Abdelwahab Elmessiri's Critique of Western Modernity and the Development of an
Islamic Humanism

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation provides a study of Egyptian thinker, writer, and public figure, Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008). It identifies and tracks the commitments, virtues, and values shaping Elmessiri's critical analysis of "modern Western civilization" and his formulation of an "Islamic humanism." The study begins by demonstrating that critiques of modernity are oriented by ethical commitments, and developing analytic tools for thinking about the critical discourses of Elmessiri's predecessors, peers, and interlocutors both inside and outside the Muslim world. In developing his critique and his alternative Islamic humanist vision, Elmessiri integrates a wide range of discursive threads, from the Traditions of Islam, to Marxism and German social theory, to British and American Romantic poetry. Elmessiri's efforts have also played a significant role in ethical and political thought in Egypt since the forced resignation of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. These features of his work warrant further attention from scholars outside of Egypt as they investigate the moral contours of our age and seek to contribute to constructive discourse about living together in an increasingly pluralistic world. In addition to contributing a first major study of Elmessiri's life, work, and legacy written in English, the project also develops a framework for reading and analyzing comprehensive critical analyses of Western modernity that have been put forward by numerous writers in the past century or more – particularly those oriented by theological concepts and vocabularies. This framework expands the space available for research at the intersection of Religious Ethics, Islamic Studies, and Social and Political Theory. It also invites comparative study of practices of critique in the context of Religious Ethics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Glossary of Terms

al-ʿalmāniyya¹ al-juzʾiyya	Partial Secularism.
al-ʿalmāniyya al-shāmila	Comprehensive Secularism
ḍīq	Narrowness. A term Elmessiri uses to characterize the Western paradigm.
al-ḥadātha	Modernity
ḥulūliyya	Immanence.
insān	Human being or humanity.
al-insāniyya al-islāmiyya	Islamic Humanism.
al-insāniyya al-mushtarika	Common humanity.
ijtihād	Interpretive engagement.
al-ithnayniyya	Dualism. Two elements fundamentally opposed and in eternal conflict.
jawhar	Essence.
ma baʿd al-ḥadātha	Postmodernity.
al-mādiyya	Materialism.
masāfa	Space.
mufāriq	Transcendence (of God).
munfaṣila min al-qīma	Value-free.
namūdhaj	Paradigm.
al-nisbiyya al-islāmiyya	Islamic Relativism
qīma /qiyam	Value(s)

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¹ Elmessiri writes the term this way, tracing it to the word for world (*al-ʿālam*); other scholars write the term *al-ʿilmāniyya*, tracing it to the word for knowledge (*al-ʿilm*).

raḥāba	Breadth. The hospitable (metaphysical) spaciousness of the Islamic Humanist paradigm.
rūḥī	Spiritual.
al-ṭabī'a	Nature.
al-ṭabī'a al-bashariyya	Human Nature.
al-taḥāyyuz	Bias.
tajāwuz	Transcendence (of humanity).
tawḥīd	God's unity; monotheism.
al-thuna'iyya	Duality. Two elements in dynamic interaction.
wiḥda al-wujūd	Pantheism.
waḥīdiyya	Monism.

Introduction to the Project:

Background, Scope, Methods, and Outline

I.   **Opening: Elmessiri the Critic**

At the time of his death on July 2, 2008, Abdelwahab Elmessiri was eulogized as one of the most influential figures teaching and writing in the Arab world. He was influential through his philosophical and political perspectives, and through his activism. Intimate friends and distant admirers formed a chorus of praise for his uniqueness as a scholar and above all for his humanity (*insāniyya*). Elmessiri is also representative as a thinker. His critique of Western epistemological, ethical, political, and economic frameworks – and his efforts to inspire the creation of genuine alternatives – reflects broader trends among intellectuals in the Muslim world, particularly in the last half century. Egypt, Elmessiri's home, has been an epicenter of such projects, since at least the entry of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798.

Elmessiri offers a sustained critique of the development of "modern Western civilization," (*al-ḥaḍāra al-gharbiyya al-ḥadītha*[1]) whose conceptual categories and institutional forms have deeply impacted Egyptian society.   In particular, Elmessiri points to the problematic nature of what he identifies as the dominant Western philosophical anthropology – i.e. the claims and metaphors that shape our understanding of human nature. He tells the story of his own transformation from a predominantly modern, Western self-understanding, characterized by materialism and demands of economic efficiency and rationality, to one that was informed by the

[1] The term *al-ḥaḍāra* is sometimes translated as "culture" instead of as "civilization."

insights of what he calls "Islamic humanism" (*al-insāniyya al-islāmiyya*).[2] This realization

and the associated changes in his thinking, as well as Elmessiri's background in ever-

changing 20th century Egypt, provided him with penetrating insight into the

predicaments of his students, peers and compatriots, and earned him the attention and

respect of a wide range of figures who continue to be engaged in understanding the

present and envisioning Egypt's future.

The past century has been divided by struggles between those calling for a return

to and revival of Islamic principles and those carrying the banner of secularism and

liberal democracy. However, political discourse in Egypt today does not readily fit

within the neat divisions of "Islamist" versus "secularist" allegiances. These oppositions

are relevant to analysis of the political and social dynamics, but they are too limited.

Particularly in the past two decades, Egyptians have eschewed them with the formation

of new religio-political projects, which have facilitated dramatic and ongoing

transformations. The time is ripe for a careful investigation into new forms of

intellectual discourse and influence that may be enabling unlikely alliances.

An investigation of Elmessiri's work provides an entrée into this broader

investigation. Many figures seeking to transform the terrain in Egypt today have been

influenced by Elmessiri's work: Some call themselves his "disciples," self-consciously

carrying out Elmessiri's work in their respective fields. Several work as professors,

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[2] Hereafter I will simply write Islamic Humanism to refer to Elmessiri's concept. The concept does not belong exclusively to Elmessiri. For other usages, see: Lenn E. Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ebrahim Moosa "The Spirit of Islamic Humanism," in *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*. Ed. John W. de Gruchy (Sun Press, 2011. 107-116); Amyn B. Sajoo, "The Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism," *Internationl Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 8.4 (1995): 579-596); P.J. Vatikiotis, "Muhammad 'Abduh and the Quest for a Muslim Humanism," *Arabic* 4.1 (1957): 55-72.

some are intensely engaged in public life, and younger students and colleagues alike keep his legacy alive through media as diverse as scholarly conferences and Facebook pages.

My dissertation turns an eye to Elmessiri's intellectual project and his legacy. It presents and explores his critical narrative of Western modernity and his vision of an Islamic Humanism. Moreover, the analysis goes further to develop an account of his popularity and influence in the context of the contentious political and religious debates that surrounded him. The hypothesis that will guide my inquiry is the following: *Elmessiri is able to develop what I will call a "critical retrieval" – a careful dynamic of critical suspicion and hermeneutic recovery of meaning – which establishes his credibility as an authentic representative of Islamic resistance and revival, while at the same time providing a model for expanded networks of conversation and alliance.*

It is in large part the range of influences exhibited in his work – romantic, poetic, philosophical, and drawn from across spatial and temporal distances – that encouraged Elmessiri's project of critical retrieval. He abandoned political Marxism early on, but remained indebted to Marx and deeply critical of capitalism; he was called an Islamist, but challenged Islamism's "modern" impulse for power; and he described his route to God as being through admiration of the "human phenomenon" (*al-ẓahira al-insāniyya*). He drew heavily on the theoretical work of the Frankfurt school of critical theory; however, he names his own critical method *ijtihād*.[3] In his own life, Elmessiri bridged

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[3] An Arabic (and Islamic) term that means striving for understanding. It is often translated simply as "interpretation." I propose to render it "interpretive engagement," in order to capture the term's etymological connection to the meaning of a sustained effort or struggle. For helpful discussion of the sense of *ijtihād* in Islamic legal history and theory, see: Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic*

otherwise adversarial approaches, both philosophically, as he adapted Marxist critique to an Islamic spirituality,[4] and by way of *praxis,* through his role in *Kefaya* – a coalition of opposition movements that has brought together figures from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Coptic community, and the Left, among others. He also composed (as a case study) the most influential – as well as controversial – study of Jewish history and Zionist ideology in the Arab world, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the political and social background of the state of Israel. The fact that such a figure is influencing the thought and work of Egyptians across generational and ideological divides warrants the in-depth analysis that this dissertation will provide and helps to shed light on key conversations and inquiries in the field of religious ethics more broadly.

Several questions will structure the chapters that follow: *What is the relationship between Elmessiri's critique of Western[5] ethics and epistemology and his own moral outlook, which he calls Islamic Humanism? What conception(s) of the human being does Elmessiri's critique target? Why is modernity's way of imagining humanity said to be problematic? What alternative conception does Elmessiri defend or promote? How has Elmessiri's alternative vision become a resource for building common ground in Egyptian debates about the possible contours of that country's future?*

Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Bernard Weiss, *The Spirit of Islamic Law* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

[4] When Elmessiri uses the term spiritual (*rūḥī*), he is usually invoking a distinction between the spiritual and the material (*al-mādī*), and referring to the belief in or longing for something outside of the immanent plane of existence.

[5] Throughout the project, I will capitalize "West" and "Western" when the referent is cultural or conceptual; the terms will remain lower case when the referent is strictly geographical.

II.   Background and Scope of Project

A presentation and discussion of Elmessiri's project of critical retrieval will be the central purpose of this project. However, I conceive of this study as providing contributions that reach beyond the biographical or even regional insights that it will provide. In particular, I put this research forward as a contribution to the growing efforts to engage with Muslim critics as conversation partners in the now-global task of moral and political reflection. These efforts have been under way in the fields of comparative religious ethics, as well as in political theory. I hope that my project will contribute a case study for incorporating analysis of the genre of "critical narrative" of modernity into the aims and endeavors of religious ethics, and more specifically, comparative religious ethics. It will be helpful to share the project's background story, in order to explain this broader vision.

The foundation upon which my study of philosophy and religious thought rests is actually a *story*. It was a grand story – which I first heard in a classroom in the year 2000[6] – about how we of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have come to think. It was the most unusual story that I had ever heard. As stories go, it was also a scary one – troubling at the very least. The story went that there was a connection between ways of thinking about truth and the self (what I thought were innocent philosophical exercises), on the one hand, and recent and present horrors of political and social history, on the other. As the semesters went on, I encountered more and more of this type of "story,"

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[6] This was Peter Ochs's class, Philosophies of God, at the University of Virginia.

but they were being called by the name of "critique" – "critique of enlightenment," "critique of secular reason," "critique of political economy," "critique of modernity," and so on. Some were more focused, others all-encompassing and grand. I was particularly interested in the big ones – the ones that offered a sweeping and disconcerting account of how we've gotten to where we are. Sometimes explicit remedies accompanied these stories, but more often, they were only implicit in the analysis. It was necessary to discern from the account of what has been lost or done in error what it was that an author had in mind for attending to the problematic situation outlined. These projects of critique form the background for much research in religious ethics. For, they justify and orient efforts at reevaluating and reconstructing moral reasoning.

From my work in Islamic Studies and my time spent in the Middle East, I knew that similar projects of critique have been under formation, particularly in response to various experiences of colonial encounter. Although their occasions, vocabularies, and the perceptions that they organized varied, I wanted to determine whether there were patterns of similarities between the "stories" that I was hearing, and those told from other parts of the world. As I began to survey such projects, Elmessiri's work stood out as providing key points of overlap as well as unique features, in both its concerns and its longings.

I will use "critique" and "critical narrative" interchangeably to refer to those projects that undertake to outline the distinct argumentative and imaginative features of modernity, from the European Enlightenment period up to the present, focusing on its

dominant ethical or moral categories. This will be my primary understanding and usage of "critique" and "critical narrative" in this project: *a coherent argument or narrative (or argued narrative) about the relationship between ideas and social life that serves to diagnose and explain contemporary problems.* Elmessiri's work provides an example of a genre of critique that has been quite influential, particularly among religious-minded[7] thinkers in general.

III. Components of Methodology

a. Theory: Prefatory Remarks

In orienting this project toward conversations in comparative religious ethics, I have several specific precedent efforts in mind. Irene Oh's work in *The Rights of God: Islam, Human Rights, and Comparative Ethics* illuminates opportunities to create dialogue with notable Muslim critic of Western modernity. Whereas many have seen two of her case studies, Sayyid Quṭb and Abul A'la Maududi, as critics responsible for inciting hostility toward, and obstructing dialogue with, "the West," Oh demonstrates that on the subject matter of human dignity and human rights, there is much potential for understanding. In addition to Oh's project, I have taken encouragement in setting comparative goals from John Kelsay's comparative work on Islam and the Just War tradition, as well as Abdulaziz Sachedina's work, which has brought Islamic moral and

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[7] A term I borrow from Jenna Reinbold's recent article, "Radical Islam and Human Rights Values: A 'Religious-Minded' Critique of Secular Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.2 (2010): 449-76. Reinbold takes the term from Clifford Geertz, in *Islam Observed* (University of Chicago Press, 1971).

legal reflection into the purview of religious ethics on a range of topics from democracy, to bioethics, to human rights. For good reasons, these scholars have privileged experiences of recognition and understanding in their analyses. In my study of Elmessiri, however, I want to sustain attention to the activity of critique and the perception that knowledge and moral judgment have suffered distortions in the modern period. Thus, I supplement my understanding of the task of comparison with the work of Roxanne Euben, particularly in her *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*.[8]

Euben focuses on the critique of modern rationality at work in "fundamentalist" Islamic political thought. For a number of reasons, I do not simply apply Euben's methodology – most notably because Elmessiri is neither a fundamentalist, nor primarily a political theorist. However, I want to follow her lead in giving serious and sustained attention to non-Western critiques of modernity, as well as in her effort to garner comparative insights from her findings. I read Elmessiri's critique in light of Euben's argument that "critiques of the modern condition, both Western and Islamic, are perhaps best understood in terms of a dialectical relationship to modernity, one that entails not the negation of modernity but an attempt to simultaneously abolish, transcend, preserve, and transform it."[9]

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[8] Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[9] Roxanne Euben, "Premodern, Antimodern or Postmodern? Islamic and Western Critiques of Modernity," *The Review of Politics* 59.3 (1997), 436. Euben's work on Islamic fundamentalism is arguably the most important research in terms of methodology for study of and reflection on critique in non-Western (Islamic) settings. One of her central arguments is that each of the prominent analytical frames for describing Islamic fundamentalist movements and discourses positions them as a reaction against Western modernity. Therefore, Western modernity remains the central analytical category through

Although there is a comparative *telos* at work in Euben's work and in my project, most Muslim thinkers have a different historical and conceptual relationship to Western modernity than their European and American counterparts (whether Christian, Jewish, or identifying as neither). Therefore, a framework is needed to ensure that key differences in context and perspective can be acknowledged and assessed in relationship to what may seem to be more exciting similarities. Toward this end, I propose to work with the following framework for analysis of Muslim critical narratives. We may identify three key *dimensions of* or *moments in* critique:[10] C1, critique of Western modernity as an alien object of analysis; C2, reflexivity or self-criticism regarding the engagement with or response to those encounters – asking, *why is modernity a problem for me?*; and C3, immanent Islamic (or Arab) critique.[11] (It may be that this framework is useful for all critical narratives, but I must leave that hypothesis for another project.)

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which others are understood. In identifying "pre-modern," "anti-modern," and "post-modern" as the dominant frameworks of analysis in Western scholarship, her worry is not simply that these frameworks render fundamentalism as opposed to what "we" in the West understand or value. Euben's claim is that each of these frameworks fails to conceive of fundamentalism as anything other than a particular relationship to Western modernity. She writes, "to claim fundamentalism is postmodern is to assimilate it into an ongoing critique of modernity we in the West both recognize and in which we participate" (Euben 1997, 431). The concern that there may be *something else going on* in these critiques is important, and highly relevant to my project. Euben points to a genuine methodological dilemma. On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge and begin to try to understand "non-Western" movements and discourses *on their own terms*. However, there is a sense in which Western modernity and the material changes associated with globalization and late-capitalism cannot be avoided and do impact the lives and reflections of people all over the world. But it is one that I will not resolve in these pages. This is in part because Elmessiri doesn't demand that it be solved. His work is too explicitly engaged in thinking through both modernity and postmodernity; and as I mentioned, none have called him a fundamentalist.

[10] As I have already acknowledged my debt to Peter Ochs, I should note that I have recently considered that there may be parallels with his framework (based upon the work of Charles Peirce) of "First-ness," "Second-ness," and "Third-ness."

[11] I understand "immanent critique" in terms of Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of "tradition" as an ongoing argument. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). This is unfortunately not the space to elaborate on this claim and the significance of this connection. However, in a follow-up project, I would like to develop the connection between practices of critique and reflections on "tradition" as an alternative mode of reason – alternative, that is, to modern rationality. I would like,

Euben's claim and my supporting framework point to the need for careful theorization of both "(Western) modernity" and "(Islamic) tradition" as substantive fields of meaning, in need of interpretation. In addressing this, my reading of Elmessiri's work will be grounded in Paul Ricoeur's negotiation of a tension at the heart of much theoretical inquiry: a perceived antinomy between "interest in the reinterpretation of cultural heritages received from the past and the interest in the futuristic projections of a liberated humanity."[12] Ricoeur insists that these two interests are most effectively pursued if they are mutually reinforcing – that is, if they give rise to interpretive acts of critical retrieval.[13] This is a helpful lens with which to view Elmessiri's project, while at the same time keeping my broader interests in view. Ricoeur's framework also reinforces my multi-dimensional account of Muslim critique, providing a fruitful supplement to Euben, who has been primarily interested in the dimension of C1.[14]

Elmessiri's work presents a critical analysis of a number of components of what he calls modern Western civilization. His arguments resonate with some of the most infamous critiques of Western culture written by Muslims. However, they also resonate with and even explicitly draw on the work of other Western scholars. Moreover,

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in other words, to assess and further explore Paul Ricoeur's claim that "critique is also a tradition" in light of recent uses of the two terms. Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, eds. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 332.

[12] Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," 333.

[13] Retrieval of meaning as opposed to "suspicion" that any previous meanings won't reproduced distortions that obstruct human freedom.

[14] Sayyid Quṭb, her primary case study, situates the modernity that he challenges as an alien object. The other two moments may be discerned in his work. However, as compared with Elmessiri, C1 dominates. In this sense, it may be argued that the study of Islamic fundamentalism more generally will tend to be preoccupied with C1.

Elmessiri's reflections on Western modernity are accompanied by engagements with several key principles, most notably, *tawḥīd* (monotheism or unity) and *ijtihād* (interpretive engagement). I will argue that his critique is in fact but one among several components of his project for developing the vision of Islamic Humanism, drawing from resources on both sides of the supposed "Islam-West" divide. A reading of Elmessiri's intellectual project as one of critical retrieval will help lay the groundwork for new engagements in religious ethics and beyond.

b. Mechanics

I will be elaborating further on the theoretical components of my methodology in Chapter One, drawing on a wide range of theoretical resources for thinking about critique within the field of religious ethics. In addition to this conceptual scaffolding, there are several more technical matters relevant to reporting on this research. There are several field-based components of my background research, including archival materials and conversations with Elmessiri's students and colleagues, primarily obtained in Cairo, Egypt.[15] I have reviewed a wide range of media: (1) Books and articles authored by Elmessiri, some unpublished or un-translated, which I have closely studied to discern and analyze the concerns and influences shaping his arguments; [16] (2) materials by

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[15] I gathered materials and conducted interviews for this project during several periods of time between January, 2008 and March, 2012. Most of the interviews cited took place in June-July, 2010, and March, 2011 – March, 2012. Most research was conducted in Cairo, Egypt. However, I also obtained materials in Alexandria, Egypt.

[16] The text that I rely upon most heavily in developing this study is Elmessiri's autobiography. The full title of the autobiography is, My Intellectual Journey in Seeds, Roots, and Fruits: A Non-Subjective, Non-Objective Autobiography (*riḥlatī fikrīyya fī budūr wa judhūr wa thimār: sīra ghayr dhātiyya wa ghayr mawdūʿiyya*. Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2006). Throughout the dissertation, I will cite it simply as

Elmessiri's students and colleagues that address and expand upon his work; (3) newspapers and journalistic media that reflect on Elmessiri's life and legacy, including opinion pieces, obituaries, televised interviews, and documentaries; (4) informal discussions with a number of Elmessiri's former colleagues and students. My questions during these conversations aimed to evoke characterizations of Elmessiri's influence, and discussions of the specific lessons that his followers have drawn from him. Since Elmessiri's objective was to develop a paradigm for social and moral inquiry that was not simply borrowed from Western methods, I encourage my interviewees to describe Elmessiri's influence and significance in his and their own terms.

IV.   Overview of Argument

Chapter One, "Critique as Ethical Practice," situates my study of Elmessiri within the broad landscape of reflection on practices of critique. It first describes the need for such a project by pointing to three areas of misperception and limitation in analysis of critique, particularly in relation to Muslim authors. The chapter then offers a basic genealogy of reflection on the nature of critique, which provides an initial challenge to these problem areas. The next two sections extend the conversation. I first offer a more detailed elaboration of the concept of critical retrieval, and then stage a conversation

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"Autobiography." Elmessiri's office, which continues to compile, translate, and publish his writings, has provided me with an unpublished English translation. My citations of this document also include original Arabic text. Quotations from other Arabic language resources are accompanied by my translations. I have also made use of a number of other English language resources that Elmessiri has published. As an appendix, I am also including a bibliography of key published works authored by Elmessiri. I include my own translation of Arabic titles in parentheses. Elmessiri published extensively, particularly on the subject of Zionism. I have only drawn on a selection of his available texts.

among "reading partners" whose insights inform my reading of Elmessiri. This chapter argues that critique should be construed as an ethical practice that comes into the purview of religious ethics, and it describes how the work of Elmessiri as a Muslim critic should be recruited into that enterprise.

The first chapter experiments with an analytical frame that is not specifically designed to examine Elmessiri *as a Muslim author*. It instead gestures at a way of reading Elmessiri as an equal and a colleague among a plurality of critical narratives about modernity. However, it is essential to understand Elmessiri and his work in the context of contemporary Egypt and contemporary Muslim thought. Portraying that context is the task of Chapter Two.

Chapter Two, "Background and Currents of Muslim Critique," surveys the ideational terrain of Egypt and, in a limited sense, the broader Arab and Muslim world(s) during the past several decades. It places Elmessiri's life and work in a broader context and outlines the major moral and political discourses, debates and narrative threads shaping his and his followers' work. This chapter is centered upon a discussion of the concept of "cultural invasion" (*ah-ghazw al-thaqāfī*), which has been among the most prominent occasions for critical reflection for Elmessiri and his peers and predecessors. We can say that it is the opening for the first moment (C1) of critique.[17] The chapter discusses a number of currents of critique in relation to this concept. Finally, it explores some important initiatives for political and social transformation, in which Elmessiri participated.

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[17] In relationship to Peter Ochs's vocabulary of "first-ness," "second-ness," and "third-ness," in the realm of semiotic relations, it may be illuminating to think of *al-ghazw al-thaqāfi* and the dimension of C1 more generally in terms of the interruption characteristic of "first-ness."

The next two chapters turn to the details of Elmessiri's critical narrative. They address the questions, *What conception of the human being is targeted in Elmessiri's critique? Why is this way of imagining humanity said to be problematic?* And *what alternative conception does he defend and promote?*

Chapter Three, "A Paradigm Hostile to Humanity: Elmessiri's Critique," presents the contours of Elmessiri's critique. It begins with Elmessiri's discussion of "bias" (*al-taḥāyyuz*), wherein he most clearly describes the predicament of critical reflection and the need for critical retrieval: We all bring assumptions, distinctions, and preconceptions to our research. However, these very tools that we use to gather knowledge to enhance life together may be undermining our ability to do so. Elmessiri notes that because of "cultural invasion," this challenge is particularly pronounced for Muslim researchers (and scholars of the third world, more generally). The discussion moves on to the basic metaphors that sustain, and the consequences of, Western bias. The central term that Elmessiri relies on in this diagnostic component of his work is "immanence" or "immanentism" (*ḥulūliyya*). Immanentism manifests itself in materialism, rationalization, and racism, and I discuss these elements of the Western paradigm, in turn. Finally, the chapter outlines Elmessiri's critical narrative of the "sequence" of modernity and postmodernity: an attempt to develop a coherent account of the emergence and inter-relationship of the distinct features of Western modernity. For Elmessiri, the term secularism (*al-ʿalmāniyya*) is the discursive hub of a set of issues that traverse modernity and postmodernity.

Chapter Four: The story told in chapter three sets up for the discussion of Elmessiri's alternative vision, presented in chapter four: "A Critical Retrieval: The Development and Meaning of Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism." The chapter discusses Elmessiri's philosophical anthropology as a proposal for how we ought to imagine ourselves in order to preserve a distinctively 'human' existence. This, he states, is the concern of Islam. However, he develops his idea in alliance with several key European and American writers of the Romantic period. The chapter discerns the various threads of reflection that have shaped Elmessiri's humanism. His work is also shaped through engagement with Islamic tradition, particularly the concepts of *tawḥīd* and *ijtihād*. The chapter demonstrates that, within and beyond critique, there is a possibility for affirmation and retrieval. I begin to indicate how this potential may be most fruitfully tapped through comparison.

Chapter Five, "A Scholar's Legacy and Disciples," begins to address the question, *how has Elmessiri's alternative vision become a resource for contemporary debates in Egypt about the possible contours of political life moving forward?* By discussing Elmessiri's life as a teacher, mentor and activist, this chapter illustrates the manner in which critique serves to enact reflection, ethical responsibilities, and practices. The chapter turns, in closing, to a discussion of Elmessiri's place in Egypt from the time of the mass, popular uprising that began on January 25, 2011. Students and other supporters of Elmessiri shared reflections on his likely role, his hypothetical response, the influence of his work, and other considerations, demonstrating that Elmessiri and his work on Islamic Humanism remain "absent but present" (*al-ghā'ib al-ḥāḍir*) in contemporary Egypt.

Chapter One:

Critique as Ethical Practice

I hope that [what I have written] will not be construed that all Americans are drowned in relativism, or that they have no sense of guilt. This is a [problematic] simplification [of] matters… My criticism of Western modernity is, to a great extent, influenced by the Western critique of this modernity, from which I have greatly benefited.[18]

I.   Introduction

What kind of activity is *critique*? What kind of stories do critiques tell? And what role do they play in the development of alternative visions of morality, community and society? Is there what might be called an *ethics* of critique? What kind of relationships and responsibilities emerge as they unfold? What is the significance of claims about the inhospitable conditions of modernity and late-modernity that are shared among critics from different settings and traditions of thought?   I turn in this chapter to a discussion of the meaning and significance of "critique" in a number of currents of academic discourse. Throughout this survey, I will elaborate on the specific manner of engagement with Elmessiri's work that I propose. This involves an integration of several theoretical projects that have not until now been considered central to religious ethics. I will begin to explain how a figure like Elmessiri may offer avenues for developing answers to these questions that I have raised.

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[18] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 209 (131).

a. Terminological Preface

The term "critical retrieval" will be a central analytic category in my engagement with Elmessiri. I want to discuss the terms of this phrase in more detail before getting underway. "Critical retrieval" may be understood as a dialectical interaction of *critique* and *hermeneutic retrieval.* I will use the term "critique" and associated terms "criticize," "criticism," and "critical" frequently in the rest of this chapter and in those that follow it. There is an ambiguity over whether the meaning of each of these terms is technical/theoretical or whether the meaning is more ordinary. The ordinary meaning includes pointing out problems or flaws. The technical or theoretical meaning is a rigorous mode of analysis that seeks to identify, and often cast suspicion upon, the bases on which we make judgments (like those ordinary criticisms). I will often embrace the ambiguity that goes with these terms. However, in every case, when I use the term "critique," the meaning is technical; in every case, when I use the terms "criticism" or "criticize," the meaning is common; when I use the term "critical" the primary meaning is the technical but this will often also entail the common usage. I will clarify from case to case if the ambiguity is disruptive. In describing Elmessiri (and others) as a "critic," I usually refer to the fact that his project of *critique* enables him to formulate sophisticated *criticisms* of Western modernity.

As for the term "retrieval," for now it will suffice to explain that retrieval refers to the possibility of identifying a shared meaning or a value worthy of recovering. Retrieval is possible if the conditions for understanding are in place, or at least can be constituted from what is given. When paired with "critique," "retrieval" signals that an

author wishes to recover meaning from the site of critical analysis – to put things together, and not only to tease them apart. In conjunction with "retrieval," I will at times refer to the "commitments," "affirmations," or "positive project" that Elmessiri's critique depends upon or enables. The terms "critique" and "retrieval" are often considered to be competing approaches to interpretation and theoretical analysis. In this chapter and in my reading of Elmessiri, I am challenging this posed opposition.

My understanding and usage of these terms will become clearer throughout this chapter. In the next section (II), I discuss some problematic or otherwise limited ways of construing critique. Identifying these problem areas will clarify the aims of my study of Elmessiri. The third section of this chapter offers a genealogy of reflection on the meaning of critique, which highlights directions for overcoming the problem areas. Section IV focuses on Ricoeur, who makes an important and compelling case for critical retrieval. Section V recruits a number of other theorists to bolster and extend this approach.

II. Problems and Limitations in the Study of Critique

a. Muslims as Uncritical Critics

In the past several decades, some of the most controversial critical challenges to Western modernity to receive wide attention (from both scholars and the general public) are those issuing from the Muslim world. However, these challenges are often too quickly relegated to the common meaning, and what is more, they are often dismissed

as the reactionary, polemical discourses of outsiders to (or even enemies of) the values of Western culture.[19] This response is in part a reaction to several key instances of violent opposition to Western governments and demonstrated willingness on the part of some groups to use violence against their citizens. The search for explanation and understanding in the wake of violence is understandable. Unfortunately, however, the violence often dominates the inquiry, putting Muslims *en masse* on the defensive as a result of the actions of a few.[20] Each violent incident threatens to become the prism through which a vast web of traditions and sub-traditions are reflected. Crucial in this linkage of violence with discourse is the easy attribution of the irrationality perceived in the violence to any participants in that discourse. Not only is this an egregious misapplication, it serves to mask the prejudices that preexisted the violent incidents that reinforced them.

Some of the more problematic studies which lend support to these errors are well-known, and now widely cited in efforts to develop alternatives to them.[21] The famous "clash of civilizations" thesis put forward by Samuel Huntington and frequently referenced in analyses of Islam is only the most dramatic way of framing the matter.[22] Also prominent in this regard is historian and professor, Bernard Lewis, who coined the

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[19] Whether Western culture is construed as "Christian" or as "secular" and "liberal."

[20] Charles Kurzman has recently made the case that in fact the rate of violent attacks perpetrated in the name of Islam is minute compared to what most audiences would expect, and negligible in proportion to the number of people across the globe who call themselves Muslim. Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[21] These efforts go back at least as far as Edward Said's *Orientalism* and his contribution to exposing what he portrays as sinister attempts to marginalize and demonize Arabs and Muslims. For an important set of more recent examples, see Emran Qureshi and Michael Anthony Sells, eds. *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[22] Elmessiri himself argues that the "end of history" discourse employs an analytic paradigm that is fundamentally anti-human.

phrase "clash of civilizations."[23] Lewis has identified several elements and trends in Islamic tradition that he believes inevitably engender animosity towards the West.[24] He focuses on a distinction – originating in early Islamic thought – between Muslim and non-Muslim lands through the concepts of *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-Ḥarb* (usually translated into the opposition between the realm of Islam and peace versus the realm of war and ignorance). This distinction has become the bedrock of Lewis's scholarship and a broader public understanding of *the* Muslim worldview, leading much of the American and European public to believe that, because of their commitment to Islam, Muslims – perhaps implicitly but increasingly explicitly – are hostile towards the Western culture and all that it represents. Thus, in spite of the historical and cultural variety of Muslim practices and debates, it is widely imagined that the "Islam" that unites them is essentially incompatible with the outlook and values of Western societies. This means, most notably, the values of individual liberty, freedom of thought, and critical inquiry that are said to define them. At this most basic level, Muslims have come to be positioned as outsiders to modernity and Western culture, and their stated criticisms hastily repudiated – disqualified from *critique*.

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[23] "The Roots of Muslim Rage: Why So Many Muslims Deeply Resent the West, and Why Their Bitterness Will Not Be Easily Mollified" in *Atlantic Magazine* (September, 1990).

[24] Lewis has, at times, tried to qualify the immediate association of Islam with certain kinds of violence against the West, by, for example, explaining that *jihād* traditionally forbids the harming of women and children. However, this is a minor mitigation. Whether to acquit or accuse, the appeal to reified tradition over and against contemporary discourse and lived practice reinforces the civilizational opposition that so many have come to imagine.

It is not only explicitly antagonistic studies that are implicated in the marginalization of critical Muslim voices.[25] Another worry is that even scholars self-consciously taking a more careful and sympathetic approach to their studies of Islamic tradition and Muslim societies have at times allowed analyses such as the above to structure their own arguments and thereby reinforce the marginalization that they initially sought to undermine. Thus it is common to find authors highlighting "liberal" Muslim voices or outlining the ways in which Islam upholds values substantially overlapping with Western and democratic ones. These efforts are sometimes too eager to declare points of understanding and shared meanings as the *true* Islam. Those who do address undeniably more hostile voices tend to characterize contemporary critical discourse through the important but restrictive lens of *reaction to imperialism* and colonial history – an effort to justify or at least give a more sympathetic account of the ill-will that many in the Muslim world do feel towards Western powers. This approach is too eager to emphasize the legitimacy of criticism (perhaps as an affirmation of an author's own politics). These are important efforts that serve to complicate stereotypes and expand knowledge about Muslim societies. However, they suffer shortcomings that I hope that my project will begin to address.

The problem with such characterizations is that they leave unchallenged several problematic premises which make the very arguments that they oppose compelling: (1)

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[25] On the periphery of the academy there are plenty of examples, including the infamous propaganda campaigns of figures such as David Horowitz and Daniel Pipes, and the aggressive testimonials of "ex-Muslims" such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali. These campaigns are wide-ranging and threaten to undermine (among other things) campus communities at universities and colleges across America. Also culpable is popular culture, film and television. Here is not the appropriate space to address the background and nature of these media, but they do figure broadly into the concerns that frame this project.

that it is intelligible to make reference to an abstract entity called "Islam" as the principal explanatory key for contemporary social and political life in the Muslim world; (2) that everything that Muslims do is an immediate reflection of what "Islam" essentially is or, conversely, that only those statements and activities that can be related to "Islam" are of interest; and (3) the assumption remains that what is most relevant is the manner in which Muslims do or do not seem to accept and adapt to Western discourses and social forms. A strict moral judgment attaches to this posed opposition: critical stances are problematic; accommodating ones are normative. Finally, (4) there is little interest in complex adaptations of and interactions between multiple resources or traditions.

One important reason that these conceptualizations are problematic is that they obstruct our ability to read or listen to the accounts of the world that are being developed by countless writers, public figures, and communities of religious or civic practice. Furthermore, they neglect what Bruce Lawrence has called the "messiness" of contemporary Islamic discourse, with its variety of competing visions of change and reform, as well as of reaction and retrenchment.[26] I would also add that they neglect the messiness of "modernity." But more pertinent for my study, by grouping and separating the positive, substantive, and moral (democracy, human rights, freedom of thought, *critique proper*) from the negative, reactionary, and morally wrong (Muslim *criticisms* of or opposition to Western modernity) these conceptualizations neglect to satisfactorily study the relationship between critique and alternative moral vision. By denying that some challenges to Western modernity have the resources to carry out

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[26] Bruce Lawrence, "The Polite Islamophobia of the Intellectual" on *Religion Dispatches*: http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/2635/the_polite_islamophobia_of_the_intellectual_/ (Accessed September 4, 2011).

what we tend to think of as critique – a practice and a relationship of knowing that many Western writers have been engaged with for decades – these conceptualizations inadvertently deny that these Muslim challengers have the resources to contribute to any common notion of the good.

b. *Critique as Domain of Enlightenment Rationality*

Irfan Ahmad begins to address these matters in an exemplary way in his essay, "Immanent Critique in Islam: Anthropological Reflections," which argues that other forms of critique are at work in a wide variety of settings in Muslim societies. He notes that there is a "highly secularized investment in critique," which makes scholars reluctant to use the term as an analytic concept in studies of Islam. "Critique," he notes, is what scholars do – not an activity of the people they study.[27] Ahmad finds this to be true even for the rich ethnographic projects of scholars who have tried to avoid letting the politics of "Islam vs. the West" prefigure their research. He describes that while anthropologists have tried to defend the intricacy and richness of discursive practices in Islamic societies, one still finds that while Muslims may "debate," "discuss," "dispute," and "argue," they are not said to engage in "critique."[28]

As Ahmad's noting of the link between secularism and critique implies, the contention that a religious tradition or broader cultural milieu can compel adherents to reactionary, irrational, or at the very least simply obedient actions is not directed

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[27] Ahmad is addressing his analysis to those working in the Anthropology of Islam. However, the concern resonates outside of this field.

[28] Irfan Ahmad, "Immanent Critique and Islam: Anthropological Reflections," *Anthropological Theory* 11:1 (2011) 107-132.

exclusively towards Muslims. It is, rather, a longstanding prejudice of Western Enlightenment thinking towards "religious" actors more generally. For many, precisely what is meant by "religious" is "non-rational," or in any case peripheral to reason, adhering to some *other* (non-rational) authority. Even self-described believers (whether Muslim, Christian, or otherwise) have been known to adopt this characterization, placing their own commitments outside the realm of interrogation or public relevance, although they may actively engage in politics or scientific inquiry using the critical vocabularies deemed legitimate in those fields.

In recent years, Islam plays a central role of antagonist in the dramatic narrative of secular progress and ever-increasing liberty. As Wendy Brown puts it in the opening of a recent scholarly conversation on this matter, "today the secular derives much of its meaning from an imagined opposite in Islam…"[29] Such concerns have as their background scholarship such as that described above, as well as an abundance of characterizations of Islam as fundamentally melding together *church and state*.[30] Moreover, there seems to be a connection between characterizations of Islam as antithetical to Western values of secular liberalism and the disturbing rise in cases of harassment and hate crimes targeting Muslims. In the first part of the 21st century, Islamophobia has plagued America.[31] Even when those targeting Muslims identify as

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[29] *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, eds. Talal Asad et al. (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009), 10.

[30] This is often the way that Sharī'ah is characterized, as a single legal system for governing both matters of piety and matters of statecraft. One may also note the popular Islamic revivalist slogan, "Islam is both religion and state!" (*dīn wa dawla*). For a detailed, critical discussion of this topic, see: Abdulkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[31] There is a growing store of literature chronicling and analyzing attitudes towards Muslims in American and Europe. This piece published by the Southern Poverty Law Center presents a number of cases:

Christian, they often deploy arguments about the incompatibility of *Sharī'ah* with *American* values, skirting their own complex and at time contradictory views about the proper place of religion in society. I do not mean to imply that this is a result of ignorance, but rather the result of a problematic way of knowing – and of viewing knowledge.

c. *Critique as a Project Excluded from Ethics*

Figures from a number of different philosophical and religious traditions have developed critical analyses of Western modernity, and their accounts share many features. However, such commonalities have not been put into productive comparison within the study of ethics. This may be in part because the disposition from which one engages in critique is believed to present problems to ethical inquiry when it comes to the matter of formulating an alternative vision: On the one hand, insofar as it scrutinizes norms and principles, the activity of critique may give rise to problematic forms of relativism – the kind that fundamentally undermine normative discourse and judgment. Additionally, critique of the prevailing moral order of a society may have a fragmenting effect, giving rise to what Jeffrey Stout has referred to as "enclave societies" that are

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http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2011/summer/jihad-against-islam (Accessed October 20, 2011). One Pew forum study simultaneously seeks to determine whether and in which cases Muslims are "radicalized": http://people-press.org/2011/08/30/muslim-americans-no-signs-of-growth-in-alienation-or-support-for-extremism/ (Accessed October 20, 2011). See also: Special Issue: "Islam in America: Zeroing in on the Park51 Controversy," *Religions* 2.2 (2011). Many have also argued that Islamophobia is not simply the result of misinformation and fear about Islam as a religion, but is also caught up with basic racism (Arab Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and self-described secularists from regions believed to be predominantly Muslim have been targeted with anti-Islamic sentiment.

based on particular efforts to revive and purify various conceptions of a lost moral order.[32]

My motivation in studying Elmessiri – a fierce critic and theorist of Western morality, epistemology, and the social and political implications that they engender – is not only to disrupt the oppositions (Islam vs. West or reason/critique vs. faith) and the judgments attached to them, but also to attend to the more problematic effect that they may have on academic inquiry: I worry that the substance of and nuanced differences among many figures working outside of the European and American academic system may be overlooked.[33] This constitutes a crucial missed opportunity to re-conceive the role of certain shared moral commitments underlying a diversity of critical considerations. Since our work in religious ethics is at least in part directed towards the end of enriching the insights that facilitate living together in a shrinking and pluralistic world, that means garnering what insights we can from influential accounts of what that world is, what seems to be wrong with it, and what it is we might work together to protect. Even where commitments diverge, we have an obligation to explore alternative ways of making sense of disagreement, ways which do not translate into stereotypes

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[32] *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), see especially Chapter 4.

[33] In the pages that follow, I will engage with some very important exceptions to these scholarly trends See: Euben, 1999; Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (London: Verso, 2003); Ahmad, 2011. Figures such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood provide a different theoretical framework for analysis, not just of contemporary Islam, but of the cultural specificities of the secular West that shape our claims about and reactions to those considered outsiders. Talal Asad, in points out the importance of recognizing other "forms of criticism" that may not fit the mold of Enlightenment modes of critique. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Mahmood offers an important study of an Islamic revival movement which challenges a range of academic conversations on the meaning of agency – a concept at the heart of questions about reason, freedom and political action. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

and various other forms discrimination.[34] In this sense, I hope that what I am presenting

is not just a study, but also some building blocks of a constructive project.

III.   The Nature and Meaning of Critique: An Alternative Reading

In order to begin to attend to these problems and limitations, I have to build the

case for understanding critique as a practice informed by substantive moral

commitments. In what follows I will describe how literature on the concept invites this

investigation.   There are some important precedents and relevant considerations

surrounding the meaning and significance of the term "critique" and its relationship to

ethical inquiry. I'll review them now in order to explain why this usage is legitimate

and how it will serve the broader contribution to religious ethics that this project hopes

to offer.

The etymology of critique has been traced to the meaning of *crisis* in ancient

Greek – both terms stemming from the prior *krisis*.[35] Elaborating on this connection,

Wendy Brown writes, "*krisis* refers to a specific work of the *polis* on itself – a practice of

sifting, sorting, judging, and repairing what has been rent by a citizen violation of polis

law or order."[36] Critique, then, is something done in response to crisis, where crisis can

refer to a problem or disruption of varying degrees of seriousness. She says a "citizen

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[34] Not to mention justification for policies that mobilize military operations.

[35] See: Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[36] Brown, *Is Critique Secular*, 9.

violation," implying that critique relates to the world of human fabrication – political and social life.   More specifically, though, what are highlighted with the associated terms she uses are the activities that lay the groundwork of response – not just providing a remedy, but determining what it is that constitutes the problem and would actually count as a remedy. From this original meaning of response to a crisis, the term has gained a cluster of related meanings, from rigorous analysis to expression of disapproval.

Thinking about critique through the paradigm of *response* already signals its relevance to ethics. Critique is an activity concerned with making it possible to identify an *appropriate* response. This observation serves as an interpretive key for the discussion that follows, where I'll briefly explore a few lines of conversation about the nature and significance of critique as a method of analysis: (a) Michel Foucault and Judith Butler reflecting on Kant and the contemporary meaning of critique; (b) Critical Theory as it builds selectively on Marxist thought; and (c) a recent conversation around the question, "Is Critique Secular?"[37]

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[37] Kant's critique is called "transcendental," while Marxist critique (deriving from Hegel) is called "immanent." It is beyond the scope of this project to address the difference and relationship between these two notions of critique. In Elmessiri's work, as in most projects called critical since Kant, the analysis is "immanent" – it traces and explores an existing logic and does not try to found one. Immanent critique can itself have different modalities: in the cases under consideration by Ahmad, for example, immanent critique is performed *within* a tradition – it provides a way of interrogating and adjusting one's own logic (so to speak); on the other hand, immanent critique provides a means of challenging another's logic, as when Stout critically engages the "New Traditionalists" in *Democracy and Tradition*. When I turn to Elmessiri's work in chapters 3 and 4, it will not be easy to distinguish these modalities. For him, "The West" or "Modernity" or any number of other umbrella phrases refer to a complex set of assumptions, arguments and commitments that neither simply belong to nor are completely "other" to him as he investigates it. Moreover, there is a simultaneous engagement with Islamic thought, as he develops his "Islamic humanism."

Though its etymology may be traced much further back, the contemporary scholarly threads that I've identified are properly traced to Immanuel Kant's famous philosophical method (and subsequent modifications by Hegel and Marx). A full elaboration of Kant's method, and the meaning of critique within his philosophy, is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it is necessary to cover some of the key distinguishing features in order to indicate how the Kantian usage of the term has become the site of important contemporary disagreements over what qualifies as rigorous critical analysis.

From Kant, the term acquired a technical meaning, not restricted to the every-day notions of *criticizing* or even simply *analyzing* something, identifying its problems and weaknesses. Critique, in the Kantian sense, means identifying the preconditions, capacities, and limits of human reason, human agency, and human judgment. The method of critique was meant to enable reason to establish its independent authority by identifying the architecture of reason itself – to deduce the laws of its own operation from within, so to speak. The question was, in essence, how each of the human faculties of understanding, will, and judgment can provide the ground rules for their own operation.

Critique, for Kant, is employed as a highly refined, theoretical and (for some) scientific method of engaging with frameworks for organizing information. It is an activity that enables us to understand what and how we can confidently claim to know – including basic principles of morality. In this sense, critique would seem to emerge as a *pre*-moral activity. However, as my study of Elmessiri's preoccupation with a project of

knowledge will illustrate, Kantian critique serves to *push back* or expand the scope of morally relevant philosophical exercise. Moreover, Kant's endeavor to develop and exercise his method of critique fits into the primordial paradigm of *response to crisis*. For, he understood himself to be attending to a problematic impasse in the philosophical discourse of his day.[38]

a. Kant, Foucault, Butler

Kantian critique becomes the occasion for a more recent set of reflections on the legacy of this archetypically Enlightenment methodology in a post-Enlightenment era. Michel Foucault's seminal "What is Enlightenment?" takes its name from one of Kant's own essays – much smaller, but (Foucault demonstrates) no less rich than Kant's better-known works. Kant's original piece doesn't specifically discuss the meaning of critique, nor even the critical method, explicitly. But Foucault finds an intimate connection between the method and the historical age. He explains: "[because] Kant in fact describes Enlightenment as the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority," therefore, "it is precisely at this moment that the critique is necessary, since its role is that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped."[39] Without the guidance of those forms of

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[38] Susan Neiman suggests that the story of modern philosophy itself can be told by beginning with the crisis of moral reflection that ensued after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Kant was a key figure in this response. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[39] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment," *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 1994), 47.

authority that "enlightenment" rebuffs, a method for identifying the realms of the authority of reason is vital. Foucault goes on to focus his account of the connection: "The critique is, in a sense, the handbook of reason that has grown up in Enlightenment; and, conversely, Enlightenment is the age of the critique."[40] This articulation establishes the link between a particular conception of reason, its relationship to authority, and the proper setting in which one engages in critique. At this level, Foucault's reading provides an explanation for why critique has been so coveted by proponents of secular modernity.

But Foucault's analysis of the essay and the two terms "critique" and "enlightenment" does not stop here. In fact, he argues that this linking of the two terms is not the most valuable gem to be mined from this text. Embedded in this piece, Foucault finds a broader understanding of the character of modernity itself, and it begins with a key observation about Kant's sense of the historical moment in which he writes. Not just the historical moment with respect to the special circumstances that led up to it, neither specifically what is expected to come. Rather, the "present" itself takes on a new meaning for Kant. Foucault explains,

> It seems to me that it is the first time that a philosopher has connected in this way, closely and from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is writing. It is in the

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[40] Foucault, *Essential Foucault*, 47. For an interesting set of reflections on "enlightenment" and the "Arab Spring," see: Mohammed Bamyeh, "Anarchist, Liberal and Authoritarian Enlightenments: Notes from the Arab Spring," *Jaddaliya*, July 30, 2011.

reflection on 'today' as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of this text appears to me to lie.[41]

Foucault names this novel *way of connecting* the "attitude of modernity." Indeed, he proposes that we think about "enlightenment" and modernity itself not just as an epoch but as an *attitude*, by which he means:

> a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called *an ethos*.[42]

By thus shifting the frame of analysis of Kant's project, Foucault illuminates the relevance of that original sense of *critique* as fundamentally an ethical practice. The "attitude of modernity" that Foucault finds showcased in Kant's short essay is characterized by a desire to discern possibility in the present, marking "today" off as opportunity, not strictly governed by what came before, and as something to which it is our task – our *challenge* – to respond. And it is not just attending to the present in the sense of fixing or correcting or repairing, but also embracing the freedom to make and be something new. Critique is the practice that orients one in this task.

So far, this characterization of Enlightenment as self-reliant reason reinforces the problematic divisions mentioned in the first section of this chapter. Enlightenment and its tool of critique seem to pose a fundamental challenge to any conception of tradition

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[41] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" *Essential Foucault*, 48.
[42] Ibid, 48. My italics.

or authority that would prefigure the meaning of "today" and the task circumscribed by it. Enlightenment, so conceived, posits a divide between an ethos of rational inquiry and an ethos that embraces the authority of what came before. However, Foucault moves on to develop an account of what critique means today – *our* today – which begins to go beyond any dogmatic appropriation of critique to a particular conception of reason or political order:

> If the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point in brief is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over… criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value but, rather, as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.[43]

With this, Foucault has offered an interpretive key for the mode of critique for which he is most famous and which shapes the work of a number of theorists that will appear in the coming pages. He continues: "In that sense, this criticism [for today] is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is *genealogical* in its design and archaeological in its method."[44] Its task is what Foucault

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[43] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" *Essential Foucault,* 53.
[44] Ibid, 53.

calls "the critical ontology of ourselves"[45] – an exploration of human capacities and limits towards the end of "liberty," very broadly construed. "This philosophical attitude," he says in closing, "has to be translated into the labor of diverse inquiries."[46] Foucault refracts Kantian critique through the prism of difference, inviting exploration of multiple genres and styles of inquiry into who we are and what we might become.

Foucault's understanding of critique – as that which prompts us to investigate who we are, what we might achieve for ourselves, what we wish to become – will be guiding me in the coming chapters as I develop a reading of Elmessiri's project and gesture at its relationship to that of other key figures who share his observations and concerns. Foucault's characterization resonates with the language of "multiple modernities."[47] Elmessiri himself describes his task as one of developing an *alternative* modernity, which I will discuss further in Chapter Four.

Judith Butler explores and extends Foucault's analysis, providing a needed elaboration on the sense of "virtue" in his presentation of critique, and implicitly answering the challenge that her own style of philosophical analysis is incapable of contributing to any kind of value-based project – incapable, that is, of making judgments and substantive claims about what is right or good. By reflecting on Foucault's usage of the concept of virtue as a lens through which to revisit the concept of critique, her own piece (titled "What is Critique?") provides a rich alternative conception of the nature and task of ethics as a field of inquiry today. Although Foucault's conception of critique

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[45] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 54.

[46] Ibid, 56.

[47] For a helpful introduction into this conversation, see the discussion in the journal *Daedalus*, 129.1 (2000); regarding multiple modernities and Islam, see: Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993).

does not conform to conventional notions of moral experience, Butler explains that it does expand the horizon of moral experience to include multiple kinds of relationships to norms, rules, and authority. Critique is the practice of investigating those possible relationships. [48]

Butler's initial objective is to establish the concept under consideration as an activity that differs in important ways from simple "fault-finding" and similar kinds of judgments more closely associated with the field of ethics. Drawing on Williams and Adorno, she explains that "judgments operate… as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves."[49] Critique takes as its subject matter the conditions that must be in place for judgments to be made. In this sense, critique is quite literally a suspension of everyday normative or otherwise evaluative judgments. This makes critique seem to be an activity very different from, if not directly contrary to the investigations of ethics.

However, Butler finds such separation between critique and discourses of normative judgment to be unfounded. She explains:

The question, what are we to do? Presupposes that the 'we' has been formed and that it is known, that its action is possible, and the field in which it might act is delimited. But if those very formations and delimitations have normative consequences, then it will be necessary to ask after the values that set the stage

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[48] Judith Butler, "What is Critique," in *The Political,* ed. David Ingram (London: Blackwell, 2002). Originally delivered as Raymond Williams Lecture, Cambridge, 2000.
[49] Butler, "What is Critique?" 213.

for action, and this will be an important dimension of any critical inquiry into normative matters.[50]

Building on Foucault, she clarifies and elaborates further: "the primary task of critique will not be to evaluate whether its objects – social conditions, practices, forms of knowledge, power, and discourse – are good or bad, valued highly or demeaned, but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself."[51] Critique must be conceived as an essential component of ethics, because effectively it asks about the *good* of the field of perceptions and conceptions on the basis of which our everyday judgments are formed – it asks after the possible consequences of making a judgment *now* or issuing a claim *on these terms*.

Furthermore, in another crucial passage Butler provides an account of what scholars such as herself and Foucault are ultimately driving at in their work. I read this account as providing, simultaneously, an invitation to look at a wider range of critical projects:

> Foucault's contribution to what appears as an impasse within critical and post-critical theory of our time is precisely to ask us to rethink critique as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing, what Williams referred to as our 'uncritical habits of mind' and what Adorno described as ideology… One does not drive to the limits for a thrill experience, or because limits are dangerous and sexy, or because it brings us into a titillating proximity with evil. One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one

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[50] Butler, "What is Critique?" 214.
[51] Ibid, 214.

lives. The categories by which social life are ordered produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability. And it is from this condition, the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges, with the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning discourses have produced an impasse.[52]

I propose that this serves as a good preliminary description of the starting point of Elmessiri's critical project – a tear in the fabric of perception and judgment; a sense that the available discourses and frameworks for judgment are inadequate. This is one crucial dimension of Elmessiri's engagement with Western modernity, which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three. One of his concerns, which he shares with many figures of his generation, is that the backdrop of moral judgment available to many people in the Muslim world is inadequate to the task of evaluating how and in which ways to create and adapt to change – when and how to draw on Islamic precepts and how to *be Muslim* today.

In their appropriation of critique from the Kantian and Enlightenment framework, both Butler and Foucault wish to move away from a simple notion of reason, as a singular faculty, triumphant over authority. However, they retain a commitment to Enlightenment's call to relate to authority in a reflective and potentially creative manner – to, as Foucault puts it, ask *how not to be governed quite this much or in specifically this way*.[53] "critique begins with questioning the demand for absolute

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[52] Butler, "What is Critique?" 215.
[53] Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *The Political*, 193.

obedience and subjecting every governmental obligation imposed on subjects to a rational and reflective evaluation."[54]

In the spaces and discourses that exclude Muslims from the supposedly progressive traditions that grew out of Enlightenment's questioning of authority, a stereotype reigns of Islam as a religion of unreflective *submission*. But for a figure like Elmessiri, it is in a sense this Enlightenment heritage, the authority of European reason, the compulsive demands of capitalism – all that we have come to associate with the shedding of traditional authority – these occupy the psychic space of that cumbersome and freedom-inhibiting authority that the Church and the old world order once occupied in Europe. The critical task for Elmessiri is to ask *how not to be governed quite this much or in specifically this way*, by the imposing authority of Western modernity.

Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have both portrayed critique as a kind of *practice*.[55] And Butler in particular argues for critique as an *ethical* practice, making interesting strides of counter-argument to those who construe the work of post-modern figures such as herself as incapable of sustaining normative or constructive conversation. Both, moreover, characterize that practice as one whose subject matter is the human agent and the difference between what we are and what we might become. In Elmessiri's work I will likewise explore links between the critical and the constructive, using these authors as theoretical guides.

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[54] Butler, "What is Critique?" 218.

[55] Itself an important and multi-faceted concept that is highly charged in contemporary scholarship at the intersection of religious studies, political and social theory, and anthropology.

b. Critical Theory

The considerations provided by Foucault and Butler are wide-ranging, encompassing both historical breadth and intellectual diversity. Critique is at the heart of a more specific stream of ethical and philosophical inquiry, which Elmessiri consciously used: The Frankfurt School's Critical Theory. The influence of the Frankfurt School in Elmessiri's work has in part to do with the familiarity and enduring influence of Marx in his background (something that I will elaborate on in the Chapters Two and Four). The Frankfurt School builds upon a specific reading of Marx's work. Critique, for this constellation of thinkers is more often used as a modifier for a type of knowledge or methodology for expanding knowledge – *critical* theory as opposed to the traditional theory of the natural sciences. A critical theory contributes to that body of knowledge which identifies the conditions of and constraints on thought and action in any given society.

In his "Traditional and Critical Theory," Max Horkheimer, pillar of the Frankfurt School, outlines the meaning and mission of critical theory, beginning (again) with a simple question: "what is theory?" *Critical* theory, in contrast with traditional theory, goes beyond basic theoretical analysis (the aim of which is discerning and understanding meaning) to seek the kinds of explanation that will facilitate social change.   This mission has a clear resonance with Marx's famous aphorism: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." What the modifier "critical" adds to traditional theory is precisely this *practical*

component – orienting theoretical inquiry toward the end of social change – towards, as Horkheimer puts it, "reasonable conditions of life."

There are two key and interconnected points of concern that Elmessiri shares with the Frankfurt School critical theorists: one is the importance of recognizing that human social life creates a wedge between human beings and nature – we can know neither the world, nor ourselves as *natural*, that is, independently of the conditions of the social world that we have shaped and that shape us. The second shared point of concern is that the human sciences are adapting themselves to a traditional theory modeled on the natural sciences. It is a premise of the Frankfurt School that society is the sum total of production at all levels – including even the seemingly most isolated of natural scientific inquiries. Traditional theory fails to attend to this relationship and is thus incapable of asking broader questions about the consequences of knowledge production for human life:

The traditional idea of theory is based on scientific activity as carried on within the division of labor at a particular stage in the latter's development. It corresponds to the activity of the scholar which takes place alongside the other activities of a society but in no immediately clear connection with them. In this view of theory, therefore, the real social function of science is not made manifest; it speaks not of what theory means in human life, but only of what it means in the isolated sphere in which for historical reasons it comes into existence. Yet as a matter of fact the life of society is the result of all the work done in the various sectors of production. Precisely in order to re-integrate questions about the effects and goods of knowledge production, Horkheimer

argues that a conception is needed, "which overcomes the one-sidedness that necessarily arises when limited intellectual processes are detached from their matrix in the total activity of society."

As will be apparent in Chapters Three and Four, Elmessiri learns some important methodological moves and some substantive claims from the critical theory tradition, and incorporates them into his critique. However, he will again *take theory to another level*, using critique to leverage the argument that the work of these figures remains inadequate, even to its own task. Critical theory takes from Marx a couple of premises that Elmessiri cannot accept: the identification of the Real with the material, and a conflation of religion with ideology.[56] Here is, again, an explanation for why theological discourses are conceived as fundamentally incapable of performing what can properly be called critique. However, Elmessiri mobilizes the reflexivity of critical theory to describe critical theory's limitations, providing an important and interesting counter-example to this prejudice.

c. *Is Critique Secular?*

A recent and more focused series of exchanges take up the question, *what is critique?* The prompt question this time directly asks, "Is Critique Secular?"[57] The pieces

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[56] See: Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[57] In the what follows, I refer and rely primarily on the essays published in the previously cited text, *Is Critique Secular?* eds., Talal Asad, et al. An additional set of reflections are available at http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/category/is-critique-secular/. The term "secular" and its associated "secularism" are highly contested concepts for the participants. In asking whether critique is secular, they are not only investigating the nature of critique, but also extending established research the meaning of the term "secular." The research on which they build views "secular" as a term that names a set of ideas and

at the core of this conversation work against the background of Kant and Foucault as well as the broader tradition(s) of Marxist criticism and critical theory; the participant writers think about critique as an ethical practice of social inquiry and ask what other kinds of practices and social meanings are caught up in American, European, and Muslim uses of and responses to critique. For the most part, authors come at the question indirectly, concentrating instead on, "[interrupting] at every turn a set of discursive oppositions between Islam and secular Christianity on issues of freedom, speech, and blasphemy, and between a political Islam identified with aggression and death and a secular West identified with rationality and life."[58]

One key assumption that reinforces the mutual inter-definition of secularism and critique is the conviction that secularism guarantees the freedom to express and question any restrictions on discourse that are normally associated with religious communities. Critique, in this sense, represents an ability to *criticize,* challenge, or reject, which exists with minimal restrictions in some societies. However, both Asad and Mahmood carefully demonstrate that "the secular" also names a field of values, rules and meanings that shape and delimit human action. In this sense, "the secular" is as much in need of critique as any other discursive field.[59] This insight is operative in Elmessiri's work. The strides made by these authors prepare the ground for my study of Elmessiri as I will

practices (including discourse) more comprehensive than previously considered. It thus makes sense, these figures suggest, to develop an "anthropology of the secular" just as the human sciences have previously studied other discrete cultural milieus. In this series of exchanges, exploring the relationship between "secularism" and "critique" means exploring the ways in which these two concepts mutually constitute the worldview we have come to describe as "secular," particularly insofar as it is defined in relation to a "religious" other.

[58] Brown, *Is Critique Secular?*, 14.

[59] This insight is operative in Elmessiri's work. Indeed, he advances this same thesis in his two-part project, *Partial and Comprehensive Secularism.*

need to develop an account of the complex interplay of traditions of thought – "secular" and "religious"; "modern" and "traditional" – in his work.

Against any strict division between critique as a value neutral mode of inquiry and ethics as a field of inquiry concerned with claims about what is right and good, each of the reflections above have established critique as an ethical practice – one that is informed by and in search of substantive commitments, evolving though they may be. However the ethical in these reflections is characterized by a liberationist impulse. For Elmessiri, as well as many others who develop braod critical narratives, questions of demystification and liberation are not the only ones relevant to the task of response. Equally important are questions of to what we should be committed and which limitations we should embrace. The above reflections encourage my inquiry into Elmessiri's negotiation of critique and retrieval. However, rich as they are, I will need to reference more than these spheres of conversation in order to make sense of Elmessiri's work and make the case for drawing it into my broader inquiries.

IV.   Elaborations on Methodology: Ricoeur's Dialectic as Interpretive Lens

While the discussion above offers a general account of the ethical dimensions of the work of critique, it cannot directly address questions about the recovery and transformation of concepts and meanings. Such questions have been the provenance of hermeneutics. For this reason, it makes sense to incorporate considerations from

hermeneutic inquiry into my study of Elmessiri's engagement with Western modernity and Islamic morality. What is more, however, the concerns of hermeneutics, especially in conversation with critical theories of the social sciences, more accurately reflect the setting in which Elmessiri and his interlocutors' reflections arise: As I will discuss more in Chapter Two, Elmessiri's work is situated in an important intellectual movement among Muslim scholars that aims to build knowledge in the human sciences in a way that reflects an Islamic view of the human place in the cosmos. This movement, which is premised on the necessity of differentiating between social and human sciences, finds important parallels with the tradition of reflection in hermeneutics and critical inquiry on questions of whether and how we can produce generalizable knowledge about social life and human action.

When I approach Elmessiri's work, I will rely for my most basic point of orientation and my most focused interpretive lens on Paul Ricoeur's negotiation of the tension between hermeneutics and the critique of ideology regarding the question of generalizable knowledge about human experience. For Ricoeur, this tension or debate – played out most clearly in the exchanges of Hans Georg Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas – extends and dramatizes a much older debate – indeed, Ricoeur suggests, the *defining* debate – in the Western philosophical tradition. It concerns what he calls "the fundamental gesture of philosophy": whether a gesture toward "an avowal of the historical conditions to which all human understanding is subsumed under the reign of finitude" or "an act of defiance, a critical gesture" against concealed exercises of

domination and violence. It concerns, in other words, the question of whether the quest for truth is ultimately construed as reparative or emancipatory.

While not denying that the tasks of hermeneutics and the critique of ideology are distinct, and that the tensions between them are real, Ricoeur warns that they have established "deceptive antinomies." He writes, "nothing is more deceptive than the alleged antinomy between an ontology of prior understanding and an eschatology of freedom."[60] Instead, he situates these movements of repair and release in a dialectical relationship, where the advance of each depends on the labors of the other. Ricoeur argues that, "the task of the hermeneutics of tradition is to remind the critique of ideology that man can project his emancipation and anticipate an unlimited and unconstrained communication only on the basis of the creative reinterpretation of cultural heritage."[61]

In what sense is this work illuminating when applied to Elmessiri's critical project? Elmessiri construes "Western modernity" as a distorting ideology (or family of ideologies), and he seeks release from its restrictive modes of thinking through engagement with "Islam" as an inherited tradition. This way of framing the problem may indicate that hermeneutics and the critique of ideology can maintain their separate domains. Because of his commitment to the wisdom of Islamic sources, and his confidence in the resources of tradition, it might seem more logical to approach Elmessiri and others like him through the framework of hermeneutic recovery alone. On the other hand, his suspicion of the distortions of modern, Western assumptions

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[60] Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," 332.
[61] Ibid, 330.

about legitimate knowledge, prompts him to undertake elaborate works of unmasking these distorting influences. In this sense, it would seem that the critique of ideology is the most appropriate framework with which to read him. Or may we simply combine these and say that Habermas is correct with respect to Elmessiri's analysis of the West, but that Gadamer is correct when it comes to Elmessiri's engagement with Islam?

I want to take the application of Ricoeur's proposal in a different direction. For, the situation as he conceives it is not simply that there is a bad ideology and a good tradition, but that tradition itself has both distorting and redemptive elements. When looking to Elmessiri, we will have to re-evaluate the situation and ask, *what counts as cultural heritage? – what counts as "my tradition"?* While concerns about identity and authenticity resonate everywhere, they have a particular acuteness for writers in his position who have often been tempted to frame the problem in a simple way such that inherited tradition and problematic ideology are and always have been distinct conceptual and imaginative spheres. But there are important moments in Elmessiri's work where he seems to be struggling with the questions, *Is Western modernity also mine? Which components of it? Is Islam mine? Which Islam?*

Elmessiri dramatizes the dialectic of hermeneutic retrieval and critique of ideology throughout his corpus. For example, referring to his own work as part of a trend, he wrote:

> The bearers of the new Islamic discourse do not see any justification for accepting Western modernity in its entirety. Instead, they stand on their Islamic ground and view Western modernity, opening up to it, simultaneously

criticizing and interacting with it. This is what can be referred to as 'the interactive critical response,' which is the very opposite of the 'positive' unqualified acceptance or the 'negative' unqualified rejection of Western modernity–two extreme points between which the old discourse oscillated.[62]

Moreover, as his reference to the "old" versus the "new" Islamic discourse implies, that "Islamic ground" is itself shifting.

Elmessiri worked at the intersection of two planes of meaning – Islam and Western modernity. From some perspectives these appear to spread out into space while maintaining proximity to one another, but from other perspectives seem to endlessly diverge through the space of history and meaning. This added dimension demands that I build from Ricoeur's dialectic a triangulation of perspectives. For as I explained above, the problematic antinomies that his critical narrative will have to overcome are not only those of critique and retrieval, but also of Islam and Western modernity.

V.   Toward Comparative Critique in Ethics: A Discussion of Reading Partners

For Elmessiri this negotiation takes place on both sites of meaning – "(Western) modernity" and "(Islamic) tradition." Moreover, in his work, both "Islam" and "the West" are simultaneously horizons of recovery and the bearers of problematic historical distortions. It is in large part because of this two-pronged negotiation that I have sought

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[62] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, "The West and Islam: Clashpoints and Dialogues – Features of the New Islamic Discourse: Some Introductory Remarks" (Accessed July 15, 2010).

to develop this study with an eye toward comparison. I want now to provide several mini-discussions of *who* will be helping me to read Elmessiri and further elaborate on *how* we ought to approach his work.

a. Constructive Critique: Some Other Helpful Precedents

In the previous section I have highlighted the ethical potential in some important theoretical conversations that make use of a concept of critique. I have also described the need for discerning the hermeneutic dimensions of critical narratives. However, the readings that I have given above may not go far enough in allaying worries that the practice of critique has lost its bearings. Moreover, I am in need of reading partners who have provided examples of how to theorize the practice of critique and how to engage with critical projects such as the one undertaken by Elmessiri. To make sense of Elmessiri's project in terms of the *ethics of critique*, I must more directly address the concern that, on the one hand, (*i.*) critique increasingly threatens to destroy the *entities* that we would otherwise hold dear, and on the other hand, that (*ii*) critique threatens to disable the *actions* the we set out to take, whether alone or in concert with others.

i. Bruno Latour has provided important reflections on the concern that, whether we are religious believers or scientists, the critical impulse is making it more and more difficult for us to reach and relate to the entities that we hold dear, whether the gods or the elements.[63] He undertakes to reform or at least tame critical inquiry so as to ensure that it doesn't only undermine, dismantle, and humiliate. For Latour, precisely because

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[63] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004).

critique is a practice, we who perform it may modify it. Latour is sensitive to ways in which the more refined notions of critique discussed in the previous section have given way to *uncritical* habits of mind that are as absurd as they are dangerous. They are absurd because they are powered by a paradoxical logic that dismantles objects in the name of human capacity for creating reality, while at the same time dismantling human agency in the name hard causal factors. These critical habits are dangerous because they cripple our efforts to build knowledge about these objects and ideas, thus crippling our efforts to develop meaningful ways of participating in reality.[64]

Latour accounts for this trend by noting that we have tended to conceive of objects in terms of "matters of fact," inviting exposés of these facts as mere fetishes. In this sense, he is directly addressing scientists (but I would suggest that he is implicating religious believers as well). Instead, Latour insists that both the human and the natural sciences should ultimately be oriented towards what he calls "matters of concern." Matters of concern are all those "things" – from rocks and cups, to parliaments and concepts – that come to command our attention and that fit into a wide network of actors, actions, interactions and meanings. In order to begin to draw us out of the fact-fetish deadlock, Latour offers a moving defense of all the meaningful entities that both obstinate science and headstrong critique lose track of and potentially harm in their escalating conflict with one another.

But although Latour is defending this new category of thing against the corrosions of critique, he nevertheless believes that we need some kind of critical inquiry

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[64] The depth of Latour's concern in this regard is captured by his term "critical barbarity," in "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 240.

in order to "get closer" to these entities – the matters of concern that make up reality. For, just as they are not as ethereal as the critic sometimes claims, neither are they as crude and hard and objective as some would insist. Drawing on Whitehead, Latour argues that the development of a critical but realist attitude that tends to objects with care will require a different way of defining and describing our subject matter. He thus proposes that we come to view the "things" in the world as "gatherings" (a meaning that he claims is actually etymologically more accurate than our mundane usage of the term "thing"). Such entities are "much too strong to be treated as fetishes and much too weak to be treated as indisputable causal explanations of some unconscious action."[65] In the context of critical scholarly inquiry, to treat entities as gatherings entails "a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence."[66] This understanding of critique retains the sense of *getting behind* or *finding the conditions of* a given phenomenon. Moreover, this approach meets the realist concerns of the scientist, as well as the concerns about plurality, dynamism and even *emancipation* motivating the critic. (It may also, as it happens, demand that the believers' entities – even the ones that we cannot perceive with the five senses – attain to a new status in the grand assembly of human inquiry.)

Latour's proposal to re-conceive critique as a practice that creates ever-enlarging spaces of assembly over matters of concern is an important resource for assessing the critical project of a figure such as Elmessiri. Elmessiri is sensitive to some of the same

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[65] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 242.
[66] Ibid, 246.

considerations as Latour. And while Elmessiri does not go as far as Latour in providing an account of how we should talk about entities, he does seek to bring certain key entities back into the conversation, without simply asserting them as matters of fact. What I have in mind as Elmessiri's entities or "matters of concern" are not rocks or cups or countries, primarily, but God, Humanity, and Nature, as well as concepts like Justice, Tolerance, and Transcendence. As in Latour's meaning, they are not definitions or facts, but rather focal points for the assembly of a wide range of claims and interpretations. Latour enables me to see the difference between Elmessiri's reintroduction of these terms and a mere reassertion; and more generally, his work could enable us to think in a more nuanced manner about the accomplishments and advancements of theologically-minded critics of modernity and post-modernity.

For a model of reading such critics, I'll need to enlist the help of another theorist. Elmessiri's matters of concern have more resemblance to those considered in the work of Stephen White's *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* and the broader theoretical work done under the heading of "weak ontology," than they do to the scientists' privileged entities. White is also writing against the background of concerns about theoretical inquiry and the future of critique. However, he is less interested in reforming critique per se than in shifting our energies from "a preoccupation with what is opposed and deconstructed, to an engagement with what must be articulated, cultivated, and affirmed in its wake."[67] The reason that White is so important and helpful as I set up my study of Elmessiri is that he offers a lens through

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which to read contemporary thinkers who are concerned with some of the same "entities" as Elmessiri – most centrally human nature and human community. White finds that in the work of a number of recent (and sometimes conflicting) currents of thought, thinkers are finding new ways to talk about the troublesome entities that would otherwise be left in the ruins of critique. The central protagonist in this story is the human subject.[68] White explains:

> Ontological concerns emerge in the form of deep re-conceptualizations of human being in relation to its world. More specifically, human being is presented as in some way 'stickier' than in prevailing modern conceptualizations. Answers vary, of course, as to the character of this stickiness and as to that to which the subject is most prominently stuck.[69]

Like Latour's "gatherings" the human subject has been caught in a tug-o-war between a modern conceptualization as a disengaged, rational being and an anti-conceptualization – a fragmentation or deconstruction of the very notion of distinctive human being. White's meticulous expedition through the work of four contemporary theorists illustrates the emergence of a new alliance between the cautions and disruptions of critique and the commitments and convictions of contemporary ethics.

Of all the writers for whom White thinks that "weak ontology" is a fitting label, his discussion of Charles Taylor offers the most relevant parallels with Elmessiri. White

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[68] It should be noted that Latour's work has been used to undermine conceptions of agency that seem to be central to work in both political theory and religious ethics. This is evident, for example, in the work of Timothy Mitchell's essay "Can the Mosquito Speak?" Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[69] White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 5.

labels Taylor's approach to questions of affirmation and the ontology of the human "theistic weak ontology."[70] White doesn't provide a full account of how he understands "theistic" weak ontology in comparison with other weak ontological claims – he only takes the term from Taylor's own categorization of the three basic "constellations" of modern morality. However, this term seems to point to a number of similarities between Taylor and Elmessiri. Most fundamentally, both thinkers defend an outlook that is leveraged by reference to a truth that transcends the everyday world and its fluctuations.

There are a two other commonalities between Taylor's and Elmessiri's engagements with modernity that invite me to draw on White in my study. First, Elmessiri's use of the concept of the "paradigm" (which I discuss in Chapter Three) finds important parallels in Taylor's notion of "constellations." Constellations are clusters of orienting concepts and ideas, which set certain limitations on the ways in which we imagine ourselves and our possible actions. However, as White explains, "Taylor is not claiming to have discovered a level of metaphysical bedrock. Rather, he is claiming that, from within the perspective of engaged, embodied agency, these limits operate for us in our moral-spiritual life analogously to the way 'up' and 'down,' 'here' and 'there' operate for us in our physical life."[71] Constellations are intractable and irreducible frameworks of judgment and moral orientation. However, White is keen to point out that, for Taylor, we are not equipped to state that they are unchanging or fundamentally obstructive of understanding other constellations. This attitude that

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[70] White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 43. White points out that Taylor himself sometimes uses the terms "ontology" and "philosophical anthropology" interchangeably.
[71] Ibid, 48.

White ascribes to Taylor, of putting limits even on our claims about our limits, exemplifies what he means by "weak ontology." Elmessiri uses the concept of a "paradigm" (*namūdhaj*) in a similar way when he attempts to think through problems in the contemporary social sciences. Hence, I will keep White's reading of Taylor in the background as I begin to think through the significance of Elmessiri's reference to paradigms of knowledge and understanding.

Another trait common to the work of both Taylor and Elmessiri is their willingness to make reference to "grand narratives." This, White says, is (another) one of the defining features of weak ontology.[72] The theoretical frame of weak ontology is meant to provide an alternative way of engaging grand narratives. In his chapter on Taylor, he elaborates, explaining that weak ontologists "take on the affirmative burden of large narratives, but in such a way that one's story signals its own contestability." White calls Taylor's *Sources* "one of the grandest portraits of the modern West that has appeared in recent decades."[73] Elmessiri similarly relies on a broad narrative for his articulation of the problems and prospects of Western modernity. Moreover, like Taylor, part of what Elmessiri seems to be arguing in his critique of Western Modernity and his search for a new method in the human sciences is that there is a need for an articulation of his sources, and the sources that serve as the background picture for other Muslims. Elmessiri's narrative is different in both style and scale from Taylor's. Furthermore, his provides an engagement with different "constellations" of commitments and ideas. It is not the commonalities in the narratives themselves that is

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[72] White, *Sustaining Affirmation,* 50.
[73] Ibid.

most important here, but rather White's identification of the place of narrative in a new pattern of theoretical reflection, in relation to which Elmessiri's work may be read.

Nevertheless, I do not draw on White because I wish to argue that Elmessiri's work fully qualifies as a "weak ontology" – it would require a separate essay to sort this out. I draw on White because Elmessiri is situated in an intellectual environment with some important common characteristics with those of the weak ontological writers with whom White engages: the period of "late modernity," where there is widespread recognition of the "conventionality" of our modern certainties – most prominently among them, the (rational, autonomous) human subject. Elmessiri also attempts to build – to affirm – even in full view of the ruins of the modern age.

ii. I'll take up the *entities* of Elmessiri's concern primarily in the fourth chapter. But one of the more distinctive characteristics of Elmessiri as an intellectual is his attention to *actions* and activism, as well as his legacy of facilitating practices among a community of interlocutors – practices which sustain members' attention to one another's differences and to their common hopes and commitments (many of which drove Elmessiri's critical project).

David Couzens Hoy addresses the concern that critique (perhaps because of its tendency to undermine objects that are "matters of concern") hinders action – particularly political action, which demands sustained "affirmations" of the kinds explored by White. In light of the centrality of "resistance" in the framing of Hoy's study, I read him as asking how critique can become constructive, where "constructive" means able to open up and sustain actions – namely, practices of resistance that are

neither reactionary (unwittingly presupposing "the patterns of oppression that they are resisting") nor domineering (resisting emancipatory efforts). Hoy seeks a particular alliance between critical analysis and practices of resistance – this is what he means by the term "critical resistance." He explains: "critique is what makes it possible to distinguish emancipatory resistance from resistance that has been co-opted by the oppressive forces."[74] As he remarks aphoristically and with an allusion to the father of critique, Emmanuel Kant, "critique without resistance is empty and resistance without critique is blind."[75] The point is not that critique must be driven by a clear vision of a substantive moral or political project. As he points out and in some sense defends, figures such as Deleuze, Derrida, and Zizek have advanced the claim that, "although resistance should not be blind, agents need not know explicitly all their reasons and principles in advance. Resistance itself may be required to make explicit through the resulting situation what the motives and grounds for that act or refusal are. On this account, the engaged agents will find out what is possible by seeing what their resistance opens up."[76]

Hoy's analysis helps me to think more generally about how the strategies of critique may be allied with or oriented toward the making of new claims and the founding of new practices, without these contributions having been fully formulated in advance. Indeed, these notions of "finding out" and "seeing what" work well to characterize the story that Elmessiri tells in his autobiography about his own life as a

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[74] David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Post-Structuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 2.

[75] Hoy, *Critical Resistance,* 6. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously wrote, "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."

[76] Ibid*,* 11.

critical project and his relationship to his community of students and interlocutors. As he says in closing his Autobiography,

> This long non-subjective, non-objective intellectual journey is an attempt on my part to reveal to the youth how my ideas were formulated and how I developed my analytical tools, so that they could have a dialogue with these ideas. Perhaps some will find them useful and so will not have to start at point zero.[77]

I'll take up the *actions* and *practices* linked to Elmessiri's critical project in Chapter Five.

b. *Critique and Narrative*

As I move on to engage Elmessiri's work, I will attend to more than just the analytical and claim-based elements of his writing. Part of what has made Elmessiri an important and influential figure is his *style* – both as a writer and as a teacher and colleague. Furthermore, as I will describe more towards the end of this chapter and in the next, Elmessiri is difficult to categorize, even among his peers and co-religionists in Egypt and the Muslim world. I want to ask, what is distinctive about his critique and his normative overtures? Does his work accomplish something in the way of style or performance that is not sought directly through argumentation? In this section, I want to highlight a few key works that contribute to my study of critique by highlighting its aesthetic, literary, or narrative elements. They will inform both my presentation of Elmessiri and the subsequent comparative component of this project.

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[77] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (460).

Some of the figures that I discussed in the previous sections have turned to literature in part because of the sense of entrapment brought on by the analytical tools available for thinking through questions of modernity, critique, belief, and so forth. As Colin Jager (professor of English at Rutgers University) put it in his contribution to an extended conversation that grew out of *Is Critique Secular?*, "my impulse at moments [of impasse] is to look to literature – not to solve the problem, but rather to find there models of it and embodiments of possible solutions."[78] Through character and plot formation, as well as narrative techniques, our moral and philosophical problems can be represented with more nuance and richness than they will through straightforward moral and philosophical argumentation. There are two levels at which this partnership of critique with the literary occurs: (1) by increasingly drawing on examples from literature in the formulation of critique, and (2) by bringing reading strategies from literary studies to critical arguments. Both are relevant to my study of Elmessiri; but here I will focus on the latter.

An example of what I have in mind when I say that I want to incorporate considerations of literary studies and work on narrative and ethics is provided by Jager and Akeel Bilgrami (professor of Philosophy at Columbia University) in their efforts to rethink the relationship between "enchantment" on the one hand and "enlightenment" or "reflexivity" on the other. These terms get at a binary in contemporary thought that is analogous to the binary of the religious (and more generally the constructive) and the critical that has been in the background of my considerations until now. Bilgrami in

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[78] Colin Jager, "Is Critique Secular? Thoughts on Enchantment and Reflexivity" (Paper presented at the symposium, "Is Critique Secular?" hosted by the Townsend Center at the University of California at Berkeley, October 2007).

particular argues that enchantment, identifiable as a mode of description and narration, may actually be seen as a strategy of critique in some currents of Western counter-Enlightenment discourse, as well as among critics of the so-called "Occidentalist" tradition in other parts of the world.[79]   Appreciating this aspect of many critiques of Western modernity is possible only if one is attuned to an alternative kind of power or influence exerted in writing, which is different from the more coercive power of analytics and argumentative persuasion.

Just as it can be argued that enchantment has been unjustifiably divided from reflexivity, so have *critique* and *narrative* been unjustifiably pitted against one another as modes of thinking/writing. Thus, "critique" is understood to be an analysis that isolates, breaks apart, orders; while a "narrative" pieces together into wholes. Jager points to the broader "romantic" imaginative frame in which both Bilgrami and those that Bilgrami studies (as well as Jager himself, he confesses) conduct their research. There is a *story*, he argues, retold in different forms since the dawn of the scientific era, which tells of the loss incurred with the transformations of the early modern era and particularly with the rise of a scientific culture. Jager points out that many recent critical narratives fit this mold and that, "while not the exclusive property of romanticism, [they have] been given a powerful and influential inflection by romantic writers and their twentieth-century interpreters." Moreover, he suggests that it is, "the very romanticism of this story [that] accounts for its appeal."[80]

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[79] Akeel Bilgrami, "Occidentalism, The Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006). The term Occidentalism designates Orientalism's counterpart in "the East": the study and representation of "the West."

[80] Jager, "Thoughts on Enchantment," 11.

Elmessiri, in fact, is one of those twentieth century interpreters of Romanticism. His first academic home was in literary studies – he received his PhD in comparative literature from Rutgers University, and spent the first part of his career immersed in British and American Romantic classics, absorbing elements of the romantic mood and stance towards the changes taking place in Europe and America at that time – changes with which Elmessiri draws parallels in reflecting on the Egypt of his lifetime. Thus, efforts to integrate the concept of critique with that of narrative in the romantic disposition serve to enrich the study of this figure, Elmessiri.

Using another set of terms to capture a similar divergence, Alasdair MacIntyre has famously argued that "genealogy" and "tradition" are grounded in fundamentally different conceptions of rationality. For MacIntyre, "tradition" is constituted in important ways by narrative modes of discourse; and the critical investigations of genealogy operate according to a different conception of validity and inference – they are not understood to be the kinds of narratives constitutive of tradition. I want to suggest that this division is not secure. MacIntyre in some ways *demonstrates* that this partitioning fails in his own great narrative of critical inquiry, *After Virtue*. I already described above that it was a *story* that first prompted my interest in exploring the moral impulses of the critique of modernity. It was in no small part also the opening of his *After Virtue* that led me to my inquiry.[81] In thinking about his separation of genealogy

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[81] The book begins with a dramatic "Imagine!" and a dramatic hypothetical tale: "Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally, a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists…" (*After Virtue*, 1). Only fragments remain, he goes on to say. And this becomes the

from tradition, I now wonder to which "genre" MacIntyre's *After Virtue* belongs,[82] because part of what makes it effective as a critique is the power of the story that it tells – the familiar characters, the decisive moments, the stakes, and the mistakes. I want to raise the question of whether thinking about critical projects such as MacIntyre's own *as both genealogical/critical and as narrative in the sense of constituting tradition* might make them available for more than just the challenges they pose to modern discourse and morality.   Developing the connection further will enrich both my reading of Elmessiri, and my subsequent comparative endeavors.

I should clarify at this point that it is not only the *romanticism* of critique or of Elmessiri's work that interests me. Rather, a richer set of reflections on critique may benefit from thinking more broadly in terms of *genre*. This will ultimately be one more resource for comparison. David Scott in *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* brings tools of genre and narrative analysis to his reading of C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins*. There, he is concerned specifically with *post-colonial* critique, but his considerations are generalizable for the purposes of this discussion. Scott argues that *theoretical* discourse will find it more productive to read the transition from the colonial

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analogue for the story that he will go on to tell – the critique that he will develop – of the confusion and incoherence of modern moral discourse.

Stephen White also begins his book *Sustaining Affirmations* with an invitation to "imagine" a scene seemingly in the wake of a destructive series of events. He seems to be echoing MacIntyre's unease about the terrain of moral inquiry. But his is a very different – bluntly put, more sympathetic and constructive – account of the state of moral and political inquiry.

[82] In a review of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, Sabina Lovibond writes that the text expresses an "uneasy self-consciousness with respect to genre." Lovibond proposes that MacIntyre fits into yet another genre, which he fails to give credit to: the dialectical. And she points out that he leaves out altogether another "tradition" with which he is most familiar: Marxism and critical theory, whose advocates, "have long understood the falsity of picturing ourselves as isolated cognitive units owing nothing to a shared past…" Sabina Lovibond. Review of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Philosophy*, 66.258 (October, 1991) 533-534.

to the post-colonial period through the lens of the genre of *tragedy*, rather than the more commonly employed lens of *romance*.[83] The title of his text provides a clue as to why: the term "conscripts," which he borrows from Talal Asad (borrowing from Stanley Diamond), captures the reality that the relationship to modernity – not only for those living in formerly colonized lands, but as well as for all of us – is one that cannot properly be said to occur on a "volunteer basis." This relationship always takes place as a response to certain compelling circumstances that emerge within a colonial/imperial power dynamic.[84] Whether in Port-au-Prince or New York or Cairo, there are certain conditions – material and intellectual – which structure our lives and our arguments, which we did not opt into and which we cannot simply opt out of. The genre of tragedy is uniquely equipped to capture this predicament – a predicament which shapes Elmessiri's work and his understanding of his task as a thinker. Here again is another reason why "critical retrieval" is a preferable analytical tool.

If part of what different genre's do is open up critical-imaginative possibilities (perhaps while closing down others) – e.g. romance's optimism and orientation toward the future vs. tragedy's acknowledgment of historical limitation – they simultaneously encourage and build upon the foundation of different conceptions of the human being. The romantic figure who casts off the present so as to actualize a better, more authentic ideal is very different from the tragic figure who suffers from but is neither simply defeated by the historical limitations that confront her. As Foucault and Butler demonstrated, critique is a practice of exploration of the possible ways of being human.

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[83] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[84] Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 8-9.

What other genre considerations might be relevant to the study of critique in general or to Elmessiri in particular? Can it make sense to speak of a *theological* or perhaps even a *scriptural* genre? What is the difference, or possible relationship, between a genre and a "conception of rationality," in MacIntyre's terms?

In the story that Elmessiri tells, one feels at times caught up in a romance, at others in a tragedy, and in still others in a distinctively theological meditation. Elmessiri's critique of Western modernity and his gestures at "Islamic humanism" come into focus as part of a decades-long effort to respond to a type of crisis by telling a certain kind of story about the fate of the idea of the human. In what is described by Elmessiri himself as one of his most important texts, he provides an overview of his arguments and ideas through yet another narrative genre: autobiography. Through telling the story of his own life and intellectual and moral transformations his project attains comprehensiveness and coherence as a weaving together of multiple threads of insight and influence.

In thinking about his work in this way, I have found it helpful to draw on Michael Fischer's concept of "cultural inter-reference" to describe the different narrative threads woven together in Elmessiri's work:

> …the world today is one of multi-linguistic and multicultural inter-reference that throws into question the utility of the notion of bounded 'cultures.' The global political economy deeply structures local events, so that cultural understandings are saturated with borrowings, comparisons, and references to others, drawing partly upon traditionally evolved stereotypes and partly upon contemporary experiences of the media, of labor migration, of mass politicization, and of

internationally organized social stratification. Perspectival truth becomes ever more necessary to recognize, and thoroughly antiquates the debates over 'relativism' versus 'universal reason.'[85]

Fischer develops his concept of cultural inter-reference to account for the observations made in this passage and brings this concept to his analysis of a wide variety of "texts," including two prominent Iranian theorist-critics of Elmessiri's generation, Ali Shari'ati and Murtaza Mutahhari. In addition to challenging reference to a bounded and static entity called "Islam," the term itself seems to put forward a call to expand the kinds of literary and comparative analyses that already occur around novels, short stories, and even living communities. It is another call that I seek to respond to echo with this study.

Elmessiri conducts his own work of comparison very early on in his career as he grapples with the Romantic writers of the North Atlantic. His dissertation compares Whitman and Wordsworth on the relationship between the human being, nature and history, finding that Wordsworth's work – the manner in which he situates and describes his human characters – induces greater attentiveness to history and encourages a more complex understanding of human nature and the human relationship to the natural world.[86] This is the beginning of his interest in the imagination as a force impacting human life in the broadest sense. In the next section, I will elaborate on this term "imagination," by discussing the contents which will be most relevant in my study: the meaning of "human" and human nature.

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[85] Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), xxiii.

[86] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, *The Critical Writings of Wordsworth and Whitman: A Study of the Historical and Anti-Historical Imaginations* (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1969).

c. "Anthropos" and Humanism

Currently there is an interest in questions about the nature and meaning of "the human," and the normative claims and judgments at stake in the answers. Reflection devoted to these matters is given various names, including philosophical anthropology, moral anthropology, and ontology of the human. A few phenomena help to account for the proliferation of such considerations. First, the discourse of human rights, which has introduced questions and criticisms about the figure of the human to which rights are said to attach. Second, the ubiquity of new technologies as extensions of human knowledge, agency, and community has generated much inquiry into the boundaries of what we may legitimately call human, and indeed the literal boundaries of the individual human existence. This includes, for example, questions about virtual reality, robotics, and "trans-human" existence.[87] Another contemporary source of interest in the meaning and significance of the human, and specifically of personhood, is the controversy surrounding the legal and metaphysical status of corporations. These issues and considerations have revived what was for a time considered an antiquated or erudite practice of reflecting on what it means to be human – this has meant, simultaneously, a resurgence of the study of ethics.

My presentation and analysis of Elmessiri's work will maintain a focus on the role of philosophical and moral anthropology in both the critical and the substantive, normative dimensions of his work. I will ask, *What conception of the human being is targeted in Elmessiri's critique? Why is this way of imagining humanity said to be problematic?*

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[87] For the past several years, the American Academy of Religion's annual conference has hosted a "Transhumanism and Religion" group.

What alternative conception does he defend or promote? My use of the twin concepts of philosophical and moral anthropology follows in part from the conversations on critique that I have outlined. For, whether stated in terms of freedom, creativity, subjectivity, liberation, or the problematic nature of these concepts, they center in one way or another on questions around dimensions of philosophical and moral anthropology: the constitution of the self, subjectivity, human agency.

Moreover, philosophical and moral anthropology have been important inquiries for ethics, thanks to key theorists whose work traverses the fields of religious studies, moral philosophy, social theory, as well as theology. Figures such as Hannah Arendt, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, Talal Asad and many others have contributed to an important body of knowledge about the relationship between modern identity and moral concepts such as responsibility, justice, human flourishing, and judgments about treatment of others.[88] Taylor's seminal *Sources of the Self* captures the conceptual anchor of much work in "ethics" in recent decades:

> I want to explore various facets of what I will call the 'modern identity.' To give a first approximation of what this means would be to say that it involves tracing various strands of our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a person, or a self. But pursuing this investigation soon shows that you can't get very clear about this without some further understanding of how our pictures of the good

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[88] Elmessiri's work and that of many of the theorists that I have drawn on so far highlights the inseparability of these concepts, "philosophical" vs. "moral" anthropology – any set of claims about what the human being is will shape the judgments that we make about what human beings do or *ought* to do. Therefore, I will primarily use the basic term "anthropology" to refer to any conception of the human being, in both its descriptive and normative dimensions.

have evolved. Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality,
turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes…[89]

 I interpret Elmessiri's critique as an illustration of the power of metaphors
about human life and human nature to shape social and political realities, thus
contributing to these conversations, and engaging both practical and
theological/philosophical ethics. Much of this literature implies (and in some cases
explicitly argues) that some ways of imagining human nature give rise to problems that
have been associated with the 20th and early 21st centuries. One can discern in this work
an effort to re-imagine what it is to be human – not as a scientific classification, but as a
pragmatic proposal.[90]

Philosophical anthropology is also a central analytic category for the study of
religious ethics in general and for comparative religious ethics in particular. A 2005
series in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* directly addresses this theme, using the "close
relationship between accounts of what human beings are and ethical ideals for what
humans should do and become"[91] as a focal point for comparison – in shorthand, the
relationship between "anthropos" and "ethics." My study considers Elmessiri's

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[89] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3.

[90] Among many other examples, Hannah Arendt proposes that we think of ourselves as speakers each charged with the task of saying something new about the world that we all share. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Richard Rorty proposes that we think of ourselves as sympathetic beings, so that we might on some urgent matters be *moved* rather than convinced or persuaded. Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," in *On Human Rights: Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, eds. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 111-134. Seyla Benhabib proposes that we see ourselves as embodied and fragile beings, *situated* in communities upon which we rely for care. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[91] Thomas A Lewis, et al. "Anthropos and Ethics: Categories of Inquiry and Procedures of Comparison," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 33.2:177-185 (2005).

engagement with Western intellectual tradition and the forms of thought and practice that this work has encouraged. Thus, it provides a crucial case study as a contribution to this literature, and enhances cross-cultural understanding of the values and commitments that motivate critique.[92]

d. *Comparison, Continued*

I will make references to the kind of comparative project that I envision in the coming chapters, but here I want to return to an important guide in that endeavor, which is also crucial for describing the broader contours of this project. Recent work in a small but growing subfield known as "comparative political theory" proposes to read non-Western critiques of Western modernity by noting parallels with familiar Western critics of the Enlightenment and modernity. This literature aims to foreground the ethical and religious values at stake in these critiques. My research takes a cue from such efforts to introduce "non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together, thus ensuring that 'political theory' is about human and not merely Western dilemmas."[93] Although Euben situates her inquiry against the background of work in contemporary political theory, the effort is relevant to other

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[92] For important precedents in comparative study of Muslim ethics, see: John Kelsay, *Islam and War: A Study in Comparative Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993); Irene Oh, *The Rights of God: Islam, Human Rights, and Comparative Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007). Oh's study is particularly significant for its engagement with two prominent critics of Western modernity, Sayyid Quṭb and Abul A'la Maududi. Notably, Oh also draws on the hermeneutic tradition, as well as what she calls the "corrective" of Habermasian concerns to develop a her comparative method.

[93] Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 9. For a critical assessment of comparative political theory, see: Andrew F. March, "What is Comparative Political Theory?" *The Review of Politics* 71 (2009), 531-565.

areas of scholarship – particularly religious ethics, insofar as it too seeks to investigate debates about goods and values in human communities.

Euben is most concerned with applying her extension of political theory to "fundamentalism" – a term that cannot be accurately associated with the work of Elmessiri or his students. And while Euben is right to point out that the "strength [of fundamentalist movements] cannot be taken only as an index of socioeconomic discontent; it is also a testament to the *moral* power of fundamentalist ideas themselves,"[94] it is not only to fundamentalist voices that we can look in contributing to her broader task of "undermin[ing] the very opposition between 'Islam' and 'the west'." Moreover, it is not only "fundamentalist" voices that are marginalized or ascribed their own isolated territories of scholarly consideration. When Euben worries that "positioning all such [fundamentalist] critiques as the antithesis of 'modernity' misses the opportunity to engage them as serious – if at times disturbing – interlocutors on the modern condition, voices contesting not only the value but the very definition of what it must mean to live in the modern world"[95] – here, I see an even broader opportunity for a comparative inquiry.

By investigating the ideals of human flourishing that come into focus through Elmessiri's critique, my project builds on the efforts of Euben and other scholars seeking to take the voices of Muslim critics more seriously as competing political or moral discourses.[96] The study that unfolds in the chapters that follow expands on these efforts

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[94] Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror,* 14.

[95] Roxanne Euben, "Premodern, Antimodern or Postmodern?" 457.

[96] See also: Suzanne Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical theory on the Left* (London: Verso, 2003); Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine, "Socio-Religious Movements and the Transformation

through focused inquiry into the role of philosophical anthropology in critiques and alternative visions. Furthermore, it enriches this conversation by providing extended engagement with a relatively unknown figure and his local and regional environment.

The two comparative enterprises of comparative political theory and comparative religious ethics ought to be related and put in conversation with one another. Engagement with a cultural critic like Elmessiri will provide an example of how to accomplish this task. Regarding the motivating concerns of both of these scholarly discourses, they share a common interest in challenging or de-centering assumptions and claims about the human being that seem to dominate the social sciences. By situating this study in relationship to comparative religious ethics and comparative political theory (as well as the scholarship on critique) I seek to establish an extension of comparative ethics to include "comparative critique" – an exercise that aims to create (or perhaps only illuminate) new possibilities for a set of commitments and practices broadly understood as *humanistic*, but which is attentive to the shortcomings of earlier humanistic projects. The fact that Elmessiri himself makes use of the term humanism encourages me in this task.

of 'Common Sense' into a Politics of 'Common Good'," in *Religion Social Practice and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Chapter Two:

Background and Currents of Muslim Critique

I think my relationship to Damanhour, with its past and present, is similar in many respects to the relationship German sociologists had to the past and present of Germany. If we studied the backgrounds of many Egyptian intellectuals (especially the revolutionaries) we would find that they lived through similar periods of transition, a fact that explains the rural background of those Egyptian intellectuals who played a role in the modern political and cultural history of Egypt. I think it is this part of my socio-cultural background that aroused my interest in the literature and movements of dissent in Western thought. It prevented me from being overawed by American society and culture, as my reference point has always been a benevolent agrarian society. Amusingly enough, and upon reading my doctoral dissertation with all it entailed of rebellion and rejection of the American worldview and the free market economy, one of my professors described it as a neo-feudalist Marxist thesis.[97]

In his autobiography – a massive tome that encapsulates a life and career of reflection – Elmessiri was at great pains to emphasize that his story of moral and intellectual growth is neither that of a self-made man, nor simply the product of a set of identifiable, causal circumstances. With this in mind, he subtitled the text, "A Non-Subjective, Non-Objective Autobiography."[98] In this chapter, taking a cue from

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[97] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 65 (38).
[98] For an extensive study of autobiography in Arab world, see: Dwight F. Reynolds, ed. *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press,2001). This text primarily deals with a wide range of pre-modern autobiographies, but see especially the concluding chapter for discussion of the modern period.

Elmessiri's own disclaimers about his life story, I will investigate the currents of critical reflection and political action amid which his life flowed. This will provide the relevant background and context for understanding Elmessiri's work, explaining the ways in which Elmessiri is a representative thinker. The discussions in this chapter will also serve to elaborate on my claim in the previous chapter that Elmessiri is unique in ways that justify further study of his life and work.

In order to understand and appreciate the critical reflections and the commitments that I explore in the coming chapters, it will be necessary to be acquainted with (a) Elmessiri's basic biography, (b) the motif of "cultural invasion" in numerous Muslim reflections on modernity, (c) several trends in recent Muslim engagements with modernity, and (d) some key political initiatives in Egypt. To address these needs, Section I provides a basic biography of Elmessiri and an overview of the relevant transformations of Egypt in his lifetime; Section II introduces the concept of *al-ghazw al-thaqāfi*, "cultural invasion" - a term that names the encounters with the West that have so deeply shaped Elmessiri's generation of thinkers. I describe its significance as a catalyst for critical reflection in the past century, and situate Elmessiri as a critic shaped by the perception of an invading and imposing Western modernity. The next two sections consider different dimensions of response to the challenge of modernity. Section III introduces several key intellectual responses, focused on the past fifty years. These include Elmessiri's contemporaries and some predecessors in Egypt, the Arab world, and the Muslim world more broadly. I also discuss several important and representative projects of critique. This section also includes a discussion of the

International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) – an international network of Muslim scholars and research projects of which Elmessiri was a part. In Section IV, I introduce and describe the political efforts in which Elmessiri participated, describing their relevant background, accomplishments, and relationship to the intellectual projects of earlier sections.

I.   **Elmessiri's Background: Beginnings, Achievements, and Transformations**

The summer of Elmessiri's death in July, 2008 was a highly energized period that began with a spring wave of resistance to the ruling regime in Egypt. Riding on the combined momentum of the new-born April 6 movement,[99] soaring prices on basic goods including the staple bread, and poor conditions among workers in the vast textile industry, a series of strikes and demonstrations were organized, with the hope of changing the conditions that seemed to perpetuate the plight of an overwhelming number of Egyptians. The regime that they targeted was that of Hosni Mubarak, who had at the time ruled Egypt for 27 years – ever since the death by assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981. Mubarak's presidency came in a line of officer-republican presidents that started with the 1952 revolution that simultaneously overthrew both King Farouk I (ruled 1936-1952) and many of the lingering mechanisms

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[99] A movement for organizing solidarity with striking textile workers. The movement grew to become a major force behind the uprising of 2011. For discussion of this background, see: Tina Rosenberg, "Revolution U: What Egypt Learned from the Students Who Overthrew Milosevic," Foreign Policy, February 16, 2011, Accessed February 18, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/16/revolution_u&page=full; and Sarah Carr, "April 6: Genealogy of a Youth Movement": http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4950/april-6_genealogy-of-a-youth-movement/

of influence that the British Empire until then had wielded.[100] And although Mubarak's title had been "elected president of Egypt," the legitimacy of his rule was challenged by a variety of opponents from the very beginning. Challenges to the legitimacy of Mubarak's rule seemed to have gathered unprecedented momentum beginning a few years earlier, in 2004, with the formation of the Kefaya movement.[101] In retrospect, many have argued, this year marked the beginning of a new kind of politics in Egypt and set the stage for the developments that ultimately led to the overthrow of Mubarak and the dismantling of his National Democratic Party in 2011.[102]

Elmessiri's personal story – particularly his later years, a period when he entered into the arena of politics – is woven into this national one. In some sense, his role as activist in the later years of his life was scripted during the earlier periods, as he explored a variety of critical approaches, and discovered and refined his own distinctive method.   This exploration was not only an intellectual journey, but also a transcontinental one. In particular, Elmessiri describes how his time living in the United States informed and impacted his philosophical work.[103]   Moreover, he experienced

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[100] For background see Afaf al Sayyid-Marsot "The British Occupation of Egypt from 1882," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*: *Volume Three*, ed. Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 651-673; Wm. Roger Louis, *Ends of British Empire: The Scramble for Empire; Suez and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); M.W. Daly, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt: Volume Two: Modern Egypt from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[101] Discussed further below. Kefaya (*kifāya*), which means "enough," was formed as a coalition of opposition movements with the purpose of ensuring that neither Mubarak nor his son Gamal would hold the presidency for another term. Kefaya is the slogan name for The Egyptian Movement for Change (*al-ḥaraka al-maṣriyya min ajl al-taghyīr*).

[102] Even as this project was turned in, in the spring of 2013, questions loomed as to whether any genuine overthrow or dismantling had taken place.

[103] In this respect, there is an interesting parallel between the figure of Elmessiri and that of Sayyid Quṭb, the well-known fundamentalist Islamist thinker, ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood. Quṭb was jailed and ultimately executed by President Nasser in 1966.

displacement from his home not only in far more liberal America but also during a stint as professor in far more conservative Saudi Arabia.

Elmessiri has provided explicit suggestions as to how his life should be understood in relation to history. The term "non-subjective" in his autobiography's title signals Elmessiri's conviction that his life story is not simply individual – not simply the unfolding of an agent's self-made project. In other words, history does matter to a great extent. On the other hand, with respect to the meaning of "non-objective," he opts against an approach to writing (and advises against a method of reading) that would reduce a narrative of intellectual development to the sweeping forces of history, as though individual lives are the expression of a formula determined by forces external to them.[104] He describes the appropriate theoretical approach to the relationship between shaping factors and creative outcomes in this way:

> It is possible to distinguish between the structure of the paradigm and the elements of its formation. The structure is synchronic, static and is almost non-temporal. The elements of the formation, on the other hand, are mobile [or dynamic] and both time and history are essential factors, so that it is impossible to understand the life of any person or of any human or natural phenomenon without knowing the relation between the one and the other.[105]

In a sense, both Elmessiri's critique of Western modernity and his understanding of a viable humanistic ethic are encapsulated in these insights about biography and

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[104] Here is a first indication of his differences with Marxist philosophy.

[105] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 14 (3). I will discuss Elmessiri's use of the term Paradigm (*namūthaj*) in the following chapter. Here he means by paradigm the methodology – the artifacts of thought.

autobiography. But it is important to first fill in more details of Elmessiri's particular story.[106]

Elmessiri was born in the historic city of Damanhour, Egypt, in October, 1938. He took great pride in these origins. For, as the passage that opens this chapter indicates, he felt that it put him in some proximity to a bygone age and gave him a perspective on the modern era, which he would have been denied had he been born and raised in bustling cosmopolitan centers of Cairo or Alexandria. Elmessiri stayed in Damanhour until he enrolled in Alexandria University in 1955. He calls this period of his formation "seeds," employing a metaphor that reinforces his connection to an agrarian past.

There are some relevant and amusing details from this period. Elmessiri describes himself as having formed a critical (and at times politicized) consciousness from a very young age. He recalls, for example, a humorous but also moving anecdote of his approach to an assignment in the second grade: The children were asked to write about a garden in their home or neighborhood. Elmessiri instead wrote a child's diatribe about how youth living in poor neighborhoods don't have access to gardens. He himself could not be counted among the poor, and both his teacher and his father advised him against such "communist writings." This was well before Elmessiri knew what communism was, but he would soon learn. He also recalls having attended protests against King Farouk and the British colonial influence in Egypt during his adolescent years. Notably, he does not attribute these early activities and stances to the

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[106] Appendix II provides a basic timeline of Elmessiri's life.

highly politicized setting, but rather places emphasis on a deeper and more fundamental sensibility about *justice.*

In his teenage years, he made his rounds with membership in a number of parties. He recalls, "I joined the [Young Egypt] Party for a few days, after which I moved on to the Muslim Brotherhood movement. When the revolution took over in July 1952, I found it logical to join the 'National Guards' and the 'Liberation Front'… In the mid-fifties, I joined the Communist Party in which I remained [until] 1959."[107] During this latter period of his communist years – from 1955 until 1959 – Elmessiri attended Alexandria University. During this time, through his studies in English literature, he became absorbed with another set of formative elements.

After college, Elmessiri traveled to the United States, where he would spend the better part of the next two decades. This was a significant period to be an observer in the United States, and Elmessiri was deeply impressed by the particularities that he discovered in his time there. He wrote of what appeared to him to be a culture in moral decline, and much of his analysis is focused on the discourse of sexual liberation that gained prominence in the 1960s. This, combined with the perception that this vast and diverse nation was quickly becoming shallow and homogenous (thanks in large part to the growth in predominance of large corporations), informed his particular characterizations of American culture as deeply and troublingly materialistic.[108] He

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[107] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 8-9.

[108] Again, Elmessiri shares this context of formation with Sayyid Quṭb. Though the two shared many perceptions, they developed very different responses. For a careful and thorough study of Quṭb's life, including his time in the United States, see: John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Quṭb's partial autobiography – a memoir of his early years –

observed that in a cross-country trip through America, even in very different and distant places, he would find identical establishments. The Howard Johnson restaurant and hotel chain feature in his narrative of American decline:

> My first experience of standardizations that characterize life in the U.S.A. occurred suddenly in the mid nineteen sixties when I went on a journey by coach across the States that lasted two days. The coach used to stop at branches of Howard Johnson restaurants. We would disembark, the waitresses would come and smile and serve us the food we ordered. I ate the food with a healthy appetite the first time, and thanked the waitresses for the excellent service and for their courtesy. But I noticed that the coach would cover hundreds of miles, then each time would stop at another Howard Johnson restaurant. Each restaurant would have the same entrance, the same menu, and the same architecture… On the fourth time, I realized the enormity of the catastrophe of standardization.[109]

Elmessiri completed a master's degree at Columbia University from 2003-2004,[110] before undertaking a PhD in comparative literature at Rutgers University. He began writing his dissertation there on June 9, 1967. Just days earlier, the Six-Day War erupted between Israel and surrounding Arab states – including Egypt. Elmessiri writes that he initially had the "revolutionary" idea to leave right away and return to Egypt to

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is translated and published: John Calvert and William Shepard, trans. *A Child from the Village* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

[109] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 192 (119).

[110] Edward Said (Elmessiri's senior by only three years) began teaching at Columbia University at this same time – also in the field of literature. They knew one another there, and spent time talking, but I haven't found any evidence that they maintained a working relationship and there is no record of exchange between them. Dr. Mahmoud Khalifa has begun to develop comparative analyses of their work.

"contribute to rebuilding [the] shattered country."[111] The whole generation of reflection of which Elmessiri was a part was shaped by this event, known simply as "The Defeat," across the Arab world.

It may be argued that Elmessiri was shaped more dramatically than others by the events in the decades after the formation of the state of Israel. He became immersed in work as an expert on Zionism and Judaism over the next several decades. Elmessiri spent the better part of the 80s and 90s researching and writing his *Encyclopedia of Jews, Judaism, and Zionism* (*mawsūʻa al-yahūd wa al-yahūdiyya wa al-ṣuhyūniyya*). This work also earned him several key professional associations and roles. His work caught the attention of journalist Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, and subsequently secured him a research position with the Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo. Although it is not the focus of this dissertation, Elmessiri's work as a scholar of Zionism was the center piece of his academic career. For Elmessiri, the study of Zionism was an entry point or case study for understanding Western modernity more broadly. His central contention regarding Zionism is that it is a racist ideology, by which he means that includes and excludes people from political and moral status on the basis of "natural" or "biological" differences. This tendency, inherent in the "modern Western outlook," undermines any inclusive, humanistic morality. Thus, he felt that an understanding of the anatomy of Zionism as a historical and conceptual formation (and as distinguished from the traditions of Judaism) would assist in the critical analysis of modernity and Israel.[112]

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[111] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 94.
[112] See Appendix III for further discussion.

These decades in the wake of the '67 war also witnessed one of the most important transformations in the life of modern Egypt: the opening of its arms to the global market. The "open door" policy (*infitāḥ*) that was overseen by President Anwar Sadat beginning in the 1970s compounded the traumas of national independence and military defeat. Many, if not most, accounts of these changes are mournful ones. In Elmessiri's narrative, these policies account for the loss of Egypt's middle class, whom he saw as the custodians of critical imagination in his country. He writes, "The progeny of the educated middle class in small urban centers and in rural Egypt were the most likely to search and question and were the most solid elements."[113] Elmessiri counts himself among this class of people, and reflects on his early years when he joined his friends, neighbors, and a wide array of compatriots in exploring different approaches to reflecting on Egypt's history and present. The losses that his work addresses include the disintegration of this class of people:

> I think one of the greatest misfortunes that has befallen Egyptian society is the disintegration of the middle class, through the Open Door policy and globalization that resulted in inflation and deflation of their income, the lives of members of the middle classes are now cluttered up with a plethora of details: food, education of their children, healthcare, etc. This has resulted in the fact that their contribution to society has diminished in an obvious manner.[114]

During the 80s, still while researching and writing the *Encyclopedia*, Elmessiri spent periods of time in other parts of the Arab world, including in Saudi Arabia and

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[113] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 31.
[114] Ibid, 55 (31-32).

Kuwait. For the last two decades of his life, however, he resided full-time in Cairo. During these years he seemed to become increasingly invested in the politics of Egypt. Particularly beginning in 2003, with the American invasion of Iraq, and with the approach of a presidential election in 2005, Elmessiri devoted himself to political protest.

These are some of the elements shaping Elmessiri's life and career, as well as the conversations with which he engaged. Elmessiri's life straddled the formative period of contemporary Egypt: He grew up in the later years of colonial rule; witnessed Nasser's Free Officers Revolution as an adolescent and completed his education during the years of modernization, pride, and optimism of the nationalist period; he came to maturity as an intellectual in the shadow of "the defeat;" and he reached the autumn of his years during the American military ventures in Muslim lands. As a result of these events and transformations, Western modernity has presented itself to many Arab and Muslim intellectuals as a foreign imposition. This will be the focus of the next section.

II.   Cultural Invasion and the Onslaught of Modernity

One of the central concerns driving any project of critique is the perception that thought itself may be or become the primary source of ill in a society. Since thought is the avenue for identifying and remedying problems, what do we do when we discover that our problems are rooted in those critical faculties themselves? This anxiety is evident in thinkers from Kant to Elmessiri. Charles Tripp describes this worry in the background to his analysis of Islamic critiques of one particular modern formation:

capitalism. Tripp speaks of the "invasive logic" of capitalism, which has presented Muslim social critics with a "double challenge":

> On the one hand, their views of society, social cohesion and public utility were informed by the very categories that had made possible the imagination of a world transformed by the expansion of capital, the organization of human labour and the calculation of social utility. They tried to reclaim these for a distinctive Islamic order, but *their reasoning was often vulnerable to the influence of that which they were seeking to criticize*. Interpretations of Islamic obligations were colored, often shaped, by these same imaginative constructions. As with other proposed alternatives to capitalism, their visions seem less like radical alternatives, and more like projects competing on the same terrain, judged therefore by broadly similar criteria.[115]

The term Cultural Invasion (*al-ghazw al-thaqāfī*) and associated terms have been used to name this predicament and a variety of related perceptions. In this section, I will reflect on this theme as an important part of the background to Elmessiri's work and that of a number of figures in his orbit of critical reflection.

a. Connotations and Associated Terms

Cultural Invasion is a significant, recurring phrase in both scholarly and popular Arab language media. This and other related terms are found in the writings of authors from many parts of the Muslim world, from North Africa to Southeast Asia. What does it mean to be *culturally invaded*? The theme reflects the widespread perception that alien

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[115] Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8. Emphasis added.

concepts, ideas, values, desires, modes of speech, and material objects have been introduced to a region from which they do not originate – and most often, in which they undermine the practices, styles, norms, and forms of authority which (authors claim) do belong to that region. Moreover, the term reflects the perception that these introductions have occurred under coercive conditions, namely against the background of colonial and neo-colonial (economic) domination in the region. Although the term emerged before the era of globalization's most evident effects, it is frequently used as a tool for theorizing the nature and impacts of globalization in the past several decades. In addition to Cultural Invasion, there are several other terms that signal concerns about Western cultural elements entering and impacting the Muslim world: *al-ghazw al-fikrī*, "intellectual invasion" or invasion with respect to thought and critical reflection; *al-imbīriyaliyya al-thaqāfiyya,* "cultural imperialism"; and one that Elmessiri uses in a number of places, *al-imbīriyaliyya al-nifsiyya*, "psychological imperialism" – forces transforming desires and the sense of self. Such terms are touchstones for much of Elmessiri's thought, and their place in his work is part of what makes him a representative writer in his generation.

In his important survey of trends in contemporary Arab thought, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' offers a representative narrative of the Cultural Invasion that has so deeply shaped Arab and Muslim reflection in the past half-century. His account highlights the concern that a foreign mode of thought has been introduced, and that the primary impact of this incursion has been the undermining of critical faculties. Hence, he helps to illustrate

how the concept of cultural invasion figures into my broader inquiry about of practices of critique. Abu Rabi' writes:

> The Arab world needs Western science and technology to further develop. However, Western science cannot be imported without the cultural and ethical values that underlie it. It is a well-known fact that during the imperialist phase, the West used culture and ideas as a means to colonize the Third World. That is why Orientalism, missionary work, and similar activities flourished. Classical imperialism was sustained by the physical presence of its troops overseas; physical and mental conquest went hand in hand. The situation is somewhat different in the age of neo-imperialism with its rapid advances in technology. The intellectual and cultural integrity of small nations is endangered... Today, cultural invasion through advanced technology leads to the following conclusions: besides being ideological in nature, Western culture was to subdue the means of criticism and rationalism in the Third World. In our case, it is aimed at Arab and "Muslim reason," attempting to make this "reason" oblivious to its unique and glorious past.[116]

Abu-Rabi's rhetoric is blunt, as is that of many of the thinkers that he surveys. These accounts need interpretation.

Earlier generations of thinkers – beginning in the late nineteenth century – were also responding to foreign encounters in their work. However, in the post-colonial period, there is a heightened consciousness of more subtle and longer lasting impacts of the colonial encounter. Whereas an earlier generation could rely on distinctions between military, technological, and economic influences, more recent generations have

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[116] Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 181.

learned that there are multiple and sometimes hidden forms of influence and control at play. Elisabeth Kassab points to the specific historical usage of the theme of cultural invasion when she explains, "whereas the Nahda fought against Western military invasion and the revolutionaries in the 1950s fought against Western economic hegemony, contemporary thinkers want to fight Western cultural invasion and hegemony, seeking disalienation against them in a passionate identification with the 'authentic *turath*'."[117] The idea of cultural invasion resonates with recent writers, for whom the perceived forms of control and influence are perhaps less overt, but all the more sinister.

The role that such terms play in Elmessiri's writing is typical: the entry or infiltration of foreign elements (including everything from foods, clothing, furniture, and technology, to terms, ideas, arguments, and values) threatens to undermine or destroy the goods and particularities of a place or tradition. The perception of a looming crisis becomes the occasion for critical reflection on whether and how to preserve those goods and particularities, and the extent to which those *invading* elements should be appropriated, accommodated, spurned, or confined. Reflection on this theme is thus an important part of the background to the other themes in Elmessiri's work. However, it also serves as a helpful framework for clarifying the kind of critical task that has faced Elmessiri and his peers. Recalling Wendy Brown's reflections in the previous chapter, "cultural invasion" sets the stage for the work of "sifting, sorting, judging" and even *retrieval*. Critique as a response to the perception of cultural invasion is a mode of

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[117] Elizabeth Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 169. In this particular discussion, Kassab is glossing the Syrian writer Georges Tarabichi. *Turath* means heritage.

encounter, analysis and interpretation – it is a practice of engaging Western modernity, distinguishable from passive acceptance, eager adoption and consumption, and distinguishable also from simple resistance or rejection.

On this note, it is important to provide a couple of points of clarification. First, using "cultural invasion" as a lens through which to view recent Muslim reflection on Western modernity is not the same as suggesting that the only or the best way to read the intellectual work of Muslim writers of the past several decades is as a *reaction* – whether to colonialism, Zionism, neo-liberalism, etc. There is a risk that this would lead to neglect of the careful, interpretive, and constructive work that has been done. As Carool Kersten argues in related terms, it is necessary to call into question "the positing of an immediate causal connection between specific political crises affecting the Muslim world and the alleged 'return' of religion in the public sphere of the Muslim world and elsewhere."[118] This is a worthy consideration. Nevertheless, the encounter with "the West" or "modernity" is an intractable part of the intellectual life of Elmessiri and many intellectuals of his age in the Muslim world, and a key factor in many projects of Islamic revival and immanent Islamic critique.

As an additional point of clarification, my inquiry's focus on the theme of cultural invasion should also not be understood in the same terms that Mark Levine has put it – as an effort to "gain a better understanding of why and how critiques of the West, however severe, cross the line to outright hatred – how the pendulum swings between what we could term a 'worldly Islam' that is fully engaged with other cultures

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[118] Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 5.

and processes… and a 'ghetto Islam' that is closed and lacks the ability to do more than resist the encroachments and threats from the 'outside'."[119] I'm doubtful that such a "crossing" can be discerned. Moreover, I'm skeptical that "hatred" can be a helpful analytical tool for understanding and comparing critical accounts of Western modernity. However, even if the distinction between an "engaged" and a "ghetto" Islam were to facilitate productive analysis, Elmessiri and the other thinkers to whom he may be compared explicitly discard the option of sealing Islam off from "outside" influence.

b. Emergence of the Terms

The history of the term Cultural Invasion and the family of similar expressions is not identical with the history of the relationship between "the West" and "the Muslim world." If there were to be such a history, it would be a history of the concepts themselves. "Western modernity" and "Muslim world" are enduring artifacts of a confluence of multiple histories.[120] Outlining them is beyond the confines of this dissertation. Even the relatively more modest task of describing the colonial and post-colonial relationships between Western powers and Egypt is far too vast for me to address here.[121] Moreover, the acute perception of *cultural*, *psychological*, or *intellectual* invasion is more recent than the entry of European powers into Egyptian lands with

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[119] Mark LeVine, *Why They Don't Hate Us: Lifting the Veil on the Axis of Evil* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 161-162.

[120] This is a conversation of many participants that was started by Edward Said. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

[121] See: Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Napoleon in 1798. What I want to do, then, is to offer a brief historical background on uses of the term and the intellectual setting in which it emerged.[122]

For the "reform" thinkers beginning in the 19th century, the question was whether and how to keep those less tangible, "cultural" elements of Europe at bay, while adopting or making use of certain technologies, institutional forms, and even ideologies.[123] But later thinkers came to perceive this earlier generation – the generation of the Nahḍa or "awakening" – as betrayers of their "authentic" heritage. They were skeptical of the possibility of adopting the one type without being too vulnerable to the other.   It is this additional degree of reflexivity that characterizes the discourse of cultural invasion in the past several decades.

Though the idea and the concerns surrounding it are older, the term cultural invasion arises most notably in the 1960s and spreads particularly in the wake of "the defeat" in 1967. There are two figures – both Egyptians – whose use of *cultural invasion* or *cultural imperialism* led to the spread and popularization of terms: Muḥammad Jalāl Kishk and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī.[124]   Both men are senior to but more or less

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[122] This is a more narrow theme than the broader "crisis of modernity" that can be said to run through much Muslim reflection from the Nahḍa generation forward.

[123] The interest in benefiting from scientific knowledge and technological advances is one dimension of the problem of cultural invasion. Another important dimension concerns the political ideologies that come into view as "solutions" after the emergence of the modern nation-state system. Several generations of thinkers and public figures have explored the possibility that originally Western ideologies like nationalism, socialism, and democracy – in spite of their foreign origins – could provide the means for establishing truly independent and thriving political communities in Muslim lands and while maintaining Muslim identity. For a background discussion of the reception and negotiation of these ideologies, see Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

[124] I found very little secondary literature on the subject of cultural invasion. However, I am thankful for the input of a number of scholars on the Sociology of Islam forum who helped me to corroborate this account. Enayat has suggested that the significance of 1967 may not simply be that the defeat itself produced these new reflections, but rather that it created the space for expression of previously suppressed doubts about the adequacy of Western ideologies. Enayat, *Islamic Political Thought,* 150.

contemporary with Elmessiri. Both had also walked the heavily trodden path from Marxism to Islamism.[125]

In the case of Ghazālī, the notion of Cultural Invasion was part of the development of a form of self-criticism or immanent critique. It took hold because of a "pervasive mental backwardness"[126] that he felt had prevented Muslim societies from flourishing in the 20th century. Ghazālī argued that cultural invasion preyed upon a weak or absent culture of reflection and self-criticism. Thus, According to Abu-Rabi' he called for revitalization of "Islamic systematic theology, which must be capable of producing new tools of thinking in order to come to grips with both theory and practice."[127] The objective of such a critical theology would be "to emancipate Muslim reason from blind imitation, reductionism and atomism, expos[ing] it to the recent scientific contributions of mankind, and facilitat[ing] its access to a well-rounded critical theory aided by the most advanced tools of social and humanistic criticism."[128] Ghazālī's remedy to cultural invasion is not one of complete disengagement from "foreign" modes of thinking, but on the contrary an active, interpretive, and constructive venture. For Ghazālī, moreover, the need to address cultural invasion through an Islamic mode of critique is not rooted in a desire for political success or a raw

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[125] Such transformations remain under-considered in scholarship on this generation of intellectuals. But such conversions seem to produce an intense sense of awakening and realization that what they thought was radicalism and resistance was in fact yet another part of the apparatus of Western control. Although Marxism was embraced in large part for its critical posture, there is a sense that a critical stance that does not emerge from *the soil of Islam* will not be adequate to the task of evaluating Western modernity in all its manifestations.

[126] From his *al-ghazw al-thaqafi yamtaddu fi faraghina* (Cultural Invasion Reaches into Our Emptiness), quoted in Abu-Rabi' *Contemporary Arab Thought,* 223.

[127] Abu-Rabi' *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 226.

[128] Ibid, 226-227.

affirmation of Muslim identity. Rather, it addresses an *ethical* need: the fulfillment of an Islamic vision of social justice.[129]

Kishk portrays a more aggressive force in cultural invasion, describing it as part of a series of "crusades" aimed at overtaking and permanently altering the Muslim world. Fouad Ajami discusses the role of Kishk and the place of this term in his thought. Ajami explains that according to Kishk, "cultural invasion" names the "third crusade." He quotes Kishk's own explanation: "The third crusade picks up where the second left off: it accommodates itself to political independence; instead of using armies, it seeks to penetrate the mind of the Muslim and to rearrange it. Once the Muslim accepted the 'supremacy of the West – not just material supremacy but cultural and spiritual supremacy as well – the Muslim's resistance would collapse; he would become like an open defenseless city, vulnerable to every plunderer and invader.'"[130]

This discussion should not imply that a single common sensibility about cultural invasion has developed in the Muslim world. On the contrary, for example, Martin van Bruinessen has pointed out that although a related discourse of Cultural Invasion has circulated in the Indonesian setting (known there as *ghazwul fikri*), in that context, the concern has not only been about Western cultural influence and threats to Islam but also about Arab and even specifically Egyptian influences. Indeed, some in Indonesia have noted that the concept of "cultural invasion" itself has been *imported* directly from the Arab world. Van Bruinessen notes that in Indonesia there have been at least two postures of defending a notion of cultural purity: on the one hand are those who defend

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[129] Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 231.

[130] Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 62.

the purity of Islam modeled on recent fundamentalist or purification movements such as Wahabism in the Arab world; on the other hand are those who defend a distinctively Indonesian version of Islam. Each accuses the other of allowing foreign impositions and corruptions.[131]

Today, the term remains a prominent trope in scholarly writings and is subsequently quoted in Western scholarly texts. Moreover, it is widespread in popular discourse and media, featuring in online forums for inquiries, analyses, and internet fatwas (solicited legal opinions). The next section will further develop the background for Elmessiri's career, by examining some of the characteristic language for describing the West as an invasive culture.

c. The West as an Invasive Culture

What is the invading culture? How do authors warning about cultural invasion characterize "the West"? There are some basic and recurring themes, each of which gives some indication as to the task of critical engagement identified by any given project. These themes or tropes – including *disease* (requiring diagnosis and remedy), *impurity* (requiring expulsion and purification), and *insanity* (requiring confinement and therapeutic reforms) – can be used to categorize much of the rhetoric employed by Muslim writers in their critiques of Western modernity. Sayyid Quṭb has famously used

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[131] Martin van Bruinessen, "Indonesian Muslims and Their Place in the Larger World of Islam" in, Anthony Reid ed., *Indonesia Rising: The Repositioning of Asia's Third Giant* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012).

terms such as taint, infection, infiltration, corruption, magic spell, and schizophrenia[132] to characterize the nature of the presence of Western cultural elements in the Muslim world. Among Iranian thinkers similar concerns and themes arise addressing the worry of "cultural onslaught," *tahājom*. The early and forceful study of the West by Jalal al-e-Ahmed known as "Occidentosis" or "Westoxification" (*gharbzadegi*) sets the tone for many that are to follow, including Ali Shari'ati and Ayatollah Khomeini.[133] For Quṭb, as well as Abul Ala Maududi and others, the essence of Western modernity (as well as of those in the Muslim world who fail to establish a properly Islamic, critical stance) is *jāhiliyya* – a Qur'anic term for the "ignorance" of pre-Islamic times, for these modern authors it designates a state of non-belief that runs deeper than any naïve lack of awareness.

Many authors describing the West – including Elmessiri – emphasize the intensification of desires that feed materialism, consumerism, hedonism and hyper-sexualization. Within the broader discourse on *globalization*, writers conceive of the spread of Western values and particularly capitalism in terms of the commodification of everything. This is accompanied by the perception that Western culture threatens virtue or value. Elmessiri frequently points to a "value-free modernity," that fails to develop evaluations on the basis goods other than (material) productivity and efficiency.[134]

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[132] Levine offers an interesting comparative point, noting that this characterization of the West in terms of "schizophrenia" is one also developed by Deleuze and Guatarri, after Quṭb. Mark Levine, *Why They Don't Hate Us.*

[133] Jalal al-e-Ahmed, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984).

[134] This is one of the themes linking together the essays in Elmessiri's *Dirasāt Fikriyya.* For a discussion (with English subtitle) see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=n01iFEjsOd4.

Although Elmessiri agrees with other thinkers that Western modernity presents itself as a troubling and potentially destructive force, he does not agree with those who conclude that resistance requires a staunch commitment to an ideal of cultural purity. We need to place his thought in the context of critical projects that complicate the picture of an invasive West.

III.   Intellectual Responses[135]

In this section I will discuss several areas of intellectual response to the perceived "cultural invasion" and indicate their relevance to reading and understanding Elmessiri. These areas are: (a) predecessors to contemporary discourse; (b) several influential critics, (c) Egyptian peers and colleagues of Elmessiri, and (d) an international network of Muslim scholars of which Elmessiri was a part: the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT).

a. History: Reform Generation

In reflecting on their encounters with Europe and the colonial experience, the first generations of reformers sought to negotiate the relationship between Islam and modernity in a variety of realms. In the Middle East, the focus was on Islam as a resource for the development of thriving political and social order. Figures like Jamāl al-

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[135] While I focus on intellectuals as the interrogators and integrators with respect to Western cultural influences in the Muslim world, Mark Levine has made the important argument that much serious and complex work of negotiation and identity formation takes place outside of these discourses, in daily life and popular culture. See: Levine, *Why They Don't Hate Us*, 164.

Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad ʿAbduh, and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā sought to create the space for modern, rationally engaged citizen-subjects who were at the same time shaped by the faith and virtues of Islam. Centered more in South Asia, scholars like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal were more deeply impacted by the questions forced upon traditional theology by modern science. According to Abdulkader Tayob, their strategy was to develop a theology based on a distinction between what is essential and non-essential to Islamic religion.[136]

Although he does not discuss these earlier figures extensively,[137] in a sense, Elmessiri's fundamental concerns – questions about epistemology and his gestures at a basic theology focused on the distinctiveness of humanity, the principle of oneness or *tawḥīd*, and the dynamism of *ijtihād* – resonate with reformers' aim of developing a conception of modernity and human understanding that mines the revelation-based world-outlook of Islam for principles of rationality, innovation, and progress. Elmessiri's developed writings are more interested in epistemological concerns than in political ones. However, some of his positions suggest influences from predecessors in his own region. For example, his search for a balance between human reason, on the one hand, and divine transcendence as the most fundamental principle of Islam, on the other, resonates more clearly with al-Afghānī and ʿAbduh than with South Asian counterparts who flirted with the immanence of natural theology.[138] Moreover, his support for basic principles of democracy and a study of the possibility of a legitimately

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[136] Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse*.

[137] Elmessiri's most developed piece in this regard is the essay "The West and Islam: Clashpoints and Dialogues." Elmessiri, "The West and Islam."

[138] For explanation of this characterization of South Asian scholars of this generation, see: Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse*.

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"partial" or institutional secularism seems to reach back to figures like 'Ali 'Abd al-Rāziq.[139]

b. Recent Trends in Arab and Muslim Critique[140]

More recent generations have felt a sense of dissatisfaction with this earlier Nahḍa generation. Elizabeth Kassab points to a "radicalization and polarization of two major trends" of reflection in Elmessiri's part of the world in the past several decades: "on the one hand, the search for totalizing doctrines, especially religious doctrines after the demise of the Left and of secular nationalism, and on the other hand, the radicalization of critique."[141] I want now to point to some important figures shaping the critical landscape of recent Muslim reflections. In the Introduction to this project, I argued that it is possible to distinguish three dimensions of critique among Muslim authors writing in settings where modernity presented itself as an import or invasion: (C1) critique of modernity as an alien object of analysis, (C2) reflexivity or self-criticism regarding the engagement with or response to those encounters – asking, *why is modernity a problem for me?*; and (C3) immanent Islamic (or Arab) critique. Kassab focuses on C2. Regarding C1, I have indicated some basic patterns in that dimension in section II of this chapter, above. Much of the discussion in Chapter Three is devoted to

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[139] For detailed discussion of these thinkers and this period, see Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (1982) and Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

[140] In this section, I will be discussing four authors who are contemporaries of Elmessiri and whose work engages similar questions and concerns. Elmessiri does not, however, explicitly reference their work except in a rare passing reference. It seems certain that he knew these figures and was familiar with their work. It would be worthwhile to explore why there is not direct engagement.

[141] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 2. Kassab seems to rely too heavily on a distinction between critical and systematic thought in framing her project.

this dimension of Elmessiri's work. This is also the dimension on which Roxanne Euben focuses in her study of Sayyid Quṭb, the well-known Egyptian, Islamist ideologue. Irfan Ahmad, whose work I described in Chapter One, offers an investigation of C3. Elmessiri primarily moves between the first two, however, there are moments of the third in his writing, particularly in his usage of terms such as *tawḥīd* and *ijtihād*.[142] In the rest of this portion, I'll discuss several important figures working between C2 and C3, some of whom, notably, are themselves engaging with the hermeneutic tradition.[143]

There have been a couple of influential endeavors to develop a "critique of reason" with a focus on the Arab or Muslim cultural milieu. Muḥammed ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, a Moroccan philosopher and intellectual historian, undertook an intricate project of C2, with the aim of leading his Arab readers towards the cultivation of C3. According to al-Jābirī, the predicament of modernity was not resolved by the Nahḍa generations,

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[142] It may be possible to discern all three in any sustained project of critique. Among critics in the European or American setting, the same three dimensions can also be identified. However, it seems that they would necessarily have a different mapping – they would tend to overlap more. In any setting, which of these three is most prominent will depend in large part on who the author/critic's "we" is – and it seems that even this can shift and change in the movement between these orientations. Thinking about these three dimensions or moments of critique is productive for trying to understand the constructive and ethical output of practices of critique.

[143] A helpful discussion of the complex interplay of tradition and modernity in recent Muslim thought is provided by: Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Haj uses MacIntyre's concept of Tradition as a framework for understanding reformist discourse about modernity. In some ways, I too rely on MacIntyre as a way of making sense of Elmessiri's objective, in his struggle for a paradigm appropriate to Islamic knowledge and values. However, MacIntyre's conceptualization is limited insofar as it depends on imagining an "inside" and "outside" to tradition. This becomes evident when, for example, Haj draws on MacIntyre as a way of undermining "liberal" and "humanist" assumptions. Certainly, the critique of liberalism and humanism in religious studies has been important and Elmessiri explicitly distances himself from *some* aspects of liberalism and *certain varieties* of humanism. But there is a sense in which his engagement with these "outside" concepts and values takes the form of a MacIntyrean *internal* critique. Haj proposes to use MacIntyre as an alternative to the "counterposition of tradition and modernity" (Haj, 4). However, so long as one is committed to the notion of an "inside" and "outside" to "tradition," the counterposition endures. Certainly, many contemporary Muslim thinkers reinforce this paradigm of enclosure in their work – Elmessiri himself sometimes writes this way.

because they were too preoccupied with modernity and what it might offer and thus did not undertake a rigorous critique of Arab thought.[144] The perception of a challenge or a threat *from the outside* disabled their properly critical engagement with tradition. The problem of modernity in the Arab world was not a problem of modernization *per se*, but rather one of continuity – the kind of continuity that exists in a tradition of vibrant *immanent* critique. Jābirī's contribution to this dilemma is to trace the contours of what that "tradition" could be, by digging deep into the history of Arabic thought.[145] By excavating a tradition of Arab reason that reaches into the pre-Islamic era and (in Jābirī's view) shapes Islam in the formative period, Jābirī identifies the resources for an Arab critique that could transcend the stalemate of tradition and modernity. Jābirī hoped that his *critique of Arab reason* would illuminate the possibility of a "modernization" without "modernism."[146]

Because Jābirī grounded his critical project in a notion of *Arab* reason with deeper roots than the religion of Islam, his work has been controversial among Muslim readers. Jābirī has also been accused of essentializing categorizations. Mohammed Arkoun's project of critique does not present these same challenges. However, it too has faced controversy. Arkoun's work builds toward a "critique of Islamic reason."[147] However,

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[144] See: Abu-Rabi' *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 256-278.

[145] Some consider Jābirī to be a nationalist writer, rather than an Islamic thinker. His seminal project *Naqd al-'aql al-'arabi* is often translated as "critique of the Arab mind." However, in light of Jābirī's attention to European Enlightenment and critique, I would suggest that the more appropriate translation is "critique of Arab reason."

[146] Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought,* 194.

[147] While Jābirī saw himself in the tradition of Kant, Arkoun has explicitly denied modeling Kant in his method of critique. Carool Kersten has explained that, "Arkoun's critique of Islamic reason does neither contain an argument of causality nor share the metaphysical foundations of Kant's philosophy," and additionally, Arkoun does not situate religion "within the confines of individual consciousness," but

his sense of what it is that needs to be excavated and retrieved is different from Jābirī's. For Arkoun, there is a vast territory of the "uthought" in Islamic theological and intellectual heritage, which is based on a problematic union between impulses for power and for meaning. Meaning-making has been subject to the limitations based on power interests. And for Arkoun, this is the source of arrested development in the Muslim world. The "critique" that Arkoun calls for and attempts to develop is a process of disentangling meaning from power, so as to re-evaluate and revive the creative and mythical dimensions of theological thinking and of worship. There is an anthropocentrism to Arkoun's work, which can also be found in Elmessiri – although both wish to develop a methodology that does justice to an Islamic, revelation-based worldview.[148]

Two other figures have contributed to recent projects of Muslim (or Arab) critique, both of whom are not only contemporaries but also compatriots of Elmessiri: Hasan Hanafi and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Hanafi's career and methodology are hybrid, building on Islamic philosophy, Marxist theory, and phenomenology. With Hanafi, critique becomes reconnected with political aspirations, as he conceives of the task of critique as oriented toward revolution. As an Islamic thinker, Hanafi focuses on what he

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instead conceives of religion "as embedded in the totality of social structures." Both thinkers' work is more genealogical, in the tradition of Foucalt – particularly Arkoun. Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 215. Kassab has compared them in this way: "Whereas Arkoun intends to rehabilitate the imaginary and the prophetic in view of acknowledging the human creation and interpretation of meaning in what is believed to be a divine message, al-Jabiri intends to reestablish primacy of demonstrative reasoning in view of rehabilitating what he believes to be the rationalist trend in the Islamic tradition." Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought,* 179-80.

[148] See: Kassab *Contemporary Arab Thought* and Kersten*, Cosmopolitans and Heretics*.

finds to be a Leftist and revolutionary orientation with Islam, and he names the philosophical-political project associated with this, the *Islamic Left*

In a daring exercise of C3, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd also rigorously engaged with the question of the place of critique in Islamic thought. Focused on textual hermeneutics, Abu Zayd sought to strike a fragile balance, calling on the one hand for an acknowledgement of the "human dimension of the Qur'an" while at the same time affirming that the Qur'an is of divine origin. He implores his critics, "placing the Qur'an firmly within history does not imply that the origins of the Qur'an are human." What this historicism *does* do is construe Islam as a tradition that lives and transforms on the bases of human interpretive engagement. For his rigorous and historicist project of excavation and reconstruction, Kassab calls Abu Zayd the "Egyptian counterpart" of Arkoun.[149]

Arkoun, along with Hanafi, are examples of what Carool Kersten has called the "new Muslim intellectuals." Kersten uses this term to name a type of figure whose work exhibits and even embraces a hybrid form of critical thought. These tend to be the figures in the Arab and Muslim worlds whose intellectual hybridity and reflexivity prevent them from fitting comfortably within the categories of fundamentalist and Islamist, on the one hand, or liberal, progressive, and secular, on the other. In Kersten's study, he isolates Hanafi, Arkoun, and the Indonesian intellectual, Nurcholish Madjid. Although his contributions to Islamic thought and the study of Islam are not developed as theirs, Elmessiri may be viewed as one of these figures. Elmessiri's background and

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[149] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought,* 181.

his experiences during his career as a scholar are complex and cosmopolitan in nature. He reached beyond the bounds of the familiar, both in terms of the resources he relied upon in his scholarship and in terms of the contacts and alliances he sought. In trying to draw attention to such integrative work, Kersten characterizes these "new" intellectuals as having a "propensity to creatively apply [their] acquaintance with recent achievements of Western scholarship in the human sciences in their engagement with Islam's civilizational heritage."[150] This "hybrid" intellectual style is, he explains, a "common denominator" between a diverse set of contemporary Muslim intellectuals; it also links them to an even wider circle of third world intellectuals trying to navigate the terrain of post-coloniality. The hybrid and intercultural nature of these scholars' reflections enables them to participate in a wide range of conversations about the contemporary world. Elmessiri's work shares many features with that of these "new intellectuals."[151]

c. Egyptian Peers and Colleagues

In addition to Hanafi and Abu-Zayd, Elmessiri's generation in Egypt produced a number of prominent intellectuals and writers whose careers were a blend of professional, political, and scholarly life. These include figures such as Tāriq al-Bishrī, a legal scholar and judge who has written about Islam and secularism; Muḥammad Ḥassanayn Haykal, a journalist and observer of America and Israel; Muḥammad ʿImāra,

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[150] Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 12.

[151] Elmessiri does not, however, explicitly engage in conversation with them. Certainly he knew of Arkoun and Hanafi. Particularly Hanafi – he and Elmessiri were part of the same relatively small intellectual circle in Cairo.

a scholar of Islamic philosophy who writes regularly in mainstream media about issues of Islam and governance; Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, who many consider to be an icon of the left and one of the few in this generation who remained a committed Marxist; and Galal Amin, social historian and critic, as well as professor of economics. Most of these figures interacted with Elmessiri in some way during his career, and a number of them contributed to a sizable set of reflections on Elmessiri's life and work, *In the World of Abdelwahab Elmessiri: A Critical Cultural Dialogue*.[152]

Significant interactions have also occurred between traditionally trained Islamic Muslim theologian-scholars and the figures mentioned above. Most prominently, Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Muḥammad Salīm al-ʿAwa, who maintain an impressive degree of independence in their work as intellectual-sheikhs.

One of the significant developments that supported the fame and flourishing of these figures is the publishing industry and other transformations in media. Publishers like Dār al-Shurūq in Cairo have nourished an intellectual sub-culture by making available affordable versions of these authors' works. Shurūq has been the primary publisher of Elmessiri's texts. Additionally, in the past decade, these figures have made use of online media outlets affiliated with local and regional newspapers. Al-Jazeera (the Qatar based international news network) has played an important role in the cosmopolitan nature of many of these figures, including Elmessiri, who regularly published and interviewed with the network.

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[152] Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal and Aḥmed Abdel-Halim ʿAtiyya, eds. *fī al-ʿālim ʿabd al-wahāb al-misīrī: ḥiwār naqdī ḥaḍarī* (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2004).

d. Islamization of Knowledge and the IIIT Community

Much of Elmessiri's work can be understood in light of his affiliation with an international network of Muslim scholars known as the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT). Through the IIIT, Elmessiri engaged with scholars from around the world working together to develop educational theory and social sciences research in a manner that would be consistent with Muslim knowledge and Muslim values. Elmessiri worked on a number of articles and research projects with the support of the IIIT. His edited book *Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences* was published through the Institute.[153]

The IIIT describes itself as, "an intellectual forum working on educational, academic and societal issues from an Islamic perspective to promote and support research projects, organize intellectual and cultural meetings, publish scholarly works, and engage in teaching and training." They claim to have "established a distinct intellectual trend in Islamic thought which relates to the vivid legacy of the Ummah (Muslim nation) and its continuous efforts of intellectual and methodological reform, principally in the field of education, classical knowledge and social science." Influential figures in the IIIT network include Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, Mona Abul-Fadl,[154] and Taha Jabir al-'Alwani.

A central component of the IIIT initiative is the project of "Islamization of Knowledge." Islamization of knowledge has become a slogan phrase for a variety of efforts to reconstruct Muslim knowledge, which can be traced as far back as Muhammad

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[153] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, ed. *Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences* (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006).
[154] From whom Elmessiri may have borrowed the term "Tawhidi paradigm." See Chapter Four.

Iqbal, but originate more recently with Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas. In contrast with the more well-known political projects of Islamization, Islamization of knowledge names efforts to address the "cognitive transformations" that underlie the more visible social, technological, and political transformations associated with modernization.[155] The IIIT understands Islamization of Knowledge as an effort to "elucidate Islamic concepts that integrate Islamic revealed knowledge with human knowledge and [revive] Islamic ethical and moral knowledge, through education, teaching and support of scholarly research."[156]

Elmessiri's interest in Islamization of knowledge and his involvement with the IIIT indicates his interest in exploring the practical implications and applications of his work. The IIIT was only one small part of this. In the next section, I discuss the relevant background to his life as a public figure, venturing into the political arena.

IV.   Politics and Practice

In his study of the history of Cairo University, Donald Malcolm Reid argues, "fervent hopes and declarations to the contrary, Egyptian academic and political life

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[155] See: Ali Hassan Zaidi, "Muslim Reconstructions of Knowledge and the Re-enchantment of Modernity," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23.5 (2006): 69-91. For a critical appraisal, see Syed Farid Alatas, "The Sacralization of the Social Sciences: A Critique of an Emerging Theme in Academic Discourse," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 40.91 (1995); Mona Abaza, *Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt* (London: Routledge, 2002). I discuss some of these criticisms in Chapter Three.

[156] From the IIIT website: http://www.iiit.org/AboutUs/AboutIIIT/tabid/66/Default.aspx. The Islamization of Knowledge project in particular has generated controversy and criticism: The project is an ongoing conversation about the implications of a shared conviction that the methods of the modern social sciences which developed in the West are neither universally valid, nor morally sound.

were intimately intertwined."[157] Elmessiri's life is a testament to this claim. As I'll discuss more in the next chapter, he devoted an important part of his scholarly work to reflection on the futility of "fervent hopes and declarations" regarding scholarly objectivity and isolation from politics. Moreover, he invested himself with increasing intensity in the political battles raging around him. In his autobiography, Elmessiri describes his life as one of diverse studies and experiences, but one united by commitment to a basic notion of human dignity and social justice. For most of his life, Elmessiri was not directly engaged in Egypt's contentious political struggles. Only during the later years of his life did he become politically active, even setting out on the streets in spite of old age and ill-health. Those around him at the time recall his determination to be there in person along side of those for whom the issues were most urgent, although he was encouraged to stay in and rest. In this section, I'll describe the relevant political organizations and movements that exemplified Elmessiri's commitments.[158]

There were two major Egyptian political organizations in particular with which Elmessiri was not only involved but was integral in organizing: the Egyptian Movement for Change (popularly known as Kefaya) and the Wasat party. The political visions of

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[157] Donald Malcolm Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3.

[158] Another important element of the response to *al-ghazw al-thaqafi* (which I will not be able to elaborate on in this dissertation) is the *Daw'a* movement. There is an atmosphere of virtue-cultivation impacting the character of people's actions together and although Elmessiri is not himself part of the Daw'a movement, the reception of his work – and to some extent the substance of it as well – reflects this broader atmosphere (which we learn about from figures like Hirschkind, Mahmood, etc.). Charles Hirschkind notes that the Daw'a movement has been largely constituted in response to the *ghazw fikrī/thaqāfī*, which also shapes Elmessiri's work. See: Charles Hirschkind, "Civic Virtue and Religious Reason: An Islamic Counter-Public," *Cultural Anthropology* 16.1 (2001), 14.

both of these groups reflect a number of important commitments elaborated in Elmessiri's work, particularly regarding their efforts to see beyond apparently intractable disagreements, to establish openness with respect to a variety of religious and other ideological positions, but to simultaneously remain firm in confronting certain matters of perceived injustice in the status quo. Towards the aim of widening the lens that might capture something about Elmessiri's life, it is important to consider these groups in a bit more detail.

a. Post-Islamism and The Wasat Party

The Wasat or "middle" party was, in a sense, born in critique as well as baptized by it: its founders were primarily (though not exclusively) composed of former members of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. In splitting off to form their own party, they received much criticism from the powerful Islamist group; however, in insisting on maintaining the Islamic character of the party, they were also under suspicion from the ruling regime and denied official party status. Augustus Richard Norton has characterized the Wasat party as "what happens when Islamists go against the grain, and declare their commitment to pluralism and their acceptance, if not endorsement, of secular political principles...a remarkable attempt by a group of moderately oriented Islamists to play by democratic rules of the game in Egypt."[159] Indeed, the Wasat party

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[159] Augustus Richard Norton, "Thwarted Politics: The Case of Egypt's Hizb al-Wasat," in *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 133

has been much celebrated as a hope for liberal Muslim politics, particularly in the later

years of the Mubarak regime.[160]

The party was founded in 1996 by Abū al-ʿAlā al-Māḍī, and finally officially

recognized in post-Mubarak Egypt on February 19, 2011 – the first party to be granted

this status after the fall of the Mubarak regime.[161] It has always been considered a party

of intellectuals. However, while it gained wide respect in the years leading up to the

overthrow of the Mubarak regime, the Wasat party did not attain significant

representation in the parliamentary elections, nor did they field a presidential candidate

in the 2012 presidential elections.

But the Wasat party is in many ways part of a broader religio-political movement

known as *Wasaṭiyya*, which signifies "moderate" Islam, and which is characterized by

much political and social pragmatism. One of the more significant pillars of its identity

is an effort to go beyond the Islamist slogan "Islam is the solution," without simply

capitulating to basic secular or otherwise Western, ideological party platforms. Those

affiliated with the *Wasaṭiyya* have been called the "post-Islamists" and sometimes the

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[160] Reviewer L. Carl Brown characterized Raymond Baker's study of Wasat leaders as "verg[ing] on hagiography." L. Carl Brown, review of *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* by Raymond William Baker, *Foreign Affairs* 83.2 (2004), 172.

[161] Today, the most heated issue for debate is the question of the precise role played by Islamic Sharī ʾah Law in the national legal system. The debate is not drawn along the clear lines that one might imagine (between those who call for Islamic law and those who call for secularism). Huge numbers of people, including many Muslim Brotherhood members, call for a civil state (*dawla madaniyya*), and debates center upon what it will mean for Sharī ʾah to be a key source of legal reasoning. This debate, while new in some sense and certainly more alive than ever before, has origins in the years surrounding the formation of the Wasat Party. In 1995, Dr. Said al-Naggar, who would go on to be a part of the Wasat Party, put forward a "civic compact" composed of basic commitments to freedom of belief, democratic procedures, women's rights, among other things.   He sought to obtain a wide array of support from a number of existing parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Back then, the Brotherhood refused to sign onto the compact because it did not acknowledge Shari'ah as the *sole* basis of the law. Norton, "Thwarted Politics," 141.

"New Islamists"[162] (not to be confused with the "new Muslim intellectuals"). These figures trace their intellectual roots most directly to Muhammad Abduh. The *Waṣatiyya* movement promotes an interpretation Islam that emphasizes concepts such as justice, participation, and pragmatism in politics. Prominent members include several of those mentioned above (III.c) such as Tāriq al-Bishrī, Muḥammad ʿImāra, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and Muḥammad Salīm al-ʿAwa. Al-Qaradawi serves as a clarifying example of the relationship between the Wasat party and the *Wasaṭiyya* movement. Husam Tamam points out that while he is hailed as an icon of the *wasaṭiyya*, he remained loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood during the schism and formation of the Wasat Party.[163]

Elmessiri played a central supportive and advisory role for the Wasat party, and is remembered as one of its founders and intellectual leaders. He contributed to drafting the program of the party, and during the period of his involvement with the party, he formulated a well-developed program for the structure and dynamics of Egyptian politics. The question was apparently raised as to whether he might run for president as a candidate for the Wasat party. In good humor, he declined. However, he shared his proposed presidential program with the group.[164] The elements of this program – including basic checks and balances, constraints on executive power, civility and respect

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[162] Gilles Kepel introduces the terms, and it is subsequently used by a number of other theorists, including in relationship to the Wasaṭ party. Raymond William Baker picks out several prototypical "new Islamists," including Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Muḥammad Salīm al-ʿAwa, and Ṭariq al-Bishrī. Raymond William Baker, *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[163] Husam Tammam, "Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the Muslim Brothers: The Nature of a Special Relationship," in *In Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi,* eds. Bettina Graff and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[164] Elmessiri can be heard discussing his electoral program with Wasat party members here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XnXfWap0XY. Elmessiri's official Facebook page has posted the full text of this program here: http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=229462317074887

among different religious groups, freedoms of expression and assembly, and Islamic

principles of morality as the ultimate adjudicators in disputes with respect to principles

of governance[165] – harmonize with those of the Wasat party.

   b. *Kefaya*

Although the Wasat party has been characterized as a "post-Islamist" entity,

Asef Bayat has called the Kefaya movement – which formed almost a decade later – the

true beginning of post-Islamism. His assessment is useful:

In a fresh perspective, this [Kefaya] movement chose to work with 'popular forces,' rather than with traditional opposition parties, bringing the campaign into the streets instead of broadcasting it from headquarters, and focused on domestic issues rather than international demands. As a postnational and postideological movement, Kifaya embraced activists from diverse ideological orientations and gender, religious, and social groups. This novel mobilization managed, after years of Islamist hegemony, nationalism, and authoritarian rule, to break the taboo of unlawful street marches, and to augment a new postnationalist, secular, and nonsectarian (democratic) politics in Egypt.[166]

   Unlike Hizb al-Wasat, Kefaya is not a political party, nor does it seek to become

one. The word *kifāya* simply means "enough." This is the shorthand name for what is

more formally known as the Egyptian Movement for Change (الحركة المصرية من أجل التغيير).

Kefaya is a grassroots coalition of opposition movements, conceived initially as an effort

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[165] The latter refers to the expression: الإسلام هو المرجعية النهائية للمجتمع ("Islam is ultimate authority for society"). This is a widespread slogan among Islamist political parties. It has yet to be clearly explicated.

[166] Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010), 6.

to mobilize people on the basis of common political and social concerns. In rallying around the call for "change," members or participants could find primary alliance with different groups embracing otherwise divergent interests and outlooks, while pooling and channeling their currents of opposition against the regime in a united front. The movement emerged in the early 2000s, as a response to three key developments: First, it drew on a surge of public protest and engagement that was ignited by the second *Intifāḍa* in Palestine; the movement was further stoked by the American invasion of Iraq in 2003; and finally, the approach of 2005 elections that would almost certainly result (and did indeed result) in the re-election of Hosni Mubarak. As the moniker suggests, the movement coalesced around a collective consciousness of overwhelming discontent and a need to take action.

What was initially so captivating and promising about the Kefaya movement was its interest in and ability to organize people with divergent political objectives to take action together. Manar Shorbagy writes, "while such collaborative work across ideological lines is not unique in democratic experiences around the world, Kefaya represents the first successful effort of that new kind of politics in modern Egyptian history."[167] There was tremendous enthusiasm and optimism generated by the successes of the movement. Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid explains:

Kefaya has exerted a demonstration effect on civil society in general through introducing to the Egyptian scene innovative techniques of mobilization using the new information technologies as well as original ways of expressing protest.

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[167] Manar Shorbagy, "Understanding *Kefaya*: The New Politics In Egypt," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 29:1 (2007), 40.

Kefaya militants organized silent sit-ins, candle light gatherings with people playing music and singing patriotic songs…. Kefaya succeeded in breaking the wall of silence over highly sensitive issues in Egypt such as the longevity of President Mubarak at the helm of the state or alleged plans to have him succeeded by his son. Its daring assault on a major taboo in Egyptian politics, namely the ban on street action, exerted a powerful impact on civil society in Egypt. It was soon to be emulated by groups of militants in many sectors and later by ordinary citizens including workers, peasants, and even government employees.[168]

The enthusiasm turned to disappointment and disillusionment within a couple of years. However, recently, Kefaya has been credited as the wave that grew tidal and washed out the Mubarak regime in 2011.[169] Talal Asad has pointed to Kefaya as an example of what is recently being called a "post-secular" sensibility. Kefaya acknowledges the irreducible religious plurality that composes Egyptian society, but builds its identity not upon the "beliefs" associated with these faiths, but rather upon a common political aim. Asad explains:

Kifaya…bring[s] together a variety of social elements – Muslims and Christians, Islamists and secular liberals, men and women, professionals and labor unionists – in a coalition against the authoritarian, neo-liberal state. It is not that there is now a happy union of all these elements, but that an irreducible plurality persists as a foundation of political sensibility…They speak of their opposition as something they did not *choose* but were compelled to take up. However, this

[168] Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, "Kefaya at a Turning Point," in *Political and Social Protest in Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009), 58.
[169] See for example Hirschkind http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/02/09/the-road-to-tahrir/; Beinin http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/31/egypt_at_the_tipping_point; and others.

situation is not merely negative; it also provides a space of daily interaction and negotiation… the religiosity of individual Muslims involved in this movement…is a mode of being often inwardly unsettled yet outwardly civil. This religiosity seeks the cultivation of feelings attuned to mutual care within the community, and in that sense it can lay claim to a democratic ethos.[170]

This discussion from Asad exemplifies a way of thinking about the constructive or affirmative side-effects or co-effects of critique.

Elmessiri played an important role in the Kefaya movement. He took over the leadership position of the movement – titled "general coordinator" – at a time when members were becoming frustrated and disillusioned. He served in this role until his death in 2008. And even in the latest stages in his life, when he was very ill, Elmessiri would be seen at demonstrations against the Mubarak regime. His role in Kefaya has contributed much to Elmessiri's posthumous fame – particularly since the 2011 uprising. The fact that he poured his energies into this movement – over and against leadership in a traditional party like the Wasat – sheds light on the more universalist commitments driving his research and writing.

V. Closing: The Search for Authenticity

At stake in much of the dynamics that I have described in this chapter is the possible loss of identity (*huwiyya*) and the principle of authenticity (*aṣala* or sometimes

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[170] Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert D. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 55-56.

khuṣuṣiyya, the latter literally means "particularity"). Robert D. Lee has described the dilemma that revolves around the concept of authenticity, particularly in an intellectual climate where both the tradition of Orientalist scholarship and Edward Said's critique of it have seeped into the intellectual life of non-American and non-European Muslims:

> The advocates of authenticity seek to establish a secure identity for those whose political, economic, and intellectual life has fallen under the sway of the West. Said's critique of Orientalism, helpful in liberating the East from a stultifying essentialism and from rationalist, Western development theory, threatens to swamp it with a thoroughly secularist, social-scientific postmodernism. The demand for authenticity represents a desire to break with the essentialist notions of truth, both traditional and modern, but not a willingness to part with the notion of truth altogether.[171]

This provides a helpful sketch of the contours of Elmessiri's predicament as a critic, and that of a number of his peers. Lee continues, "The question of authenticity emerges in a world where modernization has already become so generalized that the choice between East and West, traditional and modern, has already been foreclosed. The question is one of being modern in a way that I can call 'my own,' and it is a question that affects both West and East."[172] Elmessiri defends a notion of particularity and authenticity not only for Muslims but more generally for distinctive local histories, customs, and practices of adaptation to geography and climate. Beginning with the next chapter, we take a closer look at how Elmessiri approaches these challenges.

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[171] Robert D. Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 13.
[172] Ibid, 4.

Chapter Three:

A Paradigm Hostile to Humanity: Elmessiri's Critique of Western Modernity[173]

I.   **Introduction**

Perhaps our fears of the modern age spring from our knowledge not only of the sequence of modernization, but also of its consequences. We read the Western press and study Western society. The non-specialists hear of drugs and crime and the specialists read about the crisis of meaning and alienation. That is why when we move towards the modern age we do not move with much optimism. Our knowledge of what happened there, and of the enormous price that is to be paid, somewhat dampens our enthusiasm. We can only throw a strange look that reveals sorrow…[174]

What I alluded to in the first chapter as a tragic sensibility among some critics is evident in this opening passage. Elmessiri, however, was not content to "only throw a strange look" at Western modernity. He sought to develop an understanding of the logic – the "sequence" – of modernization such that, in what may seem like an inevitable "move towards the modern age," his audience might be equipped to avoid some of its negative consequences. The objective of this Chapter is to provide a portrait of the critical narrative that serves as the foundation of Elmessiri's work, and informs the thought and work of his disciples, students and other interlocutors. Like many others whose work fits into the genre of critical narrative, Elmessiri's account of the "sequence"

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[173] In Elmessiri's essay, "The Gate of *Ijtihād*," he includes a heading titled "A Paradigm Hostile to Man." Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 51.

[174] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 224-225 (142).

of modernity evokes a troubling imaginative landscape. However, it is through his engagement with modernity and modernity's critics that Elmessiri is able to retrieve and rediscover elements of both Western modernity and Islamic tradition that (he hopes) will equip Muslims with the epistemological and ethical resources that they need to deal with or avoid some of those "negative consequences."[175]

The chapter's focal point is the place of philosophical anthropology (or the ontology of the human) in Elmessiri's critique.[176] There are two dimensions to this. The first dimension concerns Elmessiri's own assumptions about human nature, and specifically, epistemology. Elmessiri frames his critical project in terms of a basic fact about human beings: that our worldviews are shaped and bound by *bias* (*al-taḥayyuz*). His uses of this concept evoke in different ways both Gadamer and Habermas, and more broadly, European and American debates about knowledge in the human sciences. I will explain and assess this further in the next section (II), which discusses the concept of bias and the companion concept of the paradigm: for Elmessiri, this is an aspect of the human condition that adds an additional layer to the challenges presented by modernity. The second dimension of my inquiry into the place of philosophical anthropology in Elmessiri's critique concerns Elmessiri's claims about modern-Western conceptions of the human being.

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[175] As I present Elmessiri's critique, I accept his observations and analyses as accurate representations of what he believes to be the defining features of Western culture. Although I will assess his arguments and note problems or inconsistencies, my primary aim is *not* to establish the legitimacy or illegitimacy of his claims. Therefore, in this project, my analysis will pass up a number of opportunities to argue with Dr. Elmessiri on the accuracy of any given claim. Here, the task will be to evoke this cultural-intellectual-moral other ("the West") in contrast to which Elmessiri develops his own vision.

[176] This focus is part of what distinguishes my approach from that of Euben, and more specifically identifies this project as one concerned with ethics.

The third section (III) provides a detailed discussion of the main features of what Elmessiri calls the Western "paradigm," including the philosophical anthropology that accompanies it. He claims that the defining feature is *ḥulūliyya*. When writing in English, Elmessiri alternates between translations of this term as "immanence" and "pantheism."[177] Both signal that his central diagnostic insight is that the dominant Western paradigm lacks a dimension of transcendence, thereby eliminating the imaginative and spiritual *space* necessary for human flourishing. He points to materialism, rationalization, and racism as characteristics of this paradigm. Elmessiri also relies upon the concept of *ḥulūliyya* in his analysis of the concept of *secularism* (*al-ʿalmāniyya*). Section IV considers Elmessiri's influential work on this topic. His studies of secularism communicate his insight about the relationship between modernity and post-modernity as part of a single "sequence." This portion of Elmessiri's story about modernity most clearly links Western philosophical anthropology to the troubling consequences alluded to in this chapter's epigraph – consequences which would be inevitable but for a critical intervention of the kind that he seeks to develop.

Many of Elmessiri's observations will seem familiar, and through footnotes and smaller discussions I will point to more thorough comparisons that could be developed between Elmessiri's work of critique and that of other theorists, whether from Europe, America, or other parts of the Muslim world. Such analysis – a "comparative critique" – ought to accompany (if not precede) more traditional work on comparative religious ethics, that seeks to identify common or analogous claims, commitments or ways of

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[177] He also occasionally associates the term with Gnosticism. I will not be able addressing this component of his analysis in this project. Some of Elmessiri's readers (including Haggag Ali, who I discuss in Chapter Five) are in the process of investigating Elmessiri's claims about Gnosticism and Western modernity.

reasoning about goods and norms. This requirement exists because the context of any constructive ethical thinking today is characterized by an inescapable awareness of the deeply problematic nature of modern assumptions about self-hood and moral reason.[178] The challenges and constraints presented by critical narratives of modernity and modern moral reasoning have implications for the most basic of concepts in ethics, including, for example, the relationship between the conception of the person and the discourse of human rights.[179]   Moreover, work in comparative religious ethics will require investigation into the extent of critical consensus among a range of thinkers that extends beyond the West's own theorists and critics.

The chapter concludes (V) by pointing out that there is a basis for rich comparative critique in a figure like Elmessiri, even though he does not fit either of the most obvious frameworks of comparison that have been established by existing trends in comparison – neither as a straightforward "liberal" thinker, nor as a "fundamentalist" (not even a representative of "political Islam"). At the end of the chapter, I will return to the concept of "critical retrieval" to reflect on the inadequacy of these two categories.

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[178] This is why, for example, as White has shown, even a thinker defending the supremely modern tradition of liberal commitment to the individual as the most basic unit of value must be able to develop an alternative to the "disengaged self." In order to understand contemporary contributions to liberalism, one must have a grasp of the critical reflection that serves as the background of this work. This background is a kind of consensus over some of the critical interventions in Western scholarship in the past half-century (such as the critique of the disengaged subject).

[179] There are some important critiques of human rights, for example, which raise questions of whether and the discourse of human rights can maintain its intelligibility in light of recent critical reflection. Examples include, Badiou, Zizek, Agamben, others.

II.   Limitations and Impositions: "Bias" and "Paradigms" in Human Knowledge

In Chapter Two, I discussed the important term Cultural Invasion (*al-ghazw al-thaqāfi*) and its resonances, particularly in Muslim critiques of the physical and social sciences. A recurring worry in the work of many writers is that Western cultural forms will not only come to reside in institutions and stores and homes, but in the imagination itself – the very ways in which people view the world, make judgments about present problems, and develop aspirations about future goods.[180] This is one of the central themes and concerns of Elmessiri's work. It accounts for his underlying interest in methodology and his understanding of a crucial link between epistemology and ethics. Elmessiri discusses these issues in terms of *bias* (*al-taḥayyuz*). The concept of *bias* lays the groundwork for the bulk of Elmessiri's arguments about the mechanisms of Western influence and domination. Furthermore, Elmessiri's study of bias begins to explain how he understands the task of critique.

In his introduction to a collected volume on the subject of bias in the social sciences, Elmessiri explains the basic "problematic of bias," echoing key themes that I introduced in the previous chapter. He writes:

The question of bias in methodology and terminology is a problem that faces researchers east, west, north and south; however, it faces Third

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[180] Charles Tripp provides a reading of earlier influential cultural critics Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shari'ati as justifying violence on the basis of a need to dramatically disrupt patterns of thought and perception that have hidden capitalism's offenses from their Muslim audiences. Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

World intellectuals with special keenness. For although they write in a cultural environment that has its own specific conceptual and cultural paradigms, they nevertheless encounter an alien (foreign) paradigm which attempts to impose itself upon their society and upon their very imagination and thoughts.[181]

Elmessiri's claims in this passage seem to run in conflicting directions. There seem to be two dimensions of bias at work in his project. On the one hand, bias names a *condition* to which we all ("east, west, north and south") are subject. In this sense, the reality of bias serves to establish the foundation of his Humanism, because it identifies something central to what he calls our "common humanity." Bias in this sense is an inescapable fact about human finitude – a point which evokes Gadamer's ontology. On the other hand, bias identifies a sinister process of infiltration and domination – in other words, a *distortion*, evoking Habermas.[182] Bias understood in this sense is something to be challenged and overcome. Although in the first sense, there may be many biases, in the second sense, there is one particular mode of bias that is crowding out all the others and ultimately preventing *understanding*.[183] Elmessiri does not rigorously explain how this imposition of a paradigm is accomplished, and this is a limitation in this component of

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[181] "Introduction," in *Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences* (2006), xi. Hereafter cited as "Bias."

[182] See: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Continuum Publishing, 1975); Jurgen Habermas, "On Hermeneutics' Claim to Universality," in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1985).

[183] The double nature of bias parallels the double meaning of critique that arose in Chapter One: The classic, Kantian usage of critique is for a rigorous accounting of epistemological conditions. This sense of critique is relevant to a basic understanding of the conditions of human knowledge. The more recent, theoretical, Foucauldian use of critique as a tool for uncovering or emancipating is more relevant to bias in the second sense.

his critical project.[184]   But his claim that there has been an imposition on "Third World intellectuals'" ways of thinking and seeing is fundamental.   It attributes a crisis in culture and society to a deeper crisis of knowledge, which thus becomes the occasion for critique.   Elmessiri's claim that a particular bias has been imposed also reflects a deeper commitment to plurality, thus bringing his ethics into view.

What does Elmessiri mean by *bias*? What examples does he provide? Why, when unrecognized, can be problematic?   And what suggestions does Elmessiri provide for addressing the problems associated with bias? These are the questions to which I'll now turn.

a. Terms of the Problem

The Arabic term that Elmessiri uses for bias is *al-taḥayyuz*, whose meaning encompasses notions of isolation, seclusion, partiality and prejudice. Broadly, the term captures the insurmountable narrowness of one's field of vision. Elmessiri defines bias as: "the totality of latent values underlying [a] paradigm, and the procedures and methodologies which guide researchers without their being necessarily aware of them."[185]   By pointing to "latent" and "underlying" values and thought processes of which we may not be aware, Elmessiri distances himself from a more superficial

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[184] He links the process to imperialism, as have countless other figures in the past half-century. However, Elmessiri does not have (for example) an account of the relationship between knowledge and power. Here is an area where his work could have benefited from exchange with Edward Said. Foucault – arguably the most influential figure to have theorized the relationship between knowledge and power – is on Elmessiri's most-wanted list of Western intellectual villains. Elmessiri's desire to stay at a distance from (and sometimes dismiss) Foucault's work may partly account for his neglect of this question of how exactly a paradigm of *knowledge* may be *imposed*.

[185] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* xii.

understanding of bias as opinion or motivation: unlike the bias that concerns him, this is a type of bias that we may more readily understand and change. In Elmessiri's usage, the term *al-taḥayyuz* identifies the most basic tendencies informing our judgments and the fundamental distinctions to which they give rise. Elmessiri's conception of bias is very similar to Gadamer's notion of *prejudice*, particularly insofar as it is potentially problematic, but at the same time not completely surmountable.

In Elmessiri's writing, the concept of bias finds a companion in the term *paradigm* (in Arabic, *al-namūdhaj*).[186] He defines the term as a composite of elements of bias, through which one becomes habituated in perceiving some elements of reality while excluding others:

> Every human behavior has cultural significance and represents some epistemological paradigm and perspective. A paradigm is a mental abstract picture, an imaginary construct, and a symbolic representation of reality that results from a process of deconstruction and reconstruction… According to the nature of the paradigm, it can exaggerate those elements which it deems essential and underplay all other elements. A materialist paradigm, for example, excludes non-economic, non-materialistic factors, whereas a humanist paradigm would include other elements and factors.[187]

The two terms – bias and paradigm – are intimately linked. Both reflect Elmessiri's dissatisfaction with the distinction between objective and subjective knowledge, which underlies much of modern thought and still serves as a tool in everyday language and

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[186] Elmessiri's choice of this term reflects the impact of Thomas Kuhn's work. See: Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

[187] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias*, 4.

thinking. To understand knowledge as emerging within a paradigm shaped by biases is to recognize that knowledge may be verifiable and shared (what is often captured by the term "objective") but may nevertheless *not* be non-generalizable outside of a specific context (what is often captured by the term "subjective"). Elmessiri prefers the language of paradigm and bias because the dichotomy between objective and subjective knowledge is unable to account for the ways in which knowledge is shaped by tradition, historical experience, cultural value, and social reality – and conversely, that knowledge transforms and reinforces these arenas of human life. These concepts (bias and paradigm) enable him to address "cultural invasion" by uncovering the epistemological conditions for its possibility.

There is another relevant term that must be added to the repertoire of Elmessiri's epistemological analyses. Biases shape paradigms and paradigms inform *methods* or approaches to acquiring and organizing knowledge (in Arabic the term he uses for method or approach is *manhaj*). Methods, which reflect features of the paradigms from which they emerge, are not neutral, and Elmessiri represents a number of contemporary Muslim intellectuals when he argues that the methods of the modern physical and social sciences, "[express] a system of values that define the field of investigation and the direction of research, and which very often determine their results in advance."[188] This capacity of patterns of perception and judgment to over-determine cultural, social and

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[188] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias*, xii. This is true, not only of the Islamization of Knowledge project, but also other thinkers who do not associate themselves with these initiatives, such as Alatas and others.

political realities seems to get at the heart of what Elmessiri's work of critique explores and aims to remedy.[189]

However, in describing some of the salient features of human bias, Elmessiri makes it clear that the effort is not simply to overcome bias, nor to find a universal point of reference by means of which to fully and finally mitigate its effects.[190] Bias, he claims, is *inevitable* – of a piece with our finitude and our individuality. This is not, however, something to mourn. Instead, he suggests that a properly reflective and critical relationship to bias may enable the limitations of human knowledge to become occasions for the development of new forms of understanding, creative thought, and even action.[191] Thus, he writes, "the inevitability of bias should by no means be a reason for grief or frustration… instead of placing my bias over against the bias of the other, bias can be re-defined as the inevitability of human uniqueness and the possibility of freedom of choice."[192] Elmessiri here hints at important commitments that drive his vision of an Islamic Humanism.

I want to hold off elaborating on this important outcome of his theory of bias, until I have given the theory itself a more thorough accounting. One of the key claims that Elmessiri makes about the conditions of bias is that, "unconscious bias can

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[189] A corresponding crisis of social science erupted in the West, particularly in response to the work of Foucault and Said. Also important theologically informed challenges to modern science particularly the social sciences, such as from Milbank. See: John Milbank, *Theology and Social theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[190] By which I mean he does not aim to find a first principle of knowledge. Elmessiri does describe God as such a point of reference. However, God is not an object of knowledge. Further, this contradicts an Enlightenment notion of reason.

[191] Again, this is similar to Gadamer, when he writes, "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings." Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 269.

[192] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias*, 6.

contradict an individual's daily reality." Elmessiri defends this claim by providing a number of concrete, everyday examples of the problematic presence of foreign bias, several of which I will discuss below. The damages incurred as a result of this dissonance of "unconscious" bias with "daily reality" include the destabilization or erosion of values and practices that one intends to preserve. Elmessiri seeks what he calls a "creative critical study" – a methodology for understanding and assessing the friction between elements of foreign cultural paradigms (which have for the most part been introduced under historical conditions of colonial-imperial encounter) and the concrete particularities of any given locale, including the resources of tradition. This should enable an effective assessment of the values and practices that may have been lost or threatened during the various stages and forms of encounter with Western powers. Elmessiri hoped that such work would also enable critical assessment of "indigenous" epistemological biases, so as not to imagine a simple dichotomy whereby "foreign" bias is "bad" while "indigenous" bias is "good."

There is still another dimension to the problematic of bias. Elmessiri knows that confronting the epistemological invasion – the *ghazw* at the level of paradigms of knowledge – will be a hard-fought battle, even with his Arab audience, because it is in the very nature of bias that we do not easily see it for what it is. Persuading his countrymen and co-religionists that there are urgent social and political problems, or that the overt presence of foreign elements in their country has been problematic, is one task – and a relatively simple one. However, Elmessiri's concerns run deeper. His diagnostics target the points of orientation for judgment themselves – the "latent values

underlying the paradigm" and the paradigm itself. As he sees it, even the critical idioms deployed among his Arab and Muslim peers have been shaped by foreign influences, meaning that they remain potentially harmful if they are not engaged and adopted in a critical manner.

Elmessiri argues that Arab leftists have exemplified this error. His assessment of these figures sheds further light on his own shift away from such movements. For, although they develop a critique of capitalism and the everyday material realities that it generates, they neglect to address the cognitive conditions which continue to provide capitalism with a home – they fail to ask, *what is the character of the thought with which we will think our way out of the crisis?* They thus fail to recognize the ways in which communism or socialism as anti-capitalist alternatives may give rise to similar ills. Elmessiri writes, "despite their critical attitude to capitalism and economic and social liberalism, Arab leftists generally accepted the underlying cultural and cognitive paradigm of modern Western thought. Their critiques, therefore, were confined to the politico-economic aspects of the capitalist system, but never extended to the cultural cognitive paradigm itself."[193] That paradigm, as I will explain in greater detail in the following section, is a "materialist-naturalist" paradigm, through which all that exists – humanity included – is understood to be caught up in the same system of laws. The crucial point here is that not just any mode of critique will suffice for the concerns addressed in Elmessiri's work. What is needed is a *critical* critique, a critique that is

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[193] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 18.

mindful of the more difficult tasks of retrieval and affirmation.[194]   For, the "paradigm" obstructing those tasks is not just capitalism (or communism) but a deeper set of assumptions to which these apparent alternatives are blind.

It is not only the Arab leftists whom Elmessiri accuses of shallowness in their critical stance. Even those who profess suspicions similar to Elmessiri's and call for Islam as a "solution" superior to both "Left" and "Right" alternatives come under critical scrutiny in Elmessiri's work. For example, although he credits Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood with making important strides in eschewing "the Western cultural paradigm," they are nevertheless subject to critique for maintaining an intense preoccupation with obtaining power within the framework of the modern state, and with *catching up* with the West. Elmessiri associates this impulse with the ideology of Progress – a key representative of the paradigm that he targets (and discussed further below). When his Islamist interlocutors make the case for Islam's ability to be *as advanced* – *as modern* – as the West, they continue to take Western notions of achievement as their measure, thus demonstrating the depth of infiltration of bias. Elmessiri is accusing them of failing to discern the conditions of their own judgments – or in other words, of not being properly critical.[195]

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[194] This is the kind of dialectic that Ricoeur tries to evoke between hermeneutics and the critique of ideology when he calls attention to Gadamer's contribution of a "critique of critique" – a *meta*-critique – in "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology."

[195] Elmessiri misses other opportunities to challenge some trends in Islamist thought. One point that stands out in this regard is his criticism of conceptions of America as an "earthly paradise." In his book by this title (الفردوس الأرضي) Elmessiri accuses Americans of aspiring to a utopian social order that disregards historical particularities and limitations. Abdelwahab Elmessiri, *al-firdaws al-arḍī: dirāsāt wa inṭibā'āt 'an al-ḥaḍāra al-amrīkīyya al-ḥadītha* (Beirut: al-mu'asasa al-'arabiyya li-l-dirasat wa al-nashr, 1979). There are similar impulses in some Islamist projects of reviving styles and practices from the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

Elmessiri offers several examples that serve as illustrations of this impulse to surpass Western modernity *on the West's own terms*. First, highlighting an oft-cited assertion of pride on the part of his Islamist colleagues, Elmessiri asks his readers, *why do we need to say that Ibn Khaldun was a Marxist before there even was Marx?* Why argue that he was a "social scientist" at all? Why should this be what serves to glorify his name? Although such a statement asserts the integrity and value of Muslim reflection in the human sciences, it does so while clinging to a Western standard. For an additional example, he references a relatively recent fascination among "liberal" and "moderate" thinkers with Mu'tazilite theologians. A number of scholars have drawn renewed attention to a theological debate between this school of thought and their opponent 'Ash'arite interlocutors. Through resurrection of and engagement with this debate, authors have claimed that although the voluntarism of 'Ash'arite theology has triumphed historically in the shaping of Islamic legal reasoning, there are resources for a genuinely Islamic *rationalism* in Mu'tazilite writings. Elmessiri's challenge with respect to bias raises the question of why *rationalism* is the reason the Mu'tazilites are defended. The concern is that this is another instance of seeking to put an Arab or Islamic face on what nevertheless remains an underlying standard provided by a Western paradigm. The bias, then, is built into the assessment of Mu'tazilite rationalism, which is deemed good based on its analogical connection to the West's categories and values.[196]

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[196] This example is quite poignant – the Mu'tazilites have indeed been celebrated, and their defeat by the Ash'arites (called Voluntarists) has been blamed for the "conservative" Islam troubling Western scholars today. See: George Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Richard M. Frank, "Moral Obligation in Classical Muslim Theology," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11.2 (1983): 204-223; Ahmad Hasan ("Rationality of Islamic Legal Injunctions: The Problem of Valuation," *Islamic Studies* 13.2 (1974): 95-109

Elsewhere, Elmessiri himself draws on the Mu'tazilite methodology and takes issue with Ash'arite dominance. However, his concern is not so much that our conclusions must not align – that the Muslim world and the West should be completely distinct with respect to both culture and epistemology. Rather, his effort is to enable his readers to activate a critical faculty that is reflexive enough not just to call into question the claims and vocabularies of Western modernity, but to (as Butler suggests) *ask after the values that set the stage for action*. And "action" here means developing a genuinely critical analysis of what constitute the problematic impositions – the action is the practice of critique. To understand bias is to understand how to tease apart, identify and analyze the values and assumptions that organize knowledge. It is at this level that the imposing character of bias must be addressed.[197] And it is because of this interest in the murky space of bias that Elmessiri finds it difficult to sustain either a simplistic rejection of modernity or a straightforward alliance with Islamism.

b. *Bias and the Human*

Paradigms, as Elmessiri understands them, always include certain assumptions about and images of human beings – their needs, faults and potentials, their relationship to nature and history, and so on. Whether these claims and assumptions are "true" or not is *not* of primary concern to Elmessiri. He is committed to certain claims about human nature that become visible in this chapter (and more so in the next chapter).

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[197] Furthermore, it is for this reason that Elmessiri's "disciples" (discussed further in Chapter 5) were so important to him. For, they are charged with the task of reproducing and extending his critical method, teaching it to their students, and applying his research on paradigms in their respective fields of specialization

However, his claims about human nature encompass those to which he refers in his analysis of bias – they are second order claims about how to make judgments about the basic hospitality of any given paradigm with respect to human flourishing.

There are two basic worries that Elmessiri has regarding the anthropological claims in the framework of paradigms: first, that they disrupt the *relationships* and interactions that exist between people and their "heritage," their material environment, and one another; second, he worries that through the workings of bias the *plurality* of paradigms may be destroyed. Both of these worries gesture at ontological claims about humans and the manner in which they are oriented toward goods and ends.

Before elaborating on these concerns, I should pause for a point of clarification. The two ways of thinking about bias that I described above – bias as a *condition* and bias as an *imposition* – are relevant to the assessment of claims and assumptions about human beings. When conceiving of bias as a condition, Elmessiri seems to imagine a reciprocal and inseparable relationship between the ontology of the human (those most basic assumptions and claims) and the history, heritage and material environment of a people. When conceiving of bias as an imposition, however, there is an unbalanced or distorted relationship: one particular ontology of the human intervenes on this otherwise dynamic process. As I go on to discuss the place of philosophical anthropology in Elmessiri's work on bias, and more specifically the worries about *relationships* and *plurality*, I will be focused on the paradigm of Western modernity conceived as an *imposition*. At this point, some examples are crucial.

One of the problems with unconscious bias, according to Elmessiri, is that it can "contradict an individual's daily reality."[198] To explain in a very elementary manner what he means by this, he uses an amusing (but illuminating) example of *chairs* – a ubiquitous and thus *seemingly universal* item for domestic comfort. Elmessiri invites his audience to become estranged from the chair, asking, *why have we* (in the mostly desert Arab world) *come to use them?* The chair, he claims, is suited to an entirely different environment, which is alien to desert dwellers, as are the other pieces of furniture and abodes in which most people now reside. He points out the irony that, even in the most enthusiastic conversations about the problems with the West, people will sit in chairs, in European-style apartments. Elmessiri does not wish to eliminate all chairs as a way of addressing the problem of bias – the faint implication that this should be done exemplifies the play and humor that he incorporates into his most serious discussions.[199] However, he does wish to raise the question of whether he and his students and peers will be able to thoroughly scrutinize and assess the elements of bias impacting their societies without noting and attending to such simple everyday features of their lives through which their encounters with Western modernity quite literally *position* them.

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[198] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 13.

[199] Sociologist Mona Abaza points to Elmessiri's use of this example in a vehement criticism of his work. Abaza, *Debates on Islam and Knowledge*, 149-153. Although her discussion of Elmessiri is highly uncharitable and in some places bordering on personal attack, she does make the important point that the seemingly westernized style of many cultural elements in contemporary Egypt have in reality gone through so many transformations since their initial introduction that they have taken on their own distinctively Egyptian character.

These seemingly insignificant details go to the heart of the matter of the problem of bias and of Western influence.[200]

Furthermore, it is not simply that here again, in the realm of domestic life, is an example of Western infiltration; rather, the point is that the loss incurred by the distortions of bias becomes evident in all aspects of life. In adapting as universal that which is in fact particular, Elmessiri worries that all that is rich and valuable from the cultural heritage of his people (or any people similarly positioned in relation to the West) will be lost. Although many of his efforts are devoted to reclaiming for humanity a particular space that is not simply part of nature, Elmessiri is very attentive to the importance of natural environment and material context in the development of particular ideas, values and ways of living. Unconscious bias, by enabling the transformation of the material/cultural world in particular ways, further entrenches foreign modes of living and thinking, undermining our relationship to our local histories, geographies, and climates, and undermining the variety of ways in which those relationships may unfold.

Another example that illustrates Elmessiri's worries about undermined relationships and plurality is evident in his discussion of gender roles and Western feminism. Bias may drastically restrict the kinds of conversations that we can have about what is a fulfilling and fully human life. He notes that women in both the West and the Muslim world have been challenged to defend a domestic life that does not

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[200] In some places Elmessiri's arguments teeter on the edge of problematic claims about what is "natural" for some people – problematic even with respect to his own outlook. However, it seems that if the error is occasionally made, it emerges out of an opposite tendency. In fact, his arguments to this effect (as represented by this chair example) seem to reflect his own "materialist" (i.e. Marxist) past and its recognition of the ways in which we are through and through shaped by our material realities.

include wage or salaried work outside the home. Due to the mechanisms of bias and "ideology," the simple question, "did you do any work today?" delivers a harsh judgment:

> In an apparently innocuous conversation of this type, the word *work* has been charged with an ideological content; it has lost its 'innocence' and has become a term that cannot be fully understood except within the context of the secular cultural paradigm of modern Western civilization, which sees work as something performed in the realm of public life and for which one is paid. Man here is *homo economicus*, a producer and a consumer, nothing more, nothing less. He may also be *homo erectus*, and even *homo faber*, but he is a maker who produces without love, without hatred. No *homo sapiens*, he is nothing but *homme la machine* (Man the machine, as described by a leading enlightenment thinker).[201]

Elmessiri points out that one may hear a woman saying, "no, I didn't do any work today," and accepting claims about her lack of productivity; or, one may find women arguing for the economic significance of stay-at-home mothering. In both cases, a single paradigm dominates and the basis for justifying oneself seem to narrow.[202]

Elmessiri wonders whether an apparent variety of cultural projects pitted against the West (as with the case of Islamists) may belie a single point of reference in the fundamental paradigm of Western modernity, with its corresponding assumptions about human beings. Referring to examples of what seems to be Westernization from within, Elmessiri writes:

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[201] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 25.

[202] Elmessiri's positions on the subject of women and sexuality are complex and potentially problematic. It would require more space than this dissertation will allow to fully address them here.

The basic feature of the aforementioned cultural projects – despite their apparent ideological differences – is that the West has been taken as the ultimate point of reference. In other words, they have all internalized the West's view of itself and of its cultural project. The West has therefore become the cultural formation that has outrun us, and that we have to catch up with… It is assumed that there is one fixed point that all societies endeavor to reach, that there is one single method for managing societies and determining the conduct of humankind, and that there is one single view of the human race and the universe.[203]

Here, it is apparent that Elmessiri is not solely concerned with the problems of the particular view of humanity that dominates. Beyond this, he is concerned that without carefully attending to the nature of bias, we will be left with only one vision of what it is to be human. Elmessiri is committed to persuading his readers that there can be no such singular paradigm.[204]

There is, then, a substantial price paid in failing to examine bias and acceding to the universalism of the Western outlook. Elmessiri's efforts to convey this sense of loss become the rallying cry for what he calls a "science of bias."

c. *A Science of Bias*

Through his critique and exposé of biased paradigms that have been adopted in the Arab world, Elmessiri hopes to develop a new methodology – a science for the study

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[203] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 20.

[204] Although this position may seem self-evident to many (it does to me) it is in need of explanation. Yet, I have not come across any explanation from Elmessiri for why exactly a single paradigm is problematic. It does have a Qur'anic basis, for example in the verse enjoining that humankind "compete with one another in good works" (5:48).

of bias. He calls this approach, "opening the gate of *ijtihād*." Elmessiri translates *ijtihād*
as "interpretation," but it is a word that carries rich meanings that resonate with the
Islamic legal *fiqh* (jurisprudence), with the tradition of Islamic Reform, and with current
debates about the liberalization of Islamic law. In the next chapter, I elaborate on his
meaning and his vision for a new methodology. Here, it is important to clarify the
parameters of such a science.

Elmessiri is suspicious of what he claims are the *deconstructive* tendencies that
came in the wake of modern thought. Therefore, he is cautious in characterizing the
value or end of discovering bias. The aim, he explains, is not simply to expose and
uncritically deconstruct – again, bias is not straightforwardly bad, nor is it something
that human beings can overcome. Thus, a science of bias should be a reflective, critical
discipline that aims to discern the biases at play in a given body of knowledge or a
particular inquiry. Furthermore, a key motivating concern throughout the project is to
bring together knowledge and value – scientific and moral considerations. Hence, the
effort is to realign knowledge and moral judgment, to ensure that the quest for
knowledge and pursuit of the good are mutually supportive endeavors:

> Realizing this underlying bias will enable us to deal more cautiously with the
> knowledge received from any source, be it Western cultural traditions or our
> own, lest we blindly and passively receive any concept in the belief that it is
> universal, 'natural' and 'scientific.' After all, knowledge is the fruit of a
> continuous human endeavor to discover some aspects of the world. It is an
> endeavor that will go on forever, for humankind's limited mind cannot explain
> away all aspects of the universe. Aware of the fact that there is no single,

universal, general law, we should employ our critical reason to discover the underlying epistemological paradigms and philosophical outlooks inherent in the knowledge we receive. In this manner, we can learn to distinguish between what makes for a better life and what deconstructs and subverts it.[205]

Further detail about the alternative paradigm that Elmessiri calls for are presented in Chapter Four.

d. *Science of Bias versus Islamization of Knowledge*

In Chapter Two, I pointed to a trend of "Islamizing knowledge" as an important part of the background to Elmessiri's work. The particular approach to the Islamization of Knowledge that is associated with the IIIT has been as controversial as it has been influential, and I want here to discuss the relationship between Elmessiri's work on bias and the commitments of Islamization of Knowledge more generally. Although there are some clear points of overlap, there are also some important points of differentiation. I want to bring these out by discussing some criticisms of Islamization of knowledge, and assessing their applicability to Elmessiri's efforts as I have described them.

As I noted in the previous chapter, the term *Islamization of Knowledge* applies to the work of a wide range of scholars, including many unaffiliated with the IIIT. Syed Farid Alatas characterizes this broader movement as being rooted in "the critique of the modernist discourses of man and society, and the rejection of the universality of social scientific concepts that originated in the West."[206] For Alatas, this broad impulse of

[205] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 67.
[206] Alatas, "Sacralization of the Social Sciences," 89.

indigenization – understood as a contribution to a more universal project of knowledge – is not in itself problematic.[207] However, he argues that there are two basic conceptions of Islamization of knowledge: The conception affiliated with the IIIT he claims is focused on the construction of various disciplines of empirical science, such as an Islamic sociology, an Islamic economics, etc. Alatas expresses deep skepticism about this approach. His worry is that this version of Islamization of knowledge exhibits a "nativist" ideology, whereby Western categories of science are not only critically appraised, but rejected wholesale, the aim of Islamic *disciplines* being to *replace* modern Western disciplines.

Bassam Tibi and others echo this concern. Tibi finds in the Islamization of Knowledge movement characteristic signs of fundamentalist ideology, which is more inclined to *reject* and *replace* than to critically negotiate Western categories. Kassab glosses the challenges brought into focus by Tibi: "what is important here is, again, not to throw the baby out with the bath water. The concern for a social knowledge of one's own is not unjustified. Such knowledge is important for forming a self-reflective awareness and for elaborating informed policies for development. However, its framework need not be that of a holy book…"[208]

Alatas is more sympathetic to a second approach, which he associates with Syed Naguib Al-Attas (the uncle of Alatas). According to Alatas, this second approach, which is informed by Sufi spirituality, situates "Islamization" more deeply in the metaphysical

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[207] It should also be noted that judiciousness with respect to modern science and an interest in grounding scientific inquiry in clear moral principles and purposes are not only characteristics of Islamization of knowledge. Similar efforts exist, for example, in multiple areas of Christian reflection. Catholic writings are particularly strong and longstanding on these subjects.

[208] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 244.

and epistemological frameworks underlying the various disciplines of knowledge.[209] Elmessiri's effort to develop a "science of bias" resonates more clearly with Alatas's preferred investigation into the deeper structures of perception and judgment that are the source of any particular pattern of inquiry or body of knowledge. Elmessiri explicitly signals to his readers that he does not wish to dispense with the entirety of modern science, but rather to engage critically with available tools and methods. Moreover, his example of Ibn Khaldun as a sociologist seems to be a direct challenge to the disciplines approach.

Elmessiri tries to maintain caution with respect to his challenge to modern, Western scientific inquiry. In order to continue to develop an understanding of the nature of the critical project that he has in mind, we should survey the major elements of Western modernity that Elmessiri identifies as signaling a problem or crisis.

III.   Elements of the Dominant Western Paradigm

The modern Western cultural paradigm, utilitarian and rational-materialist, is the paradigm… underlying most of human knowledge, sciences, and attitudes. It manifests itself in human terminology, axioms, research methods and procedures. Adopting such terminology or methods without the requisite consciousness of their implicit epistemological dimensions necessarily leads to the unconscious adoption of their underlying epistemological assumptions. This

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[209] Alatas offers this straightforward comparison in an interview that may be found here: http://religion.info/english/interviews/article_358.shtml. He elaborates on his criticisms of the IIIT version of Islamization in "The Sacralization of the Social Sciences."

materialistic paradigm is the most dominant because Western imperialism has successfully conquered and divided the whole world and, consequently, internationalized its own cultural paradigm, imposing it on numerous societies through force, enticements, and natural dissemination. This has led to the misconception that this Western paradigm is universal.[210]

In this section, I want to focus on several key concepts that Elmessiri invests sustained effort in analyzing: Materialism, Rationalization, and Racism.[211] In addressing these elements, Elmessiri is primarily operating in the mode of C1, conceiving of Western modernity as an alien object of analysis. The accusations and judgments introduced by these terms are well-represented (perhaps in some cases to the point of cliché) in the genre of critical narratives of modernity. However, Elmessiri also provides a specific vocabulary for explaining and linking these concepts. In this section, I outline the themes and regions of analysis which recur in Elmessiri's work. Elmessiri traces them to the principle of *immanence* (*ḥulūliyya*) or "materialist monism." Therefore, we should begin with a discussion of this term and several basic contrasts that Elmessiri tries to evoke in characterizing the distinctiveness of the Western paradigm.

a. Ḥulūliyya *and the Metaphors of Modernity*

In Elmessiri's critique, the terms under discussion in this section (materialism, rationalization, and racism) find a common origin in the Western paradigm's primary characteristic of *ḥulūliyya*. In Elmessiri's usage, it means, fundamentally, a world-

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[210] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 29.
[211] Each of which organizes Elmessiri's perceptions and observations while in the United States.

outlook that lacks a transcendent dimension.[212] *Ḥulūliyya* is best translated as "in-dwelling" or "immanence," but Elmessiri seems to use other terms interchangeably: at times he uses "monism" (*waḥīdiyya*) and on occasion "pantheism" (*wiḥdat al-wujūd*) is also used to get at this idea. He contrasts these terms with an Islamic outlook that he defends, whose fundamental characteristic is *al-tawḥīd*, meaning "oneness" or more technically, the Islamic theological concept of monotheism.

> Monism or immanentism [means] that there is one essence in the universe, in spite of the apparent variety. [This view] denies the existence of a human space [that is] independent of the natural and material realm; likewise it denies [any] duality resulting from existence [of such a distinct human space]. Hence, whatever laws apply to nature (matter), apply to the human being… Monism is not *al-tawḥīd*, for *al-tawḥīd* is the belief that the single principle (a coherent origin of the world, its unity, its motion, and its end [or purpose]) is *the god*, creator of humanity, nature, and history…he does not dwell within them… The monotheistic beliefs don't descend into pantheism; they allot to humanity a human space [or realm].[213]

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[212] The meaning of "transcendent" as an explicator of "immanence" is not particularly illuminating, since neither is more self-evident of the other. However, Elmessiri is not alone in invoking this distinction. Outside of its use in theological settings, scholars have referred to a transcendent dimension in categorizing civilizations. The so-called "axial civilizations" are those understood to be organized around a cosmic tension between the world and some source of order or truth external to it. Elmessiri does not explicitly reference these conversations. However, the distinction that he imagines seems to be an analogous contrast.

[213] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, *dirāsāt maʿrifiyya fī al-ḥadātha al-gharbiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq), 15. Hereafter cited as *Dirāsāt*.

Elsewhere, Elmessiri asserts starkly, "all biases of the modern Western epistemological paradigm emanate from its materialist monism."[214] This is his most elemental diagnosis of the Western world-outlook.

To characterize the Western paradigm as fundamentally *monist* or *immanentist* is to say something about the most basic assumptions informing the ways in which anyone who unwittingly adopts the paradigm views the world. The term "immanent," Elmessiri explains, characterizes "anything that is said to be self-contained, self-operating, self-activating, and self-explanatory," anything about which it can be said that "its laws are inherent to it and its operating force is internal." Elmessiri elaborates, stating that "the world of immanence, therefore, is a highly unified organic world, with no space separating one of its constituent parts from the others. It is a monistic universe with no dualities or complexities, for everything in it can be reduced to (or explained in terms of) the activity of one element, an operating force or organizing principle."[215] Elmessiri is accusing those inhabiting this paradigm of imagining that all that takes place in the universe (both the seen and the unseen) is subject to the same principles and laws, and is therefore ultimately knowable – an assumption that fundamentally conflicts with a theological outlook that includes a transcendent God.   Elmessiri believes that anyone steeped in modern (or post-modern) bias sees the world in this way – at least by default. Furthermore, not even the explicit rejection of this outlook will automatically qualify as a genuine *other* to it. For, as I explained in the previous section, even critiques

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[214] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 33.

[215] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, and Deconstruction" in *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, eds. Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito (New York, New York University Press, 2000), 58.

and proposed alternatives may remain superficial and may even unwittingly draw on the paradigm.

Elmessiri's attention to monism and immanence, and his suggestion of the need for a worldview that acknowledges a transcendent realm beyond material existence and beyond human knowledge, might lead some readers to believe that there are dualistic tendencies in his thinking – that in wishing to break out of the unitary order of monism, he calls for a potentially volatile other realm or essence. Simply put, Elmessiri's analysis raises issues around the logic of *ones* and *twos:* The oneness of monism is bad, but the oneness of monotheism is good: the two-ness of metaphysical realms is good, but the two-ness of unmediated conflict is bad. Elmessiri points to two kinds of oneness (monism and monotheism). He also points to two kinds of two-ness, which he calls *duality* (*al-thuna'iyya*) and *dualism* (*al-ithnayniyya*). He argues that duality is a two-ness of relationship (as opposed to conflict) and this kind of two-ness is the basis of a monotheistic order: one established by the relationship between creator and created. He explains the difference between duality and dualism, writing:

Duality is different from dualism (or hard duality). In duality there are two elements that may or may not be equivalent, but nevertheless they interact and enter in conflict. But in dualism they are different yet equal to each other (like the gods of good and evil, and of light and darkness, in some pagan religions), and that is why they are in eternal or semi-eternal conflict. One liquidates the other, or merges completely with it, forming one element; so we come back to monism once more.[216]

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[216] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 184 (113).

The centrality of *ḥulūliyya*, duality, and dualism in Elmessiri's critique of modernity illuminates the important motif of *space* (*masāfa*) in his writing: he often refers to the *narrowness* (*ḍīq*) of materialism and of the Western outlook more generally, to the collapse and loss of space and distinction, the need for distinctively human space, the distance between human beings and nature, between human beings and God, and so forth. Elmessiri's framing of the underlying problem with Western modernity in terms of *ḥulūliyya* illustrates the important role of what Charles Taylor has called *moral space*.[217] Elmessiri's characterization – particularly his effort to evoke a view of the world as claustrophobically self-sufficient, self-contained and self-ordered – also resembles that of a number of Western theorists who view fascism, totalitarianism, and ideological thinking more generally as exhibiting a quintessentially modern logic.[218] "Nature," for Elmessiri, names that realm through which this logic operates, and into which a distinctive human existence is ultimately absorbed. Moreover, the characterization of

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[217] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. Taylor writes of the importance of being "oriented" in "moral space," and argues that the use of spatial metaphors in moral reflection is something that "lies very deep in the human psyche" (28).

[218] During conversations with Elmessiri's students and colleagues, I have repeatedly been told that the critical theorists of the "Frankfurt School" have influenced his thinking. Hannah Arendt's characterization of totalitarianism also has imaginative affinities with Elmessiri's description of the features of nature, particularly his worry about a loss of *space* (which I discuss further, below). Although she does not rely upon a concept of transcendence, Arendt examines a kind of collapsed space between people that accompanies the collapse of the rule of law in totalitarian states. She notes that men become *pressed against each other*, in the "iron band of terror." They are no longer able to rely on basic distinctions that structure experience and judgment such as between fact and fiction, true and false. Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harvest, Harcourt Inc, 1968), 474-478. Finally, Elmessiri's work has been compared with that of Zygmunt Bauman, and Bauman's language of "liquid" and "solid" social and material forms is woven into Elmessiri's critique. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

ḥulūliyya in terms of a loss of space and the metaphor of dimensionality is one of the points of comparison highlighted by Roxanne Euben:

It is particularly striking that these voices share a critique of modernity as a condition of crisis and paralysis occasioned by the rationalist rejection of foundations that transcend human existence and power. Contrary to Enlightenment aspirations of opening up the world to new forms of knowledge, experience and politics, in these critiques there is a sense that the organizing principle of modernity is *not enlargement but foreclosure*. Here emerges the anxiety that the achievements of rationalization may have been bought at too high a price, and that rationalism has been the midwife not of maturity but crisis.[219]

I will return to this subject of spatiality in the next chapter, because it is the space established between humanity and God that is the condition for the possibility of a true humanism.

Elmessiri's explication of *ḥulūliyya* and his broader effort to develop a critique of Western modernity depends upon an analysis of *metaphor*. In his book, *Language and Metaphor* (*al-lugha wa al-majāz*), Elmessiri argues that we express the dominant paradigm or worldview that shapes us through the metaphors that circulate in our culture or discourse. Metaphors help to articulate and reinforce our most fundamental conceptions of the world and our place in it. In this sense, metaphors have the capacity to enable or obstruct human flourishing. Along these lines, he asserts:

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[219] Euben, "Premodern, Antimodern, or Postmodern?" 455. My italics.

The mechanical metaphorical image is not able to express the monotheistic (*tawḥīdi*) view, because it presumes that existence is like a machine that operates without goal or end. The organic metaphorical images also make this impossible to express because it considers the world as a coherent solid unity, nothing passes through it, no spaces or tears, [it is] self-sufficient and self-referential.[220]

In a moment, I will explain these two particular metaphors that Elmessiri is referencing. For now, the important point is that Elmessiri considers metaphor to be a central component of the study of modernity. If we want to develop critical tools for transforming the human sciences, we must explore and understand the basic metaphors with which we interpret the world.

Elmessiri provides an overview of the metaphors underlying the modern paradigm, most prominently, the "mechanical" and the "organic." Moreover, he claims that we should see these two metaphors as two sides of the same coin, noting that they "appear to be different and even opposed, although in fact they resemble one another to a great extent, except for some marginal details."[221]

Elmessiri supports his claim that mechanical metaphors have shaped the modern outlook on humanity and the world by surveying some key figures in the modern Western philosophical tradition:

The dark enlightenment, which is in essence a process of deconstruction and destruction of man, reducing him to what is baser than him, has translated itself into some basic images and metaphors. The first of these metaphors is Spinoza's

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[220] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, *al-lugha wa al-majāz: bayn al-tawḥīd wa wiḥda al-wujūd* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2002), 6.

[221] Elmessiri, *al-lugha wa al-majāz*, 8.

comparison of man to a stone thrown by a powerful hand. The poor stone, as it is rolling in space, thinks it is moving by its own will. Then Newton compared the world (including man) to a precise machine: a clock that is ticking eternally and with the same tempo without any divine or human intervention (As for God, he has been marginalized to the status of a clock-maker who made the clock and started it ticking, a *primum mobile* who created the world and left it governed by the laws of mechanics, immanent in matter.) Locke discovered that the machine that exists outside us exists also inside us, and compared the mind to a blank sheet on which is accumulated all the sense data that reach us. Then all these data mechanically coalesce by themselves according to the law of association, forming simple ideas that are combined in turn to form complex ideas. All this has led to the appearance of the image that Adam Smith presents of a man that lives in a world regulated by an invisible hand and a marketplace that is regulated by the mechanical laws of supply and demand.[222]

Elmessiri suggests that both the mechanical and the organic metaphors have existed throughout the modern period. However, there seems to have been a shift in the dominance of the organic over the mechanic. Regarding the organic metaphors, Elmessiri writes:

Darwin has demonstrated that Rousseau's natural Eden does not resemble a machine, but is a jungle that reaches a state of equilibrium through the invisible hand of the struggle for survival, which is the lot of the fittest (and most powerful)…Then Freud proved scientifically and objectively (according to some) that the jungle lies inside man, in the form of a dark unconscious and explosive libido. Pavlov conducted experiments on dogs, then applied the results of his

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[222] Elmessiri, *Autobiography,* 220 (139). See also, *al-lugha wa al-majāz*.

experiments to man, for he assumed that there were no essential differences between one and the other, since each is governed by his instincts and nerves.[223]

Although in other areas of his work Elmessiri describes metaphor as an essential tool in resisting modernity and maintaining a distinctively human space, in the case of the mechanical and organic metaphors, they encourage precisely the kinds of reductive ways of thinking and talking about humanity that Elmessiri is worried about.

b. Materialism

Elmessiri gives a name to that "one element" in the Modern Western paradigm through which all things are explained and to which all laws are reduced: he calls it "nature/matter" (*al-ṭabīʿa/al-māda*). Taking each term in turn, we can understand their conjunction. Nature, Elmessiri acknowledges, is a term with many meanings and a lifespan that overlaps with the history of philosophy itself. He confines himself to this meaning: "the general cosmic order," including "the totality of objects, events and processes that exist in space and time."[224] "The general cosmic order" doesn't sound like much of a confinement, but it does enable him to distinguish his use from meanings such as "essence" or "character" and specify that its meaning is broader than the set of living things and the environment they move about in, encompassing other uses of "nature" that oppose it to "culture." Defining nature in this way, as "the general cosmic order," does not automatically serve to define the paradigm. For, as he understands it,

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[223] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 220-221 (140).
[224] Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, and Deconstruction," 64.

the general cosmic order needn't be characterized by immanence.[225] For example, he points out that "a religious outlook views this order as divinely ordained, which means that behind the laws immanent in matter there is a higher order, which transcends the world of matter, bestows meaning on it, and provides it with purpose."[226] This is not, however, the conception of nature that undergirds the paradigm under critical analysis.

The term "matter" is conjoined with nature so as to specify the distinctive Western understanding of the cosmic order. Matter, as Elmessiri conceives it, is the raw potential substance that constitutes nature. In fact, he argues in a number of places that when Westerners say "nature" they in fact mean "matter," in the "philosophical sense" of the term.[227] He introduces the term nature/matter to name this particular conception of the cosmic order. It is this outlook – the outlook which conjoins nature and matter as the immanent frame within which all principles and laws of being emerge – that is properly called "materialist," according to Elmessiri.

Elmessiri outlines some of the prominent "traits" of the concept of nature/matter within "the philosophical discourse of modernity."[228] These traits as Elmessiri outlines them make the contrast with the "religious outlook" that he is reaching for clear. I include them verbatim here, because they are concise and integral to the critique; and I italicize the segments that most immediately impact the ontology of the human.

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[225] Thus it seems that many (but not necessarily all) paradigms – not only the Western one that he describes – have a concept of (or like) "nature," insofar as many paradigms include a conception of "general cosmic order."

[226] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 64.

[227] Thus, presumably, what is opposed to *form* – the distinction running through Western philosophy going at least as far back as Plato. In addition to a number of essays, Elmessiri develops this argument in his Encyclopedia and his Autobiography.

[228] The term belongs to Jurgen Habermas and a collection of his lectures published under the same title. However, Elmessiri does not place it in quotations in his text, nor does he cite Habermas.

1. Nature is eternal, self-existent, self-contained, self-dependent and self-sufficient. It is also self-activating, self-regulating, self-operating, self-directing and even self-transforming. Finally it is self-referential and therefore self-explanatory. (It arrogates for itself all the traits that traditional theology attributes to God.)

2. The laws of nature are immanent in matter; and nature, the totality of objects, events and processes that exist in space and time, is the only level of reality with nothing beyond it. *It is a whole that subsumes everything, and that allows no gaps or spaces, discontinuities, specificities, dualities, hierarchies, ultimate purpose, irreducible entities, or even totalities*. In other words, the system of nature is monist.

3. The system of nature, being independent of any transcendent entity, is determined only by its own character and is reducible to a set of causal immutable, uniform laws, immanent in it. Those laws cannot be interfered with, violated, suspended, or intruded upon. They determine and explain everything and nothing determines or explains them. *This means that nothing can transcend natural laws, or free itself from them*. It also means that 'nature' is the ultimate and final irreducible category that cannot be transcended by or reduced to, something more fundamental than itself.

4. Even though the basis of all natural phenomena is (solid) matter and (fluid) energy, nature is never fixed; it is a continuous flux that keeps on

evolving higher and more complex forms of life and intelligence. But no matter how high or complex, they are all reducible, in the last analysis, to nature.

5. Natural processes are indifferent to the parts (including man). All parts, *qua* parts, from the standpoint of nature, are of equal value and significance because nature knows of no values or significance. Therefore *material laws, indifferent to specificities and hierarchies, apply indiscriminately to all phenomena, physical or human.*[229]

To summarize, there is nothing external to nature (1), including the laws governing its dynamics (2), there is no external source, alternative, or *other* to these laws (3), they do not permit stability but demand constant *motion* (4), and they ascribe no special place to human life nor to specifically human values (5). This collection of claims and assumptions is what Elmessiri means by "materialism."

The materialistic outlook undergirds the concept of Progress (discussed in greater detail below), which Elmessiri takes to be the over-arching normative paradigm of the Western outlook described here. The concept of Progress – which equates particular patterns of material and social change with a universally applicable standard of improvement – provides standards by which to judge the significance and worth of any activity or any individual. Elmessiri further clarifies the meaning of "matter," "nature/matter," and materialism when he claims that within the Western paradigm everything in the cosmos – human and otherwise – is seen "as raw material (*natura*

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[229] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 64.

naturata)…as mere productive energy"[230] whose value is conceived in terms of its potential to move history along the trajectory of progress. This has a bearing on questions of philosophical anthropology.

According to Elmessiri, the most troubling claim or bias of the modern Western paradigm is that the human being is reducible to a *natural and material* being, who should be understood in terms of material, biological elements. He claims that this natural/material human is the central figure in the Western human sciences. Elmessiri outlines the following characteristics of the natural/material human: he is a being without limits; he does not have a cosmic space for himself wherein he is free from the laws of nature; he is, then, completely subject to the laws of nature; he is just like any other living being in nature; he is one-dimensional; his existence is dispensable in the order of being; he is dull – no longer concerned with the questions and longings of a complex, spiritual being; he lacks values independent of the workings of nature – religious and ethical values cannot be sustained.[231] Thus *materialism* is a particular attitude towards nature/matter that enables and encourages the devaluation of human life, as well as destruction of other components of the natural environment.

c. *Rationalization and "Value-Free Modernity"*

In the passage at the opening of this section, Elmessiri characterizes the paradigm that he criticizes as not just materialist but "*rational*-materialist." His use of "rational" is multi-faceted. In Arabic, two terms are relevant and used in different

[230] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias,* 46.
[231] Elmessiri, *Dirāsāt*, 18-20.

contexts in his work: the term *'aql* is usually translated as "reason," such that *'aqlānī* means "rational," and *'aqlāniyyah* is used to mean both rationality and rationalism. These terms are used both in everyday references to the reasoning faculty, as well as in philosophical discourse about rationality and rationalism.   As in the Western philosophical sense of the term, *'aqlāniyyah* characterizes an approach to knowledge that sets the mind and the logical operations of reason as standards for validity and truth. The term that draws most ire from Elmessiri, however, is *rationalization* – *al-tarshīd* in Arabic. The term is usually used in economic contexts and Elmessiri takes it directly from Max Weber. Elmessiri defines rationalization in a manner consistent with this standard usage, but he broadens it: *al-tarshīd* involves seeking to functionalize means in the most efficient service of the ends – any ends, not just economic ones, but not necessarily moral or religious ones either.[232]   Indeed, it is his contention that the economic sense of *al-tarshīd* has come to shape all spheres of human life. Elmessiri, understandably, draws a connection between *'aqlāniyyah* and *al-tarshīd*, but the connection remains implicit – in characterizing the Western paradigm with respect to its preoccupation with rationality, he moves between the terms *'aqlāniyyah* and *al-tarshīd*. I will focus on the latter, for which he provides the most extended discussion.

Elmessiri draws on Weber for his analysis, distinguishing a procedural, instrumental concept of rationalization from a simpler "traditional" rationalization of matching means to ends. Whereas the latter may draw on a spiritual-moral order with a transcendent source to develop its concept of rationality or efficiency, the former expels

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[232] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 213

all notions of goodness and value that cannot be accounted for within a strictly materialist outlook.[233]   It is characteristic of this modern, procedural, instrumental rationalization (*al-tarshīd al-ijrāʾiy al-ʿadātī*) to trace all phenomena to one source. Furthermore, proponents of this principle of rationalization claim that the separation of elements of a society and the ordering of them along efficient *rational* lines is possible *independently of any framework of value*.

For Elmessiri, the most significant and troubling consequence of rationalization (or accompanying transformation) is the separation or dissociation of value from knowledge, and more generally the breakdown of morality in the modern age. Elmessiri uses the term "value-free modernity" (*al-ḥadātha munfaṣila ʿan al-qīma*) to name this phenomenon.   He denies that there can be any such "value-free" or objective framework, arguing instead that through the process of rationalization, materialism comes to stand in for a religious or other culturally rooted moral order:

> With respect to instrumental rationality, which claims to be impartial towards value, it is usually necessary that nature/matter [is instead] the final authority, such that it is possible to call it "rationality in the materialist framework." With respect to the theoretical rationality, we find that it exchanges metaphysical interpretations for interpretations that arise out of rationalist foundations and the laws of nature/matter which apply to all of human and natural reality. On the level of application, rationality in the materialist framework involves an effort to make reality identical with rational, material principles.[234]

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[233] Elmessiri, *Dirāsāt*, 136-143.
[234] Ibid, 138.

Elmessiri claims that based on the assumptions associated with the materialist outlook, we come to imagine that the laws of efficiency (which order nature-matter and which arise within it) are also the "best" and most efficient for human life – even further, that there cannot possibly be a *better* or *more efficient* system external to nature. Materialism thus stands in for other evaluative frameworks provided by "tradition."

What is particularly problematic about this exchange of material, rational standards for other sources of moral order is that this particular stand-in gives the illusion of being "value-free" – independent of particular claims of right and good – and thus implies universality. Herein arises one of Elmessiri's deepest worries with respect to this paradigm: exhibiting a tension at the heart of the modern imagination, the human being – although he imagines himself to be free – comes to feel that ultimately his actions are strictly aligned with the laws of nature-matter. Elmessiri believes that the resulting worldview necessarily denies that human action is truly creative or free. The conjunction of materialism with rationalization reduces human life to a complex of natural-material components, making it susceptible to control and to the destructive forces that apparently govern it: "This is but another manifestation of the eradication of the human-nature duality and of the continuous movement towards a natural materialist monism which robs human society of its vitality, transforming it into a huge machine whose movement can be readily predicted since it follows general laws and central plans."[235]

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[235] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias*, 47. See also: Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, Deconstruction."

d. Racism

Elmessiri links materialism, rationalism, and processes of rationalization to *racism* (ʿunṣuriyya), against which, he claims, he was fighting one of the central "battles" of his intellectual journey. Materialism, and more generally the imaginative transformations of *ḥulūliyya*, emphasizes the empirical, genetic, and biological components of humanity (which Elmessiri contrasts with the spiritual, psychological, historical, and cultural). Moreover, rationalism emphasizes usefulness and productivity. The coupling of these elements enabled a strong association between physical characteristics and particular forms of social order – differences in the latter being characterized as deficiencies inextricably linked to the former. Elmessiri argues that these associations are made possible by the Western paradigm. Moreover, he claims that racism is born of the Eurocentrism of the modern outlook – the view that the lessons, truths, and values that formed out of Western historical experience are universal and valid in all times and places as standards and norms:

> If we analyzed the Western human sciences, we would find – as could be expected – that they are rooted in a Western perspective on the world and based on Western historical experience. However, Western man claims that this perspective is "universal" and "valid in every time and place…[236]

Elmessiri even finds the racism of a Eurocentric outlook in the work of Marx and Engels – whom we today associate with liberationist and anti-imperialist theories. He argues that these thinkers viewed the stages and developments of European history as the

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[236] *Dirāsāt*, 235 (my translation).

necessary model for the rest of the world, thereby unwittingly justifying imperialist policies in Africa and the East.[237]

Elmessiri's understanding of racism is central to his analysis of Zionism, which, he claims, has attempted to transform Jews into a people connected primarily by natural and material elements (such as blood), over and against the plurality of histories, practices, and regional, cultural particularities of the Diaspora. His work on the subject of Zionism highlights fundamentally different conceptualizations of community lying behind the often conflated terms "Judaism" (as a family of culturally, historically, and even religiously diverse peoples) and "Zionism" (as a modern, nation-state ideology). Elmessiri argues that, whereas Judaism has coexisted with many different religions and cultures across the region, Zionism is an ideology of racial superiority and exceptionalism, modeled on European and American racial ideologies. He describes the Zionist vision of the state of Israel as one of "existing in Asian and Africa but not of them."[238]

Furthermore, he draws parallels between the discriminatory policies of Zionism toward Arabs and those of Whites toward Blacks in both the United States and South Africa. His Autobiography includes a number of poignant observations and anecdotes about the socio-economic hardships and overt forms of discrimination suffered by African-Americans – conditions that were particularly egregious during his time in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, he formed academic relationships in South Africa and produced a historical and comparative study of the relationship

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[237] Elmessiri makes this argument in the essay "Marxism, Imperialism, and Racism" in *Dirāsāt*, 235-246.
[238] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, "Zionism and Racism," *New York Times*, November 13, 1975. See Appendix III for further discussion.

between Apartheid policies and the Israeli policies towards Arabs within Israel and in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank.[239]

Elmessiri does not offer a well-developed theory of race or the conceptual and institutional operations of racism. However, his frequent references to, and anecdotes of, racism are significant insofar as they provide a clear signal that his critique of Western modernity is rooted in a set of concerns far more expansive than those relevant only to Muslims or Arabs. Elmessiri points to racism as among the most concrete pieces of evidence for the "anti-human" tendencies of Western modernity. He thereby also links himself to the commitments of a broadly progressive ethics and politics, on which I elaborate in the fourth and fifth chapters.

I want now to proceed with a first synthesis of some of these elements, by looking at Elmessiri's account of the "sequence" of modernization.

IV.   The "Sequence" of Modernity: Progress, Secularism, and Postmodernity

The various elements of Elmessiri's analysis of Western modernity figure into a comprehensive account of what he calls the "paradigmatic sequence" (*al-mutatāliyya al-namādhajiyya*) of modernity. What Elmessiri provides in describing this "sequence" is an account that he feels other critiques of modernity are lacking. He believes that while other projects of critique have picked out and described many of the characteristic

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[239] Richard P. Stevens and Abdelwahab Elmessiri, *Israel and South Africa:The Progression of a Relationship*, (North American, 1977). An Arabic version of the text became available in 1979.

features of Western modernity, they have not provided a satisfactory, coherent account of their emergence, their inter-relationship, and the logic of their interaction. Because other influential streams of critical reflection that have emerged in the West (as well as in the Muslim world) have not succeeded in clearly seeing the sequence or patterns of thought that exemplify Western modernity, they have been unable to seriously challenge them. It is for this reason that he considers *post*-modernity to be an inadequate set of attempts to think past the problems of Western modernity, particularly with respect to moral considerations. Indeed, according to Elmessiri, postmodernity exemplifies the sequence.

There are a couple of emic modern concepts associated the transformations of modernity, which Elmessiri addresses in his critique: a grand narrative of "progress" and the push for "secularization." These terms, in his understanding, are very closely related. He acknowledges that there are trends of critical reflection that have genuinely challenged the claims associated with these conceptualizations of modernity. However, those trends – particularly those that he associates with "postmodernity" (*ma ba'd al-ḥadātha*) – have mis-identified the problems. Elmessiri argues for an alternative, comprehensive, and coherent way of understanding the transformations of modernization – one that links modernity and post-modernity within one and the same world-outlook, namely *ḥulūliyya*. This is what I have called his "critical narrative." He uses this account to reflect on and clarify the meaning of both progress and secularism (a term that is particularly prominent as a touchstone for morally charged conversations about the nature of both modernity and critique). I want to continue to develop my

presentation of Elmessiri's critique by addressing his analysis of the three terms that I have introduced, in turn: progress, secularism, and postmodernity.

a. *Progress: The "Magical Entity"*

The paradigm that Elmessiri associates with materialism, rationalization, and an immanentist imagination is not conceived as shaping a static social order. Indeed it is in its very nature to remain *in motion* – Elmessiri frequently uses the term "flux" (*al-ṣayrūra*). Proponents of modernization present this constant motion in terms of "progress" (*al-taqaddum*). The process of modernization in many parts of the globe has been driven by promises of ever-expanding knowledge, material prosperity, and psychological fulfillment. Elmessiri on the other hand implies that there is a peculiar but powerful myth embedded in this paradigm, which suggests that constant *improvement* – and eventually even an *earthly paradise* – will emerge through the powers of economic growth, production and consumption, and constant technological innovation. Elmessiri considers this to be a myth (or at least a flawed logic) because he holds that material standards cannot provide the measures for truly human goods. As I have begun to describe, one big concern that Elmessiri raises is that realizing the modern vision of continual progress has required fundamental transformations in conceptions of human nature and attitudes toward human life. He writes, "the cost of progress has proven to be exorbitant as it failed to cure most of mankind's spiritual and psychological ailments; instead, it exacerbated them."[240] Elmessiri argues that there is a deep irony in

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[240] Elmessiri, *Autobiography,* 277 *(*176).

Progress's promise for constant improvement of human life, because its privileging of the material dimensions of existence necessarily leads to a devaluation of other aspects of human life. Hence, he writes, "the wheels of factories turn with astonishing speed to produce goods and things man does not need, but as they turn they pollute the environment with acids and industrial waste which destroy man from the outside, drown him in goods and details, and devastate him from the inside."[241]

In addition to its inherent devaluation of human life, Elmessiri notes that the Western ideology of Progress has already proven, historically, to be destructive through its "plundering [of] the Third World,"[242] which devalues humanity on another level by dividing humanity between those taking history in their hands and those instrumentalized. Progress, because it has been linked to material developments – measured in production and consumption of material commodities – depends on an ever-growing, ever-expanding economy, the need for which justified the colonial-imperial endeavor and the disruption of other models of human community and other models of the appropriate relationship between human beings and the natural environment.

Elmessiri ultimately delivers a devastating indictment of the ideal of Progress, which applies more generally to the Western paradigm under consideration: "The progress that was presumed to realize [humanity]'s pursuit of happiness had turned to be a threat against the very existence of [humanity] on this planet."[243] Elmessiri puts

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[241] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 422 (278). Elmessiri is quoting his own observations originally recorded in *The Earthly Paradise.*
[242] Ibid, 227 (145).
[243] Ibid, 278 (177)

forward a critical narrative of false promises and disappointments. He has incorporated some of the most foundational terms of Western theoretical analysis into his own account of the immanentist cosmology of modern Western civilization. Insofar as Elmessiri's critical-philosophical project is rooted in his contention that a single template for human life has gradually infiltrated all others, the ideology of Progress may be considered the ultimate villain in his narrative.

Elmessiri tells a different story of the *progression* of the sequence of the modern Western paradigm. His clearest articulation of this progression is provided by his discussion of "secularization," which is based on a distinction that he establishes between "partial" and "comprehensive" secularism.

b. *Secularism: A Comprehensive Transformation*

The elements of rationalization and materialism, which Elmessiri argues are constitutive of the Western paradigm, impact the organization of political and social life and have been associated with key *separations* in the spheres of human activity and authority. However, Elmessiri's central insight about *ḥulūliyya* tells us that modernity may from another perspective be understood in terms of a series of *lost distinctions*. In order to make sense of this apparent discrepancy, Elmessiri undertakes an analysis of the nature and meaning of the concept of "secularism." He argues that, although the institutional separations associated with secularism (most prominently between religious and state institutions) are justifiable and important in some ways, the dividing and organizing operations of modernity have multiplied to such an extent that we can

no longer make sense of this original meaning of secularism. Elmessiri seems to find

that what from one perspective appear as separations or distinctions from another

perspective give rise to collapses and conflations: the separation of church and state (on

the one hand) entails a loss of separation between the transcendent and the immanent

realms (on the other).

The idea of secularism as institutional separations is, according to Elmessiri, only

one conception of secularism.   He acknowledges that institutional separations –

particularly between religious and civil authorities – have been a significant feature of

the modern age. However, he claims that this is only secularism in its *partial* expression.

He argues that "partial" secularism is a process that began in the middle of the 18th

Century and initially involved more limited transformations of the public realm –

outward changes in the organization of political and social life. During this phase – or,

more accurately, *in this mode* – secularism does not impact the heart and mind, which

remain "sheltered" in private life. Historically, this served for some time to preserve

"humanitarian relationships, family values, and Christian moral values or a humanist

secularized version thereof."[244]

However, Elmessiri argues that the notion of secularism as naming a transparent

arrangement of institutions and their relationship (such as the "separation of church and

state"), is no longer adequate. Not only this, he argues that the claim that secularism

merely concerns separation of church and state is an ideological claim that serves to

mask deeper transformations of worldview. He makes his case by situating secularism

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[244] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 401 (264-5).

within the sequence of modernity. He argues, "This [partial] definition implies that secularism is NOT a total world-outlook… [it] implies that processes of secularization are explicit and quite identifiable, that man's private life (his dreams and nightmares, his tastes, his aesthetic sensibilities, etc.) can be hermetically sealed off and left free from secularizing processes."[245] As the statement clearly implies, Elmessiri finds that within the dominant Western paradigm of *ḥulūliyya* secularism does not remain in this static form. A more troublesome secularism, which he calls "comprehensive secularism" (*al-ʿalmāniyya al-shāmila*), emerges, and this comprehensive secularism is *a total world outlook*:[246]

> Secularism is no longer a mere set of ideas that one can accept or reject at will, it is a world-outlook that is embedded in the simplest and most innocuous cultural commodities, and that forms the unconscious basis and implicit frame of reference for our conduct in public and in private.[247]

Elmessiri makes this move to comprehensive secularism by first suggesting that what have been described as *separations* within partial secularism are in reality *exclusions* – exclusions of any elements of human life and existence that are not reducible to natural or material elements and not available to processes of rational and material calculation.

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[245] Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, Deconstruction," 52.

[246] Elmessiri's basic contention that secularism is not a sufficiently explanatory concept if it merely designates an institutional separation or arrangement brings him into line with a number of recent commentators on the subject. Including Talal Asad, whose seminal work *Formations of the Secular* was published after Elmessiri's initial writings on secularism. Asad makes a reference to Elmessiri on the first page of this text. However, he does not engage with Elmessiri's work beyond this reference. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 21.

[247] Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, Deconstruction," 52.

Secularism understood as the operation of progressive exclusion, gradually takes over the spaces that were once preserved as sanctuaries for truly human pursuits – including not only worship, but also true love and artistic expression:

> Secularization moved on from the realm of general ideas (philosophy) and general dreams and desires (literature and art) to the realm of private fantasies and personal conduct. Public and private life started almost to correspond, and the one-dimensional (natural, rationalized) man became a dominant reality.[248]

Secularism, then, is best seen as a comprehensive outlook that separates and excludes not just religious authority, but religious and ethical values more generally; and it excludes them not only from consideration in public life but also from private. Secularism produces a systematic marginalization of these elements, reinforcing his claim that modernity becomes "value-free." As Elmessiri describes it, a secularism that emerges in and through an immanentist paradigm will ultimately reach into these "deeper and more fundamental aspects of man's life," even serving as an answer to the ultimate questions that face human beings.[249]

Elmessiri takes issue with analyses of secularism that restrict themselves to its partial expression not only because they are limited as a descriptive or explanatory tools, but also on grounds that may be construed as ethical – that is, pertaining to pursuit of the good. For him, what is problematic about framing the meaning of secularism in terms of simple institutional separations is that it distracts us from the encroachments of

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[248] Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, and Deconstruction," 57.
[249] Ibid, 67.

modernization, which, as I have described, Elmessiri feels threaten the human capacity to create, and be nourished by, cultural and moral meaning. The focus on a separation of "church" from "state" implies that the primary (if not the only) way that we are vulnerable to manipulation and coercion in the sacred space of our inner life is when the public institutions fall in the command of religious authorities. This, he asserts, is treacherously naïve. Moreover, for Elmessiri, a proper understanding of secularism is an essential component of the broader aim of developing a critical method. He writes, "the term 'secular,' if defined in a complex way, would have a high explanatory power, and would reveal the underlying overall unity between the terms used to describe modernity, [such as materialism and rationalization]."[250]

Once a more complex paradigm is in view it may be possible to discern both humane and inhumane elements – to retrieve some understanding of the worthwhile goods of the original aims of secular separations. Because comprehensive secularism roots out the "non-natural" or "non-material" elements from the public sphere (the "spiritual," "religious," or what is sometimes called the "transcendent" element), it reduces a complex human existence to a simpler element functioning in a single system. On occasion, however, Elmessiri suggests that the partial form of secularism may be relatively unproblematic. How can it be that partial secularism retains this positive evaluation, when Elmessiri has argued for seeing the two (partial and comprehensive) as bound to one another through the sequence of modernity? Elmessiri seems confident that partial secularism can succeed without giving way to comprehensive secularism,

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[250] Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, and Deconstruction," 53.

provided that it is institutionalized *within an alternative paradigm*. Indeed, he often seems to promote some version of partial secularism.

I will be returning to this topic of retrieving a conception of secularism in the next chapter. With respect to Elmessiri's critique, however, it is clear that because the modern impulse for secular order arises in a paradigm that lacks a transcendent dimension, there is nothing to sustain the separation in this limited form. Comprehensive secularism is (or becomes) a whole worldview. Eventually, Elmessiri argues, all distinctions (between church and state, private and public, human being and nature) collapse – and these lost distinctions are accompanied by a loss of human status in the cosmos.

c. *Postmodern Ethos*

Elmessiri's central insight regarding the sequence of modernization is to note that the divisions and meticulous categorizations that we have come to associate with modernity mask a deeper drive to eliminate all separations and dynamics of difference in the cosmos. This sequence was described above as *ḥulūliyya* – the process of immanentization whereby the ultimate principle (God) becomes "centered" in creation, such that there is no separation between creator and created. The story of modernity can be told, he explains, as a series of shifts in this center, such that eventually the notion of a "center" or point of reference is ultimately lost. The following is Elmessiri's synopsis of this process:

We can view the whole process of immanentization/modernization/ secularization in terms of the death of God discourse. God became first incarnate (immanent) not in one man, but in mankind as a whole, and not temporarily but permanently. This led to the rise of humanism, and of the solipsistic subject. This humanism becomes imperialism and racism when God is incarnate in one people; it becomes fascism when He is incarnate in the Leader… the process continued inexorably, and immanetisation (secularization/modernization) got more radical. The centre kept on shifting and the incarnations too many, till we got a multiplicity of centres. Nature itself was fragmented and atomized. It lost its stability, coherence, and self-referentiality. It could no longer serve as a stable center…*All things change except change itself.*[251]

Such notions of de-centering and lost reference bring us into the territory of the postmodern.

Elmessiri is one of a growing number of Muslim authors who have written systematically about the nature and significance of postmodernity, whether as a period or as a style of thought.[252] In his view, although postmodern thinkers have raised important concerns and criticisms of modernity, the ideas, arguments, and dispositions that we associate with postmodernism do not constitute an *alternative* – they are neither "after" nor "other" to modernity in any significant sense. Aslam Farouk-Alli discusses this argument, in one of the few sustained commentaries on Elmessiri's work written in English. Farouk-Alli observes that from the perspective of Elmessiri and other critics of

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[251] Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, and Deconstruction," 75-6.

[252] Important sources on the subject include the work of Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*; Akhbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Routledge, 1992); Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam in Post-Modern World: Prospects and Problems* (Hope India Publications, 2008). See also Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought* for a discussion of other relevant writings. Arab writers who address post-modernism often point to the "anti-humanism" of postmodern thought.

a similar persuasion, "postmodernism has indeed proven to be effective as a critique of modernity… [however] it does not constitute an alternative social and political project."[253]

Instead, Elmessiri argues that what we call postmodernity emerges as a stage in the development of the dominant paradigm of Western modernity – modernity and postmodernity are part of a single sequence of transformations. This is, in large part, because Elmessiri isolates "deconstruction," (*al-tafkīk)* as the characteristic project of postmodernity. According to Elmessiri, mature modernity views all things, whether natural or human, as subject to the same "change, flux, and flow" as the immanent world of nature/matter.[254] In this sense – with its emphasis on natural/material processes and impermanence – he argues that modernity contained the seeds of deconstruction. On the basis of this inference, Elmessiri prefers to use the language of "solid" and "liquid" modernity,[255] or the language of Enlightenment and Dark Enlightenment,[256] to highlight that there are two dimensions of one and the same paradigm. In summary, he explains:

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[253] Aslam Farouk-Alli, "The Second Coming of the Theocratic Age? Islamic Discourse after Modernity and Postmodernity" in *Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 297.

[254] This characterization resonates with Hannah Arendt's conception of "the social" in *The Human Condition*, a text that is also, as I remarked above, concerned with a loss of distinctions. Arendt writes of the modern age and the rise of "the social": "It is as though we had forced open the distinguishing boundaries which protected the world, the human artifice, from nature, the biological process which goes on in its very midst as well as the natural cyclical processes which surround it, delivering and abandoning them to the always threatened stability of a human world." Arendt, *Human* Condition, 126

[255] Elmessiri draws here on the language of Zygmunt Bauman. A detailed discussion of Bauman in relationship to Elmessiri is provided in a dissertation written by Haggag Ali. Haggag Ahmed Shaban Ali, "The Cognitive Mapping of Modernity and Postmodernity: A Comparative Approach to Zygmunt Bauman and Abdelwahab Elmessiri" (PhD diss. Cairo University, 2008).

[256] Also a borrowed term, most likely from Adorno who uses the language of a "dark side" to Enlightenment.

The modernist secular project is nothing if not deconstructive. This is what Hobbes discovered from the very beginning: The individual, living exclusively within its temporality, is nothing but a wolf to his/her fellows. Western philosophical discourse, trying to cover up this dark truth, evolved the Enlightenment project, which proclaimed the rise of a *natural man/woman* who, although lacking a divine origin, nevertheless is both innately good and perfectible. But the dark enlighteners were there all the time, vigorously deconstructing, with Darwin pointing out the jungle without, and Freud pointing out the jungle within.[257]

Moreover, as part of a broader defense of metaphysics – of claims about the basic structure of the cosmos – as a tool for critical analysis, Elmessiri asserts that as with modernity, postmodernity "has its metaphysics." He argues,

Post-modernism is but a higher (or lower) stage in the development of the project of modernity and immanentization/secularization. It could be a mode of reading texts that has produced a lot of verbiage, but there is a paradigm behind the terminological and phraseological labyrinth. There is a definite method, rooted in a paradigm, in the postmodernist indefinite, indeterminate madness."[258]

His point here is to show that postmodernity is not, as it seems to claim, a philosophical perspective that is able to dispense with paradigms – i.e. the fundamental claims or

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[257] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, "The Dance of the Pen, the Play of the Sign," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 14:1 (1997), 9.
[258] Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, and Deconstruction," 78.

commitments about the nature of God (or transcendence), Humanity, and Nature (again, the general cosmic order). Specifically, he claims that postmodernity is an expression of *ḥulūliyya* – *pantheism*, *monism*, and *immanent* metaphysics. He asks, "is this pantheistic metaphysics the metaphysics of he who has no metaphysics yet craves for one, or is it a materialistic metaphysics without moral burdens?"[259] Elmessiri does not provide a clear answer to this question. For it does not seem to be a clear either/or. Perhaps he sees in postmodernity a longing for a different relationship between the axial elements, God, Humanity, and Nature – a redeeming quality that Elmessiri's orientation of retrieval is able to perceive.

Nevertheless, this "craving" is out of touch with the need from which it emerged. Postmodern thought went too far, too fast with its critical impulses. In an interview published in the dissertation of Dr. Haggag Ali, Elmessiri provides a vivid image this error, and the two non-alternatives with which it leaves us:

> Post-modernity may not produce evolutionary linear paradigms or final solutions. It may not proclaim the arrival of earthly paradise or technological technocratic utopia, but it too in its own way is proclamation of the end of history and the end of man as a complex social entity capable of free moral choice. He is replaced by uni-dimensional man, either revolving around a point of reference immanent in the phenomena surrounding him, or surviving with no point of reference whatsoever. He is centered either around his self-referential natural self that has nothing to do with anything external to it, or around abstract

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[259] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (180).

non-human wholes unrelated to man as we know him. Such man has no memory and lives in the moment only, within his small narrative.[260]

This passage reflects something of the motifs and moods that penetrate this analysis, and which are as important to his critique as the terms and concepts that he introduces and defines.

Both the modern and the post-modern phases of the paradigm that is the subject of Elmessiri's critique jeopardize basic and distinctive human goods. The trends that Elmessiri identifies in postmodernism result in a world without stable points of reference in terms of ethical concepts or values. And Elmessiri claims that "man cannot live without a center or framework, (for no one can live life moment by moment); he/she cannot reach this general theory save via thinking, contemplation, the assumption of a center, and 'believing' in it."[261] Elmessiri's effort to develop a comprehensive account of modernity and post-modernity is driven by his commitment to understand those constraints on human flourishing that have endured across these seemingly very different modes of inquiry and reflection. Farouk-Alli offers a cogent summary of Elmessiri's aim, confirming this observation:

[Elmessiri's] central contention is that by grasping this overall unity and articulating it into a comprehensive paradigm…we are able to unmask the

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[260] Correspondence in Haggag Ali Dissertation, "The Cognitive Mapping of Modernity and Postmodernity: A Comparative Approach to Zygmunt Bauman and Abdelwahab Elmessiri," 201-2.

[261] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 273 (174). The particular point about the importance of "believing" in it – Elmessiri has included the quotation marks – points to what I described as a pragmatic orientation in Elmessiri's work. This is not something that I will be able to elaborate on in this project. But I consider it to be one of the characteristics of Elmessiri's predicament as a "conscript" to modernity *and* post-modernity.

relationship between the Enlightenment and deconstruction; between modernization, modernism, and postmodernism; between Nietzcheanism (sic) and Hitler, pragmatism and Eichmann; between rationalism, imperialism and the Holocaust. From the vantage-point of this novel paradigm it becomes much easier to expose the moral and sociopolitical trappings of the modernist vision.[262]

Some strands of critical reflection concluded that the central problem with (and defining feature of) "modernity" was an over-confidence in reason as a faculty that could identify fixed and universal points of reference for truth claims. Elmessiri interprets much postmodern thought to be attempting to dispense with these ultimate points of reference, structures, essences, and so forth. He hopes to correct this dialectic of certainty and relativism by arguing that the problem with modernity was not points of reference per se, but that any point(s) of reference was imagined to be *immanent* in the world. Any effort to be genuinely beyond modernity ought to have addressed the problem of immanence, as such. Postmodernity failed in this regard. Elmessiri calls for a metaphysical and moral vision organized by transcendent point of reference, and actualized through an epistemology of "Islamic relativism." I will describe this further in the next chapter.

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[262] "Islamic Discourse after Modernity and Postmodernity" in *Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, p293.

V.   A Common Predicament: Seeking Allies in Critique

In the Introduction and in Chapter One, I situated my study of Elmessiri in relationship to Roxanne Euben's project of comparative political theory. I also indicated resources within comparative religious ethics with which to develop works of comparative critique. Now that I have discussed Elmessiri's critical assessment of Western modernity and postmodernity, I can begin to reflect on the potential field of comparison in which Elmessiri may be placed. As I imagine it, this will be a project to build moving forward. Therefore, here, I will focus on the explicit moments in which Elmessiri invites such comparisons.

Elmessiri is well aware of his Western allies in critique. In many places in his work, he refers to the "Humanist Marxist critique" of modernity, and also notes the important work of the Frankfurt School theorists (particularly Adorno and Marcuse) as well as numerous other references to figures including Christopher Lasch, Zygmunt Baumam, Noam Chomsky, and others. Elmessiri's work also shares some of the same concerns as, for example, post-colonial theorists outside of the Arab world. However, Elmessiri's critique extends to some of these authors, and he is careful to distinguish himself from the lingering "anti-human" tendencies in some recent critical work, particularly that associated with deconstruction and fervent anti-foundationalism.

Thus, it seems more appropriate to think of Elmessiri's work in relationship to that of figures like Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Hannah Arendt, who (beyond all their differences) develop ways to balance an emphasis on human creativity

with a regard for some notion of tradition. They also share a strong sense of underlying commitment to a more robust notion of human community. Moreover, they share a willingness to reach beyond the immanent frame in conducting their inquiries into the possibility of such community.[263] Nevertheless, Elmessiri does not seem to have read or drawn upon their work. Differences with those he does draw on when it comes to possible shared commitments must be relevant to any work of comparative critique.

Elmessiri's engagement with the thought of Western critics in the development of his own critique of the West begins to illustrate the form that comparison might take.[264] His gestures at such comparisons are significant because they demonstrate his confidence in the possibility of understanding. They also indicate that, although his charges against modernity are wide-ranging and at times quite severe, he maintains a hope for a reconciled relationship between people with ostensibly different world-views. For Elmessiri, that hope seems to lie in acts of solidarity (intellectual and political) with those who resist these tendencies that his critique has outlined. What Elmessiri has described is, he claims, the *dominant* paradigm. However, it is neither the only, nor the essential expression of Western civilization. In an article published in the influential Egyptian *al-Ahram Weekly*, Elmessiri writes that he does not conceive of the relationship between the Western and Muslim worlds in terms of a "clash of civilizations." Rather, he claims that we are witnessing a "clash over the *mode* of civilization." That "mode" refers to the so-called "Darwinian, imperialist" impulses of "rampant capitalism," the background to which I have described above. Elmessiri observes with much satisfaction

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[263] I realize that to say this about Arendt is much more problematic than about the other two.

[264] One of Elmessiri's interlocutors, Dr. Haggag Ali, has written about Elmessiri's work in relationship to two critics of modernity. I will discuss his work in greater detail in Chapter Five.

that there are people in Western countries who similarly oppose these trends. The article, written in 2007, is set against the background of the American war in Iraq:

> Many in the Islamic world as well as in the West abhor the rapacious capitalism that accords the highest value to ever increasing production and consumer rates that believes it the right of the military fittest to protect this economic order at home at the expense of others abroad; to send out armies to seize control over the energy and mineral resources that feed this order, to create and support proxy governments to assist in its rapaciousness, to open their markets to its products and to kowtow to the global economic system. This insatiable consumerist capitalism is not identical with Western civilization, but rather only one of many trends within that civilization. Many in the West have been deeply distressed at how this trend has succeeded in maneuvering itself into power in the US and propelling the world to war and doing whatever it could to promote the interests of big business at the expense of the poor and disadvantaged and to the lasting detriment of the global environment. The millions who took to the streets in Europe and the US to protest American intervention in Iraq are indicative of growing opposition there to rampant capitalism. I believe that we in the Islamic world should ally ourselves with representatives of that trend in the interest of putting a stop to Washington's military rampage in the world. There is a very real possibility for dialogue and mutual understanding.[265]

The possibility for dialogue lies in the possibility of solidarity among those with similar concerns, and Elmessiri has explicitly stated here that those include Muslim concerns and not exclusively, for example, the concerns of a "global Left" or other political alliance.

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[265] Accessed at http://www.arabphilosophers.com/Arabic/aphilosophers/acontemporary/acontemporary-names/Abdl-Wahab%20Elmessiri/Material/IslamOnline_Modernism_and_the_Scent_of_Gunpowder.htm

This particular approach to mending the strained relationships between Western and Muslim societies is among the more interesting and valuable elements of Elmessiri's work. His call to build solidarity is distinctive, because it is not based primarily on common religious beliefs and practices nor overlapping liberal values nor even on a broad-based political alliance; against the background of his broad critical narrative of the modern age, this call seems to be based rather on a set of critical insights that could potentially share deeper kinds of commitments or affirmations. In the next chapter, I will consider in more detail the affirmative elements of Elmessiri's critical project.

Chapter Four

A Critical Retrieval:

The Development and Meaning of Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism

I.   **Introduction**

What is required is a 'new modernity' that adopts science and technology but does not discard values or human purpose. It is a modernity that makes full use of the mind but does not strike the heart dead. It develops our materialistic existence but does not deny its spiritual dimensions, and it lives the present without denying heritage. This is no doubt a difficult task, but it is not impossible. I think the first step towards this alternative modernity is to separate modernity from consumerism and from the concept of materialistic progress. Instead, it has to be linked to the concept of human nature and common humanity, so that we can determine an aim of modernity other than production and consumption. The same thing applies to the concept of progress. Its horizons must be widened so as to include the material and the moral, the physical and the spiritual. In this way we can realize the enterprise of alternative modernity, and we can achieve progress without losing our balance with ourselves and with nature and without destroying our planet.[266]

The foundation of Elmessiri's moral outlook is his recognition of a need for re-imagining what the human being is, in relation to God and to nature. This recognition comes into focus through his critical engagement with Western modernity. Elmessiri does not explicitly separate and label his critical and positive projects, but the term that

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[266] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 225-226 (143).

he introduces, Islamic Humanism,[267] names the set of substantive commitments that inform his critique of Western modernity and his vision for his readers in Egypt and the broader Muslim world. Islamic Humanism will be the focus of the present chapter. It will be helpful to preface this discussion with a brief review of how it figures into the broader whole of the dissertation.

In the first chapter, I explored the relationship between critique and ethics (understood as investigation of substantive normative claims that can structure one's behavior and relationships). Over and against an understanding of critique as fundamentally opposed to responsible engagement, I drew on a number of key analyses which portray critique as itself a type of ethical practice, inseparable from the judgments and inquiries through which we construct accounts of the good life (particularly those accounts concerned with self-knowledge or "the ontology of ourselves," as Foucault put it). In Chapter Two, I described Elmessiri's work as part of a broad landscape of projects seeking to address a crisis of meaning wrought by the "cultural invasion" of Western modernity in Muslim societies. My reading of the relationship between critique and ethics in Chapter One encourages a re-appraisal of the situation described in Chapter Two: the concept of "critical retrieval" illuminates multiple dimensions or moments in Muslim critiques of modernity, whereby both Western modernity and Islam become sites of doubt, recovery, and transformation. Chapter Three provided the first part of the argument that will be more fully developed in the present chapter: that Elmessiri's work exemplifies the partnership between critique and hermeneutic recovery (or

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[267] I will frequently use the term "Humanism" as shorthand for Elmessiri's ethic. When I mean to refer to other humanistic philosophies, I will use "humanism."

"affirmation"). We can discern these moves of recovery in Elmessiri's reflections on the human nature and his linking of Islamic Humanism to a "new modernity." He rejects simple programmatic accounts of modernity, Islam, and the human being in relationship to nature and history. He seeks a "complex paradigm" (*namūdhaj murakkab*) that accommodates a complex understanding of human nature.

Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism assimilates a number of commitments regarding what can be said about human nature, including those commitments implicit in the cultural and religious vocabularies upon which he relies. In Chapter Two, I discussed some of those vocabularies, specifically those connected to Elmessiri's regional and religious identity. My focus in Chapter Three was on the diagnostic parts of Elmessiri's critique – his account of Western modernity and of the epistemological and methodological challenges that it poses to himself and his students and peers. In this dimension of his work, he builds his own vocabulary but also borrows terms and claims from Western critics of modernity. Islamic Humanism also builds from multiple vocabularies. The present chapter explores them and the basic features of Elmessiri's ethics. The emphasis now will be on his moves of retrieval or the dimensions of his work that build and guide. Chapter Three primarily focused on what I've suggested that we understand as the C1 moment of critique – Elmessiri's treatment of Western modernity as an alien object of analysis. This chapter is primarily concerned with C2 and C3: in developing Islamic Humanism, Elmessiri draws from resources in both Islamic and Arab cultural heritage (C3), as well as on the humanism of the Romantic period and the Marxist-based European critical tradition – signaling his recognition that

the modernity that is the object of his critique is not separable from his own outlook (C2). These become his tools or "sources," for developing a framework of meaning in light of the findings of C1.

In my study of Elmessiri's work I have been interested in understanding the relationship between criticisms and values (the negative and the positive), and in seeking to understand the role of prior substantive commitments in the formulation of his critical narrative. These commitments are not presented programmatically, as though his critique were formulated in one step and his ethic were a "solution" designed in another. Nevertheless, here I will try to represent his outlook in a coherent manner by carefully analyzing the places where he does formulate the meaning of Islamic Humanism and by investigating the resources that he draws on and the intellectual traditions in which he participates.

The discussion begins with an effort to clarify the relationship between the negative and positive components of Elmessiri's critique. In the next section (II), I set up the presentation of Elmessiri's ethic by reflecting on the critical challenges of the third chapter and asking what it is that Islamic Humanism must provide. The third section presents an exposition of the conceptual aspects of Islamic Humanism, piecing together and analyzing the formulations that he periodically presents in his work, and scrutinizing his moral anthropology. The fourth section examines the different sources of Elmessiri's ethic of Islamic Humanism. The fifth section will offer a discussion of two recent conceptualizations of the term "humanism," its relationship to critical inquiry, as well as to theological reflection. This will serve to further clarify Elmessiri's place in our

broader contemporary intellectual climate, and it will set up the inquiry at the heart of Chapter Five.

II. Critical Interface: The Need for and Needs of an Alternative Vision

> The problem we face is as follows: can we embark upon the modern era and rid ourselves of the monotony of a traditional society with its tendency to repeat itself? Can we do that without losing the positive aspects that a traditional society is characterized by? Can we board the future accompanied by our past which we carry as an identity and entity that frees us from the immediate moment, preserves our specificity, and helps us find our right direction, rather than as a burden on our shoulders?[268]

These poignant questions drive Elmessiri's constructive project. It is important to specify that Elmessiri understands the Western paradigm to be problematic on two levels; distinguishing and acknowledging both is necessary for understanding his task in developing Islamic Humanism. First, the paradigm that his critique explores is problematic for Elmessiri and his primary audience in Egypt and the Muslim world because it is *foreign,* and therefore its concepts are adapted to Western societies and history. The Western paradigm has developed in conjunction with the historical experiences and cultural and religious particularities of Western Europe and North America, which means that as an analytical toolbox it is intractably limited. Elmessiri explains:

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[268] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 64 (37).

Western scholars do not have to develop any new analytical categories, because the dominant categories can be readily applied to Western reality, for after all they have been developed by other Western scholars, on the basis of their study of Western societies with all their specificities. For the same reason, Western scholars can apply these categories creatively and with subtlety since they know the analytical categories and their philosophical implications.[269]

He seems to have in mind here Western scholars doing work such as his own, which scrutinizes the conceptual and moral bases of Western thought.[270] The implicit argument seems to be that critical reflection on Western modernity can be effectively conducted by Western scholars because the commitments guiding them are likewise Western in character, having been shaped all along by Western history, languages and cultural forms.[271] But Western analytical categories will not suffice to undertake the kind of critical project that Elmessiri has in mind. For, one of his central objectives in comprehending the Western paradigm through critique is to understand how to relate to and preserve the heritage and substantive commitments of himself and his students and readers. Elmessiri believes that his ethic of Islamic Humanism addresses the need

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[269] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 26 (9).

[270] On closer look, however, it is not entirely clear who he has in mind. This is a matter that I will investigate in greater detail in a future project. A number of "Western" thinkers develop their work on the basis of an imagined alternative tradition on which they draw (a scriptural or otherwise ancient tradition, for example). Does Elmessiri mean to imply that there is a way to rebuild Western modernity from the inside? It is not clear, based on his critique, whether or how he believes this to be possible. It may be that this is what projects called "humanistic" today are attempting to do.

[271] But Elmessiri is here pushing up against a great conundrum of philosophical reflection: if it is a certain way of thinking about problem-solving that is implicated in the problems, then how do we think our way out of them? Can we think our way out of thought?

for analytic categories that are in harmony with the cultural and moral background of his students and colleagues.

However, the foreignness of the Western immanentist paradigm is not the only problem. At a second level, Elmessiri finds that the Western paradigm has the capacity to undermine distinctively human life. In other words, the paradigm is problematic *in itself*, whether or not one is from or living in the Western world. Thus the challenge for Islamic Humanism goes beyond the search for a paradigm with "indigenous" integrity. Grappling with the problems and contradictions internal to Western modernity requires protecting that which the Western paradigm preys upon: a unique concept of the human. Islamic Humanism would to need to channel the desire for some form of universality, which is implicit in this level of Elmessiri's critique.

These two levels of consideration are distinguishable but not discrete; Islamic Humanism must attend to both. Elmessiri has described this task in terms of the negotiation of "tradition" (*al-taqlīd*) and "modernity."[272] In many places in his writing, and particularly in his autobiography, Elmessiri's tone conveys simple nostalgia. Tradition, by which he often simply means *the ways of the past* (and not Islam *per se*), plays a very prominent role in his work, shaping many of the criticisms and judgments that he makes about Western thought and culture. He wishes to draw on tradition in order to secure those aspects of intellectual and moral life that cannot be replaced by

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[272] The tradition-modernity duality is a problematic one – helpful in some cases, misleading in others. This is also true for Elmessiri's usage. At times he deploys it hastily, without satisfactorily attending to the internal nuances of each term and referent. However, at other times, he consciously troubles the distinction, particularly insofar as it would map onto a normative or moralistic distinction where "tradition" represents all that is authentic and good, while "modernity" represents all that is foreign and bad.

principles and concepts unique to Western history. But he is not (as are some of his

peers) calling for a *return* to a pristine past. He is too familiar with the pitfalls of the

impulses of Romanticism to yield to any such naïve longings. Elmessiri explains:

> I hope no one construes what I am saying to mean that I am calling for a return
> to the past (which, in any case, is a ridiculous impossibility) for… I do not
> overlook or deny the existence of a dark side to traditional societies. All I want to
> emphasize is the fact that traditional societies had an ethical and aesthetic
> structure, the obliteration and destruction of which does not necessarily bring
> about more happiness.[273]

The question for Elmessiri, then, is not *how to revive tradition*, but first and more

rigorously, *why exactly are we not better off? What have we lost?*

Elmessiri looks to "modernity" as a signifier of some varieties of positive change,

noting that the challenge of attending to the difficulties on the second level of

consideration (modernity as a problem for all) belongs in one way or another to

everyone – Egyptian, American, or otherwise. He asks, "Is there a way whereby

illiteracy can be wiped out without necessarily depriving the population of a great deal

of its traditional oral culture that is handed down?"[274] Developing a suitable alternative

– answering the questions and needs raised by his critique – must involve a negotiation

of this tension.

Part of the reason that Elmessiri's choice of the term "humanism" for his own

outlook is interesting is that it implies (like other accounts of humanism) that his ethic

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[273] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 64-65 (38).
[274] Ibid, 49 (26-27).

attends to something true about all human beings – something which traverses different frameworks of cultural and moral meaning. Though he calls it *Islamic* Humanism, the fact that he develops it against the background of a critique that is concerned with *human* loss (and not simply *Egyptian* or *Arab* or *Muslim* loss) demonstrates his attention simultaneously to particularity and universalism.

His use of the term is also notable because humanism as a philosophical and moral outlook tends to be characterized by *anthropocentrism*, a belief that human thought and action are the central sources of meaning and value in the universe. Indeed, this is usually the first reason for rejecting humanism among religious-minded thinkers. Elmessiri comes very near to embracing this aspect of humanism. However, crucially, he does so not as a brute metaphysical fact, but rather as a pragmatic epistemological strategy. I will elaborate on this approach of, as he says, "arriving at God through man"[275] in the next section. Here I want to remain focused on what it is that something called "Islamic Humanism" is meant to accomplish.

Elmessiri's critique is concerned with understanding the tendencies in Western thought which undermine human life and human community. These tendencies, he finds, are patterns of conceptualizing human nature and the relationship between the human being, the material world (or "nature"), and a fundamental principle, authority, or "center." This is one reason why Elmessiri is so interested in the human and social sciences, and in contributing to a project of the Islamization of Knowledge (discussed in Chapter Two). He argues that the human and social sciences, in partnership with

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[275] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 305 (198).

modern philosophy, attempt to comprehend the human being through the paradigm of an immanentist, naturalistic and materialistic theory. This approach, he claims, begins by reducing spiritual, emotional and cultural life to scientific formulas, and ends by denying that any reliable claims can be made about these phenomena at all. This was the so-called "paradigmatic sequence" described in the previous chapter. Moreover, Elmessiri argues that, even the more reflexive and critical currents of thought that explicitly challenge these tendencies ultimately re-inscribe the human being in a materialistic paradigm, emphasizing for example disorder, rather than order (this is how his critique of postmodernism fits into a broader narrative of reductionism).

In light of these considerations, a satisfactory paradigm will be one that enables the study of human nature while avoiding the two dangerous errors of either reducing the human being to a set of natural laws or denying that any judgments, rules or generalizations are possible.[276] It will be the task of the coming parts of this chapter to understand what he means by "human" so as to discern what threatens and what protects this being in its distinctive character. But in a preliminary manner, it may be said that a philosophical/moral project of Islamic Humanism is needed because the dominant paradigm of Western modernity, characterized as "pantheist" or "immanentist," serves to undermine the claim of any human particularity at all and thus makes human beings vulnerable to being taken up into a system of thought and practice that considers them on par with whichever metaphor dominates the paradigm at a given time (organic, mechanical, and so forth).

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[276] Like the "Scylla and Charybdis" of tyranny and anarchy, identified in Reinhold Niebuhr's political philosophy. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation. Volume I: Human Nature* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996.

In order to develop this account, Elmessiri has assumed a connection between epistemological concerns (which the practice of critique addresses) and ethics: he assumes that the frameworks within which we *know* impact the forms that our relationships and communities take. He observes that the problematic tendencies engendered by the modern sciences and modern culture more generally were intimately connected to patterns of speech and reasoning. Therefore, any alternative philosophical project must reflect consciousness of this level of crisis by developing an alternative logic, including different vocabularies and metaphors. Elmessiri became increasingly aware of this as he reflected on and developed his critique of American society. He writes:

> It was necessary to use words like 'loss' (*ḍayāʿ*) and 'alienation' (*ightirāb*) in order to understand this phenomenon. That is, it was necessary to use a set of terms that has nothing to do with the world of (material) economics, but is closely related to the world of spirit (*al-rūḥ wa al-maʿnawiyāt*). Also, the use of the concept of 'human nature' (*al-ṭabīʿa al-bashariyya*) itself, as an ultimate point of reference, is diametrically opposed to absolute relativism and what ensues of liquidity, indetermination and inability to judge. It is noteworthy that Western human sciences reject the idea of human nature itself; as it is deemed a form of permanence (*al-thabāt*) in a world that was supposed to be totally liquid and fluctuating.[277]

An alternative project must invoke a concept of human nature to combat the relativism that underlies his diagnoses.

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[277] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 202 (126).

Further, the concept of human nature is necessary (he implies) in order to have any genuine ethics at all. For, as he explains, "the absence of the concept of human nature… transforms man into a being incapable of making judgments.[278]" He elaborates on this point elsewhere:

> Within this paradigm [of immanence] and in the absence of standards, one cannot 'judge' anything or distinguish between what is good and what is evil. To judge anything outside us requires a philosophical basis containing a degree of absoluteness that transcends (*mutajāwuz*) the laws of matter and motion, and through which we may develop moral and philosophical criteria that would enable us to judge and establish distinctions.[279]

With this, Elmessiri suggests that a philosophical outlook that designates a distinctive conceptual *space* for the human being is necessary for ethics. His statement also implies that reference to a transcendent realm (something fundamentally different (*mufāriq*) from the world of nature and matter) is a precondition for ethics. At the very least, transcendence is a precondition for the kind of ethical project necessary in this historical moment. It is in this sense, then, that Humanism must be *Islamic*. For, Islam provides the kind of theological paradigm or imagination that can orient thought in this way.

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[278] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 202 (126).

[279] Ibid, 291-292 (188). This is actually the opposite basis of critique among many Western scholars, who argue that scientism is too focused on a "natures" and "essences" – but Elmessiri does not mean by human nature something related to material nature – he means, rather, human spirit or soul or *nafs* or *fiṭra*.

Summary of the Task:

In describing what it is that Islamic Humanism must accomplish, what I have outlined above is the interface of Elmessiri's negative and constructive projects. It will be helpful to summarize the basic objectives and features that I have just introduced before moving on to discuss the formulation of Islamic Humanism in detail. An ethic of Islamic Humanism must:

- Develop analytic categories that reflect the distinctive historical experiences and cultural values of Elmessiri's primary readers, students, and colleagues.

- Grapple with the problems and contradictions internal to Western modernity, without rejecting it wholesale.

- Negotiate tensions between "tradition" and "modernity."

- Negotiate the demands of particularity and universalism.

- Enable the study of human nature, neither reducing the human being to a set of natural laws nor denying that any judgments, rules or generalizations are possible.

- Reflect consciousness of the relationship between epistemology and ethics.

- Make reference to a transcendent realm (something fundamentally different from the world of nature and matter).

III.   The Formulation of Islamic Humanism

Elmessiri's critical project is, in large part, an exercise in discernment – an effort to determine what it is about Western modernity that is problematic or conflicts with the conception of the good that drives his intellectual enterprise. One of the key theoretical questions structuring this dissertation has been how to conceive of the relationship between the negative and positive components of an elaborate critical narrative such as Elmessiri's. It is not enough to establish, as I did in the first chapter, that critique is an ethical practice, and that it is ultimately oriented towards shaping, building, and realizing a vision of the good. Furthermore, it is not accurate to suggest that the negative components of critique – the diagnoses, the challenges, the criticisms – give rise to an alternative vision, as their simple inversion. But neither is it the case that Elmessiri opened the door of his inquiry in possession of a fully formed picture of what must be done – there was no ready-made program or alternative to apply. Rather, by his own account, Elmessiri's constructive project crystallized (*tabalwarat*) in the process of critique.

This is one of the main reasons that I have begun to develop the argument that narrative is a useful concept for exploring the basic questions about critique and ethics that opened this dissertation. In order for Elmessiri to develop Islamic Humanism – in order for him to make this paradigm visible and clear – he must tell you the story of his intellectual life and his wrestling match with the different phases of Western modernity. Neither does this critical narrative – the part that tells you what is wrong with the

Western paradigm – take form without the successive moments when Elmessiri's commitments and moral resources come into view. As he describes it, "the decisive factor that led to my conversion from the narrow world of materialism to the broader world of faith in man and God was the gradual crystallization of the paradigm *lying dormant* in my subconscious and its transformation into the dominant paradigm."[280] In this section, I will present and discuss some of these key moments of crystallization in his work.

There are many different versions of humanism: secular or religious, existentialist, pragmatist, classical, romantic, etc. It would require a more detailed discussion than I have space for here to systematically outline the differences between them. Elmessiri does not provide a detailed discussion of his humanism in relation to others. However, his Islamic Humanism shares with other versions the premise that human existence and human action are *distinct* and (potentially) *good*. In some cases, "humanism" simply signals that a particular project of philosophical inquiry gives priority to *ethics*, by which is meant the way human beings live together. Elmessiri's Humanism also carries this sense. While there is an anthropology implicit in any philosophical outlook, for any humanism, an account of the concept of 'human' is the most important pillar. Versions of humanism differ over the character of this underlying anthropology. Fundamental to the outlook of Islamic Humanism is the basic claim that there is something that sets human beings apart from the rest of the natural world, which is not subject to the change and flux of natural processes and ever-

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[280] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 198. Emphasis added.

multiplying postmodern narratives. Thus, I begin by asking what Elmessiri means by "human nature" and "common humanity."

a. Human Nature and Common Humanity

The term "humanism" has become somewhat discredited in recent decades, in part because of the failure of 20ᵗʰ Century ideologies and suspicion of any political or social project built around an idea of stable human nature. Indeed, much recent scholarly discussion has been focused on the problems associated with essentializing humanity through the concept of human nature, particularly when defined by the faculty of "reason."   The question of whether and how we should define and characterize "the human" is at the heart of much contemporary debate in ethics, and Elmessiri clearly pits his work against those wary of referring to any human essence. This does not, however, mean that he disregards their concerns. Elmessiri tries to accommodate concerns about essentialism when formulating his own concepts.

For Elmessiri, humanism, and indeed ethics itself, depends on the assumption of a stable human nature. Thus, the first significant philosophical move that I wish to discuss is his defense of human nature as a central analytic concept. He writes, "I believe that denying the existence of an enduring human nature constitutes a conscious effort to escape from metaphysics and [from] belief in something beyond/behind matter. However, it is also an effort – perhaps unconscious – to flee from the very idea of ethics (*al-akhlāq*)."[281] In effect, Elmessiri is arguing that the denial of human nature is

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[281] Elmessiri, *Dirāsāt,* 197.

irresponsible. It is an effort to avoid the features of reality from which our responsibilities and duties derive.[282] Being bound to claims about humanity generates binding claims about what human beings ought to do and become. Elmessiri explains that the concept of human nature is central to a project such as his because it enables us to make certain kinds of judgments.[283] Man, he argues, needs a center or framework – a source of stability – in order to survive.[284] While a robust and stable concept of human nature is not sufficient for this center or framework, it is, in his work, necessary.

What constitutes this "human nature" in Elmessiri's work? How are we to imagine humanity? To begin, it will be helpful to look carefully at an extended reflection on these questions that Elmessiri provides in his *Encyclopedia* and cites again in his Autobiography. The human being is characterized as free, unique, and creative, but also finite and fallible. Elmessiri writes:

> The human being is a being with free will, in spite of historical and natural limitations which define him. He is a being conscious of himself and of the universe, able to transcend his natural/material self and the natural/material world. He is one who reasons and is able to use his rationality to make reference to the formation of his self and his environment, according to his view. Freedom resides in the fabric of human existence itself; human history tells the story of his self-transcendence, as well as his stumbling and failure in his efforts. This history gives proof of his freedom and action in time and place. The human being is one who is able to develop ethical systems that do not grow out of the

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[282] This approach has affinities with a Kantian, deontological conception of ethics, which is rooted in the brute fact of human dignity. Elmessiri has professed his alliance with Kant (see *Autobiography*, 243). However, he does so only in passing.

[283] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 126.

[284] Ibid, 170.

material/natural program governing his body's material needs and drives. He is able to be committed to [ethical systems] and he is also able to violate them.[285]

This passage encapsulates much of Elmessiri's conception of human nature. Crucially, it is not a definition of a human essence that he offers here. He does not, for example (like Kant), tie human dignity to a conception of reason. Instead, there is a heavy emphasis on the distinctive types of activities and potentials that human beings bring into the world and with which they shape it. It is not clear from this passage whether Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism will be able to avoid one of the trap that other versions of humanism fall into: overestimating human capacities. I will return to this point below. It is clear here, however, that he seeks to avoid a characterization of human nature that can be construed as exclusivist with respect to any particular conditions, whether physical, cultural, environmental, or otherwise.

Nevertheless, this does not sound like what we tend to think of as "human nature." Elmessiri does not provide a more substantive definition of the human in his work. Yet he does insist on making reference to "human nature" as a fixed quality or set of qualities which all humans possess, and which distinguish humans from other natural beings. It is almost as though he wants us to talk about human nature only on the condition that we not actually say what that nature is. He begins to clarify the tight theoretical space in which he finds himself by generating another concept, which stands in for "human nature" while we are unable to fully and finally define ourselves. That concept is "common humanity" (*al-insāniyya al-ishtirākiyya*)

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[285] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 305-306.

I generated from the concept 'human nature' the concept of 'common humanity,' which is different from the concept of 'one humanity,' (*al-insāniyya al-wāḥida*) which assumes that all people are more or less similar because they are subject to the same law. This concept denies specificity and does away with human diversity. Common humanity, on the other hand, assumes that all human beings have a certain human potential and energy that cannot be monitored or reduced to material laws. This potential is not realized in uniform ways.[286]

Here, his emphasis on the plurality and the unpredictability of human beings resonates with Hannah Arendt, who founds her ethic in *The Human Condition* on the idea that each person that comes into the world introduces something genuinely new. As with Arendt, Elmessiri's emphasis on potential (rather than essence) produces an affirmation of pluralism and a willingness to embrace diversity and difference. Thus, he continues, "diverse cultural forms separate man from nature and affirm his common humanity without denying different cultural specificities."[287] Here, he assures his readers that the concept of common humanity does not obliterate difference.

In this sense, the concept of "common humanity" seems to allow for a degree of relativism. But, as was discussed in the previous chapter, Elmessiri believes relativism is a dangerous trend in the paradigm of Western modernity. Elmessiri handles this confusion by suggesting that the concept of common humanity avoids the pitfalls of relativism as it emerges in the Western paradigm. He claims that it "provides a basis for some universal norms but leaves room for differences and diversity, in other words it is

[286] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 307 (200).
[287] Ibid, 308 (200).

a concept that recognizes the relative without sinking into the abyss of nihilist relativism."[288]

This discussion is reminiscent of one that was opened in the previous chapter on the concept of bias. Back then, I suggested that bias is not simply a problematic feature of human knowledge; it also turns out to be one of the bases of his humanism. We are now in a better position to understand how. In a passage linking bias with the ethical achievements of the concept of "common humanity," he writes:

> Instead of placing my bias over against the bias of the other, bias can be re-defined as the inevitability of human uniqueness and the possibility of freedom of choice. This implies a paradox, it should be admitted; yet such is human life. This paradox is a framework for what I term 'common humanity,' as distinct from the 'one humanity' advocated by the Enlightenment.[289]

He elaborates, arguing that his approach preserves "both potential unity and the inevitable rich variation that does not negate people's common humanity" – a difficult but invaluable balance to achieve.

Elmessiri relies on these two concepts "human nature" and "common humanity" – holding them in a productive tension – in order to navigate between utter amoral relativism and reductive essentialism. His insistence that there is something (however difficult to define) common grounding these differences prevents this relativism from, as he says, descending into nihilism in the way of other relativistic trends. It also, I suggest, constitutes an interesting contribution to conversations in ethics about what we

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[288] Elmessiri, *Epistemological Bias*, 13.
[289] Ibid, 6.

can agree to include in the meaning of "human." For Elmessiri, it seems, claiming that there is a fixed and timeless human nature makes a philosophical, and more importantly an ethical, difference – even if that concept remains undefined or only loosely defined. Moreover, it leads him to formulate an "Islamic relativism" (*al-nisbiyya al-islāmiyya*) – a term that I will return to toward the end of this chapter.

Other moral philosophers have attempted similar conceptual maneuvers, either by arguing that there is a human nature but that we are not equipped to know it (religious humanisms tend to do this); by claiming that the task of coming to understand human nature is one that is always out in front of us and takes a virtually endless amount of time to accomplish (Sartre and existential humanism); or by focusing on activities and ways of relating.[290] Elmessiri seems to work within the conceptual space between these approaches, pointing to a human nature and giving it a tentative and relational definition. He accomplishes this by introducing another dimension – literally – to the landscape of the moral imagination.

b. *Transcendence*

In formulating Islamic Humanism, Elmessiri opposes to the *immanence* of the Western paradigm the *transcendence* of an Islamic Humanist paradigm. Most basically, Elmessiri insists that for any paradigm from within which one would be able to conduct an effective critique of modernity and sustain a worthwhile alternative, there must be

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[290] Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's "capabilities" or Richard Rorty's "sympathy" may serve as examples here. See: Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001); Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," in *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, eds Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (New York, Basic Books, 1993).

something outside of nature/matter – something not subject to its laws and of a fundamentally different essence (*jawhar*) from it. There are at least three terms that are relevant for understanding the sense of transcendence in his work. I want to introduce them briefly before proceeding with discussion of them. Elmessiri refers, first, to the human capacity for transcendence, or rising above natural/material functions and limitations (*tajāwuz*); additionally, he refers to God's transcendence (*mufāriq*) in relationship to the entire natural/material realm; and finally, he refers to a hospitable, metaphysical spaciousness (*raḥāba*). *Raḥāba* describes the paradigm wherein God's *mufāriq* provides the conditions for human *tajāwuz*.[291]

According to Elmessiri, one important characteristic of the material world – the world of immanence – is its dynamic, fluctuating character. Nature, he notes, is always changing, growing, evolving, decaying and regenerating. It is for this reason that the dominant Western paradigm, which Elmessiri claims takes nature to be the single reality in the cosmos, is considered to be inhospitable to human flourishing. It undermines the development and preservation of enduring structures and practices that establish a distance between humanity and the material world.[292] In order for the social and human sciences to build knowledge about human phenomena without reducing human

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[291] A chapter heading in Elmessiri's Autobiography captures the contrast between immanence and transcendence. He translates the title "From the Narrow Simplism of Materialism to the Breadth of Humanism and Faith," highlighting the spatial motif. The Arabic title is *min basaṭa al-mādiyya ila raḥāba al-insāniyya wa al-iymān*. He elaborates on *basaṭa* (which means "simplicity") with the spatial term "narrow," but he oversimplifies *raḥāba*. I have used "hospitable spaciousness," to reflect the etymological connection to the meaning of making space to receive and welcome. It also reflects occasional usages of the term to describe Elmessiri's personality. One of Elmessiri's closest students and a "disciple" (see Chapter Five) refers to the *raḥāba* of Elmessiri (see *fī al-ʿālim al-misīrī*, Volume 2)

[292] There is a strong resemblance here with Arendt's concept of "the social" and the human need to form a "world" of endurance over and against biological processes, in *The Human Condition*.

existence to biological, we must, in our arguments and imaginings, posit a notion of *transcendence* (*mufāriq*) – a realm of reality that is fundamentally different from and beyond the natural/material realm, not vulnerable to change and fluctuation.

Being human is, for Elmessiri, always already a mode of transcendence (*tajāwuz*) – of rising above or overcoming natural and material forces. But a paradigm whose imaginative dimensions do not include a point of reference outside of the material world undermines this human capacity. This is precisely what he means when he calls the Western paradigm "anti-human" (*muʿādiyya li-al-insān*). In one of his central claims about what it means to be human, Elmessiri insists, "man exists within the natural world but is not completely reduced to it [which] means that there is something beyond nature, something we cannot measure or completely fathom, but it is there, and only through it, that we can explain the human phenomenon."[293] For Elmessiri there must be something outside and independent of nature (*mufāriq*) – something that transcends the material realm – which accounts for these transcending (*tajāwuz*) characteristics of human nature.

His willingness (or perhaps it can even be characterized as a *determination*) to think in terms of metaphysical dimensions, such as immanence and transcendence, is a prominent feature of his work. Furthermore, against the supposedly anti-metaphysical claims of later-20th Century thinkers, he defends metaphysics as providing the *way out* of the claustrophobic immanence of modernity. Thus the motif of *space* or *distance* (*masāfa*) is again evident here. Recognition of a transcendent realm establishes (or restores) the

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[293] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 304 (198). Elmessiri's English translation of this particular passage differs greatly from the original. The English version is a drastic simplification. In this section (under the heading "Faith and the Category of Humanity") Elmessiri is discussing his realization of faith, which comes about through a realization of the necessity of thinking beyond the physical or material world in order to comprehend the range of human phenomena.

metaphysical space within which humanity can thrive. What does it mean to defend metaphysics once you have already (as Elmessiri has) passed through the hazing of post-modern critique? What does it mean to argue for metaphysics when the very possibility of imagining or not imagining metaphysical truths arises in an intellectual context of disenchantment?

Elmessiri goes on to provide a more substantive account of how to conceive of this transcendent dimension. To arrive at a worldview that includes a transcendent realm is not a simple cognitive achievement, and it is not through straightforward argumentation and persuasion that Elmessiri wishes to lead his readers there. The Autobiography is a long and winding narrative that tells the story of his entry into this paradigm. Through a combination of personal and intellectual searching, Elmessiri comes to identify God as that fixed and transcendent source and point of reference, which secures the paradigm that had be developing throughout his researches. It will be worthwhile to review his description of this realization at length:

Man within nature has become the sign of fixity in the moving world of matter, and the sign of discontinuity in the continuous world of nature. That is, man transcends the laws of material nature, because there is a distance that separates man from nature. This man-nature duality had to be explained: the duality of matter and non-matter, of nature and non-nature, of human and non-human. In order to interpret this duality I had to assume another duality, that of the world of flux and a point that lies beyond it: a transcendental point that is itself the guarantee of man's separateness from nature. That point is God! It seems as if one could not interpret the phenomenon of man as separate from nature without postulating the presence of a transcendent being who exists beyond nature-

matter. The category of man has flung the door wide [open] to metaphysics. That is why I see that when Nietzsche announced the death of God, he was in fact announcing the death of man and the end of metaphysics. For, if as he says God is dead, then man lives in a natural material solid world and is himself transformed into a natural, material being that is simply a thing among things. This is perhaps what the Koran signifies in the following verse: '…those who are oblivious to God, and whom He therefore causes to be oblivious of their own selves…' (59:19).[294]

Here, linking a belief in God as a transcendent being to his critical analysis of Western modernity, Elmessiri has reached the climax of his philosophical development. Elmessiri comes to understand God – conceptually – as necessary to account for the human phenomenon. It is at this point that Elmessiri introduces his most basic statement of the meaning of Islamic Humanism. Explaining his Augustinian moment of discovery he writes, "instead of arriving at man through God, I arrived at God through man. This remains the foundation of my religious faith and is what I call 'Islamic humanism.' Its starting point is the rejection of material monism and the insistence on the duality of man and nature-matter."

God is the transcendent point of reference that makes humanism possible. Elsewhere, Elmessiri elaborates on the place of God in his philosophical schema:

The existence of God is the only guarantee of the existence of the *human* man and of his complexity and multi-dimensionality. God is the infinite complexity that transcends the boundaries of the material donnée, and He is the ultimate *telos* to which man looks and through which he transcends the world of nature-matter.

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[294] Elmessiri, *Autobiography* 305 (198).

Thus, His absence transforms the world into mute natural matter, subject to laws of motion and necessity that can be identified, studied and controlled. Man falls into the same pattern, for with the absence of God, man is transformed into a quantity of matter that can be interpreted within the framework of dead mathematical equations that can be known and predicted.[295]

For Elmessiri, the Islamic concept of *tawḥīd* (God's oneness) is at one and the same time the metaphysical and humanistic principle that is able to resist and oppose Western modernity.

The two previous passages that I have presented introduce a conundrum: Elmessiri comes close to sounding as though "God" is merely a conceptual device. He realizes that he needs God – that humanity needs God – in order to overcome the immanentist paradigm. I want to be careful here, for I do not wish to raise questions about Elmessiri's personal piety. However, the concepts of God and humanity are central to Elmessiri's critique of Western modernity, and it is necessary to understand their meaning and relationship in order to address my inquiry into Elmessiri's anthropology and his ethic of Islamic Humanism.

Some of Elmessiri's additional statements about human nature serve to clarify the relative weight that God has in his philosophical system, suggesting that Elmessiri's peculiar way of "arriving at God" should be understood as a discovery or realization rather than an argumentative construction. For example, Elmessiri often characterizes the dual nature of human existence – at once grounded in the material realm, but always longing for something beyond. Elmessiri claims that although human beings are in a

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[295] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 184-185 (114).

sense a part of nature, dwelling in and interacting with it, still "there is a part of [humanity] that transcends matter." What is distinctive about this concept of dual nature is that this "human man" (*al-insān al-insānī* - the one who transcends), "is a being whom God alone knows in all his wholeness."[296] The notion of human nature that Elmessiri has been articulating and defending is something that only God can be said to fully comprehend. But within the context of Elmessiri's critical project, this limitation is worthy of embrace. It accounts for what he calls the "tragic-comic existence of man":

> Hence, the tragic-comic existence of man: a being that lives inside his (material) body, in material nature; a part of him moves according to the laws of gravity, biological drives, and instincts. But at the same time his soul yearns for the world of ideals, and the spirit. He is a being whose feet may be stuck in the mud yet his eyes gaze at the stars; he always falls but he is always capable of rising again and of transcendence.[297]

This combination of capability and limitation is, for Elmessiri, part of the fundamental structure of the human relationship to a transcendent God.

Elmessiri's conception of Humanism – and indeed his very conception of human nature, his philosophical/moral anthropology – is deeply theologically informed. Moreover, this conception of the human being as exhibiting the qualities of a natural creature but one that is uniquely connected to the divine is deeply rooted in Islamic

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[296] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (113)
[297] Ibid, 184 (114).

moral anthropology.[298]   However, the question remains, what makes this Humanism *Islamic*?   One further indication is provided in his reflections cited above.   Elmessiri connects his (philosophical or broadly theological) insight with a Qur'anic passage that seems to support it.   Weaving elements of Islamic tradition into his argument doesn't just serve to establish the Islamic legitimacy of his work; it also establishes Islamic Humanism as practice of engagement between Islamic sources and the challenges of Western modernity.   I will discuss this further in the fourth section of this chapter when I explore the moral and imaginative sources shaping Elmessiri's ethical project.   Before this, however, I turn to consider some practical effects of Islamic Humanism.

c.   Humanism: Some Practical Effects

In his autobiography, Elmessiri mourns the loss of Egyptian society in the time of his youth, when Zakāt[299] and other practices were simply part of the fabric of everyday life in community.   When he was growing up in the (then small) city of Damanhour, he writes, "Salat, the five daily prayers and Zakat, mandatory charity in Islam, were part of our everyday life not just 'obligations' or rituals, for life without Salat and Zakat is rendered meaningless."[300]   Although the bulk of Elmessiri's career as a thinker and writer is devoted to philosophical inquiry, his work is framed by deep concerns about the constitution of human community.   Indeed, his inquiries into modern Western

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[298] For a rich and illuminating discussion of this, see Charles le Gai Eaton, "The Human Paradox" in *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

[299] An obligatory, annual contribution to social welfare, associated with purifying one's earnings.

[300] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 38 (18).

epistemological paradigms are sparked by his disappointment and dismay at his observations while living in America beginning in the late 1960s.[301]

Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism is not restricted to its conceptual and epistemological elements. He conceives of it as a "world outlook."[302] If it is a world outlook, how does it color our vision and what patterns of judgment and action does it encourage? I have described the basic theoretical components of Islamic Humanism. What clues does Elmessiri provide in the way of practical applications of this moral outlook? Can Islamic Humanism form the basis of a political philosophy? Does it support a developed philosophy of economics? of religious, cultural, or sexual difference? To some extent, answers to these questions are beyond the scope of the present study. Students and other readers of Elmessiri are working these matters out in their intellectual and professional lives.[303] In the remainder of this section, I provide some examples of his comments either on particular issues, or places in his work where he hints at applications of Islamic Humanism.

With respect to political philosophy, Elmessiri exerted much effort in the cause of democratic reform in Egypt, particularly later in his life.[304] To a large extent – in spite of his cautiousness with respect to adaptations of Western political and social projects – he was satisfied with the language of democracy and even human rights because he felt that some of the ideals of democracy are coextensive with the values that he outlines. For example, the democratic ideal of providing a voice and a role in political life

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[301] See his *al-firdaws al-arḍī: dirāsāt wa inṭibā'āt 'an al-ḥaḍāra al-amrīkīyya al-ḥadītha* (1979).

[302] This is a term that Elmessiri uses repeatedly in English, although he uses many different terms (unsystematically) when writing in Arabic.

[303] I will discuss some of these efforts in Chapter Five.

[304] This has been discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

conforms to Elmessiri's basic philosophical anthropology with its emphasis on plurality, creativity, and self-transcendence. Moreover, he argues that the discourse of human rights provides an important example of a framework of universal claims about distinctively human life that captures many of the concerns of Islamic Humanism.[305] Elmessiri also extended these considerations beyond the single nation-state and supported an international framework for implementing democratic ideals and universal human values. Thus, he writes,

> The ultimate point of reference of democratic systems and decision making mechanisms should be universal human values such as justice, equality, the right of self-determination. Most of these values if not all, are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and by the Charter of the United Nations, and the various international treaties such as the Geneva Convention. No interference should occur in the affairs of other countries except through UN resolutions passed by the General Assembly… These values are not to submit to voting or to the counting of hands. All the previous criticisms and suggestions do not mean a rejection of democracy. Some important concepts have been realized, such as the multi-party system, the separation between the three powers, and the questioning of the executive by the legislative powers. These are practices we should benefit from and incorporate in our program to reach a true democratic system.[306]

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[305] This particular approach to the subject may be compared with Abdulaziz Sachedina's in *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights* (2009). More generally, both authors undertake negotiated movements of critical retrieval in relationship to Western and Islamic vocabularies and values.

[306] Autobiography, 238 (152).

These claims are reflected in his active life as a participant in the Kefaya movement and the Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ (also discussed in Chapter Two). Both initiatives – and particularly Kefaya aim to institutionalization basic democratic practices such as establishing a fair and transparent electoral system, due process, and citizen engagement with interaction across religious and ethnic lines.

On one occasion, Elmessiri was prompted to outline his political platform, under the hypothetical circumstance that he present himself as a candidate for the presidency of Egypt. He began – as was his custom – with a joke.[307] The points that he outlines overlap substantially with the ideals informing modern democratic societies. The first point that he emphasizes is transparency – miserably absent during his entire adult life in Egypt. More concrete (but still quite general) features that he promotes include multiple strong institutions, an intricate process of decision making that seeks representativeness and a balance of power, freedom in forming parties, protection for minority rights, minimization of class polarization, and perhaps most importantly, education.

Islamic Humanism also provides for what Elmessiri calls "civic ethics." In his effort to balance the need to preserve traditional and modern society, Elmessiri notes that civic ethics, by which he means a sense of obligation not only in one's private relationships, but also in the public ones – towards the people with whom we share public transport, towards our teachers and classmates, towards our bosses and employees, towards vendors and doctors and gas station attendants – such civic

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[307] And reporting on the interview before a crowd one evening in 2007, he ended with a joke and wove a number of jokes in between. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XnXfWap0XY, accessed on January 30, 2012.

responsibilities either do not exist or do not have the same status in most traditional socieites. Elmessiri perceives a trade-off between the intense and intricate moral orders of families and neighbors in a "traditional society" versus the thin but efficient and somewhat more "universal" rights and duties of modernity's public spaces.[308] The latter may not be present in traditional society because of a different background understanding of the difference between public and private morality. Elmessiri suggests that this gap must be closed and some kind of public/civic ethics are needed.[309] These considerations exemplify Elmessiri's complex engagement with Western modernity – not because democracy and civic engagement are the sole provenance of the West, but because Elmessiri is comfortable with promoting these concepts and practices, without rigorously "Islamizing" them.

For Elmessiri Islamic Humanism also nurtures a deep commitment to education and the cultivation of critical awareness. He tells a story that exemplifies this practical task of his Humanism. His students were assigned to read a poem by W.B. Yeats entitled *Lapis Lazuli*. Suspecting that some of his students had not read the assigned piece, he undertook to teach them a lesson by offering a false (and amusing) definition of the poem's title. Not in order to make a point about obedience, but rather in order to "show them that they had converted themselves into receptive slaves of all that I was

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[308] This may seem like an odd comparison in light of a number of analyses of (late) modernity which argue precisely that modernity is characterized by a progressive loss or subversion of properly public space.

[309] This does not mean that for Elmessiri public life is most important, nor that public and private moral orders are equivalent. This becomes clear throughout his many discussions of family and sexuality issues – discussions which would seem in some places to contradict his kinship with Western theorists on other topics. Elmessiri's treatment of the subject of women and family is an important part of his study of Western modernity. It is a subject that warrants discussion in another project.

dictating, and had thus lost the ability to interact, argue and judge."[310] This commitment is also evident in his involvement in the formation of the 9th of March movement: an initiative that aimed to expel police presence on university campuses and to push back state interference in academic matters such as professor appointments and promotions.

Additionally, Islamic Humanism nurtured Elmessiri's interest in the arts and architecture. He was known to have been a patron of the arts, and would often buy the artwork of young Egyptian artists in order to promote and encourage their creative energies. When I visited his home and personal library in the summer of 2010, I found the walls and surfaces full of paintings, drawings, and other crafted items, including artwork from across the world (with a particularly rich collection of African artwork from all parts of the continent). Architecture was an important interpretive lens for him because it confirmed his theory that human life flourished only when it took a distance – established a space apart – from the natural world of consumption and decay. He wrote, "Architecture is the aesthetic framework that surrounds a human being as he goes about his daily life. It is also the sign of the triumph of human complexity over the merely material and functional; it is also the sign of the triumph of the multidimensional over the mechanical and the narrowly rational."[311] These words resonate with Hannah Arendt's concept of the "world" as a humanly built interface between human life, human action, and the achievement of permanence on the one hand, and the biological world of ceaseless production, consumption and death. Elmessiri, like Arendt, is

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[310] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (213).
[311] Ibid, (11).

concerned to extend his philosophical and moral reflections on what human beings are and how they should live into very concrete elements of daily life.

This attentiveness plays itself out in Elmessiri's narrative style. Islamic Humanism is evident in his attention to detail including his telling of many small anecdotes, which serve to illuminate the substance of his humanism. In one example, he communicates a basic element of faith in "the human spirit" to not be swept ultimately away by the problematic enticements of modernity. Elmessiri presents a playful critique of what he calls "that form of organized crime called birthdays (one of the most important secular rituals of our society)." He describes that at the party for one his grandson's birthdays, the boy received many gifts – evidence, for Elmessiri of the predominance of materialism. But he becomes pleasantly surprised: "Funnily enough, one of my students brought him a paper clown with the result that my grandson left his sea of plastic and was totally taken by this traditional clown, which means all is well with the world, and the human spirit can fight and at the end of the day, when all is said and done, the human instinct is still health."[312] What exactly he means in referring to this healthy "human instinct" is unclear. However, it would seem to be a basic curiosity for and awe at humor, play and creative craft. Such anecdotes are not "applications" per se, but they illuminate something about what it means to view the world through the lens of Islamic Humanism.

Islamic Humanism generates commitments on the epistemological level: it demands that we work hard to see and judge in a manner consistent with the

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[312] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 31 (13).

anthropological claims that Islamic Humanism embraces. In another particularly vivid example, Elmessiri demonstrates what it means to see like a Humanist. Recalling an interaction with a family servant, he writes:

> Every week, at the point where I came to pay him his weekly wage, he insisted on saying 'Nevermind this time, this one is on me.' Some people regard this statement as a form of hypocrisy, an interpretation that I, however, regard as shallow. I have decoded the statement and found that in actual fact it means the following: 'In spite of the fact that I work as your servant and have thus entered into a contractual relationship with you, yet as human beings we are equal. Therefore there has to be a relationship of solidarity between us, one that goes beyond the act of economic exchange (service for money). For all these considerations, there is no need for you to pay me this time.'[313]

The interpretive lens provided by Elmessiri's Humanism elevates a hired servant to the status of equal in humanity. More – it allows the one positioned lower socially to be morally superior.

As a response to modernity, Islamic Humanism need not be conceived as a dramatic conversion, nor a revival of lost past, nor as a straightforward dismantling of what has been unwittingly adopted. It is, rather, a project of *re-engagement*, which involves recovery, re-invention, and re-imagining human life – not simply choosing between the old and the new. This paradigm is fully consistent with Islamic *fiṭra* (human nature), and substantially overlaps with Romanticism, and even Kant. Many

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[313] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 67 (40).

figures are in the background, and in the next section, I will take a closer look at the influences to which Elmessiri was attentive in developing his outlook.

IV.   Sources

Although I finally adopted Islam as my world outlook, the route that led me to it was diverse, complex and different from the normal route. Undoubtedly this influenced my religious vision and my behavior towards others who were not of the same faith as myself.[314]

Now that the critical background to and basic formulations of Islamic Humanism have been presented, I will discuss the *unusual route* and threads of discourse on which Elmessiri drew, on the way to his own outlook. At the outset of the dissertation, I explained that I would be reading Elmessiri's work as a critical retrieval on multiple fronts or from multiple sources. I'm using "sources" in a common sense here: it is from these discourses that Elmessiri assembles his insights, vocabularies, questions, concerns, and commitments. But I don't mind the allusion to Charles Taylor's usage of "source." For Taylor, one of the great challenges for ethics in the late-modern period – in fact, not just for ethics, but for the task of *being ethical* and realizing goods – is to be able to articulate those goods as the sources informing and orienting our judgments and actions.[315] This challenge is manifest in Elmessiri's work, as he seeks to work in the

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[314] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 310 (202).
[315] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. See especially Part I, "Identity and the Good."

volatile zone of critique, where the paradigms that we typically rely on for articulation must be simultaneously resources and objects of inquiry.

Elmessiri's extended engagement with a number of different scholarly and literary discourses is a big part of what makes him a thinker worthy of more careful consideration from scholars outside of Egypt and the Muslim world. Additionally, Elmessiri's reliance upon Western and non-Western paradigms of analysis exemplifies some of the more general challenges to projects of critical retrieval. Furthermore, the plurality at the heart of his work is part of what accounts for his enduring importance as a thinker and for his popularity. In the coming sub-sections, I look more closely at some of the details of Elmessiri's corpus, with a focus on the different sites of retrieval.

a. *Romantic Literature*

In his autobiography, Elmessiri writes that he was encouraged to study English literature (not only philosophy or other scholarship) because this would provide him with a window on the philosophical and cultural underpinnings of Western civilization and, therefore, also some aspects of the Egyptian present. And indeed, his study of literature became the basis of his broader intellectual project. The writers of the Romantic period held a special pride of place in his studies. He wrote, "In its essence, the Romantic Movement was a revolution against the mechanical rational thought that predominated Europe in the 18th century… The Romantic poets (advocates of individualism as they were) nevertheless perceived the monstrosity and reductionism of

extreme individualism, which does not see man as a complex being…"[316] Elsewhere he wrote, in a similar vein, "The Romantics also understood that the human mind and perception of reality are shaped by an interactive process between the innate generative capacity of the psyche and the encounter with realities external to it." These statements are consistent with Elmessiri's diagnosis of the ills of the modern imagination and they provide insight about what it is that he is trying to protect in his own project. Elmessiri's encounter with Western literature and particularly the Romantic writers had a profound impact on his life's work, and in this section, I will explore this relationship in more detail.

Elmessiri's criticisms of and challenges to Western modernity are akin to those expressed in much Romantic literature. He explains that he was perhaps most influenced by the study of imagery in this genre and period of literature. In reading the Romantic authors, he noticed the prominence of certain images and metaphors recurring throughout the texts – particularly the organic and mechanic (noted in the previous chapter). He found that the Romantic writers effectively used these as tropes to evoke responses to the rapid modernization of the world and the subsequent fragmentation or deconstruction (*tafkīk*) of human life.

The Romantic writers also informed Elmessiri's conception of Humanism. Many of the authors that Elmessiri cites seek to rescue or redeem humanity from the perils of modernity – carving out a space for distinctively human life in a world that remains untainted by the encroachments of modern industry, technology and mass culture. I

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[316] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (133).

would also like to suggest that the genre itself shaped Elmessiri's thinking and writing, including his styles of narration, the cosmic proportions of his sketches, the evocations of human potential, and the quest for narrative unity. Elmessiri begins to confirm this when he writes:

My study of literature helped to make me aware of the irreducible complexity of man, and therefore, of the need for complex paradigms as an analytical tool for the study of human phenomena. Literature seems to be the only specialization that still deals with man as a human being and as a complex whole that cannot be reduced to one or two elements in reality.[317]

Elmessiri's emphasis on humanity as characterized by wholeness and complexity resonates with the tenor of the Romantic era. However, Elmessiri also brings his critique to the inside of the Romantic imagination in an effort to understand its problems and identify its valuable resources. For, the Romantic period was itself a part of what Elmessiri calls "modern Western civilization."

A closer look at his engagement with the Romantic writers will accomplish two things: First, it will enrich the broader study of Elmessiri's work by exploring an important set of resources informing it, and second, it will enrich my discussion of the ethics of critique, by enabling me to draw on a formulation of the concept of narrative ethics. Elmessiri's engagement with Romanticism not only provides him with resources for articulating Islamic Humanism, it also performs a mode of engagement that seems to be illustrative of Islamic Humanism's relationship to modernity more broadly: his

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[317] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 185 (114).

reading of the Romantic movement involves a critical retrieval. In the remainder of this section, I first look back on Elmessiri's early career and his first major study in Romantic literature. I then turn to an analysis of his more recent writings on his favorite work: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Before turning to Elmessiri's studies in Romanticism, I want to discuss this particular reading relationship in more detail: the sympathetic analysis of Western literature by a scholar situated outside of America or Europe and writing in a non-European language.   This seems to be a relatively under-considered reading relationship, and as part of my analysis, I will demonstrate that it is an ethically rich one to explore, particularly in the context of studies of modernity and critique. There are good reasons for this relative neglect, not least of which is the now vibrant recognition that Western culture has literally overpowered the story-telling geography for far too long. Too much emphasis on readings of the classics outside of Europe or the United States may seem inappropriate if not disturbingly self-congratulatory in the post-colonial context. To its credit the field of literary studies has in many ways taken the lead in efforts to diversify the "voices" or "stories" heard and expressed both inside and outside universities. The field of analysis of Western literature in Egypt (for example) is a vibrant one. And yet, for whatever reasons, I am aware of relatively few examples of scholarly attention to the readings of European or American classics by scholars (and their students) situated outside the Western academy – particularly from the Arab world.[318]

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[318] In discussing these matters, there is one figure that would surely come to mind: The late Edward Said who, in his *Orientalism*, famously disrupted the naïve and sinister representations of foreign peoples and

The relationship that I'm describing here – an outsider's critical engagement with Western literature – is neither a simple relationship of *admiration* for European culture, nor a reading driven only by suspicion and attention to the power imbalances behind cultural exchange. To begin to obtain a richer understanding of this component of Elmessiri's work and its influence on his conception of humanism, we should dig into his early career as a scholar. In his dissertation, one can find some hints of the direction that Elmessiri's thoughts on humanism and tradition will take. The project is a comparison of two great romantic writers: William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman. Although both writers' work centers on the theme of nature, Elmessiri argues that they imagine the human relationship to nature differently, and for Elmessiri this difference has a significant impact on ethical reflection.

Elmessiri associates Whitman with the kind of problematic anthropological vision that he targets throughout his work, claiming that Whitman consistently and with conviction displays an "anti-historical imagination" that is prone to surrender humanity to natural and material forces. On the other hand, in Wordsworth Elmessiri finds an example of the "historical imagination," which conceives of history as that which constitutes the separation between the humanity and nature.[319] Elaborating on this distinction he writes, "Whereas Wordsworth's historical world is one of dialectical interactions and revolutionary transformations, Whitman's anti-historical world is one

places found in the Western literary canon. It is largely thanks to Said's sojourn in Western literature, that we have witnessed a revolution in academic conscientiousness, whereby literature has become a key site of ethical and political reflection. Elmessiri and Said knew one another (as I mentioned in Chapter Two). But Elmessiri, more so than Said, went on to form a career geared towards his home audience (perhaps this is not surprising, since this son of an old Egyptian family would likely have had more of a sense of home than a Palestinian living in exile).

[319] Given this chapter's central inquiry, I will restrict my discussion to Elmessiri's analysis of Wordsworth.

of either absolute unity or extreme polarity."[320] Literary scholars would likely take issue with a number of Elmessiri's readings of and claims about Whitman, Wordsworth, and the comparison of their work. Nevertheless, his study provides a window into his broader critical outlook and his early conception of what the humanistic imagination is and ought to be.

On closer look, Elmessiri finds that both authors (not only Whitman) display problematic assumptions about human nature in relationship to the natural world – assumptions that are characteristic of the paradigm of modernity that I have discussed in Chapter Three. The Romantic wave of poetic expression exhibits an important humanistic focus on the losses incurred by the rationalism, scientism, and rapid industrialization. However, Elmessiri finds that these insights are accompanied by a near fetishization of the natural realm. Nature becomes a metaphor for purity and human redemption.   But according to Elmessiri there are hazards associated with this metaphor as it threatens to become all-consuming in the Romantic imagination. The Romantic writers protest against modernity. But in doing so, Elmessiri finds that they fail to fully tackle the distinctive epistemological features of the dominant "paradigm" of modernity, including immanentism and the absence of transcendence. They circumvent the mechanical, only to be swept away by the organic. Therefore, their solutions or alternative visions exhibit the same problematic features of that which they sought to escape. This is precisely what Elmessiri hopes to avoid in his work, and this is why he is

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[320] Elmessiri, *The Critical Writings of Wordsworth and Whitman*, 4.

interested in scrutinizing the moves that the Romantic writers make on behalf of the human being, and in identifying subtle distinctions among them.

Wordsworth becomes a kind of protagonist in this respect. But although Wordsworth's outlook on human nature, the natural world, and tradition are preferable in Elmessiri's analytical scheme, Wordsworth's work also possesses characteristic elements of the modern imagination. This signals to Elmessiri early on that his own project will not be one of straightforward Romantic humanism. Elmessiri opens his discussion of Wordsworth by describing how thoroughly enthralled with the natural world Wordsworth's poetry and characters are. Furthermore, Elmessiri notes, Wordsworth focuses on figures that are marginalized from tradition and society in one way or another. The bond between Wordsworthian figures and nature is characterized by simple unity and eternity, in contrast to the constant transformations of culture and society. This focus reflects Wordsworth's quest to recover a distinct and enduring human element in the face of rapid modernization. Elmessiri affirms this quest. However, he argues that Wordsworth's account of "transcendence" of the human above historical changes comes with risks:

> This belief in the myth of the simple, natural man who has a fixed, simple nature is one of the most important premises of Wordsworth's criticism. He seems, at times, to suggest that poetry should concern itself primarily not with men who are subject to historical processes but with men 'who lead the simplest lives, and most according to nature.' Such a position implies that man can transcend historical processes, lead a natural life, and partake of the fixity and eternity of nature. Yet, paradoxically, by partaking of this eternity he becomes a mere part

of nature. Viewing man as a part of nature gives rise to a series of polarities: a strong belief in the absolute freedom of the mind versus an equally strong belief in the dominance of nature; and a belief in the limitless creativity of the ahistorical poet versus a belief in the superiority of merely real natural things to his imagination. It is a polarity of mind versus matter, imagination and art versus reality, and subject versus object.[321]

The tensions and contradictions within Wordsworth's work are sources of attraction for Elmessiri's analysis. Here is an example that Elmessiri can draw upon of a figure who – like himself – sought to recover something distinctly human from the changes happening around him, while struggling not to be shaped by those changes in that very endeavor.

Elmessiri felt that the tensions on display in Wordsworth's work are prerequisite for any humanism. For it is characteristic of the anti-human tendencies in modern thought that they draw us into the partisanship of false dualisms – between objectivity and subjectivity, transcendence and immanence, absolutism and relativism, mind and matter and so forth. The "total man" is neither strictly "natural man" nor purely "spiritual man." Elmessiri affirms Wordsworth's illustrations of this claim.

Wordsworth's own poetry is an attempt to put this principle [of negotiating tensions] into practice – it is the poetry of an egotistically sublime poet who still looks steadily at his subject. When Wordsworth failed to maintain the delicate balance between the two poles, he degenerated either into the literal or the

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[321] Elmessiri, *The Critical Writings of Wordsworth and Whitman*, 13-14.

didactic. The Natural or the Spiritual Man, rather than the total man, moved to the center.[322]

Nevertheless, Wordsworth demonstrates his commitment to this "total man" – and therefore, for Elmessiri, a commitment to humanism – in the wider perspective of his work. Elmessiri discusses a number of examples that make this commitment apparent. First and perhaps most significantly, Wordsworth's specific conception of history exemplifies the humanistic impulse that Elmessiri will go on to embrace. When Elmessiri characterizes Wordsworth's as a "historical" imagination, he does not mean to defend any conception of history as promoting distinctive human interests. For example, as I discussed in Chapter Three, he considers the conception of history underlying the ideology of progress to be fundamentally anti-human because it subordinates human flourishing to particular standards of social and technological change. As Elmessiri notes already in his dissertation, "the historical process could easily be converted into a principle, abstract and ruthless."[323] By contrast, Wordsworth's conception of history is complex and ambivalent, acknowledging that historical events bring good and evil at the same time; sometimes they appear as advances and sometimes as regressions. For Elmessiri, Wordsworth's conception of history is captured in the following poetic excerpt. History is:

A river, which, both in its smaller reaches and larger turnings, is frequently forced back towards its fountains by objects which cannot otherwise be eluded or

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[322] Elmessiri, *The Critical Writings of Wordsworth and Whitman*, 56.
[323] Ibid, 36. This is another stab at Marxist historical materialism.

overcome; yet with an accompanying impulse that will insure its advancement hereafter.[324]

Elmessiri also highlights Wordsworth's characteristically "humanist" approach to epistemological matters, including the most basic concept of "truth." What is shared by humanists "from Aristotle to Mao," Elmessiri argues, is the conviction that human beings are distinct from and superior to all other natural beings. As a result, there is a need for two conceptions of truth with distinct, corresponding criteria:

> First, there is truth in the practical sciences and in natural philosophy, which Wordsworth claimed should 'be sought without scruple and promulgated for its own sake;' second, there is truth in the realm of the human which should be sought for 'purposes moral or intellectual.' There are two distinct criteria: one for man, the other for the merely natural.[325]

This distinction serves as an early cue for Elmessiri of the need to distinguish the natural from the human sciences in his own work.

Wordsworth's importance as a humanist is also evident in his relationship to tradition. In his discussion of Wordsworth, Elmessiri uses the term tradition to refer to the poetic tradition of Wordsworth's age. However, it serves as a broader metaphor for Wordsworth's conception of the past, convention, and limitation. Regarding this theme, Wordsworth again strikes an important balance, acknowledging and working in relationship to tradition, while at the same time creatively interacting with and at times

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[324] Elmessiri, *The Critical Writings of Wordsworth and Whitman*, 37. Elmessiri is quoting from "Answer to the Letter of the Mathetes," Grosart, I, p313.
[325] Ibid, 77.

transcending it. In a comprehensive summary, Elmessiri characterizes at once Wordsworth's theory of genre, tradition, imagination and other topics: "as a creative traditionalist, he did not totally reject literary conventions." Furthermore, he explains that Wordsworth, on the one hand, takes "into account the conventional hierarchy," while at the same time finding "a basis in the realities of human psychology and history as he came to know them."[326]

In his conclusion to the study, Elmessiri summarizes the contrast that he has tried to evoke, providing a clear first look at the direction his own humanistic project will take:

> For Wordsworth, man is rooted in nature, yet he is also a social and historical being whose mind is active, complex, and so capable of generating significance from nature. Wordsworth believed that imaginative poets can convert natural objects into images and symbols. Their originality, however, is neither limitless nor infinite; it is disciplined, as well as enhanced, by the poet's creative interpretation of literary traditions… For Whitman, on the other hand, man is primarily a natural being whose mind is a passive agent. Because it either indiscriminately absorbs nature or gets absorbed by it, the mind of the natural man is incapable of reshaping reality or of imposing a human form on it.[327]

The conflicting conceptions of man outlined here informed Elmessiri's diagnosis of Western modernity and his articulation of Islamic Humanism.

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[326] Elmessiri, *The Critical Writings of Wordsworth and Whitman*, 114.
[327] Ibid, 226.

Although the poetry of Wordsworth and Whitman were important in Elmessiri's early career, his most serious and sustained engagement with Romantic literature can be found in his treatment of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner.* Elmessiri raised an interesting question in the opening of his critical analysis of the poem – the translation of which into Arabic, he conducted and published. He wrote:

> I read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* for the first time when I had just moved from my home town of Damanhour (half village, half city) to Alexandria [Egypt] in 1955. The poem fascinated me, actually swept me off my feet, for I found it [to be] a unique spiritual and aesthetic experience. This led me to ask: what is in this poem (and other English literary works) that deeply touches and moves a young Egyptian, Arab, Muslim, who had no previous relationship with Western culture?[328]

Elmessiri sympathizes with the Mariner because of his own intuitions about certain patterns of modern thought and their impact on Western and non-Western societies. Elmessiri presents Coleridge and the Ancient Mariner (as well as Wordsworth, Yeats, Blake, and others) as comrades in an intellectual, moral and spiritual confrontation with some prominent strands of modern thought. He notes that the poem explores many of the questions that had haunted him throughout his life, elaborating with the following:

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[328] "The Desanctification of Man and Nature: A Study in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner," 1. This critical essay is published in a bilingual text. However, I do not have access to this item. The English portion was provided to me as a word document from Elmessiri's office. Hereafter cited as "Critical Essay."

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner poses many fundamental questions that still face us: Can man develop a system of moral values from natural-material laws, and from value-free natural science? Can any human community operate or even survive without an ultimate point of reference that goes beyond the laws of nature and without a belief in the sacred that transcends [the material realm]? … Can the general principle of material utility serve as its moral frame of reference? [and is the human mind primarily a passive organ responding …to natural laws]?[329]

Elmessiri answers in the negative to each one of these questions, and he feels that the moral and emotional balance of Coleridge's piece tips in his favor. Coleridge, he argues, reflected on the philosophical and material changes that were going on around him and distanced himself from them. Elmessiri draws direct parallels between what he takes to be Coleridge's response and the trajectory of thought of himself and many of his peers:

[Coleridge] started looking for a deeper and more complex view of reality that recognizes the material aspects of man's life, without overlooking the more spiritual aspects. This intellectual development is similar in many aspects to the development of many third world and Islamic intellectuals who begin their career with a general materialist phase, then espouse a humanistic and more complex view of man, society and history, and cast off the narrow materialism, and begin to recognize the specificity of the social and cultural formations they live in. This pattern of shift from materialism to a more complex view of life has crystallized after the failure of modernity to fulfill many of its promises.[330]

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[329] Critical Essay, 2.
[330] Ibid.

Elmessiri felt that the Mariner went through the same journey as he did, having been seduced by materialism and a will to know, committing a crime against the sacred, and then being redeemed by a recognition of the "unseen." The protest that he finds in the poem (against a number of trends that confront him and his part of the world) is a protest that is rooted in Coleridge's Romantic humanism – an impulse against what Elmessiri considers to be the dominant paradigm of modernity, characterized by materialism and instrumental rationality.

According to Elmessiri, *The Ancient Mariner* dramatizes this protest and transformation. It is a poem whose central subject "faces the world with this simple outlook, trying to utilize and totally control it." But the poem culminates in a transformation whereby, "the ancient mariner loses the desire to dominate and control as he welcomes a world he cannot hold in his grip, because it contains more unseen than seen things (as the [famous Latin] epigraph says)."

What is the significance of the powerful impact that the poem had on him? In his words, it *left a deep impression on him and drove him to look for the unseen.* It drove him. Elmessiri loved this poem, but this great passion was no simple aesthetic delight. Rather, it charged him with a task, even burdened him with a quest. Given the basis on which he finds commonality between himself and the Mariner, we might say that Elmessiri is drawn to a kind of discomfort evoked by the narrative – he is moved by sharing in a powerful linguistic venture that agonizes over the epistemological conditions wrought by the Enlightenment.

Adam Zachary Newton has explained that playing the role of reader or listener to a narrative inevitably "exacts a price" – it is an encounter, it demands a response, it draws you into a world and pushes its world into your own. For Newton, the *Rime* itself dramatizes this aspect of narrative: The Mariner is burdened with a story that he must share with reluctant listeners. And although Elmessiri's own analysis of the poem doesn't take this precise form, it does testify to the narrative power that Newton's theory captures. Larry Bouchard puts forward a related evocation. By exploring the theologically rich concept of *kenosis*, or "emptying," Bouchard demonstrates that the encounter with someone's telling of a story – whether as explicitly staged drama or as textual narrative enactment – involves shifts of meaning and thought that can come over us like waves. Newton's and Bouchard's characterization of the relationship of reader to narrative provide particularly illuminating theoretical tools for the case under consideration. For one thing, Elmessiri characterizes his encounter with the poem in terms that resonate with these approaches. When he reads the *Ancient Mariner*, Elmessiri is transformed. Moreover, these theories enrich important recent readings of critique which rely on lenses provided by terms like "tradition(s)," "(weak) ontology," or the simpler notion of multiple "moral sources." Thinking about narrative ethics in terms of the encounter *with* a narrative enables us to think about the ethics of critique on multiple levels simultaneously – not only the way that an encounter with a narrative shapes one's own critical thought (as the *Mariner* did Elmessiri), but also thinking about how the resulting critical narrative itself exists in the world and becomes encountered. This is part of the motivation for the studies in Chapter Five.

What does it mean that Elmessiri's relationship with the *Ancient Mariner* and other Romantic figures stands in the background of his critical and moral project? In part, it means what Bouchard has suggested: that "we cannot see ourselves but through all the particular parts, works, relations, and even dreams that enter [our space of emergent possibilities]."[331] By using Coleridge (a product of Western modernity) as sympathetic voice in his own critique – and by doing so in front of his students and peers – Elmessiri in a sense provides an opportunity for Western modernity to redeem something of its heritage before an audience that has an abundance of reasons to reject it wholesale. Elmessiri's relationship with Romanticism provides a model for engagement with modernity that is both gracious *and* critical. This exemplifies his sense of Islamic Humanism.

The Romantic impulse was not only expressed in literature, it was also the force behind important currents of philosophical reflection and social theory. Elmessiri was likewise moved by his encounters with it in these other fields, particularly as it was expressed by Marx and Marxist thought – a second key resource to which I now turn.

b. *Marxism and Critical Theory*

The Marxist era of my life undermined the concept of unmediated, cumulative, objective monitoring; for Marxism is a comprehensive critical perception of reality that views such reality in all its inter-relatedness and wholeness. It rejects viewing the surface structure as reality as it attempts to probe into the implicit

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[331] Larry D. Bouchard, *Theater and Integrity: Emptying Selves in Drama, Ethics, and Religion*. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 341.

structure and essence. It then presents a revolutionary vision in the name of essence (i.e. the laws of history) transcending factual material reality. This does not differ much from the Romantic view of reality. I have learned from the Romantic poets that the metaphysical essence implicit beyond nature is more important than its physical material surface. This is also the belief of the great nineteenth century thinkers who sought a comprehensive unity that transcended excessive multiplicity and fragmentation, that characterize direct reality. I have read some of the writings of Gyorgy Luckacs [sic] in which he stresses the humanist aspects of Marxist thought (contrary to what I had learned in Egypt of the importance of objective economics). I have also read a lot of the works of Roget Garaudy, when he was a Marxist theorist and used to stress the concept of alienation and will, as well as lesser known Marxist sources (such as the philosophy of Fichte). The other works I read avidly were the writings of the English sociologist (of Polish descent) Zygmunt Bauman, who is concerned with the issues of modernity. He shows that beneath its joyful glittering surface lie dark depths. [332]

The philosophical reflections of Marx and numerous other classical and contemporary social theorists provide Elmessiri with some of his most fundamental vocabulary and conceptual tools. Elmessiri's concerns with alienation, commodification, dehumanization, and value reflect his indebtedness to Marx, and his articulation of a variety of other key observations and analyses borrow on the work of figures such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodore Adorno, Zygmunt Bauman, and others. The relationship between Marxist and other social-theoretical analysis and contemporary Arab and

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[332] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 324 (210).

Muslim thought is a particularly rich and important subject, worthy of extensive research. However, it warrants more space and time than this chapter will offer.[333]

Here, my discussion will be anchored by the questions, *how did Elmessiri characterize the role of these figures in his own work? What values did he derive or appropriate from Marx's work? What are the norms and commitments exemplified by Marx that Elmessiri employs?* and *What was the significance of Marxism in Elmessiri's mature thought?* I will then turn to consider other influences from the social theory of the Frankfurt School theorists, whose distinctive appropriation of Marx was a resource for Elmessiri. These inquiries are important because they will further unpack the contents of Elmessiri's paradigm and the meaning of Islamic Humanism; they will also shed light on his difficult relationship with Western Modernity and Western intellectual traditions, and his need for an engagement characterized by critical retrieval.

Elmessiri's relationship with Marxism dates back to his years as a university student in Alexandria. This was a period of religious crisis and doubt for Elmessiri, and he was able to identify with Marxist characterizations of religion as an obstacle to emancipation from injustice. Though there was a time in his life when he straightforwardly called himself a Marxist and worked within the Communist Party, he distanced himself from this designation relatively early on. Moreover, he claims that he spent much of his career battling with his own lingering materialist tendencies.

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[333] Some important background literature for such inquiries includes Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy*, Elizabeth Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*; Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought*; Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*; Ernest Gellner, "Islam and Marxism: Some Comparisons," *International Affairs* 67.1 (1991): 1-6 Bassam Tibi, "Islam and Modern European Ideologies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18.01 (1986): 15-29*;* Kamran Talatoff*,* "Comrade Akbar: Islam, Marxism, and Modernity," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.3 (2005): 634-49.

However, unlike many members of his generation who eventually rejected Marxism wholesale, Elmessiri went on to become what he called "a hyphenated Marxist" (humanist-Marxist, or even "Sunni-Marxist" – another way of saying "Islamic-Marxist").[334] Beginning from a somewhat caricatured Marxism in his youth, Elmessiri went on to adapt Marxist insights to his own "dormant paradigm," using them to give form to his nascent vision.

Elmessiri makes a careful distinction between *Marxism* (a modern ideology vulnerable to the criticism outlined in Chapter Three) and *Marxist humanism,* which is the humanistic impulse driving Marx's critique of political economy. Some important errors take place in the space between these two facets of Marx's work. That space is characterized by a tension at the heart of Marx's work (a tension which Elmessiri's work explores more generally): the tension between scientific rigor and ethical sensitivity. Elmessiri provides a vivid illustration of the gap between Marxist humanism and the politicized ideology of Marxism. Reflecting on his early days as a member of the communist party, he describes how the impulse that led him to Communism became transformed into ideological commitment. He writes,

> I always like to live up to my ideas, as far as possible. I recall going for a walk along the [sea] with my fiancée, she saw a beggar and wanted to give him some money and I stopped her so that he 'could feel the injustice and join the revolution.' This is a typical Marxist reaction to individual empathy with the

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[334] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (185).

poor (things changed after that, and I separated collective revolution from individual misery).[335]

This phase of his relationship to Marxism did not last long. Concerns about class and revolution had to be connected to individual misery, and this would mean compromising on the party line. Additionally, Elmessiri began to feel a renewed attraction to religious faith, noting in this time a deeper feeling of kinship with his religious friends (whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish).

What, then, are the points of connection between Marxist humanism and Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism? First, Elmessiri establishes a basic distinction between societies held together by "contractualism" and those held together by what he calls "compassionate solidarity."[336] He describes the appeal of Marxism by claiming that Marx too was driven by a longing for compassionate solidarity, and that this may be even more fundamental than his scientific and revolutionary fervor:

> Karl Marx (in spite of his revolutionary rhetoric) belonged to the German sociological tradition with its admiration for traditional societies based on compassionate solidarity (Gemeinschaft). Furthermore, the Humanist Marxist critique of Western modernity and the destiny of Western man stems from the same tradition.[337]

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[335] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 140 (82).

[336] These terms come from German social theory. Elmessiri apparently takes them from Max Weber. See his studies in *Dirāsāt.*

[337] With the latter he has in mind Gyorgy Luckacs, the Frankfurt School social theorists, Herbert Marcuse, and others. I will discuss these other figures briefly at the end of this section.

This is at the same time an implicit reference to the connections that Elmessiri perceived between Marx and the Romantic tradition. They share, he suggests, a longing for a past when human life in community was richer and more *natural*, which seems to mean more attuned to community.

Elmessiri also finds in Marx a model for a critical stance towards a number of key elements of modernity and modern society that does not thereby demolish the points of reference by which we may make clear moral judgments. With dramatic approbation, he provides an explicit and extended discussion of what Marxism provided for him in the passage that follows:

I think it was humanist Marxism that saved me from nihilism, lack of direction, and the post-modernist celebration of the death of Man, or transforming Man into mathematical equations. (There is within Marxism an extreme materialistic trend that is in contrast to the humanist tendency; I, however, was a student of humanist Marxism and never fell into the trap of abstract scientific 'laws.' Perhaps, I was attracted to humanist Marxism because of the paradigm embedded in my consciousness and imagination that does not regard Man as a natural material being but envisions that there is one law for Man and another for things and animals. This paradigm may have religious roots, for it refers to a world beyond the world of matter). Furthermore, Marxism was supported by other tendencies inherent in me, like the denunciation of injustice and exploitation. Over and above, Marxism provided me with a solid critical foundation from which I could view my Egyptian bourgeois environment. Later on, when in the United States, it did the same for me in my new American environment and so I was not – like many of my generation – overwhelmed by what I saw and was not enchanted with consumerism and the desire to acquire more and more goods and objects. Through Marxism I kept my critical and

analytical perspective, my independence from my surroundings and my ability to see these surroundings not as a series of details, but as an integrated whole, a web of relationships.[338]

Elmessiri clearly links his humanism to that of Marx, but perhaps more significantly, he links Marxism to a more general humanist disposition. Marx is a valuable ally to the extent that his writing serves to promote and defend a distinctive human realm and to highlight the limitations of modern science in comprehending and manipulating human life. Aspects of Marx's work do exhibit the kinds of humanistic concerns that propel Elmessiri's critique. However, Elmessiri disparages the conflicting scientific impulses of Marxist theory. He explains:

Marxism, despite its materialistic claims, affirms the dialectics of man and nature and takes its point of departure from man's capacity at transcendence. In many of the writings of Marx and Engels we find a severe criticism of the thought of the 18th century and of its rationalism and mechanical materialism. Marxism like romanticism, is concerned with primeval innocence, (i.e., communist society), and sees that the end must be similar to the beginning and that compassionate solidarity will replace contractualism! (But Marx was careful to surround all this with the aura of science, objectivity and neutrality!)"[339]

Marx (and many of his interpreters) yielded too significantly to the scientism of the day. Furthermore, although he downplays them in this passage, even Marxist humanism suffers shortcomings with respect to Elmessiri's concerns. It remains "materialist,"

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[338] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 143 (84).
[339] Ibid, 212 (134).

which within Elmessiri's frame of analysis, accounts for its vulnerability to ideological predation. Thus, Elmessiri characterizes the early stages of the development of Islamic Humanism in terms of a "widening" of Marxist ideology.

Elmessiri finds a more precise critical, Marx-inspired project in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. The Frankfurt school thinkers have a very similar relationship to Marx's thought as that which Elmessiri comes to model. They view Marx as having provided not a methodological template or another version of a theory modeled on the positive sciences, but rather a *critical* method – a methodology for reflecting on and relating to knowledge itself. For the Frankfurt school thinkers, the most significant outcome of this difference is that while a traditional theory may produce scientific knowledge, a critical theory may inform and generate *praxis*. The Frankfort School thinkers understand critical theory to be oriented towards understanding and enriching the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practice in social life. This characteristic of their work is valuable to Elmessiri – particularly later in his career.

For Elmessiri, this type of theory – a reflexive one – is instructive because it is able to perceive, and therefore call into question, the impacts of knowledge and ways of knowing in social life. One of Elmessiri's conclusions – which was the focus of Chapter Three – is that Western epistemology has produced grave challenges to ethics. One of the most significant consequences that both Elmessiri and the Frankfurt School thinkers address is the erosion of distinctively human life and values in the middle and late 20th Century. A critical theory is uniquely able to observe this relationship between epistemology (and the imagination more broadly – concepts, metaphors, narratives,

"paradigms") and ethics. Elmessiri links this central observation of his own work to that of the Frankfurt School, in contrast with the modern scientific enterprise of attaining mastery over nature:

> The discourse of the Frankfurt School…shows how the Enlightenment invited man to regard nature as usable matter. The Enlightenment project was an attempt to liberate man from his fear of natural forces. However, the progress in controlling nature is accompanied with an erosion of the man's inner emotional life and feelings. As nature is ever more efficiently broken down to facilitate its exploitation, man is deconstructed and the human whole gradually disappears. This is the Enlightenment dialectic: progress in dominating nature is matched by the fragmentation of man.[340]

Defying the partition between critical and constructive thought, Elmessiri discovers the potential of humanism in this project of critical theory. According to Elmessiri, the Frankfurt School's humanistic impulse is evident in its concern with the Enlightenment's failures, insofar as the emphasis – the basis for critique – is the suffering of humanity. And if humanity is the victim, thought is the culprit. For Elmessiri, the Frankfurt School's effort at developing and maintaining a critical theory is an effort at reconnecting theory to practices of defining and realizing human flourishing.

Elmessiri also learns from the Frankfurt School's ambivalence about working within an Enlightenment paradigm, in some form. The theorists of the Frankfurt School did not simply reject the Enlightenment, nor did they imagine that Enlightenment could

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[340] Haggag Ali, "Conversation with Abdelwahab Elmessiri," in "The Cognitive Mapping of Modernity and Postmodernity," 196.

be simply redeemed through minor theoretical corrections. However, they remained committed to Enlightenment's underlying objective of attaining human "emancipation." As I discussed briefly in Chapter One, the Frankfurt School models the delicate relationship that Elmessiri, too, must establish with modernity: using some elements to develop a critique of others.

Regarding more specific details of the two bodies of work, Elmessiri's grievances with what he characterizes as an overly rationalized and consumer-centric American culture reveals his familiarity with the Frankfurt School discourse. Chiming in with a chorus of contemporary critics (not only progeny of the Frankfurt School) Elmessiri lambasts the consumerism (*istihlākiyya*) that has emerged from the paradigmatic sequence of modernity, whereby production and consumption become mutually reinforcing ends in themselves. Like the Frankfurt School theorists, Elmessiri argues that these activities are no longer propelled by the drive for creativity, transcendence, and the exploration of human freedom. Rather consumerist societies reflect the reductive, "one-dimensional" nature of human existence in the modern age – an existence that is dangerously vulnerable to anti-human tendencies:

> The Frankfurt school thinkers (who have had a deep impact on my thought) argue that the acceleration of rationalization rates in society has led to the disappearance of the true individual, and of the critical mind that can transcend the status quo. Man has become a one-dimensional being (Herbert Marcuse) whose existence is confined to material production and consumption. His mind becomes instrumental, concerned with monitoring, description and perception of details and difference processes, but is incapable of perceiving ultimate ends.

Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the increasing rationalization of social relationships in the modern era has led to the decrease of the individual's independence and to the standardization of life. It has led, ultimately to racism and totalitarianism. They even go as far as claiming that capitalism has translated the ideals of the enlightenment into the reality of disciplined (regulated) Nazi concentration camps, where total dominance over man was reached.[341]

Elmessiri borrows from the Frankfurt school the argument that although much of modernity may be characterized in terms of human domination over the natural, material world, eventually the human subject gets swallowed up in those very mechanisms of domination.

The Frankfurt School thinkers also demonstrate that critique of the social sciences – and even of theory itself – is an important site of moral inquiry. This is something that I discussed briefly in Chapter One. There I described that Elmessiri learns from the Frankfurt School that critique must be understood not simply as a targeting of particular problems, but as an exercise in reflexivity of critical inquiry itself. Elmessiri proves to have absorbed this understanding when he takes his own critique *to the next level* by arguing that the approach of critical theory is limited by its materialist assumptions – there is a need for transcendence, not just in method, but in the structure of imagination – ultimately *in faith*.

Elmessiri seems to find that the commitment to reflexivity on the part of the Frankfurt School is a central feature of a more general conception of "humanism." The

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[341] Elmessiri, *Autobiography* 218 (138).

human being is a qualitatively different type of object of study. Therefore the theory developed must be qualitatively different: it must be self-conscious and self-critical – this is the meaning of "critical theory." For Elmessiri this difference signifies the crucial "space" between the natural and the human or social world – a prerequisite for any humanism.

The intellectual relationships that I have presented in this section also illustrate the conversational and narrative dimensions of Elmessiri's work. His thought builds upon theirs, at times directly borrowing, at times extending and at times repudiating. As may be evident from a number of the passages that I have cited throughout this dissertation, Elmessiri does not engage with authors through a standard practice of quotation and citation. At times this is to a fault. For, it limits the potential for critical analysis that his readers might wish to conduct. However, it is also one of the more interesting features of his work. For, instead of meticulously citing and analyzing the claims of his peers and predecessors, Elmessiri weaves their arguments, ideas and stories about modernity into his own unfolding account.

The Anglo-American Romantic tradition and the European social and critical theorists played a vital role in the development of Elmessiri's Humanism as a project that is both visionary-constructive and critical. However, Elmessiri's Humanism is not simply a synthesis of his readings in Western literary and philosophical tradition. It is substantially informed by his understanding of and commitment to Islam. In the next section, I will explore this component of his scholarly identity in more detail.

c. Islam: ijtihād *as Critical Retrieval?*

In mapping modernity, I was much influenced by humanist Marxism. At the beginning I embraced historical materialism and the materialist interpretation of human existence. However, I was attracted much to Marxism because it had strong theoretical foundations and offered me at the time a humanist critique of man's alienation in the modern world. However, with the decline of leftist movements and the rise of political Islam, I came to abandon the materialist interpretation of history, embracing instead an Islamic paradigm which I developed, a paradigm that places a distance between the creator and the created, the creator and nature, and finally between man and nature. I came to realize that Islam represents a worldview that rejects the materialist Promethean and Faustian outlook. It calls for a balance between man and the universe rather than establishing paradise on earth or putting an end to history or harnessing man and nature in the service of the powerful. In other words, I discovered the humanism of Islam.[342]

Even before Elmessiri's first embrace of Marx as a university student, he had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood – and an active one, particularly for his youth. Elmessiri also observed the interconnections between Marxist and Islamist ideology, and he described what he witnessed, writing:

Early in my life…I joined the Muslim Brotherhood for a short period. I got to know a large group of people most of whom were middle class or lower middle

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[342] Elmessiri made these remarks in an exchange of letters published in the PhD Thesis of Haggag Ali. "Conversation with Abdelwahab Elmessiri," in "The Cognitive Mapping of Modernity and Postmodernity," 193-194.

class. What was surprising about this experience was that I discovered that many of the communists in Damanhour had been members of the Muslim Brotherhood before they joined the Communist Party and vice versa…Apparently this period was one of soul searching and discovery for all.[343]

Many in his generation concluded the soul-searching with a firm Islamist identity (whether within the Muslim Brotherhood or other organized groups, or simply through more informal or personal shifts in vocabulary, practice, and dress). The widespread shift among intellectuals of Elmessiri's generation from adherence to Marxism to the embrace of Islamism is an important trend that remains relevant to analysis of contemporary ethical and political discourse in Egypt and other parts of the Muslim world. Elmessiri is one of its representatives. His transformations stand out, however, as he remains vocal about his enduring indebtedness to Marxism, even until the end of his career. Yet, Elmessiri is known as an Islamic thinker and he situates his work within the discourses, commitments, and history of Islam. Therefore, I want now to more carefully consider the sense in which Elmessiri's Humanism is *Islamic*.

Perhaps the most significant element that shaped Elmessiri's philosophical and moral vision was the shift in his life during which he re-centered himself and his work in the conceptual world of Islamic tradition. Elmessiri is not shy about this change, from a period that was not simply characterized by "materialism" but by deep and nagging doubts with respect to his faith. It would not be correct to say that Elmessiri "converted" or even "reverted" to Islam. For, he grew up a Muslim in a Muslim land. And although he passed through an important and serious period of doubt, he never

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[343] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 55 (31).

explicitly broke with his Islamic identity. However, he did have a definitive transformation in his relationship to Islam, and particularly his understanding of the ethical significance of a transcendent God. There is a philosophical and a personal component to Elmessiri's transformation. These components are related.

Philosophically, Elmessiri's embrace of Islam is part of an intellectual realization that crystallizes in the process of his critical analysis of Western modernity and the paradigm of immanent materialism. He discovers that his pursuit of a way out of this cramped and claustrophobic world-view is only possible if there is a transcendent point of reference to which one may tether a lifeline. He acknowledges that this requires metaphysical thinking – a fraught and uncomfortable activity in much modern and postmodern reflection.

But Elmessiri's philosophical discoveries correspond to important realities that form the backdrop of his personal life.[344] Elmessiri speaks of Islamic Humanism as a paradigm that was always present or "latent" in his psyche. It required certain key moments of comprehension to come to full realization. As he states, the rise of political Islam offered him a context within which to take seriously the intellectual dimensions of his inherited faith tradition. There are also a few anecdotes in his autobiography, which enrich the philosophical narrative of Elmessiri's return to Islam. In one recollection, he credits observations about different Christian figures that he encountered – both famous thinkers and personal relations. Noticing patterns, he began to think increasingly about religion and religiosity, which ultimately moved him to return to Islam: "I [began] to

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[344] In referring to his personal life here, I mean simply mean to draw attention to his situated life, in contrast to the logic of his philosophical project.

feel that the category of religion was a valid one in the analysis of solid material reality, not just a part of a distant metaphysical world. That is, religion gradually grew to be part of and not separate from [my analysis of] man's historical identity. Thus, I started to get acquainted with the Islamic religious experience so as to understand its inner logic and spirit."[345]

In an earlier section, I acknowledged the problematic question of whether Elmessiri's turn to Islam is reducible to an intellectual maneuver. Some of his statements – including to some extent the one that opens this section – support this characterization. However, whatever the origins, through the course of the maturation of his project, Elmessiri becomes thoroughly immersed in an Islamic world-outlook. In his work, the defining mark of this changed orientation is his usage of two terms, which he takes to be unique to an Islamic worldview: *tawḥīd* (the one-ness of God and cosmic unity) and *ijtihād* (interpretive/critical engagement). Elmessiri's usage of these two terms is an important component of his project of critical retrieval, because he gives them a distinctive meaning in relationship to the other components of his critique. Moreover, from them, he derives another term that he considers to be uniquely Islamic: "Islamic Relativism" (*al-nisbiyya al-islāmiyya*)

Elmessiri finds that the moral and social ideals of Islam serve to combat the problems that he associates with the materialist paradigm of the West. This is because they are formulated around the basic insight that the world is created by God, who is outside of it but who has an intimate relationship to it. He uses the term

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[345] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 190 (118).

"transcendence" to capture this schema. Transcendence is the defining feature of Islam's *Tawḥīdī Paradigm.* Elmessiri's emphasis on "transcendence" as a theological principle does not signal a preoccupation with absolute power. Rather, transcendence creates the conditions of *difference* and *reference.* The reality of a dimension which transcends the natural and material in the metaphysical structure of the world provides the conditions for differences to co-exist and interact.

It is from this basic insight that Elmessiri develops the concept of Islamic Relativism. Elsewhere in his critical narrative, Elmessiri discusses the moral bankruptcy of relativism as it emerges in a thoroughly materialistic worldview such as that which he claims dominates modernity. This style of relativism is anti-human because it dissolves human uniqueness in (as he calls it) *a world of flux* (*al-ṣayrūra*), where nothing is permanent. On the other hand, Elmessiri acknowledges the grains of humanism in the philosophical projects that gave rise to relativism: the simple alternative – a human world governed by conceptual absolutes – is equally anti-human, in that it undermines the diverse forms of life and modes of transcendence captured by Elmessiri's anthropology. The Islamic Relativism that Elmessiri defends is what might be called a "guided" or "oriented" relativism. He defines it in this way: "to believe that there is one absolute, the word of God (revelation), and the rest is *ijtihād,* i.e., human endeavors and interpretations. That is, everything human is relative in its relation to the absolute that exists outside the order of nature."[346] Elsewhere, he elaborates:

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[346] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 209 (131).

[Islamic relativism] is the belief that God alone is permanent and unchanging, and all else is transient and changing. He alone is omniscient. We humans know only part of the truth… Islamic relativism that I call for does not lead to nihilism. It is a relativism within a framework and does not extend to the ultimate point of reference. It does not lead to an excessive plurality of meanings and centers which cancel each other out, till the world becomes meaningless and center-less.[347]

The humanism of an Islamic worldview, Elmessiri argues, is that it provides for some degree of relativism: there is one God, but there may be an infinite number of ways of relating to God.

Elmessiri does not provide a thorough elaboration of what it means that "there is one absolute, the word of God (revelation), and the rest is *ijtihād*." This claim in itself does not contribute any clarity to questions about the legitimate modes of interpretation by which revelation (the absolute) shapes political or personal life. However, his emphasis on *ijtihād* signals certain alliances, which may provide needed clarity on this matter. Although he does not have traditional training as a scholar of Islam, his search for a plurality of meanings – one that avoids what he sees as the incoherent nihilism of plurality in the Nietzschean tradition – resonates with the work of a number of figures who have attempted to nurture and enrich interpretive practices among Muslims. One important strategy in this regard has been to disentangle and theorize the relationship between Sharī'ah (usually translated as "Islamic law," but to be more accurate, it

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[347] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 311 (202). Elmessiri does not include the Qur'anic verses in the English translation. He has not, however, excluded such citations from the entire English translation.

designates for Muslims the lawful and pious path through life) and *fiqh* (the practices of jurisprudence that seek to understand Sharī'ah through case by case application).

Fazlur Rahman has set an important example in this trend. He emphasizes a Qur'an-based distinction between "Ideal Law" and "legal rules," claiming that we cannot finally claim to know the Ideal Law. Rahman finds that this distinction no longer figures prominently into the Islamic sciences. He explains that, "despite the distinction between legal rules and the Ideal Law, a distinction supported by the Qur'an and the later tradition…both *fiqh* and Sharī'ah became generally equated with specific rules, and it is obedience to these rules that constituted the fulfillment of God's will."[348] Rahman proposes that the Qur'an, as the bearer of Sharī'ah, be approached as a unified message of moral admonition, "and not as so many isolated commands and injunctions."[349] Understood this way, however, *fiqh* will have to be accompanied by activities of theological and ethical reflection, which constantly consider and reconsider the interaction of an eternal, divine message with historical circumstances and concerns. The distinction between Sharī'ah and *fiqh* as advocated and described by Fazlur Rahman and others is valuable insofar as it establishes an intractable distance between human knowledge and divine truth. This distance becomes an interpretive distance, across which the activity of *ijtihād* moves and within with diversity may thrive.[350]

The emphasis in Rahman's analysis differs from Elmessiri's: while both are attempting to negotiate the stability and authority of the text with the dynamism of

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[348] Fazlur Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," 5.

[349] Ibid, 11.

[350] For discussion of uncertainty and fallibilism in Islamic traditions of *fiqh,* see Bernard Weiss, *The Spirit of Islamic Law*.

human history, Elmessiri's worry about relativism in postmodern thinking is more prominent in his analysis, while Rahman's concerns about rigid conservatism in Islamic legal theory stand out in his. Nevertheless, their respective conceptions of the relationship between human knowledge and divine truth harmonize, as both seek to engage a transcendent source of truth in a manner that acknowledges human limitations, as well as historically and culturally specific needs. This seems to shed light on Elmessiri's meaning when he says "the rest is *ijtihād*."

Still, it is clear that there is more at stake for Elmessiri than the technical and sometimes tedious details of jurisprudence. Nor did he imagine himself to be anywhere near qualified as a legal scholar. *Ijtihād* for him is not only a method of rigorous engagement with and interpretation of canonical texts; it is a general mode of interpretive engagement. For example, he uses the term *ijtihād* in the context of literary studies,[351] as well as in the context of the reconstruction of the social sciences. *Ijtihād* may be brought to the text of modernity itself. I am not in a position to assess the legitimacy of this usage. But it is an important component of Elmessiri's critical engagement with Islamic tradition.

I suggest that we think of Elmessiri's notion of *ijtihād* not (or not simply) as a rigorous conceptual tool, but rather (evoking Foucault[352]) as an *attitude*. This is not the same as (or, again, not simply) the "attitude of modernity" but an attitude of critical retrieval – an expression that summarizes the project of Islamic Humanism and its

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[351] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (239). He says, "In literary studies, the researcher tries to move beyond the direct explicit 'subject' and deeper into the implicit theme…because the theme is implicit, the mind cannot monitor it directly, but has to toil to endeavor, to deconstruct, to reconstruct, to abstract and to exercise *ijtihad* in order to reach it."

[352] See Chapter 1.

partner Islamic Relativism. Elmessiri's notion of *ijtihād* informed his engagement with a number of texts and traditions, particularly those surveyed above, by illuminating their potential role in the search for a new analytical paradigm and a "new modernity."

V.   Other Humanisms

I have described the relationship between Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism and several other broad traditions of reflection, including its *Islamic* component. However, until now I have not addressed Islamic Humanism insofar as it relates to other recent understandings of "humanism." To thoroughly address this would be to develop another extensive project. It is beyond the scope of this one. Nevertheless, I want to point to a couple of recent conceptualizations of humanism that seem particularly relevant to Elmessiri's work. The first is Edward Said's usage of the term, which I consider to be particularly relevant because of its close connection to critique and because of other parallels between Said's and Elmessiri's work and careers. The second is William Schweiker's concept of "theological humanism," which I consider to be relevant because he relies on a theological conception of creation to address shortcomings in Enlightenment-based versions of humanism and other "inner-worldly" alternatives. Elmessiri and Said share a perspective on and consciousness of power; Elmessiri and Schweiker share a theological outlook that understands the conditions for ethics and human community as being established by a transcendent God.

Said uses the term humanism effectively as a synonym for "critique," or more specifically, a sustained attitude of inquiry that combines both curiosity (an interest in learning and understanding) and skepticism (a recognized need to doubt and challenge). He describes his understanding of humanism in relationship to his most well-known critical project, *Orientalism*:

> My idea in Orientalism is to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange. I have called what I try to do "humanism," a word I continue to use stubbornly despite the scornful dismissal of the term by sophisticated postmodern critics. By humanism I mean first of all attempting to dissolve Blake's mind-forg'd manacles so as to be able to use one's mind historically and rationally for the purposes of reflective understanding and genuine disclosure. Moreover, humanism is sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods: strictly speaking, therefore, there is no such thing as an isolated humanist.[353]

This discussion fits Elmessiri's conceptualization in several ways. First, it expresses a desire to produce a mode of engagement that will replace deadlocked oppositions and polemical debates; second, it acknowledges the problematic nature of humanism in the current climate of postmodern critique; third, it insists that humanism is a practice situated in a community of ongoing inquiry whose concerns, questions, and commitments go beyond the boundaries of a particular time and place. Moreover, for

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[353] From the preface to the 2003 edition of *Orientalism*.

Said as well as Elmessiri, humanism can be characterized as "an ongoing practice and not as a possession."[354] This is evident in Elmessiri's strong association between Humanism and *ijtihād* as an interpretive practice, as opposed to a set of straightforward claims about humanity and human goods.

Said's conceptualization also departs from and presents a challenge to Elmessiri's. For, in spite of his careful refinements of what humanism might mean for us today, he remains committed to an understanding of humanism that would seem to unnecessarily alienate important allies. He writes, "For my purposes here, the core of humanism is the *secular* notion that the historical world is made by men and women, *and not by God*, and that it can be understood rationally according to the principle formulated by Vico in *New Science*, that we can really know only what we make or, to put it differently, we can know things according to the way they were made."[355] Said offers a slight qualification for this strict secular orientation when he adds, "there is always something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable, and arguable about humanistic knowledge," which he says, "gives the whole idea of humanism a tragic flaw that is constitutive to it and cannot be removed."[356] Elmessiri would agree with the latter description of humanistic knowledge as incomplete and disputable. However, he and Said differ over the classic humanist concern that insofar as we posit realms that are fundamentally inaccessible to human knowledge, there will always be a risk that those metaphysical boundaries will become converted into entrenched and unquestionable worldly controls and structures of power. Said

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[354] Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 6.
[355] Ibid, 11. Emphasis added.
[356] Ibid, 12.

embraces this familiar concern; Elmessiri does not. For Said, this means that humanists must disavow a theological worldview that posits a transcendent creator; for Elmessiri, such a disavowal forecloses any true humanism.

Thus we can look to our second interlocutor on the subject of humanism: William Schweiker, whose discussion of humanism and his formulation of "theological humanism" may offer avenues around this deadlock. All three thinkers acknowledge that humanism must not become of an arena in which to celebrate unrestricted human capacities. However, Schweiker places more emphasis on this concern, which he calls "overhumanization," than the other two thinkers, who place greater urgency on rescuing a distinctive human perspective from the forces of natural, divine, or historical processes. Schweiker summarizes what he takes to be the basic challenges facing humanistic thinkers today:

> First, how, if at all, can we limit the relentless drive of technological power to enfold all life within its kingdom and thereby subdue any 'outside to the human project? Along with Regis Debray and others, I will speak about this enfolding as the "overhumanization of the world." Many people find this enfolding of life suffocating; they long for an 'outside,' for some transcendence… Second, in the light of the obvious threat that unbridled human power poses to all life on the planet, how are we, if at all, to provide a sustained vision adequate to orient human life? In a complex and culturally diverse global situation, can we even speak of a 'we' in any morally relevant way? Seen with a telescope the central challenge facing ethics, then, is how to fashion in a global context a form of thought and way of life that respects and enhances the integrity of human existence within but not against other forms of life? Stated bluntly, must one

reject any claim to the distinctive worth of human beings in order to counter the many endangerments to other forms of life? This is the specific form the question of humanism is taking in our time.[357]

Schweiker notes that there is a paradox about human self-regard, which seems to confirm the theological ethicist's insight that humanity cannot fully and finally fashion the world in its own best image of itself. He cites Vaclav Havel: "as soon as man began considering himself the source of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, the world began to lose its human dimension, and man began to lose control of it." It is precisely a theological outlook that keeps this human self-regard in check. However, this is not meant to fundamentally undermine human capacity. Schweiker, like Elmessiri, insists that it is indeed a *humanism* that must address these problems and conundrums, and not a sweeping transfer of all agency to a transcendent being, or any other non-human process or force. For, it is not human creativity or technological innovation *per se* that constitutes the over-humanization of the world, but rather an ideology of control-maximization. This concern is evident in Elmessiri's work, particularly his repeated references to the figure of Prometheus as a modern hero.[358]

In turning to a theological conception of human agency, Schweiker finds a needed balance between human capacity and limitation. He conceives of theological

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[357] William Schweiker, "Theological Ethics and the Question of Humanism," *The Journal of Religion* 38:4 (2003), 542-543.

[358] There are a number of references to Prometheus throughout Elmessiri's Autobiography. In one place, Elmessiri describes having battled with a Prometheus in his own personality. Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 461.

humanism as part of a more general approach to the reflection on human goods and values that theological ethicists have always embraced:

> Theological ethics is… a way of analyzing and articulating the lived structure of reality in order to provide orientation and guidance for life. The theological ethicist does not just imagine how life ought to be over against the actual structure of lived reality. One seeks, rather, to illuminate the structures of existence as always and already saturated with worth and purpose that human action ought to respect and enhance. Its distinctive character is that reality and human life are understood from a theological perspective, existing before God. Its ethical purpose is to aid human beings as agents in thinking about and responsibly conducting their lives.[359]

Schweiker makes a powerful case for preferring projects of *theological* humanism in ethics, because of the unique ethical power of the symbolic systems constituting religious traditions. As Schweiker notes, "the religions are treasure troves of symbolic resources for ethical thinking."[360] To illustrate what he understands to be examples of mining this treasure, he demonstrates a metaphorical analysis of other approaches in ethics, and he points to patterns in the formation of judgments about human capacities and limits that religious traditions make available – terms like "temptation," "defilement," "sin" and "karma," uniquely illuminate the hazards of human self-regard.

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[359] Schweiker, "Theological Ethics and Humanism," 542.
[360] Ibid, 556.

These considerations so far emphasize the "theological" component of Schweiker's humanism. What makes theological humanism stand out as humanistic in his account is its capacity for and willingness to conduct immanent critique:

> A theological humanist inhabits her or his tradition in a specific way. Mindful again of human fallibility, one is reticent to claim exclusive validity for one's own apprehension of religious truths. Furthermore, a theological humanist insists on isolating the systemic distortions in his or her tradition that are the source of ethical and political lapses found in societies and lives shaped by that tradition. Rather than pinning the evils of the world solely on forces external to the tradition, forces like "modernity" or the "Enlightenment" or the "West," a theological humanist admits and addresses the profound ambiguity of his or her home tradition…theological humanists take a genuinely "critical" attitude toward their tradition.[361]

In both its "theological" and its "humanist" components, Schweiker's conception is a good approximation of what Elmessiri has tried to formulate. Further conversation among thinkers reflecting on possible meanings of humanism in this late-modern setting would be fruitful.

VI.   Closing

Elmessiri conferred the task of fully developing Islamic Humanism upon his students and future generations of readers. In an interview with the Egyptian al-Nīl

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[361] Schweiker, "Theological Ethics and Humanism," 557.

channel, Elmessiri states that all of his work, though varying in subject matter, is an expression of the same idea: Islamic Humanism.[362] And so it is important now to explore Islamic Humanism as expressed in his active life and his legacy.

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[362] Dīwān Mudīrīyya, fīlm tasjīlī 'an riḥlat al-misūrī al-fikrīyya, li-l-mukhrija lamiyā' jūda, intāj qanāt al-nīl li-l-akhbār.

Chapter Five:

A Scholar's Legacy and Following

The Egyptian's love for joking could be the outcome of long historic experience that allowed him to live with many contradictions, moments of victory and defeat and feelings of strength and impotence. This has made the Egyptian capable of developing a philosophical outlook that envelopes the contradictions and allows him to overcome them through jokes. This has not ruled out his ability to overcome contradiction by resorting to revolution."[363]

The case that Elmessiri represents is a phenomenon in itself – an "Elmessirian Phenomenon."[364]

I.   **Introduction**

Elmessiri's development of a broad critical narrative, and his search for a principle of humanity that cuts across differences while withstanding the much-needed operations of critique, has invited a wide circle of people into ongoing conversations and processes of meaning-making that have already taken many forms. To return to the initial questions framing this project, in this chapter I will begin to address the question *what kinds of relationships and responsibilities emerge as critiques unfold?*[365] Those

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[363] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, 49 (26).

[364] Ḥāzim Sālim, "The Elmessirian Phenomenon: Thinker/Human," in *In the World of Abdelwahab Elmessiri*, 467.

[365] To gesture at what this would look like in comparative perspective, it would involve a kind of "ethnography" of a network like that formed around Scriptural Reasoning, adherents to radical orthodoxy, followers of Stanley Hauerwas, and other examples of centers of learning and broader

relationships and responsibilities may be identified by attending to the communities, practices, and conversations that coalesce around a critical narrative. Elmessiri developed a critical narrative that had embedded within it a vision of a new ethical framework that would inform human relationships (from the local and everyday to the broader social and political) as well as future research in the social sciences. This chapter describes the interpretation and application of Elmessiri's ideas among his students, colleagues, "disciples," and other interlocutors. It looks not just at what they argue, but also at how they have undertaken to respond to and interpret Elmessiri's work together. The material is drawn largely from conversations with and writings of those people influenced by his work; I also report on and describe a variety of media for producing Elmessiri's legacy. Not all are in agreement with Elmessiri in terms of conceptual framework or theoretical analysis; but all acknowledge his importance as a provocateur of critical inquiry, an instigator of social and political change, and an exemplar of his own Humanism.

I will maintain that Elmessiri's project of critical retrieval – including his Islamic Humanism – is fundamentally open and incomplete. He does not provide a template for political and social life. Many confirmed for me in conversation that they as his students and interlocutors were meant to continue to develop and apply his work in their respective fields of expertise. They insist that he neither claimed nor attempted to provide complete answers to the questions that he raised. Through this openness, Elmessiri's work has put practices into play that rarely found a venue in the Egypt of the

communities formed around critical narratives. The far more famous "Frankfurt School" might also be a case for analysis in this manner.

Mubarak era. It has provided a pattern to follow for those who were engaged with him in thinking and participating in public life.

I first provide some more general reflections on the value of investigating Elmessiri's legacy and following. Next, I survey the mediums through which Elmessiri's work is explored and his legacy kept alive, as well as some of the representative depictions of his character. Here, I also begin to explore the relationship between Elmessiri's career as an intellectual and writer, and his status as a moral exemplar, by looking at his place in traditional and social media and by introducing some of the traditions and practices that formed around him. The next section will introduce and discuss some members of Elmessiri's close circle of students and their ongoing work. Finally, I will look into the widespread claim that Elmessiri's work encouraged, influenced, or even prophesied the uprising of January-February, 2011.

II.   Critique Beyond the Text

a. *The* How *of Humanism: Two Cues for Further Exploration*

Our understanding of the relationship between critique and retrieval, affirmation, or positive vision will be enriched by looking at its impact on those engaged with a particular critical narrative, or at how they conduct their own work and engage in broader social and political life.[366] This is the central task of this fifth and final chapter. I

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[366] White's notion of affirmation remains abstract – not seeking to shed light on the kinds of practices that weak ontologies "authorize" or support or uphold – in spite of his insistence that one of the benefits of weak ontological reflection is that it is aesthetic-affective in "constitution and effects." He notes that Weak ontologies "disclose the world to us in such a way that we think *and* feel it differently than we

have suggested that Elmessiri's work may be understood as an effort to confront the question of how to engage with a modernity (and postmodernity) that one cannot simply escape – to which one is "conscripted" in some sense, but at the same time indebted – while maintaining a deeply critical stance. This is especially challenging in light of the available alternatives, which seem to present an option between some variety of postmodern relativism or Islamic puritanism – neither of which, according to Elmessiri, succeeds in getting beyond what they claim to challenge. Elmessiri seems to have understood that, insofar as modernity's problematic claims and concepts have penetrated into the very critical resources that might otherwise help him think beyond it, Islamic Humanism must be more than a set of arguments: it must be the basis for new ways of researching and interacting.

What Ḥāzim Sālim – one of Elmessiri's research assistants, interlocutors, and "disciples" – refers to in the opening passage as the "Elmessirian Phenomenon" is, in part, the embodied and enacted answer to the question of how to engage modernity on the terms of conscription. An expanded interpretation of the claim that Sālim makes provides the basis for this chapter. His claim is that Elmessiri's work and broader contribution as a critic of modernity is not limited to a theoretical framework or a set of written arguments, nor does his work merely provide a window onto contemporary Egyptian or Muslim intellectual developments. Rather, as Sālim clarified during a conversation with me in Cairo in late 2011, he feels that Elmessiri is best understood as

might otherwise," but he does not venture into consideration of their mobilizing effects. White, *Sustaining Affirmations*, 10. For all its strengths, what is lacking here seems to be the kind of pragmatic analysis offered by Stout, whereby we look to engagements in the public sphere to understand people's commitments, under the assumption that *we know by what people do* which commitments they embrace, which are marginal and which are fundamental.

"a moment in the history of philosophy" that expresses itself by illuminating "new ways of feeling, sensing, and thinking together." Sālim's rhetoric approaches hagiography – indeed much reflection in Egypt on Elmessiri does. However, it is significant insofar as he and others claim it to be so. Understanding Sālim's claim will require familiarity with the community of learning in which that "phenomenon" was situated. For this reason, I will take a more intimate look at the details and particularities of his engaged life as a teacher, scholar, and activist who continues to play a part in the intellectual life of many Egyptians as an "absent but present one."

In a December, 2011 piece published on the Egyptian news site *el-Tahrir*, author Khāled al-Barrī asks, "Is Elmessiri Worth the Acclaim?"[367] The occasion for this inquiry was the seventh anniversary since the founding of the Kefaya movement, in which Elmessiri played an active leadership role. This period of time had seen ever-increasing interest in Elmessiri's work. al-Barrī's analysis does not focus on the substance of Elmessiri's scholarship,[368] but rather on the *way* that he put forward an idea. According to this author, Elmessiri showed people how to dig deep in inquiry and how to connect philosophical inquiry to political action. Elmessiri, he claims, planted the seeds for revolution in people's hearts. Al-Barrī concludes, "with the passing of seven years since the founding of Kefaya, I'm honored to commemorate this man – and he is worthy of remembrance. If it weren't for those like him, who are open-minded with those who differ from them, then the first seed of the Egyptian Revolution would not have been planted." I will say more about this claim of influence in the revolution later on. Of

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[367] هل يستحق د.المسيرى الاحتفاء؟/مقالات/http://tahrirnews.com/هل-يستحق-د-المسيرى-الاحتفاء؟
[368] In fact he suggests that this was not necessarily Elmessiri's most notable contribution.

importance for now is this author's attention to the manner of critical inquiry that Elmessiri modeled. Presenting and discussing this level of analysis requires an examination of the extra-textual reach of Elmessiri's thought.

Sālim and al-Barri point to the need to think not just about the arguments that Elmessiri wrote but the ways he embodied them among others, as well as the formation of communities of conversation and debate that he initiated. [369]

b. *Ethics Beyond Arguments*

There is not an obvious theoretical framework with which to approach these matters. However, there are several lines of inquiry that are relevant to the study that I have in mind. The field of religious ethics is most often distinguished by its focus on analysis of normative claims (usually found in written texts), including considerations not just of what is *right* but of what is *good.* It is for this reason that I'm suggesting that a project such as mine that investigates the commitments and affirmations embedded in critical inquiry finds a comfortable home in religious ethics.[370] Within religious ethics

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[369] One way of thinking about this chapter's subject matter and the claim that Elmessiri's contribution (and specifically his Humanism) must be understood by reference to these extra-textual dimensions of his career, is to draw on the Kierkegaardian distinction between the "what" and the "how" of philosophical inquiry. In this sense, then, I am looking into the *indirect communication* that Elmessiri's work engendered. Of significance in Elmessiri's work is not just *what* he says, but *how* he carries out his inquiry. Discerning this requires stepping back a bit from the texts and the contents of the arguments that they contain and asking, *what did Elmessiri's project do?*

[370] Stanley Hauerwas (among others) has called into question "religious ethics" as a firm foundational concept for an academic field of inquiry. This debate about concepts, it is an important one, and particularly relevant to the study of a scholar like Elmessiri, who is not the kind of writer who would tend to be considered to be doing "Islamic Ethics." But one of Hauerwas's own proposed concession definitions of Religious Ethics is more than sufficient to convey the general thrust of much of the research that situates itself within or in connection to "religious ethics", including my own: Religious Ethics may be understood to characterize the work of scholars trying to produce "useful generalizations…about different ways traditions have become articulate about how they understand what it means to live well." Stanley

there is also important work that investigates the legitimate legal, professional, and other generalizable implications of normative discourses rooted in questions of the right and the good. Moreover, religious ethics has provided a space for discussion of the social and political forces embedded in philosophical and theological reflection (such as liberation theologies, including Christian and Muslim). Finally, there is also an important trend that has established religious ethics as a field within which to analyze and rethink concepts of political community, civic participation, and democratic virtue. All of these conversations within religious ethics invite us to explore and assess the mobilizing capacity of figures like Elmessiri.

More concrete or empirical investigations of the place of normative discourse in social and political life tend to be left to sociologists and anthropologists of religion. Randall Collins's *Sociology of Philosophies* invites study of the interaction of ideas, arguments and actors in a manner that could augment research in religious ethics.[371] Sociological and anthropological work within religious studies has provided research on the relationship between founders of religious movements and their followers. Recent work in the study of Muslim societies uses "ethics" (*akhlāq*) as a central analytical category. In Egypt, scholars such as Saba Mahmood, Samira Haj, Charles Hirschkind,

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Hauerwas, "Between Christian Ethics and Religious Ethics: How Should Graduate Students be Trained?" in *Journal of Religious Ethics*. 31:1 (2003), 399-412. Of course, Hauerwas is here doing what he accuses others of doing in the article, namely "shifting the issue," this time through use of the concept of "tradition" – more general, perhaps, than "religion," but no less in need of definition. In any case, many of the theoretical tools that have been developed for identifying, describing, explaining, and comparing claims about the right and the good have appeared in the work of scholars who connect themselves to "Religious Ethics."

[371] Related and worthy of mention is work on the "sociology of intellectuals." For detailed discussion of this field of research, see: Charles Kurzman and Lynn Owens, "The Sociology of Intellectuals," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002), 63-90.

Hussein Agrama, Sherine Hafez and others, have investigated the processes by which the task of personal virtue-cultivation and reform – the task of *becoming and being ethical* – shapes religious and ultimately also political communities.[372] I make reference to this work as part of the background of my inquiry into the living legacy of Elmessiri, because the concepts and conversations that he has helped to engender are part of the broader landscape that these well-known theorists have worked hard to portray. Indeed, I think this broader landscape is part of what explains the subject matter in the next section of this chapter: the distinctive praises and portraitures of Elmessiri that carefully connect his intellectual accomplishments with his moral stature. Furthermore, the work of these theorists may provide some insight into the ways in which his legacy may continue to unfold in interaction with this broader landscape.

Nevertheless, in spite this wide range of resources, there is not (to my knowledge) an established a theoretical framework for exploring either the living legacy of a critic or the impacts of a critical narrative. What I have in mind is simply a way of describing the relationship between a thinker and his or her readers or interlocutors, insofar as they themselves are *moved* or *affected* by engagement with that work. I am not proposing to construct such a theory or methodology here. However, if there is to be a "comparative critique" within ethics, this might be required. There may be a couple of places to explore to begin to do so and I hope my discussion in this chapter will shed some light on what that might look like.

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[372] See, Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety;* Charles Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscapes*; Sherine Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Hussein Ali Agrama, "Reflections on Secularism, Democracy, and Politics in Egypt." *American Ethnologist* 39.1 (2012) 26-31.

The work of Larry Bouchard provides some resources. His recent work offers to enrich our understanding of "ethics" by proposing alternative ways of imagining the place of texts, ideas, and ethical concepts in our lives. For example, building on Martin Buber and Steven Kepnes, he suggests that principles are not just cognitive tools that we make use of according to rational calculations and judgments. Principles are *part of our lives* just as people are. He points out that when we regard principles "as discursive expressions, not unlike other cultural signs and expressions," we come to find out that "principles are *encountered* and interpreted anew. They are at once abstractions we think with, but also voices we hear anew, from occasion to occasion."[373] In Bouchard's work I hear resonances with an additional relevant resource for the kind of theory that I seek. This is Actor-Network Theory, which seeks to theorize interactions at both the material and symbolic levels, in part by extending the notion of "agency" to non-human entities.[374] The sections that follow will explore these interactions in the wider scope of Elmessiri's career, considering them as essential components of the "affirmative" elements of his work.

In the next section, I move on to survey the mediums through which Elmessiri's work is explored and his legacy kept alive, as well as some of the representative depictions of his character.

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[373] Bouchard, *Theater and Integrity*, 244-245. Emphasis added.

[374] The work of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law is foundational. One can see this approach at work, for example, in Timothy Mitchell's important text *Rule of Experts*. He begins this study with an essay "Can the Mosquito Speak?" – a clear invocation of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" and a forceful challenge to concepts of human agency that have tended to predominate in the social sciences and humanities. It is immediately clear why such an approach might seem relevant to a field such as Religious Ethics that tends to depend on a distinctive and even privileged notion of human agency.

III.   Rituals of Remembrance

Elmessiri had been ill for a long period of time before his death. The period of his physical decline, which included a trip to the United States for medical treatment,[375] created much advanced discussion about what his death would mean for those around him and for the broader intellectual landscape.[376] Since his death, Elmessiri's students, colleagues and various admirers have kept his memory alive through diverse media, including live and webcasted conferences, newspaper articles, "salon" reading and discussion groups, Facebook groups and other web pages devoted to him and his work, and commemorative events on the anniversaries of his birth and his death. Such extensive rituals of remembrance attest to Elmessiri's embodiment of both intellectual stature and moral authority.

These media to which I have referred produce several effects that are relevant to my broader inquiry into the affirmative or constructive potential of the critic Elmessiri. They provide spaces – both actual and virtual – for a diverse community committed to arguing about, understanding, criticizing, and (for some) applying the "paradigm" developed by Elmessiri. In one way or another, these spaces are an extension of spaces created by Elmessiri himself, who opened his home and office to students and other guests for hours each week, extending his hospitality equally to his admirers and his

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[375] Elmessiri and his supporters had sought funding from the Egyptian government to receive medical treatment abroad, but he was denied. This detail is often cited in portrayals of his character: it illustrates Elmessiri's relatively humble financial situation and provides evidence for his dissident status in the eyes of the Mubarak government.

[376] One text on which I draw on in this chapter – the two volume *In the World of Abdelwahab Elmessiri*, which appears to be a posthumous tribute but was in fact compiled during Elmessiri's life – in part reflected the awareness of the impending loss of a great figure.

critics. Additionally, these spaces promote exploration of the broader network of discourses in which Elmessiri himself was steeped, including important European, American, Arab and Muslim intellectuals. Finally, they encourage an ever expanding audience to refer to Elmessiri as a resource for thinking through matters related to philosophical reflection, politics, activism, education, and civic engagement.

a. *Confronting the Loss of an 'Arab Human Thinker'*

We sometimes find a disappointing or even troubling discrepancy between the public profile or scholarly reputation of a thinker and the character of his or her close personal relationships. However, in the case of Elmessiri, the wide range of observers, admirers, acquaintances, friends and critics who have found themselves invited in one way or another into *the world of Elmessiri* consistently report on his virtues, not just as an intellectual but as a person. Indeed, it seems that this reputation is one of the engines driving the ongoing efforts to interpret and expand upon his work – as though his character testifies to the worth of his philosophical insights. I even heard the occasional anecdote about how some detail in Elmessiri's personal life prompted important personal, moral reflection in his students.[377] Even before his death, students, colleagues

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[377] The example that stands out most in my mind came from a young professor (who I discuss further, below), who has been among the more critical of Elmessiri's interlocutors. He shared with me a fascinating (and frankly, endearing) example – of a way in which Elmessiri acted as a source of moral guidance for him. He says he used to get jealous whenever his wife would talk about how another man is "great" in some way. This jealousy, he explained, would torment him. Then one day, he was sitting with Elmessiri and Elmessiri's wife. During their discussion that day, a prominent figure appeared on the television. This young professor (student at the time) was shocked to hear his professor's wife proclaim, "I would marry him!" Reflecting on his own feelings of jealousy, he was eager to see how Elmessiri would react. He was shocked to hear the reply. Elmessiri called out, "I would too!"! This left a deep impression on him about the virtues of both magnanimity and humor. This is another recurring theme of characterization provided by those around Elmessiri: his sense of humor and the importance of jokes.

and interlocutors explored the conjunction between Elmessiri's intellectual and moral authority, in part by weaving together illustrative anecdotes of personal encounters with Elmessiri that served to bring one or another of his arguments into focus.

The news of Elmessiri's death resonated around the world. Elmessiri's funeral was attended by some of the most prominent Egyptian intellectuals and religious leaders of Egypt and interviews and reactions appeared from figures across the Muslim world. Obituaries and memorials were published in multiple languages, announcing Elmessiri's death and characterizing the meaning of his passing. Many of these reflections approach hagiography – the more recent, the more so. A brief survey of these pieces will be fruitful because they set the tone for discussions of his legacy that were to follow.

One piece described Elmessiri as "a true twentieth century polymath, an astounding defender of intellect and history, and a methodologically innovative Arab scholar." This same piece calls Elmessiri "a powerful moral voice" and recalls his "unwavering commitment to the cause of social justice." [378] Another piece in the online *Electronic Intifada*, highlights Elmessiri's broad commitment to reflection on philosophical anthropology, describing him as "a careful observer of the human condition." The same reflection goes on by linking Elmessiri's theoretical contributions and his personal strength and defiance. Moreover, it highlights Elmessiri's work as a resource for critical retrieval:

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[378] These quotations come from an entry found here:
 http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Abdelwahab+M.+Elmessiri+1938-2008.-a0189598584. I have so far been unable to find more detailed information with which to cite this piece, except for the reference to the Association of Arab-American University Graduates.

Nor was Elmessiri willing to be constrained by the limits of our common vocabulary when giving expression to his ideas. If he could not find the appropriate words to describe what he wished to say, he would create them. For example, he was never satisfied with using the terms subjective and objective, arguing that they fail to account for the cultural biases that people are prone to. He therefore chose to speak about reality in terms of paradigms that were more explanatory or less explanatory. Such terms create for us the space that is needed to transcend our own cultural baggage and to look at things from a different perspective, which is a prerequisite for understanding the other.[379]

The ethical end or purpose of Elmessiri's philosophical endeavors is in clear view in this passage: *understanding the other.* This author also cites a talk that Elmessiri gave, which captures the attitude that he was to be remembered by: "God has given us minds to think and reason with, and an ability to transcend the limits imposed on us by our social and political surroundings, if we have enough imagination and tolerance."

Finally, the author provides a tribute to Elmessiri's embodied message: "if one carefully examines Elmessiri's life there is an added lesson to be learnt from his *posture*, in addition to all that can be learnt from his words: Elmessiri was a man who chose to live in the empire of the mind, where there are no shackles and where freedom is absolute. In this space, not only did he discover his freedom, he discovered his faith as well."[380] This point also highlights the fact that, although Elmessiri's faith has been vital to his reputation and esteem, his distinctive contribution consisted in his capacity to

[379] Aslam Farouk-Alli, "On Life, Literature, and Palestine: A Tribute to Abdelwahab Elmessiri" http://electronicintifada.net/content/life-literature-and-palestine-tribute-abdelwahab-elmessiri/7649
[380] Farouk-Alli, "On Life, Literature, and Palestine," My italics.

draw attention beyond the realm of particular faiths, using a vocabulary that would accommodate diverse commitments, without contradicting those of Islam.[381] This portrayal thereby establishes Elmessiri's distance from some Islamist currents, including various forms of Islamization (see Chapter 2).

Unlike other figures who have resisted some impulses of contemporary Islamist thought, Elmessiri retained the trust and respect of prominent Muslim leaders and groups. Thus, at his funeral, a number of prominent figures from across the Muslim world offered accolades. These included the highly influential Islamic scholar and television personality, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, journalist and public intellectual, Fahmī Huwaydī, as well as the popular television preacher (dubbed the "Billy Graham of Islam"), Amr Khaled. Other figures outside of Egypt chimed in, including the Tunisian Islamist thinker Rached Ghannouchi (and current leader of the Nahḍa party in Tunisia), who credited Elmessiri with, "attempting to bring Islamic thought out of theoretical level and down to the level of the public square – out of narrow partisanship to a meeting of different schools of thought."[382]

Reflections on Elmessiri's passing also situate him among the great minds of the 20th Century – and not only among Arab or Muslim thinkers. One particularly striking linkage caught my attention, when an author proposed, "although Elmessiri did not have the chance to read Hannah Arendt's 'The Jewish Writings'…it is possible to argue

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[381] There is a word that comes up somewhat frequently in Elmessiri's work and in discussions about him. This term, pronounced *raḥāba*, means "vastness," and it seems to signify the wide embrace of Islamic Humanism as both an intellectual and an imaginative/moral project. Elmessiri speaks of the *raḥāba* of the true human and likewise, people speak of the *raḥāba* of Elmessiri.
[382] http://www.aljazeera.net/News/archive/archive?ArchiveId=1094308

that on more than one issue, they arrived at similar conclusions."[383] Such wide-ranging praise is indicative of Elmessiri's appeal to an exceptionally broad audience, whose political and religious commitments vary widely.[384]

A number of other pieces highlight the importance of Elmessiri's work on Israel and Zionism, and in many, he is remembered as a hero of the Palestinian cause. And while some pieces emphasized Elmessiri's humanism and the appeal of his work across differences of religion and nationality, others argued that his accomplishments are particularly relevant to matters of Arab identity and a future of scientific and intellectual power and promise in the region.[385]

b. *Commemorations Through* Ayām al-Dhikra

The period of eulogy did not mark the end of the posthumous praise and reflection. Each year on the anniversary of Elmessiri's death, students and colleagues have organized a public event commemorating his life and his work (*yawm al-dhikra*, day of remembrance). These events have until now been hosted in coordination with one of the major professional syndicates (which have wielded considerable political and cultural influence, even in the periods of most intense repression under Mubarak).

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[383] This is written in the same piece by the Association of Arab-American University Graduates. The comparison is based on Elmessiri's research and reflection on Zionism and its relationship to Judaism. I discuss this further in the Appendix.

[384] I would suggest that the emphasis on Elmessiri's character and his exemplary moral stature may be indicative of the broader moral climate that has been analyzed by other scholars, which places a premium on inner reform, personal piety, and to some extent public virtue.

[385] On Aljazeera.net alone one can find a dozen pieces marking Elmessiri's death. Elmessiri was a regular contributor of essays and analysis to the site, which became an important medium through which he gained fame outside of Egypt.

I attended the *dhikra* of 2010, which was held at the Doctor's Syndicate near downtown Cairo. The atmosphere was part academic and part funereal, sometimes somber, sometimes dramatic, and with analysis of Elmessiri's thought coupled with stories from his life. Attendance was small (no more than 40), but some of the speakers were high profile in the Cairo intellectual scene. Included among them was Elmessiri's widow, Dr. Hoda Hegazy, as well as the popular professor and director of the Ḥaḍara Center for Political Studies, Dr. Sayf Al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Fatāḥ, a close associate and research assistant of Elmessiri, Dr. Muḥammad Hishām, and a prominent activist and member of the Kefaya movement, Dr. Karīma Al-Ḥifnāwī.

The *dhikra* of 2011 took place amidst the historic changes in the wake of the uprising at the beginning of that year. Its title was one that will come up again below: "Elmessiri: The Absent but Present One in the Egyptian Revolution." In one of the talks, journalist Muḥammed ʿAbd al-Qudūs noted that, although the previous two years' *dhikra* events were organized by the Kefaya movement, this year it was the youth who took the lead with arrangements. ʿAbd al-Qudūs also highlighted the relationship between Elmessiri's intellectual work and his influence on the political action of others. He further stressed Elmessiri's unique coupling of scholarship and street activism, citing this as the basis for his increasing popularity among young Egyptians, even after his death. Several other speakers reiterated the importance of Elmessiri's activism. Dr. Sayf ʿAbd al-Fatāḥ (again) extended the analysis of this combination of intellectual work and political action, arguing that the revolutions of the Arab world would not be successful

without revolutionizing thought and knowledge. Elmessiri's thoughts, he claimed, provided momentum for the changes taking place.

One other notable theme in the *dhikra* of 2011, which has also become prominent in recent recollections of Elmessiri's influence, is "the main stream" (*al-tayār al-ra'īsī*). References to a "main stream" seem to identify a set of common values and objectives that could be shared among Egyptians across various political alliances. These include a commitment to some basic conception of social justice, a recognition of and willingness to protect different religious groups, a commitment to rooting out corruption, and situating political power in the hand of legitimately elected officials. Certainly, there are great differences regarding what these objectives mean in their details and what achieving them would look like. However, there is wide agreement that Elmessiri is the kind of figure who uniquely positioned himself as a mediator of the currents composing this main stream.[386]

Prominent Muslim Brotherhood member and Vice-Chairman of their Freedom and Justice Party, Dr. Essam el-Erian serves as an important example of Elmessiri's influence through the "main stream." Although Elmessiri was a member of the Brotherhood for a time in his youth, he never joined the group as an adult and even acted as a foundational figure in the Wasat movement which began as a splinter group from the Muslim Brothers. However, Dr. El-Erian has described himself as a student of Elmessiri. At the 2011 *dhikra*, El-Erian shared the story of his first acquaintance with Elmessiri's work, which occurred while he was serving time as a political prisoner in

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[386] The term "main stream" does not have the same negative connotation here as when, for example, we refer to the "mainstream media." It seems to function in some sense in the same way as the term *wasaṭiyya*.

Mubarak's prison system. Friends encouraged him to spend time reading Elmessiri's *Encyclopedia* during his long hours behind bars. He explained that Elmessiri's methods of thought and perception influenced him greatly and that such impacts would be Elmessiri's enduring legacy among his Egyptian readers.

Another important contribution with respect to my inquiry here came from Ayman ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, a representative of the *Maʿrifa* project, which is a youth initiative for encouraging research in the social sciences and philosophical reflection more broadly.[387] ʿAbd al-Raḥīm argued that a thinker's achievement is best measured not by the static endurance of his ideas but by the metamorphosis of those ideas through the lives of others – *the abstract ideas do not live by themselves*, he explained.

These days of commemoration have acted as forums for periodic reflection on how to carry Elmessiri's work forward. They testify to his ongoing significance in Egypt.

c. *Salūnāt*

Regular lower profile events reinforce these commemorations throughout the year. They nurture a community of learning inspired by Elmessiri. These events, addressing Elmessiri in one way or another, are all announced and catalogued on the website devoted to him.[388] Since his death in 2008, there have been a handful each year, and they are ongoing. More recently they have taken the form of "salons" held in Elmessiri's home. This is an effort to revive a tradition of monthly salons or roundtable

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[387] Ma'rifa simply means knowledge. The group has a Facebook page can be accessed at: https://www.facebook.com/marefa.
[388] http://www.elmessiri.com/

discussions that began before Elmessiri's death. A core group plus additional guests would gather in Elmessiri's home or office (the office is a converted apartment on the ground floor of the building where he lives, and it still serves as a headquarters for the Elmessiri circle). On many occasions, they would discuss Elmessiri's work, but at other times the conversation would be over another topic, question, or a guest's work. These meetings have become the foundation for a tight-knit community, including the "disciples," and other students and admirers.

I spoke to one couple who married after meeting and getting to know one another through the Elmessiri salons. The way she tells the story, what immediately attracted her to her (then future-) husband was his *humility*, which she claims reminded her of Elmessiri himself. Such anecdotes are quite common (and they claim that they are not the only such "Elmessiri couple"). The spaces that Elmessiri sought to create and maintain became venues for the cultivation of a variety of relationships that went beyond those of simple colleagues or scholarly interlocutors.

Outside of this relatively more formal and intellectual setting, Elmessiri would organize groups to take walking tours of old Islamic Cairo, or *felucca* boat rides on the Nile, particularly during Ramadan. According to several of those who attended, these were aimed at nurturing an appreciation for history, identity, and the beauty of architecture and craft. Children and partners were welcome and the kids became accustomed to calling Elmessiri "grandpa." People I spoke to say that through these practices, he and his students cultivated a love of country that was at the same time a love of human transcendence as exhibited by the enduring and dynamic built

environment of Cairo. In this way, Elmessiri put rituals into practice - themselves "rituals of remembrance" for the Egyptian past, the philosophical tradition, Muslim and Egyptian history, broad human achievement, and for their own intellectual community

d. *Youth Admiration*

These media and settings that I have described have proven to be an effective means of generating increasing interest in Elmessiri and his work. Recently, young students – many of whom did not become acquainted with Elmessiri during his lifetime – have been poring over his works and sharing their findings, as part of a collective search for insights relevant to their questions and their times. The primary venue for these contributions has been the internet. Several Facebook pages have been created in his memory. The most popular one had almost 43,000 followers as of June, 2012.[389] The page regularly posts quotations from Elmessiri, as well as quotations and links to information about other thinkers who influenced his work, from Alija Izetbegović to Malcolm X.

The Elmessiri Facebook page is operated by the administrators of a larger group called Mofekkeroon[390] ("thinkers" or "intellectuals") which boasts over 100,000 members (as of June, 2012). I had the chance to speak to one of the administrators of this page, a proud devotee of Elmessiri's thought. Ahmed, a college student who never had the chance to meet Elmessiri in person, described his first encounter with Elmessiri's thought. As a teenager, he recalls having heard much debate about the nature and value

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[389] This main page for Elmessiri can be found at: https://www.facebook.com/ElMesseiry. For comparison, the page for Sayyid Qutb had approximately 52,000 followers at that same time.

[390] Mofekkeroon is a project of Ma'rifa

of secularism, and he was searching for some clear analysis and reflection on the concept. Having read self-described secularists like Farāg Fūda and Sayyed el-Qimni, Ahmed was moved when he found Elmessiri's more critical and nuanced engagements with the concept. In the months following the revolution, Ahmed has worked to organize a reading group for young Egyptians that would undertake a year-long reading seminar covering Elmessiri's major texts. He explained that there is a need for young people in Egypt to develop a commitment to a different kind of educational curriculum. As he described it, the project seemed to be motivated in part by the kinds of concerns articulated in Elmessiri's work on *bias*. Ahmed stated that his aim is the development of an educational curriculum that would match the Egyptian social structure.   Applications to participate in the reading group were solicited through the Facebook groups that I have described: the Elmessiri fan page and the larger Mofakeroon page. Fifteen members were selected from among a larger pool of applicants.

There is an iconic image of Elmessiri, repeatedly posted on the Elmessiri Facebook page (before, during, and after the revolution). The photograph depicts Elmessiri with clenched teeth and a stern and focused expression, pushing his way into a confrontation between demonstrators and riot police. The picture was taken during a protest in the spring of 2008 – just before his death. Elmessiri is remembered for having gone into the streets to be with the people struggling for rights and justice in their confrontation with riot police, even as he was dying of cancer. One edition of the picture comes with a caption (presumably from Elmessiri himself) that reads "the

intellectual must be in the street" – a way of communicating, not just that *Elmessiri would have supported you!* but also that there is an important alliance between the life of the mind and the engaged life of the activist.

The *Ma'rifa* group (mentioned above in *a.*) is a relevant to this discussion as well. The group is involved in a set of projects committed to expanding the intellectual life of youth in Egypt. Their slogan, "we know more in order to be more capable" (*na'rif akthar li-naghdu aqdar*), is effectively a rendering of the well known "knowledge is power." This project is representative of a broader climate of youth interest in mining the resources of the nation's intellectuals as they reclaim ownership of their destiny as Egyptians.

Young admirers of Elmessiri were also behind a documentary project about his life. The film, put together by three university students, was produced by Al-Jazeera for release around the second anniversary of Elmessiri's death in 2010. The program in four parts chronicles Elmessiri's life beginning with his birth in Damanhour. One of the film's directors, Aḥmad Abū Khalīl, explained that one of the important accomplishments of the film is breaking down the age barrier – they demonstrated that being young doesn't prevent one from discussing ideas of great importance. This, he said, is a way of revolutionizing society.[391] There is a prescience about this statement – a mark of the changing atmosphere and the increasing empowerment of youth in the year before the revolution. Abū Khalīl's statements suggest that the capacity of youth to learn about and make use of the ideas of the great thinkers of older generations is part of

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[391] http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=251362&

their own self-actualization as a generation. Elmessiri's legacy is being incorporated into this process.

IV.   From Discipleship and Devotion to Critical Gratitude

a. The Meaning of Discipleship

Perhaps as much as anything else, what distinguishes Elmessiri from other intellectuals and peers in contemporary Egypt is his following. During conversations with a number of Elmessiri's students and acquaintances, I came to understand that some dimensions of his Humanism were abundantly clear only as he played out his roles as teacher and mentor and friend. I repeatedly witnessed those who worked with him in a verbal struggle to satisfactorily convey their affection and admiration. The term "humanity" was quite repetitive, both referring to a subject matter of his work and as a portrayal of his character.   Acquaintances of varying degrees of intimacy also emphasized his humility, generosity, and accessibility.

Everyone seemed to have a vivid recollection of the first meeting with Elmessiri, and these stories share common features. A young researcher or just an inquiring mind wished to speak with him about something he or she had read or had heard Elmessiri discussing – perhaps an article in the newspaper, or on Al-Jazeera, or perhaps from a section of a book; on some occasions based on the reference of a friend. This person contacts Elmessiri – usually with the encouragement of someone else who had met with him previously, and often with doubts as to whether he will take the time to respond.

Elmessiri responds. And more, he invites this person for tea, usually in his home even for the first meeting, and they talk and talk, sometimes for several hours. One young woman recorded her story on a personal blog, recalling, "My first meeting with [Elmessiri] was an hour or so, I don't know if its value was more or less than this; for, I felt that I was outside the reference point of time, I lived in the moments, not feeling the meaning of time within them."[392]

In this way, Elmessiri found around himself a circle of students who have come to understand themselves as "disciples." This term needs some explication. "Disciple" is the English term that many students and other acquaintances used to either describe themselves or others close to Elmessiri – it is a part of the shared vocabulary of the Elmessiri circle. In Arabic the term is *talmīdh*, which can simply mean student or pupil. There are different words in Arabic for both a disciple of Christ (*ḥiwārī*) and for a companion of the prophet (*ṣaḥābiy*). Thus, the Arabic term doesn't have the same resonance as the English. However, *talmīdh* is also often used for the relationship between a student and a religious leader or *sheikh*. It does not typically capture the standard professor-student relationship. The usage of the term "disciple" is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Elmessiri himself had no traditional training in the Islamic sciences. The metaphor of discipleship serves to convey the holistic nature of Elmessiri's thought; it reinforces the image of Elmessiri as a figure who introduced a broad vision, a style of thinking, and a model of action.

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[392]http://khadeegagafar.blogspot.com/search/label/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%8A

One of Elmessiri's disciples – Dr. Jihān Fārūq, a top student and advisee – provided some explanation of the disciple relationship that Elmessiri fostered. Fārūq was Elmessiri's first official doctoral student, and now an understudy in Romantic poetry. She first attended his course in English literature at the Women's College at Ain Shams University in Cairo. Fārūq was chosen to be his disciple and, she said, to "give his ideas back to Egypt." This was, in part, how he understood his responsibility as a teacher. Indeed, she suggests that he felt responsible for a generation of Egyptian youth, and that he had visions of sending these disciples off into different arenas of intellectual, political, social, and artistic work.[393] Based on Fārūq's characterization, it seems that Elmessiri understood it to be his role as a philosopher to convey underlying critical modes of thinking, having confidence in his students to extend and apply them in their respective fields. He was not, in other words, plotting to enact his own specific vision of reality, but rather to open up new possibilities and encourage Egyptians to shape their society without the imposition of foreign or autocratic intellectual or political frameworks. Like many others, Fārūq spoke of Elmessiri's optimism, his faith in humanity, and his confidence in Egypt and Egyptians, in spite of what had been their widespread sense of hopelessness and frustration.

Dr. Mahmoud Khalifa, for example, works with the concept of Islamic Humanism in his own research. In his dissertation – a study of Muslim women's literature – Khalifa investigates the theme of the human relationship to God in several

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[393] It seems that Elmessiri aimed to begin this relationship with even the youngest of (potential) students. One of the many "applications" of his work includes a small corpus of children's literature, including short stories and poems. I had the chance to browse through several of these pieces with his former research assistant, Dina Ramadan. Dina explained to me that Elmessiri's short stories were intended to simplify and teach children about his basic philosophical ideas.

works of fiction, in order to illustrate (a) that there is an Islamic Humanism and (b) that

it is not based upon a fundamental separation between religious and secular knowledge.

He writes:

> Islamic humanism is a complete epistemological breakaway from western
> humanistic insistence on the division between the divine and the human. The
> humanism of Islam lies in the relationship between man and God which is based
> on mercy and closeness… The relationship is based on viceregency, whereby
> man is invested with freedom and moral choice which is the *Amana* [trusteeship]
> in Islam. This freedom entails responsibility.[394]

In addition to Elmessiri, Khalifa draws on the analyses of Ali Shari'ati and Ismail

Farooqi in this early project. However, he described a more recent project in which he

plans to conduct a more thorough comparative analysis of Western (secular) humanism

and Islamic humanism.

b. *Heba Raouf Ezzat*

Without rival, Elmessiri's most well-known "disciple" is the scholar, professor,

and public figure, Dr. Heba Raouf Ezzat. Ezzat is professor and researcher in the areas

of political and social theory at Cairo University, where she completed her PhD. She has

also served as instructor at the American University in Cairo, and regularly appears at

conferences and public lectures around the world. Ezzat is one of the founders of the

popular and influential IslamOnline website, in collaboration with Yusuf al-Qaradawi.

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[394] Mahmoud Khalifa, "Muslim Women Write Back: Hybridity, Islam and the Quest for Identity" (PhD diss. Cairo University, 2009), 116-117.

She is at the center of a number of conversations that we can associate with the "New Islamists."[395] Ezzat has taken the discipleship role very seriously and is developing an impact and a following that rivals (and in some ways already surpasses) Elmessiri's own. Ezzat describes her indebtedness to Dr. Elmessiri with great passion.

In her generous reading of Elmessiri, she tries to elicit his subversion of stereotypes. Her characterization of Elmessiri's relationship to Marxism is a telling example, and it captures something about her own distinctive place on the map of contemporary ideologies and alliances in Egypt. In an essay on Elmessiri, she writes, "Who says that Marxism has no link with transcendence? Communist Utopia is a transcendent dream. In spite of its materialist appearance (and its well-known flaws), it hides behind it a spirit of justice."[396] For both Elmessiri and Ezzat, the Left has been an enduring point of orientation, even if not a defining ideology or ultimate point of reference. Along these lines, her assessment of Elmessiri's work on secularism highlights the aims and achievements characteristic of critical retrieval:

In his writings on bias and secularism, Elmessiri criticizes the modernist world-outlook. However, [in doing so] he doesn't stand on [some] fabricated, neutral ground that attacks extremism and civilizational regression and proclaims the utility of the gains of Western civilization. Instead…he develops a critique of modernity, transcending it, not taking it as an enemy nor simply contradicting it. Thus he puts forward a new humanistic discourse from atop the Arab-Islamic civilizational ground. This can truly be described as a new Islamic discourse, ascending to the *maqāṣid* (aims or ends of Islamic Law, *Sharī'ah*) and not

[395] See Chapter Two.
[396] Heba Raouf Ezzat, "Arab Reason when it is Encyclopedic and Humanist: Elmessiri, A Comprehensive Thinker," in *The World of Elmessiri*, Volume 1, 23. My translation.

drowning in the details of *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Hence it is considered a humanistic discourse, good for communication and interaction with the world and different humanistic currents that oppose solid informational materialism.[397]

In her own work, Ezzat is focused on questions around the Islamic public sphere and women's roles in political life. One of her defining positions as an Islamic thinker is her claim that there should be no distinction between the public and private spheres when it comes to application of the concepts and norms provided by tradition. She notes that her stance presents a challenge to both Western and some Islamist conceptualizations of public and private domains, the relationship between personal, political and domestic life, and male and female roles in society. In an earlier interview, she summarizes her project as a thinker: "I am mainly refusing the public-private dichotomy in Western and Islamic thought. This dichotomy gives either privacy – for example family life – the priority, or the contrary. In my opinion, Islam doesn't embody such a polaristic (*sic*) perception. Private is political, not in the feminist aggressive sense but rather in the Islamic sense of solidarity and the importance of social infrastructure and grassroots politics."[398]

Ezzat holds that *Sharī'ah* has the resources for shaping and informing a progressive political and social order, by which she means that it, "is not only compatible with human rights but also the most effective way to achieve human rights." She goes further, arguing that Islam provides a program for liberation and resistance to

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[397] Heba Raouf Ezzat, "Elmessiri, A Comprehensive Thinker," 26. My translation.
[398] Karim El-Gawhary, "An Interview with Heba Ra'uf Ezzat," *Middle East Report,* No. 191. (1994), 26-27.

Western power – particularly modes of economic domination. In this sense, she signals her proximity to political and social theories of the Left:

> Sharia is a progressive platform which empowers the people and protects their rights against totalitarianism and utilitarian ultra-capitalism. It can be an egalitarian force for democratic social justice, in the Muslim countries and globally. Islam's central values are justice and personal freedom. However, they can also threaten Western economic interests when Muslim societies defend not only their cultural values but also aspire for economic independence. Reducing Islam to the individual moral dimension… means that Islam loses its core as a progressive socialist liberation theology with a vision of a just society.[399]

Elmessiri's influence on her work is evident in several areas. There are what may be called humanist impulses motivating her work. In a testimonial that recalls her first encounters with Elmessiri, Ezzat explains that she was, at the time that she met him, in the process of thinking about Islam not strictly in terms of religiousness, but in terms of its humanistic ethos.

> An Islamic outlook had begun to crystallize in my mind – not as a religious outlook, as I had seen it previously, under the influence of my involvement with my the Islamic Awakening of my generation (the generation of the 80s). Rather, [this was a] humanist outlook, believing in [human] transcendence, and not accepting to reduce human [existence] to one dimension, and finding in the unseen a space for confronting materialism, which had announced the death of

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[399] http://en.qantara.de/wcsite.php?wc_c=9091

God, followed by the death of the author, and [ultimately] the death of humanity itself![400]

Through her subsequent relationship with Elmessiri, she deepened and expanded this approach.

In her reflections on topics such as modernity, the human sciences, secularism, and human rights, Ezzat works to strike a similar balance in refusing the temptations of dichotomous thinking about Islamic and Western values. Like Elmessiri, however, she does not shy away from difficult critical judgments about points of conflict and difference – hers is not a liberal project concerned only with points of overlap and uncomplicated translation.

More recently, she has put her insights to work in interpreting and giving guidance about the transformations initiated by the Egyptian uprising (which she consistently refers to as a "revolution"). Her vision of a society imbued with and integrated by an Islamic spiritual outlook is evident in her reflections on the recent transformations in Egypt and other parts of the Muslim world. She insists that the "Western" model of revolution, because it is fundamentally subversive of modes of worship, spirituality, and religious authority, is inadequate when it comes to understanding the uprisings of the "Arab Spring." "For us," she has argued, "it's a way to go back to the essence of our religion as a religion of freedom and equality… this spiritual and religious component is very clear…the accommodation of difference came

[400] Heba Raouf Ezzat, "An Intimate Humanist Relationship: Personal Testimony," in *The World of Elmessiri*, Volume 2, 462.

from this sense of spirituality."[401]   For Ezzat, the Arab Spring (and particularly the revolutionary community in Tahrir Square) is an expression of human transcendence – not in an Enlightenment sense of *sui generis* human will, but in an *Elmessirian* sense. She claims that this form of transcendence "approaches religion." Like Elmessiri, she insists that modern concepts of rationality and order are unable to capture and describe human phenomena of transcendence.

Ezzat's engagement with Elmessiri, with her Leftist, theoretical education, and with her Islamic heritage is part of a process of critical retrieval in her own work. An interesting outcome of this process can be found in her concept of *spontaneity* (*tilqā'iyya* تلقائية) as a basic feature of human existence. Ezzat links this term – which does not initially signal a religious meaning – to the term *fiṭriyya* (which comes from the term *fiṭra*, meaning "human nature," but more specifically, the human characteristic of being receptive to God). The capacity for transcendence that she and Elmessiri have tried to theorize is exhibited in acts of *spontaneity* – in the very possibility of spontaneity – which made the Egyptian revolution possible. This spontaneity, she explains, was signaled by the passionate expressions of love and hope witnessed in the revolution. These are what made the revolution what it is – not simply a quest for a new political order or the establishment of a new ideology, but rather, for Ezzat, the enactment of a spiritual longing for transcendence and justice.[402]

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[401] From a lecture given in English before the Islamic Society of Britain: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJeJYrJmzAo&feature=related
[402] She discussed this view during a joint conference with the Kroc Center of Notre Dame and Cairo University's Center for Dialogue of Civilizations. The full talk is available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcjMVlqiSyo&feature=related
Ezzat makes a similar argument during her lecture to the Islamic Society of Britain:

c. Haggag Ali

Elmessiri's work has also proven fecund for those outside the sphere of discipleship proper. Another figure with a rich and evolving relationship to Elmessiri's work is Dr. Haggag 'Ali – professor at the Academy of Arts in Giza, in the Department of Criticism. Haggag wrote his dissertation about Elmessiri's work and has since published an article comparing Elmessiri with two notable European theorists.[403] He is particularly interested in Elmessiri's use of and relationship to Western critics. In my assessment, Haggag's work provides the most rigorous and sustained engagement with Elmessiri's, in the generation of disciples. I want to begin to describe Haggag's relationship to Elmessiri, and the directions of his work.

Haggag also has a story of getting to know Elmessiri.   He reports that after their first discussion, Elmessiri told him that he was a genius. In other words, he found the professor Elmessiri to be very encouraging and eager to promote him in his career. At first, Haggag thought that he had been gained a unique status in the eyes of Elmessiri. However, he soon came to realize that he was part of what he described as an "army" – a vast network of people who were engaging with Elmessiri's work and ideas, within Egypt and beyond. At another point he refers to these people as a "team." In either case he evokes a deep sense of commitment and *communitas* binding the Elmessiri circle. Haggag credits Elmessiri with providing a new narrative to Arabs and Muslims – and new set of concepts and terminology with which to think critically and engage with both

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[403] Both are written in English.

Western modernity and Islam. Describing Elmessiri on a personal level, Haggag too relies on the term "humanist" (more, he says a "true" humanist). For Haggag, the details from recollections of concrete interaction with Elmessiri are particularly significant. He claims that one would gain only a partial view of Elmessiri's work by reading him without knowing about students such as himself, and how Elmessiri related to them and supported them.[404]

Haggag distances himself slightly from the "disciple" label, perhaps because he, more forcefully than others with whom I met, presented criticisms of Elmessiri's work. As I mentioned above, much of the reflection on Elmessiri's life and work has approached hagiography – even before his death. Haggag, on the other hand, raises caution about potential consequences of Elmessiri's critical idiom – in particular, he finds some areas where Elmessiri's critical impulse gets in the way of his commitment to an ethic of common humanity and retrieved understanding. For example, he points to Elmessiri's use and assessment of the term "Gnosticism"[405] – this term, he notes, has been used throughout history as a synonym for heresy and thus as an invitation for hostility and even violence. Haggag also extends this critical consciousness to his reflections on the state of the contemporary Arab world. Drawing on Nietzsche (whom, he argues, Elmessiri has oversimplified) he suggests that the notion of "slave morality" may apply to any of Elmessiri's readers who are willing to reductively accept that there can be a single, comprehensive characterization of Western culture. Haggag states that

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[404] This information is based on an interview July 7, 2010 at the Academy of Arts in Cairo, where Dr. Ali teaches.

[405] I have not devoted analysis to this particular term in my study. Elmessiri tends to use it as synonymous with pantheism, but to designate an attitude toward knowledge, specifically that all things are ultimately knowable.

such concerns are partially modeled off of Elmessiri's own work – they represent a critique of critique, and a reflection on the goods and consequences of critical analysis. Furthermore, he maintains that the closeness of his relationship to Elmessiri was made possible by his willingness to be a serious and thoughtful critic. Thus, in his work on Elmessiri, Haggag also reinforces the methodology of critical retrieval on display in Elmessiri's writing.

This comes out strongly in his recent article – an initial comparative project that considers the relationship between Elmessiri, Erich Voegelin and Zygmunt Bauman.[406] Haggag builds a case for viewing Elmessiri as a unique contribution to a "new Islamic discourse," by reading him in relationship to these two European critics. The commonalities between their works, he suggests, show that Elmessiri takes an approach to engagement with modernity that differs from many of his Muslim contemporaries. Haggag's choice of Bauman as a conversation partner is a logical one: Elmessiri himself draws on Bauman's work in his writing, and there is much evidence to suggest that he incorporates his ideas in his own critical narrative. The choice of Voegelin is less clear. For, Elmessiri does not seem to have read this scholar's work. In any case, Haggag demonstrates that there are relevant similarities among the three authors. Most notably, he claims that all three, "devoted their critiques to the mitigation of the arrogance of nature-centered cosmology and the anthropocentric epistemology of the natural sciences."[407] He argues, "Voegelin, Bauman and Elmessiri attempted to offer a way out of the contradictions of modernity but their proposals remain within a critique that

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[406] Haggag Ahmed Shaban Ali, "Modernity in the discourse of Abdelwahab Elmessiri," in *Intellectual Discourse* 19.1 (2011): 71-96.

[407] Ibid, 76.

aspires to confront modernity with its contradictions rather than abandon it altogether."[408] In closing, he writes, "Elmessiri and Voegelin… like Bauman, did not fall into the trap of offering a project or an alternative, thus staying on the fronts of critique and leaving readers to make their decisions." As the next section will describe could also have added, "and to take their actions."

## V.	Revolutionary Thinker

In November, 2011, I spoke by phone with another reader of Elmessiri who is at the same time an admirer and a critic of his work: Ahmed Elewa, a co-founder of the Elmessiri Facebook group and architect of an online conference which I'll be discussing in this section. Elewa also has some important criticisms of Elmessiri's work. However, he too finds these criticisms to be the catalysts of his own creative thinking. Like many young people, Elewa has spent the recent months reflecting on the nature and significance of the microcosm that formed in Tahrir Square in Cairo, between January 25 and February 11, 2011. Many have described the Tahrir community as a virtual utopia during much of the 18 day uprising. This has prompted ongoing dialogue over how to describe this community, what made it possible, and whether and in what sense it can become an exemplar for a broader and more enduring politics in Egypt. Elewa has found Elmessiri's writings to be rich resources for thinking through these questions, as well as for a whole range of wider reflections on Egypt, identity, the revolution, and even the future of political Islam. He is not alone in this judgment. What I want to

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[408] Haggag Ali, "Modernity in Elmessiri," 89.

explore in this section is the role that Elmessiri's work has played in conversations about the 2011 Egyptian uprising and the ongoing transformations that the country is facing. Statements such as Elewa's, as well as other conversations such as the conference that Elewa organized, indicate that Elmessiri's project of critique has been facilitating the theorization of relationships and responsibilities in post-Mubarak Egypt.

The uprising of January, 2011 – what many have called and continue to call the Egyptian Revolution – began almost one year to the day after my outline for a study of Elmessiri was approved as a dissertation project. It is largely thanks to my familiarity with Elmessiri's writings and the subculture of activism to which he was connected that I was not shocked when Egyptians went down in the streets in the millions to demand change. However, neither was I prepared to think through the implications of such a massive social movement for my analysis of this figure and his legacy. Even outside of Egypt, 2011 proved to be a year during which critique demonstrated its massive mobilizing capacity, as people around the world broke the routines of their late-modern labors and leisures in order to get together and experiment with a different kind of politics of resistance – one that was focused on creating practices and communities that could eventually confront or displace the institutions and centers of power that they were challenging.[409]

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[409] I have in mind other sites of the "Arab Spring," as well as the Occupy Movement in the United States, which explicitly linked itself to the model of Tahrir Square. Putting it this way is different from saying that the demonstrations have been about "expressing" or "giving voice" to frustrations. I'm asking that we think of these demonstrations as themselves an extension of the critical project, insofar as the detailed practices internal to these movements (Tahrir square, the occupy camps, etc.) exhibit an understanding that thought and even speech are not enough to confront the political and economic challenges of the present.

There has been much discussion about the extent to which these movements are linked to the work of intellectuals. Many analysts have rightly distanced these movements from old ideologies and established political discourses. In some cases, these movements have been distanced from the role of intellectuals more generally.[410] In Egypt and in popular movements around the world, the focus has been on the youth and all that the period of youth symbolizes: novelty, imagination, inventiveness, potential, and defiance. The youth-led collective action that swept numerous regions of the globe during 2011 is notable for its genuine populism, spurning of leadership and hierarchy, and exploration of consensus-based, bottom-up organizing practices. Moreover, in Egypt as elsewhere, the momentum for the transformations taking place has apparently *not* been provided by ideological zeal – at least not primarily. Nor can it be easily traced to the intellectual platform of any figure or set of figures.[411] Indeed, many commentators have highlighted, and in some cases even celebrated, the relatively marginal role that intellectuals and systems of thought have played in recent displays of collective action. However, my findings regarding Elmessiri's legacy suggest that the young people who have taken to the streets have drawn on a wide range of political, social, and moral thought as they articulate their criticisms of the present and their visions and aspirations for the future.

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[410] See, for example, Robert F. Worth, "The Arab Intellectuals Who Didn't Roar," *New York Times*, October 29, 2011, Accessed November 1, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/sunday-review/the-arab-intellectuals-who-didnt-roar.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[411] However, Occupy has been linked to the work of theorists of anarchism and other radical politics. See, for example, "Intellectual Roots of the Wall Street Protests Lie in Academe": http://chronicle.com/article/Intellectual-Roots-of-Wall/129428/ Accessed October 25, 2011.

The exchange that I described above, between myself and the founder of the Elmessiri Facebook page illustrates this linkage. Elmessiri's followers and admirers feel that he played a distinctive role in the Egyptian uprising and ongoing revolution. He has done so not through direct leadership, of course, but rather by articulating the problems and questions that necessitate collective action, and by acting as a model of activist intellectual. In the remainder of this section, I want to present and analyze this claim, which is one that his followers and an increasing number of youth are continuing to explore.

a. *Critical Retrieval and Social Movement Theory*

Before I discuss the details of Elmessiri's legacy in relation to the dramatic changes that have been taking place in Egypt recently, I must acknowledge that I have brought the discussion onto a terrain where there is much theoretical discussion and debate: the terrain of social movement theory. My claim that it is worthwhile to explore how a theory such as Islamic Humanism has informed, shaped, or otherwise played a role in theorizing political action may benefit from a look at this literature. In particular, we can draw a parallel between the concept of "meaning-making" as an element of collective action in social movement theory, and "retrieval" as an element of understanding in ethics and interpretation theory.

According to Asef Bayat, scholar of social movements in the Middle East, Islamic societies present unique challenges to the task of theorizing of social movements. Using Egypt as one of his focus cases, he points out that compared with societies of North

America and Europe (where social movements have been studied in most detail) for the most part, Islamic majority societies have been "politically closed and technologically limited."[412] Bayat points to several key questions about social movement that bear on my inquiry. First, *who speaks for a movement?* And second, *how should the success/effectiveness of a movement be measured?* He suggests that the capacity of a movement to confront and effect change within an existing political/power system cannot be the only measure: "social movements may also succeed in terms of changing civil societies, behavior, attitudes, cultural symbols and value systems which, in the long run, may confront political power…"[413] Bayat asks that we consider "the entirety of [the] diverse and dispersed emotions, ideas and activities…as constituting the Egyptian Islamic movement of the past two decades." The question then becomes, what links and binds the various diverse currents – how can they coalesce into a potent, coordinated movement over and against internal tensions and dynamics?[414] Bayat answers by suggesting that "partially shared interests" – rather than an "aggregate" of common interests either shared or rejected wholesale – may be enough to mobilize a vast social movement. And furthermore, (invoking Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities") he proposes that this more nebulous and shifting space of shared interests is cultivated through what he calls "imagined solidarity":

> Diverse participants tend to converge on the generalities, but are left to *imagine*
> the specifics, to envision commonalities. I am, in short, proposing the possibility

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[412] Asef Bayat, "Islamism and Social Movement Theory," *Third World Quarterly* 26.6 (2005), 892.

[413] Ibid, 898.

[414] This question illustrates the relevance of hermeneutics to issues in social movement theory. To answer the question would be to point to recovery of meanings, fusion of horizons, and so forth.

of projecting 'imagined solidarities' between heterogeneous social movement actors, in the same way that people of a territory imagine their communities as nations. An 'imagined solidarity' is, thus, one which is forged spontaneously among different actors who come to a consensus by imagining, subjectively constructing, common interests and shared values between themselves.[415]

Bayat's considerations structure my discussion of findings related to Elmessiri's influence in the revolution. If, as some have argued, the 2011 movement in Egypt is best understood as the flowering of a movement which began building momentum in the early 2000s – and particularly with the Kefaya Movement – Elmessiri may be considered as one of those figures who "spoke for" the movement and who taught "imagined solidarity." Elmessiri did not survive to witness the most recent events and so he was not properly speaking one of the representative voices. However, his admirers effectively gave him that role posthumously by referring to his works and his example as they discussed the meaning of the events unfolding around them.

Elmessiri's work as a scholar and activist was also part of the more subtle civil society changes to which Bayat refers in his attempt to give a more nuanced theorization of social movements in the Muslim world – specifically, with respect to practices of *imagining solidarity*. This can be illustrated by recalling his participation in Kefaya (see Chapter 2). However, it seems that additionally, as Mahmoud Khalifa suggested to me,[416] Islamic Humanism served as a basis upon which to craft a sense of shared interests that transcend differences in religious or political commitment. I repeatedly

[415] Bayat, "Islamism and Social Movement Theory," 904.
[416] Conversation on February 1, 2012, in Cairo, Egypt.

heard that this is what Elmessiri taught – but he managed to do this in a way that did not strike listeners as a thin, conciliatory kind of tolerance or political correctness. Rather, Islamic Humanism became a conceptual space within which to embrace a serious conversation about divisive issues from secularism, to Islamism, to Israel.

Another important contribution in recent social movement theory dovetails with my inquiry into the relationship between Elmessiri's critical project and his readers' commitment to social action. Charles Kurzman argues that the drive for and process of *meaning-making* must be central to any analysis of large-scale social mobilization. His explication of this hypothesis makes its relevance to my study of Elmessiri evident:

At [the meaning-making theory's] root is the proposition that humans constantly seek to understand the world around them, and that the imposition of meaning on the world is a goal in itself, a spur to action, and a site of contestation. Meaning includes moral understandings of right and wrong, cognitive understandings of true and false, perceptual understandings of like and unlike, social understandings of identity and difference, aesthetic understandings of attractive and repulsive, and any other understandings that we may choose to identify through our own academic processes of meaning-making.[417]

The key phrase here is *a spur to action*. I have argued that Elmessiri's development of a broad critical narrative has invited a wide circle of people into a meaning-making process that is characterized by exploration of a principle of humanity that cuts across differences. Kurzman's further elaboration of meaning-making in social movements

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[417] Charles Kurzman, "Introduction: Meaning-Making in Social Movements," *Anthropological Quarterly* 81.1 (2008), 5.

serves to explain why we may want to intensify our interest in broad critical narratives in relationship to collective action:

> Social movements may be a particularly conducive site to privilege meaning-making, because their activities foreground resistance to the dominant norms and institutions of society. They raise questions about the possibility of alternative world-views and alternative dispensations, and in so doing they challenge participants and observers to re-think meanings that are too often taken for granted. Social movements actively make meaning, challenging established meanings.[418]

Based on Kurzman's analysis, I suggest the following parallel formulation: Projects of critique may be a particularly conducive site to privilege affirmation/retrieval/hermeneutics, because their activities foreground critique/suspicion to the dominant norms and institutions of society. They *also* raise questions about the possibility of alternative world-views. The question raised by recent work on Elmessiri is how these modes of critical retrieval – in theory and in collective action – interact.

These considerations within social movement theory invite further inquiry into the conceptual and imaginative reservoirs available to those involved in the 2011 uprising. An invitation to concentrate on Elmessiri's work in relation to this inquiry was

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[418] Kurzman, "Meaning-Making," 6. Kurzman further on notes that this has not been the dominant trend in social movement theory. He explains, that during the second phase of social movement theory, although analysis moved away from analyses that insisted on the irrationality of crowd behavior, an alternative emphasis on the shared rationality of social movements meant that "analyses did not need to delve into how movements made sense of their surroundings, but focused primarily on what the surroundings were – the structures in which individuals operated, rather than the world-views that allowed these structures to operate," 8.

provided by the numerous reflections on his role and influence in the revolution by the network of his admirers.

b. Elmessiri as Prophet of Revolution

It is time to ask, now, *what, according to those invoking his work, was Elmessiri's contribution to the revolution? What is the nature of his "absent presence"?* Let us return to my conversation with Ahmed Elewa, in order to open up a discussion of Elmessiri's role in reflections on recent political and social changes. As he reflected on the events of 2011, Elewa drew on Elmessiri's concept of transcendence – seemingly the obvious choice for discussion of an uprising. However, he turned quickly to the less obvious – he wished to emphasize Elmessiri's less prominent references to the tragic or tragic-comic aspects of human existence, such as when Elmessiri describes that humanity is "stuck in the mud."[419] Elewa uses this as a lens through which to focus his expectations and anxieties about Egypt's future. He explained to me that he anticipates the need to pass through a period of "the tragic," wherein Egyptians will have to accept a loss that they have been, until now, unwilling to accept. Elewa characterizes this loss as happening at the moment when Islamic movements go through a crisis that will result from realizing – on their own terms – that there cannot be a straightforward, truth-extracting relationship to scripture. In other words, when there is a widespread recognition of a fundamental need for *ijtihād* – for new practices of interpretation. Tragedy, Elewa claims, will be the mood in the wake of this crisis.

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[419] See Chapter Four.

Elewa characterized Tahrir as a symbol of Egyptian society on the brink of this crisis – or further, a glimpse at the passage through the crisis. Why? Because, he claims, the "solution" – which would seem to be a clear path for getting beyond the secularist/liberal vs. Islamist impasse – cannot come through one person or party. Instead, he says, "everyone has to be at the table," so as to find a way forward together. Tahrir, according to Elewa was this moment – an unprecedented moment when everyone was at the table. The question now is how to recreate that moment or something resembling it. There is no way to force the solution; now is the time to ask how to provide conditions for it – how to bring everyone together. From the way he talks and weaves together occasional references to Elmessiri's work – both his writings and his role in Kefaya – it seems that he finds in Elmessiri an important set of concepts and theoretical tools for just such a project of imagination and of meaning-making.

Based on this sense of Elmessiri's importance, Elewa developed the idea for a conference that would give people a chance to discuss the ways in which Elmessiri has provided resources for understanding "the revolution" in Egypt. Almost two dozen speakers appeared in Elmessiri's office to record a testimonial or short lecture as part of the conference, which was titled "Elmessiri: The Absent But Present One in the Egyptian Revolution" (*al-misīrī: al-ghā'ib al-ḥāḍir fī al-thawra al-miṣriyya*). There are several common themes to these reflections: the values defended and discussed in his work, particularly dignity (*al-karāma*) and justice (*al-'adāla*); the human capacity for transcendence (*al-tajāwuz*); and Elmessiri as a prophetic voice of resistance.

Heba Raouf presents a clear metaphor to capture Elmessiri's role – one that he himself used in his Autobiography.[420] Ideas, she explains, are like seeds in the soil. The one who plants them does not necessarily know whether and how they will grow. Elmessiri was a harbinger of the revolution, she claims – and not only through his planted thoughts, but through his own participation. She describes that he embodied the political force of his work by going up against the police even as a sick and dying man. Raouf emphasizes that his students will never forget this scene. With respect to his humanism, Raouf explains that his writings on human nature and the pillars of his thought – freedom (*al-ḥurriyya*), dignity, and justice – have inspired Egyptians to reclaim recognition of their human worth and their right to a better society. Raouf also argues that his work on secularism should receive renewed attention in this moment, as Egyptians dialogue and debate over the appropriate structure and character of their institutions.

Mahmoud Khalifa emphasized Elmessiri's faith in human transcendence. Khalifa recalls Elmessiri's admiration for Malcolm X, who, for many, symbolizes the spirit of humanity standing up in the face of "corrupting circumstances." Khalifa claims that Elmessiri's idea of revolution is rooted in the model of Malcolm X. Revolution in this sense means the collective assertion of possibility – the possibility of imagining a better world, even when hopelessness seems to rule the day. The dream of revolution constitutes the basic content of what Khalifa calls Elmessiri's humanistic faith. But Khalifa also draws attention to the role of Islam in Elmessiri's revolutionary thought.

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[420] See Chapter Two.

For both Malcolm X and Elmessiri, he claims, Islam provides the conceptual and imaginative resources for the visionary clarity necessary to bring about change. With this characterization, Khalifa inadvertently situates Elmessiri in the liberationist stream of contemporary Islamic discourse.[421]

Khalifa offers an important characterization of Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism, as a way of elaborating on his basic thesis that Elmessiri is a revolutionary writer. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the question of exactly what it means for a *humanism* to be *Islamic* is not addressed in a rigorous manner by Elmessiri himself. The question is a particularly pressing one given Elmessiri's nuanced and shifting relationship to other currents of thought (Islamic or otherwise), as described in Chapter 2. Drawing simultaneously on Elmessiri and Malcolm X, Khalifa in effect asserts that *Islam is humanism*. There is not, in other words, a disposition or moral outlook called humanism that may at a particular time or place be embraced by Muslims, as though Islamic Humanism were simply a *style* of humanism; and neither is it the case that Islamic Humanism names one school of thought in Islam. Islamic Humanism captures the insight that the human being is the *khalīfat-allah* (viceregent of God) on earth and that the universe is prepared for human action. According to Khalifa, the significance of Elmessiri's critique of Western modernity – particularly the "post-modern" period – is

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[421] To speak of the liberationist potential within Islamic thought is (I think) to points to comparisons with liberationist Christian theology. There are a few noteworthy sources. Hamid Dabashi attempts to contribute to this notion of "Islamic liberation theology." See: Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2008). This text proposes to build a liberationist movement from the model of Malcolm X. Elizabeth Kassab has explored the liberationist impulse in contemporary Islamic thought, particularly in her reading of the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi. Hanafi's notion of the "Islamic Left" is meant to "uncover the revolutionary elements inherent in religion, or, if you wish, to show the common grounds of one and the other; that is, interpret religion as revolution." (Hanafi, quoted in Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought,* 202)

that the philosophical and imaginative tendency to deny human distinctiveness, a cosmic or even conceptual *center*, and the possibility of firm moral claims makes it difficult if not impossible to speak of a revolution driven by basic human values like dignity and justice. Revolution is possible, Khalifa claims, only when the human being is able to dream of a simple, visionary world. Elmessiri's work, as he describes it, underwrites such a dream.

Ahlām Muṣṭafa discusses Elmessiri's concept of the "true human" (*al-insān al-ḥaqīqī*) in order to argue that Elmessiri's theory of human nature predicted the revolution. The "true human," she explains, stands opposed to the "marginal human" (*al-insān al-hāmishī*), a being who passively endures the conditions created by the ruling regime. Gradually, this marginal human "is transformed into…what can be called a 'moral mutant' (*al-maskh al-akhlāqī*) and loses most of its moral features (*ṣifāt akhlāqī*) until it becomes a consuming, materialistic being, seeking food and drink or (in wealthier classes) other items." Muṣṭafa takes Elmessiri's critique of the dominant Western conception of human and implicitly applies it to Egyptians living under the Mubarak regime. Her analysis highlights the moral losses (not only the political losses) suffered under dictatorship. But such a "mutation" is not a permanent one. According to Elmessiri's Islamic Humanist anthropology, Muṣṭafa argues, the moral potential of the human being, even after long periods in its "marginal" mode, is *destined* to re-emerge. According to Muṣṭafa, this began to occur in Egypt approximately eight years ago – around the time of the formation of the Kefaya movement and an unprecedented series of public demonstrations. The "moment of the true human" culminated in the eighteen

days of protests that led to the resignation of former president Hosni Mubarak, and this revolutionary moment is, she stated, ongoing.

Reflections such as these suggest that Elmessiri was able to foresee and actually tried to bring about revolution in Egypt. Whether or not Elmessiri predicted or even influenced the uprising of 2011, this conference demonstrates the importance of Elmessiri's Islamic Humanism as an interpretive lens in the contemporary political-moral discourse in Egypt. Elmessiri's philosophy has proven to be an important resource in the construction of a broad narrative about the Egyptian revolution, as part of the ongoing process of meaning-making that has attended this otherwise shocking and confusing series of events.

Projects of critique such as Elmessiri's are not only relevant to the concepts and conversations that we associate with research in ethics. They may also shed light on the kinds of commitments on behalf of which people will take action together.

Concluding Reflections

I couldn't have imagined when I outlined the project how timely this inquiry would be in the Egyptian setting. As I mentioned, it was barely one year after the defense of my proposal that Egyptians took to the streets in the millions, in an unprecedented effort to re-claim their country and re-think their identity – a process that is very much ongoing. Through much of the writing of this project, I was in Cairo, surrounded by conversations and debates about where to turn (and what to avoid) in the search for vocabularies, values, institutions, and allies – all of which seemed to be up for grabs for a time. Even since the election and swearing in of a civilian and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president in June, 2012, a great many Egyptians believe the battle to transform Egypt and remake Egyptian politics is still underway (*as-sawra mustamirra!*). It has proven to be a good time for carefully considering the work of Abdelwahab Elmessiri, who has provided a much-needed oasis of philosophical reflection in this time of upheaval – both for me and for his Egyptian readers.

I.   Review of the Project

In the preceding chapters, I have introduced and discussed Elmessiri's critical project, and I have begun to situate his work in relationship to both his compatriots and co-religionists, as well as to some more general trends in contemporary theoretical reflection. This study of Elmessiri has been shaped in particular by an interest in the

goods and values that drive his criticisms of Western modernity and give form to his vision of an Islamic Humanism.

Elmessiri undertakes to produce a critique of modernity. By this, I mean that he strives to develop a coherent argued narrative about the relationship between Western concepts and metaphors (particularly those concerned with the ontology of the human), on the one hand, and morally problematic trends in social and political life, on the other. He accounts for this linkage and an accompanying erosion of goods and values by pointing to a sequential process of "immanentization" in the modern imagination – a loss of key distinctions that serve to structure human experience, most significantly the distinction between the material world and a divine or transcendent reality. Immanentization, he claims, has produced such consequences as rampant consumerism, racism, the fragmentation of family life and a species of moral relativism that tolerates grave social injustices. He often explicitly characterizes modernity as "value-free," signaling his orientation to ethics (as opposed to, for example, political power or cultural preservation and purity).

Such diagnoses are only one dimension of his critical project. I have argued that this critique does not simply position Western modernity as an alien object of analysis, but rather that Elmessiri understands that, insofar as it has produced problems that are relevant to him (a realization that emerges in what I have called the second dimension of critical reflection), it must also become a resource for thinking through the solutions. This is particularly evident in Elmessiri's reliance upon Western ideas and theorists,

such as those of the Frankfurt school, but also in some of his political commitments, such as to democratic procedures and a type of secularism (namely, "partial").

Elmessiri's critique of modernity was to be the central focus of my project when I set out to research and write it. However, during this process, I came to understand that Elmessiri's engagement with Islam also involved elements of critique. It is not just that Elmessiri defends an Islamic philosophical anthropology over and against that of Western modernity. In addition, he engages in what seems to be a process of "immanent" critique: Elmessiri uses concepts such as *tawḥīd* and *ijtihād*, not only as a way of challenging what he perceives to be Western epistemological hegemony; he also uses these concepts in such a way as to problematize certain trends in Islamist political thought, such as a tendency to prioritize obtaining state power, and an increasing wariness of interpretive engagement with textual sources. He uses these Islamic concepts to retrieve a basic commitment to human flourishing that he perceives to be either lost or understated in a number of contemporary trends. His outlook of Islamic Humanism is the product of these complex efforts.

In light of these findings, Elmessiri's critique is best understood as a "critical retrieval." This concept invokes Paul Ricoeur's negotiation of two different approaches to reflecting on the predicament of *finite, historical* beings seeking to produce *generalizable* knowledge: (1) *hermeneutic recovery of meaning* on the basis of inherited tradition, versus (2) *critical unmasking* of the ways in which tradition itself obstructs our freedom and our access to true knowledge. These two approaches should not be seen as alternatives, but rather as part of a "double agenda," concerned with discerning and protecting basic

human goods.[422] For a thinker like Elmessiri, the agenda is not double but squared – a double agenda with respect to two discursive fields (Islam and Western modernity). To begin to theorize this difference, I proposed to rely on the framework of a three-dimensional critique. It is my hope that this framework could prove to be enriching for research on other Muslim scholars of Elmessiri's generation, as well as more recent work. I want to suggest, as well, that this framework could prove to be enriching for work in Ethics, particularly Comparative Religious Ethics. I will say more about this below.

I also argued that Elmessiri's legacy and the work of his students and other readers is an important component of his ethic of Islamic Humanism. The commitments and affirmations mingling in his critique are not only evident in its moments of scholarly retrieval, but also in the impact of his work on a new generation of scholars. Through my examination of his influence on reflections on the Egyptian uprising of January 25, 2011, it became apparent that he has left behind tools and spaces for ongoing critical reflection, value discernment, and "meaning-making."

II.   Contributions and Limitations

There is a growing body of literature in Arabic that is devoted to analysis of Elmessiri's work. However, very little has been written about Elmessiri in English. Aslam Farouk-Alli has discussed the basic contours of Elmessiri's critique of modernity and he has highlighted Elmessiri's argument that postmodernity does not constitute a

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[422] Larry Bouchard, in his course Interpretation Theory, fall, 2002.

viable alternative to modernity. Mona Abaza has also included a skeptical appraisal of his work in her *Debates on Islam and Knowledge*. Other than these two discussions, I have found only a few passing references to Elmessiri, and generally these highlight his research on Zionism. In introducing and discussing his work, this study thus provides a foundation for additional research into the various elements of Elmessiri's critical narrative. I hope that it could also become the occasion for more and more sustained engagements between scholars in America and Europe and scholars in the Muslim world.

My reading of Elmessiri as providing a project of critical retrieval offers several additional contributions. Students of contemporary Islamic thought and Muslim debates about knowledge may find this methodology illuminating. Because I have emphasized that Elmessiri's studies in epistemology are rooted in his concerns for social justice and human flourishing, the project should also be of interest to those doing work in Islamic Ethics. Not enough scholarship falling under this heading is devoted to contemporary writers and issues.

More generally, I have imagined this project as a contribution to reflections on the nature of – and particularly the ethical status of – practices of critique. In the first chapter I assembled a variety of reflections on critique from across the humanities and social sciences, including on Muslim critique, which illustrate the potential of this inquiry. I hope that this study will not only add another token to this assemblage, but provide a small contribution towards integrating the many insights that they contain. Practices of critique often target commitments and values. However, they are always

and already informed by others. This became evident in my study of Elmessiri, particularly in Chapters 3 and 4 where I examined his critical appraisal of Western modernity in terms of the goods and values that he perceived to be under threat and his vision of a pathway for protecting them.

There are also a number of lingering questions and unexplored areas that are relevant to research on Elmessiri. Most notably, the present project is limited with respect to Elmessiri's work on Judaism and Zionism. As I indicated, his interest in this subject matter is not peripheral – neither to his study of modernity, nor to his ethics. Moreover, Elmessiri's readers in the Arab world tend to understand his broader insights through this central case study. Study of Elmessiri's work on Judaism and Zionism that goes beyond that provided in Appendix 3 of this dissertation will demand considerable background research on Zionist thought and history.

A second area that will benefit from further work concerns Elmessiri's contemporaries and peers. Elmessiri's work resembles a number of contemporary Muslim thinkers in regards to the perception that Western concepts and social forms have displaced those available to Muslims, without improving or enriching their lives. Moving forward, I would like to more extensively engage with thinkers of the IIIT network and more generally literature Islamization and Islamic social sciences.

There are two areas of the theoretical scaffolding that I've constructed here that I intend to further develop: First, the nature of the linkage between narrative and critique that I have until now only suggested. Many projects of critique, including Elmessiri's, have narrative features, and it will be worthwhile to pursue the significance of this

observation by more carefully considering theories of narrative. Second, the particular sense of "immanent critique" that I identify in Elmessiri's relationship to *both* Western modernity and Islam will need further clarification and development. The term is conventionally used in one of two ways: either to describe a figure's examination of her own world of ideas, or to describe a figures examination of another's world of ideas, *from within*. Part of my motivation in making use of this concept is to trouble the notion that we as thinkers are simply "inside" one worldview, while being "outside" another – that these worldviews operate according to discrete logics that we inhabit when we employ one vocabulary and take leave of when we employ another. Most notably, in this case, separate spheres of "Islam" and "Western modernity" are inadequate to make sense of Elmessiri's aims and achievements – his project is immanent to both.

III.   Toward A Comparative Study of Critique

In addition to addressing these under-developed areas, moving forward I would like to see this project serve as a basis for developing a comparative analyses of critical narratives about Western modernity. Until now, the most pressing reason for (or benefit of) undertaking such a project is that it creates the conditions for the revitalized solidarities such as those that flourished in Egypt, the United States, and elsewhere around the world in 2011. I would like to think that cultivating broader and broader solidarities is a significant aim of the study of religious ethics.   Paul Ricoeur made – almost in passing – this tremendously provocative claim: "Critique is also a tradition."

Since those of us doing work in religious ethics are already accustomed to doing comparative work on "traditions," linking critique to tradition invites new avenues of comparative study.

I have pointed to some very broad points of comparison with respect to the critique of modernity that would be worth extending, particularly similarities between Elmessiri and thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, and John Milbank. In light of Elmessiri's interest in epistemology and the wider range of Muslim studies of social science, it would be particularly rewarding to develop a comparative investigation of critiques of the social sciences. Investigating such common concerns and observations about a shared predicament may yield insights that go beyond those provided by direct assessment of comparable commitments, virtues, and values. To garner insights from comparative critique is in part to explore a wider variety of accounts of a shared world, its ills, and its riches.

The framework of analysis of Elmessiri's work that I have outlined in this project could facilitate discernment of commitments and values operative in any given thinker's work, which would subsequently provide new occasions for dialogue between critical projects on the basis of shared or analogous commitments and values.

IV.   Closing

Elmessiri concludes his Autobiography with a story that is a tribute to the human passion for artistic creation. It is the story of a man who becomes consumed

with the objective of fashioning a staff – one that would be perfect in all respects. He pursues this aim with such fervor that time and history pass by without his notice. Elmessiri regards the story with a great degree of ambivalence, for he knows that it is important to maintain engagement with and awareness of one's history and one's world. But, on the other hand, it is his great admiration for the human capacity for creativity, craft, and transcendence of natural/material limits that sustains him in his life-long intellectual journey. Elmessiri takes this story from a classic of American literature: Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. It seems to be a telling gesture to leave the last words – ambivalent though they may be – to an icon of the culture that he invested so much energy in challenging.

I'll also borrow another's words as I close my project. Also a tribute - not to the artist *per se*, but to an equally ambivalent but much less celebrated figure: the critic. Latour's words capture something important about how I have tried to read Abdelwahab Elmessiri and what I would hope to bring to future studies in the genre of critique:

> The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between anti-fetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.[423]

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[423] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 246.

Appendix 1:
Chronological List of Key Published Works

1972   *nihāya al-tārīkh:muqadima li-dirāsa buniya al-fikr al-ṣuhyūnī* (The End of History: Introduction to the Study of the Structure of Zionist Thought). Cairo: Markiz al-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsiyya wa al-Istrātījiyya bi-l-Ahrām.

1975   *mawsū'a al-mafāhīm wa al-muṣṭalaḥāt al-ṣuhyūniyya: ru'ya naqdiyya* (Encyclopedia of Zionist Terms and Concepts: A Critical Perspective). Cairo: Ma'had al-Buḥūth wa al-Dirāsāt al-'Arabiyya.

1977   *The Land of Promise: A Critique of Political Zionism*. New Brunswick: North American, Inc.

1979   *al-firdaws al-arḍī: dirāsāt wa intibā'āt 'an al-ḥaḍāra al-amrīkiyya* (The Earthly Paradise: Studies and Impressions of American Culture) Beirut: al-Mu'asasa al-'Arabiyya l-al-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr.

1997   *al-ṣuhyūniyya wa al-nāziyya wa nihāya al-tārīkh: ru'ya ḥaḍāriyya jadīda* (Zionism, Nazism, and the End of History: A New Cultural Perspective) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq

1998   *ishkāliyya al-taḥayyuz: ru'ya ma'rifiyya wa da'wa li-l-ijtihād* (The Problematic of Bias: An Epistemological Perspective and a Call for Ijtihād) Cairo: al-ma'had al-'ālimī li-l-fikr al-islāmī.

1999   *mawsū'a al-yahūd wa al-yahūdiyya wa al-ṣuhyūniyya: namūdhaj tafsīrī jadīd*: *thamāniyya ajzā'* (Encyclopedia of Jews, Judaism, and Zionism: A New Interpretive Paradigm, in Eight Parts) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

2000   *riḥlatī al-fikriyya: fī al-budhūr wa al-judhūr wa al-thamar: sīra ghayr dhātiyya wa ghayr mawḍū'iyya* (My Intellectual Journey: In Seeds, Roots, and Fruits – A Non-Subjective, Non-Objective Autobiography) Cairo: al-Hī'a al-'āma l-quṣūr al-thaqāfa.

2001   *al-'ālim min manẓūr gharbī* (The World from a Western Perspective) Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl.

2002   *al-falsafa al-mādiyya wa tafkīk al-insān* (Materialist Philosophy and Deconstruction of the Human) Damascus: Dār al-Fikr.

2002   *al-lugha wa al-majāz: bayn al-tawḥīd wa wiḥda al-wujūd* (Language and Metaphor: Between Monotheism and Pantheism) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

2002   *al-ʿalmāniyya al-juzʾiyya wa al-ʿalmāniyya al-shāmila: juzʾān* (Partial and Comprehensive Secularism, in two parts) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

2003   *al-ḥadātha wa ma baʿd al-ḥadātha* (Modernity and Post Modernity) co-written with Fatḥī al-Tarīkī. Damascus: Dār al-Fikr.

2003   *al-brūtūkūlāt wa al-yahūdiyya wa al-ṣuhyūniyya* (The Protocols, Judaism, and Zionism) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

2003   *difāʿ ʿan al-insān: dirāsāt naẓariyya wa taṭbīqiyya fī al-namādhaj al-murakkaba* (Defending the Human: Theoretical and Applied Studies in Complex Paradigms) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

2006   *dirāsāt maʿrifiyya fī al-ḥadātha al-gharbiyya* (Epistemological Studies in Western Modernity) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

2006   Second Printing of Autobiography (see Bibliography)

2007   *dirāsāt fī al-shiʾr* (Studies in Poetry) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

2007   *fī al-adab wa al-fikr: dirāsāt fī al-shiʾr wa al-nathr* (Of Literature and Thought: Studies in Poetry and Prose) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

2007   *ṣamuwīl tāylūr kūlīridj, qaṣīda al-malāḥ al-qadīm fī sabʿa aqsām, ṭabʿa bi-l-lughatayn al-ʿarabiyya wa al-inglīzīyya.* (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Rime of the Ancient Mariner in Seven Parts, Bilingual Printing: Arabic and English) London: Awakening.

2008   *man hum al-yahūd wa mā hiyya al-yahūdiyya? asʾila al-huwiyya wa azma al-dawla al-yahūdiyya.* (Who are the Jews and What is Judaism: Questions of Identity and the Crisis of the Jewish State) Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

Appendix 2:
Biographical Timeline

1938	Born in Damanhour, Egypt
1952	Egyptian Revolution led by Free Officers Movement
1955	Enrolled in Alexandria University.
1959	Appointed lecturer (*muʿīd*).
1963	Began Master's degree program at Columbia University in the Department of English Language and Comparative Literature (MA 1964).
1964	Began PhD program at Rutgers University in the Department of English (PhD 1969).
1967	Six-Day War.
1969	Completed PhD and returned to Egypt. Dissertation: "The Critical Writings of Wordsworth and Whitman: A Study of the Historical and Anti-Historical Imaginations."
1970	Death of President Gamal Abdel Nasser; Anwar Sadat assumes presidency.
1975	Appointed Cultural Attaché for the Permanent Delegation of the Arab League to the United Nations. Returned to United States.
1979	Returned to Egypt.
1981	Assassination of Anwar Sadat. Hosni Mubarak assumes presidency.
1999	Publication of *Encyclopedia of Jews, Judaism, and Zionism*.[424]
2001	Publication of Autobiography. Travelled to United States for cancer treatment.
2004	Formation of Kefaya Movement.
2007	Appointed General Coordinator for the Kefaya Movement.
2008	Died in Palestine Hospital, Cairo, Egypt.

[424] According to Elmessiri, the Encyclopedia took a quarter of a century to research and write.

Appendix 3:
Elmessiri as a Scholar of Zionism

If you mention Elmessiri to most educated Egyptians, the first thing they are likely to bring to mind is his *Mawsū'a* or "Encyclopedia": the *Encyclopedia of Jews, Judaism, and Zionism.* In Egypt and other parts of the Arab world, Elmessiri is most well-known as a scholar of Judaism and Zionism. He produced an extensive amount of research and analysis on the subject, from the early 1970s until the end of his life. This research was available primarily in Arabic but also in English, and it included numerous books, pamphlets, internet and print media articles, and numerous lectures and interviews. His studies culminated in the famous 1999 eight-volume Encyclopedia.

Because of the proximity of Egypt to Israel, the tense and troubled history of their relationship, and the prominent role of American diplomatic efforts in the region, the centrality of these topics should not be underestimated.[425] By orienting his work towards a rethinking of the political, social, and philosophical meaning of Zionism and the historical state of Israel, Elmessiri is going to the heart of a broader constellation of questions about identity, history, and morality. He aims to provide a cogent and nuanced study of a set of topics that are fraught with stereotypes and emotions.

Elmessiri explains that this research, and particularly the Encyclopedia, "is an attempt to develop an analytical paradigm for social phenomena that goes beyond materialist monism, using Jews, Judaism and Zionism as case studies."[426] It was through his intensive engagement in analysis of Zionism that his critique of Western modernity

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[425] For a history and analysis of the role of Egypt in the U.S.-brokered "peace process," see William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[426] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (76).

crystallized.[427] It is for this reason that it was primarily later in his life – after the years

of research on the Encyclopedia – that he published on more general theoretical subjects.

In this dissertation, I have focused on these more general investigations. However,

given its importance in his career, here I want to provide some basic information about

Elmessiri's approach and findings in his research on Zionism.   My brief discussion of

this research will be focused on the question of how his studies on this subject engender

a distinctive ethos of Islamic Humanism by providing a model of critical engagement. I

base my findings on his reflections in the Autobiography and on his 1977 English

language text, *The Land of Promise: A Critique of Political Zionism.*[428]

There are a few key accomplishments of the project on Zionism with respect to

the questions of Elmessiri's reputation and legacy as an Islamic Humanist. First and

most fundamentally, Elmessiri educates his readers: he provides them with a historical

narrative, with vocabulary, and with analytic concepts that are the prerequisites for

dispensing with stereotypes and conspiracy theories. Elmessiri felt himself uniquely

qualified to undertake his studies based on his relationships with Jews in America. He

claimed that his time in America provided him with a view "from the inside" about the

complexity of Jewish identity and of Jews' relationships to the young state. He explains,

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[427] Reflecting on this work in his Autobiography he explains, "[Judaism and Zionism] ceased being the main topic of the *Encyclopedia,* they simply became a 'case study.' In other words I think I have written a work that has a reasonable amount of abstraction and comprehensiveness as well as off concreteness." Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (111).

[428] I cannot attest to the representativeness of these findings without further research. Moreover, I do not have significant background in the subjects of Zionism, Israel, or Jewish history. Readers of Arabic who would like to read more on this subject should consult Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal and Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm 'Atiyah, eds. *Fī 'Ālam ʿAbd el-Wahāb el-Misīrī: Ḥiwār Naqdī Ḥaḍārī (In the World of Elmessiri: A Critical Cultural Dialogue in Two Volumes).* Neither can I attest to the accuracy of most of Elmessiri's claims about Judaism and Zionism.

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I never came to know the Jew in general or 'the Jewish personality' in an absolute way, I rather came to know a group of Jews each with his/her own history, language, culture and personality… in spite of the overwhelming feeling of the strategic threat that the Zionist invasion of the land of Palestine represents, I knew, from the very beginning, that the Jews are neither geniuses nor devils but human beings, one can negotiate with them and can fight against them…[429]

In highlighting the diversity, complexity, and humanity of Jews, Elmessiri is not just confronting the stereotypes of many in his Arab audience. In fact, a significant element in his critique of Zionism is based on his perception that Zionist ideology itself undermines this diversity of Jewish communities, and particularly their link to other national histories and languages. Zionism, he suggests, produces its own stereotypes. Thus, as a second accomplishment, he argues firmly, repeatedly, and with meticulous evidence, that Zionism and Judaism are not identical, emphasizing that Zionism is not a religious doctrine. Elmessiri insists on the importance of distinguishing Judaism from Zionism (condemning the latter but not the former). What is most significant about this argument is that with it Elmessiri displays an important recognition that a Jewish theological (but also self-critical) critique of Zionism is possible. Indeed, Elmessiri points to "religious and humanist" Jewish challenges to Zionism, such as that of Rabbi Judah Magnes.[430]

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[429] Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (321-324).
[430] Abdelwahab Elmessiri, *The Land of Promise: A Critique of Political Zionism* (New Brunswick: North American, 1977)*,* 16.

Third, he links the specific the hazards of Zionism to the defects of Western modernity. This included several features: the notion of an end to history, racism, and nation-state ideology. He traces these to European history, and not to Jewish traditions or beliefs.[431] He argues that Zionism is a racist and therefore anti-human ideology, and that it is for this reason that it should be opposed – *not because it is Jewish*. Elmessiri also supports this argument by highlighting the Zionist emphasis on the territorial state, and specifically the "Jewish state." He quotes Ariel Sharon from the 1970s, stating "the first and the most supreme value is the good of the State. The State is the supreme value." Elmessiri claims that the phenomenon of Zionism and the creation of Israel remind us "of the great tragedy that this kind of state adulation brought upon humanity not long ago in Europe."[432] It may be that he drew parallels between what happened as religious Judaism metamorphosed into politicized ideology and the impulses of Islamism's bid for control of the modern state. Spiritual values become superseded by matters of political expediency.[433]

Zionism represents one of Elmessiri's deep concerns about Western modernity more generally: that there is a gradual profanation or *secularization* of all concepts and values. Zionism exhibits the same tendency of converting an (religious) identity into a political ideology.[434] Though human beings may never escape the temptations of

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[431] However, on some occasions, he writes of the "pantheistic" impulse of the Jewish idea of God having a special relationship to one particular group of people.

[432] He means, of course, the Holocaust. Elmessiri, *The Land of Promise,* 12.

[433] I am grateful to Dr. Daniel H. Weiss for the conversation that produced this insight.

[434] Elmessiri claims that the beginning of his interest in the subject of Zionism was a 1963 conversation with a Jewish woman in New York City. As they were introducing themselves, he told his nationality (Egyptian) and was surprised and confused when she stated that her nationality was "Jewish." Elmessiri replied, "I did not ask your religion." Elmessiri, *Autobiography*, (317-318).

exclusivism, Elmessiri finds that modern ideologies have proven to produce a different, more dangerous kind of exclusivism when brought into the order of the state.

Finally, consistent with the general themes of his work, Elmessiri argues for dispensing with supra-historical claims about the sources of historical conflicts. For example, he notes that the first step in getting beyond the status quo of deadlock would be to cease speaking of a timeless "Jewish question." Instead, he frames the discussion of possible remedies in terms of justice and solidarity more broadly. He proposes, "if there is a Jewish question in the United States or Peru, and if the Jews of the Diaspora suffer from any disability, they must make common cause with other victims of oppression and with the more progressive forces in their society."[435] He views the Zionist project of founding a state for all Jews as an attempt to flee from historical and regional particularities – those things that Elmessiri holds constitute our humanity.

It follows from this that Elmessiri supports a version of the rare and relatively marginal "one state solution." He argues, "The state of Israel should be reconstituted to be a state neither for Jews nor Zionists but for its *present Israeli citizens* within its pre-1967 borders."[436] This is, in effect, the *second* step and one made possible only by the first move of renouncing the idea of a universal, ahistorical, and ethnically defined "Jew." Israel must, he claims, become a territorial state in the truly democratic ideal, where citizenship is a more basic notion than religion or ideology. A significant benefit of this arrangement is that it makes Israel "part of the region," "sharing the same advantages and suffering the same setbacks." Although I have not found any evidence that

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[435] Ibid, 204-205.
[436] Ibid, 206.

Elmessiri read Hannah Arendt's work, his rationale for defending this particular conception of the state of Israel resonates strongly with her famous "right to have rights."[437] He states, "the human and fundamental *right of belonging to,* as distinct from the colonial and exclusivist *right of settling in*, a land should be upheld as the inalienable right of all Israeli citizens, not of all Jews or Zionists who happen to be citizens of other countries."[438] Addressing the matter of statehood and rights in terms of the priority of *belonging* ensures that the burden of addressing violations and abuses is not placed disproportionately on Israel as a refuge for Jews – neither by neglecting Palestinian Christians and Muslims, nor by discharging European and other nations of guaranteeing rights to their Jewish citizens.

Elmessiri had to respond to criticism from more than one side: some expressed skepticism that his work was yet another anti-Semitic tract – that it was designed, as he himself cited it, for the purpose of "rallying forces in defense of Arab rights." On the other hand, some criticized his critique of Zionism for not being forceful enough. Some argued that his work encouraged a degree of sympathy and humanization that was inappropriate to the political and humanitarian crises for which Zionism has been blamed. Responding to the accusations, Elmessiri offers a firm and persuasive retort:

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[437] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. When, elsewhere in the text of *Land of Promise,* Elmessiri references Arendt, he is drawing on secondary source material that cites her. An unwitting alliance between these two figures was also highlighted in one of the posthumous reflections on Elmessiri's career: http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Abdelwahab+M.+Elmessiri+1938-2008.-a0189598584. There, the authors note, "Although Elmessiri did not have the chance to read Hannah Arendt's 'The Jewish Writings,' written in the 1930s and 1940s and published in 2007, it is possible to argue that on more than one issue, they arrived at similar conclusions."

[438] Elmessiri, *The Land of Promise,* 206.

Contrary to the anti-Semitic tract that was conjured in the critics' minds, my encyclopedia on the Jews, Judaism and Zionism was no campaign of denunciation or vilification; nor did it cater to a propagandistic agenda for 'rallying forces in defense of Arab rights.' Rather, it was an attempt to comprehend and explain Judaism and Zionism through…the development of new paradigms capable of encompassing the various aspects of these phenomena in their totality and specificity….Some critics believe that to 'humanise' the Jews is to acquit Zionism and to sympathise with its advocates. Nothing could be more erroneous. Our conflict with the Zionists is not a trial and we are not bringing suit against them. What we are, or should be, trying to do is to understand them and their behavior so as to be able to deal with them better in war or in peace…To attempt to explain and understand is a far cry from condoning these ills, and we must make the effort to comprehend if we are to grasp reality and therefore change it. Conversely, without this effort, all we have are hollow slogans, and the struggle to counter these ills becomes suicidal, because it entails hurling ourselves blind and unprepared into an obscure and raging storm.[439]

A more general conclusion about Islamic Humanism emerges in the passage just cited. Elmessiri's Humanism is no thin morality of peace and tolerance at all costs. Humanism is not the name of an outcome but (once again) of a method of knowing and critical engagement.

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[439] Haggag Ali, "The Cognitive Mapping of Modernity and Postmodernity," 203-204.

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