

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Muḥammad 'Abid al-Jābirī, *al-'Aql al-Akhlāqī al-'Arabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-'Arabīyya, 2001).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

16 Adūnis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṭh fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'ind al-'Arab* (Vol. 1–4) (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Āma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 2016).

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