely rational means for achieving them, only the most suitable ones.¹⁰³ In other words, for Taha, the essence of reason is not rational.¹⁰⁴ He does not tell us what is that essence.

The second principle, “all nature can be mastered by Man,” was characteristic of the early stages of Western modernity, as exemplified in the works of Francis Bacon (1561–1626). *How can such mastery be possible?*, Taha asks. As a matter of fact, Taha argues, man is forced to obey the laws of nature, while nature still does not obey human wants. We are rather the offspring of nature, and nature should be considered a mother. This entails a universal pledge of faithfulness and mercy toward ‘mother nature,’ so that “Man repays mother nature with mercy.”¹⁰⁵ Yet, needless to say, particular aspects of nature have in certain cases been successfully controlled, such as with medical treatments or the damming of rivers—proving that there is rather a partial control of nature. Taha’s merciful alternative is an expression of a rhetorical solution. Taha does not offer a practical solution for the countless instances where nature is instead a non-caring mother to Man.

The third principle is that “everything is criticizable.” But criticism itself, Taha reminds us, does not form the gamut of our practically utilizable knowledge.¹⁰⁶ Acceptance of common background knowledge and personal accounts, for example, shapes most of our knowledge from childhood to death, without our having the capacity to criticize and verify

¹⁰³ This is similar to the ideas of Herbert Simon (1916–2001) about satisficing rather than maximizing. “Herbert Simon, seeing cognitive limits to human attention, proposed the idea of bounded rationality with the notion of “satisfying” rather than “maximizing” the decision outcomes.” In Susan Maret, *William R. Freudenberg: A Life in Social Research* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2013), 115.

¹⁰⁴ Mario Bunge holds in effect a similar view, except that, like Rescher (see footnote 99), he suggests that the basis for upholding logic and rationality is practical. In particular the first justification is communicative, for if one is not rational then linguistic communication would not take place. “Scientism includes rationality, that is, the requirements of clarity and logical consistency. The least we can expect from a philosopher is clear expression and reasons for or against the theses she discusses. A hermetic doctrine, one so meaningless that it is not even false, so that is cannot be rationally debated, does not deserve to be called a philosophy.” Mario Bunge, *Evaluating Philosophies* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2012), 24.

¹⁰⁵ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 45.

¹⁰⁶ Ṭāhā, 45.

all of this information flow. As babies, we eat what our parents offer us; as children, we learn what our teachers teach us; as adults, we generally behave based on how the economic and political elite have structured the domains of law, market, and media. Only small portions of these are truly subject to criticism, and in any case, criticism often does not change the situation. In fact, in some cases, acceptance leads to more practical or even more certain knowledge than criticism, especially when criticism is viewed as a continuous and infinite process. Thus, accepting the principles of mathematics aids in the study of the sciences, while endless criticism leaves no room for any beginning. For another example, in the case of friendship or love, good faith and trust enable a relationship to flourish, while doubting and criticizing will lead eventually to the collapse of the relationship. The alternative to absolute criticism would be, Taha suggests, adaptive, contextual, or multi-level criticism, in which the evidence sought at each particular level is suited to that particular level. Hence, the potential objects of criticism will vary from the “regularly criticizable,” to the “practically uncriticizable” higher values.¹⁰⁷ In these conceptions, Taha does not seem to have distinguished between “everything can be criticized” and “everything ought to be criticized”; much less “everything ought to be criticized all at once.” Through his considerations though, in effect he does end up with a principle of negation of the latter.

The gist of Taha’s falsification of Western rationality is then the following: Islamic rationality should think of goals as much as means, consider nature as a mother and repay her with mercy, while engaging in contextual criticism rather than absolute criticism. Taha assures us that this way, Islamic rationality would lead us to acknowledge and respect the supremacy of nature, and to accept an internally derived but expanded rationality, rather than a narrow one externally imposed by Western cultures.

4.3 *Taha on Analysis*

Rather than “analysis” being a literal translation, the English equivalent to the Arabic term (*tafṣīl*) used by Taha is “differentiation.” However, what Taha refers to is “seeking further details” and also “separating various elements.”¹⁰⁸ In English this is referred to as analysis. In any case, it is a

¹⁰⁷ Ṭāhā, 45–46.

¹⁰⁸ The meaning of *faṣal* (the root of *tafṣīl*) can be found in the authoritative and extensive medieval dictionaries of Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, and of Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī,

process that includes identifying particularities and differences, rather than blurring or confusing them. Taha notes that this aspect of analysis is found in many imitative Arab pseudo-modern circles, in which members seek to modernize Islamic philosophy through differentiating or separating between, for example, ethics and politics, gender and identity, or the good and God. The correction proposed by Taha is to move from imitative to creative analysis,¹⁰⁹ with regard to the following three tacit application premises of Western modernity: (1) “the difference between modernity and traditions is total,” (1) “the difference between reason and religion is absolute,” and (3) “analysis necessitates the elimination of the holy.”¹¹⁰

Taha provides two counterexamples to falsify the claim that modernity and traditions are totally different. In many religious cultures, the religious heritage is not identical with any religious hierarchy or institutions, such as a church. Hence, the differentiation between modernity and the religious authority of a church does not necessarily impinge upon religion itself; indeed, the absence of a church-like institution in Islamic history would make that differentiation inconceivable. Moreover, total differentiation between past heritage and present modernity assumes an instant and miraculous emergence of actual modernity. However, Taha reminds us, modernity has historical roots in religious reformations, and in religious conceptions such as “perfection” and “brotherhood.”¹¹¹ In addition, many giant figures directly involved in constructing modernity were also religious persons, such as Erasmus, Martin Luther, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Newton, Pascal, Kant, and Hegel. All this confirms the close relation between present modernity and its past heritage. However, a creative relation to heritage does not prevent one from taking a new and radical direction, something that is not recommended by Taha.

Western modernity, Taha suggests, not only rejected the solid bond between modernity and traditions; it also sought to differentiate between religion and reason and viewed religion as irrational. Thus, the premise “differentiation between reason and religion is absolute.” Here, ‘irrational’ may at least have any of the following three meanings: (1) “impossible occurrence,” such as the conjunction of opposites; (2) “inaccessible to

Tāj al-ʿArūs Min Jawābir al-Qāmūs. The *faṣal* entry is available online at <https://www.almaany.com/ar/dict/ar-ar/%D9%81%D8%B5%D9%84/>

¹⁰⁹ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 47.

¹¹⁰ Ṭāhā, 48.

¹¹¹ Ṭāhā, 49.

reason,” either because it surpasses it, differs from it, or violates it, such as in the case of the various logical paradoxes; and (3) “what cannot be judged by reason as either true or false,”¹¹² such as with both the paradoxes and the undecidable propositions of logic.

For Taha, religion cannot be irrational with respect to the first meaning, since dialectical reasoning may accommodate the conjunction of opposites.¹¹³ However, dialectical reasoning is itself philosophically rather problematic.¹¹⁴ Even if one accepts it to some extent, it cannot provide a universal solution to the problems of impossible occurrences and conjunctions of opposites.

As to the second meaning of ‘irrational,’ in terms of ‘inaccessible to reason,’ Taha holds that this does not exclude the possibility that there is some “ultra-reason” (or perhaps, “as yet undiscovered reason”) capable of rationally (or ultra-rationally) explaining what may seem for the moment an irrational claim. Just as many puzzles of nature remain unsolved, waiting unremarkably for eventual explanation, Taha believes that a seemingly irrational religious matter—such as the existence of the intangible, invisible religious entity sometimes referred to as ‘spirit’—might have its own eventual rational, or else ultra-rational, explanation. In a similar vein, according to Taha, the third way to understand the ‘irrational,’ in terms of that which cannot be judged as true or as false, neglects the fact that nothing can be classified as rational or irrational per se, there being hardly a conclusive argument for such a distinction.¹¹⁵

What the nature of ultra-reason might be and how it is actualized are questions to which Taha does not provide answers. Entertaining the ultra-possible might be interesting, yet it does not offer any real basis for knowledge. Indeed, in the past, biologists did not know how conception and pregnancy worked, now they do; astronomers could not understand why

¹¹² Ṭāhā, 51.

¹¹³ Ṭāhā, 51.

¹¹⁴ Mario Bunge, *Scientific Materialism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1981), 41–63.

¹¹⁵ Contrary to Ṭāhā’s somewhat defeatist view, in the introduction to vol. 5 of his *Treatise (Exploring the World*, Dordrecht: Reidel, 5), with characteristic optimism Mario Bunge notes that the question *What is rationality?* is an active subject of modern epistemological and sociological research. He has provided his own contributions in various works over the years, including a multi-faceted analysis in “Seven Desiderata of Rationality,” in J. Agassi and I. C. Jarvie, Eds., *Rationality: The Critical View* (The Hague: Nijhoff). See also vol. 7, part I, of his *Treatise (Epistemology and Methodology III: Philosophy of Science and Technology*, Dordrecht: Reidel, Chapter 1; especially p. 73).

the planets orbited the sun, and now they can. In both cases, what transformed the rationally unexplained into the rationally explained was not some spiritual ultra-reason, but logically meticulous and materially based reasoning. Taha's ultra-rationality does not help in these cases; mundane rationality, innovative theorizing, and discovery of new evidence are sufficient for the time being. Moreover, religious people can give equal opportunity to Yahweh, the Holy Spirit, and Karma, which are not similar entities and which do not lead to entirely compatible conclusions.

Finally, Taha holds that the modernistic claim, "analysis necessitates the elimination of the holy," unduly identifies magic with the holy.¹¹⁶ According to Taha, magic "glorifies what is embodied in the world, while the holy glorifies what transcends the world."¹¹⁷ In this view, although natural laws may unveil the magic of the world, they do not reveal the holy. The world is not only a phenomenon waiting for natural science to unveil; it is also an opportunity for reflection and the increase of scientific understanding, both of which may also increase a sense of the holy. In Islam, the holy is based on the notion that the human is a "connected being," related to different worlds. Such connectedness enables the human being to "travel by his imagination through times, spaces, and even through non-spatiotemporal realms."¹¹⁸ The elimination of the holy leads to loss of meaning, distrust of the world in times of disaster, and continuous fear of death, all of which have led the Western man to deny himself a meaningful and secure life, and a peaceful death.¹¹⁹ Islamic analysis does not create substantive differences, since everything is viewed as intrinsically connected. Therefore, any correct differentiation should rather be "functional and consequential rather than ontological."¹²⁰

Taha's position with regard to the holy might result in nothing but openness to imagination and hope. One may admit that those are no small nothings: let us not forget that imagination and hope can help us persevere in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulty and increase the chance of success. Nevertheless, these traits are not exclusively Islamic and do exist in both other religions and non-religious worldviews, without being necessarily related to a mythical and supernatural holy. Thus,

¹¹⁶ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 52.

¹¹⁷ Ṭāhā, 52.

¹¹⁸ Ṭāhā, 53.

¹¹⁹ Ṭāhā, 53–54.

¹²⁰ Ṭāhā, 54.

scientists readily distinguish between conceptual analysis—which is epistemological, not ontological—and, for example, chemical analysis, which does actually involve separating a compound into its constituents. According to Taha, Islamic analysis should emerge from within a given heritage rather than ignore it; understand the (seemingly) irrational rather than discard it; and abide by the holy, in order to avoid enslaving nature, or being fascinated by its magic.

4.4 *Taha on Universality*

Universality, another of the principles of the spirit of modernity, has the two foundations of extensibility and generalizability. As described in Sect. 3.3, ideal modernity extends from thoughts to actions, from law to morality, from nature to humanity, while actual modernity generalizes the political economy and cultural reality of the West to all parts of the world. With regard to Westernization, Taha suggests a procedure that moves from imitative to creative extensibility,¹²¹ and from imitative to creative generalizability.¹²² For Taha, the way in which the Arab-Islamic world imitates Western modernity in the age of globalization is disappointing:¹²³ there is a massive expansion of the modernity of machines, accompanied by a prevailing backwardness in the modernization of education, along with ethical degradation. In such circumstances, there is neither efficient management nor fruitful invention. Without “internal self-struggle” (*mujaḥada*), there is no freedom of thought; and without freedom of thought, the scientific spirit and technological innovation would not exist.

4.4.1 *Taha on the General Imitativeness of Today's Arab-Islamic Modernity*

Taha mourns this disappointing general situation of today's imitative Arab-Islamic modernity, which he sees as based on three false premises: (1) “modernity is destiny,” (2) “modernity yields absolute power,” and (3) “the essence of modernity is economic.”¹²⁴

The first premise promotes the idea that modernity is the natural outcome of historical progress and that humankind has no power to

¹²¹ Ṭāhā, 55.

¹²² Ṭāhā, 61.

¹²³ Ṭāhā, 54.

¹²⁴ Ṭāhā, 55.

circumvent either its advantages or its disadvantages—as if modernity were predetermined, either by divine will or by natural law.¹²⁵ Moreover, modernity is presented as a complex and interconnected phenomenon in which any correction of its disadvantages would wreck its advantages. For example, if there were no pollution, there would be no industrialization; and if there were no urbanization, with its associated alienation and crime, there would be no focused and specialized workforce. Therefore, modernity and its maladies must be maintained as is without alteration.¹²⁶ In response to such a fatalist understanding, Taha posits that the Western version of modernity is rather a contingent and extrinsic phenomenon, whose essential cause is nothing but the human will. Hence, if humankind had the power to establish Western modernity, it also has the power to reform it. “The human being is more powerful than modernity” and can change any alleged destiny.¹²⁷

As to the second premise, if we assume that “modernity yields absolute power,”¹²⁸ we have to acknowledge that this power is material, not spiritual. No wonder then, Taha asserts, that such one-dimensional power seeks to prevent the majority of the world’s population—the so-called third-world nations—from moving forward to prosperity, by plotting against their economic interests and national sovereignty. Taha accuses Western modernity of producing the dangerous combination of material power with severe spiritual and ethical degradation.¹²⁹ Islamic modernity should establish the materiality of human life on the basis of its spirituality, not the other way around. Only then will it be possible to preserve the ideals of early modernity, such as liberty, fraternity, equality, dignity,¹³⁰ and tolerance.

I have to pause here. In his proposals for Islamic modernity, Taha calls for an Islamic spirituality as if it were an obviously clear set of ideas and

¹²⁵ Ṭāhā, 56.

¹²⁶ Ṭāhā, 56.

¹²⁷ Ṭāhā, 56.

¹²⁸ Ṭāhā, 57.

¹²⁹ Ṭāhā, 59.

¹³⁰ Dignity is understood in Arabic (*al-karāmah*) as the combination of respect for the human body, keeping it from injury; and respect for the human self, keeping it from humiliation and denigration. Dignity is not often spoken of as an ideal of the Enlightenment or modernity (but see, e.g., the Preamble, and Articles 1 and 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; United Nations, 1948, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>); nevertheless its intersection with the ideals of freedom and human rights makes it highly relevant.

practices subject to traditional consensus. He does so without alluding to the massive, fifteen-century-long controversies and contradictions between the three scholastic domains of law, theology, and mysticism. These scholastic domains involve in particular the coherence of text-based practices (as in the laws of *fiqh*), the consistency of theory-based metaphysics (as in the theology of *kalam*), and the harmony of intention-based ethics (as in the psychotherapy of mysticism or *tasawwuf*).¹³¹ Not only are these Islamic fields of law, theology, and mysticism competitors,¹³² but each one has extremely divergent doctrines within itself, with deep disagreements over how to set the agenda for an Islamic spirituality.¹³³ In later works, Taha provides a more substantial response to this acknowledged shortcoming (see Chap. 10). Enough though of chiding Taha on this point,¹³⁴ and back to his critique.

With regard to the third premise, if the essence of modernity is economic, then according to Taha, consumption and pleasure become the most important goals,¹³⁵ rather than higher and more integral human goals such as intellectual and aesthetic rights, and well-being. He emphasizes that the ethical essence of the human being requires “elevating values” and “extending imagination into the future,” which Taha calls *al-istiḡbal* (lit. seeking the future, or ‘futuration’).¹³⁶ The perfectibility of *al-istiḡbal* provides the ability to better one’s condition and succeed economically, while still seeking more integral purposes and better prospects for the future, the latter being the core of ‘futuration.’ Contrary to the widely held claim of an absolute contradiction between the modern economy and religion, progress is in fact rooted in the religious notions of

¹³¹ Obiedat, “Identity Contradictions in Islamic Awakening,” 338–39.

¹³² Muḥamad ‘Ābid Jābirī provides a detailed account in his *Bunyat al-‘Aql al-‘Arabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wahdah al-‘Arabiyyah, 1986).

¹³³ Abdelmadjid Charfi, *Islam: Between Divine Message and History*, trans. David Bond (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 101–10.

¹³⁴ Ṭāhā does further elaborate the moral details of such Islamic spirituality in his three-volume project, *Dīn al-Ḥayā’* (lit. the religion of decency), along with the political framework in his other work, *Rūḥ al-Dīn: Min Dīq al-‘Almāniyya ilā Sa’at al-‘Iṭimāniyya* (lit. *The Spirit of Religion: From the Narrowness of Secularism to the Spaciousness of Fidelity*). The details of such Islamic spirituality were overlooked in his modernization proposals.

¹³⁵ In fact, the economic activities are production, consumption, trade, and finance, while pleasure is not one of them. The idea that the *purpose* of all these activities is pleasure is ill-conceived, for attributing a single motivation to the billions of diverse individuals and uncounted processes that contributed to the evolution of economic activity.

¹³⁶ “*Al-istiḡbāl*”, Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 60.

perfectibility and ‘futuration,’¹³⁷ which unfortunately “tend to disappear in the face of the stealthy and exclusive economic claims to future progress and advancement of life.”¹³⁸

Taha’s objections to economic modernity have already been raised in Western circles. Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* (1989), Benjamin Friedman’s *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (2005), or Erich Fromm’s *Life Between Having and Being* (1998), to name but a few, point to the same problems as those raised by Taha, for whom Islamic modernity should not be limited to material progress but also provide an extension into spirituality and morals. Thus, while Taha is correct in his criticism of Western modernity, he fails to adequately acknowledge either the objections or the remedies which have been proposed by critics from within Western modernity itself, throughout its long history.

4.4.2 *Taha on the Spread of the Political Economy and Culture of the West*

The second feature of actual modern universality is the generalization, or spread, of the political economy and cultural reality of the West to all parts of the world. In response, again Taha proposes moving from the imitative to the creative,¹³⁹ focusing on the following three tacit false principles of the Western experience: (1) “modernity is the sole protector of individuality,” (2) “secularism is the only way to preserve all religions,” and (3) “the values of actual modernity are universal.”¹⁴⁰

With regard to the first principle, Taha notes that there is “a strong consensus that one of the peculiar outcomes of modernity is individualism,” to mean that the individual alone “chooses his destiny, shapes his life, and takes responsibility for his actions.”¹⁴¹ Additionally, the individual, in actual modernity, makes society into a means for happiness and the utmost flourishing of the individual self. Yet for Taha, there is no necessary link between the values of individual destiny and flourishing, and individualism as such—to mean selfishness or self-centeredness. Although in its early stages modernity enabled humans to gain dignity and basic rights, and thus to facilitate individual participation in the formation of integral

¹³⁷ Ṭāhā, 60.

¹³⁸ Ṭāhā, 60.

¹³⁹ Ṭāhā, 61.

¹⁴⁰ Ṭāhā, 62.

¹⁴¹ Ṭāhā, 62.

social welfare,¹⁴² this did not mean that the individual's concern should be only for their own self. The *individual*, Taha suggests, is a view of the 'actual,' whereas the *human* is a view of the 'ought to be.'¹⁴³ Therefore, an ideal Islamic modernity would call for "a global human society," which cannot be realized on the basis of irresponsible and selfish individualism. A global human society cannot be based on Descartes' individualistic *cogito*, but rather on what Taha calls "transitive reason," for which to think is to know that your thinking always has consequences for others.¹⁴⁴ A cooperative global society is a much-needed project in today's highly interrelated world. The narrowness of individualism is neither derived from the ideals of modernity, nor capable of serving as the basis of global society.

According to Taha, rather than in Western individualism, the universal attitude toward humanity, regardless of race, color, territory, religion, or language, finds itself at home in the history of Islam across the African, European, and Asian continents. This is evident in the narrative attributed to the founder of Islam:

O people, your Lord is one and your father Adam is one. There is no virtue of an Arab over a foreigner [non-Arab], nor a foreigner over an Arab, and neither white over black nor black over white, except by righteousness. Have I not delivered the message?" They said, "Of course."¹⁴⁵

Taha notes that Islam accepts equally not only all these human pluralities. It is also welcoming to animals, and even to unknown creatures beyond humans and animals, likewise inanimate objects known and unknown, since Islam is the submission of creation to the creator. Taha regrets that traditionalist Muslim thinkers presently minimize the generalizability of the Islamic spirit by adopting an ideologically and politically defensive attitude.¹⁴⁶ Instead, he strives for an existential openness that reverses imitative and artificial restrictions on generalizability.

¹⁴² Ṭāhā, 62.

¹⁴³ Ṭāhā, 62.

¹⁴⁴ Ṭāhā, 63.

¹⁴⁵ The original prophetic narrative in Arabic has the number 23536 at *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Cairo: Mu'ssast Qurṭubah, 2011) Vol. 5, 411. The English translation above is quoted from: "Farewell Sermon: No One Is Superior to Another Except by Good Deeds," Daily Hadith Online, January 4, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2PfjvDu>.

¹⁴⁶ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 61.

4.4.3 *Taha on the Relationship Between Modernity and Secularism*

Taha observes that some thinkers not only identify modernity with secularism, but are also convinced that secularism is the only way to preserve all religions. The spread of modernity to most nations seems to have eased the task of religions by “taking away from them the management of the economic and political order,”¹⁴⁷ thus preserving their sacred status. Taha sees this shift as contempt for religion rather than appreciation of it. Besides, equating all religions is just like equating all philosophies, ideologies, and lifestyles: it leads to oversimplification and great injustice. Moreover, some see secularism as the end of the authority of the church, while others see it as the end of Christianity, the end of religion itself, and even the disappearance of God.¹⁴⁸

Taha’s suggestion is to find out how applying the Islamic understanding and experience of the holy is more rational than the irrationality that has overwhelmed the history of other religions in the West.¹⁴⁹ Preserving the holy at work in Islam provides what he calls “valuational rationality,”¹⁵⁰ which is an essential complement to the “instrumental rationality of secularism.” Instrumental rationality refers to things rather than to living creatures, let alone humans, whereas preserving the holy of religion calls for humanized or valuational rationality: a rational evaluation, appreciation, and ordering of values, and so a rational understanding of what is and is not truly valuable. Valuational rationality takes into account what is rational at the highest level of all possible rationalities; thus, it alone is capable of liberating humans from the influence of mechanical mentality, and enabling peaceful communication with others.¹⁵¹ Valuational rationality is the ideal that preserves the sacredness of religion.

Taha’s proposal claims to be more rational and to go beyond the irrational reaction against science and philosophy that has overwhelmed the history of other religions in the West. And yet, valuational rationality cannot be a way of ignoring the irrationality that has overwhelmed the history of Muslims themselves: what Taha accepts for other religions has to apply to Islam as well. If he seeks allegiance to his internal cultural idea in favor

¹⁴⁷ Ṭāhā, 64.

¹⁴⁸ Ṭāhā, 63–64.

¹⁴⁹ Ṭāhā, 64.

¹⁵⁰ The expression *‘aqlā niyyat al-āyāt* used by Ṭāhā refers to the godly signs of the world from which values can be derived. *Āyāt*, that is, signs, is a frequently used notion in the Koran.

¹⁵¹ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 65.

of Muslim peoples, then constructive criticism should not destroy this allegiance. Taha's proposal of valuational rationality should not lead to a blind preservation of the presumed holiness of all religious traditions.¹⁵² Truth has to be preserved over the wishes of cultural peculiarities, even when it clashes with one's religious traditions.

4.4.4 *Taha on the Presumed Universality of Western Values*

As to the notion that the values of actual Western modernity are universal, Taha again points to the difference between the spirit of modernity and its actualizations. Most people would agree, for example, that justice, liberty, and dignity¹⁵³ are universal values of central concern to the advocates of modernity;¹⁵⁴ yet, their implementations are not always adequate. Economic exploitation, environmental degradation, colonialism, racial segregation, ethnic cleansing, genocide, corporate supremacy, and multinational wars all characterize the history of actual modernity. Too often, what passes for universal modernity is rather "a Western locality that has been raised up to universality by mere authority and nationalist arrogance,"¹⁵⁵ a result of imposing the singularity of a Western model of modernity on the plurality of its spirit. Taha takes as an example the variation in human rights legislation across the United States, Germany, and Japan: the first stresses economic rights, the second focuses on political rights, and the third emphasizes cultural rights.¹⁵⁶ A truly contextual universality would apply modern ideals to their proper context, especially when the context is not a Western one. Taha concludes that an Islamic universal modernity has to seek "transitive reason" that believes in global cooperation rather than individualism, "valuational rationality" rather than secularism, and "contextual universality" rather than Western locality.

Taha's conceptual theorizing is certainly beautiful on the basis of ideals. However, taking all together the overwhelming pattern of non-constitutional Muslim autocrats, the contemporary Islamic sectarian strife,

¹⁵² In a more recent work, Taha overcame this shortcoming by critiquing the current Saudi and Iranian models of Islamic governance, as well as the Sunni and Shi'i strife of the past. Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Thughūr al-Murābaṭah: Muqārabah I'timānīyah li-Sir'āt al-Ummah al-Ḥāliyyah* (Rabat, Morocco: Maghārib lil-Dirāsāt fī al-Ijtimā' al-Insānī, 2018).

¹⁵³ See footnote 130.

¹⁵⁴ Ṭāhā, 65.

¹⁵⁵ Ṭāhā, 65.

¹⁵⁶ Ṭāhā, 66.

and the religious fanaticism of various Islamic movements, would show such theorizing dimly relevant to social problem solving.

4.5 *Taha on Maturity*

The maturity or autonomy characteristic of the spirit of modernity is based on independence and creativity. Independence pertains to relations with others, while creativity enables one to invest in and cultivate one's own powers. Taha urges his fellow Arab intellectuals interested in philosophy to not let others think and philosophize on their behalf. On the contrary, "thinking is one's own responsibility."¹⁵⁷ Accordingly, he unveils three tacit assumptions related to the Western implementation of the ideal of independence. All of these revolve around the concept of *wisayah*,¹⁵⁸ which can be translated as guardianship (or supervision, oversight, patronage, paternalism). Thus the problematic Western implementation of independence results from the following three claims, as unveiled by Taha: (1) "the guardianship of powerful nations over small and weak nations is the civilized man's responsibility," (2) "the internal guardianship of religious clergy is a harmful one," and (3) "liberation from the internal forms of guardianship paves the way to modernity."¹⁵⁹

During the colonial era, Britain, France, Italy, and other colonial powers introduced themselves—after bloody invasions—as protectors of the less powerful nations they had conquered. Taha finds an analogous situation today, with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council as supreme guardians of the world's unjust order.¹⁶⁰ In fact, the motive for colonialism was political domination and economic exploitation, rather than genuine care and disinterested philanthropic responsibility for the rest of the world. Hence the first claim, that "the external guardianship of powerful nations over weak and small nations is the civilized man's responsibility," is rather destructive of the autonomous management of a nation's wealth, power, and culture. The same holds for the second claim, that the internal guardianship of religious clergy is a harmful one, since Islamic history does not show an overall domination of the religious class over political and economic life, with the theocracy of Iran being only a recent

¹⁵⁷ Ṭāhā, 36.

¹⁵⁸ *Wiṣāyah*.

¹⁵⁹ Ṭāhā, 36.

¹⁶⁰ Ṭāhā, 36.

exception. Interestingly, micro-tribal and macro-oligarchic powers were regularly in charge throughout most of Islamic history, which made religious ideology a beneficial force, in favor of civil society resistance and political opposition to the oppressive governing elite.¹⁶¹ Liberation in this case should be from tribal, oligarchic, and state constraints on civil society. This liberation should be supported by Islamic legal-ethical scholastic training,¹⁶² not from overcoming an imagined religious class. Hence, in the case of Islamic societies attempting to modernize, liberation from traditional Islamic guardianship only defeats the attempt. Modernity in the Islamic context should be liberation, not from internal religious movements, but from state and external guardianship.

Although in many ways valid, what Taha proposes concerning independence cannot be allowed to stand without qualification. It is not always true that all elements of the internal culture promote independence from tribal and oligarchic economic-political domination. In the Middle Ages, mystic orders¹⁶³ in Egypt and greater Syria were accused of being protectors of the feudal elite. Another example is the religious-legal verdict (*fatwa*) prohibiting demonstrations, issued by the Committee of Highest Scholars¹⁶⁴ in today's Saudi Arabia. Such prohibition is puzzling for anyone with a minimum knowledge of Islamic law, who wonders about the justification for that in the Koran or in the prophetic traditions. The point here is that not every element in the internal religious tradition is compatible with the current interests of contemporary Muslim peoples. Even Taha's own theorizing would not be accepted by a great number of the traditionalists he defends uncritically, who would deem his understanding of the spirit of modernity too philosophical and Westernized. Taha does criticize current Islamic movements in a small book—originally a conference paper—with the title *Modernity and Resistance*,¹⁶⁵ published in 2007,

¹⁶¹ Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (New York, NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), 539.

¹⁶² For a historical account of this civil society scholastic movement, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁶³ Such as *Al-ṭuruq al-ṣūfiyyah*.

¹⁶⁴ In Arabic: *Hayʾat kibāʾr al-ʿulamāʾ*.

¹⁶⁵ Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, *Al-Ḥadāthah wal-Muqāwamah* (Beirut: Maʿhad al-Mʿārif al-Ḥikmiyyah, 2007), 80.

one year after his *Spirit of Modernity*.¹⁶⁶ Yet, this criticism is neither detailed nor comprehensive.

The final move suggested by Taha is from imitation to “the creative creativity.”¹⁶⁷ While acknowledging the redundancy in the expression, he justifies it as opposition to the attitude some Arab modernists adopt when they claim that their mere copying and imitation of the West is an act of creativity.¹⁶⁸ He highlights the following three objectionable notions: (1) “the most creative of creativity is absolute disconnection from the heritage,” (2) “creativity creates needs as well as satisfies them,” and (3) “the most genuine creativity is where the self flourishes the most.”¹⁶⁹

To be sure, disconnection with a past that “exhausted its potentials of creativity”¹⁷⁰ in the present and the future is quite in order. And yet, Taha asks, can creativity ever take place with no reference to a historical background, chain of causalities, and precedents from the heritage on which to build? Taha holds that modernization is not a time-related process that increases with the increase of disconnection with the past; rather, it is an ideal-related endeavor that increases with the increasing fulfillment of those ideals.¹⁷¹ Therefore, sometimes the most creative can be, ironically, the most connected with past cultures. This might explain why the Platonist and Aristotelian literatures are still under contemplation, given their relevance to many of humanity’s challenges. Hardly any philosophy could be proud of claiming total disconnection with ancient Greek wisdom.

The claim that creativity creates needs as well as satisfies them makes reference to an increase in material needs and desires, without a concomitant increase in spiritual needs. For Taha, this situation is clearly unbalanced: it results from a marketing endeavor that does not fulfill any particular virtue, whose only aim is to attract more customers. An increase in spiritual needs, in the need to fulfill virtues, that is to say in the need for

¹⁶⁶ After the completion of the first draft of this work in 2010, Taha published in his later book *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 2012 (lit. the spirit of religion), a lengthy, detailed criticism of contemporary Islamic movements within the *sunni* or *shīʿī* sects, and in the traditional or reformist moods of thinking. Also, in his *Thughūr al-Murābaṭah* in 2018, Taha extends his criticism to the problematic forms of governmental Islam promoted by the Iranian and Saudi states since the 1980s. His crossing of the red lines of political criticism seems motivated by the Iranian and Saudi attempts to abort the Arab Spring. More on this in Chap. 10.

¹⁶⁷ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 39.

¹⁶⁸ Ṭāhā, 38.

¹⁶⁹ Ṭāhā, 39.

¹⁷⁰ Ṭāhā, 39.

¹⁷¹ Ṭāhā, 39–40.

the valuable, would invert the situation. Instead of having the individual fall prey to massive waves of advertising, the need for the valuable would intensify personal responsibility and independence. Thus, creativity should work out a balance between material and valuational needs as much as satisfy them.¹⁷²

As to the claim that the most genuine creativity exists where the self flourishes the most, one should not forget that the self, being a social being, can never flourish without the flourishing of a partner, family, or community. Selfishness and excessive individualism undermine the basis of the self. As a result, the most genuine creativity should be where the self flourishes proportionally and harmoniously with others, because self and others are the two components of society.

The conclusion of Taha's stance on creativity is that ideal Islamic creativity should enhance connection with the vital past rather than sever it, create a need for the valuable, and enhance consideration of the social other as much as the individual self. For Taha, the imitative-creative distinction applies to all aspects of the foundations of the spirit of modernity.

5 CONCLUSION

Taha's contribution to the modernization of Arab-Islamic philosophy can be summed up as a matter of on the one hand unearthing the hidden premises underlying the problematic implementation of Western modernity, and on the other of his proposed alternative premises, based on the ideal spirit of modernity. This with the fundamental contrast between the two versions of the modernization project being one of an imported, external, imitative modernity, versus a creative modernity that emerges internally. We close the chapter with a table summarizing the particulars of this contrast (Table 5.1).

¹⁷² Ṭāhā, 40.

Table 5.1 Summary of the contrasting premises underlying Western-imitative and Islamic-creative implementations of the spirit of modernity, according to Taha

<i>Foundation of the Spirit of modernity</i>	<i>Tacit principles of the Western-imitative implementation</i>	<i>Taha's proposed principles of a creative-Islamic implementation</i>
Rationality	Reason reasons everything All nature can be mastered by Man Everything ought to be criticized	Rationality is a compromise between means and ends Man repays Mother Nature with mercy Mature criticism is judicious
Analysis	The difference between modernity and heritage is absolute The difference between reason and religion is absolute Analysis leads to elimination of the sacred	Modernity and heritage are inseparable The religious (seemingly) irrational needs to be understood rather than discarded The sacred, through imagination and hope, can prevail, so as to tame nature rather than to enslave it
Extensibility	Modernity is destiny Modernity yields absolute power The essence of modernity is economic	Human will is more powerful than modernity Absolute power is the connection of the material with the spiritual The essence of any modernity should be ethical
Generalizability	Modernity is the sole protector of the individual Secularism is the only way to preserve all religions The values of local, Western modernity are universal	Cooperative global society gives better protection Valuational rationality is more balanced Admitting contextuality is a more modest path to universality
Independence	Guardianship of the third world is the developed world's responsibility Religious clergy provide nothing but malignant guardianship Modernity is liberation from the native culture	Ideal modernity seeks liberation from all foreign paternalism Islamic religious resistance is nothing but a liberation movement in the Arab world Ideal modernity seeks allegiance to native culture

(continued)

Table 5.1 (continued)

<i>Foundation of the Spirit of modernity</i>	<i>Tacit principles of the Western-imitative implementation</i>	<i>Taha's proposed principles of a creative-Islamic implementation</i>
Creativity	Modernity is absolute disconnection from all past Modernity is the creation of material needs Modernity is the flourishing of the individual	Ideal modernity seeks connection with the vital past Ideal modernity creates a need for values as much as for material things Ideal modernity considers the social other as much as the self

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The Worldviews of Mario Bunge and
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