



Muhammad Shahrur's 'Cargo Cult'

*A meditation on his underlying
conceptual framework*

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to present an integral critique that explores the underlying conceptual structure of the work of Muhammad Shahrur. It is our contention that every thinker and writer is an inheritor of a chain of ideas or an intellectual system that he necessarily manifests in his writings, consciously or unconsciously. There is no such thing, in other words, as an orphan idea or an idea without a conceptual genealogy. This means that the nobility or soundness of any idea is narrowly dependent on the pedigree of its genealogy or *silsila*. The value of Shahrur's thought is therefore inevitably linked to the value of the origin of his ideas, which we have briefly tried to trace and evaluate in this paper.

It is hoped that this model of critique may become an effective tool in understanding the mechanics of the varying and hybridised conceptual systems that 'reformers', or one should say 'intellectual adventurers', have recently introduced into the Islamic world.

About the Author

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



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Men on a lower level of understanding, when brought into contact with phenomena of a higher order, instead of making efforts to understand them, to raise themselves up to the point of view from which they must look at the subject, judge it from their lower standpoint, and the less they understand what they are talking about, the more confidently and unhesitatingly they pass judgment on it.

Leo Tolstoy¹

If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.

Lewis Carroll

1. See *The Kingdom of God*, trans. by Constance Garnett, London, 1894, p. 128.

A CRITIQUE TO BE EFFECTIVE must have a criterion, a principle to which it adheres.

In approaching any attempted critique or analysis of a body of ideas, such as those of the self-proclaimed 'reformers' of Islam in the present time, it is important to realise and to identify the intellectual current that quickens the programs they are so eager to foist on the rest of their brethren, and with which they hope to replace the organic and seamless nature of the Islamic interpretative tradition. What immediately becomes apparent to the reader of these critiques is their aggressive impatience to venture into areas where angels, or one could say even the philosophers of antiquity, feared to tread. Concepts that were discussed by a Socrates or an Alcibiades at the height of their powers are bandied around with inordinate casualness and intellectual carelessness. An Imam Shafi'i or a Ghazālī, monuments of human genius in any age, are dismissed or corrected with ease and complete lack of inhibition. This, in some sense, is an embodiment of the *Zeitgeist* that has now overtaken much of the Muslim world but, paradoxically, originates from a separate intellectual heritage.

The prevailing wind of this genre of discourse revolves around the idea of the autonomy of the individual, and from thereon to the notion of political and ethical individualism.² The conten-

2. The word individualism was received directly from the French, *individualisme*, in the 1840s. Alexis de Tocqueville coined the word in his *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (see Volume 3, Bk II, Ch. 11): 'Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with egotism...Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow creatures; so after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself...Individualism is of democratic origin and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as the equality of conditions.' The term passed into English when Henry Reeve translated the book. Dr A.D. Lindsay commented on the word in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* as follows: 'The primary meaning of the word then is as a state or attitude of mind which is naturally produced in a certain kind of society. That society is most easily described in negative terms. It is one in which little respect is paid to tradition and authority.' In the *Dictionnaire Apologétique de la Foi Catholique*, the Marquis de la Tour du Pin wrote of the term: 'Individualism is a condition of abnormal mentality, although growing more and more in influence, which is characterised by the systematic ignoring of social bonds and duties, and by the cult of the "self" – of the "ego" – (*le culte du "moi"*). The condition is

tion is that man is no longer in the stage of tutelage and that the fruits of intellection as well as the foundational structures of the living tradition of Islam are open to inquiry on terms that can be arrived at subjectively. In this transposition of the Kantian ideal of the enlightenment,³ in as far as the latter is defined as a collective project of self-delivery of the people themselves by dint of their appropriation of certain ideas, the ‘*ulamā*’ are termed the monopolistic clergy that are no longer needed, and the interpretative tradition of Islam as the self-serving teachings of the Church. In this neo-Kantian *Valhalla*, no opposition is tolerated, for the one who rejects this reformation, or one should say ‘reformulation’, is guilty of transgressing a divine right.⁴ In other words, the urge to become enlightened is an obligation on the individual, and when not obeyed is to be considered anti-social and treasonous.

abnormal and unnatural, because the nature of man is essentially social; he can live only in a social condition. The human race is called human society, humanity. Its solidarity is not only in time but also in eternity. The first expression of individualism recorded in history was that of Cain: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” – the most frequent and the last is that of the gangster, “I wish to live my own life” – To live his own life is always to live for himself at the expense of others... This doctrine of individualism ends in anarchy in every sphere of human economy – religious society, domestic society, civil society, and political society properly so-called.’ For the above quotations see the seminal study of R.S. Devane, *The Failure of Individualism*, Browne & Nolan, Dublin, 1948, pp. 1–6. Nicolas Berdyaev added in his *The End of Our Time*, Sheed & Ward, London 1933, pp. 86–87: ‘As things are we can regard individualism only as an utter reaction, though it still flatters itself that it is the pioneer of liberty, light and progress. Liberalism, parliamentarism, constitutionalism, juridical formalism, rationalism, and empirical philosophy, so many fruits of the individualist spirit and of humanist self-affirmation, are all reactionary; they have had their day and their original significance is played out. All these forms lose the sharpness of their outline in the twilight of modern history.’

3. ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!” – that is the motto of enlightenment.’ Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment*, in Vincent G. Potter (ed.), *Readings in Epistemology*, Fordham University Press, 1993, p.221.
4. ‘A man may put off enlightenment with regard to what he ought to know, though only for a short time and for his own person; but to renounce it for himself, or, even more, for subsequent generations, is to violate and trample man’s divine rights underfoot.’ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

On the one hand, Kant admonishes the individual to think for himself and to resist the calls for obedience addressed to him by religious authority,⁵ whilst at the same time he sets up his own imperatives wherein a similar level of obedience to the command of autonomy is itself expected of the individual. In this struggle for individual autonomy, the individual is essentially advocated to think for himself as regards religious matters as an expression of his fundamental freedom. As Ananda Coomaraswamy once remarked, the impulse to think for oneself is in effect to merely think of oneself.⁶

Ethical autonomism is a state of mind that acknowledges no authority other than that of the individual will in the moral sphere. The use of reason in such a state becomes, and naturally so, largely disabled due to the rampant animal instincts that are left to dominate the human personality without checks or balances. For Kant, such autonomism is seen as a categorical imperative, where man becomes a law unto himself living in accordance with ideals that he has set up for himself, and that are self-willed. In such a scheme, all external 'interventions', or guidance, are to be excluded in favour of, or otherwise channelled by, individual determination.⁷ Johann

5. 'The guardians who have so benevolently taken over the supervision of men have carefully seen to it that the far greatest part of them (including the entire fair sex) regard taking the step to maturity as very dangerous, not to mention difficult. Having first made their domestic livestock dumb, and having carefully made sure that these docile creatures will not take a single step without the go-cart to which they are harnessed, these guardians then show them the danger that threatens them, should they attempt to walk alone. Now this danger is not actually so great, for after falling a few times they would in the end certainly learn to walk; but an example of this kind makes men timid and usually frightens them out of all further attempts.' *Ibid.*, p. 221.
6. 'No man, considered as So-and-so, can *be* a genius: but all men *have* a genius, to be served or disobeyed at their own peril. There can be no property in ideas, because these are gifts of the Spirit, and not to be confused with talents: ideas are never made, but can only be "invented", that is "found", and entertained. No matter how many times they may already have been "applied" by others, whoever conforms himself to an idea and so makes it his own, will be working originally, but not so if he is expressing only his own ideals or opinions. To "think for oneself" is always to think of oneself; what is called "free thought" is therefore the natural expression of a humanistic philosophy. We are at the mercy of our thoughts and corresponding desires. Free thought is a passion; it is much rather the thoughts than ourselves that are free.' Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'The Christian and Oriental, or True, Philosophy of Art'. in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Dover, 1956, p. 38.
7. Such external interventions are referred to as heteronomic by Kant. See H.J.

Fichte,⁸ as successor of Kant, proceeded to resolve the antithesis between mind and matter/external reality by identifying all reality with the ego. In other words, thought becomes the only and ultimate reality. The logical end of this development lies with an extreme egoism, not unlike that of Max Stirner, who held that one had to demolish the sacred before it could be considered one's own.⁹

For the purpose of this paper, our underlying philosophy from which we take our criterion will be largely the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition of philosophy, although not exclusively so, since the deviation of modernist thought stems directly from its decadence.

Shahrur in context

Shahrur begins his literary adventure by citing an abiding memory of walking in Damascus with his father, and being asked, rhetorically, whether he could deduce the cause of the 1967 defeat. Shahrur *père* then melodramatically points to the tomb mausoleum of Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī,¹⁰ the Andalusian mystic who died in 1240, and lays the blame for military defeat on the saint and

Paton, *The Moral Law or Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Hutchinson, London, 1948, I, p.100, para. 74.

8. 1762–1814.
9. 'Wenn Du das Heilige verzehrst, hast Du's zum Eigenen gemacht.' Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und Sein Eigenthum*, Leipzig, 1845, p. 128. There is a translation of this latter work by S.T. Byington which I have not consulted, titled *The Ego and His Own*, Fiffeld, London, 1912. See also Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, selected and introduced by John Carroll, Jonathan Cape, London, 1971. The thought of Max Stirner (1806–1856) represents Kantian individualism taken to its ultimate conclusions. At page 491 of the cited text he states: 'Every being superior to me, be it God or man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness [or separateness] and pales only in the light of my belief or sense of this. (Jedes höhere Wesen über mir, sei es Gott, sei es der Mensch, schwächt das Gefühl meiner Einzigkeit und erbleicht erst vor der Sonne dieses Bewusstseins).' Feuerbach in a similar vein states: '...from the viewpoint of idealism, the thing in itself, God (since God is the real thing in itself), is only the ego in itself, that is, the ego that is distinct from the individual and empirical ego. Outside the ego, there is no God.' Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1986, p. 28.
10. Interestingly enough a figure widely considered as the Seal of Saints and, *inter alia*, the most profound metaphysician in Islamic intellectual history. See Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. Peter Kingsley, Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, 1993.

his ideas. The point being, according to this narrative, that religion had become obfuscated by the metaphysics and speculative thought of such saints, leading to the 'retardative' elements in Arab society. This factor had, in turn, led to the 1967 Arab trouncing at the hands of those that had managed to stay clear of such fantastical influences. This politically pragmatic viewpoint suggests the dismissal of whole swathes of intellectual history on the basis of tenuous links.

Shahrur's intellectual stance simultaneously belongs to the camp wherein religion and modern science are mutually involved in a self-revelatory game.¹¹ Positivist science verifies religion, and religion is there to provide the required avuncular nods to scientific theory. The science encapsulated in the Shahrur corpus is of the triumphalist Marxist variety, with men selflessly and furiously labouring for the betterment of humanity without the handicap of preconceived or subjective beliefs. For Shahrur, the world is simple and uni-dimensional, and opponents such as the obscurantist '*ulamā*' are obstacles, men of straw, overwrought lest their theological monopoly be exposed.¹² In his view, religion is, above all else, about power and the self-serving manipulation of external reality. Religion is also an ideology,¹³ a tool for social concordism.

11. 'We dispense with "analogy" (*qiyās*) as a source of law as a consequence of our quest for universality in Islamic legislation. Traditional jurisprudence is inhibited by this method which has locked generations of jurists firmly inside the legal and intellectual horizon of seventh-century Arabia. The theory of limits functions perfectly well without analogies, which allows *mujtahids* to be firmly rooted in their contemporary context and to substitute comparisons to early Islam with references to the latest results of scientific research. This also allows them to correlate Islamic legislation with the epistemological progress in the sciences.' Andreas Christmann (ed. and transl.), *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, Brill, Leiden, 2009, p. 215 (henceforth QMC).

12. 'Traditional jurisprudence has sacrificed...universality in favour of very narrow cultural and nationalist agendas that reflect particular political interests more than they do the universal ethical message of *the Book*. We propose to disentangle Islamic legislation from the narrow cultural perspective which allows cultural diversity beyond the specific legal parameters on the ancient Arabian Peninsula.' QMC, p. 215.

13. Shahrur uses Islam to supply, in a result-orientated fashion, an adequate theory of society. By theory, he means ideology. 'I understood from Russia that people need concepts about society, so that if a man in Casablanca and another in Damascus were asked a question, they should give the same answer and take the same stand. This is what we call ideology or culture now. In

The metaphysical dimension is entirely and naturally absent from such a materialist scheme. The reason that Christmann gallantly dismisses theological criticisms in the introduction to Shahrur's essential works is precisely because their critique is founded on a metaphysical understanding of reality.

Muhammad Shahrur has been a productive author since his first book in 1990, *al-Kitāb wa'l-Qur'ān*.¹⁴ For the purpose of this paper, I have relied on his essential works as edited and translated by Andreas Christmann,¹⁵ wherein it is stated that the volume '...is an attempt to present Shahrur's entire œuvre in a single book, covering almost two decades of his publications and (almost) the entire spectrum of his thought.'¹⁶ It seems therefore reasonable to regard this work as a definitive statement of Shahrur's thesis, not only as addressed to the West, but also comprising a comprehensive summary of his Arabic tomes. In this literary and neo-liberal social theatre, Christmann is very much the chaperone to the debutante Shahrur. The editor's introduction presents a useful summary of Shahrur's thought with varying unrealistic attempts to situate the writer within a broader tradition.¹⁷ It may be contended, however, that Christmann does not

Russia I called it theory. I felt that we were all in urgent need of theory. This made me read more books on how to formulate theory. I also felt that theory without strength and progress means nothing.' *QMC*, pp. 505–506.

'After the break-up (*infisāl*) of the union between Syria and Egypt in 1961, I realized that we needed a theory of society for the pan-Arab Movement.' *QMC*, p. 508.

'I realized...that the principle of making theory had to come from inside Arab culture in order to change Arab thought. Islam and the Qur'an are at the basis of how Arab culture is formed.' *QMC*, p. 509.

14. Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, *al-Kitāb wa'l-Qur'ān: Qir'a mu'āšira [The Book and the Qur'ān]*, Dār al-Aḥālī li'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzī', Damascus, 1990.
15. See footnote 11 above.
16. See *QMC*, p. xviii.
17. Christmann (see *QMC*, p. xxxiii, n. 40) implies that Shahrur might be an inheritor to the linguistic studies on the Qur'an undertaken by Toshihiko Izutsu in the early 1960s. A brief perusal of the first few chapters of the latter's *God and Man in the Koran*, Tokyo, 1964, are enough to dispel this claim. Izutsu's primary approach could be described as structuralist, and largely opposed to the dialectical criticism professed by Shahrur. Izutsu furthermore never questions the semantic inheritance of the interpretative tradition, as his theories are more concerned with discovering complementarities to reflect relational semantics.

feel that Shahrur has gone far enough in detaching himself from traditional interpretations.¹⁸

The focus of his introduction is on the socio-intellectual context of Shahrur and the apparent *frisson* he is supposed to have delivered Islamic society, by dint of his ideas.¹⁹ The genre is relentless though, as Christmann litters the text with patronising footnotes whenever Shahrur outdoes himself in hyperbole or runs away with an *ad hominem* argument.²⁰ The general nature of the ideas of this protagonist are, however, displayed with utmost elegance and candour in the interview with Eickelman that is attached to the otherwise well-packaged Brill volume. It is Shahrur *sans*-Christmann, and serves as a good contrast to the rest of the book.²¹

It is not the intention of this paper to counter the author's thesis as regards his new reading of Islamic history and his understanding of the deposit of faith (*turāth*) as transmitted and understood by the jurisprudential schools. Others have ably taken up this latter task.²² Our aim here is to examine some of the underlying philosophical premises in the light of the above exposition that permit such a thesis to be presented in the first place, rather than refute his thought point by point.²³ Any cursory perusal of Shahrur's work would yield considerable evidence of the influence of a potpourri of post-enlightenment western philosophical concepts, not unlike

18. See *QMC*, pp. xlvī–xlvii: 'And since it is not easy to deal in detail with Islamic law from a purely philosophical point of view, and since his philosophical views are all outlined in Qur'anic vocabulary, one occasionally gets the feeling that he applies to universal ethics, religion, and law a still dominantly "Islamic" rather than purely philosophical or scientific perspective. Ironically, in Shahrur's effort to fit the God of the Qur'an or of *shari'ā* law into the mould of a neo-Whiteheadian system, parts of the latter's truly and uncompromised universality seems to have been lost.'

19. See the introduction to *QMC*.

20. See for example: *QMC*, pp. 46, n. 41; 147, n. 33; 205, n. 23. See also the second interview of the book with Christmann where the latter's leading questions qualify the woolly concepts unearthed in the first interview with Dale Eickelman. See also Christmann's question regarding theory and ideology, *QMC*, p. 527.

21. *QMC*, pp. 501–535.

22. See Christmann's introduction for a review of works written as critiques of Shahrur in *QMC*, pp. xxii–xxvii.

23. As most of his assertions are made subjectively, and, it is contended, made without sufficient reason.

the influence of what are termed cargo-cult beliefs in anthropological studies.²⁴ These conceptual cargo cults or pidgin philosophies, therefore, are the object of this study, that is, to examine the way in which they are wielded as neo-objective standards before the Islamic tradition and its concomitant intellectual sciences.

The transformation that Shahrur seeks to engender is above all one of definition, whether it is of man himself or that of the *dīn*. The proposal has become a common one in the last forty years with varying intensity dependent upon the political pressures faced by Islamic societies. His critique is based on a two-fold approach of a challenge to the authority of the transmitters and interpreters of the tradition, in a sense their *turāth* monopoly, and that of the posited definition of the human condition itself. This notion of change permeates his discourse in a breathless prose full of cosmopolitan metaphors drawn mostly from popular science.²⁵ His primary premises that the knowledge structure of the Islamic tradition requires reinterpretation through a Marxist tool such as dialectical criticism²⁶ inevitably fall into the trap of subjectivity, so eloquently expounded by Kant, where the objective norm for truth is rejected in favour of establishing the knowing subject as the sole measure and judge of knowledge.

In the presentation of this study, the paramount conceptual theme in Shahrur's work will be examined, namely his espousal of a neo-naturalist belief in modern science, to explicate its provenance and outline its implication. This position possesses sub-sectional

24. Christmann refers to this unabashedly in *QMC*, p.xxii: 'This synthesis between Whitehead's speculative philosophy, German rationalist idealism, and the structuralism of his mathematical-engineering mind has given his work its distinctive character among the work of other philosophical thinkers.' On cargo cults see Hans Toch, *The Social Psychology of Social Movements*, Methuen, London, 1966, pp. 38–43.

25. A case in point is *QMC*, p. 178.

26. Regarding Marxism and dialectical criticism, to which we will return below, Shahrur states: 'As a method, that is, as dialectical criticism, I believe it is worthwhile studying Marxism, but not as an ideology. I want to explore the causal connections between the form and the content (and interpretations) of ideas at a given historical moment, and the economic, social, and ideological factors that have shaped and determined their content and form. This is why dialectical criticism is so important in my theory of knowledge. But apart from that I don't take anything from Marxism.' *QMC*, p. 531.

themes such as the idea that a true interpretation of the tradition necessitates an abandonment of all previous received opinion and a beginning anew. This includes the championing of the idea of technique or method as the most important criteria in the evaluation of knowledge, namely, the notion of the supreme importance of rules that can be mechanically applied and applied universally. The second sub-theme examines the idea of modern science *vis-à-vis* its deracination based on a historical misclassification of natural philosophy, leading to the uncritical appropriation of the nineteenth-century theory of necessary progress and its influence on Shahrur's derived definitions of man as a state of becoming rather than being.

The above sub-themes have been chosen *inter alia* to portray the specious nature of Shahrur's approach to the study of Islam in its reliance on culture-specific western philosophical concepts. The whole derivation of the *naturalist* fallacy²⁷ leading to a distinct view of physical nature, and the rise of modern positivist science as a standard of certitude, arises from the deliberate abandonment of late scholastic philosophy in the seventeenth century. Such reformers, as Shahrur, have imbibed the elimination of first principles by this intellectual movement in favour of the principles of a physico-mathematical science. It is our contention that these concepts are neither of universal application nor relevance, and consequently cannot be divorced from a particular religious and cultural development from which they emerge – one that is not shared by Islam. The attempt to graft these onto the Islamic tradition, consciously or not, illustrates a two-fold misunderstanding: it is to misunderstand Islam and its cosmological heritage; and to misunderstand the post-Christian West. It is our contention that this has been demonstrated in Shahrur's work by his inadvertent use of western concepts as incantations that affect the subliminally-primed reader by their mere utterance or formulation rather than any reasoned understanding of them. Their influence can be described as a cultural Diderot effect,²⁸ serving as a psychological hub around which

27. This term is used in the literal sense here, as the fallacy of the doctrine of naturalism, rather than in the philosophic sense ascribed to it by jurists opposed to natural law.

28. The Diderot effect is well-known to marketing and advertising consultants.

the intellectual Islamic landscape may be reinterpreted if Muslims succumb to their siren call. These concepts are to be looked at in the context of the overriding framework of the notion of the autonomy of morality. It is this moral individualism, as examined below, which permits Shahrur to pronounce on the tradition and feel himself qualified to do so.

The *Qu'ran, Morality and Critical Reason* is a disappointing and superficial book that offers very little to the reader. The disappointment lies in its intellectual naïveté, its base prejudices displayed in every chapter, and its unintelligible pontifications. Its style is reminiscent of the missionary orientalist of the early twentieth century, but with less taste and elegance. Shahrur's sarcastic prose²⁹ is offensive in its reductionism of Islamic society to that of a caricature not unlike the usual depictions found in the popular tabloid journalism of northern Europe, underpinning every stereotype of Arab societies. Arabs are portrayed as uncouth, intellectually challenged and child-like in their incapacity to show initiative in the social and religious realms – a Colonel Blimp's view of the foreign natives.³⁰ Islam is a cult of prayer, rather than a holistic civilisation, a description that is redolent of Marx's own reductionist view

The effect comes from the notorious example set out by Denis Diderot in his *Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown*, who noticed that the reality of his once shambolic study had changed dramatically following his purchase and acquisition of a new dressing gown. The effect of the purchase was to create the unconscious need to refurbish his study in such manner as to reflect continuity between his expensive garment and its surroundings. This desire to have continuity or coherence is reflexive in human nature, so that once a principle or an object is taken as a 'hub'; other parts of one's life are urged to conform to it. See James B. Twitchell, *Lead us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 198–200.

29. The appendage of 'esteemed' or 'honourable' often precedes criticism aimed at the '*ulamā*', suggesting that the title is used as a form for their mockery. For example *QMC*, pp. 71–72.
30. See for example *QMC*, p. 462: 'Over a long period of time, acquiescence has become second nature for Arab-Muslims, and a mentality of (political) surrender has become fixed in their minds. The hang-man-ruler who tyrannises his own people has – by this logic of surrender – become the epitome of a national hero.... The corollary of this slavish mentality is the sense of inferiority Arab-Muslims have when faced with their own heritage, their traditions, and the people who represent the Arab past.' See also pp. 463, 506, 528.

of religion focusing solely on the outer gestures of religious man whilst disregarding any inner spiritual reality.³¹ The striking feature of his writing is the summary dismissal of the intellectual inheritance of Islamic thought and its present continuity. He approaches the religion as if the traditional study of Islamic theology, cosmology, metaphysics, language and philosophy did not exist, and that the only remaining historical protagonists are the corner-mosque obscurantist imams and the credulous masses – a suitable and irresistible setting for the unfolding of his message of deliverance.³²

Shahrur's position is coterminous with various goals that he implies or explicitly advocates. According to him, the 'ulamā' for 1400 years have manipulated people by this stance to further their control over them.³³ They have done this because of their stupidity and their slavish attachment to the Prophetic era.³⁴ This in turn has

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31. See *QMC*, p. 464: 'The so-called Islamic awakening is a big swindle. Instead of an awakened morality we have gained a culture full of hypocrisy, dishonesty, and unreliability. And the more people focus solely on their prayers and rituals, and the more women decide to become *muhajjibāt* (veiled), the more we will observe a decline in order and public morality.' See also *QMC*, p. 465: 'Our honourable scholars are spreading a mentality of conformism which persuades the masses to do what they are told by their religious leaders. They do not want to hear critical questions from their followers and prefer their brains to be completely switched off.'
32. When any rare and brief mention is made of a scholar from history, it is used as an example to brief the reader of their inadequate intelligence merely on the basis of the epoch they happened to have lived in. A typical and unreasoned example is found in *QMC*, p. 343: 'Later exegetes such as al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī were victims of a scholarly ethos that, a) regarded the Companions as infallible and b) took their accounts as sacrosanct, resulting in doctrines that mutated "historical Islam" into Islamic history, a form of revisionism through which purely historical narratives turn into sanctified heritage, and heritage into legislation. By the time al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī wrote their commentaries, they could not but accept at face value the texts of the tradition which had acquired an authority that they did not dare to challenge.'
33. By 'ulamā', Shahrur means largely *fuqahā'* (jurists), as opposed to the serried ranks of intellectual and spiritual hierarchs of the Islamic intellectual sciences.
34. See for example *QMC*, p. 150: 'The Qur'an needs to be taken away from our honourable scholars because their attitude is like that of uneducated people: they surrender their brains uncritically in a cloud of piety. They do not ask questions that satisfy the modern, rational mind, nor do they understand the philosophical quest for the truth. They use the Qur'an primarily as a tool for moralistic and ritualistic exhortations to bring the masses in line with their views. The Qur'an needs to be studied by an enlightened, educated, and

led to a rigidity whose final expression is terrorism. The political and social problems faced by Muslims today are a direct consequence of this obsession with immutability. If we were to look closer at the Qur'an, however, we should find that liberal democracy, economic success, scientific advancement, and an equitable sexual morality is just around the corner and can be read into the text. Those in the way of this cultural cornucopia are the '*ulamā*' and their fabricated *sunnah* Shari'ah, which entraps all Muslims. The way forward is to dispense with the Shari'ah in favour of civil and criminal codes loosely based on it whilst retaining enough cultural traits to provide an element of recognisable Muslim identity.³⁵ As for the Prophet ﷺ, we should continue to revere him, even fondly, in the same way as a Thomas Jefferson or George Washington, but nothing more.³⁶

Shahrur still adheres, somewhat naively, to the theory of necessary progress, the theory of transformist evolution, the triumph of mathematical exactitude as expression of theological certitude and several other canards inculcated into mass-man in Europe and America prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. These theories pepper the text in its entirety, and are never questioned, precisely because they are worn as articles of faith that are deemed

intellectually open readership.' This is fairly typical of Shahrur's prose. It is interesting to note that the refrain he uses over and over again is that of the '*ulamā*'s relationship with tradition being one of power. This reductionism is typical of Bacon's notion of knowledge as primarily representative of power rather than wisdom.

35. See for example *QMC*, p. 497: 'We have proposed throughout the volume that Islamic law should be applied as human and civil legislation within the limits that Allah has set. It requires the principle of *hanifiyya* which allows change and plurality of opinions. It requires the institutions of civil society and the existence of legislative assemblies, a fair electoral system, democratic elections, and the possibility of correcting and revising religious *fatwās*.' For Shahrur, *hanifiyya* is the 'curvature' or the ever-changing human interpretation of the law depending on the latest scientific advances.
36. See *QMC*, pp. 18–19: 'It would be fatal to insist that societies should always be modelled according to Muḥammad's (s) state on the Arabian Peninsula 1,400 years ago. It would mean defeat and stagnation if his words and deeds remain the highest ideal of human behaviour, so all-embracing that they cover all spheres of life until the coming of the Last Hour. To do so would give Muḥammad's (s) words and deeds, including the way he ate, the way he dressed, and the way he used his toothpick, the same sanctity as the injunctions of *the Book*.' See also his unorthodox views on the Prophet ﷺ, *QMC*, pp. 80–101.

unquestionable and *de rigueur*. His theory of liberal democracy is propagandist and unreasoned. His presentation and espousal of the social contract doctrine is ahistorical and superficial.³⁷

There is a great difficulty in providing a succinct critique due to the mercurial nature of Shahrur's text, and what he is proposing: namely self-expression masquerading as philosophy.

The following is an examination of his paramount fallacies, concepts that any reader should be aware of in their implications following the overriding ambience that the Kantian manifesto has seemingly facilitated for our author. It is fitting, therefore, to outline in brief the morality that Kant sought to establish by way of his critique.

*A survey of Kantian morality
and its implications*

The 'reformers' of Islam are all characterised by a desire to cherry-pick philosophical contentions and apply them in a de-contextualised form without any reasoned understanding of the notion that these contentions are necessary parts of a larger conceptual structure that is inseparable from them. The desire for moral autonomy through emancipation from religious authority, as Shahrur advocates, cannot be divorced from the wider import of this act given the Kantian manifesto of the Enlightenment.

Humankind as a whole has greatly advanced, so much so that we no longer need another prophet or another revelation as we can rely on reason and our matured experiences of this world. The scientific institutions of the modern era have inherited prophecies and prophethoods, and the new legislative assemblies and parliaments have inherited ancient messengers and their messengerhoods. In other words, with the 'seal of the prophets' ended too the period of external, moral intervention and consequently also the role of religious experts.³⁸

37. For his theory of democracy and doctrine of the social contract, see *QMC*, pp. 337–338, 393, 464, 528–529.

38. *QMC*, p. 75. See chapter 2 for his arbitrary reinvention of the meaning of messengerhood and prophethood.

These contentions belong to and represent a cosmological point of view that immediately becomes operative once these contentions are imported. A brief summary of the nature of this autonomy, and whence it came, is of the utmost importance so that one may situate a phenomenon such as Shahrur and comprehend why he feels qualified to speak as he does.

Moral autonomy as a concept precedes Kant's treatment of it, namely in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and later Christian Wolff, who both opposed a morality based on obedience. Rousseau identified human value in sentiment rather than intellect, a virtue possessed by all men. His call for man to return to nature was a call to relieve man of every social bond that tied him and restrained his liberty.³⁹ The argument outlining this stance may be recited in this way:⁴⁰ God, who is Just, will judge man on the basis of his adherence to the demands of morality. It would be unjust of God, therefore, to judge man in this way, had man not been given the *a priori* knowledge and capacity to determine the nature of those

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39. According to Rousseau, all passions are good and any restraint an infringement of liberty. Any law imposed by society from without is a curtailment of liberty precisely because all men were born free. As a return to a primitive state of nature, however, was historically inconceivable, the answer lay with the theory of the Social Contract borrowed from Grotius. In *Émile*, Book II, para. 232, Rousseau states: '...the greatest good of all is not power but liberty. The truly free man only wants what he is capable of, and does as he pleases. That is my fundamental principle...', and at para. 267: 'Let us lay down as an undeniable first principle that the first movements of (human) nature are always right.' In his *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire*, VIIIth promenade, he states: 'I no longer have any other rule of conduct than in everything to follow my propensity without restraint.' See *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, trans. by Charles E. Butterworth, Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1992, p. 89. If every man is a law unto himself, how can the state be said to operate? Who has the right to make these laws unless it be all the people, and how can they do this? Rousseau stated that this could be done by subjecting oneself to the General Will, where every man could remain both free and bound by the law. Rousseau would say that no law could be against the real good, since men are fundamentally good, and know by instinct what is for their own good. Freedom, therefore, is the acceptance of the General Will regardless of its reasonableness, so that man is paradoxically deemed to be free even if he does not desire what he is obligated to perform.
40. This particular argument, followed by many subsequent philosophers, is recited lucidly by Herbert of Cherbury (1581–1648), the founder of what is now termed intuitionism. See J.B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 513.

demands himself. That is to say, man can determine by himself what he needs to do and is in no need of an external authority to guide him.

As a philosopher, Kant set out to subject the human mind to a complete critical process so as to resolve the conflict between rationalism and empiricism by devising a particular type of phenomenalism. Essentially Kant was attempting to safeguard his belief in Lutheran pietism. Rationalism had by then descended to a pantheism, where its adherents could not successfully establish the transcendence of God over nature. Empiricism in turn had descended into scepticism, and could not resolve the issue of the separation of mind from nature. Both schools of thought held that man was unable to know things directly, but rather seized their impressions as phenomena. Rationalists examined the impressions made by things on the rational faculty. Empiricists examined in turn the impressions made on the sense faculties.⁴¹ Both schools sought to find a methodology to examine whether the knowing subject could ever be certain of the object of knowledge. Descartes appropriated mathematical deduction to answer this question, whilst Francis Bacon appropriated the inductive methodology.⁴²

Kant's main aim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* was to secure

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41. This view of the history of philosophy is somewhat indebted to Kant's own view of the demarcation of modern philosophy from science by the identification of the core of pre-Kantian philosophy with epistemology, in essence the foundation of the sciences and therefore distinct. According to Rorty, the standard version of the history of modern philosophy as a struggle between rationalism, which sought to reduce sensations to concepts, and empiricism, which sought an inverse reduction, was a formulation first advanced by Kant. He might have alternatively stated the difference between the two camps in terms of the relations between propositions and the concomitant degree of certainty required of them rather than their supposed elements. In Rorty's view, this would have altered the way that the problematic of philosophy would have been historically perceived and understood. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, pp. 148–149. For a useful bibliography on the historiography of philosophy before and after Kant see *Ibid.* pp. 132–133, n. 2.
42. Interestingly enough, according to Alfred Noyes, when Galileo declared his discovery regarding the stars, the supposedly broad-minded Bacon, as the inventor in 1600 of the first telescope in Europe, was adamant that the telescope used must have been faulty to have given such results. See Alfred Noyes, *The Unknown God*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1934.

a foundation in metaphysics for Newtonian natural science.⁴³ His objective was to secure a strong defence for pietism, and in particular his belief in God, freedom and immortality (of the soul).⁴⁴ Therein he wanted to establish a metaphysic on the basis of empirical observations rather than abstract definitions. Whereas Descartes sought to demonstrate metaphysics through mathematical principles, Kant had effectively shifted down to a demonstration based on physics.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, written in 1781, Kant set out to explore human reason and its capacity, and whether it was capable of scientific certitude. Descartes had reiterated the assumption that the human mind had innate ideas⁴⁵ that gave access to knowledge that was universal in nature, since all minds were endowed with these innate ideas. The element of necessity was also provided on the basis that any scientific knowledge had also to be necessary as well as universal, as required by inductive reasoning. The problem lay, however, with the separation between what was known, capable of being known, and the natural order of things.

The fundamental cognitive dilemma Kant sought to explain was the nature of the objective additions to human knowledge. Descartes had previously established in his system that the mind of man could only know its own internal states and was unable to accede to anything outside the limits of consciousness. The Cartesian dualism that Descartes introduced, therefore, was the bifurcation of mind and body. In short, the mind (*res cogitans*) was responsible for intellection, sense perception, and all voluntarist activity. The world of the body (*res extensa*), on the other hand, was the unconscious world of extension in length, breadth, and depth.⁴⁶ The mind was only united to the body by way of the pineal gland,

43. 'The true method of metaphysics is fundamentally the same as that which Newton has introduced into natural science, and which has there yielded such fruitful results.' Kant, *Inquiry Concerning the Clearness of Principles in Natural Theology and in Ethics*, 1763, quoted in Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1938, pp. 231–232.

44. Norman Kemp Smith (ed.), *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Macmillan, London, 1933, p. 29 (Bxxx).

45. See the third meditation in René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and the Meditations*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe, Penguin, London, 1968, p. 116.

46. See the second and sixth meditations in *Ibid.* pp. 102 & 150 respectively.

although we are not told how this comes about. It is important to note that this union was not a cognitive one, the essence of matter being extension and the essence of mind or soul, thought. Descartes arrives at this juncture by rejecting the traditional scholastic and real distinction between substance and accident. His essential mistake was to discern only a logical rather than a real distinction between a substance and the attribute by which we know it. His reasoning essentially led to material substance becoming reduced to mere extension, as thought became indistinguishable from spiritual substance.⁴⁷ It is not difficult to see how one then arrives at Kant's *apriorism*.⁴⁸ The world beyond the mind may exist for Kant, but we can know nothing of it except the phenomena created by our own minds to explain it. We are in a sense, therefore, the creators of our own reality. The line between Cartesian dualism and idealist immanentism is thus completed. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant expresses the notion of substance as a synthetic *a priori* judgment.⁴⁹ For Kant, substance, therefore, has no ontological value and cannot tell us anything of the nature of reality, the essence of things that must remain unknown.

The difference for Kant between objective and subjective is not the usual one, but is one of degree rather than one of opposites. Existents are deemed objective if they are determined by purely physical causes, and subjective when dependent on physiological and psychological conditions.⁵⁰

For Kant, objects are of two classes: *phenomena*, the subjective impression or appearance of things, and *noumena*, things as they are in themselves. Kant, then, stipulates three cognitive possibilities open to speculative thought: sense, intellect, and reason. One is a subspecies of the other rather than an opposite. The senses are endowed with *a priori* elements of time and space. When phenomena invoke the action of the sense faculty, the faculty contributes the

47. See *Les Principes de la Philosophie*, 1^{ère} partie, p. 601, para. 63, in Descartes, *Oeuvres et Lettres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris, 1953.

48. *A priori* cognition means knowledge that one appries without it being informed by sense experience.

49. Smith (ed.), *Ibid.*, pp. 483–484 (A565/B593–A566/B594).

50. Norman Kemp Smith, *A Commentary to Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, 2nd ed., Macmillan, London, 1923, p. 279.

elements of time and space to the act of cognitive interaction. These elements serve to mould the perception of phenomena.⁵¹ Once this has taken place, it becomes an empirical intuition, which in turn serves to invoke the intellect to act upon it and mould it in accordance with its own *a priori* categories, of which there are twelve.⁵²

Once an empirical intuition has been moulded or organised and sorted in this way, it is termed a judgment. These categories are in the form of four master categories, with each of the four having three branches. The four master categories are quantity, quality, relation, and modality. Judgments in turn invoke reason with its *a priori* forms, which are depicted as three master ideas: the idea of the ego or the self, that which unifies all internal phenomena; the idea of other than the self or the world, that which unifies all external phenomena; and the idea of the beyond the self or God, that which unifies all phenomena. When judgments are moulded by these master ideas, which belong to the *noumenal* world, they are then considered reasoned knowledge.

Following upon this, judgments are of two types: analytic and synthetic. An *a priori* analytic judgment is what the rationalists adhered to, but the criticism here for Kant is that such a judgment is incapable of advancing science as it is static and non-expansive. Empiricists employ synthetic judgments but they are examples of *a posteriori* judgment, where the predicate is a fact of experience that cannot therefore be universal or necessary. The synthetic *a priori* judgment devised by Kant is expansive and existential, such as the statement *all bodies are heavy*. The concept of heaviness, as a predicate, cannot be inferred analytically from the concept of bodies. Such a judgment, Kant states, requires two elements, namely form and matter. Form is provided *a priori* by the intellect, as the manner, function and law of knowing. Matter is the empirical perception man gains from the phenomenal world. Form provides universality and necessity, and matter provides empirical knowledge.

51. It is interesting to note that Newton stated that his physics necessarily required the existence of an absolute space and an absolute time. See Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, p. 234.

52. It is difficult to see why there are only twelve, or a reasoned basis for only such a number.

The synthetic *a priori* judgment is Kant's epistemological cornerstone. The system of concepts constituting *a priori* knowledge, i.e. knowledge not dependent on experience, is termed by Kant as transcendental and is opposed to the empirical mode when it concerns modes of knowledge.

The difficulty here is that there can be no assimilation of reality as such but only an assimilation of a 'construction' of reality. A synthetic *a priori* judgment is an illusory category that can, in the final analysis, never avoid being analytic.⁵³ Reality is thus reduced to the effect of phenomena on sense perceptions alone. Beyond this stage the whole of reality is reduced to the world of the mind. Phenomena are merely responsible for catalysing the sense perceptions to function, and the *noumena*, things as they are in themselves or essences, cannot be known at all. There can be no objectivity in knowledge, therefore, and this inevitable subjectivity can only lead to a profound and insoluble scepticism. If it is subjective, then it may be asked in what way Kant's work can be considered critical rather than dogmatic. If there is scepticism as an end result, then in what way can one speak of moral obligation? If there can be no certainty, in what way can there be any effective metaphysics?

The crucial factor to remember when reading Kant is that he firmly belongs to the German Romantic movement, wherein sentimentality sought to escape a rigid rationalism leading to the intuitionism and immanentism associated with Lessing and Goethe. What Kant postulates, as a Copernican revolution in philosophy,

53. 'We may say that a general proposition, such as that $2 + 2 = 4$ can be true in either of two ways – either *a posteriori* or *a priori*. It is not true for objects in the outer world unless these conform to certain conditions. These conditions cannot even be stated, still less applied, without some knowledge of the outer world, so that when the proposition is applied to real objects, it obviously represents *a posteriori* knowledge; we first test whether the proposition is true for the class of objects under consideration, and the proposition then merely gives back to us the knowledge we have previously put into it. But the proposition can also be applied to classes of objects we imagine in our minds in such a way that they satisfy the conditions necessary for the proposition to be true. When used in this way, the proposition contains pure *a priori* knowledge, but it can never tell us anything about the outer world – only about the imaginings of our own minds....

'We see that when mathematical propositions are applied to objects in the *a posteriori* manner, they can supply no knowledge about the outer world beyond that we have previously put into them, while when they are applied in the *a priori* manner, they can give us no knowledge at all about the outer world – *ex nihilo nihil fit*.' Sir James Jeans, *Physics and Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1942, pp. 47-48.

is that the question of how to act precedes any development of metaphysical principles to determine the direction and nature of this action. The *how* is to be provided by practical reason, that is to say, a function of the will. The objective reality of the moral law, he postulates, cannot be found through speculative reason or by way of deduction, neither can it be proved *a posteriori* by experience, ‘and yet it is firmly established of itself.’⁵⁴

In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, written in 1788, Kant sought to establish that the moral law, as categorical imperative, imposes an absolute obligation that is universally applicable. By categorical imperative, Kant meant the form in which the moral law is commanded; as he states in the second section of his treatise, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, categorical imperatives are commands that are not conditional on any purpose. In one sense, it is another way of saying a law of conscience. In *Groundwork*,⁵⁵ Kant states that the sole aim of the book is to seek out and establish the supreme principle of morality.⁵⁶ He adds further:

I have adopted in this work the method which I think most suitable, proceeding analytically from common knowledge to the determination of its ultimate principle, and again descending synthetically from the examination of this principle and its sources to the common knowledge in which we find it employed.⁵⁷

A particular dilemma in this statement is Kant’s appeal to the premise of ‘common knowledge’ without proceeding to define what this knowledge is and the nature of its commonality. Further on in

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54. See *The Analytic of Pure Practical Reason* in T.K. Abbott (transl.), *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason and other works on The Theory of Ethics*, Longmans, 3rd edition, London, 1883, pp. 120, 136. All translations will be from the Abbott edition unless otherwise stated.
55. *The Moral Law or Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, a new translation with analysis & notes by H.J. Paton, Hutchinson, 1947. See also *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* in Abbott, *Kant’s Critique*.
56. Paton, *The Moral Law*, p. 60, para. viii; *Fundamental Principles* in Abbott, *Kant’s Critique*, p. 7.
57. Paton, *The Moral Law*, p. 60, para. xiv; *Fundamental Principles* in Abbott, *Kant’s Critique*, p. 7.

the first section of the treatise,⁵⁸ he again refers to 'the common understanding' without any definition. Is this meant as common sense as a mode of knowledge, in which case it is the raw material of philosophy and inferior to it, or common sense as an object of knowledge, in which case it is synonymous with first principles? This is a fundamental omission, as Kant predicates his system on the universality of such a notion, that is to say, that it is true to all at all times. It is difficult to see how a subjective notion such as this can be elevated to universality by a mere *stroke* of the philosopher's pen.

It could be said that Kant is merely attempting to establish morality on the basis of reason rather than sense or emotion. As emotions are subjective and vary from person to person, Kant alternatively founds his morality on reason, which he takes to be universal. The laws of reason being the same as those of logic, he considers them to be absolute so that the reasoning process is as valid for one man as another. If universal on this basis, then there can be no variability in morality, and if based on reason, then they are also true to all men. To act immorally, therefore, is to act illogically, as he correctly posits further that the law of contradiction is the highest law of reason. We will return to this contention further below.

In the first section of *Groundwork*, Kant proceeds to outline that good will is defined as such not because of what it does or brings about, but simply due to its volition,⁵⁹ its act of willing. Moral evaluation thus is dependent on the intention of the will. If everything in nature functions according to laws, then only the rational being can have a conception or idea of law, and only rational beings possess the faculty of acting according to the conception of laws, or principles. It is this capacity which Kant terms the will. After delineating the primacy of will over reason, 'as a notion which exists already in the sound natural understanding', Kant proceeds to set out his concept of 'duty'.

Duty is the application of the good will when it opposes inclinations. The valuation of an act as good, its moral worth, is when it is performed from duty rather than inclination.⁶⁰ This is the first

58. Paton, *The Moral Law*, p. 72, I para. 21, Paton has 'ordinary mind'; *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, p. 21.

59. Paton, *The Moral Law*, p. 62, I para. 3; *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, p. 10.

60. Paton, *The Moral Law*, p. 65, I paras. 8–9; *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott,

proposition. If inclination and duty coincide, it is considered good only if duty was the motivating factor acted upon. This is somewhat over-prescriptive and it is unclear what weight Kant places on the nature in which the act is performed, as there is some case to be made that indifference is not seen as problematic provided that the overriding duty is performed. Kant appeals to the scriptural injunction of loving one's neighbour as an example to illustrate his concept of duty.⁶¹ The command to love one's neighbour is a duty, however, love as affection cannot be commanded but rather beneficence (i.e. practical or active kindness) can be, in spite of the fact that it may be against one's inclination. This he calls practical love as opposed to pathological love. It is a love that is rooted in the will and in the principle of action, rather than that of tender sympathy. The first proposition, therefore, is that there is moral worth attaching to an act so long as it is performed out of duty. Whether the aims achieved by the act are successful or not is unimportant for its moral valuation.

In his second proposition, Kant states that an action done from duty derives its moral worth not from the purpose at which it is aimed (e.g. feed the poor⁶²), that is to say that its worth is not dependent on the realisation of the object of the action but merely on the principle of volition by which the act has taken place, without any regard to why the act was undertaken. It is somewhat difficult to understand this proposition logically as there seems to be no connection with the first proposition. This new formalism means that duty cannot be defined by what it obliges, but by the mere fact that it is a duty.

In his third proposition, Kant states that duty is the necessity of acting from respect of the law. If the first proposition excludes inclination, and the second excludes results, the third posits pure respect for the law. What is law, then, it may be asked? The law is that which we impose on ourselves and recognise as necessary in itself. It is imposed on us by our will. Kant states:

Kant's Critique, p. 14.

61. Paton, *The Moral Law*, p. 67, I para. 13; *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, p. 15.

62. It is useful to contrapose Aristotle's more normative exemplar of the moral man as the man who gives to the poor because he loves the poor and not out of respect for the law. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, I., 8, 12.

As I have deprived the will of every impulse which could arise to it from obedience to any law, there remains nothing but the universal conformity of its actions to law in general, which alone is to serve the will as a principle...⁶³

By principle he means the categorical imperative, which is the form in which the command of the moral law is expressed. Kant provides several differing formulations of the categorical imperative: act only on that maxim⁶⁴ (i.e. moral principle) which you can will to become a universal law. He sets out his third practical principle for the will 'as the Idea of the will of every rational being as a will which makes universal law.'⁶⁵ According to this practical principle:

...all maxims are repudiated which cannot accord with the will's own enactment of universal law. This will is therefore not merely subject to the law, but is so subject that it must be considered as also making the law for itself and precisely on this account as first of all subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author).⁶⁶

This is the basis of Kant's autonomy. Man is subject only to the laws which are made by him and which are universal. He is further only bound to act in accordance with a will which is his own and whose purpose is to make universal law. So the imperative can be summed up as acting always on that maxim whose universality one

63. Paton, *The Moral Law*, p. 70, I para. 17; *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, p. 18.

64. 'A maxim is the subjective principle of volition. The objective principle (i.e., that which would also serve subjectively as a practical principle to all rational beings if reason had full power over the faculty of desire) is the practical law.' *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, p. 17, n. 1. Kant also adds another definition at p. 38, n. 1: 'A maxim is a subjective principle of action, and must be distinguished from the *objective principle*, namely practical law. The former contains the practical rule set by reason according to the conditions of the subject (often its ignorance or its inclinations), so that it is the principle on which the subject acts; but the law is the objective principle valid for every rational being, and is the principle on which it *ought to act* that is an imperative.'

65. Paton, *The Moral Law*, pp. 98–99, I para. 71.

66. Paton, *The Moral Law*, pp. 98–99, I para. 71.

can always will. What drives man to do this is pure practical reason, whose motivational ideal is to make certain that one adopts one's pure interest in obedience based on reverent respect for the moral law as one's sufficient incentive for acting in conformity with the legality requirement of the law.⁶⁷ This requires some elaboration. The first practical function of pure reason is to make us aware of the categorical imperative as a practical and concrete standard, *vis-à-vis* the legality requirement, for judging our material maxims. What is the legality requirement therefore? The legality requirement of the categorical imperative is that our action is such that we would want it to be raised to the status of a universal law of nature.⁶⁸ That is to say that the maxims of our actions, once universalised, would be consistent with the natural world in which the act is performed.⁶⁹

Kant enjoins us to treat other beings as rational beings belonging to the kingdom of ends, that is to say a union of these rational beings bound by a system of common laws. In this kingdom all rational beings must treat each other as ends rather than means to an end. How do we enter into this kingdom? We become members of this kingdom when we, by promulgating universal laws in it, are also subject to them. We belong to it in the capacity of individual sovereigns, because when giving laws we are not subject to the will of any other rational being.⁷⁰

There are ostensibly two senses to the notion of autonomy of morals. The first relates to the idea that autonomy, as a property of the will, can be conveyed as a form of self-determination, where the rational being determines for himself how to act on the basis of a particular maxim which can be willed as a universal law. It is this capacity that makes the actor responsible and accountable, and therefore inherently possessing the capacity to be moral. In the second sense, autonomy refers to the autonomy of the will as a moral principle, which is solely responsible for obligating the

67. Paul Dietrichson, 'What does Kant mean by "Acting from Duty"?', in Robert Paul Wolff, *Kant: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Notre Dame University Press, 1968, pp. 324–325.

68. This is the second form of the categorical imperative. See *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, Section II, pp. 39, 56.

69. This is the interpretation accorded by Richard Norman, *The Moral Philosophers*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 102.

70. *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, Section II, p. 54.

rational being's adherence to the law, and, furthermore, the basis of any act he may do in furtherance of the legal obligation.⁷¹ He cannot be obligated by any other principle or end. The law, as Kant states,⁷² must be authored by the will of the rational being, which is self-legislative. It is this 'freedom' that permits the will to have moral obligation. In this scheme, any moral law that must be obeyed must reside in one's own will and not on an external obligating authority such as God⁷³ or revelation. Heteronomic law, in contrast, obligates the rational being on the basis of *eudaimonia* or common good principles. The categorical imperative arises therefore from this dictum: that the autonomy of the will is the sole moral principle.

An example of a duty given by Kant as an illustration of the application of the categorical imperative is the duty to refrain from making false promises.⁷⁴ To make a promise to do something with an intention of breaking it would be to conflate two principles that contradict each other.⁷⁵ The two maxims or principles would then respectively be *people ought to believe such promises when they are made* and, at the same time, that *it is right that no one should ever believe such promises*.⁷⁶ If the latter maxim is universalised, however, promises would become worthless. Logical formality therefore dictates that an act should not contradict itself; hence there is a duty to keep promises in order to satisfy the principle of contradiction.

It is important to register that Kant equates here logical consistency of action with moral goodness. Logical consistency, or acting in accordance with formal logical principles, however, cannot provide in itself/themselves a definition of the morally good or true.

71. See J.E. Atwell, *Ends and Principles in Kant's Moral Thought*, Martinus Nijhoff, Amsterdam, 1986, p. 147.

72. *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, Section II, p. 98

73. 'So far, then, as practical reason has the right to serve as our guide, we shall not look upon actions as obligatory because they are the commands of God, but shall regard them as divine commands because we have an inward obligation to them.' Smith (ed.), *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 644 (A819/847).

74. *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, Section II, p. 40.

75. Viz. the principle of contradiction.

76. For a summary of logical consistency equating moral value see W.T. Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, Macmillan, London, 1937, pp. 32-35.

The definition of the true must always rest on an agency that is supra-logical, because logic can verify what the true proposition is only from following on from a proposition that is taken to be true itself. As a science, it cannot provide arguments for the truth, as this realm belongs properly to metaphysics, the science of first principles. All that is true is logically consistent but it does not follow that everything that is logically consistent is also true. A wicked act may be logically consistent, as in a society where cannibalism is acceptable morally, and yet be obviously morally unacceptable to a rational being. This would still be considered, however, a moral act by Kant on the application of his formalism. There is an inadequate capacity therefore to discern the moral from the immoral on other than relative grounds, which is Kant's fundamental fallacy.

In relation to heteronomy, Kant himself states confusingly in the *Groundwork* and *Analytic* that happiness as an end is desired by the rational being, and that he is incapable of escaping this predilection.⁷⁷ It is confusing precisely because he asserts that the desire for happiness must be eliminated as a motive for an act to be considered moral, which is practically speaking an impossible notion. In the *Analytic*,⁷⁸ he elaborates on this by explaining that our finite nature imposes the problem of desires on us, and that this condition is related to the demand for the satisfaction of our subjective feeling of pain and pleasure. This he terms a material principle of determination that may only be known empirically and therefore subjective rather than universal. Therefore, every rational being's subjective pain and pleasure determines in what he places his happiness. This establishes a contingent practical principle which is different from that which is required to become a law because of

77. There are two passages that illustrate this reiteration of Aristotelian doctrine, the first being: 'There is *one* end, however, which may be assumed to be actually such to all rational beings (so far as imperatives apply to them, viz. as dependent beings), and, therefore, one purpose which they not merely *may* have, but which we may with certainty assume that they all actually *have* by a natural necessity, and this is *happiness*.' *Fundamental Principles*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, Section II, p. 32.

The second: 'To be happy is necessarily the wish of every finite rational being, and this, therefore, is inevitably a determining principle of its faculty of desire.' *The Analytic of Pure Practical Reason*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, p. 112.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

its contingency. Kant's definition, however, takes pain and pleasure as sensual realities, hence their juxtaposition, whereas *eudaimonia* is not limited to the merely sensual or the common understanding of happiness. *Eudaimonia* more properly means the activity of the soul in accordance with complete virtue,⁷⁹ and according to Aristotle, is not therefore a mere passing or fleeting state of happiness, but more correctly an ontological state.

The contingency is not avoided, according to Kant, even if there were unanimous agreement amongst a collective as to what constitutes pain or pleasure, since we are unable to escape our particular inclination. However, happiness at hearing good news or pleasing God in some action cannot be localised to a part of the body, but partakes of our whole being. Moral happiness, furthermore, can be universal, because it impresses on our essential being. One can observe this in the performance of the act of communal prayer, an ascendance of the soul to the objective and transcendent realms, determining the will and fashioning the object of the will.

In conclusion, we can state that Kant's insistence that the motive of an act be a sole consideration is insufficient to ground a morality that possesses universal significance. If the reason for the moral goodness of an act is that it can be made into a universal law, then this excludes a large segment of moral acts. The ascetic man who undertakes ascetic acts is undoubtedly undertaking morally good acts; however, his ascetic acts are not for everyone and cannot be made into universal laws. Similarly, the man who undertakes a supererogatory act is undoubtedly performing a morally good act, but again this act cannot be made into a universal law. In the latter example, Kant's system does not provide for a gradation of the morally good neither of quality nor quantity.

In regard to autonomy, Kant essentially misunderstands God's ontological rights over us. A created being is autonomous in one sense, but this autonomy could be said to be derived from the act of creation itself. This, however, entails that the creature is dependent on God, or Being, as the fundamental basis of his condition. In other words, due to our dependent nature ontologically, our autonomy is subject to the Divine Will and not our own. God exists for

79. W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 20.

Kant in a reductionist sense, as a way of justifying our morality to ourselves as men, a moral postulate; as such, He is implied as an act of practical faith rather than believed in as a consequence of reasoned conviction.⁸⁰ This argument of convenience, as stated before, is ontologically untenable.

In the penultimate part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*,⁸¹ Kant turns his attention to the traditional proofs of God and criticises them on the basis of his epistemological monist position. Primarily, any recourse to the principle of causality by our speculative reason to establish a proof would prove problematic as the principle can never be more than a subjective law of the mind and without any ontological validity.⁸² The arguments from the contingency of things are also fruitless as and for the same reason. For Kant, God is a creation of pure reason in its search for an unconditioned unity of all predicates.⁸³ This is the basis of man's idea of God, a postulate needed for man to conduct his life on a meaningful and moral basis. The consciousness of the moral law, Kant stipulates, is a fact that cannot be deduced from anything more ultimate than itself.⁸⁴ As far as he is concerned, it is only valid, however, when on examination, it is shown to be *noumenally* grounded, in that the possibility of this consciousness is only due to the autonomous activity of a *noumenal* being, God.

Kant's main handicap is his refusal to allow metaphysical principles any dominion beyond the phenomenal world, and then only a subjective validity in the latter. By denying the ontological argument, he also doubts the ontological validity of primary ideas and first principles. The necessary relationship between the intellect and the intelligible is thus severed by this denial, and consequently the intellect is also denied by the lack of a corresponding intelligible. If the intellect's primary and formal object is intelligible being,⁸⁵ this relationship between the two is denied in Kant's system by the

80. Smith (ed.), *Ibid.*, p. 29 (Bxxx).

81. See Book II Chap. 3, *Ibid.*, p. 485–531.

82. See a discussion of this in R. Garrigou-Lagrange O.P., *The One God: a Commentary on the First Part of St. Thomas' Theological Summa*, translated by Dom Bede Rose O.S.B., Herder, London, 1943, p. 108 *seq.*

83. Smith (ed.), *Ibid.*, p. 366 (A403–A405).

84. *The Analytic of Pure Practical Reason*, in Abbott, *Kant's Critique*, p. 120.

85. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IV, chs. iv and v.

substitution of rational principles with irrational synthetic *a priori* principles. This means, therefore, that there can be no knowledge of being and, as Aristotle averred, one can no longer then affirm anything either about being or the existence of oneself or one's thoughts. If the ontological validity of the intellect is denied then there can no longer be a known object, but only the idea of an object. If this is the case, there can then be no distinction between the idea of the object and the means by which the intellect acquired knowledge of it. The causality of understanding consequently becomes inseparable from the direct act of understanding.

If God exists then we are subject to His laws, not ours. If we are subject only to ours, then this autonomy is flawed and cannot create real obligations. If we are self-legislators of laws, then we must be capable, like any other legislators, to repeal any law that we promulgate. According to Kant, we are legislators without this power, therefore to whom, it may be asked, are we beholden to for this authority? Where is, then, our autonomy, our freedom? If we are, on the other hand, able to repeal our own laws, how can there be any real obligations? If the categorical imperative is unavoidable due to our nature, then who has determined our nature?

This survey has been brief, as it is not this author's intention to delve into a refutation of Kantian permutations. Our main task, rather, has been to establish a precedent to contextualise the modern Islamic discourse that is searching for emancipation from religious authority on a doctrinal level. Kant, historically, was pivotal for opening the door to such thinkers as Schleiermacher,⁸⁶ whose espousal of religious autonomy and rejection of traditional religious authority led the way to evangelical Christianity and other emotional forms of Protestantism. The trajectory that Kant established was an attempt within the Protestant tradition to safeguard, once again, his form of Lutheran pietism. He essentially establishes the presuppositions of liberal individualism wherein questions of

86. 'Make sure of this, that no man is pious, however perfectly he understands these principles and conceptions [i.e. theological], however much he believes he possesses them in clearest consciousness, who cannot show that they have originated in himself and, being the outcome of his own feeling, are peculiar to himself.' See *On Religion*, edited & translated by John Oman, Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., London, 1893, p. 47.

fact are to be settled independently of anyone's wishes, in contrast to questions of value, which are subject to individual choosing in accordance with certain criteria.⁸⁷ The forces it unleashed however were to have ramifications beyond the Christian world. It is ironic that reformers such as Shahrur advocate a reform of Islam on the basis of a purported purification of the faith from its historical accretions,⁸⁸ on the basis of a philosophy that is itself no more than an accretion of the Protestant Christian tradition.

The fallacy of the tabula rasa

By this fallacy, I mean the idea that the Islamic tradition can be interpreted anew by divesting oneself of historical developments, seen as accretions by the reformers, in order to arrive at a true, objective and unprejudiced view. Whereas reformers until now have desired to return to a particular juncture in time which is perceived as a period of purity, as have the followers of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb in Arabia, Shahrur ostensibly wishes to institute a Year Zero. His plan is to reinterpret the religion on the basis of the revelation presently occurring, excluding over one thousand four hundred years of Islamic history. The absurdity of such a notion seems to have escaped him, but nevertheless places him in a quandary. His bid for such a task must either be premised on an authority or dispensation which he does not, nor can he, possess, or on a sufficiently reasoned argument that can pass muster, which he fails to produce by subjectively asserting meanings and definitions throughout his text.⁸⁹ Shahrur is explicitly stating that the histori-

87. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, Duckworth, London, 1971.

88. 'I vaguely understood in 1964–65 that any ideology that doesn't include a theory of knowledge is not really complete. At that time I realized that the first step was to formulate a theory of human knowledge and consciousness, the relationship between things outside yourself and things in your mind.... This relationship is the main issue in philosophy, and how to improve our understanding of it will remain the main issue until the Hereafter.' Shahrur is noticeably imbued with the Kantian formulation of reality, when he acquiesces with the notion that the fundamental problem of philosophy is to deliberate the above epistemic intellectual impasse. See his candid 1996 interview with Dale Eickelman in *QMC*, p. 508.

89. A clear example of this is Shahrur's redefinition of the terms *al-islām* and

cal religion of Islam has been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and unfulfilled for more than 1400 years, until his expositions saw the light of day.⁹⁰ This delusion is only made possible by his belief in the superstition of necessary progress; a superstition that allows men to consider themselves as wiser than the prophets and saints of old by mere dint of the technological sophistication of the world that they presently inhabit – as if this sophistication in itself is able to grant everyman an intellectual and moral superiority.⁹¹

Shahrur is at pains to present Islam as a religion that has been trapped doctrinally by ritually obsessive '*ulamā'*' who have misunderstood the scope of the Qur'an due to their attachment to an interpretation rooted to the life of the Prophet ﷺ; a life that is largely insignificant, as far as Shahrur thinks, as it is limited to a primitive period of time. In his view, the construction of the pillars of the faith on the basis of the Prophet's ﷺ life has further saddled the religion with an inheritance that does not arrive at the proper exploitation of the potentialities of the Qur'an, which must be interpreted without these impediments so that it accords more fully with the demands of modernity.⁹² This would permit a

al-imān at *QMC*, pp. 54–55: 'The fundamental difference between the two kinds of faith is that *al-islām* is the innate (natural) disposition of all people in this world, while *al-imān* is a form of ritual worship that contradicts humans' innate disposition.'

90. See *QMC*, p. 179: 'We are today in a much better position to understand the legislative verses of the divine message because of the advances that human and natural sciences have achieved. And we can confidently say that we have surpassed the Prophet's companions in doing so, with the exception, of course, of the area of rituals.'
91. This absurdity is eloquently summarised by Christmann in his valedictory introduction at *QMC*, p. xxxviii: 'The first movement consists of approaching the Qur'an with a cognitive understanding of reality that is deeply rooted in the most advanced discourse on nature, cosmos, and human society. Once approached in this way, it follows that any reading of any verse in the text must never contradict either human reason (as fed by scientific data from the humanities, social and natural sciences) or empirical reality (that is, globally available to human perception). This implies that the study of empirical data derived from objective reality must always *precede* the study of concrete passages of the Qur'anic text. It also implies that existing commentaries on the Qur'an which lack the contemporary episteme and fail to consider the most recent discoveries (and this by default includes the *tafsir* work of medieval scholarship) are to be barred from any consultation.'
92. See for example *QMC*, p. 494.

much-needed emancipation from the religious authorities that are self-serving, and furthermore an emancipation from a piety that is at odds with the commercial, economic and political goods sought by the developed nations. It is further contended that the latter are ends that ought to be pursued by Muslims.

Shahrur's *modus operandi* begins by arbitrarily redefining familiar words with his own meanings and nuances that are utterly divorced from their traditional underpinnings, proceeding then to apply the same words in a seemingly fluent manner with their new understandings.⁹³ This permits him to elaborate on his themes without fear of any effective criticism, as his subjective attributions of meanings would be alien to any scholar. This appropriation of traditional and familiar categories and concepts but with de-contextualised and inverted meanings is an effective tool for the disorientation of the traditional critic. It is also effective in implying to the casual and uninformed reader that the author is knowledgeable of the area he is traducing with his ideas. His dismissal by the traditional scholar is all the more likely to be interpreted as a reflection of the latter's limitations, and perhaps even mendacity, in the face of a superior and true interpretation of the *dīn*.

It would be beneficial therefore to begin with a brief examination of the idea that religious tradition can be reinterpreted *ab initio* at a particular juncture of time. The idea of the abandonment of all received opinion in approaching tradition is intellectually widespread throughout the post-Renaissance period in Europe. The first author to posit this idea is Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* published in 1620.⁹⁴ Bacon wanted to instigate a regeneration of

93. This is most notoriously illustrated by his new meanings for the terms *al-muslimūn* and *al-mu'minūn*; the first adhering to *al-islām* and the second to *al-īmān*. The first he defines as Muslim-Assenters, which comprises those that have a general belief in the existence of God even though they may belong to another religion or no religion. The second he defines as the Muslim-Believers, which comprises those who follow the Prophet ﷺ in the rituals and the five pillars of Islam. *QMC*, pp. 55–60. Interestingly enough, Kant, Bergson, and Whitehead perform similarly-minded redefinitions of familiar terms, creating an aura of sophistication around their ideas. Complexity, however, is not necessarily synonymous with intellectual depth in these contexts.

94. 'No-one has yet been found so firm of mind and purpose as resolutely to compel himself to sweep away all theories and common notions, and to apply the understanding, thus made fair and even, to a fresh examination of particu-

the theoretical and practical sciences by creating a new research method⁹⁵ by which he sought to establish a marriage between reason and the empirical faculty, for 'their divorce has thrown into confusion all the affairs of the human family.'⁹⁶ Bacon asserts his new method as follows:

There are and can only be two ways of searching into and discovering truth. The one flies from the senses and particulars of the most general axioms, and from these principles, the truth of which it takes for settled and immovable, proceeds to judgment and to the discovery of middle axioms. And this way is now in fashion. The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way, but as yet untried.⁹⁷

The enemy of the above-stated method applied in the human mind is received doctrines. The advancement of science is not, therefore, to be based on the *superinducing or engrafting* of new things upon old.

We must begin anew from the very foundations, unless we would revolve forever in a circle with mean and contemptible progress.⁹⁸

lars. Thus it happens that human knowledge, as we have it, is a mere medley and ill-digested mass, made up of much credulity and much accident, and also of the childish notions which we at first imbibed...there is no hope except in a new birth of science; that is, in raising it regularly up from experience and building it afresh; which no one (I think) will say has yet been done or thought of.' See Aphorism xcvi of the *Novum Organum*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Denon Heath, vol. iv, London, 1858, p. 93.

95. See the preface to *The Great Instauration*, in Spedding et al., *The Works of Francis Bacon*, pp. 18–19.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

97. *Novum Organum*, in Spedding et al., *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Aphorism xix, p. 50.

98. *Ibid.*, Aphorism xxxi, p. 52. See also Aphorisms xxxii–xxxvi.

Bacon speaks chillingly of his desire for his doctrine *to enter quietly* into prepared minds.⁹⁹ That which stands in the way of such preparedness is four classes of idols. The first he calls *Idols of the Tribe*, which are founded on human nature as it is. Man is not the measure of things, for his perceptions are in accordance with the measure of the mere individual and not the universe. In other words human nature entails an inescapable subjectivity.¹⁰⁰ The second he calls *Idols of the Cave*, which are the errors of subjective disposition;¹⁰¹ an even lower rung of subjectivity after that of human nature. The third he names *Idols of the Market-place or Public Space*, which are the errors of public opinion and language.¹⁰² The fourth are the *Idols of the Theatre*, which represent the errors propagated by systems of philosophy.¹⁰³ These received systems are not unlike stage-plays that narrate a fictitious and unreal world. This leads to the corruption of philosophy by the admixture of superstition and theological supposition.

The basis of Bacon's method is to provide man with a mastery of the natural world through his notion of forms. By knowing forms, Bacon intends essences or formal causes. To know a form is to embrace the unity of nature in substances that may be totally dissimilar. In this scheme, the confinement of knowledge to efficient and material causes by Bacon is essentially to imprison oneself in the world of the senses. Having cleared the stables of the idols identified above, Bacon proceeds to build his own system based on the inductive method, namely through drawing up his four tables.¹⁰⁴ His system of exclusion and rejection posed by his

99. *Ibid.*, Aphorism xxxv, p. 53.

100. *Ibid.*, Aphorism xli, p. 54.

101. *Ibid.*, Aphorism xlii, p. 54.

102. *Ibid.*, Aphorism xliii, p. 54-55.

103. *Ibid.*, Aphorism xliv, p. 55.

104. Table of presence; of deviation or absence-in-proximity; of comparison; of absence or rejection. If one wanted to identify the nature of something, one would use the first table to set out a list of objects or operations where the object of study exhibits itself; the next table would be a list of objects or operations where it is absent but wherein there was no opposition to it; the third table would be a list where its degrees are compared; the fourth table would be a list of objects or operations which are incompatible with the object that is being studied. Out of a collation of these lists one would arrive at the cause of the object and therefore at an understanding of its nature. Bacon actually

tables¹⁰⁵ is however unworkable as a method, as it is impossible to create the purported required lists to isolate an individual cause out of a myriad number to explain an effect. This method by elimination, furthermore, was never used or utilised historically, and not even by Bacon himself. However, the idea of the *tabula rasa* was imbibed historically and influenced subsequent philosophical thought.

The fundamental flaw in Bacon's system is once again his rejection of metaphysics, which he rejects out of hand for the sake of a subjectively laden philosophy that can never transcend the limitations of the person that upholds it. This seeps into western philosophy through the call to purge the mind of received doctrines. This necessary purge is taken up by Descartes in his *Discourse* to illuminate the necessity of setting out a method of inquiry to ascertain what can be held as certain.¹⁰⁶ For these two thinkers, the notion of method¹⁰⁷ or technique becomes the dominant feature of their philosophies, although this remains more qualified in Descartes.¹⁰⁸ What is overlooked by both, however, is that a distinction must always be made between doctrine and method. Method is the way that one may arrive at a doctrine, as an order to be observed in a series of actions for the attainment of a particu-

uses the nature of heat as an example. *Ibid.*, pp. 127–158.

105. 'A really useful induction should separate nature by proper rejections and exclusions.' *Ibid.*, i., p. 105. By nature, Bacon is referring to cause.

106. Descartes devises four preliminary precepts for his observance: 'The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not know to be evidently so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy (*la précipitation*) and prejudice, and to include in my judgments nothing more than what presented itself so clearly and so distinctly to my mind that I might have no occasion to place it in doubt.' Discourse II in *Discourse on the Method and the Meditations*, translated by F.E. Sutcliffe, Penguin Books, London, 1968, p. 41. Also: '...As far as all the opinions I had accepted hitherto were concerned, I could not do better than undertake once and for all to be rid of them in order to replace them afterwards either by better ones, or even by the same, once I had adjusted them by the plumb-line of reason.' Discourse II, in *Ibid.*, p. 37. Also: 'I have always remained firm in the resolution I made...not to accept anything which did not seem to me more clear and certain than had previously the demonstrations of the geometers.' Discourse V, in *Ibid.*, p. 61.

107. By *method* is signified the order or process which should be used in the pursuit of certainty or truth. Modern science, it should be said, asserts method as a uniform process.

108. Discourse VI, in *Ibid.*, p. 77.

lar purpose. A method can be an effective (i.e. good) or ineffective (i.e. bad) method, but one cannot speak of method as being true or false. The Cartesian focus on method is at the expense of doctrine, and cannot be used to determine the truth or falsehood of doctrine, since method operates on a verisimilar basis.¹⁰⁹

The scholasticism which Descartes sought to overturn was very observant of the principle that the intellect can transcend this world, the world of appearances. It is capable of knowing substance, the nature, of an object of cognition, and therefore is the agent that renders phenomena intelligible. Descartes' purpose was to attempt to establish a ground for certainty in theological and philosophical fields akin to that found in the mathematical sciences. He also saw this ground as being a unifying epistemological principle. This is relevant to Shahrur because his position constitutes a limitation on intellectual freedom based on the belief that the progress of knowledge has proved traditional theology to be outdated. Although this limitation, when applied, would necessarily prove disastrous, it is nevertheless a conviction based on the result of conclusions that are premised on a philosophical basis, one that we contend is wrong.¹¹⁰ As for Descartes, it is not so much his conclusions that are of importance as much as the method he has devised for discerning real knowledge. This method has left a legacy that taints much of contemporary and so-called progressive thought.¹¹¹

109. Given one thing, another follows.

110. For Shahrur's theologically unintelligible understanding of freedom in this world, see *QMC*, p. 59, n. 50: 'Note that human beings are worshippers of God (*al-'ubbād*), not His slaves (*al-'abid*). Worshippers of God enjoy freedom of choice, on a personal as well as a political level, whereas slaves of God do not enjoy such freedom. Worshippers of God are capable of implementing justice in society, whereas slaves do not have such power. What Allah demands from every human being is worship (*al-'ibāda*), not slavery. So we are His worshippers (*al-'ubbād*) in this world (but we are free to choose between obedience and disobedience), while in the After-life we will become His slaves (*al-'abid*), since no choice will then be left to humans.'

111. When asked whether he had doubts, Shahrur replied: 'Yes. When I was in Russia, when I began to read the Qur'an, I knew I had to eliminate my doubts. How? I wanted to see the Qur'an's credibility. Abraham himself had doubts and from his doubts he came to certainty. I read about a theory of doubts in René Descartes' *On the Method of Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (*Ṭarīqat al-wuṣūl ilā'l-ḥaqīqa*). It is good to have doubts because you reach truth through them.' *QMC*, p. 509.

There are essentially three elements to Descartes' method.¹¹² The first element declares that any knowledge that can be doubted must be rejected as false.¹¹³ This is a proposition that Descartes elevates to an ontological principle, that is to say, he uses it as a means of determining the true proposition from the false. Any proposition, therefore, that possesses any grounds for doubt is to be rejected as false. The failure of this test is that it is not discerning enough. What, then, of the true proposition? It is only true if it can be proved true – otherwise it is false. If a certain proposition is rejected as false then logically speaking it asserts as true the contradictory of that proposition. If a report was received by a messenger from a far-off land that one's intended wife, Layla, was beautiful, but the news, due to the exigencies of the communication lines, could be doubted for some reason, then her purported beauty would be considered false. Further, the contradictory proposition would logically now be true, namely, that Layla was ugly, a proposition that is logically and necessarily upheld. The fundamental fallacy is one of equating that which cannot be proved true with that which is false, rather than concluding simply that if the proposition cannot be proved true, it does not follow that the proposition is false merely on the basis that it could not be proved true. There is no middle ground of uncertainty permitted. By classing what is merely uncertain as false, Descartes opens the way to the acceptance of propositions that are manifestly unproved, for example Layla being ugly, and this renders his method useless as a guarantor of true propositions.

The second element declares that only that proposition which can be proved with a certainty and clarity,¹¹⁴ like that of math-

112. On Descartes' method, see Anthony Nutting, *How Firm a Foundation*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1939; Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, Editions Poetry, London, 1946; and Henri Gouhier, *La Pensée Religieuse de Descartes*, Vrin, Paris, 1924.

113. 'I had long ago noticed that, in matters relating to conduct, one needs sometimes to follow, just as if they were absolutely indubitable, opinions one knows to be very unsure, as has been said above; but as I wanted to concentrate solely on the search for truth, I thought I ought to do just the opposite, and reject as being absolutely false everything in which I could suppose the slightest reason for doubt, in order to see if there did not remain after that anything in my belief which was entirely indubitable.' Discourse IV, in Descartes, *Discourse*, p. 53.

114. Or those ideas that are distinct and clear. Discourse V, in *Ibid.*, p. 61.

ematics, can be considered to be beyond doubt and therefore true. This element qualifies the first element by giving a criterion for the standard of proof required of the true proposition, so that it may be deemed free of doubt. Mathematical propositions, however, are analytically deduced from pre-agreed logical definitions. The universal appeal of this kind of certainty is in its basis of analytic judgments. The proposition $2 + 2 = 4$ is predicated on the agreed definition of 2 constituting two units, the addition and equal signs describing particular functions, so that there is a necessary, unassailable and logical implication of the outcome. The same holds true in geometry, with regard to what constitutes a triangle or rectangle. It is this certitude which Descartes wishes to import as a test of whether a proposition in any branch of knowledge is held to be true or false. The fallacy, however, lies in transposing mathematical certainty onto other philosophical sciences. Primarily, mathematics only deals with quantities of things abstracted from concrete objects, the subject being proximate causes. This abstraction renders the object of mathematics to be simple and essentially composed of intellectual constructs that exist only in the mind. These accidents, however, by way of their essences or natures, are capable of being known in their fullness in a way that the ordinary essences could never be. Although human knowledge can comprehend sensible bodies, it cannot encompass everything there is to know about them. This is precisely what could be termed the Sisyphus complex of modern physics.

The third element of his method is its foundation, namely the formula *cogito ergo sum*. As we saw above, the criteria for the truth of an idea are that it presents itself to the mind as clear and distinct. The *cogito* formula, according to Descartes, is a truth that is indubitable and therefore clear and distinct. This third element, in essence, posits the way that the two elements above are applied. Aside from the ontological absurdity of preceding being by the act of thinking,¹¹⁵ Descartes' universal doubt cannot be evaded by the *cogito*. The method of universal doubt does away with all principles of thought, such as, for example, the logical principle of

115. The absurdity lies in the notion that thinking is deemed to validate being, since by the nature of things there can be no thinking or thought prior to being.

contradiction. As such is the case, it is difficult to see how the *cogito* cannot be doubted, since its logical integrity can only be validated by principles that are accepted prior to its establishment.¹¹⁶ This is Descartes' insuperable problem.

The scientism that eventually came to fruition in the nineteenth century took Cartesianism to its logical conclusions, not only by reducing knowledge to what could not be doubted, as Descartes had done by his method, but to also deny all knowledge that could not be understood by the mind. This anti-intellectualism, which has watered many a reformer, has precisely at its root the conflation of intellect with reason, a conflation arising from a misapplication of later scholastic thought.

The Aristotelian-Boethian classification

The traditional position of scholasticism is important to comprehend in order to perceive the Cartesian trajectory, especially within the context of the classification of the speculative sciences.¹¹⁷ This will better situate the deviation scientism sought to establish, especially as mediated by Auguste Comte's extreme phenomenalism.

Aquinas provides a clear distinction and definition in his *De Veritate*¹¹⁸ between the intellect and reason. The mind, as faculty of ratiocination, is called reason (*ratio*) as opposed to the mind as the faculty of principles, which is known as intellect (*intellectus*). They both represent differences of function, however, residing as one power in man. Intelligence (*intelligentia*) is the act of the intellect, which is its power and therefore distinct from it rather than synonymous. The act of the intellect, that is to say intelligence, is *understanding*.¹¹⁹ One is said to understand (*intelligere*), according

116. A summary of the implications of this is set out in J.G. Vance, *Reality and Truth*, Longmans, London, 1917, pp. 86–114.

117. By speculative or theoretical sciences are meant those whose end is the contemplation of truth, sciences that are concerned with truth for the sake of truth rather than for any practical purpose; for example metaphysics. See Bernard Wuellner S.J., *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*, Bruce, Milwaukee, 1956, p. 112.

118. *De Veritate*, q. 15, 1 ad. 2; translated into English in St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Disputed Questions on Truth*, trans. James McGlynn S.J., Vol. II, pp. 272–275.

119. *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 79a. 10c; translated into English in *St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica: Complete Edition* in Three Volumes, trans. Dominican Fathers, Burns & Oates, London, 1947.

to Aquinas, because in some sense one reads (*legit*) the truth within (*intus*) the very essence of the thing.¹²⁰ Reason, on the other hand, denotes a transition from one thing to another by which the human soul reaches or arrives at knowledge of something else.¹²¹

The object of the intellect depends on which aspect of the intellect is in operation. The speculative intellect operates when the intellect apprehends knowledge without reference to things outside it. The practical intellect operates when the intellect apprehends knowledge with reference to activity or things in general. The distinction between the two aspects of this one power is in their object. The object of the former is the *true*, and of the latter, the *good*. This would seem at first to confuse the object of the practical intellect with that of the will, the *good*. The *good* of the practical intellect, however, is with reference to intelligible truth, whereas the *good* of the will is in reference to the *good* that is desired, i.e. the will directed to goodness as to an end.¹²² The intellect is also subdivided into the agent intellect and possible intellect, based on their differing objects. The actually intelligible is the object of possible intellect, which acts on it, i.e. the possible intellect, proceeding from potency to act. It represents a power of the soul to receive intelligible forms, and thus to be brought into the act of understanding.¹²³ The potentially intelligible is the object of the agent intellect through which it becomes actually intelligible.¹²⁴

For Aquinas, the intellect apprehends knowledge by way of abstraction, which means that it dematerialises things presented to it by the senses and spiritualises them by apprehending them as forms. First the external senses perceive the object¹²⁵ and send the

120. There is an important but very subtle distinction to keep in mind between essence and substance. In one sense they are interchangeable, in another, they are not. The essence is simply what a being *is*. It is the being's intelligible ground, the *eidōs* or *ratio* which defines that being. The substance is what a being *is*, *vis-à-vis* its own self-subsistence, the being in its identificational individuality; the *quod est* rather than the *quod quid est* of essence. We will return to this distinction and its implications below. See Jean-Hervé Nicolas O.P., 'Essence et Substance,' in *Revue Thomiste*, 1947, III, pp. 517-524.

121. *De Veritate*, q. 15, 1 ad. 2; St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Disputed Questions on Truth*, trans. James McGlynn S.J., Vol. II, p. 272.

122. *De Veritate*, q. 5, ad. 1; Aquinas, *Disputed Questions*, Vol. I, p. 201.

123. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 459.

124. *De Veritate*, q. 15, II ad.; Aquinas, *Disputed Questions*, Vol. II, p. 282.

125. It is well to note that the senses perceive the *datum* but it is not intelligible

image to the imagination, which acts as a storehouse of images.¹²⁶ The active intellect intercepts the image in the imagination and renders the essence of the object intelligible. Once it 'illuminates' the essence of the object, its operation is at an end, as when the possible intellect receives this, the abstraction of the form or nature of the object is then taken up by it and becomes thus activated. The intellect, according to its mode, receives under conditions of immateriality and immobility material and mobile bodies, as 'the received is in the receiver according to the mode of the receiver.' The soul, therefore, through the intellect knows bodies 'by a knowledge which is immaterial, universal and necessary.'¹²⁷

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century is marked by a very striking development in regard to the classification of sciences, largely driven by the desire to acquire a particular form of cognitive certainty. The traditional Aristotelian-Boethian classification of the theoretical sciences that was paramount at that time consisted of the three disciplines of natural philosophy, mathematics, and metaphysics or science of first principles – also referred to as the three degrees of abstraction 'which correspond to the degrees of immateriality or immaterialisation of the object.'¹²⁸ These three degrees classify the generic types of knowledge distinguished precisely by the degree to which the mind departs from the materiality of things. A science in this schema can be understood as the habit or inclination of the mind towards an object or truth with a view to cognitive assimilation. The definition of a science, therefore, must be a definition on the basis of its formal object, or the object in its intelligible capacity or form.¹²⁹ Formal objects, as stated earlier,

to us until the intellect has performed its abstraction. The senses therefore as such cannot be said to be the source of our knowledge.

126. *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 78a. 4c.

127. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Dominican Fathers, Burns & Oates, London, 1947, Vol. 1, p. 422; *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 84a. 1c.

128. Jacques Maritain, *Philosophy of Nature*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1951, p. 13.

129. 'Since every science is in the intellect, it should be understood that something is rendered intelligible in act insofar as it is in some way abstracted from matter. And inasmuch as things are differently related to matter they pertain to different sciences. Furthermore, since every science is established through demonstration, and since the definition is the middle term in a demonstration, it is necessary that sciences be distinguished according to the diverse modes of

are to be categorised or distinguished in proportion to their degree of immateriality, since the more immaterial the object, the more intelligible.

The first degree, natural philosophy, is that of the knowledge of sensible nature, where objects cannot exist without matter; i.e. physics, which is dependent on sensible matter for its existence and definition. The subject of natural philosophy is mobile being (*ens mobile*), since everything that contains matter is mobile, which is to say subject to change.¹³⁰ The second degree is that of the knowledge of things that are dependent on matter for their being but whose immaterial conception can be formed by the mind; i.e. mathematics, which is dependent on sensible matter for its existence but not for its definition. The third degree, and the highest, is that of the knowledge of first principles that are immaterial, and is properly the study of being as being (*ens inquantum ens*), the formal object of the science of metaphysics.

The relationship between the three sciences is the cornerstone of understanding the transformation wrought by Descartes and, subsequently, the idealists. The traditional and proper understanding of the sciences set out above is that each science is subalternated to the one above it. So natural philosophy or physics is subalternated to mathematics, which are both in turn subalternated to the science of metaphysics.¹³¹

In other words, they are both dependent on metaphysics for their first principles. Modern mathematics, for example, does not

definition.' See Book 1, Lecture 1, no. 1 in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, translated by Richard Blackwell, Richard Spath and Edmund Thirlkel, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, p. 3.

130. It should be noted that being *qua* being is not changeable unless it is material. The formal object therefore of natural philosophy is mobility. See Book 1, Lecture 1, n. 3 in Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, pp. 3–4.

131. The relationship between the three speculative sciences and their classification and subalternation is formulated by Ibn Sina in his *Risālah fī aqsām al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyya*, in *Tisʿ rasāʾil fī al-hikma waʾl ṭabīʿiyyāt*, Istanbul, 1298 AH, pp. 105–106. Aquinas in turn appropriated this classification for medieval Christendom, promulgating it in his commentary on *De Trinitate* of Boethius, namely questions 5 and 6. What we refer to as metaphysics, Aristotle referred to as theology or first principles. It is Andronicus of Rhodes who named the famous Aristotelian treatises, the metaphysics, literally meaning 'after the physics'. It should be also noted that the scholastics categorised sacred theology both as a speculative and practical science.

proceed from the basis of premisory principles that it furnishes, but from the basis of data which is neither true nor false but verisimilar. The fact that certain conclusions may be reached from the data that may be considered true and false does not change the premise. Therefore its first principles must lie elsewhere. Modern physics, in its deductive aspects, utilises the principles formulated by mathematics to provide it with first principles. In its inductive capacity (i.e. experimental trials), it proceeds from its own derived principles. If a speculative science is defined by its degree of immateriality through intellectual abstraction then modern physics is an imperfect science, in that in its inductive capacity, its conclusions are probable rather than certain. In its deductive capacity, it is too reliant on mathematics for its principles, and consequently, imperfect.

The meaning of subalternation refers to the doctrine that an inferior science is dependent on a superior science in its manifestation of truth.¹³² This means that an inferior science is dependent on a superior science for the principles on the basis of which it proceeds. Physics therefore is subalternated to mathematics, which does not mean that physics borrows the principles of mathematics as a science, but is reliant on the conclusions of mathematics as a science. Physics therefore is reliant on mathematics and must be united to it as a science *qua* science, although retaining its distinction at the same time, in order for it to be perfected, as it cannot furnish its own premises. Physics and mathematics are subalternated in turn to metaphysics, for their ultimate first principles are those of metaphysics. Without metaphysics, they remain descriptive but can never be explanatory *vis-à-vis* the truth of what they identify.¹³³

If we return to Descartes, we can see that his philosophy effectively seeks to subalternate metaphysics to mathematics. He does this because he associates metaphysics with the system of Ptolemaic physics of Aristotle, then superseded by other newer models. His

132. 'Vera subalternatio scientiarum definitur: dependentia unius scientiae inferioris ab aliqua scientia superiore in manifestatione veritatis.' Henrico Grenier, *Cursus Philosophiae: Volumen Primum*, Les Presses Universitaires Laval, Quebec, 1961, p. 211.

133. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

error was to link the two sciences together so that if the physics of scholasticism could be said to be no longer practically true, the metaphysics to which it was subalternated was, in his view, necessarily also tainted. To resolve the matter, Descartes took the order of the three abstractions and subverted the order to accommodate his principle of evidence (namely, that nothing can be true that can be doubted), and rendered the first abstraction as metaphysics, the second mathematics, and the third physics. Metaphysics is the first abstraction as such, because Descartes' method begins with the ideas that are *clear and distinct*, namely starting from the intelligible and descending down to the sensible.

The Aristotelian order in human reasoning had until that point always begun with the sensible ascending to the intelligible or immaterial in its journey. Descartes' method sought to bypass the material world entirely in his quest to establish a new epistemological premise. According to Maritain,¹³⁴ this subversion was Descartes' attempt to free the intellect from the determination of the sensible, by not asserting the sensible as a source for the origin of our ideas. By bypassing the concrete, Descartes begins the idealist nightmare of immanentism, where the mind becomes independent of nature. The *cogito* formula, however, could never amount to a first principle, as the sequence between the *cogito* and the *sum* is not demonstrable by the formula.

In his attempt to join metaphysics and physics Descartes sought to invent a universal science to shoulder the burden. In his search to find an adequate vehicle he founded the science of universal mathematics, wherein he employs algebraic equations to express geometric relations and figures. It is this universal mathematics to which, as a science, all other sciences are subalternated.¹³⁵

What of his physics in this scheme, one may ask? The Cartesian cosmology is saturated by mathematics, in that it is founded on a mathematical understanding of extension, from which all material properties are to be deduced. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes identifies his notion of physics with geometry;¹³⁶ and

134. Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1932, pp. 78–79.

135. René Descartes, *Règles pour la direction de l'esprit* in *Oeuvres et Lettres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris, 1953, pp. 50–51, Règle 4.

136. René Descartes, *Les Principes de la Philosophie* in *Ibid.*, Deuxième partie n. 64, p. 652. See also the discussion in Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philo-*

given that the basis of geometry is to proceed from the simple to the complex proposition, he identifies the simplest attribute of bodies as extension. This seeds the rise of the so-called Uniform Method of Science, establishing physico-mathematics as the norm and the measure of all sciences. Following this, the *cogito* may be modified to state *cogito ergo res sunt*,¹³⁷ wherein Descartes denotes the sensible bodies by his idea of them rather than allowing sensible bodies to shape his idea of them.¹³⁸

The world of extensions, the realm of the body, becomes that of a well-ordered machine in the Cartesian system, as only the realm of the mind is conscious. Animals are consequently also reduced to mere automata, with the consequent rise of corpuscularism and mechanistic views of nature. Whereas in the medieval Aristotelian world view, the substantial form and its entelechy defined the intellectual parameters of a sacred anthropology, the new view of nature had reduced the order of causality to the singular efficient cause, denying any final ends in the world. The denial of final causes disenfranchises purpose from the organic functions of creation. Nature is a display of efficient causes alone. The new science that arises from this position is equally disparaging of teleology in that it seeks to study efficient causes alone, hence its metaphysical inadequacy, as nature becomes merely instrumental. Kant effectively continues this trajectory of expressing people as ends in themselves and all other objects as mere means. In the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he defiantly states:

Now I say: man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end...

sophical Experience, p. 139.

137. 'I think therefore things are.' See Etienne Gilson's essay, 'Le Réalisme Méthodique', in *Philosophia perennis*, volume 2, J. Habbel, Regensburg, 1930, p. 743.

138. It is naturally beyond the scope of this paper to delve too deeply into the ramifications and details of Descartes' own Copernican revolution. I have sufficed to outline in rather broad strokes how it is that we have arrived at a situation where positivist science has become the arbiter of all knowledge.

Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on Nature's, have...if they are non-rational beings, only a relative value as means, and are therefore called things; rational beings, on the contrary, are called persons, because their very nature points them out as ends in themselves, that is, as something which must not be used merely as means, and so far therefore restricts freedom of action (and is an object of respect).¹³⁹

The above viewpoint sets the pace for the environmental destruction that has been so much a part of the western way of life in the latter half of the eighteenth century down to our own. The displacement of any value or worth in the environmental world that is subjectively unrelated to ours is rooted in the philosophy we have attempted to delineate.¹⁴⁰ The Islamic viewpoint is entirely opposed to this world view, precisely as Islamic intellectual history has no philosophy of mechanisation or corpuscularism. The sacrality of creation has never historically been challenged intellectually in the Islamic world, so that the espousal of scientism and its inevitable conclusions by reformers such as Shahrur is not merely incoherent logically but, more importantly, can only be understood in a post-Christian intellectual ambience. Islamic philosophy never arrived at a Cartesian angst or possessed a Kantian moment in its ongoing history, because the sociology of knowledge of these ideas never existed nor were they ever needed in the Muslim world.¹⁴¹ Epistemology was never separated from metaphysics in Islamic thought, and consequently being was never separated from knowledge. It is

139. Paragraph 56 in Abbott, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 46.

140. Kant continues, concerning animals, for example: '...so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man.' See his *Lectures on Ethics*, translated by Louis Infield, Harper & Row, 1963, p. 239.

141. For the history of the decadence of scholasticism leading to modern philosophy, see Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature*, Golgonooza, Ipswich, 1987; Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. For the nature of Islamic cosmologies and their relationship to the Muslim view of reality, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Harvard, 1958; also his, *The Encounter of Man and Nature*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1968.

for this reason that Shahrur is a representative and an inheritor of a western form of intellectual decadence arising through Descartes and Kant and coming to rest in the Nietzschean and pointless nihilism of the First World War. Far from adopting a new method or an avant-garde approach in contemporary thought, Shahrur's ideas have merely clothed themselves in outworn and resurrected garments to resolve an illusory intellectual and social complex that is unrelated to the Islamic identity.

The fallacy of scientism

Following from the above discussion, Shahrur relies in his writings on a common misperception that technology is not only value-free but also inherently laden with benefit for humankind.¹⁴² His preferential understanding of the contemporary world is based on the advancements made in the natural sciences, where technology is prefigured as a harbinger of wealth to society. Our interest in this section is to set out some intellectual difficulties that this viewpoint overlooks. Rorty advances a useful definition of scientism that one may concur with for the purposes of this study, namely:

Scientism...would entail a commitment to one or more of the following tenets: science deals with 'facts' given independently of the researcher; the empirical-analytic method is the only valid mode of knowledge-acquisition; that this method should be extended to all spheres of cognitive activity; that its results are the only true form of knowledge.¹⁴³

142. 'As philosopher Lewis Mumford pointed out, technology consists of more than machines. It includes the techniques of operation and the social organizations that make a particular machine workable. In essence, a technology reflects a worldview. Which particular forms of technology – machines, techniques, and social organizations – are spawned by a particular worldview depend on its perception of life, death, human potential, and the relationship of humans to one another and to nature.' See Chellis Glendinning, 'Notes towards a Neo-Luddite Manifesto,' in Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek, *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition, An Anthology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2003, p. 604.

143. Richard Rorty, *The Hermeneutical Imagination: Outline of a Positive Cri-*

The material evidence is presently against technocratic triumphalism given the ecological disasters wrought on the environment. There is a distinct belief, however, even in the most stringent critiques against this point of view, that the cure or salvation will only come from the same form of technological advances by which the pollutive horrors of the mechanical world will be neutralised. In other words, progress even here is again seemingly inevitable.¹⁴⁴

The first contention that requires elaboration is the one that states that the natural sciences are a standard of measurable exactitude. This is important because peppered throughout Shahrur's tome are not only references to modern science as a standard or criterion of intellectual supremacy, but as the sole criterion. The second contention is that the superstition of scientism entails a belief, shared by Shahrur, that scientific advance, or a perfection of the scientific method, leads to or is correlative with an enhanced form of civil freedom and moral wealth.

Shahrur's stance, a rare one even amongst the new class of technocrats in Arab society, is based on an outdated espousal of a Newtonian physics and its purported supremacy.¹⁴⁵ The natural sciences, however, are no longer untainted by developments in quantum physics. The notion of measurement, since the appearance of the second law of thermodynamics and Heisenberg's principle, has made the objectivity criteria somewhat laughable. Shahrur calls on the *'ulamā'* and *mujtahids* to abandon traditional *qiyās* in favour of scientists, mathematicians, and experts,¹⁴⁶ and

tique of Scientism and Sociology, Routledge Kegan & Paul, London, 1982, p. 14.

144. There is no need to recite Shahrur's ascription to this point of view but will simply refer the reader to examples of this at pp. 178–179, 219–220, 331 of *QMC*, illustrating his unquestioning belief in exact science and its progress. The intellectual background for this fallacy has been dealt with above.

145. *QMC*, pp. 219–220: 'In defence of medieval scholarship we might say that their understanding of *ḥudūd Allāh* was bound to be rather primitive and that their scholarship could not significantly improve before the introduction of Isaac Newton's revolutionary theories, which gave Allah's limits a solid mathematical underpinning. It was only after the introduction of Newton's theory of "limits" that forthcoming generations of scientists were able to study phenomena in nature and link them to the limits that Allah has set for human societies. However, current Muslim scholarship cannot resort to this excuse.'

146. *QMC*, p. 492: 'The act of *qiyās*, of drawing analogies between two or more

states that *qiyās* should also be correlated with modern science rather than any traditional religious resource.¹⁴⁷ This is a common misunderstanding of the role of the natural sciences *vis-à-vis* the science of first principles, as set out above. On Shahrur's narrative, a change in the science of physics or mathematics must affect or alter the application of first principles. His espousal of this view means that he has not understood the classification of the sciences, and neither has he taken the trouble to examine the positions of the Islamic philosophers and theologians on this point. Once again one only encounters mere assertion and opinion.

On the issue of modern research in modern science, it should be stressed that there are no truly direct observations, because there are always intermediate or auxiliary instruments between the observer and the observed. Even without the use of mechanical instruments, the eyes act as auxiliary instruments. This introduces a relative and subjective condition into any experiment that is being observed. This necessarily impacts also on the results obtained, tainting any findings with a subjective intrusion. This relativity, however, cannot be predicted or filtered because it may be different for every occasion, especially in sub-microscopic examinations. There may be some room, though, for mitigating this in macroscopic observation, in that the variabilities can be narrowed down considerably to allow inter-subjective agreement.

It can be said that quantum theory has long ago displaced the perceived precision of the natural sciences as per Newtonian

legal cases, must be done on the basis of empirical evidence and scientific proof provided by sociologists, economists, mathematicians, and natural scientists. These scholars function as real advisers of state authorities and political legislators. This should *not* be done by the '*ulamā*' and the jurists of *fatwā* bureaus. The primary task of these "experts" is to give advice on what should be prohibited and permitted in matters of ritual worship. They should not be consulted in matters that are absolutely forbidden or absolutely allowed (which is God's prerogative).'

On page 65 *et al.* the author criticises the '*ulamā*' for reducing the *dīn* to mere ritual affairs on the basis that there are other greater issues at stake in civil society to concern them. Here he admonishes the '*ulamā*' for straying beyond their remit, i.e. beyond the parameters of ritual accuracy or formalism. It is difficult to take this criticism seriously in the face of such inconsistency. It becomes also very difficult to critique as the author changes his mind so often.

147. See *QMC*, p. 149.

mechanics. In 1925, Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle introduced an insurmountable limitation, despite Einstein's concerted effort to undermine it, over a scientist's contention of exact knowledge. The principle stated that certain pairs of physical properties or observables such as position and momentum and time and energy cannot both be known to a greater degree of accuracy. This means that the more precision that is attained in measuring or knowing one pair, the less precise and unknowable the other becomes. In this situation there can be no simultaneous precision of both sets of observables.

The fundamental problem of new physics is that there is a significant potential to lose the inter-relational capacity of knowledge, if the laws of natural phenomena are isolated from a principial base, be it theological or metaphysical. The interest shown by physicists for theology as a result is on the increase, as the notion of causality, at the heart of phenomenal existence, can only be understood ultimately through the question of free will and determination. This is because there is no such thing as absolute measurement in science. The efficient cause cannot explain the final cause. And if there is no such thing, then what is at the heart of the causal relationships of phenomena and their *raison d'être*? What determines something to do something else but, more importantly, why does it do it? A biologist may explain the process on the basis of reactions and properties, the efficient causes, but he cannot answer the teleological question within his discipline, the question of the final end, without resorting to philosophy, or more exactly theology. The scientific impasse, in other words, can only be resolved through theology, because it alone can resolve the primary questions at the heart of all exploration of phenomena.

The second contention, following the above, is that an advance in scientific method leads to ethical enlightenment and enhanced cultural standards. The fallacy of this belief is historically evident in the case of Nazi Germany during the 1930s, which then constituted the most advanced society in science – a paragon in the use of scientific method, and widely emulated by the West in the post-war period. There were no enhanced freedoms in Germany, however, nor could one credibly state that the cultural standards of that time were anything but depraved. The general stance towards religion was one

of hostility, the state and party claiming all allegiances, so that one could not say that religious forms were instrumental in holding the nation back. The situation was also similar to that of Japan during the same period. It is undeniable therefore that scientific advancement is not necessarily synonymous with moral or cultural advancement.

Cultural degradation can also be a symptom of the superstition of relativity that infects the body politic wherein truth and error, or right and wrong, are distinguished only on the basis of opinion that may change from time to time or person to person. It is contended that the scientific method is responsible for this when it invades the realm of ethics or first principles, as it is primarily constructed to be a practical method applied to phenomena providing solutions to particular problems as they arise. This 'practicality', however, can institute a form of intellectual genuflection before the 'useful' when one seeks to apply it to ethics. Its implicit variability contradicts the concept of immutability that first principles or even ethics demands. No moral system can keep its integrity or authority and yet abide by an ever-changing standard of truth and error.

The second symptom of cultural degradation is materialism, which is also linked to the overreach of the scientific method. Materialism establishes the belief that prosperity, wealth and satiety are the ends of man with no other final end.¹⁴⁸ The scientific method is not naturally equipped to examine anything beyond its material realm, and therefore any field of knowledge beyond the material is considered to be without cognitive value. Religion, transcending the material realm, becomes value-less in this scheme unless it serves as

148. Shahrur's seeming materialism is very clearly established as a goal to be desired in one's espousal of religion. For two examples, see *QMC*, p. 68: 'Unfortunately, generations of *'ulamā'* have failed to turn *al-islām* into a universally applicable and practical religion. Instead, they have promoted the values of slavish ritualism and a mentality of flight from this world to the Next, that is, a form of escapism that has left them unable to give common people guidance on how to fulfil their aspiration in this world.' And, *QMC*, p. 69: 'To talk about a currently ongoing Islamic revival is nonsense. If we take the example of Egypt and look at what has happened in this country between 1970 and today, we see that *al-islām* has almost entirely disappeared. We are observing a deep slumber, not an awakening! In contrast, in other so-called *non-Islamic* countries we recognise that *al-islām* is everywhere because in those countries wealth and welfare are ever growing, bypassing the so-called Islamic countries by a hundred miles.'

a duplicitous placebo for the achievement of social welfare. Such relegation is always a short-term measure on the road to atheism, as shown by the communist experiments of the early twentieth century.

Perhaps the most signifying element of Shahrur's application of scientism is his assertion that a true exegesis of the Qur'an can only be arrived at through an understanding of modern scientific discoveries, that is to say phenomena.

I said to myself, if the Qur'an is from God, it would be possible to analyze it by the most modern methods available. If it cannot be analyzed by modern methods, it is not from God.¹⁴⁹

This belies again a lack of awareness of the traditional supra-rational or metaphysical understanding of revelation. Above all, it is related to his epistemic approach to the notion of revelation as being merely confirmatory of the material basis of knowledge, which he categorises in turn as acquired through empirical data by way of sense perceptions. The difference, he contends, between the two is that sense perception gives us knowledge of our existential observations, whereas revelation gives knowledge of observations that are more temporally and semantically diffracted.¹⁵⁰ One can immediately observe in this the neo-Kantian cul-de-sac Shahrur has adopted in his approach, ensuring that his binary epistemic avenues are incapable of escaping the temporal realm.

The fallacy of the ideology of progress:

Post hoc, ergo melius hoc¹⁵¹

In the introduction to *QMC*, Shahrur sets out his philosophic principles underlying his reading of the Qur'an. He explains

149. *QMC*, p. 531.

150. *QMC*, p. 487.

151. After this, better or best will come. Louis Weber composed this formula as a play on the precept, *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this). See his *Le Rythme du Progrès: Étude Sociologique*, Félix Alcan, Paris, 1913, pp. 22-24.

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that there are two epochs in history: the first being the period of prophetic guidance; and the second, which began after the Prophet's ﷺ passing and, in which we are presently in, is the epoch of the mature man who is no longer in need of God's messengers or His revelations. The second epoch is the time, for what he terms, the post-prophetic way of legislation, comprising human rights, abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women. By these principles, Shahrur sets forth the premise of necessary progress as part of the belief that underlies his project.

I consider that Noah is at the A, B, C, level of human society and that Muḥammad came to humanity at the bachelor's degree level. Humanity now goes it alone. We discover the universe by ourselves. We can now, because we have graduated.¹⁵²

In this deist scheme, and as Shahrur states above, the Qur'an is a text of the seventh century that must be interpreted anew in accordance with the 'sophistication' of twenty-first century man, and perceived largely as a supplemental text to provide complementary assent to what man has arrived at of his own accord through the advances of the natural sciences. Communication with God can be said to be at an end since we have 'graduated'.

Any analyses of the ideology of progress will necessarily remain incomplete given the differing modes available for its study, which cannot be encompassed within the pages of this paper. However, it is important and helpful to contextualise this ideology in the contemporary formulation of future socio-political planning. It has been largely a truism in the last two decades to observe ideologues asserting a particular type of conceptual hegemony over the domain of the future to the exclusion of any transcendent notions other than those that are helpful for social control. This hegemony is formulated on terms that lay claim to the future on the basis of ideologies that are considered synonymous with the culmination of mankind's intellectual achievement. Any intrusion that seeks to

152. *QMC*, pp. 518–519.

modify or negate this assertion is particularised by its upholders as anti-man, anti-progress, and anti-prosperity. For the most part, the social goals that have been characterised as the leading ideas for defining the architecture of the future represent the detritus of the European post-Christian conceptual traditions. These are based, as contended above, on nothing higher than the compilation, collation and a hybridisation of failed philosophies that increasingly serve the interests of an elitist minority fiscally farming the greater part of humanity for its own benefit.¹⁵³

The traditional Islamic vision of the future is diametrically opposed to this conceptual surge that has been revisited on its intellectual territory, such vision being defined by the Muslim's teleology. The natural expectancy of transcendent life negates the expedient and short-term self-serving use of societies as a goal. The sense of social justice that is rooted in and defined by the equilibrium of divine justice rather than the deliberations of men defines the whole Islamic social order. This social order is predicated on preserving the good, upholding the true, and serving the Absolute in accordance with the precepts of the Islamic revelation. This is far from being an external or solipsist activity, as the fulfilment or final end of man is served through such activity, an activity wherein man moves vertically from a state of imperfection to one of perfection. The main fallacy of progress is that it seeks to substitute this vertical journey for a horizontal one. The scheme or goal that Shahrur interposes is predicated on the desire to move the Islamic world from its moorings or foundations to ones that serve the predatory forces of the contemporary world.¹⁵⁴ His desire is essentially to emancipate Muslims, especially those estranged, from their orthodox religious identity in order to substitute a hybrid that facilitates their amalgamation into a socio-economic order prescribed by the self-same minorities referred to above. His methodology for this is imbued with Marxist goals and assertions, amalgamated with notions from Whitehead and through the latter Bergson.

153. See Eric Gill, *Money and Morals*, 2nd ed., Faber, London, 1937; Jeffrey Mark, *The Modern Idolatry*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1934; Frederick Soddy, *The Role of Money*, George Routledge & Sons, London, 1934; and C.H. Douglas, *The Monopoly of Credit*, Chapman & Hall, London, 1931.

154. For an elaboration on how socio-cultural forces facilitate this activity, see John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, Ebury Press, London, 2006.

This section proposes to examine the flawed premises of his doctrine of necessary progress and the Bergsonian idea of man as being in a perpetual state of becoming. It is our contention that Shahrur's syncretic reading has led him to imbibe certain neo-Heraclitean contentions set out by Bergson, although most probably mediated by his reading of Whitehead.¹⁵⁵ The implications of appropriating the theory of dialectical criticism from Marxism will also be examined.

Christmann states in his introduction that Shahrur was influenced by Whitehead's neo-Kantian idealism. Whitehead's cosmology did much to rehabilitate the traditional position of the religious outlook as it was prior to the reign of positivism. His success in the sciences, unfortunately, led him to attempt similar triumphs in the domain of theology,¹⁵⁶ namely in the founding of what came to be known as process theology.¹⁵⁷ There is a similarity, however, between Shahrur's clumsy concept of becoming and the Bergson-Whitehead understanding of the same. The latter two were in effect attempting the construction of a religion without God. Whitehead's impulse that religion had to change to take into consideration the demise of Newtonian mechanics due to the advance of the theory of relativity has echoes in Shahrur.

Reality for Bergson and Whitehead is the flux underlying all things. For Bergson, this reality is the ever-flowing time, in which things take their place. In his book, *Creative Evolution*, he states that life is an evolution. The body is changing form at all times or, as he states, has no form at all, since the notion of form is immobile, and reality is movement. Reality is precisely the continual change of

155. As a pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus is renowned in history as the proponent of the idea that everything in the world is changing at all times, that all is in flux. On Heraclitus' natural philosophy see Jonathan Barnes, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: Volume 1 Thales to Zeno*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979, pp. 57-81.

156. See especially his *Religion in the Making*, Macmillan, New York, 1926.

157. For an introduction to process theology, see John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1976. For a sympathetic but useful critique, see Robert Cummings Neville, *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology*, State University Press of New York, Albany, 1995. For an accurate study of Whitehead's metaphysics, see Ivor Leclerc, *Whitehead's Metaphysics*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1958.

form, and not the form as a snapshot of a transition of that reality.¹⁵⁸ Following this line, to assert anything as real, including God, is to assert that it is forever changing. If future potential forms can be foreseen in a divinely pre-determined plan, then Bergson contends that there is no use for time. This position, however, leads to a contradiction, for if all reality is in time, this reality must have a purpose or an end to attain, or else it would be meaningless.¹⁵⁹ That end must be, metaphysically and of necessity, outside of time. If so, not all reality is in time as he asserts.

If the essence of a material thing is its motion or change in time alone, then Bergson seems to have written off the idea of space, the notion of length and breadth, as not being of the essence of a thing. This causes obvious problems, as it is clear that not all bodies possess the same extension and are capable of being distinguished. The second glaring fallacy in Bergson's thought is his denial of substances, which according to him are mere phantoms created by the intellect, a static faculty, in apprising a 'frame' of a constant life-force. If essences are constantly in flux, however, they can never be said to be themselves as they are always becoming but never 'are'. It may be asked how such an essence can ever then be known, as what is there of 'it' to be known? This effectively implies that for Bergson there can be the reality of movement without there being a mover, an absurd proposition.

Whitehead proposed that his new religion be in full accord with the latest advance in the natural sciences. The main principle at issue that Whitehead asserts, and Shahrur adopts, is that the foundation of metaphysics is in the natural sciences. He asserts this when he states that the laws and principles of science should serve as the foundation and guiding hand of religion.¹⁶⁰ As we saw above, however, the degree of abstraction which physics represents is narrower than that of the science of metaphysics, and therefore to subalternate metaphysics to physics is to misunderstand the nature of science completely.¹⁶¹

158. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, Macmillan, London, 1911, p. 318.

159. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

160. This is the whole basis for his *Religion in the Making*.

161. One could adopt the same argument against the purported amalgamation of

Reality becomes the perceived world alone, as Shahrur also echoes, for nothing beyond the temporal world may be known. This necessarily leads to pantheism, as Whitehead claims that God may exist but He is not a transcendent Being. If God is beyond time and space, it would mean that He could never be known, as anything beyond these can never be intelligible to men.¹⁶² If God is not transcendent then He must be immanent, providing His existence is averred. Whitehead takes the latter course referring to God as the principle of concretion, an 'aesthetic', rather than a moral or spiritual power that represents the order of the universe.¹⁶³ This subjective religion is unworkable, since its premises are by definition forever changing. The deity it worships is unknowable since its essence is always changing as subject to the spatio-temporal realm, becoming but never Being. Suffice it to say that the god of Whitehead and Bergson is not what is recognised as the Supreme Being of traditional religion. He is a temporary figure for Whitehead, a transitional stage, a useful principle, but not God.

The espousal of the dialectical critical method, as claimed by Shahrur, cannot be separated from the ideational structure of Marxism, and consequently its utilisation entails the acceptance and inevitability of that structure's conclusions. Marxism proclaimed that the meaning of history is the self-sufficiency of mankind as productive force, rendering anything transcendental as superfluous. In this scheme, the present is to be understood as a transition from the enslavement of the past to the liberation of the future. The structure of Marx's thought is underpinned by a systemic axiom of atheism, determined in part by his appropriation of Ludwig Feuerbach's extreme humanist egoism, a Promethean cult of man that proclaimed the supremacy of man. This in turn fuelled the belief that there were no transcendent motives or ideals by which men determined their actions. In a passage in *Capital*, Marx states:

The religious world is simply the reflection of the real world. A society in which the product of labour gen-

the sciences to proclaim the Uniform Method of Science, which in the nature of things is nonsense.

162. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, pp. 71, 90.

163. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

erally takes the form of merchandise, and in which, consequently, the most general relation among productive workers consists in comparing the value of their products and, beneath this aspect of things, in comparing their individual efforts by the standard of equal human labour, is a society which finds in Christianity with its cult of abstract man, and especially its bourgeois types, ...the most suitable religious complement.¹⁶⁴

Religion thus, although reduced to a sociological statement, can only be suppressed by the suppression of the social conditions that permit it. In following Feuerbach, Marx was assenting to the idea that everything that was affirmed of God's nature in Christianity belonged in reality to the nature of man. Religion as such is an ideology, a fabrication that acts as a compensatory illusion of reality. Alienation is the common theme that is woven into this positivist humanism. By denying God, man asserts or posits man. For Marx, religion is a product of human consciousness, formulated by the social forces acting on and fashioning it. The social construct that allows this collective illusion to take hold, according to Marx, is evidence that this construct is a defective ideology and must be suppressed.¹⁶⁵ The reductionism at issue is one of religion to ideology, in other words that religion is a system of ideas or a representation of the World (*Weltanschauung*), contrary to the traditional notion that religion concerns a real relationship with Being.

The notion of materialism that Marx introduces, namely

164. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Moscow ed., 1954, Book I, p. 79. As ever, Friedrich Engels goes even further in the *Anti-Dübring* when he states: 'All religion is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces.' See *Herr Eugen Dübring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dübring)*, trans. Emile Burns, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1955, p. 346.

165. Religion is 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions...the opium of the people.' See Marx's introduction to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, translated and edited by T.B. Bottomore, London, 1963, pp. 43-44. Also at p. 40: 'Religion is indeed man's self-consciousness and self-awareness (*selbstgefühl*) so long as he has not found himself or has lost himself again.'

dialectical materialism, can be distinguished from mechanistic materialism. As well attested, the notion of dialectical materialism is an amalgam of Hegel's concept of the dialectic, wedded to the materialism of Feuerbach and cemented with the sociology of Proudhon. The only reality for Hegel is the Spirit or Idea. All-knowing *in potentia*, the Idea actualises this potential by unfolding itself as a manifestation of a principle or law of its being. This unfolding allows it to reach its goal, namely to know everything, that is to say, itself. The universe, therefore, is the movement of the Idea on its way to self-knowledge as a goal. This passage must be a journey wherein the Idea adopts and discards formal masks of phenomena as manifestations. This process helps the Idea to understand being and therefore itself as the only being, as it experiments with each form, ever changing, ever discarding, and ever progressing towards its goal.¹⁶⁶ The dialectic is the principle that Hegel devises to explain how the Idea progresses from one being to another in an evolutionary trajectory.

The dialectic is not simply a principle but also a process. With the exception of the Idea having achieved its goal, every being, according to Hegel, contains its opposite or contrary. The interaction between the two, being and non-being, creates a synthesis, a movement that is characterised as becoming. This synthesis becomes subject to the dialectical process itself and in turn becomes a thesis that interacts with its anti-thesis to produce another synthesis.¹⁶⁷ What of God? God is the Idea whose absoluteness only crystallises at the end of its journey to self-knowledge: only then is it absolute. In the meantime and during its journey it embodies the dialectical principle with the unfolding of history.¹⁶⁸

Marx appropriates Hegel's dialectic, but substitutes matter for the Spirit. If Reality for Hegel was the Idea, for Marx it is matter, which is everything in the universe. The highest activity of Reality for Hegel was the knowledge sought by the Idea on its journey. For Marx, the highest activity is human action, as a collective action.

166. See F.J. Sheed, *Communism and Man*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1938, p. 6.

167. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

168. There seems to be no explanation as to why the dialectical principle itself is not subject to dialectical change as principle. Why does it alone escape, one wonders, what it determines for all others.

For Hegel the highest achievement is the Spirit acquiring knowledge of itself. For Marx it is the achievement of the perfect human social order as an end in itself. Marx examines history in order to illustrate, rather than argue for, the process of Reality seeking its goal, namely the perfect human society.¹⁶⁹ If the dialectic means that the form of matter is motion in a particular direction for all things, Marx asserts that the mechanists concentrate on the notion of matter in directionless motion, rather than in the laws of motion as a science. Whereas the mechanist sees the motion arising due to an external cause, the Marxist understands that the motion is self-propelled due to the contradictions inherent in the subject.¹⁷⁰

When we come to examine dialectical criticism, we are apprised of its operation of analysing literature from a dialectical point of view, that is to say, that it examines literature from a historical, economic, social point of view outlining the forces that led to its structure. This implies, however, a preceding definition of history, and since we are still in Marx's semantic territory, history is what Marx defines it to be. The economic structure of society, for Marx, is the foundation on which the superstructure arises, comprising the forms of social consciousness. These forms are the political, religious, aesthetic expressions of society, identified with the notion of ideology as defined above. The relation between the base and the superstructure is far from being a mechanical one, as the various elements of the latter (such as literature) interact and react with the base so as to influence its direction.

Prior to looking at the notion of criticism and its role, the fundamental basis of Marx's opposition to all speculative thought within his scheme must be examined. For Marx, all knowledge derives from experienced particulars, so that the abstraction of metaphysics cannot reach knowledge of real things.¹⁷¹ The immense development of the empirical sciences in the nineteenth century not only reflects the decline and impracticality of the speculative sciences, but also affirms that the sole or remaining task of philosophy

169. Sheed, *Communism and Man*, p. 25.

170. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

171. Marx's criticism is largely set out in *German Ideology*, edited by R. Pascal, London, 1938, namely Chapter V, Section II, 'The Mystery of Speculative Construction.'

is to demarcate scientific thinking and its laws.¹⁷² The character of this latter type of thinking is its manifest practicality. The realm of practice, as explained by Engels, is the arena where one's views of the world are affirmed or refuted.¹⁷³ In the realm of the practical, propositions of value are not, however, to be held true or false, but useful or useless. When applied to ethics, the moral standard then becomes whether an act is expedient as the end justifies the means.

The perception of the practicality of knowledge has similarities with Auguste Comte's positive scientific thought. For Comte, as for Marx, the natural sciences are the sole means of acquiring true knowledge. Scientific theories are in turn acquired by practice, i.e. experimentation and application of method. This practice or verification of a hypothesis, then, is what is placed in opposition to speculative thought – namely metaphysics. The latter is mired in abstraction as opposed to wrestling with the elements of reality, as in the empirical sciences. The supernatural, or any transcendental philosophy, is therefore a form of speculation that is not practical, and cannot be verified by the empirical sciences. This positivist factor is responsible for Marx's atheism, namely that the empirical sciences cannot show the existence of God, and so God cannot exist.

There is very little distance, unfortunately and unsurprisingly, between what Shahrur is proposing and what the current and atheist discourse itself is propounding. Unlike Kant, Shahrur utilises the concept of God as an olfactory rather than a moral postulate, an ideological nosegay, to help him navigate the putrescent waters of his agnostic mentors. His agnosticism is faintly on view when he avers that the existence of God presents an irresolvable antimony,¹⁷⁴

172. H.B. Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch: Marxism-Leninism as a Philosophical Creed*, Cohen & West Ltd., London, 1955, p. 55.

173. Ibid.

174. It is important to note that the hallmark of positivism is precisely its agnosticism. The founder of this point of view in the modern world is Kant, as shown above. The origin of the term, however, rests with Thomas Huxley, who coined it during a conference of the Metaphysical Society in 1869. Faced with other delegates to the conference who all belonged to different schools of thought denoted by an -ism, Huxley invented the term 'agnostic' to identify his creed. He derived the term from the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible (17:23), where St Paul speaks of an altar raised by the Athenians to the unknown (Gk. *agnosto*) God. The scientific viewpoint adopted the epithet henceforth to denote belief in the inability of reason to know anything beyond

rather than a confirmation of the metaphysical path of certainty that is part of the Islamic heritage.

Although I know that there is a 50:50 chance, as Stephen Hawking says, that God exists, at least I can tell people why I believe in God and then leave it to others to decide how convincing it is. I do not want to defeat atheism, I will not prove that God exists – and I don't want an atheist to disprove my belief – all that I have now is a strong argument for God and people will judge how good it is.¹⁷⁵

The primacy of method in Shahrur is symptomatic of the Marxist emphasis on action over contemplation. Contemplation however is also action, depending on the subject of contemplation. As a true technophile, Shahrur has little patience for prayer, fasting and other supererogatory activities performed by the faithful.¹⁷⁶ Ritual for him is a necessity that has overtaken ethics in its importance in the practice of the Muslims.¹⁷⁷ The implication of this is rather unclear as a reiterated fallacy.¹⁷⁸

In traditional thought, moral and ethical life is based on the refinement of character. This entails a sanctification of one's life

the sensible. See Huxley's review of Balfour's *Foundations of Belief* in the journal *Nineteenth Century*, February 1889, p. 173.

175. *QMC*, p. 527. Interestingly, Shahrur never gives us his strong argument for God. On the contrary, if one is to follow his thesis to its logical end, one arrives at an inevitable atheism since he denies, implicitly, any transcendent realms.

176. See *QMC*, p. 393: 'Political slogans that carry the name Islam (e.g., "Islam is the solution") are nonsense because religion cannot solve the economic, social, and political problems of a society, but only the people themselves. More prayers, more fasting, and more pilgrimages will never solve the ills of the community, but rather good, sensible, and moral legislation within the limits that God has set.'

177. See for example *QMC*, pp. xxxii, 49, 67, 68.

178. This passage is illuminating, *QMC*, p. 48: 'What every Arab Muslim must realise is that, contrary to what is currently believed, social obligations towards society are first and foremost moral obligations and only secondarily religious duties or political-legal obligations.'

Once again moral obligations are held to be distinct from religious duties, which may be synonymous with political-legal obligations. If they are not religious duties, one may ask, what is then their source of obligation?

that is premised on prayer, fasting and self-negation. Far from being a solipsist activity, the benefits of the presence of the saintly in a community radiate well beyond the protagonists themselves. This is a historically verifiable reality. To decry that fasts and prayers and their perfection is a secondary activity to social action is to misunderstand human psychology and its effects, and to posit the perfection of social reality as the goal of Islam rather than the perfection of the soul leading on to that of his environment.¹⁷⁹ Historically, moral appreciation has been always a by-product of the internal and spiritual life.

Shahrur primarily sets out his so-called tripartite concept of existence, on which he bases his dynamics of development and progress. Existence is divided into material existence, progressing, and becoming. The first refers to all material existence, the second to the movement of time, and the third to change and historical development.¹⁸⁰ It is this tripartite model, obscurely narrated in five pages, that serves as his cosmology, 'used both for the description of the universe as a whole and for the analysis of human societies in particular.'¹⁸¹ The element, or what he calls the 'coordinates', of cultural development can be accelerated by a scientifically and ethically advanced society, or decelerated by a stagnate and retrograde social order.

Shahrur does not explain in any detail what he means either by material existence or the notion of progressing. The concept of becoming, however, is illustrated by the alleged historical development of God's unity, which has progressed from a belief in pantheist pagan deities to a belief in an 'abstract' transcendent God.¹⁸² There does not seem to be any trace of the Islamic understanding of the primordial monotheist beliefs of the Prophet Adam عليه السلام and early man. The anthropological record disagrees strongly with Shahrur on this point as well, for the intrusion of paganism in primitive societies was nearly always a symptom of social advancement and hybridisation. Shahrur's theory of cultural progress is in effect an appropriation of J.G. Frazer's ideas in his *Golden Bough*, wherein

179. See footnote 65 above.

180. *QMC*, pp. 11-18.

181. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

182. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

cultural advance demands a definite antecedent. Frazer advanced the idea that evolutionary principles alone explain all social progress. In the preface to the second edition, Frazer aptly wrote:

Hypotheses are necessarily but often temporary bridges built to connect isolated facts. If my light bridges should sooner or later break down, I hope that my book may still have its utility and its interest as a repertory of facts.¹⁸³

These light bridges have since broken down and withered away, rendering his theories mere fables. In his book, *Religion and Culture*,¹⁸⁴ Frederic Schleiter developed the theory of the principle of convergence, contrary to Frazer's strict evolutionary development of culture. This principle states that similar cultural traits may develop from unlike antecedents. The idea of epochal stages of unilinear cultural evolution, familiar to readers of Herbert Spencer and espoused by Frazer and Shahrur, had already been totally discredited by ethnologists at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁸⁵ This purported serial ascent of man followed what was referred to as the Bachofen-Morgan scheme of sociological progress, namely following the stages of promiscuity, gynaeocracy, and then patriarchy. Ethnologists such as William I. Thomas, as far back as 1909, demolished this simplistic idea of the ascent of herd-man to the modern condition.¹⁸⁶ He wrote categorically:

183. Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., Vol. 1, Macmillan, London, 1920, pp. xix-xx.

184. Frederic Schleiter, *Religion and Culture*, Lemcke and Buechner, New York, 1919.

185. As an example, see Robert Lowie, *Culture and Ethnology*, D.C. McMurtrie, New York, 1917. On page 80, Lowie avers that 'discontinuity is a necessary feature of cultural progress.'

186. Other reputable ethnologists that refuted the Bachofen-Morgan series are Starcke, Westermarck, Grosse, Schmidt, Wundt, Swanton, Lowie, Thurnwald, Malinowski, Plischke, and Birket-Smith. These writers asserted that the series was a mental construct that had no bearing on the historical and factual evidence that primal man was monogamous. See Wilhelm Koppers, *Primitive Man and his World Picture*, translated by Edith Raybould, Sheed & Ward, London, 1952, p. 12.

[We cannot] look too curiously into the order of emergence of inventions nor assume a straight and uniform line of development among all races... The attempt to classify culture by epochs is similarly doomed to failure when made too absolutely. The frugivorous, the hunting, the pastoral, and the agricultural are the stages usually assumed. But the Indian was a hunter while his squaw was an agriculturist. The African is pastoral, agricultural or hunting indifferently, without regard to his cultural status. And the ancient Mexicans were agricultural but had never had a pastoral period.¹⁸⁷

When it comes to original monotheism, there is an overwhelming body of work that illustrates primal man's belief in a unitary and Supreme Being.¹⁸⁸ Anthropologists have successively found that a plurality of gods is only found in cultures that had degenerated from their primal and pristine states. Ethnologists such as Koppers concluded:

Nevertheless, the scientific establishment of comparatively clear and definite belief in a Supreme Being among the most primitive and ancient races, even if in no way necessary to the theological proof of revelation, does undoubtedly favour the idea of original monotheism. Under no circumstances can this and the other relevant facts be made to support the opposite thesis underlying the popular theories of evolutionist historians of religion, namely, that the notion of one Supreme Spirit is the last link in a long chain of development.¹⁸⁹

A central obsession of Shahrur is his perception of the concretisation of the traditions of seventh-century Arabia in the religion of Islam.¹⁹⁰ The following is not untypical:

187. William I. Thomas (ed.), *Source Book for Social Origins*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1909, p. 25.

188. See especially the much-respected twelve-volume work of W. Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, Münster i. W., 1926–55.

189. Koppers, *Primitive Man*, trans. Edith Raybould, p. 178.

190. See footnote 11 above for the quotation found at QMC, p. 215.

We now realise the danger of saying that ‘becoming’ in Islamic societies has happened only once, namely in seventh-century Arabia, and that it should never happen again – until the Day of Resurrection. It will be a tragic mistake to say that until the Last Hour no further development or renewal should ever take place again. It would be fatal to insist that societies should always be modelled according to Muḥammad’s (ﷺ) state on the Arabian Peninsula 1,400 years ago. It would mean defeat and stagnation if his words and deeds remain the highest ideal of human behaviour, so all-embracing that they cover all spheres of life until the coming of the Last Hour. To do so would give Muḥammad’s (ﷺ) words and deeds, including the way he ate, the way he dressed, and the way he used his toothpick, the same sanctity as the injunctions of *the Book*. It would also mean to accuse everyone who does not behave like Muḥammad (ﷺ) of heresy or even apostasy.¹⁹¹

The above encapsulates the author’s approach and dismissal of the interpretative tradition. One notices his desire for universality and necessity as criteria, similar to the empirico-rationalist traditions outlined above. What he fails to understand is that the life of the Prophet ﷺ is the manifestation of an ahistorical truth of the *dīn*, because what the Prophet ﷺ said or did is not tied to seventh-century Arabia *per se*, but is the manifestation of the ahistorical truth revealed in the Qur’an. The Qur’an transcends history; hence its non-sequentialism in the *Sūra* narratives. If the Prophet’s ﷺ character, as we are told, mirrors the reality of the Qur’an as per the *ḥadīth*, then his life must reflect, to a lesser or greater degree, this ahistoricity. When Shahrur reduces the symbolic presence of the revelation to mere socio-historical reality, he applies consciously or unconsciously a materialist understanding of Islam. First the reality of the *dīn* is reducible to ethics, and then ethics is reduced to its historical reality alone. This understanding leads him to subject a part of the revelation to continuous historical change as opposed to the normative subjection of history to revelation.

191. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

The application of dialectical criticism, as a method, to a sacred text such as the Qur'an gives the lie to Shahrur's simulated but normative assumptions as to its nature. If the Qur'an is a revelation from God, then dialectical criticism can give us very little exegetical value, contrary to his assertions.¹⁹² Primarily, the chosen critical method cannot be disassociated from the materialist strategies of Marxism.¹⁹³ For Marxist literary theory, the passage from the literary to the socio-economic or the historical is a passage from a fragmented discipline to the concrete. The text that is under examination must therefore be framed, contextualised and finally understood by way of socio-economic and cultural factors alone. The literary criticism of those such as Wilhelm von Humboldt or Plotinus may advance the idea of the inner form of a text that criticism discovers in order to penetrate to a textual meaning. This is in essence a decentralisation of a literary object in order to situate it within the underlying reality which it necessarily articulates. His linguistic distinction between the external forms of a language and the inner capacity for meaning serves as cipher for this hermeneutical approach.¹⁹⁴

Shahrur's division of the Qur'an into *qur'ān* and *kitāb* respectively, wherein the former is in conformity to the universal laws of nature and the nature of reality, and the latter with the rules of human behaviour, is contradictory. The *kitāb* in his scheme is subject to change because of what it addresses, namely human legislation

192. Ibid., p. 72: 'It is a real scandal that people are mobbed and treated as pariahs if they dare to unmask the datedness of the *salaf* heritage, and it is outrageous that they are ridiculed if they apply modern critical methods to unravel the mysteries of the divine text.'

193. In *QMC*, pp. 149–150, Shahrur states that any interpretation of the revelation must not contradict reason or reality. Reason in this context is undefined and can be taken to mean, from the context of his writings, as rationality. Reality is defined as 'objective' reality that is perceived by the senses. That is to say, Shahrur subjects the exegesis of the Qur'an to the level of the empirical sciences alone. All interpretations are considered fluid historically, in other words relative, and can never be crystallised for future generations to be followed. The value of each interpretation is therefore subjective and limited in time and scope. To what extent, it may be asked, can one expect a religion to maintain its integrity in the face of such subjectivity in its interpretation. See *QMC*, p. 531, for his espousal of the dialectical critical method.

194. See Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1971, pp. 401–402.

and mores; the *qurʿān* is purportedly not, due to its inimitability.¹⁹⁵ The contradiction precisely lies in that, according to Shahrur, the *qurʿān* and the *kitāb* are both subject to ever-changing historical interpretation. It is difficult not to surmise in the face of such logic that he desires the sacred text to be open to ever-changing positivist interpretations, which will lead to the dissolution of meaning.¹⁹⁶

Conclusion

Reformers purportedly wish to secure a return to the primary texts or foundations of a religious tradition by bypassing the organic structure of the tradition itself. Shahrur, on the other hand, wishes to use tradition as a ladder that one climbs up and then throws away. This is evidently absurd, as his starting-point is indebted *a priori* to ‘received doctrine’.¹⁹⁷

Contrary to his assertions, the message of the religion for orthodox Muslims is not subject to incremental evolution in the reformers’ perceived sense, but is recognised rather as a structure that organically develops, where every particular is incessantly and completely related to the universal principles of the faith. That is to say that tradition, metaphysically speaking, is the knowledge of things in their first principles. These principles are implicit and explicit, and ensure that the religion is never ‘concretised’ but neither is it ever-changing. Between the kinetic and static, which are perceived as the only alternatives by those like Shahrur, stand the transcendent principles at the heart of the tradition. Shahrur’s impatience with the manifestation of contemporary Islam and his perception of the tradition’s stagnation in the face of scientific and political ‘development’ in the West allows him to conclude that Islam has historically nothing to say on these subjects. The tradition, however, encompasses all the sciences, including economics, art, politics and ethics. There may be times in history where the tra-

195. QMC, p. 173.

196. QMC, pp. 149–150, 163–164.

197. To quote an admirable metaphor, apocryphally attributed to Frank Sheed, the precepts of tradition cannot be judged by those who pay no heed to them, in the same way that the efficacy of a medicine cannot be judged by those who throw it down the sink.

dition is barred by socio-political conditions from manifesting itself in all these realms, but it does not follow that it has nothing to say on these disciplines.

Shahrur's pursuit of autonomy, following upon the Kantian paradigm, is a veiled bid for ethical freedom, an ethics that is effectively defined on spatio-temporal grounds. Freedom, however, has by its nature certain limits that cannot be ignored or avoided. Freedom, when understood metaphysically as in the Islamic tradition, implies a relation to Being and possesses cognitive prerequisites. Freedom to be ignorant is a contradiction in terms, as knowledge reflects an ontological state. Ignorance, in this scheme, necessarily imposes a lack of mastery on those it affects, and creates a state of dependence contrary to any notion of autonomy. There is no state of freedom when the subject is in ignorance or error. The question then to be posited is what is the nature of a state of knowledge that can be a suitable receptor of freedom? Freedom resides by degrees where there is autonomy, which in turn requires self-transcendence and refinement of character, an ascetic and spiritual prerequisite. This requires a discipline of mind and body, for freedom of the individual means his knowledge of and identification with the Truth.

The Qur'anic revelation commands man to follow the Prophet ﷺ, and in following and obeying him, man follows God. Consequently, to be free is to follow the Shari'ah. In this sense, Islam can be said to be the nursery of the *awliyā'* (saints) and the sanatorium for the morally sick.

Revelation by its nature is the manifestation of divine truths that are otherwise beyond the reach of the human intellect. The inference that man is merely a creature of history, that is to say, of time and space, and that he therefore must be understood only historically as part of the reality in which he partakes, is a development that arose out of a frustration with positive religion in the eighteenth century. If man is subject to time and space, it could also be said, by those such as Shahrur, that his understanding or reception of revelation was subject to and limited by historical considerations alone. In this scheme, revelation could retain its 'timeless' quality, but its understanding could not escape the confines of the relative condition. Shahrur's contention resides in the desire to subjugate the understanding of the Islamic revelation to what he terms as

‘objective reality’,¹⁹⁸ the perceptible and phenomenal world around us. Any interpretation that transcends this ‘reality’ is deemed irrational, even contrary to divine injunction. This lack of distinction or awareness of the differing levels of cognition and intellection is symptomatic of his Cartesian inheritance of a reductionist understanding of knowledge.

Shahrur clearly states that his ‘limit’ method would permit *mujtahids* to be firmly rooted in their contemporary context and to substitute comparisons to early Islam with references to the latest results of scientific research’ by way of substituting *qiyās* as understood traditionally for a new type of *qiyās*.¹⁹⁹ By its nature, prior to any valuation, the latest scientific research is a category that represents a chimera, a phantom or a will-o’-the-wisp, as it is by definition ever-changing and transient. To anchor *qiyās* to such a category is to invite disaster on the intellectual and moral orders of society. Shahrur offers no definition of science; neither does he offer any definition of what he considers valid scientific research. He fails further to set any ethical limits on this research, since not everything that is subject to inquiry should be researched. These limits he augurs should be set by the research itself. This is an inadequate appeal to scientific fetishism.

198. *QMC*, pp. 149, 163–164, 483. At page 149 Shahrur states: ‘The aim of interpretation is to establish a constant harmony between objective reality, which we perceive via our senses, and the theories and laws that we derive from reading the *Qur’an*. Sometimes a complete harmony is achieved (when science has discovered an absolute truth, for example, the earth is a globe and rotates around the sun), at other times, harmony remains deficient (if a scientific theory is not yet fully proven, such as Darwin’s theory of evolution). Total harmony will never be fully achieved – except on the Day of Resurrection.’ Also, at p. 483: ‘The main task of our study was to demonstrate that there is no other way to understand the text than through rational analysis. By rational analysis we mean a study of the text whose results correspond with the objective reality around us. In this volume we have shown that any interpretation that contradicts reality is non-rational and undermines the purpose of Allah’s revelation which was sent down “so that people understand”.’

The immediate problems that arise here relate to the metaphysical incompetence with which these ideas are elaborated. Our senses cannot interpret objective reality without the rational faculty. Science is incapable of conferring value to the truths in the *Qur’an*, but vice-versa, and is incapable of attaining to absolute truths.

199. See footnote 11 above.

Ultimately, the discussion between 'reformers' and the tradition is one relating to correct metaphysical definitions. The Muslim abides by the principle that the ends sought always determine the means employed. Life on earth is a means for the sanctification of the soul for the journey to God. The ends sought, namely God and His pleasure, determine the nature of the means, as they must conform in their materiality to the goal intended. One who seeks God, Truth or Certainty will not be morally reprehensible in the social realm and will treat all others in conformity with the divine law. His interaction with his surroundings will necessarily be beneficial and uplifting and become a transformative catalyst for the betterment of society.

It is clear that Shahrur may have returned from his sojourn in Russia with several pieces of excess intellectual luggage. This paper has attempted to open and inspect some of the contents, but has left some items unexamined. He clearly posits a goal for Islam to seek as a religion, and is disappointed that this is not what the majority of Muslims desire. His definition of man and his role in life is opposed to what traditional societies have always sought; namely commutative justice and more importantly transcendence. His appropriation of definitions from the enlightenment philosophers and his subsequent attempt to accommodate this with the traditional religion have placed him in a quandary wherein he either reinterprets the whole religion *ab initio*, or else seeks another creed. It is our contention that Shahrur has proceeded in essence to construct his own cargo cult with its defined and specific categories of understandings and methodologies. His amalgamations of enlightenment philosophers with half-understood or digested morsels from more contemporary authors do not make for a coherent system. It is unfortunate that throughout his work he has followed, to the letter, the portentous *dicta* of Humpty Dumpty, namely that words mean only what he chooses them to mean.²⁰⁰

200. Lewis Carroll, *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*, Nonesuch Press, London, 1939, p. 196. See QMC, p. 9, for Shahrur's very own charter on arbitrary interpretation: 'The assertion of non-synonymity lies at the heart of our methodology. This is one of the reasons why our approach is different from that of traditional exegetes who all operate on the assumption that synonymity exists in Allah's speech. We believe that for a truly modern understanding

The edition presented by Christmann serves as a comprehensive summary of Shahrur's work, despite the editor's frequent interventions in footnotes. Although these are presumably meant to clarify the implications of the prose, they also effectively project definitions and interpretations of normative Islamic understandings.²⁰¹ In conclusion, Shahrur's book represents, ominously, a symptom of the path that one is prone to follow when traditional intellectual sources are no longer studied or sought. The first step in such a setting is nearly always to stipulate that the guardians of this knowledge are irrelevant and unnecessary; the second is to deny that these sciences exist or ever existed. The lack of rigorous and traditional religious education and the contemporary waning of the corresponding intellectual sciences may have put some wind in Shahrur's sail, but we contend that his ship remains fundamentally unseaworthy.



of the text it is necessary to leave behind the era of *'ulūm al-tafsīr* which is based on the doctrine of synonymity. Our aim is to reach for a more subtle and precise understanding of the divine text in which every word in the Book expresses a unique meaning.'

201. See for example *QMC*, p. 205, n. 23 on homosexuality; *QMC*, p. 208, n. 24 on stoning adulterers; *QMC*, p. 16, n. 13 on his particular notion of predestination; *QMC*, p. 147, n. 33 on the spurious identification of Shahrur's concept of *ta'wīl* with Whitehead's concept of concrescence; *QMC*, p. xvii on his criticism of Shahrur's philosophical failings.

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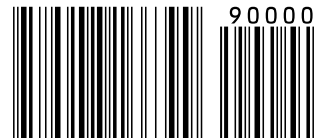
The purpose of this paper is to present an integral critique that explores the underlying conceptual structure of the work of Muhammad Shahrur. It is the author's contention that every thinker and writer is an inheritor of a chain of ideas or an intellectual system that he necessarily manifests in his writings, consciously or unconsciously. There is no such thing, in other words, as an orphan idea or an idea without a conceptual genealogy. This means that the integrity or soundness of any idea is narrowly dependent on the pedigree of its genealogy or *silsila*. The value of Shahrur's thought is therefore inevitably linked to the value of the origin of his ideas, which we have briefly attempted to trace and evaluate in this paper. It is hoped that this model of critique may become an effective tool in understanding the mechanics of the varying and hybridised conceptual systems that 'reformers', or one should say 'intellectual adventurers', have recently introduced into the Islamic world.

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