



A Reflection on Our Relationship with Western Modern Philosophy and Thought: Beyond Clarity and Obviousness

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Abstract

The main issue of the present paper is: What exactly is the relationship between our Iranian culture and thought and Western philosophy and thought? Most discussions raised in Iran regarding tradition and modernity have considered this relationship to be self-evident and obvious. However, contrary to appearances, it seems this relationship is not so obvious and clear. The mere fact that we study books and sources of Western philosophy, or write texts and articles about it in the form of various research projects, does not mean that we, who have been situated and grown within a different historical and intellectual framework, have a relationship with the intellectual tradition of the West. It must be acknowledged that the historical and intellectual course of modern

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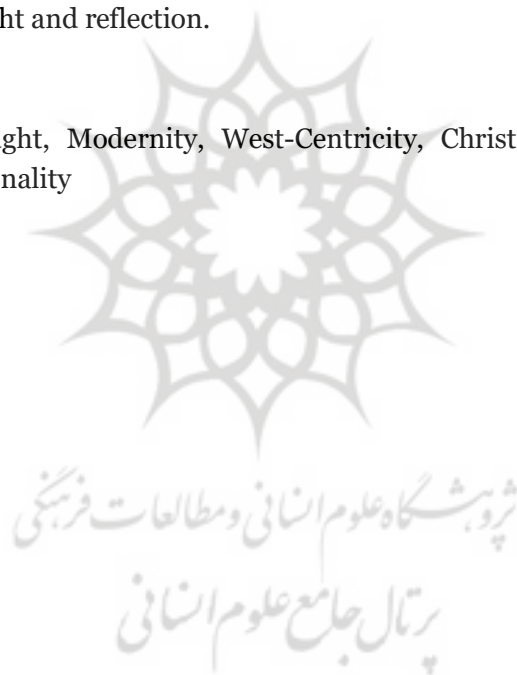


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Western thought, considering its roots and origins, has its own requirements and characteristics that do not necessarily align with the historical and intellectual framework in Iran. Therefore, the absolute extension of its precepts and concepts to this framework does not seem entirely acceptable. This very issue must be subjected to a serious question; that is, we must understand what the aforementioned relationship actually is and what characteristics it can possess. Hence, this seemingly clear relationship must itself become a subject for serious reflection and scrutiny. Finally, this paper proposes that instead of taking our relationship with modern Western thought for granted, we must begin an effort to discover the various dimensions of the internal logic of Iranian thought and reflection.

Keywords

Iranian Thought, Modernity, West-Centricity, Christianity, Tradition, Modern Rationality



Introduction

Western philosophy and thought (especially modern philosophical thought, which is emphasized here) originate from a distinct historical, cultural, and civilizational context that is not necessarily related to our own history, culture, or thought. According to the great German philosopher Leo Strauss, Western civilization and thought have two essential pillars: Judaism-Christianity and Hellenism (Strauss, 2018, p. 321).

These two pillars have had little influence on our history and culture, or at least not in a way that profoundly affected the historical and intellectual trajectory of Iran. This means that, from a historical perspective and considering the surviving works of various thinkers, Iranian thought and reflection, at their foundation, were not near the core influence of these components. This is despite all the cultural communication and contact that has flowed between Eastern and Western civilizations throughout history, which is not negligible.

Naturally, the intention is not to draw a decisive border between our history and thought and that of the West, as such an act is neither wise nor even possible. The aim is to state that the cultural and intellectual foundations of Western civilization, which are also the source of modern Western philosophy, despite their possible influence on the entire history of the world, did not become part of our lived historical experience and were simply not in the realm of this historical experience.

It can be argued that the historical reserves we have deeply held at the core of our experiences and accumulations, and which have shaped our historical and cultural lived experience, are Iranian identity and Islamic identity. It is true that, historically, some works of Greek philosophy were translated into Arabic at the beginning of Islamic civilization and found their way into our culture. Still, they never

became internalized within the fabric of this civilization and culture. Considering the elaborations added to Greek philosophy in Islamic philosophy by predominantly Iranian philosophers, and the fundamental concepts introduced to it, thought and philosophy in Iran advanced on a different path until the contemporary era.

It must be noted that the meaning of "we" here is the Iranian "we" of this time and place, supported by a specific tradition. A "we" that has lived in a distinct historical and intellectual sphere that is neither similar nor identical to the historical and intellectual sphere of the West. Philosophically, it can be said that the issues raised by great Western philosophers in the modern era are not necessarily our issues, because they have reflected and spoken strictly within the framework of their own specific intellectual tradition, which dictates problems unique to itself.

Another point for reflection is that it seems we are unable to properly connect with our own tradition and its heritage. This is not a personal matter or something related to individual interests, but a complex philosophical-civilizational problem (if such a term can be used). It is as if we face large, yet intangible and unconscious, obstacles when confronting the sources and intellectual heritage of Iran. It is as if our communicative bridge with our own tradition has been severed. This issue entails a double burden for us, as here the act of confrontation itself has become an issue, not merely *how* to confront it. To reach an understanding of Iran, we must engage with its intellectual sources and writings, but now it seems this first step won't be easily taken.

A concrete and perhaps trivial example in this regard is that we, the people of the humanities, endure the pain of learning German, French, or Greek so that we can access the original texts of European

philosophers—texts that were not necessarily written for us or focused on Iranian issues (though it should be noted that the effort itself is highly instrumental and important for understanding the modern Western world). However, this seemingly ordinary occurrence becomes questionable when we realize that, in contrast, we haven't reached a level of proficiency in Arabic or even Persian that allows us to study our own sources directly and effortlessly. These sources stem from both wellsprings of our thought, such as the Quran, Nahj al-Balagha, Avesta, Tarikh-i Bayhaqi, Shahnameh, Diwan of Hafez, and the texts of Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Mulla Sadra, among others. It must be emphasized again that this is not merely a personal issue but indicates a deeper predicament.

The history of Iranian reflections on the encounter with the West perhaps reaches back about three or four centuries, when our civilization was once again directly confronted with the West, specifically during the Age of Enlightenment and following the emergence of modernity. Most of the sources resulting from those initial reflections have, of course, gained historical value today. However, in recent decades, discussions on this important topic have been presented in various sources, and Iranian experts have attempted to understand Iranian civilization in relation to the West.

Most of the research in this field is thematically often categorized in the realms of history and politics, rather than presenting distinctly philosophical analyses. They have examined the relationship between Iran and Western civilization based on specific historical periods. Among the most important of these works are: the late Dr. Davoud Feirahi's book *The Concept of Law in Contemporary Iran* (Nashr-e Ney), Dr. Farzin Vahdat's *Farsi: Intellectual Encounter of Iran with Modernity* (Nashr-e Qoqnoos), Dr. Abbas Milani's *Modernity and Anti-Modernity in Iran* (Nashr-e Akhtaran); or Dr. Seyed Javad

Miri's article titled "Our Relationship with the West and its Impact on the Social Existence of Iran", which is mainly a re-reading of the views of Dr. Davari Ardakani on the West.

Among these, Dr. Hossein Mesbahian's book, *Modernity and Its Other*, which is also a source for this article, has attempted to examine the philosophical aspects of this issue, especially with regard to the views of Western thinkers and a critique of exclusive and monopolistic modernity. However, alongside all this notable and valuable research, the books of the late Dr. Seyed Javad Tabatabai perhaps have the closest proximity to the main idea of this article, as he aims to conceptualize the issue of Iran and turn the confrontation with the West into a fundamental subject through philosophical analysis based on historical and political data.

The present paper, borrowing from some of these sources, takes a step toward understanding the principle of the issue of relationship and connection. That is, it attempts to emphasize the very initial stage, rather than organizing its analyses *a posteriori* by assuming our relationship with Western culture and thought. In this context, the potential contribution of this writing can be that we intend to establish ourselves at the first step and question the relationship and connection with the West itself. This very action will guide us toward discovering the structure and internal logic of thought in Iran. Our aim and endeavor has been to add these points to the existing discussions to pave the way, as far as possible, for subsequent research.

1. On the Roots and Origins of Western Modernity

It must first be said that although parts of the doctrines of modern Western philosophy have universal aspects, their roots and origins are not. Carl Schmitt, one of the most important political philosophers of the twentieth century—a key figure alongside Karl Löwith and Hans

Blumenberg in the dispute over the legitimacy of the modern age—states in the first volume of his book, *Political Theology*, in a sentence that has practically become proverbial: "All significant [and pregnant] concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts [i.e., of Christian theology]" (Schmitt, 2014, p. 77). He emphasizes that this transition process did not happen merely due to historical developments but rather due to the systematic structure of theological concepts; for instance, the concept of the omnipotent God in Christian theology was transferred to the concept of the absolute sovereign or legislator, and the concept of the miracle in theology became the concept of the exception in law (Schmitt, 2014, p. 77).

Generally, according to Schmitt, modernity and its concepts are a phenomenon resulting from the configuration of Christian theology and do not possess a wholly independent status of their own. Although this notion has staunch opponents like Blumenberg, the principle that the modern age originated from the wellspring of European Christian civilization is agreed upon by those who hold expertise in this area. In fact, the discussion revolves around the degree or nature of the connection between the modern age and its preceding Christian-Western heritage, not a doubt about the connection itself.

Carl Schmitt insists on the deep amalgamation of political theology concepts and the categories of modern thought—concepts that are so interwoven that they cannot be precisely separated by a boundary. According to Schmitt, the modern legislative state triumphed along with the same theology and metaphysics that dispensed with the miracle as an exceptional state (Schmitt, 2014, p. 77). And, ostensibly, it sought to advance the ordering of human life in a purely worldly and secular manner.

Similarly, some other interpreters believe that at the threshold

of the modern era, the theological-political problems arising from Christianity were unique and specific to European civilization. Moreover, the awareness of how Christianity differed and the unprecedented nature of its political crisis became very powerful and prominent. Mark Lilla expresses one of the most important of these unique problems as follows:

When the ancient Jews were an independent kingdom, they were governed exclusively through the Torah, that is, through divine law, not human law. Medieval Muslim societies were [mostly] ruled in the same way, through the Sharia. [Thus,] in no other religion could the struggle between 'Church and State' arise. But Christianity, at least in its original sense, was not law-based; Christianity retained the Ten Commandments, but abolished the highly elaborated system of Jewish Law in favor of the law of the heart... Medieval Christianity followed no model, neither the Judeo-Islamic nor the pagan model; and this... was the closest source of the crisis (Lilla, 2023, p. 40).

One way to explain the emergence of modern political philosophy (and the entirety of modern thought) is to situate it within the context of the specific theological-political disputes and conflicts that occurred in the West, conflicts that reached a critical and perilous level during the Protestant Reformation and the religious wars that followed. In the sixteenth century (the threshold of the modern age), there was no unified and integrated Christianity (which determined the main intellectual context in the Middle Ages) in the West. All that existed was a collection of churches and sects that cooperated with the rulers of the time. Doctrinal differences and political ambitions mutually incited each other and fueled the flames (Lilla, 2023, pp. 36-37).

A period then had to pass for new ideas to emerge and rely on the preceding intellectual tradition. The changes in Christian thought,

and especially Christian political theology, prepared the ground for new changes and developments (Lilla, 2023, p. 37). The concept of "modern" itself fundamentally emerged within the context of Church reform in the twelfth century, although its meaning at that time was different from the present era. The Church reformers believed they were building upon the heritage of their predecessors, but the crucial point is that they did not see a path leading to a prosperous and shining horizon; instead, the future for them was the imminent approach and arrival of the Apocalypse. Therefore, to them, being modern meant standing on the threshold of eternity; for example, this idea was embodied in the work of Joachim of Fiore, one of the most important thinkers of that period (Gillespie, 2019, p. 46). The view of figures like Joachim of Fiore regarding this spiritual and eschatological age served as a precursor to the Renaissance view of a new golden age or the idea of modernity concerning the age of reason and rationality. However, the medieval concept of the modern still had its roots in a specific understanding: an understanding of eschatology and an allegorical view of time (Gillespie, 2019, p. 46).

To understand the idea of modernity, attention must be paid to a crucial distinction established in the eighteenth century between the two terms: the Old Way (*Via Antiqua*) and the New Way (*Via Moderna*). According to some interpreters, including Gillespie, this decisive distinction is not, as it may first appear, a historical distinction, but is fundamentally a philosophical and metaphysical distinction concerning two views on universals (general concepts), which were related to two different interpretations of Aristotle. In truth, the Old Way was a Realist and objectivist approach that ultimately considered general concepts to be real and objective entities. In contrast, the New Way was primarily a Nominalist approach that regarded particulars and singular entities as real and

treated universals merely as a collection of names. Thus, a new understanding of existence and time was seemingly forming (Gillespie, 2019, p. 47), and a new era was being shaped, born out of a fundamental philosophical problem related to the issues of medieval philosophy and Christian theology. According to Gillespie, the word "modern", in the sense we mean today, was virtually not in use before the sixteenth century (Gillespie, 2019, p. 47).

The basis of the modern era scientists' (like Bacon) evaluation of the difference between the ancient and new ages, which often argued in favor of the new age, was not only the development of a new concept of knowledge and awareness but also a new concept of time—time that was considered not cyclical but linear and infinite. Within this framework, change was a continuous natural process that man could master using new methods and tools. The Western human thus gained the ability to become the master and possessor of nature and to manage it (Gillespie, 2019, p. 48).

Modernity emerged from within the metaphysical and theological structures of the Christian-European tradition; that is, modernity arose from the ruins of the medieval world (Gillespie, 2019, p. 58). The epoch-making question from which the modern Western world was born was the product of a metaphysical-theological crisis in Christianity concerning the nature of God and, consequently, the nature of existence. This crisis manifested itself most prominently in the Nominalist Revolution against Scholastic philosophy. Of course, this intellectual revolution itself reflected a deeper transformation that had occurred in the Western person's experience of existence (Gillespie, 2019, p. 61). This great and fateful crisis, in brief, was that the Scholastics during the Middle Ages, ontologically, believed in the real existence of universals or general concepts; that is, they were considered Realists in this respect. They viewed the world as the

material embodiment of the categories of Divine Reason, meaning they believed that, ultimately, these general concepts are real and objectively reflect reality. Scholastic philosophers formulated this view and experience through the structures of syllogistic logic—a logic that, in their view, corresponds to or is at least a reflection of Divine Reason. Cosmologically, creation itself was the physical and material form of this Divine Reason, and man, as a rational animal and a being created by God in His own image, sat at the head of this creation (Gillespie, 2019, p. 61).

In contrast, Nominalism overturned this entirely rational and unified world. According to them, universals are nothing more than illusions, and the world of existence is wholly particular and individual. Words do not signify real universal entities but are merely signs of utility for human understanding. Cosmologically, Nominalists consider creation to be fundamentally individual and particular; that is, they did not interpret creation teleologically. Consequently, God can be known to some extent not by human reason but only through Evangelical Revelation and mystical experience. Therefore, human beings have no natural or supernatural purpose or goal. In this way, the Nominalist Revolution against Scholastic philosophy utterly demolished the medieval world. This revolution ended the extensive effort of Scholastic Christianity, whose goal was the synthesis of revelation and reason (Gillespie, 2019, pp. 61-62).

The God of Nominalism was chaotic and terrifying. This God was frighteningly omnipotent and beyond human comprehension, constantly threatening the order of human life. This God could not be captured in the form of words and categories; rather, He could only be experienced as a terrible enigma that evoked human fear and reverence. This concept stood in direct opposition to the God defined by a Scholastic philosopher like Aquinas—a God whose benevolence

and glory are everywhere observable, or at least whose manifestations are always evident (Gillespie, 2019, p. 62). It can now be said that Modernity emerged as a result of attempts to find a way out of the crisis created by the Nominalist Revolution (Gillespie, 2019, p. 63).

The two movements of Humanism and the Reformation, which grew amidst the emergence of Nominalism and the formation of the modern world, both affirmed the ontological particularism or individualism stemming from Nominalist views. However, their difference centered on the issue of whether priority lay with God or with man. Humanism, naturally, gave priority to man and interpreted God and nature based on this prioritization. The Reformation, however, departed from God and viewed man and nature from God's perspective. These differences between Humanism and the Reformation seemed irreducible, and these profound differences had a fundamental impact even on the catastrophic religious wars that occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, profoundly affecting the lives of the people of Europe (Gillespie, 2019, p. 65).

Generally, according to the prominent American philosopher Mark Lilla, it is we in the West who are different, not the non-Western nations. Modern political philosophy is a nascent and new invention even within the West itself, where Christian political theology has been the dominant, and perhaps the only, constructed intellectual tradition for centuries. The new political philosophy of the West, by critiquing Christian political theology, challenged the legitimizing factors of political authority. This was a decisive and historical rupture in the West (Lilla, 2023, p. 25). It was within the framework of this significant rupture that Western history and thought experienced a fundamental transformation, and the new world gradually took root. According to Lilla, the originality of modern political philosophy was the separation of the realm of human political affairs from the sphere

of theological contemplation regarding what lies beyond this realm. Political philosophy, in effect, abandoned recourse to revelation and mystical insight as tools for justifying the principles and foundations of political power (Lilla, 2023, p. 27).

Overall, the core of Christianity that drives it forward is the doctrine of the messianic Incarnation—the teaching that God became man. This doctrine is generally considered the source of Christian political theology (Lilla, 2023, p. 18). Based on this foundational doctrine, Christianity has a view of history that links it to eschatology and an apocalyptic end goal. On the promised day, Christ, who is the incarnation and physical form of God, will appear on Earth. Therefore, the intellectual structure of the modern West, in a broad perspective, could be constructed or even legitimized by following such an image. Recourse to such discussions is not raised merely in a religious and dogmatic context. Indeed, some thinkers consider the ideas related to progress and building an ideal world in modern thought to be a secularized form of the Christian eschatological framework, and they regard the modern age as lacking identity without considering this connection. In theological literature, in Lilla's words, the Christian God, who is the Father, stepped onto our earthly world and risked His transcendence. The Savior, who is the Son of God, became embodied and incarnated but left us, promising to return at the end of time (Lilla, 2023, p. 18).

This same discussion can be raised in connection with the concept of the Subject (or 'Self'), as the main pillar of modern philosophy and thought. In a sense, it can be stated that the Subject is the result of the Western man's defeat before the Christian God—a Nominalist God who initiated a revolution in thought in the late Middle Ages.

Nominalism holds that God is entirely transcendent to this world, and this God is like a will that is completely incomprehensible,

irrational, and, of course, unknown and terrifying. Man is unable to approach this God because He has become so transcendent and distant that He has left man and his world entirely to their own devices. Now, man must live in this absolutely contingent world, which is deaf and blind to his desires, and he must organize his affairs by himself, alone.

The Subject comes into being under such conditions, when divine attributes and qualities become humanized. From this point onward, man is the center of the world, and by relying on this centrality and axis, he confronts and organizes reality. In the modern era, Christianity and its churches gradually continued as a form of religious faith and belief, but they were replaced by a new approach to politics that was primarily human and worldly in nature. According to Lilla, a phenomenon called the Great Separation occurred under such conditions, which specifically severed, or at least diminished, the link between Western philosophical thought and Christian theology.

However, it must be noted that the problems that led to this Great Separation were not universal, but limited to Christianity. Problems such as: Why has a specific interpretation of the Bible overshadowed the lives of us, the people of Europe? Why do disputes over issues such as the Incarnation, divine grace, or various rituals threaten existing political stability? The various attempts to answer these dilemmas and concerns ultimately created a new way of understanding human life and the organization of political and social life (Lilla, 2023, p. 42).

2. A Critique of West-Centric Modernity

2-1. A Brief Look at the Ideal of Enlightenment Rationality

We must pay attention to the somewhat dominating character of modern Western rationality itself. This is the Cartesian rationality that subordinates everything to the two criteria of clarity and distinctness,

excluding anything that does not meet them. Consequently, many other intellectual horizons and structures are fundamentally unable to assert themselves and are expelled from the realm of thought and reflection.

This issue is intensely linked to the ideal of objectivity in the Enlightenment era, an ideal that, relying on a trans-historical reason, aimed to bring about a relatively unified and integrated framework for the entirety of human thought. This ideal was partly dependent on the remarkable growth of scientific achievements and the imposition of its method onto all aspects of human life. In essence, the Enlightenment sought an objectivity that transcended specific temporal, spatial, and historical contexts—a refined and impartial objectivity that science also aspired to achieve.

Due to the increasing emergence of natural and empirical sciences in the Enlightenment era, an ideal arose that influenced all intellectual endeavors: the ideal of setting aside subjective presuppositions. This ideal sought to use specific, objective methods as much as possible to achieve knowledge.

Based on this, according to Gadamer, modern science adopted the rule of doubt and the idea of method from Descartes to realize this ideal. Cartesian doubt implies that we must doubt anything that is capable of being doubted, and therefore, we must empty our minds of all presuppositions and pre-understandings. However, the crucial issue is that our inherently historical knowledge, which shapes our historical consciousness and is formed based on presuppositions, cannot be reconciled with this Cartesian ideal (Gadamer, 2004, p. 273).

The empirical sciences fostered an environment where understanding or reflection itself became a laboratory activity; that is, anyone, using specific methods and principles, could achieve a

universal and all-encompassing thought—a thought that would be usable and meaningful for all human beings in any position. This is precisely analogous to how different individuals in a laboratory environment can perform the same experiment based on similar methods and arrive at specific results. Under these circumstances, the methodology of science was considered comparable and shared with the foundations of other domains of thought, and a subject addressed in philosophical or artistic discussions, for example, was treated like an object of scientific research—i.e., without regard for the contexts or presuppositions upon which these discussions are necessarily dependent (Gadamer, 2007, p. 236).

In fact, philosophers such as Heidegger and Gadamer, in opposition to the abstract rationality of the Enlightenment and the ideal that emerged from it, situated reason within the context of history. For these philosophers, the historical approach is a concrete one that must be engaged with, not merely regarded as something expired and passed.

Reason is not self-sufficient and trans-historical; rather, it has its own specific requirements at every juncture and is constrained by given conditions. With this perspective, the ideal of Enlightenment reason—a reason that had achieved remarkable dominance, around which all doctrines and relations revolved, and whose inherent quality was considered to be self-grounding and autonomy—is destabilized. This reason ostensibly stood above all historical constraints and determinacies. Still, considering the understanding articulated by Gadamer and others, different questions and problems must fundamentally be raised in a different manner.

Perhaps this entire issue can be summarized in this one sentence by Gadamer: "In fact history does not belong to us, but we belong to it" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 278).

Indeed, the problem with rationalism is that while reason claims to be comprehensive and universal, it is always dependent on a specific cultural text and context (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 254).

2-2 Questioning the Universality of Western Modernity

Given the description of the ideal of objective Enlightenment rationality, the crucial question now is: When a particular culture and thought (Western thought) attempts to justify universality based on a specific type of rationality (Western rationality) and claims that only *that* culture and thought have achieved such rationality, does this in itself not indicate a self-perception of superiority over other cultures and thoughts?

In reality, it must be stated that there is no consensus regarding the all-encompassing nature or universality of Western rationality (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 217).

Eurocentrism, meaning positioning European culture and doctrines as the axis for all other cultures, naturally emphasizes European concerns and issues and gives them precedence over the intellectual and cultural elements of other nations (especially nations with historical roots). The idea of European superiority over other nations emerged historically during the era of European imperialism in the sixteenth century, expanded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and peaked in the nineteenth century. Simultaneously, philosophical doctrines and social sciences were influenced by Eurocentrism to a considerable extent (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 290).

Historically, starting in the nineteenth century, modern Europe, which had considered itself the center of world history since 1492, defined all other cultures as its periphery. Considering this historical point, there is undoubtedly a serious and vital need to arrive at a

different conceptualization of the Enlightenment and Modernity so that this phenomenon takes on a multi-dimensional and global form (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 301).

Fundamentally, we must take action to recognize the other/others of Western modernity. Through this effort, we can arrive at our own specific intellectual and historical context and, after that, explore this context to provide a new framework that is not necessarily Western. In other words, recognizing the other/others of Western modernity is only the first step. What the subsequent analysis of our own Iranian history and thought will yield, and how this analysis should be conducted, is the very issue that arises after the first step.

If we consider that Western Enlightenment and the entirety of Modernity have managed to present themselves as the central base in world history over several centuries and push other cultures to the periphery, then it becomes clear that European ethnocentrism is the only type of ethnocentrism that claims to be universal and all-encompassing. In reality, the Eurocentrism of Modernity is confused and fluctuates between two poles: on the one hand, the claim of universality, which is truly an abstract issue; and on the other hand, the desire for concrete and palpable domination over the world, which arises from the position of Europe and the West as the center (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 297).

For example, Reinhart Schulze, a German historian and Islamic scholar, subjected Western unilateral historiography concerning Islam to serious criticism during a scientific conference in 1988. He compared the history of the Islamic eighteenth century to the European Enlightenment era and showed that Western historiography has appropriated all progress that existed in the history of other nations and counted them as Western achievements (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 308).

Habermas, as one of the most prominent contemporary defenders of the universality of Western Modernity, emphasizes the concept of the Lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), which serves as the backdrop for all interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, Habermas's concept of Communicative Rationality is built upon the permanent social solidarity that enables the formation of the modern Lifeworld. Indeed, for Habermas, the Lifeworld makes both the possibility of understanding and the understanding of context achievable. Fundamentally, Habermas links his concepts of Communicative Action and Communicative Rationality (a rationality that he claims is a universal foundation for human life) with the notion of the Lifeworld derived from phenomenology. It is through this concept of the Lifeworld that human life's communications and interactions can somehow have meaning or at least be closer to realization (Mesbahiyani, 2019, pp. 228-229).

However, the reality is that the concept of the Lifeworld itself is not a truly general category and a shared horizon for human actions and values, because the Lifeworld is a prerequisite for communication, and communication itself is encompassed by historical processes (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 230). That is, communication itself includes determinacies that have been shaped by different histories and cultures over time.

Every individual in the process of communication carries with them a mass of historical, intellectual, and cultural presuppositions, both consciously and often unconsciously. Therefore, the concept of the Lifeworld, despite its appearance, cannot be considered truly comprehensive. Every form of communication and interaction is inevitably accompanied by an encounter with completely diverse and varied Others. This otherness, this alterity and difference, cannot be effaced under the pretext of entering a shared field. In a sense, specific Lifeworlds and their details and components are formed in a particular

situation, and we exclusively experience them as a horizon. In truth, the Lifeworld is unable to secure the criterion of knowledge and become fully rationalized (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 230).

The Western rationalism of figures like Habermas has failed to see how its supposedly universal ethics may manifest in different cultural forms (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 238). In fact, we will not be able to adequately discuss the project of Modernity or even address the debate on the diversity of modernities unless we can pay attention to the specific contexts from which Modernity or various modernities arise (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 240).

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Some researchers have proposed the idea of the diversity of modernities (*Multiple Modernities*) in contrast to a single-voiced, Western modernity. The source and main claim of the diversity of modernities is that a re-reading of different intellectual and cultural patterns that emerge from the historical context of each civilized nation can lead to the appearance of different modernities, provided that the differences and diversity of traditions and cultures across the world are recognized beforehand. It is true that Modernity and the Enlightenment originated in Western Europe, but they cannot be considered phenomena whose creator and founder was exclusively the West (Mesbahiyani, 2019, p. 299).

The idea of the diversity of modernities (*Multiple Modernities*) can challenge the single-voiced and exclusive narrative of Modernity in several ways:

1. First, the idea of the diversity of modernities, instead of emphasizing inherent differences, contradictions, and the clash of civilizations, often insists on the inclusion of other cultures and intercultural interactions.
2. Second, introducing the diversity of modernities into the

paradigm of discussing Modernity and the Enlightenment largely nullifies the single-voiced narrative. At the same time, however, the concept of the diversity of modernities is aware of the dangers of relativism and intellectual chaos.

3. Third, the diversity of modernities intends to explain the specific characteristics of civilizations and cultures not merely in terms of their proximity to the West, but with attention to their internal concepts and frameworks (Mesbahiyan, 2019, p. 301).

3. The Necessity of Returning to Tradition and its Fundamental Re-Evaluation

The ambitious ideal of the Enlightenment, which was previously discussed, is summarized in Kant's famous phrase: "Dare to use your own understanding" (Kant, 2006, pp. 51-52). According to this ideal, the entire world should, as much as possible, be appropriated within the bounds of pure reason. This is how uncontextualized reason finds an undisputed position in the heart of the Enlightenment worldview. It is as if one can set aside all presuppositions and achieve a rational form of knowledge, free from any constraints.

However, to the extent that the issue of presuppositions and the role of determinate historical and cultural conditions were attacked during the Enlightenment era, to that same extent, the revival of the importance of tradition appears to be a necessary action for thought and reflection. This is an action toward giving serious attention to the present and living voices echoing from the past. These voices resonate as presuppositions that shape the framework of our thought. This continuous chain must be kept in sight, because "this issue means protecting the possibility of confronting those ways of seeing and

thinking which propose answers to the questions that preoccupy us" (Davey, 2006, p. 8).

The Enlightenment believes that for evolution and progress, one must be freed from the superstitions and prejudices of the past. From the perspective of the Enlightenment, any tradition and authority that has been declared meaningless and invalid by the new reason is no longer worthy of being examined. Everything that has reached us from the past, including the tradition and the authority we ascribe to it, must be subjected to judgment before the court of reason to determine its veracity and validity. Any kind of unquestioning obedience to the legacy of the past is completely rejected and must be set aside. The Enlightenment believes that no tradition can claim absolute validity:

Generally, the Enlightenment does not intend to accept the authority of tradition and aims to place everything before the court of reason; therefore, [for example,] the written tradition of the Bible, like any other historical document, cannot claim absolute validity... It is not tradition that is the ultimate source, but reason that constructs authority... (Gadamer, 2004, p. 274).

The Enlightenment believes that reliance on the authority of tradition means blind and irrational obedience and causes us to be deprived of reason. In fact, the authority of tradition imposes a tyrannical rule over reason and rational thought and blocks the way for any kind of rational deliberation. Therefore, the authority of tradition must be the servant of reason, not its master (Gadamer, 2004, p. 279).

In his critique of the Enlightenment ideal, Gadamer considers this ideal itself to be an unexamined prejudice. He argues that the Enlightenment, by emphasizing the fundamentality of reason and rational knowledge, seeks to invalidate knowledge based on the authority of tradition (Grundin, 2012, pp. 59-60).

The belief in the existence of such fixed rational foundations is merely an abstract concept and incompatible with reality. Reality has a concrete and historical character, and this view of rationality throws us into a distant abyss. In such a case, we will no longer be able to establish a connection with reality.

The Enlightenment views the authority of tradition as something that influences various beliefs. This, in itself, is true. However, the important point here is that when tradition influences various viewpoints, it does not mean that tradition cannot be a source of truth. But the Enlightenment neglected this important issue; it entirely regarded the authority of tradition as a cause of misunderstanding and intellectual deviation, and it sought to eliminate the associated requirements (Gadamer, 2004, p. 280).

What Gadamer specifically emphasizes is the dominance of finitude and limitation over us and our consciousness. This issue is directly related to the critique of the Enlightenment's ahistorical view, because, according to the Enlightenment, we must overcome pre-existing conditions and focus on a trans-historical sphere. We must achieve true knowledge free from the constraints of the historical context that limits our view. From this perspective, man is a being who can and must free himself from these limitations. Indeed, it is on this basis that we set aside the requirements arising from historical tradition because these requirements keep us bound to our specific historical situation.

This is in stark contrast to Gadamer's clear stance against this view, as he emphasizes the fundamental importance of human existence's finitude and contingency on its specific historical conditions (Gadamer, 2004, p. 277). By what criterion and authority can man, in principle, pass beyond history? Man lives in specific historical conditions and is unable to transcend this finitude. Thus, the

necessities and requirements arising from historical tradition must be given serious attention.

A point that can pave the way for discussion here is the depiction of a new conception of tradition that stands in opposition to the Enlightenment's understanding. Gadamer believes that the Enlightenment has a distorted meaning of authority in mind, which has led to widespread suspicion toward it. Based on its conception of reason and freedom, the Enlightenment saw authority as being in contradiction with reason and freedom—meaning that, according to the Enlightenment, the authority of tradition signifies absolute subservience and the suspension of reason and freedom. In contrast, Gadamer explicitly states:

...But this meaning is not the essence and nature of tradition... [Generally] the authority of persons is not based on the surrender and resignation of reason, but on an act of knowledge; that is, the Other is superior to us in judgment and insight, and for this reason, his judgment takes precedence. This is related to the fact that authority is not granted to someone, but is earned, and if someone is to rely on it, it must be so... This reliance on authority is dependent on the act of reason, a reason that is aware of its own limitations and trusts the better insight of others. In this sense, the authority of tradition is correctly understood; that is, the authority of tradition has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands and orders, but is related to knowledge... The true basis for giving authority to a superior person is freedom and reason, primarily because they have a broader view of things or are more informed—that is, because they have more knowledge and know more (Gadamer, 2004, p. 281).

In accordance with this approach, we fundamentally refer to another source or person to gain a better and truer understanding. This

Other becomes our destination for reference due to their ability and capacity—meaning this Other possesses a stronger insight and broader knowledge than us. Otherwise, referring to them would mean blocking the path of rational and intellectual freedom. Thus, when the Other is a trusted and reliable authority, they must necessarily be competent; otherwise, baseless referral to someone or something is clearly irrational. In other words, it must be remembered that the competence and qualification that the authority must possess are not something granted through attribution or inheritance. This qualification is an acquired matter, dependent on possessing capacities and capabilities.

Generally, our existence is unintentionally influenced by what has reached us from the past, as we have a finite historical existence and cannot free ourselves from the past and its heritage. However, there is a difference between tradition and the prevailing beliefs and customs we have inherited. Tradition is like a refining filter that organizes our lived experiences in various situations. It is a current that is always present and explicitly or implicitly sustains its presence. "Tradition is a filter that allows new experiences to occur, but only after these experiences are recognized as valid and approved through the lens of prior experiences" (Ritivoi, 2011, p. 70).

As long as we consider tradition as an uninterrupted and dynamic flow, understanding and thought, whose foundations are inherently shaped by this continuous flow, are not meant to end at a final point (Gadamer, 2007, p. 240). That is, knowledge and understanding, which are themselves historical and constrained by specific historical conditions, never reach a definite and final completion. Our understanding and knowledge, riding on the continuous flow of history and tradition, possess an inherent dynamism, fluidity, and becoming. Consequently, our understanding and knowledge of ourselves are constantly evolving and expanding.

With this in mind, it can be said that one of the tasks we must undertake in the re-evaluation of our own tradition, history, and thought is to understand that, through the passage of time, there are seeds hidden within this tradition and thought that have the potential to sprout and grow. As mentioned, we must, with a deeper look at tradition, comprehend the complexities of its concept. Tradition is not an expired matter; rather, it always possesses the capacity for movement and dynamism, and it is precisely by virtue of this capacity for movement that one can approach it and confront its various dimensions.

Generally, if we want to arrive at modernity, renewal, and innovation from within, or in other words, to internalize modernity and renewal within our own culture and thought, we must not exactly and precisely implement Western Modernity here, especially only its manifestations, not its intellectual foundations. Western Modernity can be considered as renewal and desire for change—that is, the renewal and transformation of the very historical and intellectual tradition that belongs to us and is known as our foundation. When the idea of renewal passes through our internal and lived experience—that is, when it becomes our actual historical experience—only then can we speak of renewal, a renewal that is not necessarily equivalent to or co-referential with its Western meaning.

However, a very important point is that we do not want to present a new version of the issue of "Return to Self" (*Bazgasht be khishtan*), nor do we want to overemphasize the role of colonialism and dominance by modern Western countries, although the discussion of the undeniable importance of colonialism itself requires a separate opportunity. Above all else, we must trace the process of decline and decay from within Iranian history and thought and correctly highlight the role of internal factors, instead of merely looking at conspiracy theories and excessively emphasizing external factors.

4. The Need for Conceptual Tools from Within Tradition

Given this context, we must fundamentally and radically rethink Iranian history and thought, specifically through conceptual tools extracted from the very core of this historical and intellectual tradition. In other words, this intellectual and historical tradition and the transformations it has undergone serve as the raw materials from which concepts must be derived from within them and for the sake of understanding them.

One could argue that, in our current situation, we are not truly capable of thinking authentically about ourselves, because the majority of our concepts, ideas, and analytical tools are somehow borrowed from Western thought. These Western concepts, however, are tailored for the materials and subject matter that constitute the core of Western history and thought. Western thinkers and philosophers have tested these concepts against the materials, instances, and specificities of Western thought and have innovated ideas aimed at self-understanding.

4-1. The Beginning of the Effort to Discover the Internal Logic of Iranian Thought

The crucial and thought-provoking point is that it seems that after the arrival of Modernity and its fundamental concepts, we lack even the necessary conceptual tools to think about ourselves and understand Iran. This issue is not solely limited to the influence of Western Modernity. It must be remembered that our historical decline and decadence began approximately four or five centuries ago. Iranian thought and reflection seem to have suffered from a conceptual and textual void from a certain historical juncture onward—a void of concepts and texts stemming from the intellectual endeavors of Iranian thinkers, through which we could comprehend the internal

logic of our own history and thought and arrive at its specific structures. This compels us to re-evaluate the Iranian intellectual tradition and extract concepts from its very core.

In a sense, we are in serious need of intellectual *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning in Islamic law), an *Ijtihad* aimed at discovering the internal logic or mechanism of Iranian history and thought. This logic is certainly not one-dimensional and straightforward, possessing many complexities that cannot be contained within a relatively short article. Nevertheless, within this limited scope, one can strive to achieve such a plan and entrust its potential yield to future research. This intellectual *Ijtihad* is naturally a very extensive, comprehensive, and critical endeavor that will take a long time, perhaps generations, and no single researcher can accomplish the task alone.

In this context, the issue of the conceptual void (which the late Dr. Javad Tabatabai also referred to as the textual void) is of paramount importance. At a certain point in our history and thought, we suffered from a conceptual void or the lack of concepts; that is, we currently do not possess a system of concepts from whose perspective we can analyze and evaluate our situation—concepts that have arisen from the raw materials of the history of thought in Iran. The concepts and ideas that we have tacitly borrowed from modern Western thought are not suitable for application to our historical materials and instances, because they originated from a fundamentally different context (a point already referenced in the section on the roots of Modernity).

For instance, the concept of Secularism (*'Irfa Shudan*), very briefly, indicates a process that occurred in the history of Western thought—a process in which Christian theological concepts gradually gave way to modern concepts, and modern thought was formed from

this conceptual transformation within Christian doctrines. Or, for example, the concept of Humanism in Western thought emerged in opposition to the idea (prevalent at least during the peak of Nominalism, in response to which Humanism, as a modern movement, partly appeared, and not across the entirety of Christianity) that human nature and essence were polluted due to Original Sin—in essence, man had, as it were, fallen from God's grace. In principle, the entire material nature is a realm of ignorance and darkness, and man descended into this realm due to Original Sin. Now, under such circumstances, Humanist thought, in contrast to this view of man and his status, claims that man, on the contrary, has an important, prominent, and central status (Gillespie, 2019, p. 65). Man is not a base and sinful being who has been subjected to God's indifference and wrath. This man, in fact, can be the center of the world and organize this world himself.

This is while the view of man in our history and thought is not like this. Nor is there such a view towards nature and the material world. Iranian and Islamic thinkers operated with a completely different perspective. They not only did not regard material nature as a source of darkness and ignorance but viewed natural phenomena as the manifestations and signs of God's creation. Scientific work for them meant discovering the signs of God's power in nature. Metaphysically and philosophically, man for Iranian and Islamic thinkers is considered the Caliph (*Khalifa*) and vicegerent of God on Earth and the noblest of creatures (*Ashraf al-Makhlukat*). Man is, in fact, the boundary between heaven and earth and the meeting point of *Lahut* (divinity) and *Malakut* (the spiritual realm).

Therefore, the consequences and implications arising from this kind of outlook can potentially draw a different path before us. From this standpoint, without intending to make a value judgment, we must

recognize that the intellectual foundations of the concept of Humanism are fundamentally not related to the general framework of our culture and thought and have their own specific contexts.

Of course, there are extensive and very broad discussions regarding the details of these changes and transformations, which are not the subject of our current study. Naturally, we do not witness such a process in the history of Iranian thought; that is, the curve of intellectual transformations in Iran, at least in the last few centuries, has not been determined by such events. Concepts cannot be used carelessly and abstractly. Every important concept has its own specific background and roots that have developed from a unique set of circumstances. In other words, concepts are not formal and mental words that can be easily detached from the context of their reality.

In principle, Iranian historiography in the modern period, which emerged through imitation of Western researchers, attempts to explain the materials, instances, and examples arising from the context of Iranian history by applying Western methods and styles. In fact, this historiography, which naturally also covers the history of ideas and concepts, is a repetition of Western historiographical discussions but in the absence of attention to their theoretical foundations. In other words, the Iran of Western historiography is an Iran whose new era is primarily Western (Tabatabai, 2016, p. 16). This means that we have approached the writing and analysis of Iranian history (in the general sense) and the history of Iranian thought (in the specific sense) with the framework of new Western concepts. The result is precisely a Westernized Iran (i.e., Iran analyzed based on modern Western concepts).

According to Javad Tabatabai, the history of Iran is generally a counter-flow (*khelāf āmad*) (Tabatabai, 2016, p. 27). That is, the history of Iranian thought and culture has followed a path that does not

necessarily correspond to the curve of Western-European intellectual and cultural history. This history has its own specific logic, and by discovering the various aspects and dimensions of this logic, an analysis specific to the entirety of Iranian history can be achieved. However, because Western-European history is typically taken as the axis of world history, Iranian history (especially the history of thought and ideas) has inevitably been measured and inferred in relation to the Western model.

A significant example is Persian Poetry and Literature as one of the central pillars of thought in Iran. It must be said that Persian poetry and literature is the main focus of Iranian thought and reflection, especially from around the seventh to the tenth century AH (Tabatabai, 2016, p. 40). This signifies a unique characteristic that determines the basis of investigation in Iranian thought, while this very characteristic holds little significance in modern Western thought, or at least not with the same intensity and density as in Iranian history. Searching for concepts and engaging with Iranian thought by relying on the context of Persian poetry demands its own specific requirements. Furthermore, the thought presented in Persian poetry is a different kind of thought that cannot necessarily be identical to the thoughts arising from the philosophical texts of the modern West. In fact, according to Javad Tabatabai, with the decline of historiography after the Mongol invasion, the continuation of Iranian historical memory, which had been preserved for centuries, became a sensitive and precarious matter. It was in this situation that Persian literature, as the guarantor and carrier of historical memory, represented Iranian thought (Tabatabai, 2016, p. 40).

After the Mongol invasion, with the end of the golden age and flourishing of Persian poetry, which includes the period after Abd al-Rahman Jami, the ties between Iranian thought and reflection and the

questions and issues of the time were severed. A long period began, lasting until the preliminaries of the Constitutional Movement, which we refer to as the period of the hardening of tradition (Tabatabai, 2022, p. 427).

Another most important issue concerning Iran's complex and challenging situation is that the Iranian Middle Ages came *after* its Renaissance, unlike European history, where a clear process saw the Middle Ages followed by the Renaissance and rebirth. In fact, during a period of Iranian history when Iranians ceased theoretical thought or at least experienced stagnation and intermission in it, a certain type of thinking became possible in Iranian literature and poetry. And this Iranian literature flows in the various languages spoken by Iranian ethnic groups (Tabatabai, 2016, p. 58). In a sense, the Golden Age of Iranian culture, which continued approximately until the sixth and seventh centuries AH, was followed by a period of stagnation and decay whose continuation is observable even up to the contemporary era. In fact, one might even say that this single point—that the historical logic of our thought differs significantly from the curve of intellectual history in the West—is sufficient to warrant serious and urgent attention to the specific characteristics of Iranian history and thought.

5. Stagnation, Conceptual Void, and the Non-Self-Evident Relationship with Modernity

It can be said that the cessation of Iranian thought and reflection during the three centuries prior to the preliminaries of the Constitutional Movement (from the mid-Safavid era onward) made the articulation of the questions and issues of the new era impossible. The Constitutional Movement itself was primarily a transformation in action, but theoretically, little change occurred in the Iranian thought

system (Tabatabai, 2022, p. 409). The discussion of the conceptual void subsequently emerges from this historical situation. This characteristic, in relation to the issue of the precedence of Renaissance over the Middle Ages in Iranian history, can be understood.

Given the state of the cessation of thought, which lasted at least three centuries, the introduction to new Western concepts created a complex and confusing situation. On the one hand, our thought system was weakened and had lost its dynamism, and on the other hand, new issues were forming in the minds of Iranians according to the requirements of the time, while concepts and doctrines were simultaneously entering Iran from the West, originating from a different intellectual space.

Conclusion

In summary, it must be stated that, considering the main lines of analysis in this article, the relationship between Iran (and us, the Iranian people, here and now) is no longer a self-evident and clear relationship. That is, we cannot simply speak of a determined and specific relationship and pursue the subsequent related discussions by presupposing it.

In short, the majority of concepts used in Western philosophical thought, especially the modern world, all originate from the historical and intellectual framework of Western civilization. These concepts are, in effect, the result of the Western person's confrontation with their own problems. This Western person is not an abstract and formal concept but has emerged from a specific, concrete context.

Likewise, the Iranian person has been nurtured in a different historical and intellectual structure and carries concepts, doctrines, and ideas that, inevitably, originate from the context of this very structure.

Considering the arguments and examples presented in this paper, it can be said that each of these macro-frameworks has its unique characteristics that are not necessarily related or congruent with each other. In truth, Modernity was a phenomenon that was imported from the outside onto a stage called Iran, rather than being a historical experience that we arrived at in an internal and natural way. Therefore, this very issue can encourage us to pursue an internal and self-willed renewal that can be paved by criticizing and examining the past intellectual tradition.



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