



The Architecture of Critical Thinking in Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Epistemological Project: From the Deconstruction of Western Modernity to the Restoration of the Tawhidic Vision

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Abstract: This paper examines the epistemological project of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, arguing that his critical thinking operates through three interlocking mechanisms that together constitute a distinctive architecture of philosophical critique: the deployment of the Islamic worldview (*ru'yat al-Islam lil-wujud*) as a metaphysical criterion against which the claims of Western modernity are evaluated; the systematic deconstruction of Western modernity's conceptual vocabulary through the project of dewesternization of knowledge; and the restoration of the concept of *adab* as both the normative framework within which genuine knowledge is possible and the critical instrument through which the disorder of contemporary Muslim intellectual life is diagnosed. Drawing on al-Attas's primary texts, principally the *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* and *The Concept of Education in Islam*, and engaging with the secondary literature of Wan Daud and Stenberg, the paper concludes that al-Attas's critical architecture, while philosophically formidable, faces a persistent challenge in translating its metaphysical achievements into concrete and replicable research methodologies. The paper situates this assessment within the broader contemporary debate on epistemic decolonisation, arguing that al-Attas's project remains an indispensable resource for any serious engagement with the relationship between Islamic epistemology and Western modernity.

Keywords: *Dewesternization of Knowledge, Adab, Islamic Worldview, Epistemic Decolonisation, Al-Attas, Tawhid, Islamic Epistemology.*

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I. Introduction

There is a particular kind of intellectual courage that consists not in the production of new ideas but in the willingness to question the very categories through which ideas are produced. This is the courage that defines the epistemological project of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the Malaysian philosopher and theologian who has spent more than half a century constructing what may be the most systematic and philosophically rigorous critique of Western modernity to emerge from within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Al-Attas does not engage the West from the outside, as a civilisational adversary to be repelled, nor does he engage it from the inside, as a collaborator willing to dissolve Islamic thought into the categories of secular liberalism. He engages it from a third position that is rarer and more demanding than either: the position of a thinker who has mastered the Western tradition deeply enough to diagnose its pathologies from within, while remaining anchored in an alternative metaphysical framework that provides him with the critical distance necessary to see what those inside the tradition cannot see about themselves.

The concept of critical thinking that animates al-Attas's project is fundamentally different from the procedural rationalism that the term has come to denote in contemporary Western educational discourse. In that discourse, critical thinking is typically understood as a set of cognitive skills — the ability to evaluate arguments, detect fallacies, weigh evidence, and reason to conclusions — that are in principle neutral with respect to the substantive content of the beliefs they are applied to. The implicit assumption is that the critical faculty is a kind of universal solvent: applicable to any claim, from any tradition, without remainder. Al-Attas regards this assumption as itself one of the deepest illusions of Western modernity, an illusion that masquerades as methodological sophistication while concealing a specific metaphysical commitment: the commitment to the self-sufficiency of human reason as the final arbiter of truth. For al-Attas, there is no such thing as content-neutral criticism, because every act of critical evaluation presupposes a standard against which things are evaluated, and that standard is never itself arrived at by purely critical means. It is given, prior to criticism, by one's fundamental orientation to reality — what al-Attas calls, in a phrase central to his entire project, the worldview (*ru'yat al-Islam lil-wujud*).

This paper argues that al-Attas's critical project operates through three interlocking mechanisms that together constitute a distinctive architecture of epistemological critique: first, the deployment of the Islamic worldview as a metaphysical criterion against which the claims



of Western modernity are measured and found wanting; second, the systematic deconstruction of the conceptual vocabulary of secular modernity through what al-Attas calls the dewesternization of knowledge; and third, the restoration of the Islamic concept of *adab* as both the normative framework within which genuine knowledge is possible and the critical instrument through which the disorder of contemporary Muslim intellectual life is diagnosed and addressed. These three mechanisms are not independent operations but moments in a single continuous movement: from critique, through deconstruction, to reconstruction — or, in al-Attas's own preferred language, from the cleansing of knowledge to its Islamisation.

The significance of al-Attas's project extends well beyond the particular philosophical arguments he makes, important as those arguments are. It lies in the model of intellectual engagement it offers: a model in which fidelity to a tradition and critical engagement with modernity are not competing imperatives but mutually reinforcing ones, in which the depth of one's rootedness in a metaphysical worldview is precisely what enables the acuity of one's critique of an alternative worldview. This model has profound implications not only for Islamic intellectual life but for the broader project of what has come to be called epistemic decolonisation — the attempt to recover intellectual frameworks that have been marginalised or suppressed by the global dominance of Western academic culture.

II. The Islamic Worldview as Epistemological Criterion: The Metaphysical Ground of Critique

The first and most fundamental mechanism of al-Attas's critical thinking is the construction and deployment of what he calls the Islamic worldview (*ru'yat al-Islam lil-wujud*) as an epistemological criterion — a standard of measurement brought to bear on all knowledge claims, including and especially those that present themselves as universal and tradition-independent. In his *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, al-Attas defines the Islamic worldview as "the vision of reality and truth that appears before our mind's eye revealing what existence is: its nature, relationship with God and with man, and man's relationship with his fellow human beings and with the natural world."² The worldview is not constructed by the intellect through reasoning from data; it is revealed to the intellect by something that precedes and exceeds it. It concerns not merely the natural world but the totality of existence —

²Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 2.



including the relationship between creation and Creator. And it has a normative dimension: it does not merely describe what is but illuminates what ought to be.

This understanding of the worldview has a direct and decisive consequence for the structure of al-Attas's critical project. If the Islamic worldview provides a vision of reality that is not arrived at by human reasoning alone but is illuminated by revelation, then it occupies a position that is epistemologically prior to the kind of critical inquiry that operates purely within the bounds of reason. Al-Attas is quite explicit about this hierarchical relationship: "We regard the Qur'an as the ultimate criterion of truth and falsehood, good and evil, right and wrong."³ This is not a retreat from rationality but a refusal of the rationalist pretension that reason is self-grounding — that it can provide its own criteria of validity without appeal to anything that exceeds it.

The concept of relativism (*al-nisbiyyah*) is central to al-Attas's diagnosis of the pathological consequences of reason severed from revelation. Wan Daud captures this diagnostic precisely: "The relativism that pervades modern Western thought is not a discovery but a consequence — the consequence of having abandoned the metaphysical framework within which alone absolute truth is intelligible."⁴ Against this relativism, al-Attas counterposes the concept of *yaqin* — certainty — which in the Islamic epistemological tradition designates the highest grade of knowledge: knowledge grounded not in the fallible operations of human reason but in the unfailing truth of divine revelation. The deployment of *yaqin* as an epistemological concept is not a dogmatic move that short-circuits inquiry; it is the identification of a dimension of knowing that secular epistemology systematically excludes by definitional fiat, and whose exclusion renders that epistemology unable to account for the most fundamental features of the human cognitive situation.

III. The Deconstruction of Western Modernity: Dewesternization as Critical Practice

The second mechanism of al-Attas's critical project is the deployment of the Islamic worldview as criterion in a systematic deconstruction of the conceptual vocabulary of Western modernity — a project he designates as the dewesternization of knowledge. This project is not

³ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978), 133.

⁴ Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998), 299.



the rejection of Western knowledge but the exposure of the specifically Western, historically contingent, and metaphysically committed character of concepts that claim to be universal and value-free. In *Islam and Secularism*, he defines secularism as "the disenchantment of nature, the desacralisation of politics, and the deconsecration of values,"⁵ arguing that these three processes are not independent developments but expressions of a single underlying movement: the progressive withdrawal of the sacred from the structure of reality. What makes this analysis particularly acute is al-Attas's insistence that secularism is not the neutral absence of a religious framework but the positive affirmation of an alternative one. As he argues in the *Prolegomena*: "The secular worldview is not simply the absence of a religious worldview; it is a rival worldview with its own metaphysical commitments, its own anthropology, its own ethics — commitments that are the more powerful for being unacknowledged."⁶

The critique of individualism (al-fardaniyyah) proceeds along analogous lines. The Islamic conception of the human person does not begin with the individual but with the khalifah — the vicegerent of God on earth — whose identity is constituted not by autonomous self-determination but by the relational obligations that flow from the divine covenant. Stenberg, in his comparative study of Muslim responses to Western modernity, notes that al-Attas's critique of individualism is among the most philosophically developed in the contemporary Islamic intellectual tradition, "precisely because it operates not at the level of cultural preference but at the level of metaphysical anthropology."⁷ Similarly, the critique of materialism (al-maddiyyah) is not a defence of superstition but the argument that materialism is not a conclusion of scientific inquiry but a metaphysical commitment that precedes and structures that inquiry, producing systematic distortions in the understanding of the human person, consciousness, meaning, and value that no amount of scientific progress can correct because they are built into the framework within which progress is measured.

IV. Adab as Critical Instrument: The Normative Architecture of Genuine Knowledge

⁵ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 18.

⁶ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 14.

⁷ Leif Stenberg, *The Islamization of Science: Four Muslim Positions Developing an Islamic Modernity* (Lund: Religionshistoriska Avdelningen, 1996), 143.



The third and most distinctive mechanism of al-Attas's critical project is his deployment of the concept of *adab* as both the normative framework within which genuine knowledge is possible and the critical instrument through which the disorder of contemporary intellectual life is diagnosed and addressed. In his *The Concept of Education in Islam*, al-Attas defines *adab* as "the recognition and acknowledgement of the right and proper place of things, of oneself, and of one's community; and the practice of that recognition and acknowledgement in a manner that reflects wisdom."⁸ This definition distinguishes *adab* decisively from the Western concept of culture. *Adab* is relational in a specific and irreducible way: it concerns the relationship between every thing that exists and its proper place in the divinely ordered hierarchy of being. It is normative in a way that culture is not: its normative force derives not from human convention or social agreement but from the metaphysical order of reality as established by divine wisdom. And it is epistemological in a way that has no parallel in the concept of culture. Wan Daud's analysis is illuminating here: "For al-Attas, the person of *adab* is not merely the person of good manners but the person of right knowledge — the person who knows the proper place of everything in the hierarchy of being and orients all his knowing accordingly."⁹

If *adab* is the orientation that enables genuine knowledge, then the loss of *adab* is not merely a moral failure but an epistemological one. Al-Attas regards this loss as "the root cause of the crisis of knowledge in the Muslim world today."¹⁰ The Muslim who has absorbed the secular framework of the modern university has not simply adopted a different set of cultural values; he has lost the cognitive orientation that would allow him to recognise the proper place of revelation in the hierarchy of sources of knowledge, the proper place of reason in relation to revelation, and the proper place of the human person in relation to God and creation. The critical force of the concept of *adab* is that it identifies the disorder of contemporary Muslim intellectual life not as an informational deficiency but as an orientational one: the problem is not that Muslims lack data but that the framework within which data is organised and evaluated has been disrupted at its deepest level.

⁸ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1991), 27.

⁹ Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, 171.

¹⁰ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 89.



V. The Linguistic Mechanism of Critique: Semantic Sovereignty and the Restoration of Meaning

Running through all three of the mechanisms discussed above, but constituting a distinctive operation in its own right, is what al-Attas calls the conceptual clarification of Islamic terminology: the critical examination of the key concepts of the Islamic intellectual tradition with a view to recovering their authentic semantic content and distinguishing it from the distortions introduced by inadequate translation and the uncritical importation of Western conceptual frameworks. Language, on al-Attas's account, is not merely a system of conventional signs that human communities adopt for communication; it is, at its deepest level, a medium in which reality makes itself articulate. The words that a tradition uses to designate the most fundamental dimensions of its experience are not arbitrary labels attached to pre-linguistic contents; they are semantic structures shaped by centuries of encounter between the tradition's understanding and the reality it is engaging. To change these words, or to translate them into the vocabulary of a different tradition without remainder, is not merely to change the medium of expression; it is to alter the understanding itself.

The translation of *ilm* as "knowledge" in the generic English sense, stripped of its specifically Islamic connotations — its hierarchical ordering, its orientation toward God, its culmination in *ma'rifah* (gnosis) — does not merely introduce an imprecision; it systematically misrepresents the Islamic understanding of what knowing is and what it is for. The translation of *din* as "religion" in the sociological sense — a bounded domain of practices and beliefs that occupies one sector of human life alongside politics, economics, and culture — imports a specifically Western and specifically modern partition of human experience that is foreign to the Islamic worldview, in which *din* designates the total mode of life ordered in accordance with divine guidance. The translation of *adab* as "culture" or "literature" evacuates from the concept precisely the vertical, normative, and epistemological dimensions that make it philosophically indispensable.

Al-Attas's response to this situation is the restoration of key terms to their proper semantic contexts — a process exemplified in extraordinary detail in the *Prolegomena*, where al-Attas subjects a series of key concepts — *ilm*, *din*, *insan*, *hikmah*, *adl*, *amanah*, *khalifah* — to exhaustive semantic analysis, tracing their deployment through the Qur'anic text and the classical Arabic intellectual tradition. Shabbâr's analysis of al-Attas's terminological method identifies this integrative character as its most distinctive and philosophically important feature: "Al-Attas does not merely analyse Islamic concepts in isolation; he shows how each concept



acquires its full meaning only within the semantic network constituted by all the others, a network whose organising principle is the doctrine of divine unity."¹¹ The critical dimension of this reconstructive operation is as important as its constructive dimension. For by recovering the authentic semantic content of Islamic concepts, al-Attas simultaneously exposes the inadequacy of the Western concepts with which they have been conflated — a double movement of semantic decolonisation that is arguably the most practically consequential contribution of his entire project.

VI. Conclusion: The Legacy and Limits of al-Attas's Critical Architecture

The foregoing analysis has traced the architecture of al-Attas's critical thinking across its three interlocking mechanisms: the deployment of the Islamic worldview as an epistemological criterion, the systematic deconstruction of Western modernity through the project of dewesternization, and the restoration of adab and semantic sovereignty as both normative framework and critical instrument. What emerges from this analysis is not merely a set of philosophical arguments but a distinctive model of intellectual engagement — one in which the depth of one's metaphysical commitments is the condition, rather than the obstacle, of critical rigour, and in which the most radical critique of a dominant intellectual tradition is conducted not from a position of cultural reaction but from a position of philosophical confrontation on the terrain of epistemology itself.

The question that any assessment of al-Attas's project must confront is whether it succeeds not merely as philosophical critique but as intellectual programme: whether the architecture of critical thinking he constructs is capable of generating not only devastating diagnoses of Western modernity's pathologies but positive and practically implementable alternatives. Here the assessment must be more nuanced. The most persistent concern is what might be called the gap between the metaphysical and the methodological in al-Attas's work. His philosophical reconstruction of the Islamic worldview and his critique of Western epistemology are executed with formidable rigour and depth. But the translation of these philosophical achievements into concrete research programmes, curriculum designs, and institutional practices remains underdeveloped in comparison with the philosophical foundations. The International Institute of Islamic Thought Malaysia (ISTAC), which al-Attas

¹¹ Sa'id Shabbâr, *Al-Mustalah wa al-Manhaj: fi Qadaya al-Turath wa al-Fikr al-Islami* (Beirut: Markaz Nama lil-Buhuth wa al-Dirasat, 2015), 89.



founded and led, embodied his vision, but the challenge of translating philosophical principles into disciplinary practice proved more resistant than the original programme anticipated.

A second concern is the question of accessibility. Al-Attas writes for an audience simultaneously at home in the classical Arabic intellectual tradition, conversant with Western philosophy from the Greeks to the present, and trained in Islamic theology and jurisprudence. This is an extraordinarily demanding readership, and the difficulty of his work — which is not obscurity for its own sake but the necessary reflection of the genuine complexity of the problems he is addressing — has limited the dissemination of his ideas beyond a relatively small circle of specialists. The contrast with al-Faruqi's Islamization of Knowledge project, which was more programmatic and consequently achieved a wider institutional reach, is instructive: philosophical depth and institutional impact do not always travel together.

These limitations do not diminish the significance of al-Attas's contribution; they contextualise it. His work represents the most philosophically serious attempt within the contemporary Islamic intellectual tradition to think through the relationship between Islamic epistemology and Western modernity at the level of first principles — to refuse both the capitulation that adopts Western frameworks uncritically and the defensiveness that rejects them without engaging them. In an intellectual landscape increasingly shaped by the twin imperatives of epistemic decolonisation and cross-civilisational dialogue, the architecture of critical thinking that al-Attas has constructed offers resources that have not yet been fully exploited. The task of building on the foundations he has laid — rather than simply repeating the arguments he has made — is among the most important challenges facing Islamic intellectual life in the twenty-first century.



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