

# GRADUATE STUDENT FORUM

# REVISITING THE THEORY OF MODERNITY AN ANALYSIS FROM AN EXISTENTIALIST METAPHYSICAL FRAMEWORK

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## ABSTRACT

This article revisits the theory of the origin of modernity in the history of philosophy that focuses on Descartes' skepticism and dualism which is said to have contributed to much of the destructive tendency in modernity, such as ecological destruction, racism, and colonialism, among others. This narrative of a Cartesian origin is then contrasted by bringing forth previous philosophers and historians of ideas' theories which saw that Descartes was only continuing the modernizing tendency already present in the Scholastic period. An alternative theory on the origin of modernity is put forward using Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas' careful analysis of the metaphysical positions of the Scholastics, which he elaborated to support his theory that the Thomistic effort to harmonize faith and reason instead led to secularization and opened the way to skepticism and dualism. An elaboration of essentialist and existentialist metaphysical position follows, and it is affirmed that the modernizing spirit which arises from an existentialist position, that of the School of the Transcendent Oneness of Existence (*wahdat al-wujūd*), as elaborated by al-Attas, does not lead to the secularized modernity's destructive tendencies in the understanding of the world and its ecosystem, in scientific advancements and in the study of history.

**Keywords:** Modernity, skepticism, metaphysics, Scholasticism, *wahdat al-wujūd*

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The changing worldview from the medieval world to the modern world oftentimes would focus on the 17<sup>th</sup> century where Descartes and his *cogito ergo sum* was typically seen as the precursor of the modern *zeitgeist*, bringing Europe and subsequently the whole world into the new mechanistic-scientific world, with little or no mention on the role of the Scholastics.

However prevalent this idea is in the history of philosophy, one might wonder if having a clear break between Medieval Europe and the modern period did not produce a distortion in understanding the history of ideas where instead of a break, the medieval and the modern period in Europe forms a continuity and the latter is a product of former. A clear break may also render Medieval Europe and the Scholastic philosophy as a passive bystander to the Cartesian assault on Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy.

In the Introduction to his *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* as well as in *Islam and Secularism*, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas put forward a thesis that the seeds of secularism were planted and nurtured in the medieval period by the Scholastics and came to its full fruition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with theologians such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and others in their effort at proposing a reconciliation between Christianity and secularization.<sup>2</sup> Al-Attas puts forth a theory which centers the origin of secularization in the Medieval Scholastics due to their application of Greek philosophy into their theology and metaphysics, and this “logically led to the scientific revolution enunciated by Descartes, who opened the doors to doubt and skepticism”,<sup>3</sup> which marks the beginning of the modern secular and humanistic worldview.

In this article, we will look into al-Attas’ theory on the origin of modernity, which takes place due to the process of secularization, which can serve as an alternative way to look at the history of ideas instead of locating Descartes’ *cogito* as the origin of modernity. Al-Attas is by no means the only one who sees a continuity between modern philosophy with its Medieval

predecessor, as we will see shortly that there have been other thinkers who argued along the same line. However, unlike the latter theory which faulted Cartesian dualist ontology and epistemology, al-Attas’ reasoning arises from him identifying the Western worldview as having an essentialist ontology and that Cartesian dualism is a necessary consequence of this ontology. The focus on essentialist/existentialist ontology by al-Attas marks a shift from a focus on the difference in epistemological framework in explaining how modernity comes about. In other words, modernity did not come as a result of giving up the framework of epistemological realism in place of an epistemic doubt (Descartes’ *cogito*), instead, it is argued that modernity and skepticism as well as the ontological dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* that follows is simply a development of the events in the Medieval Scholastic period. In this way, it can be said that it is not ontology (dualism or monism) that ought to be dictated by an epistemic framework, but ontology precedes and will be important in shaping and guiding the epistemological framework and the scientific activity arising from this framework.<sup>4</sup> This also emphasizes that a change in the methodology of science or a new focus in the investigation of nature does not necessarily spell a break with the past. The historian of ideas should not be distracted by changes on the surface but must identify instead the metaphysical framework which underlies such changes. Al-Attas’ thesis on secularism and the origin of Western modernity serves as an accurate genealogy of the problem with modernity and helps the Muslim world on how to understand and respond to it.

## I. MODERNITY: THE ‘CARTESIAN EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFT’ STORY

Modernity is understood in this article as a way of thinking and living that employs scientific thinking. What is considered scientific thinking is the reliance on concrete facts and in the absence of this, statistical or mathematical predictions or approximation to reproduce the concrete facts, such as seen in the understanding of consciousness or the investigation

1 This article is developed from a handful of write-ups submitted throughout 2020 for the course ‘Worldview and Epistemic Frameworks’ taught by Prof. Dr. Muhammad Zainiy Uthman at Raja Zarith Sofiah’s Center of Islam, Science and Civilisation (RZS-CASIS), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and as such, had benefitted tremendously from consultations and discussions with Prof. Muhammad Zainiy, primarily, and then with the other students who attended the course. It is to these enlightened souls that I wish to extend my gratitude.

2 Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 2-3.

3 Ibid, 22.

4 The relation between epistemology and metaphysics or specifically ontology is most often seen as a chicken or egg question; which one comes first? Having a certain method or delineated objects of knowing certainly effect our interpretation of reality and being, thus it seems that epistemology precedes ontology. However, a method or a framework of investigating the natures of things also assumes that we already know what a thing is, it is with this in mind that I state that ontology precedes and dictates epistemology, though it is admitted that ontology and epistemology are closely related.

into the fabric of the universe. But modernity should not be limited to an area of natural science, it is a comprehensive way of living which affects politics, socio-economic and ethical conduct in life.<sup>5</sup> In politics, modernity brings in the theory and reality of the nation-states and this affects the understanding of economy, where citizens of the nation-state is responsible to pay taxes to the state in return for a membership and protection of the state.<sup>6</sup> This renders the human being as citizens which have rights as accorded by the law, designed to preserve the state, with the understanding that the state's preservation will necessarily preserve its citizens. Modernity has also been argued to lead to colonialism, imperialism, and totalitarian governments<sup>7</sup> as well as capitalism where its economic theory transforms the understanding of human nature.<sup>8</sup> Attendant with modernity is the destructive tendency in the realms of natural world (climate change and extinction of species); the structure and hierarchy in society (emphasis on individual rights and the disintegration of the family structure); religion and spirituality (breakdown of religious systems). This, in brief, is what is meant by modernity as used throughout this article.

The trend of perpetuating the start of modernity and scientific revolution in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century is not only seen in philosophers who write on what we can classify as history of philosophy such as Charles Taylor<sup>9</sup> or those writing in history and philosophy of science like E.A. Burrt,<sup>10</sup> but it can also be seen in other fields like that of philosophy of ecology and decolonial discourses. J.I. Kureethadam, a Vatican priest and philosopher of science, insisted

that the contemporary ecological crisis resulted from the modern worldview beginning with Descartes' ontological and epistemological dualism.<sup>11</sup> Ramon Grosfoguel and Enrique Dussel in their decolonial works both came to the same conclusion as to the roots of contemporary Eurocentric modernity; which are Cartesian epistemological and ontological dualism, brought about as the logical consequence of the conquering ethos (*Ego conquiro*) during European colonization project of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which in turn provides the philosophical basis for modernity.<sup>12</sup> It can be said that the prevalence of this thesis in the history of ideas was cemented early on by Martin Heidegger where he delineated carefully how subject-object relations changed from the classical and medieval period with the Cartesian ego.<sup>13</sup>

## II. MODERN PHILOSOPHY AS A CONTINUATION OF MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

We will first look at how the Scholastic period<sup>14</sup> is said to be where modernity originated to put more weight on the theory of a continuity between this period and the modern period.<sup>15</sup> Take an event in the Medieval Scholastic period which some thinkers pointed to as having played a greater role in shaping the direction of the modern world and its secular worldview

5 Jane Bennett, "Modernity and its Critics" in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, edited by Robert E. Goodin (online reprint, 2013), 1.

6 See Alexander J. Motyl, "The Modernity of Nationalism: Nations, States and Nation-States in the Contemporary World", *Journal of International Affairs*, 45: 2 (1992), 307-323. Motyl argues that the sentiment for nationalism increases as a result of the secularization of the religious world, in line with Max Weber's disenchantment of the world, see 314-315.

7 For an argument of how the rationalizing tendency in enlightenment leads to fascism, imperialism and a totalitarian governance, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 63-93. See also Hannah Arendt's analysis on modernity and its impact on social life and science in the last chapter of her book, *The Human Condition*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 248-326.

8 Marx has long argued that capitalism brings about self-alienation where workers are reduced to labors and the creative product made by the worker no longer carries any meaning. Arendt pursues this argument further and explores how higher capacities of man such as intellecting and appreciating the arts are neglected in capitalistic economy. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 162, 320-322.

9 See Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992).

10 See E. A. Burrt. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003, originally published 1924).

11 Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam. *The Philosophical Roots of the Ecological Crisis: Descartes and the Modern Worldview* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

12 See Ramon Grosfoguel, The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century in *Human Architecture: Journal of Sociology of Self Knowledge*; for Enrique Dussel, see *The Invention of the Americas*.

13 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 85-86. We can list more writers from the opposite spectrum in philosophy who would echo this argument that Descartes and his Cartesian dualism brought forth modernity as we know it today. Among them is the Thomist Etienne Gilson, see his book, *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990, originally published in 1935); and the French postmodern thinker, Michel Foucault, which although he shows caution in taking the historians narrative of the break between Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy with Cartesian mechanism, nevertheless takes the break as somewhat granted and used it to interpolate his analysis of the different epistemes there are. See *The Order of Things* (New York: Routledge, 2002, originally published in 1972), especially Chapter 5. Jacques Derrida, another French postmodern, also locates the break in Cartesian dualism. See *Heidegger: The Question of Being & History*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 115-116.

14 I use the common period of Scholastic as spanning from 1100 to 1700. This means that its end coincides with the Renaissance in southern Europe.

15 The Age of Enlightenment began in the 1700s, but in the history of philosophy, modern philosophy is said to begin much earlier in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with Descartes, Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton all active within this century. They and their contemporaries laid the foundation for modern science.

than what was previously believed. This event is the Condemnation of 1277, a text drawn by Bishop Stephen Tempier on behalf of the Church where in it is listed 219 propositions that are found to be against the belief held by the Catholic Church.<sup>16</sup> Among the propositions that are philosophical in nature,<sup>17</sup> it can be seen that the *condemnatio* was intended to stem the influence of Averroism among the Masters of Arts,<sup>18</sup> and specifically, philosophical naturalism. The introduction to the Condemnation specifically outlined the heretical position of the double truth; a position which espoused the idea that there are two contradictory truths arrived at; one by the Christian doctrine, and the other by way of Aristotelian philosophy. How Ibn Rushd's name became associated to this group of Christian 'deviants' is one of those peculiarities in history considering that he himself is a judge (*qādi*) and this can perhaps be attributed to the fact that only his philosophical works were translated into Latin, resulting in his image in Europe then as a highly astute follower of Aristotle against religion.

A few propositions condemned Aristotelian natural philosophy, this being his theories of the first principles and the eternity of the world, and these condemnations have been hypothesized as causing the Scholastics to practice caution in their intellectual foray into Greek philosophy. The punishment of those who held these beliefs were severe; it would prohibit them to teach at universities or hold positions within the Church, therefore, this condemnation had the effect of opening up alternative ideas to Aristotle in the attempt to explain the universe. This is Pierre Duhem's thesis in his book *Saving the Phenomena*; that the Condemnation caused the philosophers to break with Aristotle and welcomed the origin of modern science.<sup>19</sup> This thesis seems to be highly supported by the observation that there was a change in the epistemic framework from the 13<sup>th</sup> century when Albert the Great and his famous student, Thomas Aquinas, were realists, compared to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century Scholastics in Oxford, Paris and Padua where the main epistemic framework is nominalism;<sup>20</sup> nominalism being a rejection of universals, or a belief that universals exist only in name or

concepts. It was also to be noticed that nominalism is the kind of skepticism that fits right into the spirit of the condemnation and the chief proponent of this is William of Ockham.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the Scholastics, due to the impact of the condemnation, turned to abstract logic rather than dealing with concrete claims on the physical universe and they became more wary to assert truth claims in the realm of science in response to the condemnation.

To support this thesis further, it has also been shown that the Nominalists' framework and logic influenced an important figure of the Reformation, Martin Luther.<sup>22</sup> Reformation and its child, Protestantism, were further credited with pushing forward the secularization of the world. Al-Attas would also note that the Protestants were more accepting of modernizing Christian theology,<sup>23</sup> and Charles Taylor singled out the Protestants or specifically the Puritan ethic for advancing modernization, because the latter elevated the position of work and family in their affirmation of the ordinary life.<sup>24</sup> Previously, both were looked on as something of lesser importance in the Catholic tradition that prioritized monastic or priestly life and learning, with other non-monastic life in the village or town only seen to have a supporting role for the monastery.<sup>25</sup> This shift moved human society into the life of commerce and acquisition in the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup> One is also reminded of Max Weber's seminal work which suggested the same; that the Protestant ethic normalizes success in economy and was a major force in bringing forth capitalism.<sup>27</sup>

Another supporting evidence to the thesis that it is the Medieval world that is the precursor of modern science can be found in the work of a historian of philosophy, Stephen Gaukroger, in his book *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture*, who acknowledged that agenda driven exclusively by Christianity is what drove the Scientific Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and what has set it apart from other scientific programs in the world.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it is no surprise to see

21 Ibid. Wallace, in his essay argued that the mark of modern science can be seen even prior to the condemnation, with Albert the Great and Aquinas.

22 Thomas Osborne, 'Faith, Philosophy, and the Nominalist Background to Luther's Defense of the Real Presence' in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2002, 63-82; Graham White, 'Luther as Nominalist: A Study of the Logical Methods Used in Martin Luther's Disputations in the Light of their Medieval Background', in *Schriften der Luther-Agricola Gesellschaft*, 1994.

23 Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 3.

24 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 215.

25 This, of course is not surprising since in the Medieval Period, the church and its institutions are the landowners.

26 Ibid., 214.

27 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge Classics, 2012, originally published 1930).

28 Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

16 Selections from the Condemnation of 1277 in *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*, ed. Gyula Klima (Oxford: Blackwell Publication, 2007), 180-189.

17 The condemnations also condemn occultic propositions and other more theological ones. On the overview of the Condemnation, see John F. Wippel, 'The Parisian Condemnations of 1270 and 1277' in *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 65-73.

18 See *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013) for accounts on how Ibn Rushd's commentaries on Aristotle and other writings were received in Europe 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

19 William Wallace, 'Pierre Duhem on Galileo' in *Prelude to Galileo: Essays on Medieval and Sixteenth-Century Sources of Galileo's Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1981), 303-319, 303.

20 Ibid., 304.

that many among the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century theologians or religious men contributed to the scientific discoveries and advancement in mathematics, such as the aforementioned Ockham, Francis Bacon to 16<sup>th</sup> century Newton and Descartes.<sup>29</sup> Margaret J. Osler, the late historian and philosopher of early modern science, had also argued that Descartes' mechanistic philosophy is indeed an inheritance of Thomistic' theology in believing that God has inserted necessary relations in the universe.<sup>30</sup>

So, what have we shown so far? We can see that events prior to Descartes have been seen to be monumental in shaping aspects of modernity in both the Catholic and Protestant strands of Christianity, but in so far as Protestantism is only possible because of certain events taking place in the Medieval-Scholastic world which is Catholic, it can be said that the origin of modernity seems to be located in the Scholastic period in Europe, rather than the Protestant Netherlands (or England with Bacon and Newton) in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, against the much-pushed narrative of the Cartesian spark to modernity.

### III. AL-ATTAS' MODERNITY AS SECULARISATION AND THE ESSENTIALIST FRAMEWORK

The above is a survey of how modernity arose from the Scholastics, and we have so far only shown supporting evidence from Western historians of philosophy or ideas. Here onward, we would take a deeper look into how al-Attas traced the onset of modernity to one fundamental question; ontology or what he terms as the Problem of God. His approach differs from the historians and philosophers of science mentioned above, as al-Attas is not concerned with explaining the changing face of science, in terms of methodology or epistemology (realist vs nominalist). He is approaching the question of modernity from his concern towards secularization and its impact on the worldview of Islam and how Muslims relate to knowledge including knowledge of reality, the nature of their selves and their role in the universe. Secularization, to al-Attas, plays a major role in modernization, and it is important for the Muslims to know what constitutes these two so that he or she can discern the good and the bad forms of knowledge under the complementarity of modernity and secularization. It is foolish

29 This was explored by Ernan McMullin in "Medieval and Modern Science: Continuity or Discontinuity", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 5, no. 1, 1965, 103-129.

30 Margaret J. Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

to appropriate modernity mindlessly into the lives of Muslims and futile to reject it outright. Therefore, to be able to discern which aspects of modernity are appropriate for application, the Muslim must first understand and comprehend how the world became modern in the first place. This is how al-Attas approaches the discussion on the intellectual tradition of the West from the Greek to the Scholastics and modern European philosophy in the first two chapters of his book, *Islam and Secularism*.

Al-Attas' locating the origin in the ontological framework of the Scholastics does not in any way minimize the role of Descartes as shaping the modern worldview, but to him, Descartes' philosophy is merely the consequence of the philosophical problems arising from the attempt to harmonize Christianity with Greek philosophy. The Problem of God arises from the difficulty faced by the Scholastic thinkers in mediating between the essentialist<sup>31</sup> and existentialist position with regards to ontology, starting with the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence, and this advances the thinking that essence and quiddity can be understood without knowing its existence. This idea arises from the Greek worldview, the idea of the Divine Being and the creation of the world. However, Christian Scholastics must break the link between the world and Divine Being so as to confer necessity only to God and not to His Creatures. Al-Attas elaborates this further in saying that,

...when Christianity officially adopted Aristotelian philosophy into its theology, it had to deny necessary being to the creatures and affirm necessary being only to God Who alone is Eternal. Thus whereas Christian scholastic theology, like the Greeks, affirmed God as the Supreme Being Whose Being is Necessary, it did not regard the being of the world and nature as necessary, for as created being the world is by nature contingent. However, since it continued to adopt the Parmenidean epistemology, while it denied necessary being to the creatures, it could not deny the necessity of the being of the creatures as to their intelligibility; hence the creatures are contingent as to their being, but necessary as

31 An essentialist ontological position prioritizes essence as opposed to existence as the main 'stuff' of being whereas an existentialist ontological position looks at existence as the being of Being. Proponents of the former in the Muslim world are Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi, whereas the latter position finds Ibn Arabi, Mulla Sadra and the 17<sup>th</sup> century Aceh theologian, Nur al-Din al-Raniri among its supporters. Existentialist here is not to be understood as the 20<sup>th</sup> century European movement which centers on the question of individual existence amidst the popularity of Hegelian speculative philosophy which centers on a general Absolute while disregarding the issue of individual role. For elaboration of essentialist and existentialist positions, as well as the similarities or difference between the European existentialist philosophies with existentialist ontological position, see Alparslan Açıkgenç, *Being and existence in Şadrā and Heidegger: A comparative ontology* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993).

to their being in thought....Since a distinction was made between necessary being and contingent being, and with reference to the creatures their being necessary in thought and not in actuality, a real distinction was thus made between essence and existence in creatures. The essence of the creature is its being in thought, and this is necessary; its existence is its actuality outside of thought, and this is contingent.<sup>32</sup>

Al-Attas attributes this distinction of essence and existence to Thomas Aquinas which in turn has obtained this from a misunderstanding of Ibn Sina.<sup>33</sup> He then shows how this thinking led to William of Ockham's view that knowledge can be separated into knowledge of the objects in thought (formal knowledge) and knowledge of things in themselves. However, if Aristotelian metaphysics rely on the investigation into the causes, then the causes of formal knowledge is still ambiguous and uncertain and this leads to the doubting of man's ability to know for certain about external things, and the consequence of this is a skepticism of external reality, i.e, whether anything actually exists. Al-Attas says,

From the ensuing doubt that Ockham raised about the existence of objects, it follows that the existence of God is likewise cast in doubt. Our knowledge of things is based upon the existence of objects. Even if the external existence of objects remain problematic, at least their being in thought is known. But their being in thought, which constitute 'formal' knowledge, can also possibly be caused, as such, by an efficient cause other than the actually existing objects – such as God, or by the very nature of the mind itself, - and hence, the problem as to the 'objective' reality of ideas become more complicated for philosophy and cannot be established by it.<sup>34</sup>

In the above passage, al-Attas' spelling out the step (or rather, misstep, in his view) from Thomistic philosophy regarding the fundamental ontological question, on what is the relation between existence to essence and which one is prior, and to the problem of objective or external existence uttered by William of Ockham. Ockham, as has been said earlier, promoted a view called nominalism which rejected that universals have real ontological existence, and this is a view derived from its logic which separates names from their reality, which parallels

the confusion of the relation on being on the one hand, and what is thought on the other, as elaborated above by al-Attas. If quiddity is a real ontological thing, and existence another, then it is natural to think that there are essences of a thing and the existence of a thing; essences symbolized by the name of a thing while existence is its reality. A resulting view that we can see from Ockham's nominalism is the belief in modern epistemology that what can be thought (the names) must represent reality (must exist), known as the correspondence theory of truth. From here, the link to Descartes is clear, as Descartes pushes this doubt to its logical conclusion and sought a new foundation for certainty. This new foundation is found in the self, or the Ego; the only indubitable thing that is accessible to man's mind. If all names or essences are separated from its existences/reality, then it is natural to doubt the existence of these essences, except for the essence that does the doubting, as explained cogently by al-Attas,

Ultimately, this trend of philosophy naturally led to consequences resulting in the casting of doubt also on knowledge of the essence of the creatures, and not merely its existence. The epistemological consequences of doubting the existence and essence of objects created the 'problem of God'. After Ockham, Descartes, following the logical course of deduction from the observation of Aquinas, sought to establish the existence of the self by his famous *cogito* argument...<sup>35</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss in detail the relation between existence and essence in Thomism, but briefly stated, the traditional view in Thomistic scholarship has always been that Aquinas hold *esse* (the act of existing, or "to be")<sup>36</sup> as the supreme act and perfection but *essentia*, or essence, still have an ontological positivity of its own. This ontological positivity takes place in a composition with existence, thus the traditional view of a being, or *ens*, is explained as that of existence actualizing the potency of essence. This view is also called in Thomism as the real

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Aquinas uses the term *esse* in both sense; the act of existing, and an actual existing. This results in an obstacle in trying to interpret his doctrine. Yet, an Aquinas scholar would be able to tell in which sense he is employing the term in based on the context or previous discussion on where the term is found. This does not occur in Arabic, as Jean Jolivet shows in his research of how some philosophical terms fare when being translated from Arabic into Latin. On *esse* as the act of existing, the Arabic term used for this is *kāna* which conveys a sense being-in-process, thus an 'act' of existing, whereas actual existing is *wujuda* in Arabic. See Jean Jolivet, 'The Arabic Inheritance' in *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*, ed. Peter Dronke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 113-148).

<sup>32</sup> Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

distinction or real composition, as essence is taken as a real entity and it is really distinct from existence, and that any being is composed of essence and existence, in the way that Aristotelian matter and form makes up a substance. This view finds support in Aquinas' own works.<sup>37</sup> Essence, in relation to the act of existence, in a more sophisticated interpretation, is not an actual thing as it exists only in a state of potency. However, when existence is contracted into a determinate mode, this requires a real principle and this is that essence, e.g., the existence of a horse requiring the act of existence and the principle or the potency of a horse (its essence). Otherwise, without this essence, the horse will not be a horse and will be a pure form, and Aquinas has said that only God has its essence the same as existence. It is in this way how essence is said to have an ontological positivity.<sup>38</sup>

The Problem of God is the realization that the existence of God, under the correspondence theory which links reality to what is thought, stands on a very shaky ground of making thought as the standard to judge the 'existence of reality', and if the last part sounds paradoxical, that is because it is, because intuitively, we *know* that reality exists. But the separation of essence from existence and thought from reality problematizes the link between essence and existence, hence, what comes as intuitive towards reality; e.g. that the table is/exists, becomes a fertile ground for suspicion and doubt. This here, then, is the shift from realism to nominalism, the change from the view which took for granted that reality exists (the Thomistic view) and a view which leads to skepticism of some aspects of reality (in the Nominalists' view, this aspect is the

universals). This shift in epistemology did not begin in Cartesian skepticism, but began in the Nominalists' skepticism, which was a reaction to the intrusion of Aristotelian philosophy into Catholic theology. And indeed, Nominalists are often portrayed as going against Thomism and in the process 'destroy' the collaboration between the Catholic doctrine and Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

#### IV. TWO VIEWS ON MODERNITY AS A CONTINUITY FROM MEDIEVAL PERIOD

There are two ways to look at the history of modernity. One way is to look at modernity as beginning from Descartes and the scientists of 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century working within a new epistemology (starting from doubt as opposed to realism, dualism of the subject-object). Another is to insist that the Cartesian shift is only an evolution of the events that are already taking place in the Medieval Scholastic philosophy, the nominalist turn of Ockham. Al-Attas' view is similar to the latter, but he brings in another angle to understand why the shift occur, which is on the metaphysical understanding of existence. This puts the *entire* Western intellectual tradition since the Scholastic's reception of Aristotle as being responsible for the development of modernity, due to the strict separation between essence and existence. That this took place over five hundred years (12<sup>th</sup> century to 17<sup>th</sup> century) is much more probable than a complete overhaul only under two hundred years.

The significance of this view is in its ability to explain why centuries of Muslim civilization in the past did not produce the type of modernity and secularization that we are seeing today, the modernity originating from Europe which perpetuates dualism in all aspects and sciences, be it natural science, or politics, or ethics; subject-object, man-nature, thought-reality, intuition-intellect, body-soul, mind- brain, religion-science, modernity-tradition, European-savages (in the case of colonialism) etc. If essentialist metaphysics is what underlies the Western Judeo-Christian intellectual heritage and imperial expansion, then the destructive tendency that accompanies modernity is the consequence of a duality which arises from this metaphysics. If it be argued that the only time human civilization has seen another universal scientific and

37 See on Being and Existence, in *Thomas Aquinas Selected Writing* (London: Everyman's Library, 1964), 167. See also his *Summa Theologia*, when discussing whether in God, *esse* and *essentia* is identical (ST 1. Q.3, Art.4), Aquinas explains that if they are not identical, then its *esse* will be caused either by its own essence or by external cause. But God who is absolute cannot be said to have its own *esse* caused by external factor. Also, essence is regarded as potentiality, and God cannot be said to have potentials. By negation, beings other than God has their essence and existence not identical. In ST 1. Q.13, Art. 11, Aquinas affirmed that "the being of God is His very essence (which can be said of no other being)." In *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 2, Ch. 52, Aquinas said that in all intellectual substances, even if they do not have anything material or material form, they have the *quod est* (what is, quiddity) and *esse* (the act of existence). It seems that beginning 1960s, there is an 'existential shift' among the Thomists, a call for a reinterpretation of the Thomistic real distinction which argues that it be understood in a way that does not lend ontological existence to *essentia*. These are Fr. Gerald Phelan, Joseph Owens, and Jacques Maritain, to name a few. See William Carlo, *Ultimate Reducibility of Essence to Existence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 4-5.

38 I thank Dr. Brian Kemple, the Director of the Lyceum Institute, the US, for explaining the relation of essence to existence in Thomism as well as on Aquinas' elaboration on the question of being. His view differs from the traditional view in that the ontological status of essence is only minimal, that of potency always in relation to the act of existence, but to us, an ontological thing all the same. This was elaborated to me through Microsoft Teams messaging, on 15<sup>th</sup> of March, 2021.

39 Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 498.



political culture is that of the Muslim civilization;<sup>40</sup> since only the Muslim civilization has a scientific-technological and a modern political society which spanned across vast geographical areas and for a long period of time before current Western modernity, and whose scientific and societal knowledge were used by other civilizations and cultures, then the reason why Muslims' modernity did not evolve into the secularized modernity as we know it today is due to it not affected by the prism of dualism brought about by an essentialist worldview.

Indeed, we can see that al-Attas advanced a thesis that the Malay world's encounter with Islam brought it into modernity, modernity here taken as an intellectual awakening in the mind of the Malays to the reality and experience of religion, the nature of one's soul, the civilizational spirit and a realization of man's place in the world and his responsibility and duty.<sup>41</sup> This type of modernity connects the Malay mind to the rich heritage of the Islamic intellectual tradition and broadens his horizon beyond the Hindu-Buddhist world to Greek philosophical discourse as well as other sciences coming from the Greek intellectual tradition. Al-Attas compares this to the awakening of the European intellect after the introduction of Muslim intellectual works in the Medieval period.<sup>42</sup> The Malay world's encounter with and submission to Islam, to al-Attas, have managed to plant the seeds of rational-intellectual spirit in the region.<sup>43</sup> His writings on Malay works of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, particularly on Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī, showed the Malays having in-depth discussion and insights on higher Sufi metaphysical thought, which is based on an existentialist metaphysics; the school of the transcendent oneness of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*).<sup>44</sup> This metaphysics looks at existence not as a concept but as a reality. In the words of al-Attas,

Existence as a reality is not something static like existence as concept; it perpetually involves itself in a dynamic movement of ontological self-expression, articulating its inner possibilities in gradations from less determinate to the more determinate until it appears at the level of concrete forms such that the particular existences, which we regard as multiple and diverse 'things' having separate, individual 'quiddities', are nothing but the modes and aspects of the reality of existence...The real and true quiddity or essence of a thing, according to the Sufis, is existence as individuated into a particular mode. The reality of existence is identified by the Sufis as the absolute Existence, or as the Truth.<sup>45</sup>

The impact of this view on any intellectual tradition, not only the Malays, can be seen in the way Muslim scholars within the Islamic intellectual tradition study nature and their history. In the study of nature, a view which looks at everything as particular modes of existence, will not treat those entities other than the self, whether living or non-living, as objects to be manipulated or resources to be exhausted. Revelation is affirmed as the source of knowledge of ultimate truth of created things and means of knowledge is not only restricted to senses and rational thinking, but also to intuition and true report.<sup>46</sup> The science that is practiced in the existentialist metaphysics takes into consideration the meaning of reality and truth of every created things in nature. Things are seen to occupy their proper positions in the world and so do the different sciences occupy its own hierarchy and importance according to its objects of study. Hierarchies imply also that each science has a limit; another important aspect of the philosophy of science in the worldview of Islam.<sup>47</sup>

In the study of history, the unfolding of existence into ever more concrete forms sees history not simply as an interplay of thesis and antithesis; of the ebbs and flows or rise and decline of civilization as if history is a mechanical thing and every civilization is determined to take the path that it takes and necessarily have a rise and fall. However, Islam sees important events in history as being moved because of the emergence of great men and women who embodied the Islamic worldview. Individuals are "among the principle causes of history, and who have decisive influence in the making of history... and actualizes their age."<sup>48</sup> External

40 This is not to negate that other cultures did not have their own scientific tradition, since it is a well-known truth that there have been scientific and technological achievements in Chinese, Persian, Hindu and Mayan civilization, to name a few. But I would argue that these are not universal and are only localized to a limited geographical region.

41 See his *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, 1990), 19-24, where he argues that the historiography in the Malay world should not compare the Malay Muslim civilization with the Hindu-Buddhist one before it, but with the trajectory that the European civilization took after its encounter with the knowledge tradition of the Muslims in the Medieval period.

42 Ibid., 22.

43 Ibid., 24. Al-Attas also interestingly said in this page that subsequent European colonization, while in one aspect, can be said to disrupt the process of Islamization of the Malay world, in another aspect, can be said to be continuing the rationalism spirit of the Malays which Islam had already taught them.

44 This is how al-Attas himself translates the term *waḥdat al-wujūd*, instead of the more popular term, Unity of Existence, to denote the school in works written in English. See *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Ṣiddīq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture Malaysia, 1986), 33.

45 Ibid., 35.

46 Al-Attas, "Islam and the Philosophy of Science", in *Prolegomena*, 120.

47 Ibid., pp. 124-125. See also M.Z. Uthman, 'Al-Attas on Action, Thinking Framework, and the Human Soul' in *Thinking Framework* (Kuala Lumpur: RZS-CASIS and UTM Publication, 2020), 7-44, for an elaboration on the framework for science which takes into consideration the nature of the human soul and intellect as well as the limits of knowledge.

48 Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit UTM Press, 2011), 72.

historical data are not narrative-free facts, which can be interpreted in just any epistemological framework or sociological theory, but it has its internal causes; in line with the understanding in *wa dat al-wujūd* that every reality has an external and internal aspect.<sup>49</sup>

This, in brief, are the differences between the sciences as seen and practiced from an existentialist metaphysics, whose impacts on the interpretation of the world and on nature vastly differ from a science whose underlying philosophy is essentialist and dualistic. It will produce a different kind of modernity than the one that we know today, and this is the modernity which was seen in the history of Islam; in Mecca with the coming of the final Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), to Arabia as well as the lands which his message has touched.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the field of history and philosophy of science and studies on modernity, needs to take into consideration the overarching metaphysical worldview of the science and modernity in question. Once this is done, it will be seen that modern science as we know it today forms a continuity with its medieval predecessor. The Condemnation of Bishop Tempier, which sought to defend Christian doctrines from the influence of naturalistic philosophy, had the opposite effect of changing the epistemic framework of the Scholastics to that of nominalist position, which opened the way for the new sciences and modernity. This conclusion is not new, and has been reached and written by others, however, the continuity elaborated by them is premised mainly on the external aspects of science; such as by comparing the main methodology of medieval and modern sciences, or tracing the origin of inventions in the sciences. While this supports the theory of continuity, it does little to explain why and how this continuity happened despite the obvious difference externally, such as the religious convictions of the practitioners and theorists. It also does not explain how and why modernity and scientific culture in the Muslim world did not have the same trajectory as European science.

Another interesting thing to note from this is that that al-Attas mentioned Christianity

arrived at secularized modernity despite and because it has very covetously guarded its doctrine from the influences of what they see as secularization (which was Greek philosophy at that time). If secularization and modernity goes hand in hand, then it can be argued that the Muslim world was secularized by way of being colonized, since it is via colonialism that Eurocentric modernity is introduced here. Instead of pushing the narrative that the advent of Eurocentric modernity is purely epistemological in origin, to the Muslim world, modernity should be looked at along with its attending metaphysical worldview, i.e., its essence-existence distinction.

Al-Attas' thesis on secularization and Westernization should be taken as a precautionary tale to the Muslim world of what would happen if our reaction to something foreign did not take into consideration the foreign idea's metaphysical framework and our own metaphysical framework. The problem needs to be diagnosed accurately to have a truly functioning antidote to the many problems faced by Muslims today. Thus, we see that the other side of al-Attas' genealogy of secularism and in detailing its destructive tendencies is an elaboration of the metaphysics of Islam, following the tradition of the higher Sufi metaphysicians, that of an existentialist worldview. This can be seen in his works, the *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, *Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf*,<sup>50</sup> and *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*,<sup>51</sup> to name but a few.

50 Al-Attas, *Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf: Preliminary Thoughts on an Islamic Philosophy of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Academy of Science, 1981).

51 Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 2001).

49 Ibid., p. 71. The ones who would be able to furnish the correct interpretation of the history are the ones who would be able to glean the meanings of both the external and the internal aspects. See an elaboration of the dual aspects of existence in al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 135, 136, 137-138.