

# Negotiating the relationship human - non-human as a question of meaning in twentieth century Iranian authenticity discourse : the role of all I-e Ahmad's essay West Infection

Autor(en): **Gösken, Urs**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen  
Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société  
Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **72 (2018)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **27.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-813514>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Urs Gösken\*

## **Negotiating the Relationship Human – Non-Human as a Question of Meaning in Twentieth Century Iranian Authenticity Discourse: The Role of Ğalāl Āl-e Aḥmad’s Essay *West Infection***

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2017-0061>

**Abstract:** The present article investigates the intellectual and discursive orientation of the culture-critical essay *West Infection* by the twentieth century Iranian writer Ğalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (1923–1969). In doing so, it likewise discusses the question of why this particular text was to have so deep and lasting an effect in redirecting the sociocultural modernization debate among Iranian intellectuals from a mainly developmentalist discourse to one about the issues of authenticity and identity. While considering Āl-e Aḥmad’s essay as raising a question of meaning – more specifically the question of human being’s meaning in the face of dehumanization under the spell of technological ‘Westernization’ –, we critically examine, in the course of our study, former interpretive approaches that define Āl-e Aḥmad’s text as reflecting influence on the author of existentialist philosophy. At the same time, we also address scholarly discussions of *West Infection* that regard it as a manifestation of nativism or leftist anti-capitalism. Rather than trying, in our turn, to pin down what Āl-e Aḥmad has to say to any given ideological or philosophical doctrine, we attempt to understand the use by Āl-e Aḥmad, in his essay, of terms such as ‘authenticity’, ‘alienation’, ‘identity’ and ‘religion’ – some of which are highly evocative of existentialism and of nativism indeed – as constitutive of a discourse that – for all the arguable influence on it of modern ideologies and philosophies – deserves to be treated as a word in its own right in the debate about Iran’s sociocultural situation.

**Keywords:** Iranian intellectuals, authenticity, existentialism, nativism, Westernization, modernity, tradition, religion

Twentieth century Iranian authenticity discourse is one of the defining phenomena of the intellectual counter culture against the official sociocultural

---

\*Corresponding author: Urs Gösken, Asien-Orient-Institut, Abteilung Islamwissenschaft, Universität Zürich, Rämistrasse 59, 8001 Zürich, Switzerland. E-mail: urs.goesken@uzh.ch

orientation and practice of the Pahlavī era (1925–1979).<sup>1</sup> It started in the early 1960s, and the intellectual boosting this debate was the writer Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (1923–1969) by his seminal essay *West Infection – Ġarbzadegī* in the Persian original<sup>2</sup> –, which started to see the light in 1962.<sup>3</sup>

Given that Āl-e Aḥmad's<sup>4</sup> entire biography as a writer of a literary oeuvre consisting of novels and short stories, author of essays, reviews and ethnographic studies as well as a school teacher and some time political activist<sup>5</sup> is marked by his concern for Iran's sociocultural situation, *Ġarbzadegī* fits in neatly with the overall theme of its author's life and works.<sup>6</sup> The essay started its adventurous journey as a report Āl-e Aḥmad had prepared for the Commission on the Aim of Iranian Education within the Ministry of Education in 1961, but the commission, upon deliberation, decided not to release it.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, after first publishing the first third of the original version in the journal *Ketāb-e Māh* in 1962, which – as the author held later – caused the enforced closure of the journal,<sup>8</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad, in the same year, released a thousand copies on his own.<sup>9</sup> In 1963, he proceeded to publish an extended version with another publishing house, which ended in

1 Boroujerdi 1996: 106, 112–113, 217; Mirsepassi 2000: 96–127; Nabavi 2003: 57–58; Vahdat 2000; Vahdat 2002: 113–127.

2 cf. 'Abdolkarīmī 2014: 144–147; Boroujerdi 1996: 66, n.17, enumerates alternative translations such as 'West-struckness', 'Occidentosis', 'Plagued by the West', 'Western-mania', 'Euromania', 'Xenomenia', 'Westitis', 'Westamination', 'Westoxication'; he himself goes with 'Westoxication': Boroujerdi 1996: 65–76; Gheissari 1998: 89, 179, ns. 100 and 101, in addition to these renderings, mentions 'Occidentitis' and quotes Aḥmad Fardīd's translation 'dysiplexia'; Lenze 2008: 8 gives the current German translations 'vom Westen geschlagen [struck by the West]', 'vom Westen befallen' ['befallen by the West'] and 'Verwestlichung' ['Westernization'], the last of which he criticizes as too weak; Mirsepassi 2000: 97–114 and 2011: 33, 119–124 alternately uses 'Westoxication' and 'Westoxification'; Nabavi 2003: 57–64 sticks to 'Westoxication'; Seidel 2014: 59 suggests 'Westomanie' ['Westomania'] and 'Verwestlichung' ['Westernization']; Vahdat 2000: 61 and 2002: 113–117, 186–191, referring to Aḥmad Fardīd, quotes 'dysiplexia' and mentions the various renderings as 'Occidentosis', 'Westmania' and 'Westoxication'.

3 Boroujerdi 1996: 66–67; Dabashi 2008: 75–76; Gheissari 1998: 88; Ḥalīlī 2005: 59; Hanson 1983: 8; Hāšemī 2015: 148; Vahdat 2000: 55.

4 Clinton 1985: 745a–747b.

5 Clinton 1985: 744b.

6 A list of publications is provided in Clinton: 746b–747a.

7 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 15; Boroujerdi 1996: 66–67; Dabashi 2008: 76; Hāšemī 2015: 148; Lenze 2008: 118.

8 Gheissari 1998: 88 n. 96; Nabavi 2003: 60.

9 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 16; Dabashi 2008: 76; Nabavi 2003: 60, 60 n. 99 and 100, 157 n. 10.

the seizure of the copies and the bankruptcy of the publisher.<sup>10</sup> While, in 1964, the author had sent an enlarged and final version to Europe to get it published by Iranian students there – which attempt failed –, it was the penultimate version of the essay that had already been printed clandestinely and, as Āl-e Aḥmad claims, without his initiative in Tehran and California.<sup>11</sup>

In *Ġarbzadegī*, Āl-e Aḥmad denounces the official intellectual and practical culture of his day as a form of disease.<sup>12</sup> Actually, the author, in the very first lines of his essay, allegorically paraphrases the term *Ġarbzadegī* itself as ‘being infected by cholera’, as a ‘heatstroke’ or as the ‘destruction of wheat by June-bug’.<sup>13</sup> It is on account of this understanding by the author himself of the term and the phenomenon denoted by it that I have chosen, in this paper, to render the term as ‘West infection’, whenever referring to the phenomenon it signifies, and to remain with the Persian *Ġarbzadegī*, when quoting the title of the essay. More specifically, Āl-e Aḥmad deals with the sociocultural crisis that he sees as resulting from the official intellectual and practical culture of his day and that he calls West infection as a form of dehumanization. This, from the outset, established the Iranian authenticity discourse as a quest for the definition and the affirmation of the identity of ‘human’ against non-human concepts and forces.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of ‘human’ underlying the official Iranian discourse of the time mainly derives from Enlightenment teachings championing the autonomy of the individual human subject grounded in ratio and from various types of nineteenth century positivism.<sup>15</sup> Positivist rationalism as well as empiricism and scientism – the latter often in the form of a crossbreed between positivism and Büchnerian biological materialism – in addition to popularized versions of biological and social Darwinism underlay the mindset of quite a number of late nineteenth and early twentieth century intellectuals, many of whom were also reform thinkers and political activists.<sup>16</sup> It was, in fact, not least the intellectual and practical projects of reform thinkers and activists that, from as early as the mid nineteenth century, introduced

---

**10** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 16–17; Dabashi 2008: 76.

**11** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 17; Dabashi 2008: 76; Wells 1982: 44–46.

**12** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 21, 224.

**13** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 21.

**14** Boroujerdi 1996: 68–69, 106, 112–113, 217; Hāšemī 2015: 11–18; Manūčehri/‘Abbāsī 2011: 306–307; Mirsepassi 2000: 96–127; Nabavi 2003: 57–58; Vahdat: 113–127.

**15** Atabaki/Zürcher 2004: 1–12; Chehabi/Martin 2010: 165–191; Gheissari 1998: 13–39; Mirsepassi 2000: 55–64; Seidel 2012: 141; Seidel 2014: 31, 55–58; Vahdat 2002: 27–74.

**16** Atabaki/Zürcher 2004: 4–5; Seidel 2014: 31; von Kügelgen 2017: 36.

modern Western philosophy to the Iranian intellectual scene.<sup>17</sup> One of them, Mīrzā Fath ‘Alī Āḥūndzāde (1812–1878),<sup>18</sup> recognizing the proponents of natural science – commonly referred to as atheist in the Islamic tradition – as the sole bearers of truth,<sup>19</sup> presents a purely materialist doctrine which, in its application to human nature and society, branches off into Iranian nationalism coupled with anti-Arab racism.<sup>20</sup> Many of Āḥūndzāde’s ideas were taken up and developed further by another key thinker, Mīrzā Āqā Ḥān Kermānī (1853–1896),<sup>21</sup> who – even more than Āḥūndzāde – paved the way for modern Western philosophy in Iran.<sup>22</sup> Kermānī, in the name of a world view based on evolutionism and materialism, identifies human body and mind with physical and chemical processes<sup>23</sup> and classifies humanity according to nineteenth century racist phrenology.<sup>24</sup> Religion, too, has to conform to this paradigm of rationalism: In the view of some late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iranian intellectuals, such as Kermānī, it can.<sup>25</sup> In the view of others, it can’t. A prime example of the latter attitude is the very Āḥūndzāde, who holds that, if society is to become ‘civilized’, ‘science’ – by which he understands thinking independent of revelation – has to replace religion<sup>26</sup> and who considers materialism as the esoteric meaning of certain – most of them mystical – Islamic teachings.<sup>27</sup>

The privileged or even exclusive identification of truth and reality – including those of human being – with ‘science’ and positivist rationality, forming, as it did, the doctrinal background of many thinkers relevant to, or indeed active in, the Iranian constitutional movement,<sup>28</sup> started to directly affect Iran’s socio-cultural development as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. Following the advent of the Pahlavī regime after the demise of the constitutional movement, many of the Western-inspired intellectual doctrines discussed above continued to play a dominant role, albeit in a changing sociocultural and political setting. As a case in point, it was very much on the basis of

---

**17** Seidel 2014: 42–54.

**18** Vahdat 2002: 42; von Kügelgen 2017: 49–54, 121–139.

**19** Von Kügelgen 2017: 51.

**20** Von Kügelgen 2017: 54, 135–136.

**21** Born as ‘Abdolḥoseyn Ḥān. Vahdat 2002: 36; von Kügelgen 2017: 70–78, 202–207.

**22** Von Kügelgen 2017: 54.

**23** Vahdat 2002: 38; von Kügelgen 2017: 54, 75.

**24** Vahdat 2002: 39.

**25** Von Kügelgen 2017: 54, 67–99.

**26** Von Kügelgen 2017: 52.

**27** Von Kügelgen 2017: 51, 136.

**28** Atabaki/Zürcher 2004: 1–12; Seidel: 55–57.

modernization through Westernization, a principle already advocated by constitutional and pre-constitutional thinkers and activists, that the Pahlavī rulers carried out their reform projects from above, with a focus on the appropriation of technology, science and education.<sup>29</sup> In fact, it was the hope of many Iranian intellectuals – some of whom, by the way, in the constitutional era had been championing individual freedom – for the implementation of their vision of positivist modernity that made them put up with, or even welcome, Pahlavī autocracy.<sup>30</sup> In the official discourse and practice throughout the Pahlavī era, and in the dominant intellectual debate until as late as the end of the 1950s,<sup>31</sup> the concept of positivism and rationalism – together with the concomitant understanding of ‘human’ – tended to be further reduced to an instrumental means-ends rationality, mainly in the form of industrialization, technocracy and developmentalism,<sup>32</sup> with many a progressive intellectual subscribing to historical determinism.<sup>33</sup> Religion, in this mindset, figured as the antithesis to progress, rationality, scientific thought and development.<sup>34</sup>

It was not before the late 1950s that the theoretical validity of this discourse came under questioning among ever wider circles of Iranian intellectuals.<sup>35</sup> The fact that this happened at all, and that it happened at that time, may be attributable to a large degree to historical developments and events occurring in the reign of Moḥammad Reżā Pahlavī (r. 1941–1979). Unlike his father, Reżā Pahlavī, who, for all his despotism, was given some credit for being a dauntless defender of national independence and a committed, if ruthless, champion of modernization, Moḥammad Reżā was known to owe his very accession to the throne to Western powers, mainly the US. His legitimacy took a further blow when, in 1953, he was virtually reinstalled as ruler by a CIA-orchestrated coup, ending the term of the democratically elected and nationalist government headed by prime minister Moḥammad Moṣaddeq, who had attempted to nationalize Iran’s oil industry.<sup>36</sup> For many contemporary intellectuals, the Shah’s behavior toward Moṣaddeq, coupled with his ever more obvious dependence on the West in the wake of the CIA-coup, was a learning moment that in their eyes discredited not only the ruler’s pretensions at Western-style modernization,

---

**29** Seidel 2014: 57.

**30** Gheissari 1998: 41; Vahdat 2002: 79.

**31** Nabavi 2003: 34.

**32** Nabavi 2003: 68–70; Vahdat 2002: 80.

**33** Nabavi 2003: 34.

**34** Nabavi 2003: 33.

**35** Nabavi 2003: 34.

**36** Boroujerdi 1996: 28; Nabavi 2003: 11.

but Western modernity itself.<sup>37</sup> The ensuing intellectual discussion increasingly steered away from the issue of how best to introduce Western modernity to Iran, turning to the question of the very desirability and meaningfulness of Western modernity. Āl-e Aḥmad's *Ġarbzadegī*, then, in this context, can be seen as the most influential manifestation of, and contribution to, this debate.<sup>38</sup>

New though the dominance on intellectual discourse of this question was, it deserves mention that the question itself had been raised before in Iranian intellectual history. It was the Western-educated political and social scientist and writer Ḥoseyn Kāẓemzāde (1884–1962), better known by his pen name 'Īrānšahr',<sup>39</sup> who, for all his acknowledgment of the contribution of Enlightenment thought to humanity, criticized Western modernity for its materialism and spiritual alienation resulting, as he saw it, from gearing the rational faculty toward the body – which, in Īrānšahr's conceptual mind-body dichotomy, is secondary in human beings – rather than toward the soul, which is primary.<sup>40</sup> Iranian nationalism's task, as envisaged by Īrānšahr, was to bring about a civilization and a human being that would steer clear of these aberrations.<sup>41</sup> Although Īrānšahr, in his later years, became aloof from the sociopolitical debate of his native country, working instead as the leader of a theosophic circle in Switzerland,<sup>42</sup> his discourse on nationalism and his criticism of instrumental rationality and materialism were taken up and developed along new lines by Seyyed Aḥmad Kasravī (1890–1946).<sup>43</sup>

The point we choose to take up in this paper is that it is the understanding of the identity of 'human' along the lines of a conceptually reduced positivism as championed by the official discourse of the Pahlavī state and, for a long time, prominent in the intellectual debate that Āl-e Aḥmad in his essay *Ġarbzadegī* subjects to a damning critique, with the catchword he uses to denote this process being 'West infection', which is also the title of his essay. But before we embark on our discussion, we have to do justice to the fact that Āl-e Aḥmad's text, in the scholarly and non-scholarly debate surrounding it, has been dealt with from a wide variety of interpretive angles.

One of them refers to Āl-e Aḥmad's political orientation as an Iranian leftist. And, indeed, Āl-e Aḥmad's long-time career as a political activist is marked by his

---

<sup>37</sup> Boroujerdi 1996: 31–32, 33; Nabavi 2003: 17–18.

<sup>38</sup> Nabavi 2003: 34–36.

<sup>39</sup> Vahdat 2002: 83–85.

<sup>40</sup> Vahdat 2002: 84.

<sup>41</sup> Vahdat 2002: 84–85.

<sup>42</sup> Vahdat 2002: 83.

<sup>43</sup> Vahdat 2002: 85–90.

membership in varying, but always leftist, political organizations.<sup>44</sup> Considering this background, a number of scholars have interpreted *Ġarbzadegī* as a manifestation of its author's professed leftism and anti-capitalism.<sup>45</sup> Such views may seem well founded, given that Āl-e Aḥmad's criticism of Western civilization displayed in his essay and elsewhere extends to Western capitalism. However, we should likewise bear in mind – and we shall deal with this issue later on in our discussion of Āl-e Aḥmad's essay – that *Ġarbzadegī*, however strong an anti-capitalist statement we may see in it, is at least as outspoken against machinism or 'mechanism'. And machinism is a phenomenon Āl-e Aḥmad explicitly does not relate exclusively to the capitalist West, but describes as a mode of being transcending all ideological affiliations:

We no longer live in a time in which people in the 'West' are scared of 'communism' or, in the 'East', of the bourgeoisie and of liberalism. Nowadays, even [...] Khrushchev can buy wheat from America. In our times, all those isms and ideologies are avenues leading to the heavenly throne of 'mechanism'<sup>46</sup> and 'machinism'.<sup>47,48</sup>

And, anyway, Āl-e Aḥmad's anti-machinism emphasized in his essay could not be put down to his leftist convictions alone. For mechanization and industrialization are no strangers to leftist ideologies and policies, whereas Āl-e Aḥmad is known to have broken away from several leftist organizations – most notably the Tūde-party – on the grounds that – besides their uncritical devotion to the Soviet Union – in their development programs aiming at industrializing Iran they failed to respect Iranian culture.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the writing of *Ġarbzadegī* itself came at a time when Āl-e Aḥmad, disillusioned with party politics anyway, from bitter experience as a political activist had come to realize that leftist – and other secular – ideologies failed to reach the very masses whose cause they claimed to defend.<sup>50</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad's anti-capitalist statements in *Ġarbzadegī*, then, cannot be accounted for by his leftist convictions, certainly not in an exclusive manner.

Another angle from which Āl-e Aḥmad's essay is frequently approached is nativism, a term introduced for the first time into scholarship, in 1943, by the sociologist Ralph Linton and defined as 'any conscious, organized

---

44 Boroujerdi 1996: 66; Dabashi 2008: 46–50; Lenze 2008: 20–26; Mirsepassi 2000: 101; Vahdat 2002: 113.

45 Dabashi 2008: 61–62; Nabavi: 35; Seidel 2014: 61.

46 Persian *mekānizm*.

47 Persian *māšīnī šodan*.

48 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 25–26. All translations, if not referenced otherwise, are my own.

49 Boroujerdi 1996: 66; Dabashi 2008: 46–50; Lenze 2008: 21–26; Mirsepassi 2000: 101; Vahdat 2002: 109–113.

50 Dabashi 2008: 78.



attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture.'<sup>51</sup> We have to stress from the outset that it is scholars dealing with Āl-e Aḥmad's essay such as Mehrzad Boroujerdi<sup>52</sup> and Franz Lenze<sup>53</sup> who have labeled it as 'nativist', while its author never refers to the term. To be sure, in *Ġarbzadegī* ample evidence that seems to justify the application of this denomination can be found. After all, it is Āl-e Aḥmad himself who, in his essay, takes stock of what he perceives as Iran's cultural situation of his day by saying:

This essay is primarily about the fact that we have not managed to preserve our cultural-historical identity<sup>54</sup> in the face of the machine and its inevitable<sup>55</sup> onslaught.<sup>56</sup>

And Āl-e Aḥmad's text is replete with laments about the destruction of village life and of traditional handicraft in the wake of the introduction of industrial methods of production, the staggering growth of towns at the expense of rural settlements and about the resulting socio-economic dislocation.<sup>57</sup> Based on references like these, some followers of a nativist interpretation of Āl-e Aḥmad's essay go so far as to attribute to the author 'anti-Western nostalgia', 'romanticism of Iranian and Islamic traditions',<sup>58</sup> 'romanticism of local cultures',<sup>59</sup> 'anti-modernization romanticism'<sup>60</sup> and even a yearning for a paradise lost<sup>61</sup> and to describe *Ġarbzadegī* as a 'eulogy of a passing era'.<sup>62</sup> Interpreting *Ġarbzadegī* in the light of nativism does have the advantage of accounting for Āl-e Aḥmad's displays, in his essay, of anticapitalism in a more convincing way than attributing them to his political record as a leftist does. In particular, the ongoing pervasion, in Āl-e Aḥmad's time, of Iran by foreign capital would have been deeply disturbing to a nativist. On the other hand, interpretations of Āl-e Aḥmad's essay from the angle of nativism only work on the implicit assumption that the culture Āl-e Aḥmad, in the name of alleged nativism, consciously

---

<sup>51</sup> Linton 1943: 230–231. Cf. Lenze 2008: 36–38.

<sup>52</sup> Boroujerdi 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Lenze 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Persian *šahšiyat*.

<sup>55</sup> Persian *ġabrī*.

<sup>56</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 28.

<sup>57</sup> Boroujerdi 1996: 70; Lenze 2008: 156–168; Mirsepassi 2000: 77–78; Mirsepassi 2011: 33–34; Mirsepassi 2017: 51–52.

<sup>58</sup> Mirsepassi 2000: 77.

<sup>59</sup> Mirsepassi 2000: 78.

<sup>60</sup> Mirsepassi 2000: 105.

<sup>61</sup> Lenze 2008: 156.

<sup>62</sup> Boroujerdi 1996: 68.

attempts to revive or perpetuate is Iran's pre-industrial past. We shall get back to this point later in the paper.

Now, approaching, as we do, Āl-e Aḥmad's essay as a critique of a reduced concept of 'human' as a result of a likewise conceptually reduced positivism, we may note that Āl-e Aḥmad takes issue with this process on two interconnected counts: first, that the understanding of 'human' in the process of West infection is reductionist; second, that that to which 'human' is reduced in this process is a non-human principle. The catchword Āl-e Aḥmad uses for this non-human principle is 'machine',<sup>63</sup> as in the following quote where he says about the situation of Iran as a country of the developing world:

The very fact alone [that we in the developing world are not producers, but mere consumers of the machine] leaves us no choice but to fashion ourselves after the design of the machine [...], ourselves and our governments and our culture and our daily life.<sup>64</sup>

In another quote where he condemns militarism as yet another form of machinism, Āl-e Aḥmad relates his concept of 'machine' to the doctrines that he regards as its intellectual background:

[...] militarism [...] basically learns its ways from the machine, from the machine that in turn is the product of 'pragmatism', 'scientism' and 'positivism' and other isms of this kind.<sup>65</sup>

Āl-e Aḥmad does not specify what he understands by the philosophical doctrines he mentions in the quote and what connection he supposes to hold between them and the machine. His condemnation of the doctrines referred to in the quote, however, goes to show as much that he is opposed to all of them. Whether his opposition to them is itself grounded in any philosophy, and, if so, in which one, is an issue hotly debated both among later intellectuals referring to Āl-e Aḥmad and scholars dealing with him scientifically.<sup>66</sup> Ali Gheissari, in his reading of Āl-e Aḥmad's essay, describes the author's critique of Western technology as reminiscent of a Marcusian criticism of positive science.<sup>67</sup> Reading Negin Nabavi's *Intellectuals and the State in Iran*, in which she discusses Āl-e Aḥmad mainly in the context of Iranian intellectuals' relationship to the official

---

<sup>63</sup> Persian *māšīn*.

<sup>64</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 27–28.

<sup>65</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 202.

<sup>66</sup> Boroujerdi 1996: 68–71; Dabashi 2008: 74; Gheissari 1998: 88–90; Ḥalili 2005: 61–62; Hanson 1983: 7–13; Hāšemī 2015: 155; Manūčehri/‘Abbāsī 2011: 302–306, 308; Mirsepassi 2011: 32–34, 119–124.

<sup>67</sup> Gheissari 1998: 88–89.

discourse and practice of the Pahlavī era, one might feel tempted to take Āl-e Aḥmad's rejection, in the quote, of scientism and positivism, the theoretical substructure of technology, as a note of protest against technocratic policies enacted without sensitivity to Iran's cultural condition.<sup>68</sup> Boroujerdi, viewing Āl-e Aḥmad's essay as an expression of nativism, presents Āl-e Aḥmad's critique of science and technology as grounded in the author's conviction – allegedly influenced by Heidegger's philosophy of technology – that these are instruments of human mastery as the essence of Western civilization.<sup>69</sup> Boroujerdi's view is adopted by Rezā Ḥalīlī<sup>70</sup> and, although not without qualification, by 'Abbās Manūčehri and Moslem 'Abbāsī.<sup>71</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Moḥammad Maṣū' Hāšemī deplors a very lack of knowledge, in Āl-e Aḥmad, of Heidegger's thought about technology.<sup>72</sup>

Following up the issue of a potential philosophical grounding of Āl-e Aḥmad's above-quoted dismissive remarks about pragmatism, scientism and positivism, we may take note that Āl-e Aḥmad's reading background and his translation projects do suggest a marked, but not exclusive, interest in some major themes of existentialism, notably the problem of human subjectivity.<sup>73</sup> And adherence to existentialism would certainly establish a strong counter position to positivism and rationalism. Indeed, many recipients of Āl-e Aḥmad, be they scholars or not, interpret his essay in the light of existentialist philosophy.<sup>74</sup> The impression of existentialist influence on the author seems to be all the more justified when we learn that Āl-e Aḥmad, besides reading and translating works by Sartre and Camus, was acquainted with the philosophy teacher Aḥmad Fardīd (1912–1994),<sup>75</sup> who was a member of the aforementioned Commission on the Aim of Iranian Education<sup>76</sup> and who is known as the first Iranian Heideggerian.<sup>77</sup> Fardīd's lasting involvement with Martin Heidegger's

---

**68** Nabavi 2003: 68–70.

**69** Boroujerdi 1996: 68.

**70** Ḥalīlī 2005: 61–62.

**71** Manūčehri/'Abbāsī 2011: 302–306.

**72** Hāšemī 2015: 155.

**73** Boroujerdi 1996: 69–70; Dabashi 2008: 57–58, 74; Ḥalīlī 2005: 58, 62; Hanson 1983: 8; Manūčehri/'Abbāsī 2011: 308; Mirsepassi 2011: 120–121.

**74** Boroujerdi 1996: 69–70; Dabashi 2008: 57–58; Hāšemī 2015: 163; Manūčehri/'Abbāsī 2011: 308; Mirsepassi 2011: 120–121.

**75** About life and works cf. 'Abdolkarīmī 2014; Boroujerdi 1996: 63–65; Hāšemī 2015; Mazinani 2006–2007; Mirsepassi 2011: 30–43; Mirsepassi 2017.

**76** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 16; Boroujerdi 1996: 67.

**77** 'Abdolkarīmī 2014: 155–170; Boroujerdi 1996: 63–65; van den Bos 2005: 122; Hāšemī 2015: 82–87, 147–171; Mazinani 2007: 52–62, 78–82, 90–95; Mirsepassi 2011: 30–43; Vahdat 2002: 114–115.

(1889–1976) thought in turn goes back to his acquaintance with the French philosopher and Orientalist Henry Corbin (1903–1978), who first introduced Heidegger’s philosophy to the Iranian intellectual scene in the late 1940s and early 1950s. That was the time when he started to work and live in Iran as a researcher into Islamic mysticism and philosophy,<sup>78</sup> using Heidegger’s phenomenology as a hermeneutic key to understanding Islamic mystical and philosophical texts.<sup>79</sup> As for Fardīd’s attraction to Heidegger, it seems largely motivated by his conviction that Heidegger’s analysis of human being’s situation in the world had the potential of a paradigm shift in understanding Iran’s cultural and intellectual situation.<sup>80</sup> It was Fardīd, too, who, as a keyword in the context of his Heidegger-inspired critique of metaphysics, coined the term ‘West infection’,<sup>81</sup> which Āl-e Aḥmad adopted from him, albeit in a sense different from the one intended by Fardīd.<sup>82</sup> The latter seems to understand the term as an equivalent of what Heidegger refers to as forgetfulness of being, further drawing on Heidegger to construe an ontological East-West dichotomy.<sup>83</sup> In this, the ‘West’ figures as the home of rationalist ‘reality’ resulting in the forgetfulness of being and the ‘East’ or ‘Islam’, for that matter, as the abode of ‘truth’, a truth grounded in the mindfulness of being in the name of spirituality.<sup>84</sup> In the framework of this dichotomy, Fardīd goes on to combine Heidegger’s history of being with the Islamic mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī’s (d. 1240) doctrine of the divine names with each name constituting the manifestation of a new era in the history of being.<sup>85</sup> Added to this, we find a modified version of Aristotelian hylomorphism with each preceding era in the history of being relating to the subsequent one in terms of its matter and each subsequent one relating to the preceding one in terms of its form.<sup>86</sup> In Fardīd’s criticism of Iran’s sociocultural situation, it is Heidegger’s critique of technology as the ultimate form of

**78** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 69–71, 86–87; van den Bos 2005; Landolt 1999.

**79** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 101–106; van den Bos 2005: 115, 118; Corbin 1981: 31; Landolt 1999: 488; Seidel 2014: 62–63.

**80** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 156–158, 266–268; Boroujerdi 1996: 63–65; van den Bos 2005: 122; Gheissari 1998: 89; Mirsepassi 2011: 30–43; Seidel 2014: 60–61.

**81** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 144–147; Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 16; Boroujerdi 1996: 65–76; Dabashi 2008: 76; Gheissari 1998: 89, 179 n. 101; Lenze 2008: 38–39; Mirsepassi 2000: 97–114; Mirsepassi 2011: 119–124; Nabavi 2003: 57–64; Seidel 2014: 60–61; Vahdat 2000: 61; Vahdat 2002: 113–117, 186–191.

**82** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 144–147, 380–381; Gheissari 1998: 89; Hāšemī 2015: 104–108, 148–151; Mirsepassi 2011: 119–124; Vahdat 2002: 114–115.

**83** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 144–147; Hāšemī 2015: 104–108.

**84** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 144–147; Hāšemī 2015: 75–76, 82–87.

**85** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 133–144; Hāšemī 2015: 76–82, 87–89, 94–96.

**86** Hāšemī 2015: 96–104.

metaphysical thought under the spell of the forgetfulness of being and his understanding of ‘authentic’ vs. ‘inauthentic’ being that figure prominently in Fardīd’s adaptation of Heidegger’s philosophy.<sup>87</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad, in his turn, certainly uses ‘West infection’ in his culture-critical essay to construct an East-West dichotomy in sociocultural terms without, however, featuring Heideggerian fundamental ontology and onto-history as drawn on by Fardīd – let alone the latter’s inclusion of Ibn ‘Arabī and Aristotle.<sup>88</sup> Still, how much of implicit Heideggerian or, for that matter, Fardīdian baggage we are justified to sense behind Āl-e Aḥmad’s words, is again a divisive issue among scholars and non-scholars dealing with *Ġarbzadegī* and a question we are going to touch upon in the further course of this paper. As for now, suffice it to say that statements affirming a doctrinal affiliation to Heidegger’s philosophy on the part of Āl-e Aḥmad like the ones by Ali Mirsepassi to the effect that Āl-e Aḥmad uses the term West infection in his criticism of consumerism, autocracy, poverty and decline of religiosity in the sense of a Heideggerian notion<sup>89</sup> or that it was directly from Fardīd’s analysis of Heidegger that Āl-e Aḥmad derived and developed his concept of West infection<sup>90</sup> cannot be substantiated on the basis of terminological borrowings from Fardīd by Āl-e Aḥmad.

Another point besides the aforesaid Āl-e Aḥmad-Fardīd connection that has come to be interpreted as an indication of existentialist influence on Āl-e Aḥmad is the author’s remark in the introduction to his essay that one of the earliest readers of it, the philosopher and translator of works of Western philosophy Maḥmūd Hūman (1909–1981),<sup>91</sup> identified its message with that of the German Ernst Jünger’s (1895–1998) essay *Crossing the Line*<sup>92</sup> which discusses nihilism and deals with certain themes of Heidegger’s thought.<sup>93</sup> Notably, Jünger, in this text, building on his previous definition of technological reality as nihilistic,<sup>94</sup> reflects on how human being, in the face of annihilation in the nihilistic maelstrom, can stay alive,<sup>95</sup> and, as some claim, it is Jünger’s diagnosis of technological modernity that had brought

---

87 ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 266–268; Hāšemi 2015: 120–132.

88 Seidel 2014: 60–61.

89 Mirsepassi 2011: 39.

90 Mirsepassi 2011: 119.

91 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 15–16; Boroujerdi 1996: 145 n. 24, 198; Dabashi 2008: 76.

92 Common English translation of the German original *Über die Linie* (cf. Bibliography to this article), in Persian *‘Obūr az ḥaṭṭ: Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 15–16.*

93 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 15–16; Dabashi 2008: 74, 76; for a comparative analysis of Jünger’s essay with Heidegger’s philosophy see Figal 1995a and Figal 1995b.

94 Figal 1995a: 189.

95 Figal 1995a: 189.

Heidegger to prominently address the question of technology in his oeuvre in the first place.<sup>96</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad, however, does not state any opinion of his own with regard to Hūman's judgement nor does he say on what grounds Hūman regards Jünger's and Āl-e Aḥmad's message as the same, but simply goes on to mention that, with the latter's help, he embarked on translating Jünger's essay into Persian.<sup>97</sup> Whatever we may think, then, about intellectual common ground between Jünger and Āl-e Aḥmad, the latter's non-committal remarks about Hūman's comparison between *Ġarbzadegī* and Jünger's *Crossing the Line* make the judgment by Mirsepassi, who sees in Āl-e Aḥmad's essay a similar adherence to a philosophy of will at work as in part of Jünger's oeuvre,<sup>98</sup> stand on its own merits.

On the other hand, specifically with regard to the essay *Ġarbzadegī* with its emphasis on the machine, it would be tempting indeed to suggest an affinity to Heidegger on the part of Āl-e Aḥmad given that Heidegger had focused on the question of technology in texts that had appeared in the years before the publication of *Ġarbzadegī*.<sup>99</sup> But then, again, it is in the context of a lengthy passage on the nature of the machine in Āl-e Aḥmad's essay that we come across the remark

[...] the machine is a means, not a goal.<sup>100</sup>

Now, the concept of the machine as a means is manifestly not the idea underlying Heidegger's thought about technology,<sup>101</sup> and this consideration should be enough to warn us against trying to pin down Āl-e Aḥmad's message to some particular philosophy. This caution is especially recommended when, in oft-quoted secondary sources on twentieth century Iranian intellectuals, we come across statements like the one by Boroujerdi, who accuses Āl-e Aḥmad, in his criticism of machines, of 'parroting of Heidegger'<sup>102</sup> and, elsewhere in his discussion of *Ġarbzadegī*, gives the impression, unsubstantiated by any textual reference in Āl-e Aḥmad's works, that Heidegger's thought that, as Boroujerdi phrases it, 'technological

**96** Figal 1995a: 185–186.

**97** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 16; Dabashi 2008: 74, 76; Ḥalili 2005: 58.

**98** Mirsepassi 2000: 109.

**99** E. g. Heidegger: 1954, 1960, 1977 (1935/36), 1997 (1938/39), 2000 (1959), 2007 (1962); Boroujerdi 1996: 68, 70; Manūčehri/'Abbāsī 2011: 302–303; Mirsepassi 2011: 95.

**100** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 119.

**101** Borgmann 2005: 428–429; Ġamšīdi/Īrān-nežād 2012: 62; Hāšemī 2015: 155; Heidegger 1954: 9; Luckner 2008: 93–94; Manūčehri/'Abbāsī 2011: 302–303.

**102** Boroujerdi 1996: 71.

development was to be viewed not as a mere instrument but as a mode of thought' is in fact the position expressed by Āl-e Aḥmad himself.<sup>103</sup> Similar reservation is advisable when approaching Hamid Dabashi's claim, based on no textual evidence in Āl-e Aḥmad's essay, to the effect that the author 'verified the validity of his own observation [...] on its proximity to [...] Ernst Jünger.'<sup>104</sup> The same goes for remarks by Mirsepassi, who declares Āl-e Aḥmad, prior to his turn to Islam, a Sartrean existentialist<sup>105</sup> and, elsewhere in his discussion of Āl-e Aḥmad's intellectual orientation, mistakes Maḥmūd Hūman's allegation of similarity between Āl-e Aḥmad's *Ġarbzadegī* and Jünger's *Crossing the Line* for Āl-e Aḥmad's own words – notwithstanding the fact that Āl-e Aḥmad in his text marks out this observation as Hūman's by introducing it with the phrase 'in his [i. e. Hūman's] words' -<sup>106</sup> and accordingly construes the statement as an acknowledgment of intellectual indebtedness to Ernst Jünger on the part of Āl-e Aḥmad.<sup>107</sup>

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, in the concluding chapter of his essay, Āl-e Aḥmad, in order to sum up its overall message, refers to literary works by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Albert Camus (1913–1960), two central figures of French existentialism, as well as to Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994) and Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007),<sup>108</sup> both of whom likewise prominently address the question of the meaning of human existence. The work by Camus that Āl-e Aḥmad singles out for discussion is *The Plague* which, as he remarks, he embarked on translating in order to better grasp its message.<sup>109</sup> He specifically deals with the way the plague affects the behavior of the characters in the story, rounding off his observations in the remark that

[...] the impact of the plague does not move anyone from the course he has been following so far, but, quite on the contrary, makes him move on it ever faster.<sup>110</sup>

As his subsequent remark goes to show, this is the same kind of self-destructive obsession under the spell of disease that he attributes to Iranians befallen by West infection – likewise a contagious disease, and a disease, by the way, which Āl-e Aḥmad, in the opening lines of his essay, compares to cholera:

---

**103** Boroujerdi 1996: 70.

**104** Dabashi 2008: 74.

**105** Mirsepassi 2011: 120.

**106** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 15.

**107** Mirsepassi 2011: 121. Similar reservations apply to Ġamšīdi/Īrān-nežād 2012: 62, who uncritically repeat Boroujerdi's above-quoted statement.

**108** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 223–227.

**109** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 224.

**110** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 224.

The same applies to us who are involved in the plague of West infection with the pulse of our decay throbbing faster and faster.<sup>111</sup>

And Āl-e Aḥmad relates what he regards as the overall message of *The Plague* even more clearly and succinctly to the theme of his own essay when, in the same context, he concludes:

I saw that the ‘plague’, in Albert Camus’ opinion, is ‘machinism’.<sup>112</sup>

Now, ‘machinism’, as we have seen, is that non-human principle West infected man, in Āl-e Aḥmad’s opinion, is reduced to, and, indeed, the author himself, in what immediately follows the previous quote, straightforwardly refers to machinism as

this killer of all beauty, poetry, humanness and Heaven.<sup>113</sup>

The other literary work Āl-e Aḥmad subjects to a more detailed analysis in his concluding chapter is the play *Rhinoceros* by Ionesco. Just as he equated the plague in Camus’ novel with West infection on the grounds of both being a disease, in the case of Ionesco’s play he refers to the metamorphosis of man into a rhinoceros as a disease similar to West infection on the grounds that

[...] our dear fellow citizens are likewise [...] day by day about to become a rhinoceros, which is the last chance of resistance against the machine,<sup>114</sup>

again making the point that, for humans, staying human is no mode of being compatible with the machine. Āl-e Aḥmad reiterates this point when, again referring to Ionesco’s play, he says:

[...] if mankind does not want to be crushed under the foot of the machine, it clearly has no choice but to transform into a rhinoceros.<sup>115</sup>

It is a similar conclusion Āl-e Aḥmad draws from his discussion of Bergman’s movie *The Seventh Seal*, when, obviously having in mind the major theme of the film, the silence of God, he remarks:

---

111 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 224.

112 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 224–225.

113 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 225.

114 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 225.

115 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 227.



Once the age of belief has come to an end, the era of empiricism<sup>116</sup> begins. And empiricism, in turn, leads to the atomic bomb. This is what Bergman hints at, or, at least, my understanding of what he hints at.<sup>117</sup>

As far as these references go, it appears that, in order to explain what moved Āl-e Aḥmad to write *Ġarbzadegī*, we need not resort to declaring him an existentialist, certainly not in terms of doctrinal affiliation in any strict sense. Rather, it seems that Āl-e Aḥmad, in *Ġarbzadegī*, draws on works by existentialist authors where he feels that his own, more particular, concern about the dehumanization of the human being in a West infected society can benefit from being related to what he knows of existentialism, whose more general question is about man's situation in the world. This conclusion, it is true, runs counter to findings arrived at by other scholars dealing with Āl-e Aḥmad's essay such as Mirsepassi's interpretation of *Ġarbzadegī* as being suffused by a Heideggerian historicist reading and by a likewise Heideggerian critique of technological nihilism.<sup>118</sup> Even if we leave aside the question of how justified these remarks, taken individually, may be, they are tacitly based on an unwarranted presupposition, namely, that what underlies Āl-e Aḥmad's text is a systematic awareness and appropriation of Heideggerian or – more broadly – of existentialist philosophy.

That said, given the strong emphasis by existentialist philosophy on the question of meaning or meaningfulness, we may feel tempted to identify a more specific affinity to existentialist teachings in Āl-e Aḥmad where he portrays West infection as a loss of meaning and as a form of inauthenticity, when, e. g., he says about West infected man:

West infected man has no personality.<sup>119</sup> He is a thing without authenticity.<sup>120</sup> He himself, his house and what he says do not smell of anything, but he rather is a mere representation of anything<sup>121</sup> and anyone.<sup>122,123</sup>

Presented with the term 'authenticity' in the above context, when assessing the possible influence on Āl-e Aḥmad of existentialism we cannot refrain from taking note that it is a key word of existentialist philosophy, notably in

---

**116** Persian *tağrobe*.

**117** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 227.

**118** Mirsepassi 2011: 122.

**119** Persian *šaḥṣiyyat*.

**120** Persian *bī-eṣālat*.

**121** Persian *hame čiz*.

**122** Persian *hame kas*.

**123** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 146; cf. also Boroujerdi 1996: 68; Mirsepassi 2011: 100.

Heidegger's analytic of human being or – in his terminology – Dasein.<sup>124</sup> Taken as a non-evaluative term, it points up Dasein's ontologically unique, first-person relation to itself in terms of a point of view irreducible to any second or third-person point of view.<sup>125</sup> Heidegger stresses the essential irreducibility to any second or third-person point of view of the first-person point of view in Dasein's relation to itself in opposition to doctrines, such as Descartes' and Kant's,<sup>126</sup> that, in his view, assimilate the reflexive, non-observational structure of our self-understanding to the kind of presence a thing – including human being as a 'thinking thing', as defined by Descartes – has when we encounter it in an attitude of observation.<sup>127</sup> Applying this latter, observational point of view to our self-understanding is for Heidegger 'inauthentic'. In addition to this authentic-inauthentic dichotomy, however, Heidegger, in his analytic of Dasein, makes room for yet another mode of self-understanding, which takes place in Dasein's average everydayness. In it, Dasein in its self-understanding is neither consistently adhering to the non-observational, first-person point of view nor to an observational third-person point of view, but – typically in accordance with the situational requirements in its everyday world – switching between first, second and third-person points of view in a rather undifferentiated manner. Heidegger calls this mode of self-understanding the modal indifference of 'the one'.<sup>128</sup> Now, notwithstanding Heidegger's insistence on the contrary, one cannot get rid of the feeling that, in certain contexts, he, on the one hand, uses 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' in an evaluative sense in which 'authentic' describes a mode of existence more choice-worthy than 'inauthentic'<sup>129</sup> and, on the other, assimilates modally indifferent average everydayness to inauthenticity.<sup>130</sup> If, then, we are at all allowed to relate the term 'authenticity' and Āl-e Aḥmad's depiction, in the above quote, of West infected man as a representation of 'anyone' to such existentialist understandings of human being, we certainly have to take the inauthenticity referred to in it in the evaluative sense and, likewise, to assimilate West infected man's existence as a representation of 'anyone' in the sense of the existentialist modal indifference of 'the one' to inauthenticity in the evaluative understanding. In the mode of 'the one', according to Heidegger, 'everybody is the other, nobody is himself'.<sup>131</sup> One could object, here, that Āl-e Aḥmad,

---

124 Carman 2005.

125 Carman 2005: 285, 290.

126 Carman 2005: 289.

127 Carman 2005: 290.

128 Carman 2005: 295. 'The one' translates the German '[das] man'.

129 Carman 2005: 286.

130 Carman 2005: 293.

131 Heidegger 2001: 128.

portraying, as he does, West infected man as having no personality, does not even affirm of him a ‘self’ in the first place, so that there can be no question of relating Heidegger’s statement, which speaks of a ‘him-self’, to what Āl-e Aḥmad has in mind when he comes up with the term ‘authenticity’. Neither does Heidegger’s notion of inauthenticity, however evaluative it may be, imply assimilating human being to a ‘thing’, as Āl-e Aḥmad does. To counter the objection by simply declaring Āl-e Aḥmad’s description of West infected man as having no personality and his assimilation of him to a thing as hyperbolic renderings of West infected man’s inauthenticity in the existentialist sense would be a cheap argument and end up in a moot point. At a less speculative level, it looks safer to regard Āl-e Aḥmad’s remark about West infected man having no personality as meaning the same as his assimilating him to a thing, for the obvious reason that a thing, being not a person, naturally has no personality. This interpretation would bring us close to our conclusion drawn from the earlier quote about man transforming into a rhinoceros to the effect that, in a West infected culture, being human is no option for human being. That said, although we need not – or even must not – sense existentialist deep structure underlying Āl-e Aḥmad’s use of ‘authenticity’ here, in consideration of another quote from *Ġarbzadegī* that we shall discuss shortly we should likewise beware of rashly dismissing Āl-e Aḥmad’s bringing up this term as simply one more example for the inflationary occurrence of ‘authenticity’ in colloquial speech.

As already mentioned, that ‘thing without authenticity’ to which, according to Āl-e Aḥmad, humans are reduced under the impact of West infection is the machine:

[...] enforcing conformism on people is itself but one more necessary result of the machine, its cause and effect at the same time. Uniformity in the face of the machine, conformism in the factory, punctuality and doing the same kind of tedious job for a lifetime become a second habit for all men who deal with the machine.<sup>132</sup>

It is this reduction of humans to the non-human principle of the machine as a thing without authenticity that in turn spells meaninglessness. And meaninglessness in Āl-e Aḥmad’s essay is not merely to be understood as relative meaninglessness in the mere sense of the powerlessness of man in the face of the machine and the technological age. It is rather to be understood as a meaninglessness of the human being in absolute terms in the sense of meaninglessness itself becoming human being’s very mode of being. Āl-e Aḥmad, even invoking Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* in the course of his argument,<sup>133</sup> takes the point of

132 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 201.

133 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 201–202.

this quote still further by linking – as he does in an earlier quote – machinism to militarism in the sense that military service in a machine infected culture implies the same conformism of man as his service of the machine.<sup>134</sup>

It is in the same vein as the previous quote that Āl-e Aḥmad, commenting on the latest developments in space travel, makes the point that

they are [...] the ultimate encroachment of the machine upon the sphere of humanness.<sup>135</sup>

and

[...] in this heavenly journey [of space travel], dogs and monkeys are superior to this reduced mankind. [...] by expending such human sacrifices, the machine is producing humans of a new kind, as obedient as farm animals, which means that it strips humanity of all dignity.<sup>136</sup>

This understanding of meaninglessness as resulting from reducing man to some non-human essence, in this instance the machine, may be taken as reminiscent of the position of existentialist philosophy which deals with the world through the paradigm of meaning and understanding vis-à-vis ontologies promoting an object cognition paradigm like positivism and scientism, which Āl-e Aḥmad condemns in an earlier quote.<sup>137</sup> In this context, the production of humans of a new kind – ‘new’ in the sense of being reduced to a non-human essence like the machine – would only constitute one more example of the reduction of humans to a positivistically defined essence. Whereas in doctrines like positivism and scientism – and even more so in positivist means-ends rationality – such essentialization of the human is valued as grasping and realizing the reality of the human, in the understanding paradigm of existentialism such essentialization is considered the manifestation of an inauthentic mode of perception forever failing to get to the reality of the human and, therefore, making the human into something unreal. West infected man, from this perspective, then, can be seen as an extreme case of an unreal human<sup>138</sup>:

West infected man [...] is a thing with no ties to the past or any grasp of the future. He is not a point on the line, but a hypothetical point on a page or rather in the void [...].<sup>139</sup>

and

---

**134** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 201.

**135** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 211.

**136** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 212.

**137** Sheehan 2005: 205.

**138** cf. also Vahdat 2000: 62.

**139** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 141.

West infected man is a follower of whatsoever. He is without belief in anything. But he is without unbelief in anything, too. [...] Nothing matters to him. [...] He has no faith, no principle, no goal, no conviction either in God or in man. He is not even unreligious. He is a whatsoever man. Sometimes, he even goes to the mosque, just the way he goes to the club or to the cinema. But wherever he goes, he is no more than a spectator, just as if he has gone to watch a soccer game. [...] He never commits himself.<sup>140</sup>

and likewise

[West infected man] is nowhere. [...] He is an amalgam of an isolated existence without personality and of a personality devoid of properties.<sup>141</sup>

The essentialization of the human under the impact of West infection, then, since it dehumanizes humans, does not signify empowerment of an autonomous human subject, but rather its reduction to something non-human and, therefore, less-than-human in the sense of a mere object of some non-human power.<sup>142</sup> In this context, it deserves attention that existentialist doctrines, which advocate an understanding and meaning paradigm rather than an object cognition paradigm, come to play an important role in the Iranian authenticity debate.<sup>143</sup> This may be because philosophies championing the meaning question look better suited to deal with issues of authenticity and identity since both issues are intimately connected with the meaning issue.

Interestingly, in his essay, Āl-e Aḥmad describes West infection as an historical process affecting both East *and* West. When he mentions the phenomena that he subsumes under the catchwords ‘West infection’ or ‘machine’ respectively, he often refers not only to Iran, but to the West as well.<sup>144</sup> The following quotes bear witness to this:

[...] parties in a democratic Western society are platforms for the gratification of the whims of unbalanced and psychopathic human beings who, being brought in line at the machine on a daily basis and forced to get up on time and to arrive at work on time and to catch the tramway, have lost every chance to display individual will in any way.<sup>145</sup>

and

---

**140** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 144.

**141** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 146.

**142** cf. Vahdat 2000: 56.

**143** ‘Abdolkarīmī 2014: 266–268; Boroujerdi 1996: 63–65, 69–71; Hāšemī 2015: 11–18; Mirsepassi 2011: 28–43, 85–128; Vahdat 2002: 114–117.

**144** cf. also Mirsepassi 2011: 120–121.

**145** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 203.

[...] as long as we [Iranians] are only consumers, as long as we do not produce the machine, we are West infected. And what is even more beautiful is that once we do produce the machine, we will be machine infected exactly like the West, whose lament about the unruliness of 'technology' and the machine is for everyone to hear.<sup>146</sup>

Intriguingly, at this very point of his argument, Āl-e Aḥmad, in a footnote consisting of no more than a source citation, refers the reader to the essay *La France contre les robots* by Georges Bernanos, French writer and one of the main representatives of the so called catholic renewal – to a text, that is, which contains a scathing indictment of industrialization and machinism as transfiguring the very thinking of humans and threatening French civilization. The fact alone that Āl-e Aḥmad refers to Bernanos' text allows us to assume as much that, before completing *Ġarbzadegī*, he knew about the issues discussed in it. This makes us wonder all the more why he does not become more specific about what actual parallels he sees between Bernanos' essay and his own, precisely considering that even the above outline of Bernanos' message is suggestive of striking similarities to Āl-e Aḥmad's. Anticipating a point to be discussed later in this paper, we may add as a further similarity both Bernanos' and Āl-e Aḥmad's critical attitude toward the religious establishment – catholic and Muslim respectively – of their day on the one hand, while, on the other, advocating non-establishment religiosity as a remedy against machinism and West infection. Anyway, while, whatever parallels readers may feel justified to draw between Āl-e Aḥmad's *Ġarbzadegī* and Ernst Jünger's *Crossing the Line*, these cannot be accounted for by any influence on Āl-e Aḥmad of Jünger – for reasons we have discussed earlier –, Bernanos' *La France contre les robots* does qualify for being at least considered as a source of inspiration for Āl-e Aḥmad's essay.

It is the very lament formulated in the preceding quote that, as Āl-e Aḥmad sees it, is voiced by all those Western authors he refers to in the final chapter of his essay:

And I see that the ending of all these stories amounts to the threat of the final hour that, by the hand of the demon of the machine (if we do not control it and put its spirit back into the bottle), the hydrogen bomb has been planted at the end of the road of mankind.<sup>147</sup>

Both East and West, then, are West infected, both are mere objects of the machine. The particular predicament of the East in this scenario, according to Āl-e Aḥmad, is that the East, in addition to being the object of the machine, is the object of the West, too. What makes the East an object of the West is the fact

---

**146** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 29.

**147** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 227.

that it is a mere consumer of machines whereas the West is a producer.<sup>148</sup> Actually, what, in the final analysis, defines ‘the East’ in Āl-e Aḥmad’s terminology and sets it apart from ‘the West’ is not geography, but being affected by that compounded predicament in the aforementioned sense.<sup>149</sup>

If we take Āl-e Aḥmad’s latest quotes as his last word on the future in a machine infected world, the outlook would be bleak indeed. But, according to Āl-e Aḥmad, there is hope for humans to preserve or regain their identity as humans even in the face of the machine. The author makes it clear, however, that this can, and need, not be achieved by abolishing the machine:

This is not about denying the machine as a fact or about abolishing it such as was the idea of the utopians at the beginning of the 19th century. By no means. The fact that the machine rules the world constitutes an historical necessity. It is about how to deal with the machine and technology.<sup>150</sup>

And, anyway, Āl-e Aḥmad leaves it no doubt that he is far from glorifying Iran’s pre-industrial way of life as some sort of good old times worth hankering after, but instead holds that, if only the machine was introduced according to a carefully thought up program, it could be beneficial

[...] so that all these eyes and hands and chests of the young villagers no longer be ruined at the carpet weaving loom in order to embellish the homes of the fine lords and ladies.<sup>151</sup>

These quotes as well as the next one have much potential to declare case closed on any understanding of Āl-e Aḥmad’s essay as an expression of ‘anti-Western nostalgia’,<sup>152</sup> ‘anti-modernization romanticism’,<sup>153</sup> ‘romanticism of Iranian tradition’ or of ‘local cultures’,<sup>154</sup> as suggested by Mirsepassi, and likewise on Boroujerdi’s statements that ‘Al-e Ahmad [...] was willingly oblivious to the reality that [...] machines also curtailed workers’ hardships [...]’<sup>155</sup> and that ‘in the entire *Gharbzadegi* essay no mention is made of the positive results of technology’.<sup>156</sup> That *Ġarbzadegi*, then, has not been intended as a nativist’s

---

**148** Boroujerdi 1996: 70; Hāšemī 2015: 155.

**149** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 21–22, 23–24; Hāšemī 2015: 150–151;

**150** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 27; cf. also Boroujerdi 1996: 70; Hanson 1983: 11; Mirsepassi 2011: 123–124; Vahdat 2002: 116–117.

**151** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 100.

**152** Mirsepassi 2000: 77.

**153** Mirsepassi 2000: 105.

**154** Mirsepassi 2000: 77, 78.

**155** Boroujerdi 1996: 70.

**156** Boroujerdi 1996: 71.

appeal to revive past traditions or to return to a premodern Iran can in fact also be borne out by referring to the contributions of Nabavi<sup>157</sup> and Vahdat.<sup>158</sup> Rather, what Āl-e Aḥmad condemns as West infection, is not the machine as such, but an inverted – or, in fact, perverted – relationship between the machine and human being, a relationship in which human being, instead of appropriating the machine, becomes itself – down to its very essence – appropriated by the machine. Āl-e Aḥmad, it is true, is not consistent in his terminology, using, as he does, the word ‘machine’, at times, in the sense of ‘technical device’ and, at others, as synonymous with ‘machinism’ or, indeed, with ‘West infection’. Understood as a technical device, ‘machine’, according to Āl-e Aḥmad, is a means at the service of human being; conceived of as ‘machinism’ or ‘West infection’, it is an inauthentic mode of existence for human being. This is another point where we may be allowed to discern a difference between Heidegger and Āl-e Aḥmad in their approach to technology: For Heidegger, there can be no question of understanding technology or the machine, for that matter, other than in terms of an inauthentic mode of being for humans resulting from a likewise inauthentic understanding of Being under the spell of metaphysics. To conceive of ‘machine’ as a means, even if this understanding runs parallel to a concept of the machine in terms of an inauthentic mode of being, as is the case in Āl-e Aḥmad, as far as Heidegger is concerned would amount to blatantly ignoring the essence of technology as not being anything technological at all.<sup>159</sup> Rather, for Heidegger, technology is the truth of a particular epoch, i. e. of our time.<sup>160</sup> For Āl-e Aḥmad, however, technology or ‘the machine’ in the sense of West infection are the situational *reality* of our time, but not the *truth* of our time – in fact, not a truth at all, but rather the distortion of the truth: The ‘truth’, for him, is the fact that, as he says, the machine is a means at the service of human beings, and this ‘true’ relationship between machine and human being, as he sees it, has been upset or turned upside down by human being having become subservient to the machine. Both Heidegger and Āl-e Aḥmad, however, in order to revise human being’s relationship to technology, are far from advocating the negation or abolishment of technology or the machine. Heidegger hopes for a shift in epochal truth itself, truth not in the formal sense of truth conditions, but in the substantive sense of what is eminently and decisively true of a particular time.<sup>161</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad hopes

---

157 Nabavi 2003: 62.

158 Vahdat 2002: 115.

159 Heidegger 2007: 5.

160 Borgmann 2005: 424.

161 Borgmann 2005: 424.



for the rise, *within* our epoch, of not (yet) – or less – West infected human beings to change reality by restoring the ‘true’ relationship between human being and the machine.<sup>162</sup>

Now, this ‘true’ relationship, as the author of *Ġarbzadegī* has said in one of the previous quotes, consists in the machine being a means for a goal, not a goal in itself, and, in the continuation of that same quote, Āl-e Aḥmad also states what goal it is that this means should serve:

The goal is to remove poverty and to make material and spiritual welfare accessible to all people.<sup>163</sup>

This is definitely a human goal. But precisely because it is a human goal, it only makes sense if we first define human identity and preserve humanness.

Regarding this point, Āl-e Aḥmad has clear ideas of what, at least as far as Iranian culture is concerned, constitutes human identity: It is Shii religion.<sup>164</sup> It is in this spirit that the author of *Ġarbzadegī* bemoans the execution of the Shii cleric Šeyḥ Fażlollāh Nūrī (1843–1909),<sup>165</sup> who, in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906,<sup>166</sup> championed the rule of Islamic religious law, favorably setting him apart from intellectuals of his time whom he regards as too secular-minded like Mīrzā Malkom Ḥān (1833–1908)<sup>167</sup> and Mīrzā ‘Abdorrahīm Ṭālebūf (1832–1910)<sup>168</sup> and seeing his execution by hanging as the writing on the wall that signaled Iran’s ultimate immersion into West infection:

[...] the martyred Šeyḥ Nūrī [...] was ordered to be hanged as a defender of the rule of religious law and, as I want to add, as a defender of the universality of Shii Islam. [...] And this happened at the very time when the leaders of our West infected intellectuals were the Christian Malkom Ḥān and the Caucasian social democrat Ṭālebūf! Whatever the case may be, it was from that day that our forehead has been virtually branded with the stigma of West infection. And I see the body of that great figure dangling from the gallows like a flag

**162** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 213–217.

**163** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 119; cf. also Hāšemi 2015: 166.

**164** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 77–78; Boroujerdi 1996: 72–73, 75–76; Dabashi 2008: 79, 80–86; Ġamšīdi/Īrān-nežād 2012: 60, 76–78, 79–80; Gheissari 1998: 89–90; Ḥalīlī 2005: 73, 81–83; Hanson 1983: 12; Mirsepassi 2011: 121–124; Nabavi 2003: 100–106, 128–136; Vahdat 2002: 120–121.

**165** Dabashi 2008: 85, 233, 494; Gheissari 2016: 35; Matin 2016: 90–91; Odabaei 2016: 111–112; Vahdat 2002: 65–68.

**166** Ansari 2016; Gronke 2006: 92–95; Martin 1989.

**167** Gheissari 1998: 24, 27–28; Vahdat 2002: 30–36.

**168** Gheissari 1998: 15, 24, 126 n. 14; Vahdat 2002: 48–54.

that was hoisted on the rooftop of our homeland as a token of the conquest by West infection.<sup>169</sup>

And Āl-e Aḥmad, in the same context, details the consequences of that event as follows:

And now, in the shadow of this flag, we resemble a people in self-alienation<sup>170</sup> – in our clothing, housing, eating, in our literature, in our printed media and – what is most dangerous – in our culture. We raise people beholden to the West and, beholden to the West, we seek solutions for every problem.<sup>171</sup>

and

[...] it is from that very time of constitutionalism that the [Shii] clergy [...] who used to be the last bulwark of resistance against the Westerner hid in their shell so much and closed the door to the outside world in their own face so much and holed up in their cocoon so much that, if ever, it will crack open on the Day of Resurrection.<sup>172</sup>

Taking note of Āl-e Aḥmad's identification, in the penultimate quote, of West infection with self-alienation, we may be allowed to feel reminded of his characterization, in one of the earlier quotes, of West infected man as 'inauthentic'.<sup>173</sup> This suggests that Āl-e Aḥmad, when defining the dehumanization of man under the spell of West infection, uses the terms 'self-alienation', which can be traced back to the thought of Hegel and Marx, and 'inauthenticity', which occurs as a keyword in existentialist philosophy, in a somewhat similar sense. Now, far from attempting to classify Āl-e Aḥmad as an existentialist in any doctrinal sense, we nonetheless cannot help observing that the semantic rapprochement between 'self-alienation' and 'inauthenticity' takes place in post-world war II existentialist philosophy in the context of trying, in the name of existentialist humanism, to equate the two concepts with each other on account of the principal possibility for man to live an inauthentic life.<sup>174</sup> Finding this terminological assimilation in Āl-e Aḥmad's *Ġarbzadegī*, then, may be taken as an indication of some awareness, however unsystematic, of existentialism on the part of the author. And, indeed, Āl-e Aḥmad is remembered by people close to

---

169 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 78. Cf. Dabashi 2008: 85; Ġamšidi/Īrān-nežād 2012: 78; Ḥalīlī 2005: 82.

170 Persian *az ḥod biḡāne*.

171 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 78.

172 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 77–78.

173 Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 146.

174 Hügli/Lübcke 2005: 174a, 555a.

him – some of whom, like Daryush Ashuri<sup>175</sup> and Moḥammad-Taqī Ġiyāsī,<sup>176</sup> dealt with his oeuvre as scholars, too – as interested in, or even influenced, by Sartre.<sup>177</sup> But, again, as we have remarked in our comment on a previous quote, however much Āl-e Aḥmad may have known, or cared about, existentialist philosophy, his references to existentialist notions do not add up to any underlying existentialist system.

Āl-e Aḥmad's tribute to religion as reflected in the three previous quotes has caused much confusion among many of his recipients given that the author, in the very same essay in which he highlights the importance of Shii religion as the hallmark of Iranian cultural identity, makes some very unflattering remarks about the religious establishment of his day such as when he says:

[...] religion with all its institutions and conventions is grounding itself, as far as it can, in superstition and sheltering in bygone times and in rotten and obsolete ways, resigning itself to being a cemetery caretaker and thinking, in the 20th century, by the standards of the Middle Ages.<sup>178</sup>

and

[...] not only did the clergy, in the face all that pressure [in the wake of 20th century modernization measures by the Pahlavī regime], show nothing in terms of a reaction, but kept concerning themselves with the minutiae of ritual prayer or the details of ritual purity or impurity. [...] and if indeed they put their best foot forward, they declared radio and television a sin, regardless of the fact that these have spread so far and wide that no hero can check them anyway.<sup>179</sup>

He does so, however, in order to remind the representatives of the religious institution of what he regards as their real religious duty, namely, to stand up against unjust and incompetent rulers:

Instead, the clergy, quite rightly and aptly, could and, indeed, should arm themselves with the weapons of the enemy, countering the West infection of the official and semi-official broadcasting stations with radio and television stations of their own, broadcasting from [the holy cities of] Qom or Mašhad – just as the Vatican does. [...] If the clergy only knew what a precious seed in terms of a nucleus of any uprising against the rule of oppressors and sinners, by virtue of their belief in the lawfulness of disobedience to those in power, they have kept alive in the hearts of the people, if they could reveal the true nature of these

---

**175** Ashuri 2000: 661–664.

**176** Ġiyāsī 1988.

**177** Ashuri 2000: 661–664; Boroujerdi 1996: 69–70.

**178** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 107.

**179** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 81–82. Cf. Ḥalīlī 2005: 73; Hanson 1983: 12; Hāšemī 2015: 165; Vahdat 2002: 121.

rulers to the people by using their own media and apply the rule on general questions to specific ones, and if they could give momentum to their cause by joining international clerical institutions, they would never focus so much as they are doing now on trivial issues that only result in mere ignorance of, and in isolation from, the depth of life.<sup>180</sup>

And as far as the clergy is concerned, it can be said that the seed of Āl-e Aḥmad's admonition fell on fertile ground.<sup>181</sup> Even prior to, and independent of, the publication of *Ġarbzadegī*, parts of Iran's religious establishment had come around to recognizing the need to assume opinion leadership in dealing with 'the West' both at the theoretical and practical level and to play an active part in Iran's sociocultural development.<sup>182</sup> It is in the wake of these efforts that two eminent religious scholars of their time, Moḥammad Ḥoseyn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1903–1981)<sup>183</sup> and Mortazā Moṭahharī (1920–1979),<sup>184</sup> in their treatise *The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism*,<sup>185</sup> undertook the first systematic attempt in Iran's more recent intellectual history to subject the philosophical doctrines they regarded as intellectual roots of Western modernity to a critique in the light of what they defined as 'Islamic' philosophy.<sup>186</sup> At the same time and in the same context, scholarly exchange between the religious seminary and secular institutions of learning was encouraged in order to bring each side up to date on the intellectual tradition and the teaching subjects of the other.<sup>187</sup> At the more practical level, leading clerics, most prominently Āyatollāh Ḥomeynī (1902–1989)<sup>188</sup> in his book *The Guardianship of the Jurist*,<sup>189</sup> reformed religious legal thought and formulated new positions concerning the relationship between religion and politics.<sup>190</sup> Against this backdrop, Āl-e Aḥmad's essay proved to be an additional inspiration for the so-called clerical subculture, a

**180** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 82. Cf. Boroujerdi 1996: 72–73, 75–76; Dabashi 2008: 74–88, 91–94; Ġamšīdi/Īrān-nežād 2012: 78–80; Gheissari 1998: 89–90; Ḥalīlī 2005: 73, 77, 82–83; Hanson 1983: 12; Hāšemī 2015: 165–166; Mirsepassi 2011: 121–122; Vahdat 2000: 66; Vahdat 2002: 121.

**181** Boroujerdi 1996: 75–76; Dabashi 2008: 76–88.

**182** Boroujerdi 1996: 80–83, 85–94; Dabashi 2008: 274–275, 278–279, 281–282, 284–285.

**183** Dabashi 2008: 273–323.

**184** Dabashi 2008: 147–215.

**185** My translation of the Persian original *Oṣūl-e falsafe va raveš-e re'ālism*: Boroujerdi 1996: 88; Dabashi 2008: 313–314.

**186** Gösken 2014: 250–438; Seidel 2012: 143.

**187** Boroujerdi 1996: 90–94, 131–136; Halm 2005: 94–99.

**188** Dabashi 2008: 409–484; Halm 2005: 100–106.

**189** My translation of the Persian original *Velāyat-e faqīh*: Boroujerdi 1996: 84–85, 96; Dabashi 2008: 491–493; Halm 1988: 160–166; Halm 2005: 102–106.

**190** Boroujerdi 1996: 81–82; Lambton 1964.

term denoting the clerical variety of the counter culture against the official sociocultural discourse and practice promoted by the Pahlavī state.<sup>191</sup>

There are scholars of twentieth century Iranian intellectual history who see in Āl-e Aḥmad's identification of Iranian cultural identity with religion a reflection of his biography, noting a 'return' to religion of the author in the final stage of his life.<sup>192</sup> And it is true that Āl-e Aḥmad had been born to a religious family and that his father, a cleric, had sent him to the holy city of Naḡaf in Iraq, a center of Shii religious learning.<sup>193</sup> Āl-e Aḥmad, however, after staying in Naḡaf for no longer than a few months, returned to Iran in order to pursue – without his father's knowledge – a secular education,<sup>194</sup> and his ideological orientation until the 1960s is marked by secular, for many years even communist, tendencies.<sup>195</sup> His heightened emphasis on religion – besides what he has to say about the subject in *Ġarbzadegī* – is manifest in his literary production in the 1960s, most notably *Lost in the Crowd* from 1965, his edited notes on his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964.<sup>196</sup> From what becomes apparent from the essay *Ġarbzadegī*, however, the religion Āl-e Aḥmad turns to in the 1960s is not to be conceived in terms of convention or tradition – let alone institutionalized tradition – into which man is born, but rather as the result and the manifestation of an existential choice in the name of the question concerning the possibility for human being of being human. 'Religion' in the sense in which Āl-e Aḥmad understands it in his essay, then, is not 'religion' in the sense his father presumably understood it and wanted his son to understand it. Neither does Āl-e Aḥmad – as many reformist thinkers had done – perceive religion as a discourse that, at best, had to conform to modernist rationalist discourse and, if judged unfit to do so, had to be dropped, but values it as a discourse and as a mode of existence in their own right. Viewed from this angle, Āl-e Aḥmad's intellectual development in the 1960s cannot be rightfully called a 'return' to religion – no more than his remarks, in *Ġarbzadegī*, about Iran's cultural tradition can be understood as advocating a 'return' to Iran's pre-industrial past. It is the understanding of religion as an existential choice, in the way it

---

**191** Boroujerdi 1996: 77–98.

**192** Ġamšīdī/Īrān-nežād 2012: 76–77; Ḥalīlī 2005: 77–78.

**193** Boroujerdi 1996: 65; Hanson 1983: 7; Dabashi 2008: 42–45; Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. 1, 1985: 745a; Gheissari 1998: 88; Vahdat 2002: 113.

**194** Boroujerdi 1996: 65; Dabashi 2008: 45; Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. 1, 1985: 745a; Gheissari 1998: 88.

**195** Boroujerdi 1996: 65–66; Dabashi 2008: 45–50; Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. 1, 1985: 745b.

**196** One of the conventional translations of the original Persian *Ḥasī dar mīqāt*: Dabashi 2008: 71–72; Ġamšīdī/Īrān-nežād 2012: 77; Ḥalīlī 2005: 78.

is detectable in Āl-e Aḥmad's essay, that came to be adopted by a number of Iranian intellectuals – perhaps most conspicuously the sociologist and ideologue 'Alī Šarī'atī (1933–1977)<sup>197</sup> –, many of whom are considered as having paved the way for the 1979 revolution or even took part in it. That the understanding of religion apparent in *Ġarbzadegī* contributed to shaping the course and the discourse of a revolutionary movement aiming at overthrowing a regime that was itself widely perceived as an agent of West infection, against this background, comes as no surprise: For it is the understanding of religion as an existential choice that had the potential to transform religion from a 'tradition' expected to be overcome by 'Western' modernity into a force expected to overcome, in its turn, Western modernity.

## Conclusion

Āl-e Aḥmad's *Ġarbzadegī* can be argued with good reason to constitute the single most important contribution to shifting the paradigm of the sociocultural discourse of Iranian intellectuals from being – until the late 1950s – a mainly developmentalist discourse to focusing on identity and authenticity, two issues which have remained dominant themes ever since. Speaking of authenticity, we consider it safe to say that Āl-e Aḥmad, in bringing up this concept, drew inspiration from existentialism. At the same time, we do not feel compelled to regard him as a systematic follower of existentialist philosophy in order to be able to meaningfully interpret his essay or to account for its deep and lasting impact. After all, Āl-e Aḥmad himself, although reportedly interested in Sartre and acquainted with Aḥmad Fardīd, never claimed to be a philosopher in his discourse. But it may well be this very non-commitment of the author to any particular philosophical doctrine which contributed to his essay's lasting effect. For by bringing up the issue of authenticity, while not appropriating it himself in the light of any given philosophy, Āl-e Aḥmad left all options open for other intellectuals to develop it further. And many of those other intellectuals who have been – or still are – developing it further can clearly be identified as followers of existentialist philosophy. To quote but a few examples, we may mention the philosopher and political scientist Daryush Shayegan (1935–2018),<sup>198</sup> who, in his analysis of Iran's sociocultural situation vis-à-vis

---

**197** Boroujerdi 1996: 105–115; Branson 1983: 13–18; Dabashi 2008: 102–146; Gheissari 1998: 97–107; Vahdat 2002: 135–153.

**198** Boroujerdi 1996: 147–155; Mirsepassi 2011: 34–38.

the West, until the 1980s adopted and adapted many points of Heidegger's concept of the history of *beyng*<sup>199</sup> and who, like Āl-e Aḥmad, regarded Shii religion as Iranians' primordial source of identity.<sup>200</sup> Another representative of existentialism-inspired Iranian authenticity discourse is the philosopher Reżā Dāvārī Ardakānī (1933-), who, very much on the basis of his appropriation of Heidegger's history of *beyng*, constructs an ontological East-West dichotomy.<sup>201</sup> Apart from these philosophers, we may again name 'Alī Šarī'atī, who, appropriating Sartrean existentialism and Marxism, in the name of a 'return to self' took the step from defining Iranian identity as Shii Islam, as Āl-e Aḥmad had done, to defining Shii Islam as a revolutionary doctrine and practice expected to defend Iranian identity against Western imperialism.<sup>202</sup>

But Āl-e Aḥmad's significance for these and other intellectuals does not lie in whatever influence on his *Ġarbzadegī* of existentialism with its stress on authenticity and the question of meaning interpreters may feel justified to attribute to this text. It may rather be seen in that Āl-e Aḥmad in his essay challenges the developmentalist ideals so fervently promoted by Iranian policy makers and intellectuals under the spell of their belief in technological rationality's promise of salvation by throwing into their face a seemingly simple question: 'So, what's the point?' Āl-e Aḥmad, in his essay, rhetorically asks this question when describing his reaction to media reports praising the latest achievements in space technology that, as Āl-e Aḥmad phrases it, have not only made it possible for man to travel to outer space, but also to reproduce there. Instead of being duly impressed, Āl-e Aḥmad comments on this news with the words:

This only goes to show that humanity has been ridiculed. 'Pragmatism' and 'scientism', then, have become so advanced that two human beings are being made the object of tough experiments followed by insemination and then by reproduction and ... So, what's the point?<sup>203</sup>

And, replying to his rhetorical question with an equally rhetorical answer, the author goes on:

The point is to prove that man can live and reproduce outside the earth's atmosphere. But then again – what's the point?<sup>204</sup>

---

**199** Boroujerdi 1996: 150–152; Mirsepassi 2011: 34–35.

**200** Boroujerdi 1996: 152–153; Mirsepassi 2011: 35–37.

**201** Boroujerdi 1996: 159–165.

**202** Boroujerdi 1996: 105–115; Dabashi 2008: 109–122, 125–144; Gheissari 1998: 97–108; Lenze 2008: 177; Mirsepassi 2011: 124–128.

**203** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 212.

**204** Āl-e Aḥmad 1964: 212.

This question of Āl-e Aḥmad's is clearly a question about meaning. But in order to make sense of it, we need not feel compelled to understand it as a question about meaning in terms of existentialism. Rather, we may be allowed to take Āl-e Aḥmad's argument implied in his question further by interpreting it as an antithesis to the belief in technological modernity being the answer to Iran's sociocultural situation. For, being appropriated by technological modernization and reduced to a mere object of the machine, human being does not matter, being deprived, as it is, of its identity as a human being and, hence, of any option of being human. But for a human being that does not matter since it does not exist anymore as a human being, technological modernization, which, after all, claims to be for the good of man, naturally cannot matter either. So, indeed – what's the point?

## Bibliography

- 'Abdolkarīmī, Bīžan (2014): *Hāydegger dar Īrān. Negāhī be zendegī, āsār va andīše-hā-ye Seyyed Aḥmad Fardīd* [Heidegger in Iran. A Glance on the Life, Works and Ideas of Seyyed Aḥmad Fardīd]. Tehran: Mo'assase-ye pežūhešī-e ḥikmat va falsafe-ye Īrān.
- Āl-e Aḥmad, Ġalāl (1964): *Ġarbzadegī* [West Infection]. Tehran: Rivāqīyyūn.
- Ansari, Ali M. (ed.) (2016): *Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Narratives of the Enlightenment*. London: Gingko Library.
- Ashuri, Daryush (2000): "Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad". In: *Yādnāme-ye Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad* [Memorial Book of Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad]. Edited by 'Alī Dehbāšī. Tehran: Beh-dīd va šahāb-e sāqeb, 661–664.
- Atabaki, Touraj / Zürcher, Erik J. (ed.) (2004): *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah*. London: Tauris.
- Borgmann, Albert (2005): "Technology". In: *A Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus, Mark A. Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 420–432.
- Boroujerdi, Mehrzad (1996): *Iranian Intellectuals and the West. The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Carman, Taylor (2005): "Authenticity". In: *A Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus, Mark A. Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 285–296.
- Chehabi, H.E. / Martin, Vanessa (ed.) (2010): *Iran's Constitutional Revolution: Popular Politics, Cultural Transformations and Transnational Connections*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- Clinton, J.W. (1985): "Āl-e Aḥmad, Jalāl". In: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 1. New York: Columbia University, 745–747.
- Corbin, Henry (1981): "De Heidegger à Sohrevardī: Entretien avec Philippe Némo". In: *Cahiers de l'Herne: Henry Corbin*. Edited by Christian Jambet. Paris: Ed. de l'Herne, 23–37.
- Corbin, Henry (1993): *Itinéraire d'un enseignement*. Tehran, Paris: Institut français de recherches en Iran, Ecole pratique des hautes études.
- Dabashi, Hamid (2008): *Theology of Discontent. The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York: New York University Press.



- Figal, Günter (1995a): “Der metaphysische Charakter der Moderne. Ernst Jüngers Schrift „Über die Linie“ (1950) und Martin Heideggers Kritik Über „Die Linie“ (1955)”. In: *Ernst Jünger im 20. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Hans-Harald Müller, Harro Segeberg. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 181–197.
- Figal, Günter (1995b): “Nochmals über die Linie”. In: *Magie der Heiterkeit: Ernst Jünger zum Hundertsten*. Edited by Günter Figal, Heimo Schwilk. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 25–40.
- Ġamšīdī, Moḥammad Ḥoseyn / Īrān-nežād, Ebrāhīm (2012): “Čāleš-e ġarb-gerāyī va bāz-ġašt be ḥīštan dar andīše-ye Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad” [“The Challenge of Westernism and the Return to Self in the Thought of Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad”]. *Moḡāle‘āt-e mellī* 2 (12th year): 56–82.
- Gheissari, Ali (1998): *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gheissari, Ali (2016): “Iran’s Dialectic of the Enlightenment: Notes on Constitutional Experience and Conflicting Narratives of Modernity”. In: *Iran’s Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Narratives of the Enlightenment*. Edited by Ali M. Ansari. London: Gingko Library.
- Ġiyāsī, Moḥammad Taqī (1988): “Čehel va šeš sāl zendegī, sī sāl neveštan [Forty-six Years of Living, Thirty Years of Writing]”. *Ādīne* 27: 40–42.
- Gösken, Urs (2014): *Kritik der westlichen Philosophie in Iran. Zum geistesgeschichtlichen Selbstverständnis von Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā‘ī und Murtażā Muṭahharī*. Munich: DeGruyter.
- Gronke, Monika (2006): *Geschichte Irans. Von der Islamisierung bis zur Gegenwart*. Munich: C.H. Beck.
- Guignon, Charles B. (2006): “Introduction”. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Charles B. Guignon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–41.
- Guignon, Charles B. (2006): “Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy”. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Charles B. Guignon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 268–292.
- Ḥalabī, ‘Alī Aṣṡar (2003): *Tārīḥ-e falāsefe-ye Īrān [The History of the Philosophers of Iran]*. Tehran: Zovvār.
- Ḥalīlī, Reżā (2005): “Ġarb-zadegī va hovviyyat; Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad va pāsoḡ be porseš-e ‘aqab-māndegī” [“Westoxication and Identity; Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad and the Answer to the Question of Backwardness”]. *Moḡāle‘āt-e mellī* 20.4 (5th year): 55–86.
- Halm, Heinz (1988): *Die Schia*. Munich: C.H. Beck.
- Halm, Heinz (2005): *Die Schiiten*. Munich: C.H. Beck.
- Hanson, Brad (1983): “The ‘Westoxication’ of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangī, Al-e Aḥmad, and Shariātī”. *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 15.1: 1–23.
- Hāšemī, Moḥammad Manšūr (2015): *Hovviyyat-andīšān va mīrās-e fekrī-e Aḥmad Fardīd [Thinkers of the Identity Question and the Intellectual Legacy of Aḥmad Fardīd]*. Tehran, Kavīr.
- Heidegger, Martin (1977): “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”. In: *Holzwege*. Edited by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann.
- Heidegger, Martin (1997): *Besinnung*. Edited by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann.
- Heidegger, Martin (1954): “Die Frage nach der Technik”. In: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Edited by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann. Pfullingen: Neske.
- Heidegger, Martin (2000): “Gelassenheit”. In: *Reden und andere Zeugnisse seines Lebensweges*. Edited by Hermann Heidegger. Pfullingen: Neske.
- Heidegger, Martin (1960): *Zusatz zu ‘Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes’*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

- Heidegger, Martin (2001): *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Heidegger, Martin (2007): *Die Technik und die Kehre*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Hef, Jeffrey (1984): *Reactionary Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoffman, Piotr (2006): "Death, time, history: Division II of 'Being and Time'". In: *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Charles B. Guignon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 222–240.
- Hügli, Anton / Lübcke, Poul (ed.) (2005): *Philosophielexikon. Personen und Begriffe der abendländischen Philosophie von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.
- Jünger, Ernst (1951): *Über die Linie [Crossing the Line]*. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann.
- Kamal, Muḥammad (2006): *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Lafont, Cristina (2005): "Hermeneutics". In: *A Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus, Mark A. Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 265–284.
- Lambton, Ann K.S. (1964): "A Reconsideration of the Position of the Marja' al-Taqlīd and the Religious Institution". *Studia Islamica* XX: 115–135.
- Landolt, Hermann (1999): "Henry Corbin, 1903–1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism". *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119.3: 484–490.
- Lenze, Franz (2008): *Der Nativist Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad und die Verwestlichung Irans im 20. Jahrhundert: eine Analyse der ethnographischen Monographien Awrāzān, Tāt-nešīn-hā-ye bolūk-e Zahrā und Ġazīre-ye Ḥārg, dorr-e yatīm-e ḥalīḡ unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner Programmschrift Ġarbzadegī*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.
- Linton, Ralph (1943): "Nativistic Movements". *American Anthropologist* 45.2: 230–240.
- Luckner, Andreas (2008): *Heidegger und das Denken der Technik*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Manūčehri, 'Abbās / 'Abbāsī, Moslem (2011): "Far-āyand-e šekl-gīri-e andīše-ye siyāsī-e Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad: 'Bāz-gašt be ḥīštan'" ["The Formative Process of Ġalāl Āl-e Aḥmad's Political Thought: the 'Return to Self'"]. *Siyāsāt, Maḡalle-ye Dāneš-kade-ye ḥoqūq va 'olūm-e siyāsī, series 40.4 (winter): 299–313*.
- Martin, Vanessa (1989): *Islam and Modernism. The Iranian Revolution of 1906*. London, Tauris.
- Matin, Kamran (2016): "The Enlightenment and Historical Difference: The Case of Iran's Constitutional Revolution". In: *Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Narratives of the Enlightenment*. Edited by Ali M. Ansari. London: Gingko Library.
- Mazinani, Ehsan (2007): *La réception de Heidegger en Iran. Le cas de Ahmad Fardid (1910–1994)*. Diss. Université de Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle 2006–2007.
- Mirsepasi, Ali (2000): *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mirsepasi, Ali (2011): *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment. Philosophies of Hope and Despair*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mirsepasi, Ali (2017): *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought. The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Movaḥḥed, Šamad (2005): *Negāhī be sar-češme-hā-ye ḥekmat-e ešrāq va mafhūm-hā-ye bonyādī-ye ān [A Look on the Origins of Illuminationist Philosophy and its Key Concepts]*. Tehran: Ṭahūrī.
- Mulhall, Stephen (2005): "Human Mortality: Heidegger on How to Portray the Impossible Possibility of Dasein". In: *A Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus, Mark A. Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 297–310.
- Nabavi, Negīn (2003): *Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse, and the Dilemma of Authenticity*. Tampa: University Press of Florida.

- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (1996): *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Odabaei, Milad (2016): “Shrinking Borders and Expanding Vocabularies: Translation and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906”. In: *Iran’s Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Narratives of the Enlightenment*. Edited by Ali M. Ansari. London: Gingko Library.
- Rizvi, Sajjad (2007): *Mullā Ṣadrā Ṣīrāzī. His Life and Works and the Sources for Safavid Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rizvi, Sajjad (2009): *Mulla Sadra and Metaphysics: Modulation of Being*. London: Routledge.
- Rudolph, Ulrich (2004): *Islamische Philosophie. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. Munich: C.H. Beck.
- Seidel, Roman (2012): “Kants Autonomiebegriff. Chance oder Gefahr für die Religion? Positionen der Kantrezeption in Iran heute”. In: *Kant und die Religion – die Religion und Kant*. Edited by Reinhard Hiltcher, Stefan Klingner. Hildesheim: Olms, 137–155.
- Seidel, Roman (2014): *Kant in Teheran. Anfänge, Ansätze und Kontexte der Kantrezeption in Iran*. Munich: DeGruyter.
- Sheehan, Thomas (2005): “Dasein”. In: *A Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus, Mark A. Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 193–213.
- Vahdat, Farzin (2000): “Return to which Self? Jalal Al-e Ahmad and the Discourse of Modernity”. *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis* 16.2: 55–71.
- Vahdat, Farzin (2002): *God and Juggernaut: Iran’s Intellectual Encounter with Modernity*. New York: Syracuse.
- van den Bos, Matthijs (2005): “Transnational Orientalism. Henry Corbin in Iran”. *Anthropos* 100. H.1: 113–125.
- von Kügelgen, Anke (ed.) (2017): *Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion. Religionskritische Positionen um 1900*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.
- Wells, Robert (1982): “Jalâl Âl-Ahmad: Writer and Political Activist.” Ph.D. thesis, Faculty of Arts, University of Edinburgh.