

A Critical Analysis of Textual Historicity in Abu Zayd's Thought in Light of the "Spirit of Meaning" Theory in Transcendent Philosophy

Mansoor Doagoo¹ 

Lecturer, Faculty of Islamic Teachings, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

Article History: Received 14 June 2025; Accepted 20 September 2025

ABSTRACT:

Original Paper

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's theory of the "historicity of the text," which emphasizes the primacy of cultural context in textual formation, reduces the revelation to a historically bounded linguistic message. By producing a rupture between the textual horizon of meaning and the horizon of the contemporary interpreter, this approach raises serious challenges for the efficacy and dynamism of the language of the Qur'an. The present study, with a critical approach, evaluates Abu Zayd's linguistic model on the basis of the theory of *rūḥ al-ma'nā* (spirit of meaning) in Transcendent Philosophy (*al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'aliyyah*). The findings indicate that Abu Zayd's theory rests on two fundamental errors. First, an ontological rupture between text and author: by treating the text as an independent historical product, Abu Zayd separates it from its author's trans-historical subjectivity. In contrast, in the *rūḥ al-ma'nā* model the text is a manifestation and existential continuation of the author, and a union between text and author is established that guarantees the persistence and vitality of meaning. Second, a spurious dualization of *ma'nā* and *maghzā*: Abu Zayd holds that *ma'nā* (meaning as a historical signified) is imprisoned in the past and must be contemporized by constructing a new *maghzā* (interpretive significance). By contrast, the *rūḥ al-ma'nā* theory, by explicating the mechanism by which words are instituted for the spirit of meaning, demonstrates that the signification of Qur'anic words is not constrained to the material-historical instances of the period of revelation; rather, words are instituted for general functions and

1. Corresponding Author. Email Address: mdk.doagoo@gmail.com

<http://dx.doi.org/10.37264/JIQS.V4I2.7>

https://iqs.sbu.ac.ir/article_106948.html?lang=en

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



universals. Accordingly, textual meaning possesses a fluid referential capacity that, without requiring a separation between *ma'nā* and *maghzā*, can be applied to novel instances in any temporal context.

KEYWORDS: The Qur'an, Historicity of the text, Abu Zayd, *Rūḥ al-ma'nā* theory, Transcendent Philosophy, *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'aliyyah*, *Ma'nā* and *maghzā*.

1. Introduction

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's theory of the historicity of the text, as one of the most influential hermeneutical approaches in contemporary Islamic thought, posits that the Qur'an, viewed as a cultural product, was constituted within a dialectic with the socio-historical realities of the seventh century CE. This view, by distinguishing between meaning, which it confines to the comprehension of the earliest addressees and treats as frozen in history, and *maghzā*, which is fluid and dependent on the intellectual horizon of the contemporary reader, effectively challenges the existential linkage of the text with the intent of the speaker (God). Although Abu Zayd's approach is advanced with the aim of revitalizing religious understanding, it ultimately reduces revelation to a historical document and opens the door to unrestricted ideological readings. One might argue that Abu Zayd's approach is merely linguistic and not concerned with theological matters; however, any linguistic theory is necessarily grounded in specific ontological presuppositions. The reduction of revelation to a human text stems from an ontological rupture that this study seeks to investigate.

The significance of this research lies in the fact that Abu Zayd's theory targets the epistemological and ontological foundations of revelation and has had broad influence on currents of religious intellectualism. The necessity of this study arises because most critiques of Abu Zayd have been either theological-polemical or limited to historical analysis, whereas the core challenge resides in the philosophical and ontological premises of his theory. Therefore, a foundational critique capable of testing these philosophical presuppositions and offering a coherent, viable alternative is an undeniable scientific requirement. It should be noted that Abu Zayd emphasizes the distinction between utterance and text, whereas the *rūḥ al-ma'nā* theory considers utterance and text as continuations of one another and applicable to both.

2. Literature Review

Abu Zayd's thought, especially his theory of the historicity of the text

and his effort to apply modern hermeneutics to the understanding of the Qur'an, has elicited wide response in domestic and international academic circles. A critical survey of the existing literature indicates that studies on his views can be grouped under three broad research orientations.

A cluster of studies focuses on the explication of theoretical and humanistic hermeneutic foundations, with a descriptive-analytical approach. They attempt to explicate Abu Zayd's hermeneutical apparatus and its key concepts, such as the role of the interpreter and the *ma'nā/maghzā* binary, without advancing fundamental theological refutations. In this vein, Sukidi (2009) characterizes Abu Zayd's approach as a form of humanistic hermeneutics that, by foregrounding the human dimensions of the interpretive process, creates space for a dynamic reading of the Qur'an. Sulaiman (2023) analyzes this approach as a move from textualism toward discourse-centered analysis, showing how Abu Zayd uses semiotics and hermeneutics to treat the Qur'an as a cultural product. Similarly, Naupal (2019) and Benmadi (2025), stressing Abu Zayd's indebtedness to the hermeneutical circle (Gadamerian tradition), show that his primary concern was to desacralize human readings and to reject interpretive certainties tied to literalist readings.

Second group of studies analyzes the ideas within discursive, ideological, and political conflicts, with a sociological-historical approach. They regard Abu Zayd's thought as a response to complex social, political, and discursive conditions in the Islamic world. Mufid et al. (2023) and Falyouna (2020), by examining the historical context of Egypt, interpret his theories as a reaction to the impasses of contemporary religious discourse and as an effort to overcome the decline of Muslims when faced with the European Renaissance. Mirzaei and Hossaini (2025) critique the historicity thesis sociologically, viewing it as a passive reaction aimed at adjusting religious heritage to modern values. From a more psychological angle, Movahedinia and Fadaei Mehrabani (2023) argue that Abu Zayd, facing the consequences of his theory, displayed a kind of prudential caution shaped by cognitive clichés. The common feature of this group is their focus on external (extra-textual) motivations rather than an ontological interrogation of the text itself.

The third orientation concentrates on epistemological, theological, and intratextual inconsistencies in Abu Zayd's theory. López-Farjeat (2024) demonstrates that the foundation of Abu Zayd's work is less Western than rooted in *Mu'tazilī kalām* concepts, Ibn 'Arabī's Sufism, and Shi'ī *ta'wīl*. Va'ezī (2010) issues a careful philosophical critique of internal inconsistencies in Abu Zayd's theory. Sa'dī and Niktab Eta'ati (2018) critique his reductive treatment of revelation as a written text by

emphasizing the spoken nature of revelation. Ma'aref and Shoja'i (2020) have argued that the consequences of his position invalidate certain subsidiary sciences of the Qur'an. From the standpoint of modern linguistics, Dahhan et al. (2025) have offered an intra-discursive critique of his hermeneutical process.

A comprehensive review of the above literature indicates that studies in the first and second categories mostly confine themselves to describing Abu Zayd's apparatus or analyzing its socio-historical origins, while those in the third category tend to adopt a predominantly negative stance, focused on refutation in theological, historical, or intra-discursive registers. The fundamental limitation and lacuna in this context is the absence of an affirmative, intra-textual alternative model, capable of elucidating textual dynamism while simultaneously preserving its sacred authenticity.

The innovation of this study lies in shifting the critique from contentual and theological refutation to a critique of linguistic and ontological structure. Contrary to prior studies that have been unable to apprehend the ontological dimensions of meaning or that have treated the *rūḥ al-ma'nā* (spirit of meaning) merely as an abstract philosophical topic, this research reinterprets the *rūḥ al-ma'nā* as a workable semantic model and a potent alternative designed to challenge Abu Zayd's linguistic presuppositions. This approach demonstrates how the historical knot tying word to meaning may be untied and offers a systematic framework to overcome the impasse of the *ma'nā/maghzā* binary without accepting the reductionism implicit in the historicity-of-the-text thesis. Accordingly, the central research question is formulated as follows: How does the *rūḥ al-ma'nā* theory, grounded in the ontological premises of Transcendent Philosophy, deconstruct the theoretical foundations of Abu Zayd's historicity-of-the-text and provide an alternative model for accounting for the dynamism of Qur'anic understanding?

3. Theoretical Framework

This section delineates the conceptual foundations of the study by contrasting two divergent hermeneutical paradigms. It situates the discourse within the tension between modern historical-linguistic approaches and the classical ontological perspectives of Islamic philosophy.

3.1. *The Dialectic of Historicity of The Text and Understanding in Abu Zayd's Thought*

The interpretive theory of Abu Zayd rests upon both the distinction and the intertwining of two spheres: the historicity of the text and the historicity of understanding. Abu Zayd's intellectual trajectory, shaped initially by modern reformist figures such as Sayyid Qutb and later consolidated through a critical rereading of the *Mu'tazilī* heritage and Ibn 'Arabī (notably in his *Risālah fī falsafah al-ta'wīl*), aims to move beyond traditional approaches and to offer a modern, linguistic reading of Qur'anic sciences (Majmū'ah min al-mu'allifin 2019).

On the first plane, textual historicity, Abu Zayd's central claim is that the Qur'an, as a linguistic text, was constituted within a determinate spatio-temporal setting (the twenty-three years of revelation) and in dialectical interaction with the cultural reality of its age (Abu Zayd 1998). By proposing a transition from "vertical revelation" to "horizontal revelation," he contends that the moment of revelation marks the transformation of divine discourse into human text. From this perspective, insisting on the Qur'an's eternal presence on the *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz* (Preserved Tablet) overlooks the communicative and human aspect of the text and reifies it as a supra-historical object, thereby precluding a scientific mode of understanding (Abu Zayd 1998).

To justify a worldly orientation toward the text, Abu Zayd clarifies that historicity here means occurrence in time and the distinction between absolute divine existence and existence contingent upon time (Abu Zayd 1995, 71). The epistemological consequence of this stance is a separation between *ma'nā* (meaning) and *maghzā* (significance): the text's *ma'nā* is the historical comprehension of the original addressees, frozen in time, whereas the *maghzā* or semantic import is fluid and dependent on contemporary readings (Ibn Fariḥa & Aḥmad, 2018, 66).

On the second plane, historicity of understanding, Abu Zayd, influenced by philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer), regards understanding as the product of the fusion of the text's horizon with the interpreter's historical horizon. Because the interpreter is always enclosed within the paradigms of her or his cultural moment, any reading inevitably bears ideological and historical coloration, and access to the authorial (divine) intent in a pure, objective form appears impossible (Va'ezī 2010). The ultimate outcome of this theoretical complex is a theory of the reproduction of signification. Abu Zayd (1994) argues that to contemporize the Qur'an one must move beyond authorial intentionality and attend to the text's intentionality and its

interaction with the reader. While this approach is proposed to achieve religious dynamism, it effectively reduces the text from a signifier of transcendental truth to a cultural product.

A critical analysis of Abu Zayd's theory reveals that his view rests on two problematic presuppositions: first, an ontological rupture between discourse and the speaker, which sidelines the serious intent of God; and second, the confinement of lexical denotation to the material referents of the period of revelation. In contrast, the present study, relying on the premises of Transcendent Philosophy and the theory of the coinage of words for the spirit of meaning, seeks to propose an alternative model. In this model, words such as *qalam* (pen) or *mizān* (scale) are not treated merely as cultural metaphors but are interpreted as symbols for abstract and supra-historical realities; an approach that, while preserving textual dynamism, prevents falling into the trap of historical relativism.

3.2. Ontological Premises and Explication of the Spirit of Meaning Theory

To address the limitations inherent in the historical-reductive model, this section elaborates on the metaphysical foundations of the spirit of meaning theory. It explores how this framework provides a robust alternative for reconciling textual dynamism with the preservation of sacred origins.

3.2.1. The Ontology of Language in the Transition from Validity to Truth

To precisely formulate the spirit of meaning theory and apply it to textual understanding, it is first necessary to examine the philosophical origins of this theory so as to clarify on what grounds and bases this perspective has been prevalent among Islamic philosophers and theosophical sages. The point of departure for this discussion is the movement from an instrumentalist view to an ontological view concerning language.

Within the paradigm of Transcendent Philosophy, although language at the level of everyday discourse displays conventional aspects, in final analysis it maintains an intimate linkage with ontological realities. This existential bond between lexical form and meaning is so deeply rooted in the thought of the philosophers that it is reflected even in accounts of how words are coined. Indeed, there exists a spectrum of opinions among Muslim sages who, despite differing over the agent of coinage, concur on the principle that language possesses the capacity to signify abstract realities.

At one end of this spectrum, philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā (1996, 2: 492) and Sabziwārī (1981, 429), adopting a maximalist stance, essentially regard the source of language as supra-human and identify God as the coiner of words. In this reading, coinage is not a social contract but the manifestation of the descent of meaning from the rank of the unseen to the realm of the visible. Accordingly, words are originally established for the abstract form and the higher reality; their application to material instances constitutes a kind of descent from truth to appearance. Qāḍī Saʿīd Qummī (1994, 2: 519), for example, maintains that the word *qalam* (pen) was initially coined for the intelligible, higher pen.

At the other pole, even thinkers such as Tabataba'i (1973, 10:447), who consider the source of lexical coinage to be social needs and convention, do not altogether foreclose an ontological reading. By introducing a teleological criterion for coinage, he argues that because the ground of naming is the purpose and end of a thing rather than its material form, words can be liberated from the cage of matter and be literally applied to abstract and immaterial instances. Similarly, Imam Khomeini (2002, 1:116), through a comprehensive approach, demonstrates that even if the coiner of terms is human, it does not contradict their signification of the spirit of meaning. He believes that terms are coined for general meanings; thus, even if the initial coiner was a non-divine individual unaware of abstract realities, the term coined (such as the term existence) still encompasses the higher ontological levels.

Therefore, regardless of whether the origin of language is deemed divine or human, the output of the philosophical system of Transcendent Philosophy is that language is gradational, and terms possess the capacity to carry metaphysical weight and signify trans-historical truths. This ontological foundation serves as the cornerstone of the theory of the spirit of meaning.

3.2.2. Ontological Correspondence of God and Creation in the Formation of Words

In the worldview of the Transcendent Philosophy, existence is founded upon the fundamental principle of the unity of existence (*waḥdah al-wujūd*), which entails perceiving unity within multiplicity and multiplicity within unity. This single metaphysical reality of existence manifests, in a descending procession from the Origin, as the multiplicity of the world, and in an ascending movement returns to that same single Origin. This movement traces a circular system, expressed in revealed discourse by the statements “*Indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him do we indeed return*” (Q. 2:156) and “*He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden*” (Q. 57:3).

Hasanzadeh Amoli (2004, 78) likens the relation of creatures to God to the relation of waves to the sea, stating: A divine wave rises from the sea, mingles with it, and escapes in it: “*Indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him do we indeed return*” (Q. 2:156). This course is cyclical because existence, in its ascents and descents, is circular: “*He directs the command from the heaven to the earth; then it ascends toward Him...*” (Q. 32:5) (Hasanzadeh Amoli 2006, 28). Sabziwārī (2011, 2: 666) compares this descending and ascending series to two arcs of a circle, whose ranks are distinct from one another. On this basis, all creatures are the divine words that share a common existential principle and, in accordance with the principle of gradation in being (*tashkīk fī al-wujūd*), possess degrees and ranks.

This foundational principle provides the ground for extending the ontological system of creatural words into the realm of human discourse, arising from the correspondence between human speech and the divine discourse. Mullā Ṣadrā (1987, 2: 367) holds that the perfected human is a comprehensive being (*al-kawn al-jāmi*) who embodies the form of divine knowledge and is a complete template of the outwardness of the visible realm and the inwardness of the unseen realm; since the verse “*So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit,...*” (Q. 15:29) and the narrative “*Indeed God created Adam upon His image*” (al-Kulaynī 2009, 1: 133-134) pertain to the relation of the infusion of the Merciful spirit into the human station.

Accordingly, just as creatures are the words of God, each aspect of a human being, manifested as speech, movement, or conduct, is likewise that person’s word. Man, like God, is a creator of words. As reported in the traditions: *Know that no word of the servants issues from the tongue except that God creates that word in the form of an angel. If the word is good, the angel is of the nature of mercy; if it is evil, the angel is of the nature of punishment* (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., 2: 639). This meaning is echoed in the verse “*he says no word but that there is a ready observer beside him*” (Q. 50:18), for every human utterance is envisaged as an entity that is recorded and realized within the order of being.

This system of unity-in-multiplicity extends to human words such that human speech, like the creatural words, possesses a single essence and spirit that manifests through multiple verbal forms; this is the ontological foundation of the spirit of meaning theory. Now, this unified identity appears across gradational ranks. Mullā Ṣadrā (1990, 7: 7–11) distinguishes three orders for human discourse corresponding to the worlds of existence: the highest/intellectual order (apprehension of pure meanings), the middle/imaginal order (the non-material forms), and the lowest/corporeal order

(manifestation in words and sounds). Linguistic convention, within this philosophical horizon, counts only as the lowest mode of the manifestation of meaning.

The relation between word and meaning is like that between body and soul (Mullā Ṣadrā 1990, 8: 6); the soul is the spirit of discourse and the word is its body. Discourse, like the human being, has both spirit and body. Just as the identity and individuality of the body belong to the soul rather than to its materiality (Mullā Ṣadrā 1990, 9: 190), the reality of discourse is not annihilated by the removal of the word; rather it ascends to the imaginal and then to the intellectual order. This existential continuity among the three ranks constitutes the spirit of meaning theory: a theory that emphasizes the existence of a unitary substantial essence of meaning which constitutes the singular identity of human discourse and whose continuity across ranks corresponds to the gradational system of the divine creatural words.

3.2.3. Existential Unity of Discourse and the Discursing One

According to the premises of Transcendent Philosophy, just as the world is the Word of God and He creates beings through speech, so too is the human, by virtue of being a comprehensive being, the creator of his own words. In this perspective, human words are manifestations of the essence and perfections of the speaker, and their existence is united with the existence of the discursing one. Hasanzadeh Amoli (2006, 249) states that every effect is the manifestation of the possessor's being and perfections. This existential bond entirely rejects the modern linguistic doctrine of the death of the author (e.g., Barthes 2007), which posits the dissolution of the author within the text, because separating a work from its possessor is like separating the manifestation from the manifested, an impossibility. The Qur'anic verse "*Whoever acts righteously, it is for his own soul*" (Q. 41:46) also supports the view that every utterance (word) reflects the truth of the human self and that no real separation can be made between them.

On this basis of unity, discourse, like its author, possesses levels, and its semantic range is precisely dependent on the existential expanse of the discursing subject. Human discourse, although bearing a single identity, appears across gradational orders (material, imaginal, intellectual). Mullā Ṣadrā (1989, 8: 6) likens the relation of word and meaning to that of body and soul. The key point is that if the author exists only at the material level, his discourse will be confined to that level; but if the speaker has traversed the material, imaginal, intellectual, and divine ranks, his speech, by virtue of the principle of union, will likewise encompass all these ranks and possess an infinite longitudinal series of meanings.

Hence, the Qur'an as divine discourse is the reflection of its speaker. Because God and His vicegerent (the Prophet) possess supreme and inexhaustible ranks, their discourse likewise has a single spirit with innumerable levels. According to the spirit of meaning theory, a word in this discourse extends to all its longitudinal and lateral referents, and the true meaning flows through every ontological rank, from the world of matter to the divine realms. Mullā Ṣadrā (1989, 7: 4) depicts this unity further by asserting that the words of God, and consequently human words, stand in an emanative relation: creatures that come into being from God are signs of the unseen, and by their emergence they unveil what is hidden and interior. Consequently, the whole world is a sign and token; the purpose of their creation is to declare and disclose the unseen. Just as discourse reveals the hidden inner state of its speaker and is a sign of what is within the speaker, so too is the world of creation a sign of what is beyond and within the unseen. Therefore the entire universe consists of divine words that stand by God, and their standing is an emanative standing. The same holds for human discourse (Khomeini 2002, 2: 348).

3.2.4. *The Theory of the Spirit of Meaning*

In order to offer a fundamental critique of the historicist approach of Abu Zayd, it is necessary to articulate with precision the theoretical framework adopted in this study, namely the theory of the spirit of meaning (*rūḥ al-ma'nā*). Within this perspective, the spirit of meaning is conceived as a single essence and unified reality that, independent of material determinations, manifests itself in diverse verbal and non-verbal forms. The roots of this view can be clearly traced in the works of al-Ghazālī (2004, 1: 284), where he states in a profound analogy: just as everybody has a spirit that does not remain with it, the meaning of letters is like the spirit, and the letters are like the body. The nobility of the body is due to the spirit, and the nobility of letters is due to the spirit of meanings.

After him, major figures of Islamic philosophy and mysticism such as Mullā Ṣadrā, Fayḍ Kāshānī, and Tabataba'i brought this theory to its culmination. Transcending the superficial level of language and conventional usage, Mullā Ṣadrā (1984, 91-92) emphasizes that a word is posited for an absolute meaning that encompasses all intellectual and sensory meanings... People, due to their habituation to perceiving certain of these particular features, confine the application of the word to those familiar characteristics and remain unaware of other meanings; thereafter, they judge that usage beyond these is metaphorical. To clarify this point, he introduces the key example of the term *mīzān*, asserting that *mīzān* applies to the spirit of its meaning, namely, anything by which measurement can be

made, whether sensory or intellectual. Accordingly, transformations in the form of measuring instruments over time (from balance scales to digital or even intellectual measures) do not affect the applicability of the term *mīzān*, since the word is designated for that end and essential reality, not for its material form. In continuity with this perspective, Hasanzadeh Amoli (2006, 349) formulates a general principle, stating: Words have been posited for meanings in their most general sense.

3.2.5. Causal (*Limmī*) Methodology of Textual Understanding Based on the Gradation (*Tashkīk*) of Meaning

The theory of the spirit of meaning is not merely an abstract philosophical foundation; rather, it offers a precise interpretive methodology for understanding the Qur'an. According to the methodology derived from this theory, the path of cognition begins with apprehending the true reality of a word's meaning. In this process, the exegete first arrives at the intellectual meaning of the term, namely, a general and universal meaning that is inclusive of all instances and exclusive of what falls outside it. This general meaning, like a spirit, flows through all usages and derivatives of the word and constitutes the central axis of understanding.

This process corresponds precisely to the *limmī* demonstration (*al-burhān al-limmī*) in philosophy, that is, the movement from cause to effect. In other words, knowledge is first attained of the principle and reality of the word's meaning (the spirit of meaning), and only then does one descend to its verbal structure, evaluating linguistic levels in accordance with that central meaning. Within this framework, contrary to the view of Abu Zayd, who regards meaning as dependent on historical context, the central meaning never changes in accordance with circumstances or temporal developments; rather, it is the instances that undergo change. Consequently, phenomena such as unregulated synonymy or the ellipsis/addition of meaning have no place in this method, since every word bears its own unique spirit of meaning.

This capacity for multiplicity within the unity of truth is precisely the feature referred to in Islamic narrations as the Qur'an possessing multiple inner layers (*dhū buṭūn*), as reported by al-Majlisī (1982, 33: 155). This characteristic establishes the legitimacy of both longitudinal and lateral multiplicity of meaning in light of a single, unifying meaning, a relation that, in *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, is termed the application of a homonymy term to all its meanings (*ḥaml al-laḥẓ al-mushtarak 'alā jamī' ma 'ānīhi*) (Tayyib Hosseini 2009, 188).

Accordingly, a term in divine discourse extends, along both longitudinal

and lateral axes, to all its material and immaterial instances. The true meaning (the spirit of meaning) thus permeates all ontological levels, from the material world to the imaginal (*'ālam al-mithāl*) and intellectual realms (*'ālam al-'aql*), without engendering contradiction.

4. *Critical Analysis of the Historicist Approach*

Following the explication of the ontological and methodological foundations of the theory of the spirit of meaning in the preceding sections, and the demonstration that divine discourse possesses gradational levels and a fluid spirit unfolding across time, the ground is now prepared to assess the validity of the historicist approach to the text. Abu Zayd, by emphasizing the human and historical dimensions of the Qur'an, seeks to conventionalize textual understanding, an approach that stands in fundamental tension with the principles of semantic realism and the ontological unity of speech and speaker. In this section, Abu Zayd's principal claims across four domains, essence, meaning, existence, and teleology, will be critically examined in light of the theory of the spirit of meaning.

4.1. *Essentialist Critique: The Essential Impossibility of Reducing Revelation to a Cultural Product*

The point of departure for Abu Zayd's analysis of the nature of the Qur'an is its definition as a *cultural product*. In this reading, the Qur'anic text is the outcome of social, political, and linguistic forces operative in the Arabian Peninsula. From the standpoint of the ontological foundations of the theory of the spirit of meaning, this sociological perspective encounters two essential challenges:

4.1.1. *The Problem of Extending the Model of Production to Manifestation*

The claim that the Qur'an is a "product" rests on a methodological error that is the unwarranted generalization of a single explanatory model and the neglect of ontological gradation. From the perspective of Transcendent Philosophy, every text is a manifestation of the ontological level of its author. On this basis, a distinction can be drawn between two general types of text:

- **Productive Text:** When the author is a human being whose existence is fully circumscribed by the material world and historical-social conditions, the text is likewise a *product* of those conditions. Here, the

text is the outcome of external forces, and Abu Zayd's sociological analysis proves entirely effective for this category.

- **Manifestational Text:** When the author transcends material levels and attains higher realms of knowledge and being (as in the case of prophets and saints), the text is no longer merely a product; rather, it is a manifestation of transcendent truths that appear within the form of words.

The Qur'an, as divine speech, represents the highest degree of manifestational text, originating from the eternal knowledge of God. Abu Zayd's methodological error lies precisely here. By disregarding this ontological distinction, he extends the model of production, valid only for the lowest level of texts, to the highest level, namely divine discourse. This results in a conflation of the efficient cause (God) with the material conditions of emergence (the culture of the time).

4.1.2. The Ontological Distinction between the Context and the Factor of Origination

The most fundamental critique of the *cultural product* thesis lies in its failure to distinguish between container and content. Abu Zayd regards Arabic language and culture as constitutive and formative of the content of the text. However, according to *Transcendent Philosophy*, the culture of the time merely serves as the context/container of revelation. The relationship between revelation and culture may be likened to that between water and a vessel: when water (the revelatory content) is poured into a jug (Arabic language and culture), it assumes the shape of the container, yet its essence remains water and it does not become clay. The culture of the time functioned only as the medium within which the trans-historical truth of the Qur'an assumed verbal form.

One might object, on the basis of modern linguistics, that language is never a neutral container but actively shapes content. In response, it must be said that while this claim holds for human language, inasmuch as it is itself a product of cultural evolution, it does not apply to divine speech. In this case, it is the *content* (the eternal, pre-existent knowledge of God) that is primary, transcendent, and ontologically fundamental, while the *container* (Arabic language) is selected and employed to express that higher truth.

Thus, the relationship is reversed: it is the divine content that shapes and instrumentalizes the linguistic medium in accordance with its purposes, rather than being determined by it. Consequently, the presence of Arabic linguistic features does not justify the conclusion that the essence and content of the Qur'an are products of that culture. What Abu Zayd perceives is merely the container; he remains inattentive to the content, which is divine and trans-historical.

4.2. *Ontological Critique: The Ontological Impossibility of Separating the Text from the Speaker's Reality*

The fundamental error in Abu Zayd's position becomes even more evident at the level of ontology. In the course of humanizing revelation, Abu Zayd maintains that the Qur'anic text, at the moment of its descent and its articulation in human language, becomes detached from its speaker (God) and acquires an independent, human identity. He describes this process as humanization, asserting that once revealed, the text is governed by human laws and that the metaphysical sanctity of the speaker plays no role in textual analysis. This view, aptly described as the secularization of the text, encounters an intellectual impossibility when examined through the ontological principle of the unity of speech and speaker.

The foundational error in separating the text from the speaker lies in a mechanistic conception of speech. Abu Zayd implicitly treats discourse as a physical object, like a structure erected by an architect and subsequently abandoned, such that, once produced, it possesses an existence independent of its maker. However, as demonstrated in earlier discussions drawing upon Transcendent Philosophy, the relation of speech to the speaker is one of emanational subsistence. Speech is an act and a mode of the speaker's being; its existence is identical with dependence and relation to its agent (Mullā Ṣadrā 1975, 264).

Just as a ray of sunlight has neither meaning nor existence even for a moment without its connection to the sun, divine speech cannot be severed, even instantaneously, from the sustaining presence of the Speaker (God). Therefore, Abu Zayd's claim regarding the independence of the text after revelation entails the impossible assumption of an effect existing without its cause, or an act persisting without an agent.

A necessary consequence of this ontological unity is that the existential attributes of the speaker permeate the speech. If the speaker is living (*al-ḥayy*), knowing (*al-ʿalīm*), and holy (*al-quddūs*), then the speech is likewise a living, conscious, and sacred manifestation. Abu Zayd's attempt to strip the text of its sanctity and reduce it to a purely literary and historical phenomenon amounts to disregarding the text's existential connection to an inexhaustible divine source.

By virtue of this ontological connection, the Qur'an remains perpetually the speech of God and never undergoes an essential transformation into human discourse. Its descent into the form of Arabic language represents only its manifestation within the material realm, not a transformation of its

essence. Hence, contrary to Abu Zayd's claim, the Qur'anic text in every time and place continues to bear the presence and sanctity of the Speaker. A proper understanding of it is therefore impossible without attention to this existential attribution, which entails purity and sanctity.

One might argue that this critique conflates Abu Zayd's claim (the human character of the text) with the presupposition of this study (its divine character). However, the subtle point is that even if, following Abu Zayd's premise, the Prophet is regarded as the agent of the text, the principles of Şadrian anthropology maintain that the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), in the arc of ascent (*qaws al-şu'ūd*), attains a level of being at which his acts (including speech) are manifestations of immaterial realities. Thus, even under the assumption of human authorship, a text issuing from such a being cannot be confined within the limits of time and space.

4.3. Semantic Critique: The Incompatibility of the Historicity of the text with the Principle of the Absoluteness of Meaning

A further challenge in the approach of Abu Zayd lies in the confinement of meaning within the bounds of history. By distinguishing between meaning (the historical signification of the text) and *maghzā* (its contemporary significance), Abu Zayd argues that the meaning of the Qur'anic text is identical to what its seventh-century audience understood, and that this meaning is fixed within that historical horizon. This historicization of meaning, resulting from the reduction of a word's general concept to its salient instance at the time of revelation, stands in clear tension with the semantic principle that words are designated for the spirit of meaning.

4.3.1. Incompatibility with the Immateriality of Speech and the Ontological Levels of Meaning

Another fundamental problem in Abu Zayd's theory is the neglect of the ontological levels of speech and the restriction of attention to its material layer. By focusing exclusively on the verbal and human dimension of revelation, he extends the assumption of materiality, and thus temporality, to the entirety of the Qur'an's identity. His underlying assumption is that because words are historically situated, meaning itself must be historically confined. However, according to Transcendent Philosophy, such historical restriction would only hold if words were designated for matter and particular instances, since matter is subject to motion, decay, and change. Yet, as established earlier, the reality of divine speech possesses longitudinal

ontological levels and is rooted in the intellectual realm and the *Umm al-Kitāb* (*the Mother Book*). Mullā Ṣadrā (1989, 1: 300) explicitly states that imaginal and intellectual realities are free from the properties of matter, such as motion, time, and space.

Likewise, Tabataba'i (1973, 18: 84), citing the verses “*We have made it an Arabic Qur'an so that you may apply reason and indeed it is with Us in the Mother Book [and it is] surely sublime and wise*” (Q. 43:3–4), emphasizes that the pre-verbal reality of the Qur'an transcends language and is free from temporal limitation. This immaterial reality is precisely the spirit of meaning. By distinguishing between the container of manifestation (Arabic language and historical culture) and the reality of the content (*rūḥ al-ma'nā*), the theory of the spirit of meaning demonstrates that what Abu Zayd calls the historicity of the text pertains only to the outer shell, the body of words. Although the Qur'an was revealed in the linguistic form of a particular historical period, its reference to the spirit of meaning, being immaterial and trans-historical, endows it with perpetual applicability.

4.3.2. *Refutation Based on the Mechanism of the Designation of Words for General Meanings*

A direct consequence of Abu Zayd's approach is the historicity of meaning itself. While his concern for rendering religious understanding contemporaneous and avoiding intellectual stagnation is understandable, his proposed mechanism, namely, separating a historically fixed meaning from a fluid, contemporary *maghẓā*, deprives meaning itself of vitality and transfers dynamism to the mind of the interpreter.

In contrast, the theory of the spirit of meaning, grounded in the principle that words are designated for general meanings, provides an intrinsic and authentic mechanism for semantic dynamism. Abu Zayd's fundamental error lies in conflating the salient instance at the time of revelation with the general meaning of the word. He mistakenly assumes that words were designated for the particular, material instances of their historical context.

Within this alternative framework, semantic dynamism is explained through longitudinal layers, including: the universal end or governing spirit, which constitutes the trans-historical purpose of the verse; the general meaning of the word, which is the true, comprehensive meaning for which the term is designated; and the salient historical instance, which represents only one concrete manifestation of that general meaning for the initial audience. For example, in the verse: “*Prepare against them whatever you can of [military] power and war-horses...*” (Q 8:60), the universal end is deterrence and defensive preparedness; the general meaning of *quwwah*

(power) includes any capacity or instrument that realizes this aim; the general meaning of *ribāṭ al-khayl* is not limited to warhorses but extends to the preparation of any rapid and strategic means of mobility; while the salient instance in that historical context consisted of trained warhorses. Thus, applying *ribāṭ al-khayl* to tanks or fighter jets is not the production of a new *maghzā*, but rather the discovery of the scope of the original general meaning. Another example is the concepts of *lawḥ* (tablet) and *qalam* (pen) in functional rather than material terms: whatever serves as an instrument of inscription is a *qalam*, and whatever receives inscription is a *lawḥ*, both possessing material and immaterial levels (Hasanzadeh Amoli 2006, 350).

Since these general meanings (the spirit of meaning) are immaterial and trans-historical realities, they are never subject to historical expiration. The transformation of salient instances over time is not evidence of the death of meaning, but rather proof of its extensiveness and absoluteness. In this way, the theory of the spirit of meaning dismantles the alleged historical fixity proposed by Abu Zayd and demonstrates that divine discourse is inherently dynamic and living, without any need for the artificial bifurcation between a “dead” meaning and a “living” *maghzā*.

4.4. Methodological Critique: The Inadequacy of Horizontal Reading in Uncovering the Teleology of the Text

The final, and perhaps most tangible, challenge in the theory of Abu Zayd emerges at the level of method. His proposed approach may be described as a *horizontal reading*, meaning that the interpreter, in seeking to understand the text, operates solely within the plane of relations between the text and the socio-historical reality of the time of revelation. Within this framework, the signifiers of the text refer exclusively to signifieds embedded in the cultural and social milieu of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia. The interpretive trajectory thus becomes a horizontal line connecting words to historical events. Such a method confines the interpreter within the prison of linguistic forms and historical context, which function merely as the outer shell of the text. By insisting that the text is the product of a dialectic with historical reality, Abu Zayd directs interpretive effort toward analyzing this outer layer, namely, the occasion of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and the culture of the time.

This horizontal approach, however, is fundamentally at odds with the very aim of interpretation, precisely because of its inability to transcend the surface level. In contrast, the proper method of interpretation, grounded in the theory of the spirit of meaning, is vertical and ascending. Just as realities descend from the realm of abstraction and universality into the domain of

language and multiplicity, true understanding requires a reverse movement, an ascent from words toward the spirit of meaning. Only through such a movement can the interpreter pass beyond the shell and penetrate into the core of discourse, which consists of trans-historical truths. This is precisely what Abu Zayd's horizontal method and his insufficient account of extracting *maghzā* fails to achieve.

Moreover, the ultimate goal of interpretation is to uncover the intended meaning of the speaker. Within the theory of the spirit of meaning, words are designated for the spirit of meaning, and the divine intent consists in conveying universal, guiding truths that find realization in every age. By contrast, Abu Zayd's method, by binding meaning to a specific historical context, effectively substitutes the literal meaning that is, the meaning understood at the moment of revelation, for the enduring and ultimate intent of the discourse.

This methodological deficiency results in reducing the Qur'an, in Abu Zayd's reading, to a mere historical document that reports the concerns of the seventh century, rather than a text bearing a living message for contemporary humanity. The horizontal method, lacking a ladder for ascent from the outward to the inward, is thus incapable of attaining the teleological depth of divine discourse. In summary, the historicist approach, by severing the ontological connection between text and speaker, freezing meaning within historical confines, and adopting a one-dimensional, horizontal method, ultimately fails to access the living and eternal message of the Qur'an, which constitutes the very purpose of its revelation and interpretation.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the theory of the spirit of meaning (*rūḥ al-ma'nā*) invites a re-evaluation of Abu Zayd's approach across several foundational domains:

At the ontological level: By relying on the principle of emanational subsistence of the act with respect to its agent, this theory refutes Abu Zayd's central presupposition regarding the existential independence of the text after revelation. From the perspective of Transcendent Philosophy, divine speech exists in a state of essential dependence upon its agent; its separation from the source of divine life and knowledge entails an intellectual impossibility (the persistence of an effect without its cause). Consequently, reducing the Qur'an to a mere cultural product is incompatible with these metaphysical foundations, since the text at every

moment remains a manifestation of the presence and sustaining power of the eternal Speaker.

At the semantic level: The theory of the spirit of meaning, by drawing a precise distinction between the universal spirit of meaning (an immaterial and trans-historical reality) and its instances and manifestations in history, exposes Abu Zayd's error in equating meaning with its historical instance at the time of revelation. Within this framework, the dynamism of the text is not achieved through attaching a fluid and external *maghzā* to a fixed historical meaning; rather, it arises from the infinite capacity of the spirit of meaning to apply to new instances across time. This ensures both the stability of divine meaning and the flexibility of interpretation.

At the methodological level: In contrast to Abu Zayd's horizontal reading, which confines the interpreter to the plane of text–history relations, this study advances a vertical model of interpretation. In this method, genuine understanding requires an ascending movement from the body of the word to the spirit of meaning in higher ontological realms. Having apprehended that universal reality, the interpreter can then return to the historical domain and apply it to contemporary instances. Unlike Abu Zayd's approach, which substitutes literal meaning for intended meaning, this method opens the way to uncovering the enduring and teleological purpose of divine discourse.

In conclusion, Transcendent Philosophy, through the theory of the spirit of meaning, provides a coherent and philosophically robust framework for understanding revelation, one that avoids both the pitfalls of historical relativism and rigid literalism, and instead enables a living, profound, and responsible engagement with divine speech across all ages.

Declarations

Funding: No funding was received for conducting this study.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no competing interests.

References

- Abu Zayd, N. H. (1994). *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī*. Cairo: Sīnā lil-Nashr.
- Abu Zayd, N. H. (1995). *Al-Naṣṣ, al-sulṭah, al-ḥaqīqah: al-fikr al-dīnī bayna irādāt al-ma'rīfah wa irādāt al-haymanah*. Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī.
- Abu Zayd, N. H. (1998). *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ: dirāsah fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī.
- Al-Ghazālī, M. (2004). *Kīmīyā-yi sa'ādāt* (H. Khadivjam, Ed.). Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications.
- Al-Kulaynī, M. (2009). *Uṣūl al-kāfī*. Tehran: Islāmiyyah.
- Al-Majlisī, M. B. (1982). *Bihār al-anwār al-jāmi'a li-durar akhbār al-'immah al-aṭhār*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
- Barthes, R. (2007). *Mythologies* (Trans. Daqiqyan). Tehran: Nashre Markaz.
- Benmadi F. Z. (2025). The Premises and Outcomes of Textual Interpretation in the Thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(8), 696-702. <https://doi.org/10.56352/sci/8.8.63>
- Dahhan, Z., Parvini, K., and Motaghizadeh, I. (2025). Analyzing the Historicity of Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd in the Textual Interpretation Process based on the Use of Grammatical Mood in Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar: A Study of Surah Al-Anfal. *Literary Quranic Researches*, 11(4), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.22034/paq.2024.2035065.3873>
- Falyouna, N. (2020). Analytical study on Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's understanding of religious texts in Islam. *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, 15(2), 45-55. <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol15no2.4>
- Hasanzadeh Amoli, H. (2006). *Ten Persian essay* (in Persian). Qom: Alif Lām Mīm.
- Hasanzadeh Amoli, H. (2007). *A hundred words on the cognition of nafs* (in Persian). Qom: Alif Lām Mīm.
- Ibn 'Arabī, M. (n.d.). *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir.
- Ibn Farīḥah, A. (2018). *Ishkāliyyat qirā'at al-Qur'ān fī ḍaw' al-tārīkhiyyah 'inda Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd*. *Majallah al-Tadwīn*, University of Oran 2.
- Khomeini, R. (2002). *Taqrīrāt falsafah Imām Khomeini: Sharḥ al-manzūmah* (in Persian). (M. M. Ardabīlī, Ed.). Tehran: Institute for Compilation & Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works.
- López-Farjeat, L. X. (2024). Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's Use of Classical Theological and Philosophical Islamic Sources in His Qur'ānic Hermeneutics. *FILOZOFIA*, 79(8), 892–906. <https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2024.79.8.4>

- Ma'aref, M., and Shoja'i, R. (2020). A Critique of Abu Zayd's View on Naskh and its Relation to the Historicity of the Quran. *Pazhouhesh Name-ye Quran va Hadith*, 14(27), 235-256.
- Majmū'ah min al-mu'allifin. (2019). *Nasr Hāmid Abū Zayd: dirāsah al-naẓariyyāt wa naqdihā*. Iraq: al-'Atabah al-'Abbāsiyyah, Islamic Center for Strategic Studies.
- Mirzaei, M. A. and Hossaini, S. R. (2025). A Critical Review of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's View on the Challenge of Tradition and Modernity. *Interdisciplinary Studies of Quran & Hadith*, 2(3), 433-460. <https://doi.org/10.30497/isqh.2025.248997.1064>
- Movahedinia, M. and Fadaei Mehrabani, M. (2023). Expedient Historicity; a Critique of the Thought and Opinions of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohammed Arkoun. *Islamic Political Studies*, 5(2), 189-216. <https://doi.org/10.22081/jips.2023.75469>
- Mufid, A., Massoweang, A. K., Mujizatullah, M., Muslim, A., & Yani, Z. (2023). Rereading Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's method of interpreting religious texts. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 79(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8102>
- Mullā Ṣadrā, M. (1975). *Al-mabda' wa al-ma'ād*. Tehran: Iranian Institute of Philosophy.
- Mullā Ṣadrā, M. (1984). *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*. Tehran: Institute for Cultural Studies in Philosophy.
- Mullā Ṣadrā, M. (1987). *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*. Qom: Bīdār.
- Mullā Ṣadrā, M. (1989). *Al-ḥikmah al-muta'āliyah fī al-asfār al-arba'ah*. Qom: Maktabat al-Muṣṭafawī.
- Mullā Ṣadrā, M. (1996). *Al-shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah fī al-manāhij al-sulūkiyyah*. Beirut: Arab History Foundation.
- Naupal, N. (2019). The Criticism of Literalism in Reading the Qur'an through Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd hermeneutics. *International Review of Humanities Studies*.
- Qāḍī Sa'īd Qummī, M. (1994). *Sharḥ tawḥīd al-Ṣadūq* (N. Ḥabībī, Ed.). Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.
- Qarai, A. Q. (2004). *Translation of the Holy Qur'an*. London: ICAS.
- Sabziwārī, H. (1981). *Maḥāṭib al-uṣūl*. Qom: Imam Khomeini Educational & Research Institute.
- Sabziwārī, H. (2011). *Sharḥ al-manzūmah*. Tehran: Nashre Nāb.
- Sa'di A, and Niktab Eta'ati, S. (2018). A Critical Study of Nasr Hamed Abu Zeyd's View of Historicity of the Quran with an Emphasis on Verbality of Divine Revelation. *ANDISHE-NOVIN-E-DINI A Quarterly Research*. 13(51), 73-88.