Book: The Polished Mirror

THE POLISHED MIRROR

Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism

CYRUS ALI ZARGAR
“The Polished Mirror is the perfect title for Zargar’s erudite and eloquent book, for it reflects with superb analytical clarity the views of a wide range of thinkers on the subject of ethics. Justifiably going beyond writings that explicitly deal with the topic, he draws together various strands of Islamic tradition, clarifying both the links and similarities that join them and the distinctions that separate them. A major contribution to Islamic studies, from which both established scholars and those new to the field stand to gain significantly.”

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The Polished Mirror

Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism

Cyrus Ali Zargar
For Shirin

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INTRODUCTION

This book introduces its readers to a selection of thinkers whose insights about achieving ultimate happiness (saʿāda) still affect Islamic thought today. They wrote during a very important period in premodern Islam, from around the year 900 CE to around the year 1300. The book’s focus is ethics, especially a branch of normative ethics that might be called “virtue ethics,” considered the pathway to ultimate happiness. While these thinkers usually wrote treatises in discursive prose outlining their arguments and reflections on character, they also engaged in storytelling, especially where virtue was concerned.

THE MEANING OF “ETHICS”

When we, as English speakers, say “ethics,” we mean moral philosophy. At the most abstract level, that of meta-ethics, the study of ethics considers the philosophical underpinnings of morality itself. At a less abstract level, that of normative ethics, ethics becomes about how we might determine right from wrong. Those studying normative ethics consider guidelines, principles, and even rules by which humans ought to regulate actions. At the least abstract level, applied ethics, ethics becomes a tool to judge specific moral issues, such as gun control, sexual behavior, killing, and the like.

To single out “ethics” as a field of study in Islam would be a daunting task, because almost every branch of Islamic learning has some relationship with ethics as defined above. Those who study scripture, law, theology, and philosophy take an interest in ethics, each with its own approach and specialization. One branch of learning called ʿilm al-akhlāq (“the science of character traits”) has a special relationship with the word “ethics.” The key term here (akhlāq), translated as “character traits,” came to be associated with a science of refining those traits, much as the word “ethics” comes from the Greek word ēthos, which signifies a disposition of character. The term appears in its singular form (khuluq or khulq) in a verse of the Qurʾan describing the Prophet Muhammad’s “tremendous character” (Q 68:4). It also appears in a famous saying of Muhammad, “I was delegated as a prophet for nothing other than the perfection of righteous [or noble] character traits.” As this saying might be interpreted, Muhammad (d. 632 CE) — whom Muslims generally believe to be a divinely sent messenger and a personification of human virtue — was commissioned to help human beings reach their full potential in two related ways: through proper decisions about right and wrong actions and through the cultivation of noble character traits, which occurs by means of a proper moral outlook, good habits, and knowledge and awareness of God. In order to accomplish this, over centuries, many sciences developed.

ETHICS IN THEOLOGY

The debate over the nature of the good began early on in Islamic theology (kalām) as one topic among others that were grounds for disagreement. One group, the Muʿtazila, held that God is just and that God’s actions can be held to a standard of justice. Theirs was a clear answer to one of the most important longstanding questions in ethics, once famously asked by Socrates, “Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?” From a monotheistic perspective, the question was more accurately, “Is there an objective reality to actions that are good, or is ‘the good’ that which God decrees to be good?” This question is important because it sets up a divide between ethical objectivism and ethical subjectivism. Objectivists hold that actions have real ethical properties, and they will often argue that the intellect has some independent access to those properties. The second group, namely, the theistic subjectivists, locate morality in the determinations of God. They hold that actions do not have real ethical properties, so that humans know the good by referring to a judge, God, who determines good and bad without reference to a standard outside of His will.
The Muʿtazila, ethical objectivists, argued (more or less) that the good is loved and commanded by God because it is good. Eventually a member of that group, Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Ali ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī (d. 936), reversed his opinion: The good is good because it is loved and commanded by God. A third major point of view—espoused by Abū Manṣūr Muhammad al-Samarqandī al-Māturīdī (d. ca. 944)—fits between that of the Muʿtazila and that of the school of al-Ashʿarī (the Ashʿarīs, or the Ashāʿira). He recognized the human’s ability to know the good through reason, though such recognition was limited to obvious acts of good and obvious acts of bad, and only insofar as indicated by revelation. Some other scholars had “traditionalist” inclinations, in that they sought answers to such questions primarily in the Qurʾan and the Hadith (ḥadīth, plural aḥādīth)—that is, the recorded sayings and deeds of Muhammad, which are sometimes called “traditions” or “narrations.” They questioned and sometimes even rejected the endeavors of theologians to determine morality using the tools of reason. Of particular relevance are the arguments of the Ḥanbalī scholar Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).5 His dual interests in challenging the rational methods of his time and rediscovering the interpretations of the earliest generations of Islam (the salaf) have resonated widely in modern Islamic thought, despite a lack of original scholarly interest in his writings.

Sunni Muslims today tend to belong predominately to the Ashʿarī school, or to the Māturīdī school, or to a traditionalist propensity to avoid theological schools while acknowledging God’s mastery over human actions. Muʿtazī fiqh theology lives on not so much as an independent school but rather as it was adapted into Shiʿī (Shiʿi) theology, buttressed by the study of philosophy among Shiʿī scholars, and brought into line with the teachings of the Shiʿī imams. When it came to normative ethics, all camps had an interest in scripture (the Qurʾan and the Hadith) and in that form of law that was derived from scripture, even the rationalizing Muʿtazila.6

ETHICS IN JURISPRUDENCE AND POSITIVE LAW

While theologically driven ethical debates were important, most preeminent among the moral sciences historically have been those that have been called “jurisprudence” and “positive law,” which reached maturity in the form of legal schools by the tenth century.7 Jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh) describes the basic hermeneutical principles by which a scholar might know God’s commands and discern thereby the moral standing of all human acts. Through jurisprudence, the scholar can interpret scripture, that is, the Qurʾan and the Hadith, to establish that which is obligatory (wājib), recommended (mandūb), morally indifferent (mubāḥ), discouraged (makrūḥ), and prohibited (ḥarām).8 The product of jurisprudence—Islamic positive law (fiqh)—applies jurisprudence to specific situations, creating rules that can claim to be the most justified solution available.9 Like ʿilm al-akhlaq, these sciences cannot be separated from ethics. Mohammad Fadel, for example, argues that jurisprudence should in fact be called “moral theology” or “religious ethics,” because it is most essentially a science focused on how one knows the good.10 There has been a countervailing tendency among many Muslim thinkers, past and present, to see scholars of the Islamic legal sciences as advocates of rules and rituals devoid of ethical depth. This is a mistake, but it is not without cause.

That legal sciences might be seen as separate from ethics is perhaps best displayed by an example. The Spanish Muslim poet Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Quzmān (d. 1160) describes a time when he (or, more accurately, the antiheroic persona of his poems) was in a bind. Having seduced with some difficulty his neighbor’s wife, and having brought her into his home, he realized that he had no blanket. So, he left her there and went to the home of a religious scholar, a grammarian with knowledge of the Hadith who is the subject of this “panegyric” poem, a poem so imbued with irony that it resembles more of a roast than a tribute. The poet goes at night to the grammarian’s door, and the grammanian responds generously:

He said, “So what’s up? You’ve actually been on my mind.”

I said to him, “My brother, this-and-that’s happened to me.”

He said, “What’s the whole story to me? What’s it matter?
Permissible (ḥalāl) in this are my silver and gold.

What a woman, o chums, in my neighborhood lives!

Now, how do I approach her, when her husband’s my neighbor?

Go, my friend, for I’ll send you a blanket and more.

Go, and don’t stumble—except into a cushion!”

This, o my brother, is the core of nobility!

Do you see how he sensed just how needy I was?

What a woman, o chums, in my neighborhood lives!

Now, how do I approach her, when her husband’s my neighbor?11

The refrain (in italics) highlights the irony of the situation: The persona’s intentions are absolutely clear—and absolutely vile—yet the grammarian knows his Islamic law well enough to justify helping his friend. As long as he remains uninformed about the details (“What’s the whole story to me?”), especially as long as he remains uninformed about the express purposes for which the blanket will be used, he can technically provide a blanket to his friend, an aspiring adulterer. As long as one does not expressly know that one’s assistance will be used for forbidden purposes, then one can assume the best.12 It seems that once lines of moral action exist, however sensible, some will perform careful maneuvers on and between those lines, finding loopholes. The grammarian’s narrow interpretation of law satirizes a larger social situation in Ibn Quzmān’s homeland of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain).13 The abuse of legal interpretation, through loopholes or fixation on ritual without concern for applications to the life of the soul, troubled many Muslim thinkers, from the Brethren of Purity and Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī (both discussed in this book), to Wafī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406).14 This sort of ostensibly amoral legalism, shared by other religious traditions, continues to be a matter of concern today. It is a phenomenon that sociologist of religion Thomas O’Dea has called the “dilemma of delimitation.”15

It would be shortsighted, however, to see legalism—that is, concern with the boundaries of divine commands seemingly disconnected from spiritual and ethical significance—as endemic of the entire pursuit of studying God’s law. Rather, legalism devoid of spiritual significance is a trend that often saw its corrective in Muslim societies. Most famously, Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī’s (d. 1111) *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*) aimed to revive the Islamic sciences by changing the way people thought about the formulae of life that God has revealed to humans. In the hands of the legal scholars of Ghazālī’s day, God’s commands had become tools of power and governance, by which such jurists pleased rulers and enjoyed their patronage.16 Legal scholars suffered from “hypocrisy” and were scholars merely of a “worldly” sort of knowledge, as opposed to that of the next world.17 The legal scholar or jurist (*faqīh*) mainly existed to support the ruler’s attempts to govern and manage people, a pursuit only accidentally related to religion.18 Religion for Ghazālī is essentially a means to find felicity in the hereafter, and that which directly benefits a person in that regard is “the lights of hearts, their secrets, and their sincere dedication” to God, “none of which falls within the expertise of the jurist.”19

Ghazālī labels his alternative the “science of hearts” or the “science of the path to the hereafter,” suggesting that it is this sort of religious knowledge that the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and even the founders of the Sunni schools of law all knew, taught, and practiced.20 This science relies on jurisprudence and positive law yet frames divine commands as a progression of the human soul toward God, often through meditative and ascetic practices. Ghazālī draws heavily from adherents to Sufism (called “Sufis”) to describe this path to God, the states of the heart, and the meanings of rituals and human actions. He also takes an interest in the science of character traits (*ʿilm al-akhlāq*) as studied by philosophers, so that a person might cultivate virtues that will save the soul in the hereafter.21 While jurists deal in hypotheticals that often never affect themselves, Ghazālī wants to introduce his audience to knowledge that can be put
into salvific action, as per the many hadiths he quotes declaring that knowledge without beneficial action is condemnable. “A man is not a scholar,” Ghazâlî quotes the Prophet Muhammad as having said, “unless he acts upon his knowledge.”22 This practical knowledge that concerns states of the hearts and the cultivation of righteous character traits can be called Ghazâlî’s own interpretation of “virtue ethics.”23

Even if virtue ethics might help remedy shortcomings in legal scholarship and practice, one should not imagine that virtue ethics was an alternative to jurisprudence and positive law in Islam. Jurists themselves often pursued virtue as an antidote to the hypocrisy that Ghazâlî mentioned, many becoming renowned for their piety.24 (One such pious scholar of law appears in a narrative studied at length in Chapter Ten.) Indeed, Islamic virtue ethics can and usually has existed side-by-side the study of jurisprudence and positive law. Even the most well-known early virtue ethicists of Islam, figures such as Abû ʿAlī Ahmad Miskawayh (d. 1030), as discussed in this book, and Abû Hayyân al-Tawhîdî (d. 1023), as discussed in detail by Nuha Alshaar, would agree with this claim. They speak of “divine commands” (sharîʿa, henceforth “Sharia,” which has traditionally been determined through jurisprudence and taken shape as positive law) as a God-given set of standards separate from virtue ethics but needed by the moral agent in her pursuit of ethical perfection.25 Almost all of the interpreters of Islamic ethics depicted in this book see law as a mere starting point, if not for themselves then at least for society at large.

ETHICS AS THE SCIENCE OF REFINING ONE’S CHARACTER TRAITS

The study of character and its perfection was always a means to some other end for our authors and their contemporaries. For them, “virtue ethics” complemented some other framework for the pursuit of human felicity. That framework varied from author to author. Some were philosophers through and through, and saw the objective of ethics as the forging of a human intellect capable of contemplating higher principles. Others saw the basis for right action and inner perfection to be revealed in scripture, and saw their own writings on ethics as pathways to comprehending that revelation. Some, among whom were the Sufis, saw themselves as part of a long chain of righteous individuals inspired by God to know Him. Their writings on ethics recorded not only the deeds of those bygone spiritual greats, but also the means by which one might follow them. In many Sufi models, the agent should use law to align intentions and actions with a pious model, but as that agent works on purifying the heart and cultivates a long list of virtues, eventually proper action will be intuitive. For Sufis, virtue ethics was a first step that led to knowing, witnessing, and losing oneself in God.

Hence defining “virtue ethics” is more difficult than defining jurisprudence and positive law, in part because a number of genres of writing and ethical methods in classical Islamic thought might qualify. This book, in other words, assumes a rather broad view of virtue ethics. Rather than exploring virtue ethics as a fixed system among other fixed normative systems parallel to Anglo-American or Continental European philosophy, this book presents virtue ethics as a cluster of ethical themes. What these premodern ethicists had in common was concern with the niceties of human character and with the perfection of the human soul by acquiring good character traits through habit. And while there were marked differences between philosophic and Sufi approaches to character, the “science of the refinement of character traits” did allow for ideas about the human soul to be shared.

Most often recognized as “virtue ethics” are studies of character traits written by philosophers. Since these philosophers initially began their pursuits by expanding upon the writings of ancient Greek philosophers, the cardinal virtues that were usually their focus will be familiar to those who have studied virtue ethics in the European tradition: temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. These virtue ethicists emphasized friendship and love as means to bettering society, and often related their arguments to Islamic scriptures.

Then there is Sufism. In a number of articles and in a forthcoming book, for example, Atif Khalîl has examined the study of Sufi states and stations as “Sufi virtue ethics” and “Sufi moral psychology.” “Moral psychology” for Khalîl denotes a discipline that grew from “discourses on moral and spiritual self-transformation which mapped out the various ‘states’ and ‘stations’ of inner change” to become “a psychology rooted in the Islamic vision of the universe with the Prophet as a model of human
As for “virtue ethics,” it is not the case (or Khalil’s argument) that each of the various Sufi states and stations are equivalent to a virtue, although Khalil does successfully make the case for certain such stations, including gratitude (al-shukr) and satisfaction (al-ridā). Rather, there exists a parallel between practical Sufism and virtue ethics, in that both focus on an agent’s character and progress to some moral aim, using practices and habituation. Even in Sufism’s very beginnings, Sufi writers used terms from the Qur’an and Hadith to describe an individual’s struggles with the evils inside and outside of oneself, which resulted in terms that can be called virtues and vices. As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, as Sufism developed into what Ghazālī called a “science of the heart,” Sufi writers formalized the progression of the path to perfection, which is proximity to God and intimate knowledge of Him. Temporary conditions were called “states,” while lasting achievements were called “stations.” Within this book’s more encompassing category of “virtue ethics,” which describes writings concerned with perfecting human character, the phrase “moral psychology” describes specialized terms and theories used to study the development of the human soul, often focused on intentions, states, and stations, and often associated with Sufism.

While Sufism cannot be reduced to virtue ethics, certainly a major genre of Sufi writing is that which focuses on the cultivation of good character traits. Consider a definition of Sufism by the early master Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 910), who says that—among other things—Sufism is “the acquisition of virtues and the erasure of vices.” It is stated even more clearly by the later master of Sufi stations, Khwāja ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī of Herat (d. 1089), who declares in a chapter on “character” that “all those who have spoken about this science [of Sufism] agree that Sufism is equal to character; all the words spoken about it revolve around one axis, namely, striving to do good and refraining from doing harm.” The triad of (1) the charted path to God, (2) good character, and (3) proper action tells us that Anṣārī would have agreed with contemporary advocates of virtue ethics that, in your pursuit of ultimate happiness, you will necessarily need to perfect your character. They would also agree that this pursuit of the perfection of character will not only benefit you as an individual, but also society itself, since a virtue-based society will be led and populated by those who have also perfected their own characters. Such a reading has a precedent in a definition of Sufism that Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988) attributes to Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Qaṣṣāb (d. 888–9), a teacher to al-Junayd, who was once asked, “What is Sufism (al-taṣawwuf)?” He replied, “Noble (karīna) character traits that appear in a noble time from a noble man among a noble people.” In other words, Sufism is the realization of a perfection in character, which—as other definitions that follow elucidate—involves a constant awareness of God, and occurs in its fullest form when social and cultural conditions are accommodating. Put differently, Sufism in its most ideal form is the fruit of a virtuous individual’s best efforts, solidified as character traits, combined with a much larger moral evolution that has taken place in the collective character traits of the society around that individual.

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF VIRTUE ETHICS

A growing body of literature considers the contemporary relevance of ancient virtue-based ethical systems. This is because, in the latter part of the twentieth century, thinking about morality in terms of virtue made a return to Anglo-American philosophy. The Enlightenment introduced two new important ways of seeing ethics: deontological and consequentialist ethics. The first was about duty (in Greek, deon), because its advocates—originally, Immanuel Kant (d. 1804)—thought that some moral principles were universally necessary. Consequentialists, however, held that one should look at the end result of an action to determine if it is right or wrong. The most prevalent interpretation of consequentialism, utilitarianism, holds that one should do what is best for everyone—one should calculate what will bring the most happiness to all people and undertake that action. While these Enlightenment approaches made the ancient Greek view of morality seem overly individualistic and primitive, many of today’s philosophers designate virtue ethics as an alternative to those other normative approaches because it is agent-centered, while consequentialism and deontology are act-centered.
Diagram of normative ethics

In the Anglo-American tradition, G. E. M. Anscombe (d. 2001) had much to do with the rise of virtue ethics. Anscombe famously made the point that duty-based ethics are the after-effects of relying on a higher power or scripture to legislate, so that the word “ought” carries a sense of “obligation.” In a secular setting, Anscombe posited, the human mind and not law must take center stage, so that a “philosophy of psychology,” one that probes human intentions and desires, is a necessary prolegomenon to a real secular ethics. Once study of the moral agent replaces study of the moral action, only then can we define “the good,” that is, define virtue. We would no longer need to determine that something was “morally wrong,” because we could—like Aristotle (d. 322 BCE)—speak of that which is “unjust,” that is, contrary to our lucid definition of virtue. Other philosophers and ethicists sympathized with Anscombe’s call for a new interpretation of virtue ethics, and thinkers such as Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others have helped place virtue ethics alongside these other two approaches—deontological and consequentialist ethics—as an ethical approach taken seriously, especially within the Anglo-American academy.

Renewed interest in virtue ethics allows closer study of Islamic philosophy and Sufism, two very rich virtue-based traditions religiously and often culturally distinct from Greek, Christian, and contemporary Anglo-American virtue ethics. The period in time covered here is formative—one might even say canonical—in the history of Islamic virtue ethics. Scripture aside, these are some of the signature sources toward which today’s Muslim ethicists look. Moreover, while contemporary writings have a sense of immediacy, the connections between virtue ethics and storytelling are far more direct and transparent in these premodern texts. The authors mentioned here wrote on virtue, theorized virtue, and were also either the authors or the subjects of narratives about virtue. As such, contemporary advocates of virtue ethics can find insights in premodern Islamic virtue literature.

THE QUR’AN, THE HADITH, AND ETHICS

This book focuses on Islamic thought as it became consolidated in a period after the earliest formative movements in interpretation, law, philosophy, and Sufism had settled or were settling. Nevertheless, brief mention of ethics in Islam’s two main scriptural sources (the Qur’an and the Hadith) is necessary because such “scriptural ethics” were an inseparable part of Islamic virtue ethics. The Qur’an and the Hadith will be discussed throughout the book, moreover, in the context of those ethicists interpreting them. In order to highlight Qur’anic usage, references appear in parentheses within the text, with “Q” followed by chapter and verse number, rather than in notes.

As will be discussed in Chapter Nine, an essential component in Islamic virtue ethics seen throughout the Qur’an is the model of “virtue” as taking on the traits of God (takhallaq bi-akhlāq Allāh). As contemporary...
Muslim ethicist Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān mentions, it is the basis of the notion that one imitates the Prophet Muhammad, since he has embodied God’s beautiful names.35 The Qurʾan establishes a narrative in which all human beings have been created in accordance with a divine nature (fiṭra) to know God, who is the ultimate truth and the ultimate good (Q 4:1, 30:30, 91:8).

Obedience to God also features prominently in the Qurʾan. Often the Qurʾan’s phrasing of matters of obedience and even virtuous conduct is as a choice between this world and the next, the “worldly” (al-dunyā) and the “hereafter” (al-ākhira). One might also see this as a moral choice between the “nearer” life and the “deferred” life, a wording justified by the Arabic terms (Q 2:86). Those who prefer the “nearer” take those things closer at hand but more ephemeral. Those who prefer the “deferred” life take those things that are farther, more difficult, but also permanent.

To summarize what the Hadith corpus—usually considered Islam’s secondary scriptural source—says about virtue would be more daunting even than summarizing that which appears in the Qurʾan. What I have been calling the “Hadith” refers to collections of books, volume upon volume, that recount the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and deeds. Shiʿi collections also include narratives concerning the inerrant imams from Muhammad’s progeny, who embody Muhammad’s virtues and have inherited his charisma. Almost any topic imaginable to a premodern person can be found in such Hadith collections, and most of those topics have some relationship with virtue.

Muslims have considered the person of Muhammad to have been the epitome of virtue in no small part because of a number of Qurʾanic imperatives, perhaps most famously: “There is before you, in God’s messenger, an excellent paragon for those who hope in God and in the Last Day and who remember God frequently” (Q 33:21). Muhammad’s character has been summarized perfectly in a statement attributed to his wife ʿĀʾisha (d. 678), who replied to a question about the nature of his character by saying, “Have you not read the Qurʾan? The character of God’s messenger was the Qurʾan.”36 The Qurʾan becomes practical when viewed through the actions, conduct, and character of its messenger. Therefore, for any virtue in Islamic books of ethics, a corresponding hadith can be found locating it in the “custom” or “way” (sunna, henceforth “Sunna”) of Muhammad. Renunciation of the worldly, to give one example, becomes epitomized in Muhammad, who, as a revered community leader, nevertheless “used to eat on the ground and sit as does a slave; he would mend his own sandals and patch his own clothes.”37

WHAT IS “ISLAMIC” PHILOSOPHY?

“Islamic” philosophy is an imagined category. The earliest figures writing philosophy in Arabic were not overwhelmingly Muslim. Indeed, many of the initial translators of Greek texts into Arabic were Christians. Moreover, in subsequent centuries, many non-Muslims took part in debates that constituted a network of shared philosophical questions and positions. For this reason some speak of “Arabic philosophy,” but that gives rise to the problem that philosophers also wrote in other languages; one featured in this book, for example, wrote in Persian.38

This problem, though, exists mainly for those intending to consider this philosophical tradition as a whole. The subject of this book is limited to virtue ethics in a particular Islamic context, in which Muslim readers have made use of ideas conveyed by philosophers and by Sufis. Our authors were self-proclaimed Muslims, and their arguments were disputed and embraced by Muslim theologians, jurists, poets, spiritual guides, and educated individuals without academic specialization. In other words, philosophy was not necessarily “Islamic” in formulation but certainly by reception. Philosophers were not theologians; they were not debating about “God” as presented in scripture, because they avowed to be willing to go wherever reason might take them, even if their conclusions seemed outwardly opposed to scripture. As such, it was existence as a whole that was the topic of their discussion. These philosophers did, however, become a patch in the quilt of Islamic thought, and it is in that way that their debates are considered “Islamic
philosophy” here. Nevertheless, one might press matters further: As William Chittick illustrates, a certain shared philosophical worldview did indeed prevail that might be called “Islamic philosophy.” While specifics would certainly differ from philosopher to philosopher, in a general sense this worldview was a profound and comprehensive manner of conceiving of the universe and all phenomena within it as sharing in a descent of meaning from one absolute reality.39 What follows is a very brief summary of the early history of Islamic philosophy, leading up to the time of our authors.

The teachings of the ancient Greeks have an often-ignored history in western Asia. In Syria, Christian philosophers had maintained an interest in philosophical branches of learning, which drew from a longstanding philosophical tradition in Alexandria and which became known to Muslim rulers after the center of their empire shifted to Damascus. Further east and before Islam, the Persian emperor Anūshīrawān, or Chosroes I, founded a school of philosophy around the year 555 CE, welcoming those pagan instructors who fled from Justinian after he closed the School of Athens in 529. That school, founded at Jundishāpūr near Baghdad (which was to become the capital of the Muslim empire), remained well after Muslim conquerors settled in the land. Those conquerors soon discerned great value in the ancients and their writings, for the most effective means to rule over the various religious and ethnic groups in Iraq and Iran, their geographical “base,” was to maintain the cultural and scientific structures that the Persian Sasanians had once established.40 Thus, with roots in a revival of pre-Islamic Persian ways, translations of Greek texts into Arabic began most noticeably during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr (r. 754–75). Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, Galen, Porphyry, Bryson, and the Stoics, all began to influence Muslim authors via translation.41

For some time the project of philosophy continued to find momentum in a caliph’s political ends. The caliph Abū al-ʿAbbās´ Abdallāh al-Maʿmūn (r. 813–33) became interested in Greek philosophy in part to establish himself as the heir to ancient Greek wisdom, as opposed to the Christian Byzantines nearby with whom he was at war.42 The caliph also saw philosophy and rational thought in general as a means to suppress the increasingly diverse body of independent Muslim scholars in his empire, caring emphatically little for and even mocking the traditionalist claim that knowledge necessitated a line of transmitters back to Muhammad.43 Al-Maʿmūn, followed by his brother and nephew who succeeded him, used intimidation, imprisonment, and torture to try to cement rationalism in lands under Abbasid control, from 833 to 848. The division between rationalist and traditionalist approaches grew and would last much longer than a mere fifteen years, although many—especially the emerging theological schools—did find ways to make the two sides meet.

The earliest contributors were translators rather than philosophers proper. Perhaps the first known “Muslim philosopher” was Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. after 870), who led a circle of students and translators in Baghdad and who applied Qurʾanic monotheism to the universe as described by the ancient Greeks. Arabic philosophy found its focus and direction in Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (d. 950–1), who forged Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought into a new and cohesive system. Al-Fārābī’s interest in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, which he recognized as having wider implications for politics, governance, and society, influenced those who came after him. Indeed, the Nicomachean Ethics reached other Muslim philosophers, it seems, most often not through direct translation, but rather through commentaries and interpretations such as those of al-Fārābī.44 A result of al-Kindī’s and al-Fārābī’s writings, which drew from the translations mentioned, was that a distinctive variety of “philosophy” (falsafa) began to take shape in the Arabic language. Although philosophy laid claim to knowledge in all its divisions, the focus here is on ethics.

WHAT IS SUFISM?

Sufism (taṣawwuf) is an Islamic tradition that can be defined perhaps only in a polythetic sense. Traits have come to include allegiance to a spiritual master (shaykh or pīr), formulae of remembrance, practices of renunciation, affiliation with an order that has sacred historical legitimacy, and association with a body of literature. My focus on literary Sufism, the Sufism of manuals, hagiographies, and literary works, reflects a
common theme one finds in premodern Islamic texts, namely, that complementary to the tradition of Sufism was a recorded science of Sufism (ʿilm al-taṣawwuf).

Concerning the tradition of Sufism, the phrase “interpreting piety” might best summarize the appearance of numerous devotional communities in the first few centuries of Islam. Ardor for God and renunciation of the worldly were traits that had been observed in the life of Muhammad, and, subsequently, the lives of his companions and those who learned from them. Sufis have retrospectively seen an exemplary and unidentified “Sufism” in this earliest generation, one absolute in its sincerity of intention and in its disregard for using that piety to acquire spiritual rank or social recognition. In such a manner, one of the earlier codifiers of Sufism, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ʿibn Ibrāhīm al-Kalābādhī (d. ca. 990), likens the Sufis to the Prophet Muhammad and a group of his followers called the “People of the Bench” (Ahl al-Ṣūfīa), who were especially dedicated to God and renounced comfortable clothes, satiating amounts of food, all forms of wealth, and even their own homeland. Like others who debated the nature of God, or the nature of knowledge, or law, those who debated the nature of piety often claimed to have the soundest connection to Muhammad and the revelation he received. Sufis saw themselves as distinct from other renunciants and devotees in that they were the consummate heirs to Muhammad’s piety.

At first, interpreters of piety were various, spread out, and unaligned with any particular designation. The ascetic practice of wearing coarse wool (ṣūf) belonged to many, including devout social activists and scholars who had retreated from urban life. Once those who lived in Islam’s capital of Baghdad became known for having adopted this practice, they acquired the designation “Ṣūfī,” meaning “wool-wearer.” Even in Baghdad there were varying interpretations of piety; many renounced worldly goods and devoted themselves to piety who would never label themselves “Sufī.” Nevertheless, by the middle of the ninth century, a group known as “the Sufis” could be recognized in Baghdad. This group began to have somewhat cohesive views on the nature of piety, inspiration, and hermeneutics. Those who gave shape to these views were figures such as Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 899), Abū al-Husayn Ahmad al-Nūrī (d. 907–8), and al-Junayd. Other interpretations of piety did indeed exist. Why and how “Sufism” came to absorb many of these non-Sufi interpretations, practices, and even figures is a complex historical topic that will be touched on in Chapter Seven.

Over time, as the concept of a Sufi “master” (shaykh) took hold, institutions were also established, not only places of communal gathering, but Sufi “orders” (ṭuruq/ṭarīqa, plural ṭurāq). Each order became an approach to the theories and practices of drawing nearer to God that traced itself back to the Prophet Muhammad through a line of masters and saints. (Unfortunately, in order to limit the scope of this book, these important Sufi practices arise only as they pertain to the discussion of ethics, but Sufi teachers have continuously stressed that practice and ethics are wed inseparably.) Men and women participated and were both pupils and masters, women less often the latter. Major and minor orders appeared throughout Muslim-populated areas. The masters of these orders also became sought after for blessings, famous for piety, and respected by those in power, and even sometimes became power-players.

The science of Sufism—which along with philosophical virtue ethics is the focal point of this book—appears best described by one of its central codifiers, al-Sarrāj. Responding to those who claimed that there was only “outward knowledge of Sharia, as conveyed by the Book [the Qur’an] and the Sunna” and that the concept of an “inner knowledge” called the “science of Sufism” had no substance, al-Sarrāj does more than defend his tradition. He establishes Sufism as the science of intentions and moral interiority, a science that elucidates signposts and situations in a range of the heart’s spiritual development, parallel to the “science of the heart” that Ghazālī would expand upon a century later. As with those who study the outward form of Sharia, those who study inward knowledge rely on the Qur’an and the Hadith. The Qur’an mentions that there is a group of people “who discover [the truth]” (Q 4:83). For al-Sarrāj, this “discovered knowledge” (al-ʿilm al-mustanbat) is indeed “the knowledge of the inward, and it is the science of Sufism.” The Sufis can look into the Qur’an, the Hadith, and other sources, and derive insights about the states and stations of the heart because “knowledge is outward (ẓāhir) and inward (bāṭin); the Qur’an is outward and inward; the Hadith of God’s messenger, blessings be upon him, is outward and inward; and Islam is outward and inward.”
WHY BOTH PHILOSOPHY AND SUFISM?

As will be seen, when it came to ethics, philosophy and Sufism engaged in interdisciplinary discussion and borrowing, to a great extent. Ghazâlī is an excellent case of someone whose ethical program relies on both philosophy and Sufism, even if his epistemological framework is “Sufi.” On the philosophy side, Abû Bakr ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185–6) and Shihâb al-Dîn Yahyâ al-Suhrawardî (d. 1191) both refer to Sufi unveiling as advanced achievement for the soul. The philosophically minded ethicist al-Ṭawhîdî, as well, employs Sufi insights and terms to describe higher spiritual concepts.52 Even the less mystically inclined Abû ʿAlî Ḫusayn ibn Sinâ (d. 1037), or “Avicenna,” uses Sufi terms and metaphors to describe the spiritual training one must undergo before achieving those final stages in which a person “disappears to himself.”53 While Avicenna never labels this sort of training as Sufism, a famous commentator on Avicenna’s text Allusions and Admonitions (al-Ishârât wa-l-Tanbîhât) does. That commentator, Naṣîr al-Dîn Ţûsî (d. 1274), describes Avicenna’s mission in “the Stations of the Knowers,” the ninth division of Allusions and Admonitions, as “giving proper order to the Sufi sciences (al-ʿulûm al-ṣûfîyya), in a way that none before him have and no one after him will.”54

In fact, while adhering to two distinct and sometimes competing disciplines, philosophers and certain Sufis borrowed frequently enough from one another for a tradition to come into being called “philosophical Sufism.” Emerging out of the thought of Muḥyî al-Dîn ibn al-ʿArabî (d. 1240), this school produced the major form of theoretical Sufism worldwide.55 Shahab Ahmed has discussed the far-reaching cultural outcomes of this “cosmological re-infrastructuring,” but what matters here is that these two major branches not only contemplated virtue more closely than other branches of Islamic learning, but also at times intermingled and even merged.56

One will find in all the texts discussed that there is a fairly consistent, broad, overarching outline for the progression of ethical concerns: An individual begins with a program of what I will call “humoral ethics,” a way to treat the soul using knowledge about each individual temperament, which is affected by the body. That individual then moves on to a range of practices and discoveries that have different ends. For some philosophers that end is absolutely rational, while for the Sufis that end is super-rational. Regardless, because the higher ethical practices are associated with Sufism in many of these texts, including those of philosophers, I focus my attention on Sufism in the latter half of the book. By placing “philosophical virtue ethics” alongside what will be called “Sufi virtue ethics,” I hope to introduce the reader to traditions of virtue and storytelling that ran through much of Islamic thought. Unfortunately, time and space do not permit an extended discussion that would include ethics as pertaining to the management of the city (“political science”), or even of smaller groups of people such as the family. The focus is mostly on the immediate human self.

WHAT IS “THE POLISHED MIRROR”?

The polished mirror is an image that unites these two ethical traditions, philosophy and Sufism. One finds it mentioned repeatedly as a way to describe a receptive self-perfection, whether that be the perfection of the human intellect, heart, or soul. It tells us that there were similarities in these ethical models, which often relied on symbols of light, reflection, the removal of imperfections, and patterns of emanation. Perhaps the Neoplatonic sympathies of both traditions brought this image to the fore. As Aaron Hughes illustrates, the metaphor of the imagination as a polished mirror appears in the writings of the ancient philosopher Plotinus (d. 270) and aligns with the model of imagination prevalent among Muslim and Jewish philosophers.57

For an example from philosophy, the polished mirror in Avicenna’s writings has noticeably ethical significance. According to Avicenna, the rational soul goes through a process of refinement, trading base character traits for excellent ones and shedding vile habits for noble ones, becoming purified through the knowledge of God. When that is the case, the soul “becomes like a polished mirror upon which are reflected the forms of things as they are in themselves without any distortion,” achieving the ability to reflect all the intelligibles—the pinnacle of human achievement in Avicenna’s philosophy.58 Avicenna also uses this image of the “polished mirror” in a manner reminiscent of Sufi writings, to describe the
penultimate stages of the “knower” (al-ʿārif) of “the Real.”59 (This recurring designation, “the Real” or al-Haqq, signifies God in Himself, as the Absolute, abstracted from conceptions of Him and from His relationships to creation. It becomes common among those claiming to have privileged knowledge of God.)

In Sufism, Ibn ʿArabī begins his Bezels of Wisdoms (Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam) by comparing Adam’s capacity for reflecting all of God’s attributes to a “polished mirror.”60 Before him, Ghazālī had famously used the image in the context of comprehending the Qur’an: “The heart is like a mirror; desires are like rust; and the meanings of the Qur’an are like forms that appear in that mirror, so that ascetic practice, by extirpating the lower desires, does for the heart what polishing does for a mirror.”61 The trope of the polished mirror elicits an image of ultimate human perfection as a matter of removing deficiencies—as opposed to acquiring the good. This is a common “end” to virtue ethics in both philosophy and Sufism, as will be discussed in Chapter Nine.

HUMORAL ETHICS: THE SCIENTIFIC BACKDROP OF PREMODERN ISLAMIC VIRTUE ETHICS

The reader will also notice an emphasis, especially throughout the first half of the book, on the four humors. To understand the centrality of the humors to premodern ethics, consider by way of analogy the place of psychology in contemporary language. Modern psychology so informs our way of thinking that we have difficulty noticing it humming in the background of our assessments of self and others. Every time we, as Americans or Westerners, think of a moral action as “unhealthy,” we speak in psychological terms. Moreover, phrases such as “Freudian slip,” “inner child,” “anal retentive,” “acting out,” or “OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder)” have become a part of everyday English, even if such usage often does not conform to the phrase’s scientific meaning. Psychology is, after all, for many moderns, an important—if not the most important—standard of measurement for the wellbeing of the human mind and, in many ways, life as a whole.

Premodern Muslim writers inherited a view of the soul–body relationship that was just as influential for them as modern psychology is for us. Their view posited that the human body thrives through a balance of the four humors, the balancing of which also affects one’s psychological states and even one’s dispositions for character. Ethics strove to bring order to imbalances in the soul influenced by the contending forces of the body. This assumed a cosmological pattern of emanation from unity to disunity, perfection to imperfection, such that the observable world revealed mixtures and multiplicities that had their origins in perfection and unity. While not as widely accepted as humoral medicine, alchemy too ensued from theories about a hierarchy of elements, one part of the overarching hierarchy of being. Thus, one often finds alchemical metaphors in writings on virtue ethics.

One might locate original Muslim interest in the ethical implications of the soul–body relationship in the Qur’an.62 Yet it was in philosophy—especially in the pursuit of health for both body and soul—that the groundwork for “humoral” virtue ethics was laid. Works like Hygienics for Bodies and Souls (Maṣāliḥ al-ʿAbdān wa-l-Anfūs), written by a student of al-Kindī named Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 934), treated vices in explicitly medical terms.63 There is also the Spiritual Medicine (al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī) of Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (d. 925 or 935), or “Rhazes,” as he was known in Latin. While Rhazes was critical of certain core axioms in the theory of humors, he nevertheless saw ethics and medicine as intertwined, having been largely influenced by the ancient philosopher-physician Galen (d. ca. 216).64 Al-Fārābī, like the philosophers studied here, also saw parallels between moral philosophy and medicine.65

An important caveat is that all the virtue ethicists discussed here agree that the major achievements of the soul lie beyond the basic humoral virtue ethics aimed at justice. The loftiest expectations for the human soul, however, even for the Sufis, often assumed a humoral substructure. Thus, this applies not only to Ghazālī, but also to the major Sufi thinker, Ibn ʿArabī. Ibn ʿArabī inherited centuries of insights from Sufi masters about states and stations, and his ethics is a complex web of illuminations about Islamic law and scripture. Yet even he says that “in most cases, the soul is ruled forever by the property of its constitution.”66
STORYTELLING AND VIRTUE ETHICS

Among the common threads that knit together Sufi and philosophical virtue ethics, arguably none is more illuminative than storytelling. After all, the interchange between Sufism and philosophy was often more apparent in storytelling than, say, in specialized treatises, polemical texts, or Qur’anic commentaries. Allegorical tales—one major example of the phenomenon of storytelling—were a form of writing common to masters of both sciences. Moreover, it seems that Sufis and philosophers, or sometimes those who were Sufi-philosophers, engaged in narrative exercises often motivated by the need to communicate theory and practice in a way more inclusively “human.” Classical Arabic and Persian storytelling allowed abstract ethical theory to materialize as a part of human narratives, daily life, social norms, personal longings, and edifying entertainment. Throughout the book, I will continue to explore adoptions, shared ends, and contrasting premises in Sufism and philosophy using this “common thread,” that is, storytelling as virtue ethics exemplified.

From the beginnings of Islam, storytelling had a central position in Islamic learning, especially moral learning. The premise that righteous conduct could be found in the great figures of the past prevailed not only in the Qur’an and in pre-Islamic Arabian narratives, but even in the Biblical and extra-Biblical narratives that served as Qur’anic commentary, as John Renard explains. Tales of ancient prophets, such as those told in the collection of Ahmad ibn Muhammad Tha’labi (d. 1035), presented an audience with models of behavior while also reaffirming the veracity of the Qur’an, which alludes to details in the lives of those prophets. One of the roles of the earliest qāḍī (judge) was not only to administer law, but also to tell stories of those who exemplified worthy character traits, most especially the Prophet Muhammad. Many such judges held a second official position as “storyteller” (qāṣ, plural qusṣāṣ). The role that storytellers played in expanding the Hadith corpus was later lamented by scholars of Hadith. Yet even collections of Hadith verified as reputable can be treated as literary texts saturated with narrativity.

Modeling virtue became a pattern adopted by Hadith narrators, philosophers, Sufis, and other Muslim writers. For Sufis especially, models of behavior were and still are an evident part of the tradition. In a seminal study, Vincent Cornell argues that hagiographies (stories of saintly lives) follow patterns of “typification,” a term that describes the way in which institutions acquire identity by directing attention to certain actions by certain representative actors. Concentrating on Sufi sainthood in Morocco, Cornell outlines how the saint’s special relationship with God assumed patterns of moral authority, often through narratives surrounding that saint. Idealized behaviors were recorded in hagiographical collections. They then became remembered as historical fact—as real standards. Idealized roles embodied by saints of the imagined past, therefore, “were played by real people in Muslim society.” In that way, accounts of the lives of saints (and the lives of saintly philosophers) meld storytelling, history, and virtue to communicate how ethics might be lived.

Muslim ethicists used storytelling of many varieties to convey normative standards of virtue. In fact, the concept of “literature” itself surfaced in an ethical context for Arabic (and Persian) readers. This can be seen in the Arabic word adīb, which our authors would have known to mean both a category of “wisdom literature” and “proper conduct.” Adīb also included knowledge of the literary arts such as grammar by which one attained such conduct. It referred to the specialized training and values of the well-to-do, for whom “literature” and “proper conduct” were inseparable. Being able to quote a saying or lines of poetry most apropos to the context at hand; displaying a wide range of knowledge; communicating with grammatical rigor; and exuding both wit and grace in one’s speech, writing, and conduct; these were all signs of the adīb, that is, the person with adīb, the “lettered” person. One can see how these qualities came together in the example of al-Tawhīdī, a polymath versed in philosophy, Sufism, and Islamic law. Al-Tawhīdī communicates the cardinal social virtue of friendship (ṣadāqa) by means of a letter that not only highlights the grace of his pen, but also relies on narratives about those he knew, narratives that contextualize wisdom about good behavior. In Sufism, such “lettered” conduct or adīb had special significance, for it affected the way one learned from a master, interacted in spiritual companionship, or cohabitated in lodges.
Storytelling appears in each chapter of this book in part because contemporary virtue ethicists have made a compelling case that, in the words of Alasdair MacIntyre, “man is in his actions and practice, as well as his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.” MacIntyre argues that only a “narrative selfhood,” in which humans envision their actions and identities within the context of narratives with intelligible ends, will have lasting effects on individuals and societies. Both ancient and contemporary virtue ethics take each individual human narrative into account, as opposed to Enlightenment theories that sought to offer universal norms. What is virtuous differs in different circumstances. Unlike axioms, narratives can capture the contextual nature of virtuous and vicious habits and choices. This has led to interest in the study of literature as ethics, or even what might be called “literary ethics.” According to Martha Nussbaum, can reveal human character, examine “the relevant passions with acute perception,” and offer a picture of “what it means to organize a life in pursuit of what one values.” Novels as constructions of human experiences and human striving for good in specific contexts of choice and limitations can convey a lived “Aristotelian ethical thinking.”

Yet even beyond an Aristotelian framework, narratives seem distinctively able to reveal values, situations, decisions, character, and the relationship between them all. A modern reader might take delight in a novel and might even say that she has “learned” from it because it so often presents events in the moral universe through the prism of an individual’s circumstances, emotions, point of view, and development. Even bad choices or complete moral indifference in narrative form tell us something about the experience of being human, that is, the experience of being in an individual situation with enough universal relevance to merit its being communicated. To include premodern Muslim literary and ethical writings in these discussions expands the scope of the search for lived and situated human experience.

**THE BOOK’S ORGANIZATION**

The chapters that follow might be divided into two uneasy halves, one half largely concerning Islamic philosophy (beginning with “humoral ethics”), and the other half largely concerning Sufism. This division is an uneasy one because, as you will see, sometimes the lines between these two sciences are blurred. Certain philosophers held an allegiance to Sufism. Certain Sufis, even those opposed to philosophy, made use of philosophical terms and teachings to make their point. Chapter Ten should be considered a case study that blends together themes mentioned throughout the book within the context of storytelling. In it, preceding discussions are applied to the narrative poetry of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273).

My approach in this book is neither linear nor encyclopedic. A number of major figures are missing to allow more detailed consideration of fewer thinkers. The author, ethical theme, and narrative of each chapter function together as a cognitive window through which I explore related topics. Because I hope for the reader to appreciate ways in which thinkers shared, debated, and developed ideas, I sometimes include materials that might not seem immediately on topic but in fact provide contextual information. In the spirit of this cross-textual approach, sometimes a chapter on a certain thinker includes ethical discussions that arose after that figure’s death and appeared in commentaries. Also for this same reason, in the narrative portions, I do not always include stories by a particular thinker. Those stories might be about that thinker, a commentary on his life or writings. This is so that we might consider how an idea or a figure was received and reinterpreted.

**TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION**

This book focuses on Arabic and Persian texts, and terms are often shared between writers in both languages. For that reason, I have aimed to have one transliteration scheme for both languages and have
modified the transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, so that all Persian names and terms use Arabic consonant equivalents except where those Persian consonants have no such equivalent in classical Arabic.

Finally, all translations of Arabic and Persian texts are my own, unless otherwise indicated. While some texts included have not been translated before, most have, yet I have still translated them anew. This has been done mainly for the sake of terminological and stylistic consistency. For the benefit of the reader, I refer to other translations in the bibliography and in the notes.

NOTES

1 For one version of this hadith, see al-Haythamī, *Majmaʿ al-Zawāʾid*, p. 8:188. See also Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ’Ulūm al-Dīn*, p. 3:48.14. Line numbers are included for the *Iḥyāʾ* because the text of this edition is condensed.

2 All dates refer to the Common Era (CE).


4 While “theological voluntarism” is a familiar term for this stance, “theistic subjectivism” more precisely suits its place in theories of value. See Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, p. 59. For a lucid summary of these issues, see Shihadeh, “Theories of Ethical Value in *Kalām*.”

5 Sophia Vasalou discusses Ibn Taymiyya’s case against these various groups in her *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theological Ethics*.

6 It would be a mistake to say that the Muʿtazila, or even the rationalists in general, were opposed to revealed law. Rather, Muʿtazilis—such as the eminent ʿAbd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad (d. 1025)—held that reason gives us access to universal moral truths, but not to their particular instantiations. See Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, pp. 34–5. Even Aristotle himself admitted that the human ethical endeavor of knowing what is noble and just cannot claim to be too precise an instrument. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)* 1.3, 1094b, pp. 4–5.

7 An argument for the Islamic legal sciences as ethics is made by A. Kevin Reinhart in “Islamic Law as Islamic Ethics.”


9 Fadel, “The True, the Good and the Reasonable,” p. 29.


11 Ibn Quzmān, *Dīwān Ibn Quzmān*, pp. 97–8. These are strophes 21 and 22 in *zajal* no. 20, which occurs on, pp. 92–9. An alternate English translation of this poem (in its entirety) can be found in Monroe, “The Mystery of the Missing Mantle,” pp. 4–12, with a separate verse translation on pp. 42–5.

12 Al-Sayyid Sābiq (d. 2000) explains this using a saying of a famous Ḥanbalī jurist, Muwaffaq al-Dīn ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 1223). One can, for example, sell grape juice to a person who makes both wine (a forbidden substance) and vinegar (a permissible one) as long as that buyer “does not utter anything indicating his decision to make wine.” See Sābiq, *Fiqh al-Sunna*, p. 3:104.

14 Moosa, “Muslim Ethics?” p. 239.

15 This describes when rules clarify and even sometimes simplify an original religious message, but in that process can make mundane “what was originally a call to the extraordinary.” See O’Dea, The Sociology of Religion, p. 94.


18 Ibid., p. 1:18.15. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ghazālī’s books were condemned by many jurists in Almoravid Spain and ordered burned near the time when Ibn Quzmān wrote his adultery-themed zajal. See Farrin, “Season’s Greetings,” p. 262.

19 Ghazālī, Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, p. 1:19.9. The jurist, for example, declares the ritual prayer (al-ṣalāt) to be valid “even if the person praying was heedless throughout the entire prayer, from beginning to end, his mind busy reckoning his profits from the market,” and even though such prayer “has no benefit in the hereafter.” Ibid., p. 1:19.10.


21 Ibid., p. 1:20.4.


23 Ghazālī also took interest in considering the aims of God’s commands (maqāṣid al-sharīʿa), adjusting positive law to accommodate the needs of believers. This view has had far-reaching significance, especially today. See Gleave, “Maḳāṣid al-Sharīʿa.” A Sufi reading of maqāṣid al-sharīʿa can be found in Ibn ʿArabī, al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya, pp. 1:246–51, as well as 1:742.


26 Khalil, “Contentment, Satisfaction and Good-Pleasure,” p. 372.

27 States and stations are explained in Chapter Eight. “Intention” can be defined in this context as the will behind any thought, action, or omission that is accompanied by an awareness of that will. For a discussion of the varieties of terms (al-nīya, al-hamm, al-irāda, al-shahwa, al-qasd, al-ikhtiyār, al-qaḍāʾ, al-ʿināya, and al-mashīʾa) that allow for subtle differences within this definition, see al-Zabīdī (d. 1791), Iḥāf al-Sāda al-Muttaqīn bi-Sharḥ Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, pp. 13:69–71.

28 For a consideration of Sufi treatises on character traits as “Sufi ethics,” see Honerkamp, “Sufi Foundations of the Ethics of Social Life in Islam.”


30 Anşārī Hirawī, Manāẓil al-Sāʾīrīn, p. 123, ch. 37.

32 Dividing these ethical approaches into three categories is itself open to criticism because of a seeming lack of precision. See Nussbaum, “Virtue Ethics.”


34 While we lack detailed sources for reconstructing philosophical and Sufi thought from the perspective of women in the period under consideration, recent attempts by Rkia Cornell, Laury Silvers, Th. Emil Homerin, and others do much to correct this. See Cornell’s translation and notes on al-Sulamī, Early Sufi Women, as well as Silvers, “Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women.” See also Homerin’s study and translation of ‘Ā’isha al-Bāʿūniyya’s (d. 1517) The Principles of Sufism.


37 This phrase occurs in a sermon attributed to his son-in-law ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. See al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, Nahj al-Balāgha, pp. 383–4, no. 158.


40 Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, p. 29.

41 Fakhry, Ethical Theories in Islam, pp. 61–6.

42 Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, p. 95. Ziai, “Islamic Philosophy (Falsafā),” pp. 57–9.

43 Cooperson, Al-Maʾmūn, p. 31.

44 Akasoy, “The Arabic and Islamic Reception of the Nicomachean Ethics,” p. 98.

45 Al-Kalābādhī, al-Taʾarruf li-Madīḥab Ahl al-Taṣawwuf, pp. 12–14. In wearing coarse wool, they resembled not only Muhammad’s companions, but the prophet most renowned for his renunciation, namely, Jesus.

46 Green, Sufism, p. 16; Karamustafa, Sufism, pp. 1–2.

47 Karamustafa, Sufism, pp. 7–18.

48 For a brief summary, see Baldick, Mystical Islam, pp. 72–7.

49 Al-Sarrāj, Kitāb al-Luma’ī fi al-Taṣawwuf, pp. 23–4. The scope and concern of the science of Sufism can be seen in al-Sarrāj’s list of “stations and states,” which he describes as “inward deeds, which are like deeds for [our] hearts, these are stations and states, such as verification (al-taṣdīq), belief (al-īmān), certitude (al-yaqīn), truthfulness (al-ṣīdāq), sincerity (al-ikhlāṣ), intimate knowledge of God (al-maʿrifā), trust (al-tawakkul), love (al-mahabbah), satisfaction (al-riḍā), remembrance (al-dhikr), gratitude (al-shukr), penitence (al-ināba), reverent anxiety (al-khashya), Godwariness (al-taqwā), self-surveillance (al-
murāqaba), contemplation (al-fikra), reflection (al-tifār), fear (al-khawf), hope (al-raja’), forbearance (al-sabr), contentment (al-qanā), submission (al-tasḥīm), consignment (al-taʿwīd), proximity (al-qurb), longing (al-shawq), ecstasy (al-wajd), alarm (al-wajal), sadness (al-ḥuzn), regret (al-nadam), modesty (al-ḥayā), shame (al-khajal), declaring grand (al-taẓīm), declaring majestic (al-ijlāl), and awe (al-hayba).”

50 Ibid., p. 24.

51 Ibid., p. 24.

52 Alshaar, Ethics in Islam, pp. 68, 165.

53 Avicenna, al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt, p. 363.

54 Ṭūsī, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt, p. 4:47.

55 See Rustom, “Philosophical Sufism,” pp. 399–400; Akasoy, “What is Philosophical Sufism?” Henceforth Ibn al-ʿArabī will be referred to as Ibn ʿArabī.

56 Ahmed, What is Islam?, p. 79.

57 Hughes, The Texture of the Divine, pp. 89–90.


60 Ibn ʿArabī, Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam, pp. 48–9.


62 See Ghazālī’s reading of Q 50:22 in Kīmīyā-yi Saʿādat, pp. 1:28–9. With the death of the body, veils are lifted, and one observes through the soul, seeing the truth for better or worse.

63 Adamson, “Ethics in Philosophy,” EI3. Al-Kindī also composed an ethical treatise, one with evident Stoic themes that treated sadness as an ailment to be conquered through reason and habit, The Art of Dispelling Sorrows (Risāla ḍal al-Ḥīla li-Dafʿ al-Aḥzān). See Fakhry, Ethical Theories in Islam, p. 68.


65 Adamson, Philosophy in the Islamic World, p. 106.

66 Chittick, The Self-Disclosure of God, p. 323 (translation Chittick’s). Concerning Ghazālī, see Kīmīyā-yi Saʿādat, pp. 1:4–5, as well as Ghazālī’s explanation that the forces of the spirit and that of the body are the origin of good and evil on pp. 1:22–3.


68 Ibid., p. 249.


70 Brown, Hadith, p. 73.

72 Renard, Friends of God, p. 277.

73 Ibid., p. 276.

74 Heinrichs, “The Classification of the Sciences and the Consolidation of Philology in Classical Islam,” p. 120.

75 Hämeen-Anttila, “Adab a) Arabic, Early Developments.”

76 Alshaar, Ethics in Islam, pp. 137–8. Eric Ormsby has reviewed some of the major themes and styles of Islamic literary ethics, which he rightly treats as a major category of premodern Islamic writing. See Ormsby, “Literature.”

77 An edited volume on this topic has recently appeared, so recently—unfortunately—that I was not able to consult it in time for this book. See Chiabotti, et al. (eds), Ethics and Spirituality in Islam.

78 MacIntyre, After Virtue, p. 216.

79 Ibid., pp. 214–18.


82 In such a manner, interest in uncovering Being in particular and temporal lived human contexts seems to have led Martin Heidegger (d. 1976) to appreciate the function of poetry. See Hughes, The Texture of the Divine, p. 84.
According to the Brethren of Purity

For those of you who, like me, spend time imagining the inner workings of real secret societies, the Brethren of Purity and Friends of Loyalty (Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ wa Khullān al-Wafāʾ) provide much food for thought. The Brethren hid their identities (or the identity of one person posing as many) so carefully that, even after a thousand years, scholars of Islamic intellectual history remain uncertain of their identities. Further kindling the sense of intrigue surrounding the Brethren is their interest in the esoteric sciences, especially magic.1 The idea of secrecy is important when thinking about the ethical dimension of their writings. For the Brethren, knowledge is premised on a sense of worthiness, an elitism that assumes that not everyone has the proper balance of virtues or even the capability for such a balance. Thus, the esoteric or hidden sciences—medicine, alchemy, astrology, and the science of talismans (and magic)—must remain hidden.2 Moreover, related to these sciences is a hierarchical view of the universe. Medicine brings the body’s humors into balance, so that it resembles higher, more balanced forms of being, such as planets. In alchemy, base metals become transubstantiated into a higher one, gold, also by balancing the properties of those metals—cold and wet, versus hot and dry. Astrology and the science of talismans (which often involves the astrological significance of symbols and letters) both presume that the higher, celestial realm directly affects human life. In other words, as the Brethren clarify in their twelfth epistle, all substances in the sublunar realm—whether meteorological, mineral, plant, or animal—become subject to internal incongruity and decay, and must strive for balance.3 Alchemy and ethics both aim at using the principle of balance to convert lower substances, base metals and lower souls, respectively, to the highest, most balanced ones, namely, gold and the intellect.

Ethics, then, as a balancing of human character traits, is a type of alchemical transubstantiation. It aims at human perfection. In fact, the human being’s centermost quality is perfectibility. Human potential outstrips the potential of other creatures, in large part because the human being as presented by the Brethren encompasses the entire universe of perfection—if only the human being endeavors to do so. The human, for the Brethren, is a microcosm. Rather, more accurately, the cosmos is a “macranthrope,” a human of astronomical proportions, as they explain in their sixteenth epistle.4 Thus, ethics allows each human to put the universe back in order, albeit one’s own internal universe, namely, the human self. Fraternities such as that of the Brethren were focused on giving life to this perfection-making process, not only for the individual, but for a larger group of people, indeed anyone who might join them in their vision of the self and the universe. The political side to their approach, namely, that love and friendship might take the place of power and coercion, was based on the idea that humans can live in a natural, harmonious way, like the planets, as opposed to the ruthless way of tyrants, a vicious method of rule beneath even predatory beasts. Because the Brethren were interested in a universal human, they were interested in universal knowledge, which helps explain the vast range of topics they cover. Because of that range of topics, statements about ethics and the cultivation of virtues (like their statements on astrology) appear scattered throughout their writings, placed in the context of other sciences. It is probably on account of the encyclopedic nature of their writings that the Brethren were so widely read, since they were not the authorities of their age in philosophy or the natural sciences.5

So, who were they? While there is no consensus, the Brethren were most likely bureaucrats in the city of Basra, Iraq, living in the latter half of the tenth century, probably adhering to Ismāʿīlī (Ismaʿīli) Shiʿism. Ismaʿīli Shiʿism, like other branches of Shiʿism, maintains an alternate model of leadership than the Sunni
caliphate, arguing that a living, just, and often infallible imam should be at the helm of the Muslim community. The Brethren’s imam, an unidentified hidden imam whom they probably considered the promised deliverer of humanity (al-mahdi), is the voice of one of the epistles of the Brethren (the forty-eighth). In this epistle he encourages adherence to the contemplative, philosophical Shi’ism the Brethren espouse throughout.6 The other epistles are said to have been authored by Zayd ibn Rifāʿa, Abū Sulaymān Muḥammad ibn Maʿshar al-Buṣṭī “al-Maqdīs,” Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Hārūn al-Zanjānī, Abū Aḥmad al-Mīhrājānī “al-Nahrājūrī,” Abū al-Ḥasan al-Awī, and Abū Muḥammad ibn Abī al-Bagh.7 This assumes that all of the epistles were indeed composed in the 960s or 970s, yet compelling evidence suggests that parts existed before this date, as early as a century before.8

The fifty-one epistles of the Brethren, which might have been fifty or even fifty-two, initiated the reader (addressed as “brother” throughout) into their worldview, a Neoplatonic and yet also Qurʾanic and Shiʿi perspective on the universe.9 Indeed, the Brethren were not reticent about their mission to propagate their doctrines, nor about the success of their recruitment. They spread their epistles and carefully recruited suitable converts, including princes and other high-ranking officials who secretly aligned with them.10 It is difficult to measure the range of influence of these epistles, simply because passages are frequently taken or summarized without credit, referenced but not cited often because of controversy surrounding the epistles and the Ismaʿilism of their authors. In fact, the Sunni caliph al-Mustanjid (r. 1160–70) supposedly had the epistles incinerated in full view of the people of Baghdad.11

Influences on the Brethren span Greek, Christian, Jewish, Indian, and Islamic sources, as discussed by Ian Richard Netton in Muslim Neoplatonists. In terms of the discussion below, Greek influences are especially relevant. The idea that the number “four” represents balance (and hence justice) relates directly to the Pythagorean notion that reality is constructed according to numerical relationships. Indeed, the Brethren directly refer to, and even quote, the Golden Verses, a Pythagorean treatise attributed to Galen.12 While Platonism is reflected in their recognition of the forms, and Neoplatonism in their theory of emanation, Netton correctly argues that it is Aristotle, or rather Aristotelianism, that prevails most clearly in the Brethren’s treatment of natural sciences, of substance and accidents, and of matter and form.13 In other words, theirs is a Neoplatonic reading of Aristotelianism, within a monotheistic, Qurʾanic framework.

WINDOWS TO THE SOUL

The Brethren admit to the near impossibility for those people of true wisdom, who have endeavored in philosophy and trials of self-renunciation, to get to the essence of the disembodied soul and its states. If the soul has been so elusive for the truly wise, then imagine—the Brethren say—how elusive it must be for the rest of us. The good news is that the body and its states can serve as windows to the soul, for “that which is apparent of the states of the body indicates that which is hidden of the states of the soul; the manifest points to the interior; the unveiled to the veiled; the conspicuous to the hidden; and the perceivable to the abstract.”14 The body can tell us about the soul because the body is to the soul as a house to its resident, a craftsman’s shop to the craftsman, or the city to its inhabitant.15 These metaphors are meant to capture the sense of interdependence between soul and body, but also the possibility of divorcing the two: Can a carpenter accomplish anything, or even function as a carpenter, without chisel, hammer, saw, or wood? Of course not. Yet the carpenter can be imagined as abstracted from all of these tools, as a person possessing a skill, and hence cannot be reduced to, or even identified with, a set of tools. The body serves the soul, but the two are not one entity. The body serves the soul by gathering data and expressing speech, by allowing life, nourishment, and growth, as the soul accomplishes its ends.

The cosmos (and the human body, as its microcosmic counterpart) is a combination of four natures: heat, cold, wetness, and dryness, which were created by God before all other natural phenomena.16 These four natures counteract one another, bearing varied influence over one another. God combined the four natures into pairs, thus creating the elements: fire, air, water, and earth. Fire is hot and dry; air is hot and wet; water is cold and wet; and earth is cold and dry.17 These four natures, within the human body, interact and oppose one another. For the sake of health and even life itself, the natures must achieve a balance appropriate to that individual’s age, sex, place of birth, occupation, and surroundings, although each of
these factors might also adversely affect the balance. When these natures or powers (heat, cold, wetness, and dryness) are out of balance, it is as though they have metaphorically become reckless and rebellious. In such a state, they bring about sickness, much as ruffians might set fire to a marketplace or destroy houses.18 When medicines and elixirs drive out excesses of these natures from the body, it is much like when the sultan and his forces combat such ruffians, bringing about peace by driving them from the city.19

THE FOUR HUMORS AND THE THREE SOULS

Within the body, the four natures are realized as four humors: yellow bile (the body’s fire), blood (air), phlegm (water), and black bile (earth).20 The humors are the basic materials of the body’s internal world. They serve as building blocks for the body’s nine substances (bones, brains, nerves, veins, blood, flesh, skin, nails, and hair), which are arranged much like, the Brethren say, the raw materials of a city, such as wood, iron, and bricks.21 They are organized as ten levels from the top down, that is, from the head to the neck, chest, abdomen, pelvis, groin, hips, thighs, calves, and feet. The posts that hold it all in place are the bones; the ties that bind things together are the nerves. Each of the body’s members has a power from the powers of the soul that is peculiar to it, and the Brethren mention that each power is called the “soul” of that particular member. So, for example, sight is the soul of the eye; hearing is the soul of the ear; and so on.22

The three most powerful sources of bodily life are the liver, the heart, and the brain. In fact, the natural powers and instinctual traits that arise from these three organs are as central to the body as citizens of different races and colors are to a city. As the organs are three, so too are the souls that serve as intangible generators for these organs and, also, derive their particular strengths from each respective organ:

1. The power of the soul that resides in the liver is called “vegetative” (al-nafs al-nabātiyya), indicating the human’s inclination to feed and grow. The vegetative soul has “inclinations and desires, virtues and vices” peculiar to it, and its influences and acts reach the body through the veins.23

2. The power of the soul that resides in the heart is called “animal” (al-nafs al-ḥaywāniyya), indicating the human’s ability to perceive via the senses and to move. It too has inclinations, desires, virtues, and vices peculiar to it, and it influences the rest of the body through the arteries.

3. Finally, the power of the soul that resides in the brain is called “rational” (al-nafs al-nāṭiqa), indicating the human’s ability to contemplate and make judgments. Again, there are virtues and vices peculiar to the rational soul, which influences the body through the nerves.

While described as three, these souls are indeed one human soul that performs in multiple contexts. Such is explained lucidly by the Brethren:

Then know that these three souls are not disjointed and separated one from the other, but rather are like branches from a single root, joined by one essence like the joining of three boughs of one tree; from each bough having grown a number of twigs, and from each twig some leaves and fruits. Or like one spring from which come three rivers, each river being divided into a number of tributaries, and each tributary having a number of small streams. Or like one nation, which branches off into three tribes; from each tribe branch off a number of clans; from each clan a number of families and kinfolk. Or like a man who works at three crafts with three different names, so that he is called ironsmith, carpenter, builder, when he excels at all three. Or like a man who reads, writes, and teaches, such that he is called a reader, writer, and teacher, because these names apply to the actor on account of what appears from him in terms of actions, movements, crafts, and deeds. Such, also, is the affair of the soul, for it is one in essence, but these names apply to it on account of what appear from it in terms of actions. That occurs when it acts in the body to bring about feeding and growth, so that it is called the vegetative soul; when it acts in the body to bring about feeling, movement, and translocation, it is called the animal soul; and when it acts to bring about contemplation and discernment, it is called the rational soul.24
These three sources of bodily life are also, indirectly, the sources of the major ethical character traits. Three faculties spring up from the liver, heart, and brain as well as from the vegetative soul, animal soul, and rational soul. The appetitive faculty (or, we might say, desire) originates in the liver; the irascible faculty (or anger) originates in the heart; and the rational faculty (or reflection) originates in the brain.

**MANAGING THE MULTIPOLARITY OF BODY AND SOUL**

The Brethren refer to these three faculties, (1) the appetitive faculty, (2) the irascible faculty, and (3) the rational faculty, as “princes” of the other faculties. The constant cycle of intrigue, triumph, and defeat between these three adversarial princes yields the ethical balancing act of the soul. If either the appetitive or the irascible faculty wins, then all is lost. The appetitive faculty must be controlled by the irascible faculty, otherwise—say the Brethren—its actions will resemble those of children when left unmanaged by their fathers. Without proper edification, which comes from the irascible faculty, the soul dominated by the appetitive faculty will pursue its whims until it falls into perdition, engaging in play, overeating, laziness, and other vanities. The irascible faculty, in turn, must answer to the rational faculty. When the irascible faculty goes unchecked by the rational faculty, its actions become as those of “devils, juveniles, ignorant thugs, or insolent hooligans” when left unmanaged by the intellectuals and enlightened elders (mashāyikh) around them, the latter of whom should be engaged, also, in commanding them to right and forbidding them from evil. Bouts of violence, asocial or antisocial behavior, excessive banter, and transgressing the rights of others will result. The rational faculty must answer to the higher intellect, which we might consider—in this context—to be something like a fourth, overarching faculty, one that administers the three faculties using the perfections inherent in it.

When the rational faculty does not answer to the higher intellect, it becomes overscrupulous, trapped in its own thoughts, tormented by useless minutiae. Here the description of the Brethren is useful, because it provides a social commentary on a problem that has, periodically, dogged Muslim communities, namely, pedantry: “As for the rational faculty, when the intellect does not manage and cleave to it, its actions resemble those of scholars and Qur’an reciters, contending with one another about religious rulings and differing about them, thereby—multiple schools of thought and doctrines, when a just imam from the successors to the prophets does not manage and cleave to them.”

The soul, then, might be described as the power behind the functions of the body, as the body replenishes the soul, in turn, with knowledge and life. The body’s balances and imbalances affect the soul, but the soul also affects the body. As the Brethren of Purity explain in a section of their ninth epistle titled “On the Variances in Character Traits with Respect to the Humors,” the dominance of one of the four humors makes one predisposed to certain ethical traits:

Know, my brother, that those who are dominated by heat in their temperament, especially those in whose constitutions the heart predominates, are usually brave-hearted, generous, reckless when in fearsome situations, lacking fixity and deliberateness in affairs, rushed in movement, intense when angry, quick to reconcile, short on resentment, intelligent, sharp-witted, and good at forming mental conceptions. The cold in temperament tend to be dim in terms of intelligence, thick in terms of nature, heavy in terms of spirit, and unripe in terms of character traits. The wet in temperament tend to be stupid, indecisive, flexible, forbearing, goody in terms of character traits, indulgent, quick to forget, and very careless when it comes to worldly affairs. The dry in temperament tend to be restrained in their deeds, fixed in their opinions, and reluctant to accept things; they are dominated by forbearance, spite, stinginess, avarice, and good memory.

To give a very clear example of this relationship, anger, one of the three potentially destructive forces that one must manage in order to achieve virtue, causes a chain of reactions in which the passive animal faculties arise in the heart and work their way through the arteries, stimulating the body’s instinctual (or innate) heat. That heat then rises to the surface, clouding the brain with a turbid smoke that corrupts the thinking process and leads to the desire for vengeance. Anger actualized, therefore, has both physical and spiritual effects on the body and soul respectively. A person dominated by heat and the power of the
ANIMAL FABLES: SOME BACKGROUND

Ethics in the epistles of the Brethren encompasses much more than just the humors. Focus on the humors in this chapter merely lays the groundwork for the chapters to follow, wherein other thinkers base their discussions of virtue on a similar humoral model. This “humoral model” traces the foundations of character imbalances to the forces within the body. All variants of this model, however, hold higher expectations for human perfection than merely offsetting the body’s forces. The Brethren also have higher expectations and encourage the pursuit of knowledge of the divine. Revelation and divine law have important functions in pursuit of the knowledge they extol, so that their ethics, while Neoplatonic, has a strong Islamic substance behind it. The Brethren sometimes even modify notions from Greek writings to suit a Qur’anic framework. For example, “greatness of soul,” or kibar al-nafs—a virtue praised by the Greeks but one in which Muslims saw implications of arrogance—becomes a limited virtue, applicable only to leaders, politicians, and kings, who need it to command and govern.30 Conversely, renunciation (zuhd) becomes the highest virtue.31 The Brethren merge multiple strains of thought current in their day to create an outlook and an ethics that is at once “Islamic” and “philosophical.”

One of the finest examples of such syncretism appears in a literary narrative. The Brethren’s twenty-second epistle, translated by Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor as The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn, is an animal fable that tells of an island ruled by a benevolent king. That king belongs to the race of jinn (al-jinn or banī al-jānn), intelligent beings who resemble humanity in their moral autonomy but often elude human sight. It is commonly said in Islamic theology that angels obey God because of their luminous nature, such that they cannot do otherwise, and animals obey God because he has commanded them only to fulfill their animal ends, but humans and jinn must choose obedience, an arrangement supported by the Qur’an and, to some degree, the Brethren’s tale (Q 22:18 and 55:33–4).32 Animals in this tale, however, clearly have an intelligence and moral agency that resembles that of humans and jinn, a situation that Goodman calls “virtual subjechthood.”33 In striving for their own interests, animals have a subjechthood much like human personhood, even if that subjechthood only materializes through the fictional attribution of human language to animals. For the sake of this story, it is important that jinn are neither human nor animal, because the jinn-king must adjudicate between the former two sorts of beings. That is, the author does not mean that jinn are superior, but uses the trope of a jinn-king as a third party, in order to imagine a scenario wherein humans and animals contend in litigation. Humans have recently landed within the king’s precincts, and, while the humans want to claim the animals as their slaves, the animals have come to complain about generations of human abuse. The epistle takes the tone of a courtroom drama as varieties of animals and humans send representatives to make their case for or against human superiority to animals. The humans do not fare well until the very end.

Muslims have had a rich tradition of considering the place and significance of animals in cosmological terms. In his discussion of the Brethren of Purity’s animal fable, Eric Ormsby traces philosophical concern with animal welfare to the rationalist Mu‘tazili school, for whom animal innocence and animal suffering were difficult to reconcile.34 Prior to that, the Qur’an goes beyond mere concern for the welfare of animals, if, according to Sarra Tlili, one reads the text carefully and without anthropocentric bias. Tlili argues in Animals in the Qur’an that the Qur’an presents animals as “persons,” cognizant of their relationship with God, accountable for their own sort of morality, endowed with souls, and worthy of respect.35 Indeed, animals in the Qur’an, along with other nonhuman entities, such as the earth, the heavens, and the mountains, exhibit clear qualities of intelligence and agency (e.g. Q 27:18, 27:22, and 33:72). The Brethren, using the perspectives of animals, take these qualities even further than most, presenting a very early non-speciesist, animal-egalitarian reading of Qur’anic verses.36 As Tlili notes, global industrialization, mass consumption, and scientific experimentation have made our modern world abusive toward animals and their habitats, much more abusive—I would add—than the premodern world.
about which the animals in Epistle Twenty-Two complain. Were the case against us made today, humans would have much weightier evidence against them.

**ANIMAL-CENTRIC TEXTS BEFORE THE BRETHREN**

Two texts stand out as models for the Brethren’s depiction of intelligent animals who make a case against human moral corruption. First is the *Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*) by Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥīẓ (d. 868–9), which raises the question of human superiority to animals. This question might have been a literary representation of an ongoing social debate about ethnic superiority. A group of intellectuals called *al-Shuʿūbiyya* argued that Arabs were not superior to non-Arabs, especially to Persians. This was in response to a system of clientage established by the Umayyad caliphate, one that favored Arabs. While al-Jāḥīẓ had little sympathy for *al-Shuʿūbiyya*, he also saw great dangers in the tribal prejudices of his time. An ironic discussion of animals and speciesist chauvinism might have allowed al-Jāḥīẓ to deliberate on issues of hierarchy and ethnic chauvinism, themes that arise in his book, and in the story of the Brethren as well.

Not only were notions of Arab superiority being questioned by the rising Persian secretary class, but new tools had emerged for reading the Arabic scriptures, mainly in the form of writings translated from Greek and Persian that emphasized human reason. As a Muʿtazilī favorably disposed to such use of reason, al-Jāḥīẓ is eager to establish an affinity between the laws of nature and the wise actions of God. A peek into the lives of animals helps subvert our prejudices about the way the world works, such that al-Jāḥīẓ makes a case, using the Qurʾān and observation, that birds communicate in a way analogous to human communication. By subjecting human superiority to inquiry, al-Jāḥīẓ forces his readers to consider animals in a new light, even if he does conclude that humans are indeed superior because of their intellectual capacity.

Also influential is *Kalīla and Dimna* (*Kalīla wa Dimna*), a book that collects numerous stories about animals and humans, and is considered one of the most influential in Arabic literature, even if some (such as al-Jāḥīẓ) did not appreciate its merits. The Brethren clearly did appreciate the stories, even giving one of its two main characters, Kalīla (a jackal), a prominent role in their own animal fable. The stories, originally Indian and thus in Sanskrit, trace back some 700 to 1,000 years before the time of the Prophet Muhammad, making their way eventually to the pre-Islamic Persian court. They were and are focused on ethics and governance, using parables, often about animals. The Arabic translation (from Middle Persian) became widely influential, for it made its way into a variety of languages, including Hebrew, Greek, New Persian, Turkish, Old Spanish, and Latin. Its fascinating “frame-tale” structure (in which stories contain other stories) became a medieval literary tool to add thematic and structural complexity to disjointed moralizing tales, as one finds in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which was influenced by Boccaccio’s *Decameron* in structure, which was influenced in turn by *Kalīla and Dimna*.

The translator-writer of *Kalīla and Dimna*, ʿAbdallāh Rūzbih ibn al-Muqaffāʿ (d. 757), was a prominent litterateur and not, strictly speaking, a philosopher. Nonetheless, the high station granted to “philosophers,” which was still a relatively undefined group, appears clearly in *Kalīla and Dimna* and indicates that the turn toward ancient knowledge was also a turn in part toward pre-Islamic Iranian (Sasanian) culture. The stories would later appear throughout Arabic and Persian literary works pertaining to ethics, especially ethics as a venture not necessarily tied to the study of scripture and law, such as in the writings of Rūmī. That the mouths of animals conveyed much of the text’s philosophical wisdom delighted premodern audiences. The Brethren point to this very aesthetic component of animal fables in defense of writing their own.

**SOME ETHICAL CONCLUSIONS IN THE BRETHREN’S ANIMAL FABLE**
In George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, animals revolt and take control from their human master. Animals serve as a trope to satirize the Russian Revolution, but, more broadly, to contemplate the dangers of unquestioned revolutionary authority. Human dominance of animals, after all, often goes without much consideration. Animals, despite their resemblances to humans, often at best have the right to be used and even killed *humane*. By questioning that very assumption of power, humans over animals, the Brethren (like Orwell) bring into question two “sibling” institutions in their day, state and religion, that is, state as ruled by the Abbasid caliphs and those recognizing them, and religion as interpreted by corrupt legal scholars, jurists, and others whose interpretation of Islam—they argue—supported such authoritarianism. What is worse is that those at the head of such authoritarian Islam, the caliphs themselves, follow the lifestyles of tyrants and slay God’s friends and the Prophet Muhammad’s progeny, among their other acts of sin and oppression.

The Brethren’s story champions an ethics-based interpretation of religion over an authoritarian and legalistic one. Their ideal religion favors the acquisition of virtue and God-consciousness over rules imposed by the powerful. When religion fails to be based on virtue, its persons of eminence become jurists who bend rules and find loopholes in God’s law. The humans in this story, who ultimately hope to cheat animals into subordination, represent this failed and deceitful worldview. Upon landing on the island, humans began to subjugate the animals. Until then, the animals had lived in harmony because—the Brethren imply—even animal aggression, disorder, and competition are results of human mismanagement. This can be seen in the consumption of meat and the killing of animals; before humans began hunting and herding animals, carnivorous animals subsisted peacefully on carrion. Humans ought to be less concerned with subjugation, the text implies, and more concerned with discovering the harmony, interdependence, and wisdom that exist in creation, even if it might mean adopting a vegetarian lifestyle.

Only a wise person will have a loving appreciation of the purposefulness of all created things. The jinn-king, who is the judge of this story, is precisely such a wise person. The animals, accordingly, beseech this jinn-king, telling him that he would have wept for them had he seen the lack of human compassion as animals were slaughtered, cooked, ridden, driven, and beaten. The jinn-king would weep because such is the rational response to injustice, the intellectually sound response to affairs being out of order. In this story, the race of jinn, hidden yet sentient, represents all those virtuous people who must hide their true identities for fear of hatred or violence. In a similar manner, their king represents the intellect (as well as possibly the hidden Shi’i imam). Like the intellect, the jinn-king is an entity hidden, rational, merciful, and just, and yet taxed with the management of the affairs of all beings. Also, like the intellect, the jinn as a race are not trusted by humans.

The Brethren present their critique of a power-based religion (which is also an “Abbasid” Islam) quite cleverly. Elements in the story intimate the political implications of their virtue ethics. For example, the humans are first represented by an Abbasid, a representative of a realpolitik interpretation of Islam in the epistle. His reading of the Qur’an focuses on verses in isolation, not placed in a larger context. He reads those verses literally, using them to construct a dichotomy between master and slave in his presentation of humans and their subjects, namely, animals. His sermon is debunked by a mule’s. The mule presents a solid linguistic and rational argument that animals have been “subjected” to humans in a manner similar to the sun and the moon, not as slaves, but as facilitators of human perfection. The mule calls attention to a system of interdependence grander than the master–slave relationship, a system of interdependence in which (I might add) even human-to-human relationships play a part, according to the Qur’an (Q 43:32). In other words, humans benefit from other humans as they do from other animals, but in neither case is subjugation justified. It is not that animals belong to humans as chattel, but rather that all of creation is a network of service and benefit. This is the animals’ argument.

Humans, on the other hand, as masters of judicial misconduct, will use any means—including those outside of rational argument—to attain dominance. They consider using spurious documents lost in Noah’s flood to assert their superiority over beasts. (This is an allusion to the use of specious scriptural arguments made concerning Arab superiority in Islam.) While humans make use of pietism and abuse of scripture, the animals are almost obsessively conscious of the importance of sincere intention in all things. An owl, for example, momentarily objects to supplication—a central theme in Islamic religiosity (Q 25:77)—because supplication has no purpose if done without proper presence of heart, intention, and kindness to others.
The same is implied for formality and ritual. Religion, like supplication, fails to be useful if our focus does not shift toward the interior.

The Brethren even present an ethics-based theory of religious tolerance in their exposition. The animals point out that they, despite their sundry forms, live in harmony, under one natural order. Humans, however, while united in form, have countless religions and sects, adherents of which defame and even sometimes kill one another. In response to this problem, a Persian—an ethnicity with which the Brethren self-identify—explains that religion and state have a mutually necessary relationship, and the lesser (the state) is ideally there to protect the lofty aspirations of the greater (religion). All religions, moreover, including not only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, but also the “Brahmins of India,” have one common purpose, namely, to instill a transcendence of the self, often realized as self-sacrifice. Unfortunately for humanity, state overpowered religion, and self-sacrifice became the selfish sacrifice of the lives of others for one’s own ends. Religion became a means for worldly advancement and self-aggrandizement, epitomized by the murdering of the Shi’i imams for the sake of power.

The entire epistle seems aimed at redirecting the human fixation on self-aggrandizement, through its assessment of human superiority. By the end, the discussion shifts from simple observations (and refutations) of what superiority might mean to a profound picture of human superiority to animals. The humans seek a categorical statement about human superiority. What they get instead is a sense of how complex “virtue” really is: All things have it, even if for different ends. Human superiority lies in a potential that merits humans’ eternal life and that allows them to join the select:

If we are obedient, then we find ourselves with the prophets, the saints, the imams, the successors to prophets, the wise, the good, the virtuous, the successors to saints, the renunciants, the righteous, the awakened worshippers who know God, the rational, the insightful, the intelligent, the choicest souls among good-doers, those who resemble God’s noble angels, who rival one another in good deeds, who crave meeting their Lord, approaching Him in all their moments, listening to Him, gazing upon Him, contemplating His majesty and splendor, relying on Him for all affairs, beseeching Him, seeking from Him, hoping in Him, anxious out of fear of Him. If it turns out that we are rejected, then we will find deliverance through the intercession of our prophet, Muhammad. We will then become eternal, living in the garden with houris, youthful servants, as well as repose and fulfillment [Q 56:89], encountering the All-Merciful, and the reward of those who acted most virtuously and were given the best and given more in terms of [intercession on behalf of] us [Q 10:26]. The Exalted has said, “Peace be upon you. You’ve arrived to our delight, so enter it, abiding forever” [Q 39:73].

It is only after such people are mentioned that the animals and jinn-king concede the humans’ point: “Now at last you have brought the truth!” The central thesis is that human beings have an extreme range of potential, at one end possibly resembling angels, and at the other end possibly resembling devils; this range, it seems, makes them subject to eternal life, unlike the animals. Most humans, then, are “superior” exclusively in potential, and perhaps in affiliation with their betters. Yet striving for that potential becomes the only way a notion of human superiority can be salvaged. It is not a static, inherent quality of humans to be higher than animals, but rather an anticipated greatness that occurs only through the pursuit of both knowledge and action. In that regard, the narrative presents ethical choices, such as kindness to animals, as a moral reasoning that does not necessarily rely on law, or even on scripture, but on an awareness of one’s teleological moment: Knowing your place in creation, its limits and its expectations, and knowing the burden upon you to pursue justice and the other virtues, you could not possibly make light of the suffering of animals, or commit any other act of injustice for that matter.

To take this idea a bit further, the use of animals brings us to reassess what it means to be human. One view of animals and nature in general is to see them as part of a background upon which is superimposed the one rational agent, the human, much like a player in a video game might be the only rational agent interacting with virtual reality. This is a view held by the most myopically anthropocentrist humans in the Brethren’s story. Yet when we engage with nature more closely—animals especially—we draw something nonhuman—awakened worshippers who know God, the rational, the insightful, the intelligent, the choicest souls among good-doers, those who resemble God’s noble angels, who rival one another in good deeds, who crave meeting their Lord, approaching Him in all their moments, listening to Him, gazing upon Him, contemplating His majesty and splendor, relying on Him for all affairs, beseeching Him, seeking from Him, hoping in Him, anxious out of fear of Him. If it turns out that we are rejected, then we will find deliverance through the intercession of our prophet, Muhammad. We will then become eternal, living in the garden with houris, youthful servants, as well as repose and fulfillment [Q 56:89], encountering the All-Merciful, and the reward of those who acted most virtuously and were given the best and given more in terms of [intercession on behalf of] us [Q 10:26]. The Exalted has said, “Peace be upon you. You’ve arrived to our delight, so enter it, abiding forever” [Q 39:73].

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possessed variously by plants, animals, humans, jinn, celestial bodies, angels, and even universal entities higher than angels. In other words, virtue becomes part of the cosmological order. Thus, even the word “human,” as the potential perfection of that order (the microcosm as reflected by the macranthrope), takes on more universal significance than the commonly perceived hominoid instantiation called “the human being.” “Human” can then mean “pinnacle of all creation,” realized fully by some humans, not at all by others, and in an attenuated and highly specialized fashion by animals.

This merits some elaboration. Animals, in the Brethren’s fable, function as dimensions of humanness, as facets of what it means to be human in a universal sense. Thus, just as human character traits develop from balances and imbalances within the constitution, so too does the “temper” of a particular animal dictate its peculiar character traits. Adam’s form was arguably the most mediate and perfect, with the most balanced constitution, fashioned on the most astrologically auspicious day. More important, however, is the idea of relative perfection; every creature, and every human, has a capability dictated by its nature (including its biology), and strives to meet its own suited perfection. Thus, justice is not one blanket expectation: Rather, justice for the elephant is one thing, and for the gnat, another.64 While none are identical, all are equal (mutasāwīya) in receiving what they need for a meaningful life in accordance with their place and rank.65

The Brethren’s focus on capability and difference translates to a virtue-ethical interpretation of Sharia, one that relies not on universally codified laws that can be bent through sway, bribes, and exploited ambiguities, but on individual character traits—which are embodied by the variety of animals. Each animal represents a certain perfection suited for a certain situation, and thus represents the varieties of virtuous character traits. Humans (ought to) represent the cumulative acquisitions of all traits, the perfect and complete animal. Were a human to resemble only one or two animals in his or her traits, that human would be “base,” even though for those specific animals such partial perfections are perfections. For this reason, the lion—himself king of the predators—makes the case that humans who resemble predators (namely, kings and other commanders) are only human in form, while those who are the people of “intellect, perspective, knowledge, and acumen have character traits and dispositions that resemble the traits of angels.”66 A human must limit his or her predatory qualities by using the scale of justice as determined by wisdom. In doing so, the human may become loftier than her biology, loftier, in fact, than that which can be expressed by biology, relinquishing the ways and traits of animals for those of angels, “the inhabitants of the heavens.”67 Yet, in pursuit of such perfection, one must know what it means to be human, and to know the human, one must know animals. After all, both come to exist as part of the same natural order, an order in which humans represent the whole and animals represent specific parts. To understand animals is to understand situated perfection, and to understand situated perfection is to understand the morally good.

NOTES

6 Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ wa Khullān al-Wafāʾ, p. 4:121. Ian Netton questions the identification of the imam of the Brethren with a Shiʿi hidden imam, based, in part, on a statement by that imam that some say he is “hidden for fear of those who would disagree with him,” when in fact “he is manifest in their midst.” See Netton, Muslim Neoplatonists, p. 102. I read this differently. The imam seems to mean that he is not actively hiding, but rather unrecognized by those unworthy to know him and hence is absent while present. As Netton and Nader El-Bizri have shown, nevertheless, the Brethren do not exhibit a

7 Callataÿ, “Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’).”

8 Callataÿ, *Ikhwan al-Safa’*, p. 10; Callataÿ, “Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’).”

9 The word “Neoplatonic” refers to a philosophical outlook, influenced by Plotinus’s (d. 270 CE) interpretation of Plato (d. 347 BCE), in which qualities and forms of perfection emanate from a unitary and even “divine” source down to the imperfect sensory world that surrounds us.


11 Callataÿ, “Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’).”


13 Ibid., p. 20–6.


16 Ibid., pp. 2:321–2.


19 Ibid., p. 2:328.


22 Ibid., p. 2:326.

23 Ibid., p. 2:326.

24 Ibid., p. 2:326.


26 Ibid., p. 2:327.


30 There is some suggestion made later in the Rasāʾil, in the animal fable, that those qualities that pertain to human rulers resemble those of predators. See Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, Rasāʾ il Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ wa Khullān al-Wafāʾ, p. 2:202.

31 “Greatness of soul” and renunciation in the writings of the Brethren are discussed by Winter in Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, p. iv. See also Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, Rasāʾ il Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ wa Khullān al-Wafāʾ, p. 1:298.


33 Goodman, “Reading the Case of the Animals,” p. 249.


35 Tlili, Animals in the Qurʾan, pp. 166–209.

36 Ibid., pp. 50–1.


38 Cooperson, “Jāḥeẓ.”


40 Al-Jāḥiẓ, Kitāb al-Ḥayawān, p. 7:57.

41 Netton, Muslim Neoplatonists, p. 92.

42 Irwin, “The Arabic Beast Fable,” p. 42.

43 Riedel, “Kalīla wa Demna.”

44 Ibn al-Muqaffāʾ, Kalīla wa Dimna, p. 56.


46 Ibid., pp. 2:310, 2:303.


50 Ibid., pp. 2:189–93.

51 Ibid., p. 2:172. See also the note by Goodman and McGregor in Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn, p. 103, n. 17.

52 Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, Rasāʾ il Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ wa Khullān al-Wafāʾ, p. 2:196. See also the note by Goodman and McGregor in Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn, p. 147, n. 146. The suggestion is made by the “Arab” in Goodman and McGregor’s text, but by the “Abbasid” in al-Bustānī’s edition.
Chapter Two

Virtue Ethics in Avicenna’s Philosophical Allegories

None of what has preceded is meant to imply that the virtue ethics of Islamic philosophers was entirely or even primarily concerned with the state of the body. For many philosophers, knowing the human body was a first step in knowing virtue and the higher accomplishments of the soul. In part this is because Avicenna and other philosophers largely accepted Aristotle’s division of the soul into vegetative, animal, and rational as three aspects of an interconnected whole, such that the rational soul requires the other two souls in order to come into existence. Despite connections between body and soul, Avicenna, arguably the most important codifier of Islamic philosophy, explicitly rejects the view that the soul is somehow equivalent to the human constitution or is itself a physical constitution. Rather, the human soul, or the rational soul, has an intellect that can be described as two intellects, two “faces” according to Avicenna; one looks downward, toward the body (the practical intellect), and the other looks upward, toward absolute concepts (the theoretical intellect).
Ethics falls within the domain of the practical intellect. The most basic ethical charge of the practical intellect is the management of the body’s forces. This is why the practical intellect “faces the body.” It is also why we can speak of “humoral ethics,” since the body’s forces for Avicenna and others of his day usually corresponded to the humoral model described in the previous chapter. The practical intellect prepares the soul to free itself of the concerns of the body and to undertake the completion of the higher, theoretical intellect.

For Avicenna, the practical intellect has its own subdivisions. Just as the intellect has two faces (practical and theoretical), the practical intellect has three orientations. The first orientation of the practical intellect is toward the appetitive animal faculties of anger and desire, both of which excite emotions that bring a person to laugh or cry, or to feel shame and modesty. These are functions of changes within the body, actions and reactions, but they sometimes involve the practical intellect, since emotions can stimulate lower intellectual functions. The second orientation of the practical intellect is toward the higher animal faculties, imagination and estimation (explained below). When oriented toward imagination or estimation, the practical intellect might engage in creative human endeavors, as well as determinations of matters devoid of universal or higher rational significance. The third orientation of the practical intellect is “toward itself,” that is, toward its own principal potential: the ability to contemplate moral action. When oriented toward itself, with the help of the theoretical intellect, the practical intellect makes moral determinations.

Moral determinations are not completely rational, because social norms help shape them, but they do make use of reason. The practical intellect determines “common moral knowledge” (al-ārāʾal-dhāʾiʿat al-mashhūra), such as knowing that lying and oppression are wrong. This is what helps it begin to bring the drives of the body under control. The forces of the body and those of the practical intellect contest for influence over the soul; one side will end up being active and dominant, while the other side will end up being passive and receptive. The decisions one makes over time, in favoring one side or the other, leave certain propensities in the soul. If those propensities favor the practical intellect, so that the practical intellect is active and the body is passive, then those propensities are virtues, or virtuous character traits (al-akhlāq al-fāḍīliyya). If, however, those propensities favor the body, so that the body is active and the practical intellect is passive, then those propensities are vices, or vile character traits (al-akhlāq al-radhīliyya). In this sense, the intellect and the body each have their own “ethics” or set of traits (akhlāq), and the two vie for predominance.

To understand the place of ethics in Avicenna’s thought, one must first understand the hierarchical structure of human completion, the pinnacle of which is the “acquired” intellect (al-ʿaql al-mustafād, discussed below). The acquired intellect is the full achievement of the theoretical intellect. The theoretical intellect is served by the practical intellect. This is because the practical intellect’s role is to manage the body’s drives and inclinations, which allows the perfection of the higher, theoretical intellect. The practical intellect is served by the inner senses. The inner senses are served by the five outer senses as well as the appetitive faculty. The appetitive faculty is served by desire and anger, which are served by a motive faculty in the body’s muscles. These “animal” faculties are served by the plant faculties, namely the reproductive faculty, which is served by growth, which is served by the nutritive faculty. The nutritive faculty is served by attraction, retention, digestion, and excretion. All of these are served by the four basic natural properties: Heat is served by cold, and both are served by dryness and wetness. In other words, “ethics” has at its foundations the most basic functions of the human body. Ethics is a management of urges originally resulting from that body, and it is a means to the higher pursuits of the intellect.
The soul and its faculties according to Avicenna

The human faculties result from a hierarchy that begins with matter and ends at the intellect, a hierarchy that affects the way human perception and cognition come to exist. As the soul and body take shape, they acquire faculties. Some of these are shared with both plants and animals: (1) nutrition (which itself relies on attraction, retention, digestion, and excretion), (2) growth, and (3) reproduction. Others are shared only with animals: (1) the motor faculty (which allows movement) and (2) the appetitive faculty (which comprises both anger, which repels the unwanted, as well as desire, which attracts the wanted). Humans and many animals have five outer senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. They also have five inner senses: 7

1. **Common sense** (*al-hiss al-mushtarak*), which allows varied sensory input to become unified as one experience and integrated with reason. Avicenna equates this with Aristotle’s *phantasia* (*fanṭāsiyā*).8

2. **Formative or retentive imagination** (*al-quwwa al-muṣawwira* or *al-khayāl*), which stores all the forms received by the common sense.

3. **Compositive or creative imagination**, which creates forms in the soul or mind. It does this by breaking down sensory data, as well as composing or synthesizing both forms and intentions. This faculty allows thought and is constantly active. If this imagination is used to construct rational thought, then it is called the **cogitative faculty** (*al-quwwa al-mufakkira*). If not, if composing forms is its own end, then it is called the **creative imagination** (*al-quwwa al-mutakhayyila*). In addition to receiving forms from the retentive imagination, the creative imagination receives suggestions through the stimulations of the appetitive faculty (the faculty of desire and anger).

4. **Estimation** (*al-wahm*), which determines intention or “meaning” based on sensory data received. The senses, both outer and inner, exist to convey forms and meanings (or intentions) to the rational soul. Form is that which is perceived by the outer senses and then transferred to the inner senses, while meaning (or intention) is, according to Avicenna, “that which the soul perceives of sensible things that the outer senses do not perceive first.”9 The example of estimation usually given is of a lamb’s awareness that it must flee from a wolf, by perceiving not only the form of the wolf, but its intentions, which is done via estimation. Estimation plays a far more complex role for humans, as originally described by Avicenna; many of our aesthetic and emotional judgments, along with those that seem rational but that the intellect must dismiss as irrational, come from the interplay between estimation and reason.10

5. **Memory** (*al-quwwa al-ḥāfiẓa al-dhākira*), which receives and stores determinations from the faculty of estimation. Memory stores meanings perceived by the estimation in a way that the retentive imagination stores forms from the common sense, for Avicenna.

Avicenna locates each of the inner faculties in a different part of the brain. Forms are abstracted and juxtaposed, readying the intellect for universal concepts, which are then reflected from the Active Intellect.11 Avicenna acknowledges that knowledge can be gained from ways that might seem to bypass rational processes, namely, through “witnessing” (*mushāhada*, reference to a visionary encounter with the supersensory) and “tasting” (*dhawq*, reference to a direct experience of the supersensory akin to inspiration). Nevertheless, these are direct means of acquiring intellectual knowledge. Knowledge is still contact with the Active Intellect, even if the demonstrative process has been so immediate that it will seem to have been circumvented.12

**WHO IS AVICENNA?**

As summarized above, Avicenna’s psychology and his consequent view of ethics provided an infrastructure from which countless philosophers after him worked, in Asia, Africa, and Europe, though those views were debated and developed.13 Recognition of Avicenna as the most prominent of all philosophers in Muslim-ruled lands appears in a title of his, “the Principal Master” (*al-shaykh al-raʿīs*). In Europe, the name
“Avicenna” was synonymous with erudition; it is a Latinate adaptation of his patronymic (Ibn Sīnā), current among those Europeans who held his medical masterpiece The Canon of Medicine (al-Qānūn fī al-Ṭibb) above other works of medicine until as late as 1545.14 Avicenna was born to a family of high social standing in a village near Bukhara, in modern-day Uzbekistan.15 His father was a Samanid administrator, which provided Avicenna with a privileged education and access to libraries. This, coupled with his rare genius, helped position Avicenna to become a vizier, administrator, and court physician for numerous, and even sometimes rival, sultanates, as we know from his own autobiographical account. In that account, Avicenna casually describes himself as cerebral to the point of being virtually superhuman—teaching his teacher, completing his study of medicine by the age of sixteen, staying awake every night devouring books and staving off fatigue with cups of wine, dreaming about answers to philosophical problems, and mastering all of the “philosophical sciences” by the age of eighteen.16

Avicenna was both a philosopher and a physician, author of arguably the most authoritative book of Galenic medicine ever written. This pairing was not unusual at the time, reflecting the entangled relationship that all spheres of existence—from the cosmos to the human body—were known to have among philosophers of his day. This interrelationship encouraged philosophical ethicists to see the origins of character flaws in humor imbalances, as we have seen. When discussing “ethics” and Avicenna, two things should be borne in mind. First, Avicenna’s writings—ethics included—presented an entire worldview that took all facets of ontology, epistemology, eschatology, society, and human life (including medicine) into account, within a larger framework that might be called both “Islamic” and “philosophical.” The various branches of premodern knowledge are so interconnected in Avicenna’s thought that Robert E. Hall describes his worldview as “the best-unified general system of thought in Western traditions up to his time and probably in any tradition.”17 Second, while Avicenna’s writings on practical philosophy (ethics and politics) are dispersed and never presented systematically, nevertheless they form a central part of his thought. His many accounts of the soul’s acquisition of virtuous perfection unite the manifold layers of his philosophy and even serve as a litmus test for those other layers.18

AVICENNA, ETHICS, AND ALLEGORICAL STORYTELLING

Like many philosophers, Avicenna sometimes made use of allegorical storytelling. Those allegories deserve consideration, because (1) they explore the full implications of the perfection of human character; (2) they prompted important imitations by other philosophers, including Ibn Ṭufayl and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl; and (3) they highlight the centrality of allegorical writing to classical Arabic (and Persian) literature.19 Avicenna composed two allegorical texts, both in Arabic, The Bird Treatise (Risālat al-Tayr) and Living, Son of Awake (Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān).20 An allegory called The Book of [Muhammad’s] Heavenly Ascent (Miʿrāj-Nāma) in Persian has also been attributed to Avicenna, but there is no evidence of his authorship.21 In this chapter, I will focus on Living, Son of Awake, which I will refer to by its Arabic title, ḥayy ibn yaqzan, since it is the name of a person. I will also discuss a narrative that exists not in Avicenna’s own words, but in a reconstruction and interpretation of his words by a later philosopher. Doing so highlights the way in which these narratives come to life when studied and transmitted, for philosophical allegory is much more a product of a tradition of interpretation than a series of works by individual authors.

According to Peter Heath, in his extensive consideration of allegory in the writings of Avicenna, the Greek terms logos and muthos are helpful in understanding the two major forms of philosophical writing practiced by Avicenna. Logos refers to discursive writing that relies on rational proofs; we might think of philosophical texts that are purely demonstrative or argumentative. Muthos refers to artful, multilayered accounts that we might call narrative.22 Avicenna, Heath contends, held a goal higher than philosophy for philosophy’s sake. Rather, he advocated the completion of the intellect, by any means, and when discursive argumentation and what Heath calls “logos exposition” might have failed to capture the entirety of Avicenna’s vision, Avicenna employed allegory (or muthos) to convey what might have otherwise been missed.23 Allegory, in other words, was Avicenna’s alternate way of communicating philosophy; by trying to decipher the allegory, the reader of philosophy might come upon some of the conclusions that would otherwise be found in logical argument. Avicenna’s understanding of allegory might best be seen in the context of his poetics, because of the shared focus in allegory and poetry on imaginative language. For Avicenna, artistic imitation or mimesis (muḥākā) engenders a sense of wonder that truth (ṣīdq) alone does
not. Yet truth coupled with imitation resonates in a way unlike either alone, because it appeals both to the intellect and to the imagination. It is for this reason that ethical or higher philosophical truths best affect a person when coupled with the artistry of narratives, since narratives recreate and describe human scenarios but in a more meaningful way than the chance happenings of life.

Not everyone agrees that allegory was so vital to Avicenna and his method. Notably, Dimitri Gutas argues that, for Avicenna, allegory was largely recourse for those who could not grasp more direct language “because of their stupidity.” When used by philosophers for other philosophers, allegory aimed either to encourage them to engage in syllogistic reasoning or to allow them a means to share philosophical truths while still concealing them from the masses. In response, Aaron Hughes applies Martha Nussbaum’s consideration of philosophy-as-literature and literature-as-philosophy to an Islamic and Judaic Neoplatonic context. Hughes argues that Avicenna’s allegories cannot be reduced to simplified, elementary symbolic means for conveying higher philosophical truths. Instead, imagination as piqued in allegory is an important tool for realizing such philosophical truths, which makes storytelling one of those “spiritual exercises” that are useful even for able-minded philosophers.

It should be mentioned that these two views are not mutually exclusive. Allegory can awaken realizations using the imagination, while still stimulating a lower register of thought than pure demonstrative reasoning. For the common people, allegory is a primary mode of knowing things. They do not move beyond allegory to grasp philosophical truths, relying entirely on allegories in place of rational demonstration. For the elite, however, allegory is supplemental. If reasoning accomplishes the task, so much the better, but if and when it does not, then allegory might do so. Even for the elite, it seems, certain matters lent themselves to being realized through the imagination. As Hughes argues, Avicenna singles out imagination as that which communicates the ineffable experience of contact with the divine, even if that contact is made through rational means. Imaginative language and hence allegory is a means for bridging “an ontological gap” that exists between human and divine, because it gives dimensionality, context, and form to that which escapes all of these things. It uses the language of body (sensory perception) to localize the lessons of soul, thus addressing humans “as composites of soul and body.” How and when storytelling might have functioned to achieve this may not be something that can be known simply by studying the texts we have at our disposal. Only those students who learned directly from philosophers such as Avicenna would know.

THE ELITE AND THE COMMON IN AVICENNA’S ETHICS

In Avicenna’s allegories, and in his thought more broadly, ultimate human fulfillment lies in the completion of the intellect. Since fulfillment brings pleasure, true pleasure also lies in the completion of the intellect. This aim—completing the intellect—determines Avicenna’s ethics. As he says in his Allusions and Admonitions (al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīḥāt), “It occurs to the imaginations of the common people that sensual pleasures are prevailing and dominant, while supersensory pleasures are weak, but that is all fanciful thinking without any reality.” Preferring the supersensory to the sensory is the basis of becoming one of those whom Avicenna calls the “sublimely unattached knowers,” who, upon death, will have perfectly separated their cares from bodily attachments, turned their attention to the realm of transcendence, and achieved complete happiness. They enjoy some of that separation from bodily cares and hence intellectual pleasure—however incompletely—during life.

Such ultimate fulfillment is not accessible to all, but rather only to the higher, more intelligent ranks of people. Here it should be said that an ethical system that recognizes various types of virtuous conduct or even rankings of people will be open to the charge that it is elitist. This is true of Aristotle’s ethics, at least insofar as his audience, especially in the political implications of his ethics, is exclusive to free men. Because of the egalitarian impulse in modern thought, many of us will object to such ethical systems, or at least to what we perceive as elitist in them. We might try to abstract that which is appealing and that which seems true from that which is dated and hence seems false. In such a manner, we say, we can revive ancient virtue ethics—for example—in a more classless, rankless, and thus “modern” setting. Such an endeavor would be equally difficult when it comes to classical Islamic virtue ethics, whether presented by
philosophers such as Avicenna or by Sufis, because such an ethics (like Aristotle's) is built upon the premise that some are inherently more qualified for perfection than others.

Certainly, Avicenna pondered the wellbeing of all humans, including those who would not or could not achieve the completion of the intellect. For the most part, however, he thought that the basic moral code of revelation—the Sharia—sufficed for the functioning of a society mostly composed of those who are not “knowers.” Non-knowers need incentivizing rewards and discouraging warnings, because worship and renunciation are, for them, merely business transactions from which they hope to gain.36 In the words of a later Andalusian admirer of Avicenna who shared this view, Abû Bakr ibn ʿUṭayfī (d. 1185–6), “most of the people are at the rank of irrational beasts” who need religion in its simplest form, as revealed by the prophets, “to which nothing else can be added” because their natures will reject anything more profound.37 Avicenna and Ibn ʿUṭayfī share a common concern with those who might be “knowers,” if given the proper intellectual and ethical tools to do so.

The allegorical narratives of Avicenna’s writings assume that there are some truths unbefitting for the general public. As Peter Heath has argued, while allegory thrives in societies in which ideas compete, and not in climates of “intellectual totalitarianism,” there must also be some degree of expressive restriction, because otherwise—when expression is free and open—the puzzles and indirect language of allegory become unnecessary.38 In the case of Avicenna’s allegories, the major restriction seems to be that the most profound truths of philosophy would endanger the necessary, if incompletely true, beliefs of the masses.

THE SOUL’S JOURNEY FROM EMBODIMENT TO PERFECTION IN LIVING, SON OF AWAKE

An important element in much of Islamic virtue ethics is the figure of the guide, a person who has achieved ethical perfection and acquired great knowledge, such that he or she can serve as a paragon and a model for others. The epitome of the guide figure is the Prophet Muhammad, whose way (or “Sunna”) is worthy to be imitated by all Muslims. Even Muhammad benefited from the guidance of the angel Gabriel, who led him on his heavenly ascent, delivered God’s revelation to him, and often clarified matters. The guide in Avicenna’s tale—Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān—appears as part of a cycle: His name is “Ḥayy,” which means “living,” but we know that his father, too, was once “living” (“when he was alive”), and one can assume his grandfather before that; each of them was once both living and awake, and, upon death, remains “awake” but is no longer “living.”39 In other words, there will always be a guide who is not only awake (that is, cognizant of the reality of things) but also living (that is, accessible to others who are alive and seeking). This guide, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, is an old man endowed with great wisdom. Henry Corbin, who translated and analyzed this narrative, interprets Ḥayy as a “hierophany” of the Active Intellect, a typological figure of the revealing angel.40 The Active Intellect is the highest point of contact for human knowing. It exists outside of human thought; it is the maker of thought in which knowledge in all its forms exists. Corbin insists, moreover, that the tale of Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān is not an allegory, but a collection of symbols.41 Allegory involves one-to-one equivalences, in which elements of the story stand for something else. Symbols, however, transmit concepts in the form of words and images in a much looser way, one that evokes broad or multiple meanings, instead of serving as a set of allegorical codes. Certain allegorical equivalences in Avicenna’s stories seem too clear to dismiss, so that Corbin’s reading seems perhaps more esoteric than necessary. Still, there is value in thinking beyond one-to-one equivalences. In the case of Ḥayy, for example, Aaron Hughes argues that the old man represents something more socially grounded and multilayered than the Active Intellect. Tied into this figure of a “celestial guide” were a number of connotations familiar to Avicenna’s audience, including prophets, angels, and spiritual masters.42

Avicenna narrates the story as himself, but also—allegorically—as the rational soul. That narrator, accompanied by three friends, encounters Ḥayy and asks for guidance. Ḥayy is a master at discerning character, and announces to the narrator that the narrator’s friends will bring him harm. One friend is a loquacious, fast-talking liar; the second friend is a quick-tempered brute; and the third friend is an insatiable glutton. Two of the narrator’s companions, according to Corbin, are not only the “concupiscible and irascible appetites” but also “psychic Energies, the mass of demonic energies that multiply in the human soul.”43 Perhaps more literally, the three companions seem to represent three bodily forces centered
in the brain, heart, and liver: imagination, anger, and desire, respectively. The loquacious friend, who represents imagination, walks in front of the narrator, giving the narrator a mixture of reliable and unreliable information. This is because imagination rearranges and categorizes sensory forms in ways that lead to rational thought but also to delusions. The brutish friend, who represents anger, walks to the narrator’s right. And the gluttonous friend, who represents desire, walks to the narrator’s left. Avicenna represents the order in nobility of these forces as a matter of direction and placement vis-à-vis the narrator: front (the most noble), right, and left (the least noble).

The interdependence of body and character traits comes to light in Hayy’s proficiency in physiognomy (firāsa), which he uses to detect and remedy character flaws. Physiognomy is, in fact, the ability to determine inner states and ethical proclivities by observing outer features, such as facial structure or the shape of one’s head. Hayy is a master of both the spiritual and the biological; he is, much like Avicenna himself, a sage and a scientist of anatomy. Hayy describes physiognomy as the most valuable science he has gleaned in his travels, proclaiming, “Physiognomy is among those sciences that yields its profit immediately, for it exposes that which every person hides of his own natural disposition (safīyya), which you can then take into account in dealing generously or tight-fistedly with him.”44 People have, according to Hayy, certain shortcomings and tendencies in their very constitution, in the “clay” from which they have been formed, and physiognomy brings awareness of those shortcomings and tendencies. One, then, can better deal with others, and a master of physiognomy can serve as a guide who leads to ethical reform by correcting these congenital deficiencies.45

The Hayy narrative is one of the finest examples of the centrality of the humors to philosophical virtue ethics, because the key to good character lies in balancing the opposing natures within the human constitution. Hayy’s advice to the narrator centers on ways in which he might mitigate the evil tendencies of his friends, much as one might need to mitigate one’s inner natural predispositions to anger and desire. His simple formula for success in dealing with these conflicting inner forces captures the very basis of classical philosophical virtue ethics: “One stratagem that works with such friends is that you use the malicious and irascible one to overcome the frivolous and gluttonous one by restraining him with rebukes and breaking him utterly. Also, you can gradually neutralize the excessiveness of the conceited and rough one by using the charm of the frivolous and flattering one to subdue him.”46 In other words, you can achieve the ethical mean (explained fully in the next chapter) by provoking the sternness and severity within you to practice discipline, thereby curbing your tendency to seek pleasure and comfort. Conversely, if you are dominated by the urge to lash out, assert your superiority, or subjugate others, then soften your demeanor by engaging in simple pleasures and in humor. Use the passions instrumentally—an idea also found in Galen.47 These observations do not just apply to the inner world of human psychology: Hayy’s advice also has political import, since sometimes people are dominated by one or the other character trait, and a learned judge of character can counterbalance one tendency with another to create social equilibrium. Mass imbalances can create societies in dire need of justice, whether those societies (or subsections of those societies) are dominated by anger, desire, or imagination.

Hayy then advises the narrator to listen to the third friend, the one who brings information, but to listen carefully. Just as proper thinking requires distinguishing seeming truths from real ones and the aspiration to strive beyond what is only apparently true, the narrator must verify the information that his deceitful friend presents, because the friend mixes truth with lies. Imagination is inseparable from the thinking process, but the rational soul must use the filters of skepticism and reason and not latch on to the immediate.

The narrator cannot simply be rid of such friends; dumping them is no easy task, much in the same way that we are all burdened with our conflicting lower natures, those that result from our bodies, until death. Hayy describes the death of the body as an individuation (al-tafarrud), a detachment or separation from those nefarious friends, such that the traveler will one day arrive at a land in which they simply cannot survive.48 Unfortunately, death is a “fixed appointment that you cannot outstrip.”49 So, until then, one must try to move internally toward the direction of the guide, Hayy, and away from the evil companions.

Hayy’s advice to the narrator continues and, until the end of the tale, is occupied mainly with describing the inhabitants of various climes, mostly of the earth (West and East), but also beyond the earth—including the angelic realms. Avicenna makes allegorical use of the genre of geographical writing to describe places that both affect and reflect the character of their inhabitants, drawing closer and closer in his descriptions to the
ideal location—near the king. As a guide, Ḥayy intends to lead the narrator to the king, namely God, which is a movement away from conflicted, earthly climes to more celestial ones; one draws near the king even by thinking about him and becoming “awakened” to him.50

Ḥayy’s discussion of the various climes not only reveals extensive geographical knowledge, but also further emphasizes an embodied humoral ethics. Ḥayy teaches the narrator about the effects of various natural and supernatural climes on the physical makeup and resulting character traits of those who inhabit such places. While his concerns in the Ḥayy narrative are too allegorical for medical purposes, Avicenna elsewhere does clearly state that the inhabitants of the fourth clime have the most naturally balanced constitutions and thus psychologies of all habitable climes.51 The fourth clime would occupy the center of the earth, with three climes to the south and three to the north. The parameters of the fourth clime were debated among experts, but usually included Avicenna’s home city of Bukhara as part of the Khurāsān region.52 Interestingly, Abū al-Walīd ibn Rushd (d. 1198), known as “Averroës,” a Spanish commentator on Avicenna, rejects his predecessor’s view. Citing Galen, Averroës asserts that the fifth clime, which includes Averroës’s own homeland of al-Andalus, is the most temperate.53 Most of Avicenna’s contemporaries who wrote about humoral pathology held that one’s surrounding geographical climate and location—especially while the fetus gestates in the womb—affects one’s character and intelligence.54

In viewing human psychology and physiology as affected by one of seven corresponding climes, Muslim writers were probably influenced by the geography of Claudius Ptolemy, though ancient Persian geography had a sevenfold division that also appeared in Muslim writings.55 Not surprisingly, since many of these writers hailed from western Asia, they tended to locate the very center of the fourth clime (the place best suited to a balanced constitution) proximate to Baghdad or Isfahan. They also considered other ethnic groups—those ethnic groups belonging to distant climes, those who tended to be lighter, darker, taller, shorter, or in any way noticeably different in appearance from the Arab/Persian norm—to be uncivilized and congenitally unintelligent, fierce, irrational, or idle.56 Those other ethnic groups engaged in cultural practices and a sense of backwardness that stemmed from a deformed constitution.57 One should bear in mind that, during the Abbasid age especially, Arabs and Persians could easily imagine Islamdom as the pinnacle of human civilization, on account of not only their seeming cultural and political ascendancy, but also the size and design of their cities—especially Baghdad.58 As Muslims became more aware of urban centers elsewhere, especially in the European north, their view of the ethnic groups that occupied that region shifted accordingly.59

The appearance of ethnocentric themes in philosophical allegory tells us something about the social role of “literature” as well. Since writings on geography and ethics would have been considered part of the adab tradition, Aziz Al-Azmeh argues that the ethnic categorizations one finds among premodern Muslim writers such as Avicenna reveal that adab functioned to create a “sense of cultural unity” among powerful elites that stood in contrast to “barbarism in its many gradations.”60 To create a sense of cultural unity by defining the self as good in contrast to a barbaric other equally describes the function of contemporary popular media here in the United States, as can be seen in numerous films such as Body of Lies (2008) and Argo (2012), or the television series Homeland (2011–), as well as more subtly in any production that makes American culture seem normative.61

One can see that Avicenna’s allegory assumes a humors-based or humoral virtue ethics in which one moves, first, away from the conflicting drives of the body and, second, toward horizons of higher realization. This pattern of movement exemplifies a recurring motif in Muslim philosophical literature, namely, the journey and development of the soul. As Aaron Hughes has argued, the story or “career” of the soul is the driving theme in Neoplatonic theory and consequent allegories, including the influential work of Avicenna.61 Avicenna’s ethical system, much like the conversation between the narrator and his guide, begins with the practical monitoring of oneself and leads into the loftier aspirations of ascent into higher spheres of realization and being.

AVICENNA’S VIRTUE ETHICS IN THE “STATIONS OF THE KNOWERS”
One finds a roadmap to higher spheres of realization in Avicenna’s “Stations of the Knowers,” which is the ninth division of his Allusions and Admonitions, a division about spiritual and ethical perfection in a book covering the most important branches of philosophy. An allegory appears in the “Stations of the Knowers” to which Avicenna merely alludes. Perhaps because his audience already knew the story, Avicenna never explains it. The knowers of God, according to Avicenna, have certain states that are best conveyed by a literary narrative, that of Salāmān and Absāl: “Salāmān is a representation describing you, and Absāl is a representation describing your rank in knowing, if you are worthy; so solve the puzzle, if you can.”62 Of course, the problem is that no one seems to know who these fictional figures are, or what exactly happened to them in the story mentioned. Avicenna’s commentator Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūṣī describes the failed attempts of another famous commentator, Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, in trying to decipher the allegory. Rāzī suggests that the riddle might be indecipherable, while also mentioning the possibility that Salāmān represents Adam and Absāl represents paradise. Twenty years after first completing his own commentary, however, Ṭūṣī claimed to have gotten closer to solving the puzzle. He establishes that “Salāmān” and “Absāl” (or “Ibsāl”) refer to names known among Arabic-speakers and even mentioned by the great Sufi master Ibn ’Arabī.63 Avicenna’s tone, according to Ṭūṣī, indicates that the names do indeed refer to a known narrative. Ṭūṣī mentions two versions, the first of which he dismisses on grounds of allegorical inconsistencies.64

In the second version of the tale, the story that Ṭūṣī ends up accepting, two devoted brothers—Salāmān and Absāl—endure the evil machinations of Salāmān’s wife. (The misogynistic theme of the duplicitous wife is a recurring motif in medieval literature, found perhaps most famously, in the case of Arabic literature, in Alī Layla wa Layla, known as The Thousand and One Nights.) The younger brother—Absāl—possesses every human perfection, including the cardinal virtues (in this case, wisdom, temperance, and courage), as well as physical beauty. Salāmān’s wife has fallen in love with Absāl, and does everything in her power to seduce him. She fails, and so decides to marry her younger sister to him, informing her sister that they will share him. She also informs Absāl that he should only lie with his new wife at night and without conversation, since her sister is a shy virgin.65 On Absāl’s first night with his wife, the elder sister has taken his bride’s place, and he notices that she is far too aggressive in bed for a virgin. Moreover, a flash of lightning allows him to discern her true identity. Absāl then decides to separate himself from his sister-in-law. He leaves to fight in battle on behalf of his older brother and expand the kingdom, a task in which he finds much success, becoming the first major world conqueror.66 He returns from his triumphs to see that his sister-in-law still seeks to be with him, so, again, he rejects her. While Absāl is fighting a battle in defense of his brother, his wicked sister-in-law bribes his soldiers to betray him. Near the point of death after being vanquished by the enemy, Absāl is nursed back to health by a beast who breastfeeds him. He returns to rescue his grieving brother, Salāmān. At this point, Salāmān’s wicked wife pays Absāl’s cook and food-taster to poison Absāl, which they do.67 The brother—Salāmān—in his grief, relinquishes his kingdom to one of his vassals and confines his agonies with God, Who reveals to him what really happened with his brother. Then Salāmān forces the wife, cook, and food-taster to drink from the poison that they used to kill his brother, at which point they too die.

In Ṭūṣī’s interpretation of the story, Salāmān is the rational soul (al-nafs al-nātiqa), which means that he represents each of us and is, in a sense, the protagonist. The rational soul might be thought of as our embodied and intelligent self, and the highest achievement for that intelligent self is to perfect and even become completely associated with the very principle of intelligence within it. Absāl is that very principle of intelligence—namely, the theoretical intellect (al-ʿaql al-nazari).68 In more technical terms, the theoretical intellect is that function of the human intellect that has the ability to contemplate universal concepts. As described above, it is supported by the practical intellect (al-ʿaql al-ʿamali), which allows the theoretical intellect to flourish by controlling the body’s forces and achieving virtue. There also exist terms to describe the theoretical intellect’s transformation from potential to completion. In its beginnings, it is the primordial or completely potential intellect (al-ʿaql al-hayūlānī), an intellect only in its capacity to become one. Then, it begins to acquire the tools of intellect, at which point it can be called the intellect by disposition (al-ʿaql bi-l-malaqa). Once its powers of intellect have become complete, it is the actualized intellect (al-ʿaql bi-l-fī l). Finally, Avicenna has a separate term—“acquired intellect” (ʿaql mustafād)—to describe the highest realization of the theoretical intellect.

As an acquired intellect, the intellect is perpetually an intellect and entirely free from its lower possibilities. The agent has reached complete human potentiality.69 At the stage of acquired intellect, the theoretical
intellect has become capable of consistently applying thought to the intelligibles, that is, concepts in their purest form, concepts both celestial (as immaterial beings without bodies) and within the mind. It is also aware of this thinking process. By contemplating these intelligibles, the theoretical intellect—having now become acquired intellect—moves away from the material world toward the supersensory world, and ultimately toward the Active Intellect. Absāl represents the intellect at any stage of this completion. Your “Absāl”—as a reader—is your intellect’s stage of completion.

According to Ṭūsī, the wicked wife of Salāmān represents the body itself—or, at least, its commanding property (al-ammāra) that stimulates desire and anger, that is, those bodily forces that call away from virtue and toward vice. We might call it the “body-force,” or the “commanding soul” (al-nafs al-ammāra). Her infatuation with Absāl represents the body-force’s desire to bring the intellect into subordination, just as the body-force controls lower faculties. The body-force seeks to use the intellect to fulfill its desires for the ephemeral.70 The younger sister represents the practical intellect, which obeys the theoretical intellect when the soul is at the stage of the tranquil soul (al-nafs al-mutma’īna), that is, at peace with its pursuit of good and, hence, in control of its faculties. Here, however, the soul is not in control of its faculties: The wicked wife has taken her younger sister’s place, much like the commanding soul (al-nafs al-ammāra) can appear in the guise of a person’s true wellbeing.71 The lightning that reveals the wicked wife’s true identity is a divine flash—one might say a moment of true inspiration and insight—that occurs for those absorbed in God. Absāl’s rejection of his sister-in-law represents the intellect’s turning away from lower desires. Absāl’s conquest equals the intellect’s learning, its acquiring realities in all the domains. Absāl’s betrayal at the hands of his soldiers is the intellect’s being severed from its faculties, those of sense, imagination, and fantasy, due to its attention to sublime matters. Absāl’s being nourished by milk is the outpouring of perfection upon the intellect from higher realms. In Absāl’s absence, Salāmān has a disturbed state, one that represents the rational soul’s remorse for once having neglected the higher pursuits of the intellect in favor of lower, bodily ones. Absāl’s return to his brother means that things have been set straight: The triumphant intellect has a renewed interest in putting its affairs in order by managing the body’s drives. The rational soul has been reunited with the intellect. The intellect’s detractors, anger and desire, are represented by the cook and the food-taster. The cook works with fire (hence passion, or anger), and the taster is literally a consumer of food (hence appetite, or desire). As the body’s life ends, the intellect fades, and hence it becomes more reliant on these two faculties; this is represented by Absāl’s murder. Salāmān’s killing of the cook and food-taster represents the disappearance of these two faculties upon the death of the body. Salāmān’s relinquishing of his kingdom stands for the soul’s release from the body upon death.72

Ṭūsī presents compelling evidence that this is the story Avicenna intended, including a reference made by a student of Avicenna and an allusion made to lightning (and the revelation of a woman’s face) in a treatise by Avicenna.73 Regardless of whether it reflects Avicenna’s intentions or not, Ṭūsī’s story and his interpretation work. The central theme of Avicenna’s ninth division of the Allusions and Admonitions is the soul’s acquisition of perfection by turning toward the truth and away from bodily urges. Renunciation (zuhd) and worship (ibāda) play important roles in Avicenna’s description of God’s knowers. While non-knowers (ghayr al-ʿārif) engage in the two as business transactions, giving up worldly pleasures and endeavoring in worship for something greater in the next life, knowers see renunciation and worship as means to the Real.74 Thus, we return again to the body and the balance of humors, for—in Avicenna’s view—the body’s pleasures are a person’s greatest obstacle to intellection, to intellectual pleasures (which are the highest forms of pleasure), and to the completion of the intellect.

The body is an obstacle to the completion of the intellect because it is a combination of contradictories, namely, contradictory natures and humors. Not only do these contradictories promise sickness and ultimately death for the human body, but they also point to the lower-order quality and ephemerality of its urges and pleasures. Avicenna makes the case that the intellect finds its perfection in that which is unadulterated—that which is not a mixture of other things. This is because as one ascends, up beyond spirits and heavenly bodies, entities become less mixed, and hence purer.75 Unlike the intellect, all of the other, lesser faculties find perfection and pleasure in mixtures, for while “intellectual perception is unadulterated to its core by any mixture... sensory perception is all mixture.”76 Avicenna says “mixture” because—as you may recall from the Brethren of Purity—sensory existence is a combination of four natures that have descended from one ontological principle. Our human body is a mixture derived from those natures, in the form of the humors. When a person takes pleasure in food, he or she enjoys a mixture of elements, hot and cold, from dirt and from sea, taking pleasure in the satisfaction of the pains of hunger
and the energy that flows through the blood as multiple nutrients. When a lover takes pleasure in the embrace of a beloved, that too is an enjoyment of another composite being, one whose physical makeup—like the lover’s—relies on a balance of elements. While in this body, we are preoccupied by these pleasures that suit the body. Because of these bodily preoccupations, according to Avicenna, “you do not long for your suited perfection,” namely the completion of the intellect.77 According to Avicenna, however, hope does exist: “There is within you some of the means of what might bring you to realize this.”78 One can intuit that higher callings exist.

This contradictoriness within the human frame was an essential principle of premodern Islamic thought, beyond philosophy. One finds this theme almost everywhere, such that the Sufi writer Najm al-Dīn Rāzī Dāya (d. 1256) describes the first human, Adam, as having a frame “founded on four contradictory principles and thus incapable of permanence.” That human frame is “dark and cramped, full of several thousand insects and noisome creatures,” animals ranging from snakes, to pigs, to horses, who are all “in conflict with another, and all too attacking the spirit.”79 Animals, in Rāzī Dāya’s view, are representations of various subhuman tendencies contained within the human microcosm, as we saw with the Brethren. Only the pure spirit (or intellect, for Avicenna) stands outside of these contradictions, suffering, nonetheless, on account of them.

Just as Rāzī Dāya, a Sufi, makes free use of concepts from philosophy, so too did Avicenna incorporate language commonly associated with Sufism into his description of ethical perfection. As the would-be-knoower disassociates herself from the contradictory and muddled longings of the body and aims her ambitions at the most sublime truths of the intellect, she passes through stages that have been best described by Sufi writers. The first degree that the would-be-knoower must reach, according to Avicenna, is that of volition (al-irāda). Through volition, a person becomes a seeker (murīd), one who has made the determination to move toward the highest good.80 Following volition comes self-discipline or “asceticism” (al-riyūd.a), which, when understood, gives us a sense of Avicenna’s higher-level ethical program. Avicenna describes self-discipline as having three progressing stages:

1. Self-discipline involves, first, clearing everything away from the heart, other than the Real. Practices of renunciation help with this first part of self-discipline.

2. Second, self-discipline involves a redirection of one’s perceptive faculties—imagination and estimation (al-takhayyul and al-wahn)—toward mental productions “befitting sanctified affairs, and away from mental productions befitting base affairs.”81 This is done by bringing the commanding soul (al-nafs al-ammāra), which draws one to bodily urges, to obey the tranquil soul (al-nafs al-mutma’īnna), which is at rest with the higher objectives of the intellect. Recall that Absāl’s turning away from his sister-in-law’s advances represented the taming of the commanding soul. Worship tied with contemplation aids this second part of self-discipline, especially when such worship is inspired by melodious sounds and beautiful admonitions spoken by the pure of heart.82

3. Third and last, self-discipline demands that one soften the innermost heart, so that it reaches a state of constant awareness. This is done by maintaining delicate thoughts, and by falling in love, chaste love, not the sort in which appetite-desire dominates, but rather the sort centered on the traits of the beloved.83 Šālih’s love for Absāl, motivated entirely by Absāl’s goodness, resembles the love Avicenna describes here, while the love of Šālih’s wife for Absāl, motivated by misdirected desire and the passions of the body, resembles the love to be avoided.

One who practices such volition and self-discipline will eventually experience “delightful peeks into the gleaming of the Real’s light, as if they were flashes of lightning appearing before him and then disappearing,” much like the flash of truth that appeared as lightning to Absāl.84 These flashes are called “moments” (waqtlawqāt) among the knowers, and they increase with practice. Soon, the person begins to see the Real in almost everything.85 Eventually, after some difficulty, he or she experiences a constant state of awareness; the flashes become a “manifest blaze,” which, at first, the person can call forth at will, but which eventually changes her perception entirely.86 The person always sees things as “something else,” that is, she sees the reality of things, and ascends “from the Realm of Falsehood to the Realm of the Real.”87 The pivotal metaphor of the polished mirror enters Avicenna’s description at this critical juncture, once the knower has passed from self-discipline to attainment (al-nayl). At this highest stage, the innermost
heart—the most hidden core of a person’s identity—becomes “a polished mirror with which she faces the direction of the Real.”88 The joys of this proximity surround the knower, who finds herself oscillating in terms of identity, alternating between the self and the Real, because so little of the self’s identity is left, having been replaced by its reflective property.89 Finally, the knower “disappears from herself, beholding only the most sanctified vicinity,” so that if any sense of selfhood remains, it is only insofar as the soul is a beholder of the Real. Here, Avicenna tells us, “arrival (al-*waṣūl*) has been realized.”90

The social element here might seem sparse, but Avicenna’s advice for the perfection of the self provides an excellent commentary on the social functions of a seemingly individualistic virtue ethics in general, whether Greek, Islamic, or modern. The knower who sees the Real in everything will be innately happy with everything, such that she will share that joy with others. Whether rich, poor, young, or old, all will receive equally kind treatment from her, because “all of them are to [that knower] equally deserving of pity, having busied themselves with useless things.”91 The knower’s kindness, it seems, resembles that of an adult among children, a superior among inferiors. While this might hint at arrogance to us, arrogance is an aggrandizement of self-worth, an undue claim; the knower’s view of her achieved self, however, is merely an acknowledgement of reality. Moreover, the knower has courage, generosity, forgiveness, and clemency because she knows the truth. The virtues are accidental to her knowledge. She knows that death is meaningless, which means she fears nothing and is hence naturally brave. She knows that wealth is meaningless, and will neither add nor, in its absence, take away from her relationship with the Real, making her unattached to wealth and hence naturally generous. She knows that the soul is entirely a mirror for the Real, or ought to be, and so can only be affected by its own success or failure in that regard, not by the actions or wrongdoings of others, making her naturally forgiving. She has no sense of needing the kindness or affirmation of others; she is self-contained. She knows that the only occupation for the knower is being near the Real, or remembering the Real, so she has no interest in harboring resentments and thinking upon what has passed between herself and others, and thus she is naturally clement.92 The knower has flown so far above the needs of the body, and so deeply into the realms of light, that her perspective among humans almost resembles that of God.

NOTES


8 For a discussion of this concept, see Rahman, *Avicenna’s Psychology*, p. 78n2.


13 In illustration of this point, see Heinrichs, “Die antike Verknüpfung von Phantasia und Dichtung bei den Arabern.” See also Black, “Imagination and Estimation.”


16 Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, pp. 16–18.


18 Ibid., p. 63; Mahdi, “Avicenna vii: Practical Sciences.”


22 Heath, Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna, p. 8.

23 Ibid., pp. 156–7.

24 Ibid., p. 163; Hughes, The Texture of the Divine, p. 69.


26 See Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, pp. 340–2, 266.


29 Ibid., p. 95.


31 Ibid., p. 109.

32 Avicenna, al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt, p. 341.

33 Ibid., pp. 348–9.


35 Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?”


39 Avicenna, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 44.

40 Corbin, Avicenna and the Visionary Recital, p. 154.

41 Ibid., p. 135.


43 Corbin, Avicenna and the Visionary Recital, p. 156.

44 Avicenna, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 44.

45 Ibid., p. 44.

46 Avicenna, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 45.

47 Walther Riese comments on Galen’s argument for an instrumental use of the passions in Galen, Galen on the Passions and Errors of the Soul, p. 125.

48 Avicenna, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, pp. 45–6.

49 Ibid., p. 46.

50 Ibid., p. 54.


60 Al-Azmeh, “Barbarians in Arab Eyes,” p. 18.


64 In the dismissed version, Salāmān is a prince who falls in love with his wet-nurse, Absāl, much to the displeasure of his father, the king. Unable to fulfill their love, they throw themselves into the ocean. The king has Salāmān saved magically; he then has his philosopher cure the prince, which occurs by showing the prince a picture of Venus and thus redirecting his love quite literally from the earthly to the celestial.

65 Ṭūsī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, p. 4:54.

66 Ibid., p. 4:54.

67 Ibid., p. 4:55.

68 Ibid., p. 4:55.


70 Ṭūsī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, p. 4:55.

71 Ibid., p. 4:56.

72 Ibid., pp. 4:56–7.

73 Ibid., p. 4:57.

74 Ibid., p. 4:59.


76 Ibid., p. 346.

77 Ibid., p. 347.

78 Ibid., p. 347.


81 Ibid., p. 360.

82 Ibid., p. 360.

83 Ibid., p. 360.

84 Ibid., p. 360.

85 Ibid., p. 361.

86 Ibid., pp. 361–2.

87 Ibid., p. 362.

88 Ibid., p. 362.
Chapter Three
The Virtues, from Philosophy to Scripture: Refining Character Traits in Miskawayh and Ghazālī

This book sits at a meeting place of two ethical traditions that did more than merely borrow from one another. Philosophy and Sufism were, in terms of ethics, rivulets of shared streams of knowledge. Borrowings, correspondences, and deviations between them appear in the case of the philosopher Miskawayh and the Sufism-inclined theologian Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī. This is because Miskawayh’s virtue ethics deeply affected Ghazālī’s ethics, and Ghazālī’s ethics affected countless Sufi writers. Although many Sufi writers opposed the epistemological foundation of philosophy and rejected rationalism as a way to ultimate reality, they tended to be well read and broadly educated. For this reason, they often had no qualms about engaging with philosophical thought to extract that which supported or enhanced their view of the world.

The juxtaposition of philosophy and Sufism has assumed a larger category of ethical writings: Islamic virtue ethics. As discussed in this book’s introduction, this category is nothing new. Nevertheless, since relationships between philosophical and Sufi approaches to virtue will henceforth surface repeatedly, some discussion of established categories of ethical writing might benefit the reader, for context. We can see, thereby, how Miskawayh and Ghazālī might fit into one category of ethical writing here, while—using a different typology—they can also be seen as markedly distinct.

Perhaps the best-known categorization of Islamic ethics is that of George F. Hourani. Hourani divides classical Islamic ethical writings into “normative” ethics (relying on received wisdom) and “analytical” ethics (relying on reasoning). He also divides such writings into “secular” ethics (relying on nonscriptural sources) and “religious” ethics (relying on scripture). This allows Hourani to classify genres of Islamic ethics into four categories:

1. Normative religious ethics. This includes the Qur’an, the Hadith, books of jurisprudence and positive law (which are based on the Qur’an and the Hadith), as well as books about character (akhlāq) or spiritual self-betterment that rely on religiously received wisdom, such as Sufi manuals.

2. Normative secular ethics. This includes extra-scriptural sources that use received wisdom: proverbs, poetry, books of advice to kings, treatises that popularize Greek thought, and books of character that are neither clearly religious nor sufficiently philosophical to belong in any other category.

3. Ethical analysis in the religious tradition. This is what we might call a philosophical approach to religious sources. It includes writings of theologians and legal scholars who, whether they upheld or denied the validity of rational thought as a path to ultimate truth, did so using the tools of rational argument. This is the category that interests Hourani the most, on account of its originality in terms of contemplating the nature of good and bad.

4. Ethical analysis by philosophers. This includes those figures who had less interest in religious sources and either continued the work of the ancient Greeks or combined mystical elements with classical philosophy.

Hourani comments that Miskawayh’s writings belong to “normative secular ethics” rather than to “ethical analysis by philosophers.” This is because his works tell us much about the social norms of that age,
especially of the court, but little about original philosophical thought. This is even more the case for those whose ethics derive heavily from Miskawayh’s, namely Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (d. 1502). Hourani tells us that “their philosophical framework is taken from Aristotle, the Peripatetics, and Neoplatonism,” which is certainly true. Yet part of Miskawayh’s ingenuity was to present a “Greek” virtue ethics that was “Islamic” enough for Ghazālī to incorporate his insights into a monumental book that aimed to revive the entirety of religious learning. After all, Ghazālī’s ethical writings would belong to “normative religious ethics” in Hourani’s system.

Miskawayh’s book on character became the framework by which Ghazālī constructed a very original and long-lasting amalgam of “secular” ethics, scriptural ethics, and the teachings of Sufis. It is true that Ghazālī devoted far more consideration than Miskawayh to scripture and normative theology, but Miskawayh also grounded his ethics in a God-focused view of the human being. The transition from Miskawayh (and other philosophically minded writers) to Ghazālī, despite their differences, is exciting from a historical perspective. It was part of a larger socio-historic process, in which authors took Greek sources and harmonized them with Arabic scripture, leading to offshoot after offshoot, reconfiguration after reconfiguration, as interrelated sciences pertaining to virtue then began to appear in literary, mystical, legal, folkloric, and other contexts. Hourani’s categories do not allow us to see the common concerns of Miskawayh, Ghazālī, and the many other writers who pondered the nature of human character and virtue. While Hourani’s focus on genre is historically valid, the pursuit of self-perfection crossed the many genres Hourani lists. Such genres, moreover, were less invested in the most debated questions about good and bad. Consequently, “virtue genres” correspond to the very categories of ethical writing that interested Hourani least (that is, normative religious ethics, normative secular ethics, and ethical analysis by philosophers). Yet, despite the variety of their backgrounds, Muslim writers within manifold genres offered insight into the cultivation of virtues through self-control and habit.

MISKAWAYH AND THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

As a relatively early figure in Arabic philosophy, the librarian Abū ʿAlī Aḥmad Miskawayh (d. 1030) is open about his indebtedness to Greek sources. He does not strive to be original; he strives, rather, to be correct. Because of his careful approach, his ethical works are important contributions to the history of Islamic thought. He presents Greek virtue ethics in a manner that is detailed and orderly, and in a framework congruous with the Qurʾan, as well as the sayings of the Prophet and other early saintly figures. In that last regard, he enjoyed much help, for Miskawayh inherited a philosophical tradition that had already passed through monotheistic and even Abrahamic filters. This includes the Neoplatonists and earlier Muslim philosophers, such as al-Kindī, whom Miskawayh mentions by name in his most important ethical treatise. Again, then, Miskawayh’s writings are part of a gradual coming-to-be of an Islamic philosophical tradition that will be increasingly distinctive from the Greek side of its lineage.

Miskawayh’s most important book, The Refinement of Character Traits and Purification of Hereditary Dispositions (Tahdhib al-Akhlāq wa Taṭhīr al-Aʿrāq), parallels the writings on ethics by the Brethren of Purity, to a large extent. Using the writings of the Brethren, we earlier established that the three most powerful centers of human life are also the three most powerful centers of inclination, action, and hence ethical choices: The liver, heart, and brain are physical counterparts to the appetitive faculty, the irascible faculty, and the rational faculty, respectively. There is one more important, immaterial counterpart to these faculties, namely the intellect (al-ʿaql). Miskawayh describes the intellect as the very essence (dhāt) and substance (jawhar) of the soul. One might think of Miskawayh’s distinction between the intellect and the rational soul as like that between electricity and an electrical grid; the former is realized through the latter. One must imagine, however, that this electrical grid draws upon and transmits the electricity of the intellect only when it strives to do so, because the rational soul must become an intellect through the process of contemplation. Miskawayh explains this in a treatise written prior to The Refinement that treats the metaphysics of the soul in greater depth. In Miskawayh’s Neoplatonic view of the universe, all things emanate from the First Intellect (al-ʿaql al-awwal) and derive eternal existence through it. For that reason, and since the human is a universe in miniature, the human intellect is the origin of all things human, including the soul itself. The soul’s ethical flight to the virtues and thus to true happiness is in fact a movement toward the intellect, a movement toward its own metaphysical origins.
Using Miskawayh’s treatise on virtue ethics, we can establish the virtues related to these four faculties. Miskawayh’s presentation of the virtues (fadil al-fadā’il) focuses on four cardinal virtues (al-fadā’il al-ra`isa), namely temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice, but includes other virtues. Those other virtues are subdivisional; they are virtues associated with the cardinal virtues. Subdivisional virtues are dispositions of the soul that are more initial or “proximate” than the cardinal virtues. Often, subdivisional virtues require less moral proficiency in the social sphere. Virtue is more complete, for Miskawayh, the more it necessitates measured and often unselfish interactions with others. When a person masters the initial virtues in the social domain so that they become permanent dispositions of the soul, they correspond to the cardinal virtues. The anomaly is liberality. Liberality—which is a subdivision of temperance—is treated almost as if it were a “fifth” cardinal virtue. It is given associated, subdivisional virtues of its own.11 Miskawayh organizes the cardinal virtues in terms of the human faculties and builds on them to discuss other virtues and vices:

1. The virtue of the appetitive faculty is temperance (al-`iffa), which occurs when the soul is able to overcome or control its passions and desires. Temperance requires balance: Excessive license of the appetitive faculty would lead to intemperance, or profligacy (al-sharah). Yet excessive control over the appetitive faculty would be extinguishing desire completely (khumūd al-shahwa), which opposes both the needs of the body and reason.12 Even though temperance is the term for the genus (jins) of this cardinal virtue, it leads to liberality (al-suhbā’) when it becomes a more complete disposition in the social domain. Liberality is, therefore, the more complete virtue of the appetitive faculty or the appetitive soul.13

2. Then there is magnanimity (al-hilm), which leads to courage (or “bravery,” al-shajā’a) when it becomes a more complete disposition in the social domain. Thus courage is the true virtue of the irascible faculty.14 A lack of courage is cowardice (al-jubn); an excess of this faculty of the heart would be recklessness (al-tahawwur).15

3. Wisdom (al-hikma) belongs to the rational faculty. When the virtue of knowledge (al-`ilm) becomes a disposition of constructive contemplation and judicious decision-making—again, especially in the social domain—this leads to wisdom.16 It occurs when there is a balance in the soul’s pursuit of knowledge, such that the soul has avoided ignorance but not veered into extraneous, useless, or even deceptive knowledge. It has achieved the balance between a lack of use of the rational faculty, which we would call stupidity (al-balāh), and an improper or excessive use of it, which we might call insolence (al-safah) or deviousness (al-jarbaza).17 It should be noted that the rational faculty can be used excessively only in practical matters, matters pertaining to human action and social interactions. In terms of theoretical matters, there is no ethical limit to its application.

Of the cardinal virtues mentioned so far, those of the appetitive and irascible faculties benefit the individual on earth, whereas wisdom lives on into the afterlife, as does knowledge.18 In point of clarification, an individual who has liberality and courage will be sought and feared by others; sought because the “liberal” (or “generous”) are inclined to give, feared because the courageous are prepared to fight. Yet because these are “animal” virtues, that is, they proceed from the two faculties that humans share with animals, they do not benefit us after death.

Miskawayh, then, makes room for what we might call “worldly” and “otherworldly” (or “bodily” and “spiritual”) virtues in a manner similar to the distinctions that medieval Christian theologians made between moral, theological, and intellectual virtues.19 Wisdom, when spread to others, will benefit the individual in the afterlife, because it is a “human” virtue. It is a pursuit of the intellect for further enlightenment, which is the very purpose of human existence and which is exclusive to humans. It is for this reason that the “way of wisdom,” and not the way of pleasure or the way of honor, brings about ultimate happiness (al-sa`a`da).20

4. Justice (al-`adāla) is the virtue of the intellect (al-`aql). It is the soul’s ability to keep the three virtues mentioned above in harmony and to manage them.21 Thus, we can say that justice is the soul’s ability to administer, that is, to administer for itself as well as for others in a balanced manner. A lack of justice is injustice (al-zulum) or tyranny (al-jawr).22 An excess of justice is servility (al-mahāna). One is excessively just when one forgoes one’s rights too easily and has an inclination to allow others to do injustice to oneself (al-inzilām).
ON JUSTICE

In discussing justice, Miskawayh is aware that there are more than merely philosophical discussions preceding and surrounding his work. Justice, after all, is one of the names of God according to a famous Prophetic narration, and it is an important theme in the Qur'an. As such, justice features prominently in the earliest Islamic theological debates. Miskawayh, nevertheless, is careful to keep his writings within the confines of his own discipline, philosophical virtue ethics. He only hints at larger implications. One such implication is theological, political, and quite important: Aristotle himself, according to Miskawayh, upheld the need for a wise and virtuous person (ḥakīm fāḍil) to occupy the position of leadership for all. Such a leader would be both “caliph” (the recognized authority) and “imam” (the just leader), as opposed to rule by caliphs given authority merely because of lineage. Divine law, as the legislative balance ordained for all, is the embodiment of the virtue of justice. For such law to function, it must be upheld by an imam who has achieved that balance within the soul.

Miskawayh describes justice as the very principle of intermediateness; we might say “virtue” or “virtuousness” itself. As a virtue, justice is more of a benchmark or standard than a completed ideal. To justice can be added excesses, good and bad, of other virtues. Thus, a just person may have met a necessary measure of liberality to be considered “just,” while a more generous person may still exist. Justice does not correspond to perfection; it is a way to describe those who give others and themselves their due and consistently avoid wrongdoing and vice. Such an understanding of justice is especially important when considering someone characterized by benevolence (tafāḍḍul). Miskawayh points out that benevolence is a quality added to the qualities of the just. Upon consideration, this makes sense. We do not expect a person’s benevolence to contradict his or her sense of justice, but rather to buffer it. That is, we expect the benevolent person to make merciful allowances within what would still be “just” and certainly not “unjust.” Moreover, benevolence cannot be a universal standard of law, while justice can. If benevolence were required universally, then a person would be required to forgo his or her claims against a transgressor. Someone whose property was stolen, for example, would be required to forgive a thief and could not charge the thief in court. Benevolence would, in such a scenario, be an unjust demand, giving no real claims of recompense or requital to anyone. When benevolence occurs in the context of justice, however, it is a voluntary and virtuous waiver of one’s dues.

In this regard, Miskawayh promotes an idea of justice influenced by the Qur’an, in which justice is a balance that exists in all of creation as an act of God’s wisdom. This sense of balance in the universe has led to divine commands regarding humans (al-shari‘a), commands that place certain limits on human actions and require those who do wrong to others to face retribution. In the Qur’anic moral landscape, humans are called to justice (‘adl) as well as to “doing what is best” (iḥsān), a virtue even more desirable than justice (Q 16:90). “Doing what is best” includes forgiving others and forgoing one’s rights. Indeed, the Qur’anic reading of “an eye for an eye” offers two choices to a moral actor. One can impose equal—but never greater—retaliation. Or, one can practice iḥsān, by offering one’s right of retaliation as an act of goodwill, which is the better, more merciful option (Q 5:45 and 2:178). According to Miskawayh, victims of crimes or families of victims should practice benevolence, although they cannot be required to do so. Conversely, a judge must practice justice and not benevolence, because he deals in the rights of others, not of himself. Of course, observing the rights of others first involves observing one’s own rights, such that becoming a just person requires becoming just to oneself. A person does justice to himself or herself by acquiring virtue and achieving a sense of balance vis-à-vis character traits. Then, this just person will do justice to others, to friends, family, and even animals. Miskawayh acknowledges that a city founded on relationships of love (if that is possible) is more nearly ideal than one founded merely on justice.

LOCATING VIRTUE

Miskawayh uses Aristotle’s mean and Plato’s (d. 347 BCE) virtues to organize numerous virtues as branches of the four cardinal virtues. In this, he had some help from his sources. He and other Arabic-
language philosophers had access to an Arabic translation of Galen’s ethics, the original Greek of which has been lost. Galen emphasized Plato’s four cardinal virtues; integrated Plato’s three faculties (appetitive, irascible, and rational) with Aristotle’s three souls (vegetative, animal, and rational); and also incorporated the medicine of Hippocrates (d. ca. 460 BCE).34 This ethical tradition inherited from Galen and the ancients provided the framework by which Miskawayh and his contemporaries categorized, ordered, and ranked the universe. For Miskawayh, minerals are beneath plants; plants are beneath animals; animals are beneath humans; and humans are beneath angels. So too, in the internal universe of the human being, there is ranking. The appetitive soul is as a pig; it ranks beneath the irascible soul, which is as a lion; and the irascible soul ranks beneath the rational soul, which is as a king.35 Within these rankings there are multiple subdivisions, finer designations and degrees, with a climactic ending: In a successful life, the rational soul allows the human being to achieve the rank of angels.36 To do this involves the full realization of two different branches of philosophy, theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy, which reflect two different facets or faculties of the soul, the intellectual or theoretical faculty (al-quwāw wa-l-ʿālima) and the practical faculty (al-quwāw al-ʿāmila).37 This division parallels Aristotle’s “intellectual virtues” (aretai dianoētikai) and “character virtues” (aretai ēthikai).38

The distinction between these two faculties is an important part of Miskawayh’s ethics, just as it is for Avicenna, who—as we saw—discusses the theoretical and practical as two intellects. Miskawayh describes the difference between the branches of knowledge associated with these faculties in a way that differs slightly from Avicenna, although the broader outline is the same. “Virtue ethics” is still the science of practical philosophy, and thus the domain of the practical faculty. Theoretical philosophy is still a matter of acquiring knowledge of the essences and universal qualities of all existences—the domain of the theoretical faculty. Miskawayh, however, describes in more detail an intertwined relationship between the two. Practical philosophy is about putting theoretical knowledge into action, conducting one’s life according to the knowledge that one has. Theoretical philosophy is the “form” (ṣūra) of human perfection, while practical philosophy is the “matter” or “substance” (mādda).39 One might say that the theoretical is the plan, and the practical is its execution. Ultimate happiness lies in achieving both. Miskawayh’s division reflects scenarios we all see in our lives, cases of those who might have developed their theoretical strengths without developing their practical ones. One might imagine a biologist who studies the lungs of various mammals, and yet who smokes. Conversely, it is possible to have a person who knows little and yet succeeds in the realm of action. Imagine a person who has read very little about health, but acts so devotedly and consistently upon the little known that he or she is quite healthy; or knows little, conceptually, about ethics, but is a much more upstanding person than an academically trained ethicist. The practical faculty needs repeated action, habituation, before it pays dividends of virtue in daily affairs.

When a person combines the theoretical and practical intellects, then he or she can become a world in himself or herself, a “microcosm.”40 The person thereafter becomes “God’s representative,” a position first occupied by Adam according to the Qurʾan (Q 2:30).41 If the person succeeds, then, unified with the divine intellect, he or she lives on eternally after death. If, however, the person fails, then his or her afterlife is nonexistence, a dying away much like animals and plants.42 Theoretical and practical philosophy together yield a life of eternal felicity. This last point places Miskawayh with many other philosophers who adhered to sweepingly metaphorical interpretations of Qurʾanic verses describing the afterlife as either bliss or torment, which they interpreted as either union with the intellect or nonexistence. For this reason, many Muslim theologians (such as Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī) and traditionalists saw the views of philosophers as outside the boundaries of normative Islam.

In terms of practical philosophy, Miskawayh holds an Aristotelian view that every virtue is a mean (waṣaṭ) between extremes.43 Courage, for example, is the perfect balance between cowardice (a lack of courage) and recklessness (excessive courage). This results in eight vices that are extreme counterparts to the four cardinal virtues, two extremes for each mean.44 The idea of the “mean” can be illustrated by a circle. The mean is the middle of the circle, because it is the point furthest from the circumference. The circumference represents all the extremes—the vices—that veer from the mean in the center. To hit the mark of modesty (al-hayā’), for example, a virtue that is an offshoot of temperance, you must avoid shamelessness (al-waqīṭha), which is a lack of modesty, but also social awkwardness (al-khurq), an excess of modesty.45 You can see, then, how difficult a venture it would be to achieve this, namely to hit the target once and keep hitting it, but that is what Miskawayh’s virtue ethics asks us to do. The good news is that this becomes easier over time.
Human character, according to Miskawayh, is malleable, a point that he makes by referring to the opinions of his predecessors. The ancients, he tells us, debated the nature of the human being. The Stoics held that humans are good by nature, but are corrupted by those around them.46 Those before the Stoics held that humans are congenitally evil because of the physical “clay” (al-fāna) from which the human body generates, only to be rendered good through training. Galen, however, disproved both by pointing out that “good” and “bad” must come from somewhere within the human being. If people are corrupted or reformed by others, then there must have been both good and bad in human nature to begin with. A few might be born “good,” and many might be born “bad” or somewhere in between the two, but most are subject to reform, according to Galen.47 Miskawayh sides with Galen, mainly because he has observed that some (the bad) are much more difficult to train than others (the good); his experience as an ethical tutor for the sons of powerful men and women emerges clearly in this text.48 Like Galen, Miskawayh sees human beings as having different innate potentials and inclinations, which are not a static part of that person’s nature. Rather, referring to Aristotle in support of his view, Miskawayh envisions human reform as on a spectrum of malleability affected by inborn inclination, not solidified in some unchangeable nature.49 Since there are innate degrees of rapidity or resistance to forming good habits, some youngsters might need more work or might inherently achieve more, in ethical terms, than others, but practice makes it possible for most to acquire some degree of virtue.50 Miskawayh, who will be followed in this regard by many Muslim virtue ethicists, upholds Aristotle’s view that virtue is cultivated through habituation.51 He also echoes Aristotle’s view that legislation—for Miskawayh, divine commands or Sharia—is necessary for aiding a person in the difficult act of developing a noble disposition.52

The reason that the human soul is subject but also resistant to reform is that its character traits (khulqlakhlāq) are twofold. Miskawayh, echoing Galen, defines the character trait as “a state of the soul that calls it to its actions without contemplation or deliberation.”53 The character trait is either natural, coming from the very origins of the constitution (the particular balance of elements in the form of humors that constitute each person), or procured, coming from repeated practice and habituation, “even though its original source might have been deliberation and thought, such that the person repeated the actions of that trait over and over until it became a disposition (malaka) and character trait (khulq).”54 Two hundred years after Miskawayh, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī wrote a Persian expansion—and, in some ways, a commentary—on Miskawayh’s The Refinement of Character Traits. His more detailed comments about disposition and traits can help us understand how classical Muslim virtue ethicists saw the relationship between character traits and habits:

The character trait (khulq) is a disposition (malaka) of the soul that necessitates the appearance of spontaneous action, without either thought or deliberation. Theoretical philosophy has made clear that those qualities of the soul quick to disappear are states (ḥāl), and those slow to disappear are dispositions (malaka). Therefore, the disposition is a quality from among the qualities of the soul; this is the quiddity of the character trait. Its existence in the soul, that is, the cause of its existence, comes from one of two things, either nature or habit.55

The disposition is a fixed quality of the soul. When it becomes realized or made manifest, we call it a trait. Traits are thus fixed habits, not passing moods or the sort of character fads that one sees among adolescents. Some traits are, moreover, “natural” or inherited, while others are “habitual” or adapted. “Inherited” does not refer to the genetic process defined by science today, but rather to the body’s predispositions toward certain psychological tendencies and moral behaviors. For Miskawayh, “inherited” means “inborn,” built into the very constitution by a variety of factors, including lineage, but also including geographical climate and zodiacal positioning, both at the time of birth.56 These would make a person readily inclined to one of the four humors, and thus different character traits, to such an extent, Miskawayh comments, that he or she might become angry, afraid, happy, or sad at the slightest prompting, because the body’s very makeup so readily inclines in that direction.57 That traits can be procured, acquired, or changed through habit over time leaves room for the science of virtue ethics.

Lastly, according to Miskawayh, humans must live with other humans for these virtues to be realized. Seclusion does not work ethically. A person is not practicing the virtues, perfecting them, without others, whereby one practices liberality, for example, or justice. Indeed, someone who is liberal vis-à-vis himself or herself is merely a spendthrift; someone who is protective vis-à-vis himself or herself is merely jealous. These traits become virtues when the element of selflessness decrees that the person acts for the benefit of
others. Humans are communal by their very nature (madaniyyun bi-t-tab) and should ideally live, according to Miskawayh, in cities, so that it is clear that Miskawayh is writing from a metropolitan perspective, indeed a courtly one.58 Divine law brings people together. Therefore, it legislates communal love, as exemplified by three compulsory religious gatherings, (1) the weekly Friday prayers, (2) the yearly ‘Id prayers, and (3) the once-in-a-lifetime Hajj rituals, which bring together the people of (1) the city, (2) its larger surrounding area, and (3) the world, respectively.59 Miskawayh very clearly rebukes the ascetics of his day, who seek acts of renunciation in “mountains and caves,” and hence never foster the virtues in social settings, as humans are supposed to do.60 Virtues require actions and interactions; they are more than simply avoiding vice.

GHAZĀLĪ’S QUEST FOR THE ANGELIC HEART

One preeminent figure who did not take Miskawayh’s advice about remaining in the city, living among others to perfect virtue, is the theologian Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī. Ghazālī, in fact, fled from the capital of the Sunni Muslim world at the time—Baghdad—and assumed a life of isolation, relinquishing his prestigious post at the university because he felt the whole affair to be disingenuous. He feared that the fame he had come to love endangered his very soul. While teaching, he had lost the ability to speak, apparently a psychosomatic symptom of the crisis he endured internally. He told his patrons that he would make the pilgrimage to Mecca, implying a return to his post, but probably never intended to. Instead, he adopted the sort of life of renunciation, contemplation, and isolation that he associated with the Sufis of his day, the very kind of isolation that Miskawayh opposes. The reflective fruits of his period of withdrawal were manifold, but they are best captured in his The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyāʾ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn).61

Ghazālī sought to bring the Muslim community back to life by reviving the study of Islam itself, because Islam—like Ghazālī—was on the verge of spiritual death. These grand aspirations appear in the very title of The Revival, a book that is lengthy but, as any reader interested in classical Islamic thought will admit, never tiresome. In four major sections, Ghazālī analyzes religious worship and obligations (‘ibādāt), social customs and relations (‘ādāt), the heart and what threatens its eternal felicity (muhlikāt), and those virtuous acts and stations—often described by Sufis—that can salvage the heart and return it to contemplating God (munjiyyāt). In this book, Ghazālī brings together what he considers to be the redeeming parts of the learning of his day. For that reason, he places the sources of knowledge he values most, the Qur’an and Hadith, at the forefront, buttressed by the sciences of jurisprudence, theology, and Sufism, while often making his case by employing the arguments and insights of philosophers. It is not that philosophy is a mere dressing for Ghazālī’s work. Ghazālī is incredibly indebted to philosophers, but hopes to use philosophy to uncover or explain the doctrines of Sufism, thereby providing his Muslim readership with a science that is—in his view—the interior dimension of Islam itself, as opposed to something both alien to revelation and subject to the fallibilities of reason. Lenn E. Goodman hits the mark when he describes Ghazālī’s appropriation of philosophical virtue ethics as comprising an “almost invisible weave of virtue ethics into the fabric of a scriptural command ethics.”62 Even though the foundations of his virtue ethics are philosophical, Ghazālī constructs upon those foundations a system that puts the development of character at the service of contemplating, worshiping, and obeying God in a manner congruent with scripture.

Nowhere is Ghazālī’s debt to philosophical virtue ethics more apparent than in the second book of The Revival’s third volume (Book 22). Its title is The Book of Discipline for the Soul, and the Refinement of Character Traits (Tahdhīb al-‘Ulūm al-Dīn), and Treatment for the Diseases of the Heart. The phrase “Refinement of Character Traits” that Ghazālī uses is common to (and indeed defines) philosophical virtue ethics. It is found, for example, in the title of Miskawayh’s manual. Here, while most of the evidence and citations are from the Qur’an, the Hadith, and the sayings of early saints, everything hangs upon the theoretical skeleton of emanation, the mean, the faculties, and the humors that Miskawayh (and others) adapted from the Neoplatonists, Plato, Aristotle, and Galen.63 Ghazālī’s ethics differs from Miskawayh’s in that it bears the conspicuous influence of Sufi renunciation (zuhūd). While Miskawayh advocates a balanced life, Ghazālī advocates a more rigorous and self-denialist ethics that eventually leads to a discussion of “shattering” (in the sense of subduing) the body’s main sources of desire: the stomach and the genitals.
THE BODY AND VIRTUE ACCORDING TO GHAZĀLĪ

As with Miskawayh and the Brethren, the close connection between the body and virtue appears in the writings of Ghazālī. Ghazālī points out that the Prophet, whose character was morally beautiful, was also beautiful in his physical appearance. For that reason, Muhammad prayed, “God, you have perfected beautifully my physical formation, so perfect beautifully my character!”64 In an ideal situation, the inner should reflect the outer: Both should be beautiful. On one hand, the body indicates one’s spiritual symptoms. On the other hand, properly managing the body can contribute to its spiritual cure. The relationship between the bodily and the spiritual can be seen, for example, when Ghazālī discusses the need for hunger. Hunger purifies the heart (al-qalb) by lessening its blood, hence brightening it, and melting away the fat around its outer portion (al-fuʿād). This will render both the physical and the spiritual heart more tender, lifting the veils from both, and allowing the aspirant to witness his or her Lord.65 This occurs because the physical heart is a nethermost reification of the subtle, spiritual heart. Ghazālī even suggests that the reduction of blood through hunger will reduce the ability of demonic suggestive powers to flow through one’s veins, because a hadith describes Satan as flowing through a human like “blood through the body” so that his passageways are best straitened by hunger.66

For Ghazālī, while the body contributes to temporal and thus spiritual knowledge, it does so from the bottom of a hierarchy of awareness: The body exists to serve the senses; the senses exist to gather information for the intellect; the intellect exists to contemplate God’s creation, which it does in service to the heart; the heart exists to witness divine beauty.67 Despite its humble rank in this hierarchy, the body pervades Ghazālī’s metaphors for character ethics, so that he often refers, for example, to “diseases of the heart” in his The Revival, a modified Qur’anic phrase (e.g. Q 2:10) that has since become well known and commonly used in Islamic ethics. Certain salient thematic resemblances brought Ghazālī to use the body and its sicknesses as a metaphor (mithāl) for the soul and its imperfections. Both body and soul begin as incomplete; both require nourishment (whether food or training); both are harmed by excesses and deficiences; and thus both require balance.68 They resemble one another because they are interdependent—one (the soul) the interior counterpart of the other (the body). Ghazālī and other Sufism-inclined ethicists shared this metaphor with philosophers like Miskawayh, who also refers to “diseases” (al-amrāḍ). For Miskawayh, however, concern is for diseases of the soul (al-nafs) and not the heart (al-qalb).69 Such bodily language in ethics was part of a much larger existing trend, as discussed in this book’s introduction.

HABITUATION AND THE MEAN IN SCRIPTURAL TERMS

Extending the metaphor of healing, Ghazālī follows Miskawayh (and thus Aristotle) in prescribing a treatment of opposition for those who suffer from character imbalances. Just as an excess in the body’s humors must be treated by its opposite, such that excessive heat needs cold, so too, Ghazālī says, do the diseases of the heart require treatment by opposites: The miser should force himself or herself to be liberal and spend (al-tasakhkhā), for example.70 Regular “correcting” of the soul results in habituation, much like any repeated action will become second nature. Ghazālī clearly also adopts Miskawayh’s mean in ethics.71 Yet Ghazālī’s use of the mean veers from Aristotelian ethics toward an understanding grounded in his reading of normative Islam and the spiritual path. The “mean” is identified with the Qur’ān’s “straight path,” which gives to the mean and humoral ethics a large degree of eschatological and scriptural force (Q 1:6–7). As mentioned in the Hadith, the “straight path” is a post-resurrection bridge thinner than the blade of a sword, over which all must pass for salvation, and it is also an exemplar for proper living mentioned in the first chapter of the Qur’ān, upon which believers pray to be guided in every daily and supererogatory ritual prayer.72

Ghazālī’s use of evidence proving that the Qur’ān advocates an ethical mean is resourceful. In terms of spending, the Qur’ān declares that believers are to be balanced, to be neither prodigal nor miserly (Q 25:67). In terms of appetite, believers are to eat and drink, but are to avoid waste (Q 7:31). Finally, in terms
of anger, believers are to be resolute toward those who actively and obstinately cover the truth, but merciful toward other believers, and, in all circumstances, they are to subdue their anger, habitually pardoning others (Q 48:29, Q 3:134). Nevertheless, as Ghazālī points out, they should not completely lose the ability to be justifiably angry.73

Moreover, Ghazālī’s mean often does not seem very moderate, because of the ascetic impulses behind his ethics. (The Sufi framework of Ghazālī’s asceticism, or “renunciation,” which is more stringent than Miskawayh’s, will become clearer in Chapter Seven.) Ghazālī’s trepidation concerning the most basic objects of human desire—such as food or sex—is based on the premise that humans naturally incline toward excess and indulgence. Therefore, the soul will desire the forbidden if allowed to indulge in the permissible.74 Even if it happens not to desire the forbidden, the indulgent soul will be heedless by nature and will fail to remember and contemplate God adequately. Self-discipline, after all, has an ultimate objective: the heart’s continuous residing in the presence of God.75

THE PLACE OF SUFISM IN GHAZĀLĪ’S VIRTUE ETHICS

Another notable difference between the ethics of Ghazālī and that of Miskawayh is that Miskawayh only considers childhood and adolescence in his discussion of ethical guides and tutors. Ghazālī, however, has aspirations for training the Muslim community well into adulthood, hoping that the Sufi model of shaykh and murīd (master and pupil) can become both effective and commonplace. He leaves the reader with no doubt that Sufism is, by definition, the epitome of good character.76 As he proclaims in his autobiographical essay The Deliverer from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl):

I came to have certain knowledge that Sufis, in particular, are the foremost on the path of God, the Exalted; their way of life (sīra) is the best; their path the most correct; their character traits (akhlāq) the purest. Indeed were the intellect of the intellectuals, the wisdom of the wise, the knowledge of those scholars who are masters of the law’s secrets, all gathered to improve anything from the ways or traits of the Sufis, they would find no means to do so, for their very movements and stillnesses, their outsides and insides, are drawn from the light of the lamp of prophethood, to which no other light on the face of this earth can lend illumination.77

The pious Sufi master is best equipped to inform a person of his or her faults, though Ghazālī admits that such masters are lacking in his time and that Muslim scholars are too corrupt to improve the situation.78 Thus, he advises his readers deprived of the shaykh, who is the finest of all physicians, to refer to the honesty of friends, the insults of enemies, and the study of the faults of others, to discern their own faults.79 Were one to find a qualified doctor of the heart, that master would probably prescribe hunger at the beginning of the path, because nothing else is more effective.80 He or she might have the pupil take recourse to the fourfold “sabers of asceticism” (asyāf al-riyāḍ.a) as described by the early Sufi preacher and ascetic Yahyā ibn Muʿādh (d. 871–2). To allow oneself only the necessary minimum in terms of eating, sleeping, and speaking, respectively, are three of these sabers. As for the fourth saber of asceticism, Yahyā ibn Muʿādh (and thus Ghazālī) advise a person to do all of this while bearing the injuries (al-adhā) that all of society might heap upon her.81 This contrasts starkly with Miskawayh, who counts suffering injustice as a vice. In addition to denouncing the worldly, certainly formulaic remembrance of God and isolation would be prescribed. It is Ghazālī’s aim that the rational and scriptural foundations of Sufism’s goals and methods of spiritual training seem indisputable.

Ghazālī seeks to draw the Muslim community back to a spiritually revived Islam, placing the human heart at the center of his discussion. His use of the word “heart,” which implies vision instead of intellection, matters greatly. For those seeking a scripturally grounded Islamic spirituality (whom historian Marshall Hodgson calls “Sharia-minded” Muslims), the philosophers’ emphasis on the metaphysical pursuits of the intellect would have sounded quite foreign. Conversely, Ghazālī’s emphasis on the health of the spiritual “heart” would have rung true, because it is a focal point of the Qur’an and Hadith. This important shift in language has given longevity and relevance to the many assertions Ghazālī borrows from philosophical virtue ethics. More than simply a matter of language, the heart is truly center stage in Ghazālī’s ethics. His
attention to human psychology and the states of the heart is meticulous, drawing from Sufism and other sciences as well. According to Ghazālī, the heart must be monitored carefully and constantly, because it is in a constant state of fluctuation—like a fluttering bird, a boiling kettle, or a feather being blown around the desert, as the Hadith canon reports. Moreover, Satan and his armies attack the heart relentlessly, so that only death brings relief for the believer. The gateways through which they can enter the heart are many, including greed, lust, envy, anger, and rashness, multiplied by the desires of the body. Were those Satanic forces to disperse completely from the hearts of human beings, another hadith tells us, we would “gaze upon the hidden dominions of the sky,” that is, we would see the hidden realities of things and would have eyewitness-like conviction about the unseen, as described to us in the scriptures.

Thus, a person must actively polish the heart as one would polish a mirror. In Ghazālī’s use of this metaphor, the mirror can be polished by good deeds and remembrance of God, or dulled by the tarnishing vapor of sins and forgetfulness. The heart covered by such rust or turned in toward itself cannot reflect God’s light, so it understands little. It cannot receive inspiration, so it strays. On the other hand, avoiding sin and developing good character will give the heart more reflectivity, so that knowledge of divine mysteries and awareness of God increase. Avoidance of sin and contemplation of God, in other words, lead to more avoidance of sin and higher contemplation of God. Thus, while Miskawayh advocates the intellect’s reflecting upon the true nature of things to bring it into a state of conformity with the Active Intellect, Ghazālī advocates polishing the heart, orienting it toward God, removing all barriers until it receives via unveiling and inspiration the true reality of everything.

To illustrate the priority of spiritual purification over rational exertion, Ghazālī tells a story about a competition between the Chinese and the Byzantines in which polishing upstages decorating, a narrative that reappears in the poetry of Rūmī. Artisans from China and Byzantium contend with one another as to which of the two groups is superior in terms of painting and decorating. They agree that a certain king will settle their dispute. He decides to have each embellish facing walls of a vestibule (ṣūfā) in his palace, with a curtain hung between them. The Byzantines begin painting using the rarest colors available, while the Chinese enter the vestibule without any paint, and simply begin to clean their wall, polishing it. When the curtain is lifted, the Chinese side has become a “polished mirror.” It reflects the artistry of the Byzantines, but, in being a reflection, adds “radiance and glimmer” to their paintings. Ghazālī’s point is that knowledge is not about adding things to one’s intelligence; it is not about the accumulation of facts or proofs. Rather, knowledge comes from stripping down the heart, removing those traits and traces of selfishness that are excessive, so that it can reflect the divine light from which comes all true knowledge.

The rational sciences, for Ghazālī, are merely a starting point. In knowing the truth, the rational sciences cannot rival divine inspiration, nor the monitoring of one’s heart that leads to such inspiration. That monitoring can be quite painstaking. To give an example, even a simple action—such as turning around to see a pretty woman in the street (a forbidden action)—is preceded by four internal movements within the heart or soul. As these internal movements become actualized into an action, a person becomes increasingly responsible for them: First, there is a bestirring in the heart that a person experiences as a suggestion coming from outside of the heart, followed by an inclination to act that involves movement within the body’s natural desires, followed by the decision to act that is the heart’s choosing between multiple possibilities, followed by the actual intention—a sort of promise to oneself—to act, which all culminates in the actual turning of the head.

ETHICS REALIZED AS PERMANENT REGRET: GHAZĀLĪ’S ALLEGORIES

From a literary perspective, Ghazālī’s writings remain valuable for more than their historical influence. Ghazālī is a masterful writer. In fact, one might say that Ghazālī’s major legacy is his ability to consolidate more effectively and summarize more articulately a body of views shared by many others in his time. He excels particularly in the use of metaphorical writing to make his point clear, often using extended metaphors in the form of allegories. Ghazālī uses metaphors frequently in The Revival as well as in another book, The Alchemy of Happiness (Kīmīyā-yi Saʿādat), which reflects much of the content of The Revival, but with two major differences. First, it is written in Persian, not Arabic, allowing the nonscholarly
audience from his home region of eastern Iran to understand. Second, and probably for the same reason, it is presented and organized very differently. It begins with a study of the self and the heart, leaving legal matters until later, and lacking the detailed scriptural references and philosophical details of the longer, Arabic Revival. For this reason, Ghazālī’s allegories, many of which appear in both books, carry The Alchemy in a way that they do not in The Revival. While metaphors and allegories appear in the Qur’an and in the Hadith, Ghazālī’s lengthy allegories, sometimes with esoteric implications, might be a tool he acquired from the Brethren and other Arabic translations of writings attributed to Hermes, in which such allegorical writing is a common feature. Many metaphors in The Revival and The Alchemy exist only to clarify Ghazālī’s basic ethical teachings. For example, in a paradigm borrowed from the Brethren of Purity, the heart appears as the ruling prince of a city, with the intellect as his vizier, the faculty of anger as his chief of police, and the faculty of desire as his tax collector.

Many of Ghazālī’s most powerful and profound metaphors provide his readers with a stimulus for ethical living that does not appear in Miskawayh’s The Refinement or in philosophical virtue ethics more broadly: the fear of agony after death. Miskawayh, you will recall, proposed that the imperfect soul dies away upon the annihilation of the human frame. Ghazālī famously countered such views of the philosophers as illogical and heretical in his book The Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-Falāsifa). For Ghazālī, the resurrection is not only real, it is the completion of an ethical process that would make no sense otherwise. Ghazālī also counters those Muslim thinkers who took scriptural descriptions too literally, who dismissed the deeper psychological implications of the Qur’an and Hadith’s vivid descriptions of life after death. For Ghazālī, much of that which a sinful person encounters after death emanates from the soul itself, so that there is a psychological torment far more dire than the bodily torment of the afterlife. When a disbelieving and ungrateful person encounters the ninety-nine snakes promised by the Hadith to be in his or her grave, for example, physical snakes do not become reified in the place of burial. Rather, they have already become reified in the soul, as representations of all the foul traits the soul has created within itself during life.

Purifying one’s soul acquires a sense of urgency because, after death, all that remains for a person is the world of the soul. Everything that had once been a mere instrument for the soul’s success will disappear, and the “[outward] forms will conform to spirits and realities.” Death will be excruciating for the person severely attached to the world. For this, Ghazālī has us imagine a man who receives news that his horse has been stolen. The torment in his soul will be less than if he comes to learn that ten horses have been stolen, or all of his wealth, or everything he loves, including his wife and children. Yet upon death a person loses absolutely everything. While a person might deem himself or herself unattached, sometimes the heart has unyielding attachments to something that one realizes only upon losing it. For this, Ghazālī relates a scenario that brought fascination to the men of his day: A man might sell his slave-concubine and, upon losing her, suddenly realize that he was madly in love with her, feeling so much pain that he wants to be submersed in water or fire to forget, suffering an internal anguish that resembles the anguish of the immediate stages after death for those attached to worldly things. One should not suppose that death will bring a sudden cure for all the attachments and ills that exist within the soul. If a person has come to know God, then such knowledge will be magnified and without hindrance when death removes the barriers and the soul’s sight becomes “sharp,” to use a phrase that Ghazālī often borrows from the Qur’an (Q 50:22).

Yet that clarity of sight occurs for everyone upon death, so that the heedless will see very clearly and experience firsthand the full extent to which they have wasted their lives. One should not imagine that, upon death, the soul will suddenly become improved in some ideal way. Using another metaphor, Ghazālī says that if the body is a horse and the soul is a rider, the horse’s death does not mean that the rider becomes infused with knowledge, such that the sackcloth-wearing mendicant (jūlāha) will magically become a master of jurisprudence (faqīh). The horse’s death only means that the rider must walk. The soul will have to use whatever it has of itself; there is only God and the soul, light and the mirror’s ability to reflect, and the knowledge and traits one toiled to gain while alive.

Describing torments beyond the earlier stages of death, Ghazālī provides another allegory (one that does not appear in The Revival) to help the reader grasp how “spiritual hell” can be even more painful than physical hell. (It is a tale that appears in the epistles of the Brethren of Purity.) The story has been told—Ghazālī narrates—of a king who marries off his son, who had enjoyed much wine on his wedding night. Drunk, he searches for his bride, but veers in the wrong direction. The prince finds a home that he believes to be the place of residence of his new wife. He sees people lying around, all asleep, which would
presumably not be unusual after a lively, wine-filled, royal wedding. He searches for his bride among them and comes across one covered in a draping garment, who he figures must be her. The prince notices, upon pulling aside the chador, that her fragrance is lovely, and her use of perfume convinces him that this is his wife. He makes love to her until the morning, sticking his tongue in her mouth. As day arrives, he comes to his senses. He looks around and notices that he is in a Zoroastrian burial tomb. The drunken guests were actually dead bodies. The one he thought to be his bride was an elderly woman who had recently been buried. The perfume was aromatics used on corpses, and the liquids that had come to his mouth from her were the fluids of a decomposing body. Filled with agitation and shame, the prince wants to die, but this is just the beginning. He now realizes that his father, the king, and his host of soldiers will come looking for him. As these thoughts cross his mind, the king and a retinue of his high-ranking generals appear and see him in this state. The prince wishes he could hide beneath the earth to escape his choking sense of disgrace.

Ghazālī describes a realization brought upon by death, namely, that one has traded one’s lofty birthright—knowing God—for that which is base. It is so base, in fact, that it will later seem disgusting. Regret and shame not only become permanent states of the soul after death, they take on forms and images as real or realer than those seen in life. What happens after death resembles, in a way, Ghazālī’s manner of constructing allegories. Ghazālī aims to capture otherworldly meanings in the more vividly grasped form of storytelling. Form and meaning correspond in these stories; the externalities of things match their internal realities. This is not the case during life, when appearances can veer from reality, but Ghazālī tells us that this is what happens after death. After death, we encounter a symbolic realization of what we have earned in life. We encounter the truth that we have fashioned within ourselves. Hence a person should not fear God in the way one fears an irrational punisher or an irritable judge. Rather, one should fear the most momentous of personal failures: a disappointment of God’s expectations for His most noble creation, the human being. More seriously, one should fear the ultimate solidification of this failure in the afterlife. The cultivation of virtues becomes, in Ghazālī’s eschatology and in the allegories he uses, a terrifyingly critical preoccupation.

NOTES

1 Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, pp. 15–16.

2 Ibid., pp. 16–21.

3 Ibid., pp. 21–2.


5 Richard Walzer describes Miskawayh as a “Muslim” who was also a “convert to philosophy,” such that “his arguments in favour of communal prayer and the pilgrimage to Mecca are worthy of his Stoic predecessors.” Walzer, *Greek into Arabic*, pp. 232, 233–4.

6 Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, p. 190. This refers to the Arabic edition. References to Constantine Zurayk’s translation or notes from that translation will be titled *The Refinement of Character*.

7 Ibid., p. 9.


10 Ibid., p. 109.
11 Zurayk observes that this might be because of the importance placed on liberality (or “generosity”) in Book IV of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. See Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, p. 198, n. 14. On the other hand, the opposite might be the case: Considering the salience of temperance in Aristotle’s ethics (as opposed to liberality/generosity), Miskawayh might have given it prominence as a cardinal virtue, even though liberality is the more socially applied virtue of the appetitive faculty and thus would be a more consistent choice as a cardinal virtue within his arrangement.

12 Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, p. 27.

13 Ibid., p. 16. It should be mentioned that the terms “soul” and “faculty,” or *nafs* and *quwwa*, are often interchangeable in Miskawayh’s treatise, not on account of any slip of the pen, but because he does not wish to enter here the debate about whether the soul has many faculties or many manifestations (ibid., p. 51).

14 Ibid., p. 16.

15 Ibid., p. 27.

16 Ibid., p. 16.


18 Ibid., p. 85.


20 Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, pp. 93–4. For Miskawayh’s views on true and ultimate pleasure (as opposed to lower, bodily pleasures), see Adamson, “Miskawayh on Pleasure.” Miskawayh’s view in *On Pleasures and Pains (Fi al-Ladhdhāt wa-l-Ālām)* echoes that of Aristotle, as Adamson states.


22 Ibid., p. 193.

23 Brockopp, “Justice and Injustice.”


25 Ibid., p. 125.

26 Ibid., p. 127.

27 Ibid., p. 130.

28 Ibid., p. 131.

29 Ibid., p. 131.

30 Ibid., p. 132. Compare this perspective to that of the Judge in Chapter Ten.

31 Ibid., p. 133.

32 Ibid., p. 134.

34 Fakhry, “Justice in Islamic Philosophical Ethics,” p. 244; see Ghazālī, *On Disciplining the Soul (Kitāb Ṣadūq ’aṭṭi al-Nafs)*, pp. liii, lixii, lixiii (Winter’s introduction), as well as p. 17, n. a.


36 Ibid., p. 46.


38 *NE* 2.1, 1103a, p. 23.


40 Ibid., p. 41.

41 Ibid., p. 41.

42 Ibid., p. 42.

43 *NE* 2.6, 1107a, p. 31.


45 Ibid., p. 27.

46 See Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlāq*, p. 32. A discussion of Miskawayh’s sources appears in Walzer, *Greek into Arabic*, pp. 220–32. This resource and others are mentioned by Zurayk in his notes to the translation; see Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, pp. 198–9, nn. 2 and 3.

47 Galen makes this clear in his “Diagnosis and Cure of the Soul’s Passions.” See Galen on the Passions and Errors of the Soul, pp. 54–6.


49 Ibid., pp. 33–4.

50 Ibid., pp. 34–5.

51 *NE* 2.1, 1103a, p. 23.

52 *NE* 1.9, 1180b, p. 202.

53 See Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlāq*, p. 31. Galen, in his *Character Traits*, defines the character trait as “a state of the soul that induces someone to perform the actions of the soul without consideration or choice”; see Galen, *Psychological Writings*, p. 135.


57 Ibid., p. 31.

58 Aristotle, whose line of reasoning about virtue and social context mirrors Miskawayh’s, also says that “a human is a social being and his nature is to live in the company of others.” See Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, p. 115; NE 9.9, 1169b, p. 177.


60 Ibid., p. 168.


63 See, for example, Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, p. 3:52.31, where his definition of *khulq*, as well as his discussion of the four faculties, mirror that of Miskawayh. Ghazālī clearly abides by the fourfold humor scheme both in *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (p. 4:425.23) and, more clearly, in *Kīmīyā-yi Saʿādat* (p. 1:87 and, less directly, p. 1:18).

64 Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, p. 3:49.7.

65 Ibid., p. 3:73.28. Ghazālī’s alternating use of *qalb* versus *fuʿād* here indicates the inner heart (*qalb*) versus the outer covering of the heart (*fuʿād*), both in the physical and in the spiritual sense. According to Abū Hilāl al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAbdallāh al-ʿAskarī (d. ca. 1010), such usage is not a lexical distinction but one referenced by the “People of Hadith.” See al-ʿAskarī, *Muʾjam al-Furūq al-Lughawiyya*, p. 433, no. 1742.


69 Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, p. 175.


71 Ibid., p. 3:56.3.

72 Ibid., p. 3:62.3.

73 The above passages appear ibid., pp. 3:55.28, 3:56.5.

74 Ibid., p. 3:65.30.

75 Ibid., p. 3:76.11.

76 Ibid., p. 3:51.19.


Chapter Four

Reason, Revelation, and Discovering the Virtuous in Ibn Ṭufayl’s Literary Thought Experiment

Any book interested in the confluence of virtue ethics and narrative cannot afford to ignore Ḥayy ibn Yaẓān by the Andalusian philosopher Abū Bakr ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185–6). He is known simply as “Ibn Ṭufayl” in Arabic and as “Abubacer” in the Latin-writing premodern West. Ibn Ṭufayl was a court physician and friend to the Almohad caliph Abū Ya’qūb Yūsuf (r. 1163–84), which allowed him to introduce the great philosopher Ibn Rushd or Averroës to his future patron. Ibn Ṭufayl so admired his predecessor, Avicenna, that he wrote a prequel or origin story to Avicenna’s narrative Ḥayy ibn Yaẓān.
Capturing enough of a sense of personal narrative and interiority to be sometimes called a “novel,” Ibn Ṭufayl’s version of this tale tells of the birth and maturation of Ḥayy, the old man in Avicenna’s account. Ibn Ṭufayl presents Ḥayy as an unusually rational human being who discovers the inner meanings of life, and the finest way to live, using only his intellect and his immediate surroundings. Aside from this allegory, little remains from Ibn Ṭufayl—a few treatises on medicine and a correspondence with Averroës.

The mark that this text left on the course of European philosophy and literature certainly deserves the notice given to it in Samar Attar’s *The Vital Roots of European Enlightenment: Ibn Tufayl’s Influence on Modern Western Thought*. Its publication in Hebrew, Latin, Dutch, French, German, and English, sometimes multiple translations in one language, corresponded with its having become one of the more popular books of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. The text garnered such admirers as Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (d. 1716), and Alexander Pope (d. 1744). It is possible that Daniel Defoe’s (d. 1731) *Robinson Crusoe*—considered by some the first novel in English—received inspiration from Ibn Ṭufayl’s text.2 The story of a self-taught genius (the title, in fact, was often rendered as *Philosophus autodidactus*, or “the autodidactic philosopher”) resonated with Enlightenment ideals of individualism, rationality, and even empiricism.3 Indeed, G. A. Russell has argued that John Locke’s (d. 1704) momentous shift toward an empirical epistemology sprung from his exposure to a Latin translation of Ḥayy and to his close friendship with the translator, Edward Pococke, and his father.4 Influence is difficult to prove conclusively, without textual evidence. Details aside, one of the legacies of the text, even beyond the age of the Scientific Revolution, has been Ibn Ṭufayl’s call to a reason-centered curiosity that might uncover scientific, metaphysical, and ethical truths.

**THE BIRTH AND EDUCATION OF ḤAYY**

The narrative begins in a mode akin to science fiction. An equatorial island near India just so happens to have such a perfect balance of heat, and a body of clayish earth with such a perfect balance of natures, that a child was born without mother or father, a case of spontaneous generation. Ibn Ṭufayl’s discussion of the island is one of many places in which he disagrees with other philosophers. The island, named al-Wāqwāq, is not in the fourth clime, but rather right on the earth’s equator, one of many ideas that shows the influence of the Brethren of Purity on Ibn Ṭufayl.5 Contrary to the prevailing opinion among experts of his day, Ibn Ṭufayl theorizes that the equator is not excessively hot, because its exposure to sunlight is more balanced than that of other regions of the earth. (Of course, the equator is indeed hot.) According to Ibn Ṭufayl, the equator has the least fluctuations of hot and cold, the most temperate climate, and—as more important—has the greatest propensity to receive the “highest light” that represents God’s own emanation.6 Thus it happens that, within the earth of that island, a pocket of clay becomes so perfectly balanced in terms of heat, cold, wetness, and dryness, that it contains—in its middle section—a lump resembling the balanced human constitution. When the divine spirit, which is everywhere, attaches itself to that clay, the body begins to form, beginning from the heart. From this lump of clay, Ḥayy comes to be.

The human form, according to Ibn Ṭufayl, is the material body closest to the spheres in perfection, so that the serendipitous occurrence of this proportioned earth, ready to accept soul, is extraordinary, yet possible. This possibility qualifies Ibn Ṭufayl’s narrative as not only an allegory, but also a thought experiment: Is it possible for a person, cultivated in the perfect clime and with the perfect complement of constitution and rational faculties, to uncover the secrets of existence without the aid of society or revealed religion? Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* proceeds to argue that such would be possible by rational reflection upon indicators of the Necessary Existent, or, as the Qur’an says, God’s “signs in the horizons and themselves” (Q 41:53). Ibn Ṭufayl borrows the term “Necessary Existent” (*wājib al-wujūd*), meaning “God,” from Avicenna. It signifies that all beings (other than God) are contingent, in that their nonexistence is a possibility, while God exists by necessity. As Ḥayy will discover in this story, God is the cause and perfection of all contingent things.7 Perhaps anticipating objections about the likelihood of spontaneous generation—a possibility that had been raised by Avicenna and a theme captured allegorically by Plato—Ibn Ṭufayl mentions another possibility at the beginning of his tale.
marriage on a nearby island, placed by his mother in Mosaic fashion in a chest, and marooned on the uninhabited island in question.8

In either case, the child, once born, soon runs out of nutrients and cries out. A deer, who has recently lost her fawn, hears the child’s sound. She nurses him with her own milk, and becomes his foster mother, feeding him with the fruits and other plant-life that she would normally consume. He grows, noticing differences between himself and other animals: Unlike other animals he has neither a proper means of self-defense, such as horns or great speed, nor a natural covering for his genitalia, which he finds embarrassing. He solves both by using his hands, which are far more dexterous than the paws of animals, to make weapons from sticks and clothes from leaves, which he later replaces with the remains of a dead eagle.

The death of Ḥayy’s foster mother is a crucial and touching moment in the story. When the doe lies down and dies, Ḥayy is baffled. He cannot understand why, nor can he see an impediment or wound. Hoping to revive her, he begins to dissect his mother and uses inductive reason to locate the problem not in her limbs, but in her heart, the importance of which Ḥayy infers in its being so central and so well protected by surrounding tissue. He further localizes the life property to the chamber on the heart’s left side, which is empty. Ḥayy soon realizes that he cannot bring his mother back to life, and, indeed, his mother was not the decaying body before him, but the life-force that has escaped it. When Ḥayy later discovers fire, he surmises that fire is the cause of life; a live animal dissection, in which the heat of the animal’s heart’s inner chamber nearly burns him, confirms his hypothesis.
By the age of twenty-one, Ḥayy has not only discovered the source of animal life—the innate heat that spreads from the heart—but has also learned to hunt, store food, ride animals, and make more advanced weapons as well as sewn clothing. Scientifically, Ḥayy’s feats in the seven years that follow are even more amazing. He begins to use similarities and differences he observes among animals, plants, and the rest of the world around him to understand the nature of the sensory and even supersensory world. In line with the narrative’s sense of realism and consistency, Ḥayy first focuses on animals, because he identifies with them. All animals are composed of parts, such as organs; all move, perceive, and sense by their own volition. He then notices that plants grow and consume, and in that sense share qualities with animals, but do not move, perceive, or sense. Lastly, he notices minerals and other substances, which have qualities of height, width, and depth, as does everything else that has a body, much as all bodies are light or heavy. Ḥayy begins to discriminate between the bodies and forms of things and the souls that animate them, such that animals have an animal soul (allowing them to move and sense) and a plant soul (causing them to feed and grow), while plants only have the latter.

During the next seven years, until Ḥayy is thirty-five, his questions become more complex and the reach of his intellect more grand. He sets his sights on the heavens and on the nature of the universe, which he determines is finite. He has begun to see an agent—a cause, mover, and creator of all things—in the world around him. After that, he begins to contemplate the mover more seriously, and comes to the conclusion that, in order to be a cause for needy, perceptible, and limited things, the mover must be self-sufficient, imperceptible, and unlimited. Moreover, Ḥayy considers how he himself has come to know this Necessary Existent, which is not by means of the senses. Rather, only something that transcends bodies and matter can perceive another transcendental being. There is, in other words, something infinite within himself.

Ḥayy also begins to act upon his knowledge. He decides to imitate celestial bodies, such as planets and stars, because he has determined that his own animal spirit resembles them. The animal spirit within the human being has achieved such equilibrium between the four elements (fire, air, water, and earth) that it is almost celestial. It is to the body what planets and stars are to the cosmos: so perfectly formed and balanced that, were it allowed to move, the animal spirit in the human would, like the celestial orbs, rotate around a center and revolve around itself. Beyond this heavenly animal spirit, Ḥayy also has an essence that seems to be derived from the Necessary Existent, which becomes most apparent when he ceases to contemplate other things and even forgets himself. Although these realizations bring him to see the body in a disparaging light, he acknowledges that he has been created to live, so he must serve the body—by eating, for example—but only enough to ward off death, since the needs of the body distract him from focusing on higher matters, especially pondering the Necessary Existent.

Celestial bodies, according to the author, move in perfect harmony with the will of the Necessary Existent. Moreover, their movements also bring benefit to the creatures on earth. So, similarly, Ḥayy determines to be of benefit to the plants and animals of the island, by untangling plants choked by other vines or by assisting animals in need of water. His determination to limit the calls and hence distractions of the body also has him commit to a strict and simple diet. Moreover, Ḥayy does not want to act against the order of life caused by the Necessary Existent, so his diet aims to avoid as much harm as possible. Whenever possible, Ḥayy observes a fruitarian diet that leaves plants unharmed, even preserving and replanting the seeds. In further imitation of the celestial bodies, Ḥayy tries to be as flawlessly balanced and luminous as possible by keeping himself very clean and fragrant. Ibn Ṭufayl’s audience would recognize in this Islam’s many guidelines on personal hygiene. Lastly, Ḥayy tries to imitate the movements of celestial bodies, which reflects their constant congruity with the will of the Necessary Existent. He engages in circular motions, circumambulating the island and spinning around himself, which would strikingly remind Ibn Ṭufayl’s audience of the circumambulation of the Ka’ba on the Hajj and perhaps the Sufi practice of audition and ecstatic movement (samā’).

Ḥayy also seeks to emulate the Necessary Existent, to which the hiddenmost, infinite essence within him corresponds. To achieve this, Ḥayy must try to cease all impeding types of perception and thought; he must close his eyes, block sound coming to his ears, and limit his imagination. Achieving this sublime sense of awareness of the Necessary Existent proves difficult, and Ḥayy will waver between imitating the celestial orbs and trying to emulate the Necessary Existence. Spinning helps him clear everything from his mind, but
eventually he must cease all bodily movements, even those in imitation of celestial bodies. He spends much of his time with his head cast down toward the ground, without food, silent in his cave. Eventually, he achieves a constant awareness of the Necessary Existence and a corresponding unawareness of himself.

AFTER SELF-ANNIHILATION: THE EPILOGUE

In the seventh seven-year portion of his life, Ḥayy achieves the apex of mystical experience, namely, a constant awareness of God limited only by the needs of his emaciated body, of which he longs to be rid.9 Now fifty years old, Ḥayy will be drawn to human society through a chance encounter. Here Ibn Ṭufayl shows his reverence for Avicenna by linking another of his allegories (that of Salāmān and Absāl) to the narrative, creating backstories and an expanded literary universe. In this case, Ibn Ṭufayl responds to the explicit challenge Avicenna presents in his Allusions and Admonitions, in which he declares, “So solve the puzzle, if you can,” the very challenge discussed in Chapter Two. Avicenna’s challenge specifically uses terms from Arabic literary criticism to encourage readers to analyze the proverb of Salāmān and Absāl and expand upon it in prose.10 Here, in Ibn Ṭufayl’s response to that challenge, Salāmān and Absāl are friends belonging to a nearby island. Both are religious, but they represent the two polar proclivities engendered by revealed religion. Salāmān sees religion as a social phenomenon; he finds his life’s purpose in the company of others and is drawn to that part of religion—law—that concerns the functioning of human society. In Salāmān’s opinion, divine law forbids withdrawal from society. It is little wonder that he becomes the chief authority on the island. Absāl, however, seeks inner meanings and solitude. For this reason, he decides to live out the rest of his life as a recluse on a lush island nearby that he presumes to be uninhabited. The island that Absāl has chosen is, in fact, Ḥayy’s island.

For some time, because of Ḥayy’s self-cloistering in the cave, Absāl imagines he is alone. Even when he sees Ḥayy, he supposes that Ḥayy has come to the island for the same reason as himself, seclusion, and so avoids him. Their meeting is a masterfully written scene: Ḥayy has a difficult time recognizing another human being. Absāl—who tries to flee from the curious Ḥayy—is amazed by Ḥayy’s strength, a result of the latter’s supreme constitution and life on the island. In an ironic exchange, Absāl teaches Ḥayy his human language (beginning with naming simple objects) in order to guide him, by means of proper learning, to his religion. This is ironic because Absāl will soon discover that the self-taught, illiterate Ḥayy has an enviable expertise of the mysteries of the universe. Ḥayy’s ideas seem to possess an element of perfection. Developed in abstraction from human language (which is based upon metaphor), Ḥayy’s ideas are based upon images, that is, direct vision.

Indeed, Ḥayy’s knowledge is so superior that Absāl soon longs to become a pupil of Ḥayy. It is Ḥayy who confirms the veracity of Absāl’s religion. Ibn Ṭufayl never defines the religion of Absāl’s home island, though it clearly resembles Islam, and Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān remains vague enough to serve as a commentary on what the author might have imagined all religions to be—assuming that his definition of religion included only those that were monotheistic and scriptural. Ḥayy sees the truth in Absāl’s religion and in the prophet who first communicated it, but he is bothered by that prophet’s use of symbols to represent higher truths in an indirect and adulterated fashion. Ḥayy wonders why the truth was not presented directly. Moreover, he is unsettled by the worldliness of the religion’s rules, rules that assume people will engage in trade and will make transgressions upon another’s property. To Ḥayy, property is a silly concept and a distraction. Why ritual, moreover, when it is far more important to exact stringent restraints on the pursuits of the body? Ḥayy determines to become a guide and teacher for the people of Absāl’s island.

Absāl and Ḥayy journey to the inhabited island. Though riveted by the feral man’s origins, the elect group gathered by Absāl to learn from Ḥayy cannot accept a conception of God divested of human attributes—despite their being the most intellectually gifted residents of the island. His teachings are too weighty for their minds. What is more, the story implies, only the rarest of people can renounce worldly goods in the way that Ḥayy expects.

In the end, Ḥayy realizes that Salāmān and his ilk are correct in their reliance on a religion of rituals, myths, symbols, and legally imposed limits: correct not in terms of absolute reality but in consideration of their
Ibn Ṭufayl ends by disclosing that he has written this tale to refute fallacious views in vogue during his age. He wishes to enkindle the ambitions of those who are worthy to pursue the path of sublime secrets, a path that he, like Hayy, knows well because “I have ascended to towering heights beyond the reach of eyesight.”

KNOWING THE TRUTH, KNOWING THE GOOD: DO WE NEED RELIGION?

Moral philosophers might use fictional scenarios (or science-fictional ones) to isolate a particular problem in ways that the humdrum course of life does not allow. An imagined scenario that poses a question is called a “thought experiment.” In his book *After Virtue*, contemporary Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre isolates key philosophical questions by taking recourse to an imagined scenario, though he uses more of an extended metaphor than a thought experiment. He begins his argument for a modern Aristotelian virtue ethics by imagining a world in which only fragments of the natural sciences remain accessible to us. Public outcry against perceived abuses of those sciences led disgruntled masses to burn scientific books and support the state-sponsored execution of physicists and chemists, leaving only scattered instruments and text-portions, the uses and meanings of which are unknown. People, later, try to revive those lost sciences. The problem, MacIntyre posits, is that, in this attempted revival, only the semblances of science survive; specific terms gleaned from those remains are used in partially correct ways, and the sciences and scientific terminology seem to be whole, despite the fact that the complete reasoning behind them has been lost. Such is the state of moral language in Western thought, MacIntyre says. Moral philosophers after Aristotle rely on terms such as “utility,” “duty,” and “natural rights,” when—as Nietzsche has shown—what is presented as irrefutably rational is in fact more a matter of individual judgment. Instead, MacIntyre makes one of the most famous cases for a contemporary virtue ethics, by arguing that humans are naturally driven by narratives and need some defined end or *telos* from which to derive virtues, which can serve as a ground for laws that actually resonate with human self-betterment, as opposed to pseudo-rational universal dictates. MacIntyre’s revisionist reading of Western thought, in which philosophers took a wrong turn at the Enlightenment, begins, then, with a dystopian metaphor that he references throughout his book.

Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Ḥayy* story aims at no less a task than MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. By proposing the “desert island” scenario, Ibn Ṭufayl has allowed himself to start humanity from scratch. Having removed the elements of society and revelation, he imagines a moral world devoid of religious preconceptions, in which only observations of the natural order shape the truth. Because the author presents Ḥayy’s observations as if they have no prejudice, the reader can accept conclusions drawn from them as certain fact. Of course, like some of the best science fiction accounts, Ibn Ṭufayl’s story has a surprise ending. At the end of *Ḥayy*, the protagonist discovers that religion, in offering diluted and representational truths along with infantilizingly rigid rules, was right about human beings all along. Ḥayy’s hopes were too lofty, and the prophet of Ṣalāmān and Absāl’s religion knew more about human nature in setting the bar so low. Ḥayy’s way of life, like his island utopia, and like the highest reaches of human knowledge and existence, must by definition involve the very few. The integrity of the optimistic and individual protagonist contrasted with the soberingly real deficiencies of human society can be found in much of modern science fiction, as well. One might have in mind, for example, the surprise ending of the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*, when the human protagonist finds a destroyed Statue of Liberty on the coast, realizing that the alien planet was actually “home” and that the ape-scientist Dr. Zaius was right about human beings, in a sense, because their intelligence, when coupled with their beast-like drive for dominance, actually brought about their ruin and their subjugation to other simian species.

Debate has surrounded Ibn Ṭufayl’s views of revealed religion. George Hourani reads the ending of the narrative, in which Ḥayy recognizes the congruity between revelation and philosophy, as a sort of dissimulation. The author’s environment was too religiously conservative to be left without such an ending.
in Hourani’s view. This opinion coincides with a larger thesis held by Leo Strauss, who saw premodern philosophy in general as esoteric and anti-religion, using codes to communicate that which the inflexible masses could not handle. According to this reading, Muslim philosophers—enlightened by the unveiled truth of the intellect—were not really “Muslim” at all by the standards of those with scripture-centered, fideist perspectives. Philosophers’ interpretations of the resurrection and religious moral codes, especially, were dressed in allegories because the truth was simply too seemingly heterodox for most to hear. Léon Gauthier, however, has read the ending as an honest statement of congruity.

When viewed as a thought experiment, the story of Ḥayy clearly explores the question of whether a person can reach the truth without the aid of religion or society. The answer is a resounding “yes.” The protagonist, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, is Ibn Ṭufayl’s interpretation of the possibilities for a human who “blazes with intuition,” as Avicenna had put it. One comes to the conclusion by the end of Ibn Ṭufayl’s tale that revelation—especially symbols and ritual—are only necessary because capacities such as Ḥayy’s are so rare. This is the second question in the thought experiment: Can Ḥayy’s experiences apply to the masses, or even an elect group of people? The answer is, of course, “no.” The masses need religion, that is symbols (or even myth) and ritual, because of the simpler manner in which their minds work. In this, Ibn Ṭufayl’s stance coincides with that of al-Fārābī, an earlier philosopher mentioned along with Avicenna in Ibn Ṭufayl’s introduction to Ḥayy. According to al-Fārābī, prophets of religions were legislators who had perfected philosophical reasoning. The masses, however, could only understand through representations. For this reason, prophets translated their philosophies into parables, images, symbolic language, and other representations that would appeal to the imaginations of the masses. “Philosophy,” known by the prophet-legislator, takes on the configuration of “religion” when presented to the masses, much like a computer programmer might discern and deal with code, when all we see are funny and moralizing cartoons on a computer screen and not the “reality” (here, code) behind them. Religion’s purpose, according to al-Fārābī, is to put philosophically ascertained truths into action, which is virtue. Ibn Ṭufayl’s Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, then, might be categorized among those works that consider religion to be a socially realized, representational, simpler, and yet necessary form of true philosophy. For both al-Fārābī and Ibn Ṭufayl, it is philosophy that presides over religion, much like reason should preside over imagination, and principles should preside over actions.

The difference between these two, the philosopher and the masses, yields two separate but related moral codes, as portrayed in the story. Two sets of “laws” appear in the text. The first is Ḥayy’s private set of restrictions, based on his relationship with reality. They are self-imposed and have the clear objective of facilitating his awareness of the Necessary Existent and his conformity with the natural order. The second set of laws comprises the rules and rituals of Salāmān and his people, namely, “Sharia.” Many of the principles behind the two are the same, such as sensory limitation, volitional abandonment of desires, and recognition of the wellbeing of others. The key difference is that the first set of laws follows naturally from reason and has a telos that is much higher, namely furthering the most sublime level of contemplation. For this reason, the first set of laws is much more exacting. The second set of laws is accepted as divine command and has only become necessary because of people’s social interactions, as well as their inability to relinquish worldly pleasures. The second, lower set of laws serves as a fail-safe for the many who will not pursue the way of Ḥayy, but who nevertheless deserve to be morally good and achieve thereby some level of bliss in the afterlife.

While not everyone can be a Ḥayy (a philosopher-master), or even an Abśāl (a pupil), Ibn Ṭufayl hopes that those few competent souls will read his text, draw inspiration from it, and achieve the loftiest human pinnacles of divine resemblance. If one considers Ḥayy as a precursor to the modern novel, as Emilio González-Ferrín has argued, Ibn Ṭufayl’s grand aspirations might tell us something about the possibilities of the book’s many contemporary descendants. Many novels present protagonists who either figure out their place in the world or help us reconsider ours; we might call this an exploration of selfhood. Perhaps our view of the novel changes when we observe that this modern mode of exploration has at least one ancestor in a philosophical thought experiment, one entrenched in the ethical perfection of the human self, with or without religion.
Like Maclntyre, whose eyes are set on the past as he constructs a philosophical framework for the present, Ibn Ṭufayl proposes a way forward for those who seek the truth, one that he claims is grounded in the concealed, mystical teachings of Avicenna. This claim has been disputed and is the subject of debate among those who study Islamic philosophy. While Ibn Ṭufayl asserts that his blending of Sufism and philosophy merely expands upon Avicenna’s hidden “Eastern philosophy,” Dimitri Gutas finds Ibn Ṭufayl’s claim contestable and probably false—a case of “dramatic license at best or deliberate distortion at worst.” According to Gutas, Avicenna gradually parted ways with Aristotle, developing his own philosophical system, one that was “Eastern” insofar as it was associated with Avicenna’s own homeland, Khurāsān, as opposed to Greece.24 His evidence, based on close textual analysis, is compelling. Salman Bashier, on the other hand, argues that Ibn Ṭufayl simply proclaims that Avicenna had written a book presenting the utter truth of philosophy without Peripatetic arguments. Furthermore, claims Bashier, Avicenna says as much himself.25

Ibn Ṭufayl certainly tries to remain loyal to much of Avicenna’s thought. In Ḥayy’s construction of categories of body (jism) and soul (nafs), he begins to realize the intuitive truth of Avicenna’s cosmology. Bodies—in Avicenna’s thought—are divisible, have dimensions (length, width, and depth), and are ultimately transient. Souls are indivisible, immaterial, and can act only through bodies. The intellect is indivisible, immaterial, independent of bodies, and distinguished from the Necessary Existent only in its contingency upon It.26 Ibn Ṭufayl does not elaborate on or even frequently mention Avicenna’s highest cosmological category, intellect (al-ʿaql), preferring the Qurʾanic language of “light,” language one also finds in Ghazālī. Moreover, as Gutas has shown, Ibn Ṭufayl tries to find a middle ground between two contradictory epistemologies. He valorizes Avicenna’s epistemology, which places prophecy within the purview of the intellect; prophecy is a sort of immediate and rational intuition. At the same time, however, Ibn Ṭufayl endorses Ghazālī’s binary division between the intellect and a higher, prophetic, visionary faculty beyond reason; reason has limited access to the truth for Ghazālī, but not for Avicenna.27

It is difficult to tell, then, if one ought to pursue the truth primarily through reason, or primarily through trying to awaken inner vision. On one hand, Ibn Ṭufayl implies the centrality of the “intellect” throughout the narrative. It appears in Ḥayy’s rational method of attaining the truth, in the use of Avicenna’s allegories, and in a fleeting mention of the “intellect” in the context of supernal “vision.” The “eye of your intellect” as the medium of such vision seems to contrast with Ghazālī’s description of revelation (or “prophecy”) as that “eye.”28 If one focuses on Ḥayy’s rational progression, then the intellect seems to be God’s secret lodged in humanity, so that reason grants human beings access and proximity to the divine. Reasoning, in this scenario, is worship: In rational reflection, we find our ontological and ethical perfection and ultimately our happiness. On the other hand, if one focuses on the author’s description of a vision beyond and purer than reasoning, then one might concentrate one’s efforts on the Sufi practices mentioned throughout the narrative (remembrance, seclusion, silence, sensory limitation, hunger, meditative bodily movement, and benevolence to creatures). Ibn Ṭufayl presents both, side by side.

To what extent, then, is philosophical reasoning in conformity with supersensory (or “mystical”) visionary experience? This question seems to have been current among Muslim intellectuals in the Iberian Peninsula. One such intellectual, Ibn ʿArabī, describes the time when, as an adolescent, he went to Cordoba and met Averroës, the famous Spanish philosopher and friend of Ibn Ṭufayl mentioned above. Averroës had known Ibn ʿArabī’s father, who was an Almohad administrator in Seville. Having heard about Ibn ʿArabī’s mystical visions, Averroës was excited to meet him in person. Ibn ʿArabī’s autobiographical account of the encounter, one that escapes my abilities of paraphrase, captures the tension between direct esoteric knowledge and philosophical rational knowledge:

He embraced me and said to me, “Yes?” I said to him, “Yes.” So, he became even more delighted with me, because I had understood him. Then I sensed why my response had brought him such joy, so I said, “No.” Thereupon he became dejected; his color changed; and he doubted what he had [of knowledge]. He said, “How have you found the affair in unveiling and divine effusion? Is it what philosophical speculation has given us?” I said, “Yes. No. And—between the yes and the no—spirits fly from the matter they quicken and necks from their bodies.” He turned sallow and was overtaken by shivering. He sat down and began saying, “There is no power and no strength except in God.” He knew what I was suggesting to him.29
There was a meeting place in the medieval Iberian Peninsula between Sufism and philosophy, and Ibn ʿArabī and Ibn Ṭufayl stood on either side of the border that separated these two ways of knowing. For Ibn ʿArabī, God’s revelation (Sharia) and personal revelation (supersensory vision) work closely together, while rational thought depends on personal perspective, constitution, and preconceived objectives. While he allows seekers to be receptive to philosophy and even learn from it, Ibn ʿArabī holds that philosophers ultimately fall short because they seek wisdom from rational thought instead of from God directly.

In Ibn Ṭufayl’s story, however, reason and spiritual exertion work hand in hand. The philosopher is a Sufi by default, because it is the rational thing to do. Ḥayy’s proofs of the Necessary Existent start from observing animals and end with observing the heavens, coming to conclusions about God through a premodern scientific method (in a manner that resembles Abraham’s astronomically based conclusions about God in Q 6:76–9). Observation and reason lead him to engage in Sufi practices that reinforce his witnessing of realities. Moreover, not only is the philosopher a Sufi, but the Sufi is a philosopher (and scientist) by default, because one seeks to know the Beloved whose acts encompass everything, and to know the Beloved, one must know the acts. That is, to know God, one must know creation.

WHAT IS IBN ṬUFAYL’S “ETHICS”? 

Part of the social context of Ibn Ṭufayl’s attempt to reconcile Ghazālī (representing Sufism) and Avicenna (representing philosophy) was the rise of Sufism in the Iberian Peninsula. Ibn Ṭufayl was, as Vincent Cornell has shown, a Sufi, a link in at least one Moroccan Sufi chain of initiation, a proponent of Sufi praxis (such as the practice of seclusion), and yet a clearly committed philosopher who championed intellection over mere submission to revealed scripture. While, from a historical perspective, this distinguishes him from many other Muslim philosophers, we might use Ibn Ṭufayl’s Sufi lineage to ensure that we do not confuse his advocacy of reason and observation with several prominent advocates of those same faculties today. Ibn Ṭufayl’s rationalism is incredibly God-focused and Neoplatonic (in that it focuses on an emanation of the One). While a champion of unhindered scientific thought, Ibn Ṭufayl is no Richard Dawkins. The ethics he proposes has none of the positivism of scientism, nor the skepticism of moral relativism. What, then, does the author put forward in terms of ethics?

Ibn Ṭufayl wants to spur readers to seek an unveiling of the unseen truths of existence, an unveiling that becomes a constant vision or “witnessing” (mushāhada) of the Real. He prescribes a benevolence to plants and animals that mimics the way the heavenly spheres benefit all beneath them, advocating—as much as possible—a vegan diet, and even, when possible, a fruitarian one. He prescribes an exacting asceticism aimed at constant remembrance of the Necessary Existent in seclusion. Finally, he prescribes a sincere and selfless desire to guide others to a life of rational contemplation and beatific vision, even if that desire is ultimately proven futile. In terms of practice, Ibn Ṭufayl’s Ḥayy is also a celebration of seclusion. With seclusion comes silence, which is another practice important in numerous Sufi orders. Ḥayy is silent not for forty days, but—aside for some animal noises he makes early in life—for fifty years.

The Sufi-philosophical cosmology of the book also presents a cohesive system in which metaphysics informs ethics. Ibn Ṭufayl belonged to a group of Muslim thinkers who saw truth as emanational; they viewed creation as a process by which God knows himself. In that knowing, God has created mirrors, so that everything that exists reflects some aspect of His perfection, though none as completely as human beings. The telos of human existence is to reflect divine attributes as faithfully as a polished mirror might reflect the sun, an image that appears in Ibn Ṭufayl’s Ḥayy. All of Ḥayy’s actions reflect that goal, and the more he knows about the nature of creation, the more he knows about the nature of God, and the more he can perfect his own soul. Examples of this include Ḥayy’s imitation of the rotation of the heavens, or his emphasis on shutting out sensory input so that, as Ghazālī suggests, the polluting pathways to the heart— likened to rivers feeding into a pool—might be blocked. Consequently the pool of the heart can be cleared of its turbid water, clay, and other obstructing contents, allowing fresh water (prophetic knowledge) to spring up from below. In this example, presented by Ghazālī and implied by Ibn Ṭufayl, there is an assumption that a human being strives for attributes of virtuous perfection, gains knowledge (or light), and then receives even loftier, divine attributes of virtuous perfection, from a higher source. One might
approach the light by rational means, but the job of the moral agent is ultimately reception. Ibn Ṭufayl’s ethics, therefore, derives directly from his metaphysics; metaphysics and ethics are a congruent whole.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON “UNIVERSALS” AS A WAY TO CONCEIVE OF VIRTUE ETHICS

An unwritten theme in Ibn Ṭufayl’s narrative is that the good can be found only by conceiving of universals. Ḥayy’s ability to discern shared properties in things, categorize them, and then conceive of universals brings him to his own philosophical view of the world, including his ethics, his program for life. Ḥayy’s first philosophical realization is one of category, when he determines that the life-force of his deer-mother was of a different category than her body, which has died: “He knew that his mother, who had awakened his love and nursed him, was that now-departed ‘thing’ and nothing else, and from it had proceeded all her actions, not from this functionless body.”36 The doe’s soul was more essentially “she” and boundlessly more elevated than the body it inhabited. Life, action, and will are associated with that life-force, while limits, physicality, and death are associated with the body. It is this realization, Taneli Kukkonen reminds us, that propels Ḥayy away from the body, toward what is more abstract, universal, and thus divine.37

As Ḥayy’s understanding of the world becomes more abstract and conceptual, he awakens to truths (and true habits) that are more universal. Later in his life, for example, Ḥayy’s musings about his mother’s death will mature into a more clearly articulated theory that “decomposition and disappearance are only properties of bodies.”38 Similarly, he will realize that while animals are many in species, there is one spirit shared by all of them, like “one water or one drink divided into many vessels.”39 He has also come upon the notion of quiddity (māhīya) or “what-ness,” which describes individual things as having a conceptual essence that allows for multiple realizations: All deer share in “deer-ness,” so that an individual deer is but one realization of this quiddity.40 This will later allow Ḥayy to create three categories of being (resembling those in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*) that will determine his ethics—the animal, the celestial, and the divine.41 Ḥayy’s animal properties mean that he must endeavor to survive, by eating and drinking. His celestial properties mean that he must be engaged in contemplation and purity. Lastly, his “divine” properties (those he shares with the Necessary Existent) are those that are not bodily. This means that he must devote himself to renunciation and ascetic practice, in order to erase his own selfhood to the degree possible and allow the light of the Real to overcome his perception.

Ḥayy’s observations of celestial bodies are particularly noteworthy, because it is from them that he abstracts a notion of benevolence. Ḥayy notices certain properties common to celestial bodies, properties that allow him not only to categorize them as heavenly, but also to strive to imitate them. They give or limit heat to that which is below them, that which is on earth, and through the influence of their order the lower spheres became prepared to receive “spiritual forms.”42 Their benevolence seems to result from their near-perfection and purity, since their occupation in contemplation of the Necessary Existent makes them unreliable on all that is beneath them. They have “translucence, luminescence, and visibility free from opacity and all varieties of impurity, moving in circles, some rotating around themselves, others orbiting others.”43 From them, Ḥayy learns to be a caretaker of everything on the island; he shields some plants from the sun, for example, or protects them from other plants. Ibn Ṭufayl posits, in other words, that even a concept such as “benevolence” can only be derived from universals, that is, from a grouping of shared qualities that come to be known first by sensory perception.

In Ibn Ṭufayl’s narrative, universal encompasses universal until Ḥayy begins to understand his place in the cosmos as being defined not by his species, but by life, justice, and goodness. His extreme renunciation of the worldly and the sensory (which is his form of temperance) actually means taking part in something more universal than the body. This seems to be an invitation to us, as readers, to do the same. By noticing that all of these categories become subsumed by larger categories, Ḥayy progresses to that which encompasses all universals but is not encompassed by them, which is the Real, or the Necessary Existent, namely God. This is not simply a theoretical process, but—as is evidenced by changes in Ḥayy’s daily
practices—an ethical one as well. Hayy’s process of self-perfection through self-discipline and habits is also a transformative realization of the truth.

NOTES

1 Attar, The Vital Roots of European Enlightenment, p. 40.

2 Ibid., pp. 21–7; Watt, The Rise of the Novel.


5 Ibn Ṭufayl shows clearly the marks of influence of the Brethren’s animal fable. The Brethren see the equator as the finest balance of seasons and day-lengths, most suited for the human constitutional form, for which reason they trace human origins to that area, specifically mentioning India as an ideal location in that regard. See notes by Goodman and McGregor in Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn, pp. 68, n. 16, 206, n. 271. The Brethren also intimate the ethical soundness of a vegan diet. Perhaps more important, their entire fable takes place on an island upon which animals and humans meet for the first time, with a history of oppression taking place elsewhere, and present a case adjudicated by a jinn king. The island for the Brethren allows for a thought experiment in which the superiority of humans to animals is considered, much like Ibn Ṭufayl’s island allows him to consider the human as a blank slate.

6 Ibn Ṭufayl, Hayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 64.

7 Bashier, The Story of Islamic Philosophy, pp. 53–5.

8 Even according to this alternate introduction, Hayy is still born in the vicinity of that which Ibn Ṭufayl has defined as the ideal clime for a balanced human constitution.

9 As Mohammed Rustom highlights, Hayy experiences his annihilation (a topic discussed in Chapter Nine) as a witnessing of the Real in a “polished mirror.” See Rustom, “The End of Islamic Philosophy.”


11 Ibn Ṭufayl, Hayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 130.

12 MacIntyre, p. 258.

13 Ibid., p. 129.

14 Hourani, “The Principal Subject of Ibn Ṭufayl’s Hayy Ibn Yaqẓān,” p. 45. See also Ibn Ṭufayl, Ibn Ṭufayl’s Hayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 47 (Goodman’s introduction).

15 Khalidi, “Orientalisms in the Interpretation of Islamic Philosophy,” p. 27.


18 Ibn Ṭufayl, Hayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 59.
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20 Ibid., p. 92.

21 Walbridge, God and Logic in Islam, pp. 74–82.


26 See Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s lucid explanation in An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines, p. 200.


31 Ibid., p. 32.


34 Ibid., pp. 116–17.

35 Ghazālī, Iḥyāʿ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, pp. 3:74, 8–12.

36 Ibn Ṭufayl, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 75.


38 Ibn Ṭufayl, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 109.

39 Ibid., p. 84.

40 Kukkonen, Ibn Tufayl, p. 56.

41 Ibid., p. 87.

42 Ibn Ṭufayl, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, p. 124.

43 Ibid., p. 125.

Chapter Five
From Humors to Pure Light: Knowledge and Virtue in the Allegories of Suhrawardī

One cannot help but wonder what the general mood was in Aleppo in 1191 during the days when the people of the city learned that their prince had put to death the young philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī. Was the philosopher well known? If so, did the masses see him as a wild-eyed magician, a brilliant sage, or something else? From the little we know it seems to have been a matter of debate, some sympathizing with him, others viewing him as a heretic.1 Still, one wonders if they knew what was lost. By the age of thirty-six when he was executed, having composed his entire corpus in ten short years, Suhrawardī had developed a new philosophical system. This system, he claimed, drew on the wisdom of the ancient Greeks and Persians and rectified shortcomings in Peripatetic philosophy, espoused by Avicenna and his followers. Suhrawardī proposed an epistemology—knowledge by presence—that has engrossed Muslim philosophers to this day, one neatly integrated with his views on the emanation of light.

He called this system in its entirety the “Philosophy of Illumination” (ḥikmat al-ishrāq), and those who aligned with and developed it were called Illuminationist (ishrāqī) philosophers, as opposed to the Peripatetics (mashāʾī). All this from a man whose world-renouncing style of dress brought others to mistake him for a donkey-driver, when he entered Aleppo. Indeed, he was known for his ascetic practices, such as eating food only once a week.2 Yet he was also known to have engaged in magic—causing things to appear instantaneously—and, perhaps fatally, to have acquired the doting regard of the prince, al-Malik al-Ẓāhir (r. 1186–1216). When the prince’s father, the legendary Saladin, learned that Suhrawardī was training his son to become an ideal sovereign for all humanity, an illuminated philosopher-king perhaps in a chain of imams, he demanded that his son execute the philosopher.3 It is likely that Suhrawardī was then deprived of food until he died.

HOW HUMANS ENCOUNTER LIGHT: THE CONSTITUTION, THE FACULTIES, AND KNOWLEDGE

As with Avicenna, Suhrawardī’s system is far too comprehensive to be summarized succinctly. What follows pertains to his ethics. God, in Suhrawardī’s philosophy, is the “Light of Lights,” and His light emanates throughout creation. (To identify God with light has precedence in verse 24:35 of the Qur’an, which describes Him as “the light of the heavens and the earth.”) The central intermediary for the relationship between God’s pure light and the light we can experience is the Active Intellect (which is also the angel Gabriel), the last in a chain of ten intellects. Suhrawardī describes the intellects as the highest, dominating lights; these lights are simultaneously archetypes and angels, each of which brings lower entities into being by contemplating them. The highest realization of the human essence has its angelic archetypes in Gabriel.4 This light bestows upon the human frame life and virtue; when embodied, it becomes “the commanding light” (al-nūr al-isfahbad or al-nūr al-mudabbir), which is the sense of “I” or “ego” that each person has, or in other words, the soul.5

This commanding light manages the human frame, which Suhrawardī calls the “human fortress” (al-ṣayāṣī al-insānī), an abode of darkness that allows the light to act, know, perfect itself, and eventually ascend toward the source of light. In fact, this commanding light has no place in which it can be located, nor can it be approached in any way, other than in its management of the human frame.6 The commanding light comes into existence only with the formation of each individual human body. Because it comes to exist in the body and because of the varieties of bodily constitutions, every soul is unique, even if it originates in a universal light.7 One should be careful not to confuse Suhrawardī’s views with those of Mani (d. ca. 277 CE), the founder of Manicheism, especially since Suhrawardī himself rejects Manichean doctrines, such as dualism, as inauthentic to the ancient Persian tradition.8 Light (or the soul) is not trapped or even located in the body; the soul is immaterial and merely acts through the body. You might think of it as analogous to your sense of volition or “will,” which came to exist as your body (including the brain) formed. Your will directs your body to act but cannot be located as an actual measurable “thing” inside your body. This is even more the case if you imagine your will as originating in God’s will.
Because the commanding light has come into being as a relationship between light and matter, the soul must come into individualized existence through the body. That body, that human fortress, is a collected balancing of properties (the four natures), and it is dark. Yet the human body still excels other bodies in its receptivity to the perfections of light. This means that the human soul is more distinguished (sharīftar) than the souls of other beings possessing constitutions, namely, animals and plants.

At times, Suhrawardī’s views on the body and its faculties seem to resemble those of Avicenna, especially in The Book of Radiance (Partaw-nāma). For example, he agrees with Avicenna that the faculties are housed within the brain and that those faculties support the intellect. Yet there are differences. The concept of a “common sense” adopted by Avicenna—a consolidation of various senses into one sense—allows Suhrawardī to make a case for all of the inner senses as ultimately being one unified perceptive ability of the commanding light. The soul (or the “commanding light”) encounters knowledge in differing ways through the external senses, so that a multiplicity of five senses occurs only because of the commanding light’s veiled state within the tenebrous confines of the body. The senses are, therefore, varied instantiations of the singular essence of the commanding light, namely, the sort of perception or knowledge that we might call “vision.” Concerning retentive imagination, Suhrawardī, in contrast with Avicenna, holds that the imagination reflects forms existing eternally in a separate realm. Concerning creative imagination, Suhrawardī disagrees with the Peripatetics in that he sees the creative imagination as engaged not only in an “activity” but in a mode of “perception,” because he posits that imagination engages in a kind of vision after a veil has been lifted. Suhrawardī emphasizes that knowing is a process of uncovering forms that exist elsewhere in a realm between the material and the immaterial, even for the imagination. Just as light has emanated to encompass everything, so too the human soul (the commanding light) emanates in the process of knowing, returning to the origin of light. In this process, archetypal lights direct the human soul toward objects of knowledge.

Suhrawardī’s divergent stance on knowledge came after a time in which he was “taxingly occupied, absorbed in thought and acts of self-renunciation because the question of [the nature of] knowledge weighed so heavily upon me, and that which had been mentioned in various books was not, in my opinion, sound.” Aristotle appeared to Suhrawardī in a dream, commanding him, “Refer to yourself, and it will be resolved for you.” In this conversation, Aristotle presents philosophical demonstrations that knowledge in its most absolute form mirrors the manner in which a person knows himself or herself, such that the immaterial human essence is “intellect (al-aql), the subject of intellection (al-ʿāqil), and its object (al-maʿqūl).” Intellection (al-taʿaqqul) is “the presence of a thing to the immaterial human essence, or, if you prefer, its lack of absence.” It is a “lack of absence” because to know is actually to receive a thing, unveiled and illuminated. This is why many can know directly, without undergoing demonstrative knowledge. In fact, in the dream, Aristotle appears completely unimpressed by Islamic philosophers who have mastered the intellectual sciences. They have only endeavored in “knowledge by traces” (al-ʿilm al-rasmi). He extols, on the other hand, those who have endeavored beyond such traces and into “knowledge by presence, supernal connection, and witnessing,” namely, two Sufi saints with no Aristotelian output: Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī (d. 848 or 875) and Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896). Thus, Aristotle, or actually Suhrawardī, elevates experiential (dhawqiyya) knowledge above demonstrative (bahiyya) knowledge, and, in fact, it seems that demonstrative knowledge is merely an inferior grade of experiential knowledge. Largely because of Suhrawardī’s position on knowledge and the forms, his philosophy differs enough from Avicenna’s to be categorized as the second major “school” of Islamic philosophy. The model of “knowledge by presence” prevails in academies of Islamic philosophy today, although it has been modified and adapted into a newer philosophical system, that of Muḥammad ibn ʿĪbrāhīm al-Shīrāzī, known as “Mullā Ṣadrā” (d. 1635–6).

In presenting his epistemology, Suhrawardī envisioned himself as reviving Plato’s lost teachings. In the aforementioned dream, Aristotle surprises Suhrawardī by praising his own teacher, Plato, with whom he famously disagreed. Such unexpected praise for Plato, along with Aristotle’s admission that his own writings on knowledge do not account for the intellect’s acquisition of particulars, is a confession by the “First Teacher,” who has seen the errors of Peripatetic (that is, Aristotelian) epistemology after death. The true ancient philosophy for Suhrawardī was that of Illuminationism—a philosophy in which light shines upon forms. It is possible that Suhrawardī saw the Stoics as champions of Plato’s purer, esoteric teachings and Aristotle and the Peripatetics (which would include, by extension, al-Fārābī and Avicenna) as somewhat misguided, materialist students of Plato. Plato’s esoteric teachings, like those of the Greek
sages before him such as Socrates and pre-Socratics such as Empedocles, resonated with the statements of the ancient Persians concerning light and the archetypes.27 For that reason, Suhrawardī can link the Platonic archetypes to the names of Persian-Zoroastrian angels.28

Scholars such as Mehdi Ha’iri Yazdi have argued that Suhrawardī presents an epistemology fundamentally at variance with Avicenna’s.29 Jari Kaukua, however, interprets Suhrawardī’s knowledge-as-presence not as an entirely different model of human knowledge or cognition, but rather as an explanation of the manner in which God’s knowledge of particulars might be understood. Avicenna struggled with the way intellect (including God as Absolute Intellect) might comprehend particular things. Intelleccts apprehend universals and only universals, so that even something like your sister Fatima would only be known to the intellect as a collection of universal properties: She is funny, tall, generous, and of olive complexion. These universal properties are shared by many, and yet to the human perceiver there is something that makes your sister Fatima an individual unlike any other, something beyond a mere chance combination of universals. Avicenna would say that such knowledge of particulars comes from our engagement with the sensory world, since we perceive through bodily senses and encounter manifold particular things as distinct things.30 According to Kaukua, Suhrawardī solves this problem by asserting that God knows particulars because His knowledge is indeed perfect self-awareness. This is similar to the way humans are aware, most essentially, of themselves and acquire knowledge thereby of everything else that enters into the domain of the self.31 All of our experiences and sensory input occur in a context of self-awareness; the faculties of sight and hearing, for example, only see and hear when they present their objects of perception to the domain of the soul’s awareness. Once we are aware of ourselves, we can be aware of things outside of ourselves. Thus we humans create a domain of self-awareness; at the center of this domain is the soul’s nonabsence, a presence to oneself, which then expands to include awareness of things outside of the self. If one sets aside the fact that human self-awareness results from many material factors, such as the development and use of the senses, and supposes self-awareness to be a thing in its own right, then we might extend it beyond human cognition. God’s knowledge of particulars, then, becomes analogous to this sort of self-awareness (or self-presence) known by humans: Everything is an effect of God, so that He knows them in that they reside within His all-embracing domain of self-awareness (or self-presence).

Regardless of the degree to which he veered from Avicenna, Suhrawardī’s position on knowledge has significant implications for philosophical ethics for two reasons.32 First, Sufi exercises and self-purification become a path to knowledge that not only rivals discursive learning, but surpasses it. This leads to the second implication: Suhrawardī’s “knowledge by presence” means that the ethical pursuit of virtue has a sense of urgency, because knowledge is best attained by self-illumination, and virtue ethics is a necessary first step in that direction.

HOW HUMANS RETURN TO LIGHT: ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGY AS SELF-ILLUMINATION

The absolute achievement in Suhrawardī’s philosophy is for the soul to associate itself so completely with the highest dominating lights and indeed the Light of Lights, that it supposes its own identity to be one with theirs.33 Yet the soul’s individual identity is also maintained through an awareness of its own individual essence and a memory of its control of the body, or, one might say, a memory of the process by which it attained the status of being light.34 Such souls now live in lights, much like images live in mirrors. Here their encounter with the Light of Lights is the ultimate bliss. Even in life, while the soul still manages the body, the spiritual wayfarer focused on illumination can experience different encounters with light, until he or she achieves a death-in-life and clings to the highest lights, receiving the sort of revelation that Suhrawardī associates with Plato, Hermes Trismegistus, Muhammad, and others throughout history.35

For those whose association with the highest dominating lights is not perfect, there are two lesser ways of achieving eternal felicity after death in Suhrawardī’s philosophy.36 The first is to follow the ethical mean until one achieves happiness, that is, the completion of virtuous character traits (al-su‘ādā’ min al-mutawassifīn).37 This involves offsetting the body. The second is to engage in self-renunciation until the ascetic becomes disassociated from the body (al-zuhhād min al-mutanazzīhin). These groups take delight after death in having whatever they want, by being able to call forth the perfect forms of things.38
Conversely, those who have failed ethically will be confined—after resurrection—in shadows that correspond to their negative character traits, shadows that draw their forms not from the luminous Platonic forms, but rather from those separate from such forms of light (nūriyya). These forms can be dark (zulmāniyya), or they can borrow illumination from forms of light (mustanīra). They are “suspended” between light and darkness (al-suwar al-mu‘allaqa). 39 In Suhrawardī’s philosophy, the medial realm between light and matter, occupied by those either punished through forms or enjoying the forms (but not enjoying the bliss of pure light), is an “imaginal” one, one of “suspended images” (ālam al-muthul al-mu‘allaqa). 40 Its association with mystical vision and an eighth clime beyond the seven natural climes was the subject of much contemplation by Henry Corbin. 41

One should not be under the impression, however, that the pursuit of the mean and the virtues is merely for a middling group of people. Rather, it is a starting point that should lead to higher contemplation and perfection, even if (for the middling sort) it does not. For Suhrawardī, just as for Avicenna, the intellect occupies the central place in his program for felicity. By referring to intellectual pleasure, and even comparing that pleasure to the pleasure of sex, Suhrawardī makes the case for a successful life, which is a life of the mind, supported by regulation of the body, that ends in unhindered spiritual vision. Suhrawardī argues that pleasure can be defined as a thing finding its perfection or even some lesser good. The pleasure of the soul (rawān) lies in its becoming an actualized intellect. As the soul uncovers truths, it absorbs those truths, or rather uncovers their existence in the soul. Once the soul becomes completely imprinted with intelligibles, it becomes actualized as an intellect, which corresponds with the highest stages of illumination and the apex of bliss. 42

While less lofty, the ends of the practical intellect cannot be ignored. It is needed to actualize the intellect and live a full life. The practical intellect seeks to find its perfection in the absolute control of the body, so that it no longer has a passive role; rather, it has become a sovereign, and the body its subject. Once this has occurred, the person in question has achieved the virtue of justice. 43 Suhrawardī follows Avicenna and Miskawayh in accepting Aristotle’s mean, so that temperance, courage, and wisdom demand a middle position. He clarifies that the “wisdom” of virtue ethics differs from the “wisdom” of philosophy. For the latter, there is no mean, since there is no limit to the wisdom the soul should wish to acquire. 44 Suhrawardī gives the same advice that Hayy ibn Yaqẓān gave to Avicenna’s narrator, namely, that the method for controlling the soul is to use the faculties against one another, creating balance, so that one arouses lust (or pleasure-seeking) to weaken the faculty of anger, and provokes anger (or self-discipline) to weaken the faculty of lust. 45 The mean leads to happiness because it is an equilibrium. That equilibrium, the balancing of contradictory faculties, is the closest an embodied human can come to incorporeality (tajarrud), so that one might think of “balancing” as a sort of “neutralizing.” 46 Once the body and its faculties have been neutralized, the intellect as light becomes free to contemplate, strengthen its associations with higher lights, and make its return, just as Plato, according to Suhrawardī, beheld “luminous spheres” after having achieved incorporeality. 47 Of course, as mentioned above, Suhrawardī’s notion of a balanced life applies mostly to those who will not and perhaps cannot excel and become intellectually illuminated—that is, it applies to the masses seeking to be morally good. For those who seek the highest wisdom, he prescribes extreme renunciation of the worldly, especially food.

THE ALLEGORIES

Suhrawardī has a richer allegorical corpus than most other major figures from Islamic philosophy, including Avicenna. Many of his narratives were written in Persian, which adds a sense of rarity to these stories, since Islamic philosophical texts tended to be written in Arabic, even by Persian philosophers. His allegories are thus highly valued by contemporary Persian-speakers eager to learn about Islamic metaphysics, as well as anyone interested in his original system of thought. They include (1) Risālat al-Ṭayr (“Treatise on Birds”), in which Suhrawardī imagines himself as a captured bird longing to ascend to the king; (2) Āwāz-i Par-i Jabrā’il (“The Sound of Gabriel’s Wing”), in which Suhrawardī recounts enigmatic discussions in a Sufi lodge or khānaqāh concerning, among other things, the archangel Gabriel’s wings as God’s vehicle of creation; (3) ‘Aql-i Surkh (“The Red Intellect”), in which Suhrawardī’s conversation with an old, red-colored man encompasses mythological places and people that magnify the themes of light and darkness; (4) Rūzī bā Jamā’at-i Śuṭīyān (“A Day with a Group of Sufis”), in which
Suhrawardī summarizes the teachings of his master, many of which concern astronomy, to a group of Sufis in a khānaqāh; (5) Risāla fī Ḥālat al-Ṭūfūliyya (“Treatise on the State of Childhood”), under discussion below; (6) Fī Ḥaqīqat al-ʿIshq or Muʿnis al-ʿUshshāq (“On the Reality of Passionate Love” or “Solace to Passionate Lovers”), a treatise on beauty and love as a priori modes of knowledge for the intellect that includes Qur’anic narratives, especially that of Joseph (Jacob’s son in the Bible) and Zulaykhā (the wife of Potiphar); (7) Risāla-yi Luḥfat-i Mūrān (“Treatise on the Language of the Ants”), which is a series of fables, mostly involving animals, focused on Sufi themes; (8) Risāla-yi Ṣafīr-i Sīmurgh (“Treatise on the Screech of the Sīmurgh”), which is allegorical almost entirely because of its introduction, in which the author describes the mysterious “sīmurgh,” a legendary bird, and continues to describe the pursuit of knowledge as a progression achieved by Sufi practices that leads to a tranquil heart and, ultimately, self-annihilation; and (9) Qiṣṣa-yi Ghurbat-i Gharbiyya (“The Tale of Western Expatriation”), in which Suhrawardī expands upon Avicenna’s Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, continuing the latter’s consideration of symbolic climes in terms of a journey that involves imprisonment, escape, and a promise of reimprisonment.

Suhrawardī’s allegories present some difficulties for newcomers to Islamic philosophy. They rely on allusions to literary narratives, Islamic scripture, and philosophical concepts, so that properly unraveling even a few sentences requires many notes and references. The goal below is a modest summary of “On the State of Childhood” that raises points relevant to virtue and moral psychology.

Because of such complexities, especially in the symbolic use of language, the French scholar Henry Corbin rejected the label of “allegory” for Suhrawardī’s narratives. In Corbin’s phenomenological reading of Suhrawardī, such texts aim to awaken realizations within the reader not through rational processes made by means of allegorical equivalents, but rather through the use of “primordial” images. Such a view is supported by Rešid Hafizović in an imaginative article in which he asserts that storytelling (ḥikāya) among Sufis and philosophers demands an interpretation of symbols that should lead to an interiorization, such that the soul uses the text to undergo its own inward heavenly ascent or miʿrāj. Stories such as Suhrawardī’s Occidental Exile use historically situated language, such as names and events, to induce a self-wakening to an eternal drama of the soul. In defense of my use of the term “allegory,” however, is the tradition of writing commentaries on narratives by Suhrawardī, Avicenna, and other philosophers, wherein equivalents are made, but not seen as binding. Such narratives are “allegorical” insofar as they are meant to be deciphered, but are “symbolic” insofar as they are also meant to induce realizations, to have timeless and transcendent implications, and to carry multiple possibilities of interpretation. One such commentary, by contemporary scholar Mohammed Rustom, finds cosmological and even “allegorical” equivalents while still affirming that Suhrawardī’s style of narration, in which readers find themselves in the place of the narrator, allows readers to “unveil” the text and “unveil and therefore ‘become’ their true selves.”

“ON THE STATE OF CHILDHOOD”

In “On the State of Childhood,” Suhrawardī imagines himself as a child who sees a group of children walking to school to acquire knowledge. “I asked,” he says, “what is knowledge?” The children, not having an answer, refer him to their teacher and leave. Suhrawardī, or rather the Suhrawardī persona, regrets not having followed them, pursues them, and finds instead an old man standing in the desert, to whom he recounts everything. The old man announces the unlikely: “I am their instructor.” Suhrawardī pleads for knowledge, so the instructor teaches him the alphabet. Suhrawardī and the instructor spend increasingly more time together until all Suhrawardī’s time is spent with the old man, learning a great deal.

One day, while walking to his teacher, Suhrawardī is joined by a friend unfit for such learning (nā-ahl), whom Suhrawardī is unable to lose. Like Ḥayy’s friends in Avicenna’s tale, this tagalong represents the lower faculties. By combining two friends (the faculties of anger and desire) into one, Suhrawardī depicts the total effect of the body. When Suhrawardī sees his instructor holding up a tablet upon which is written “a secret,” it exhilarates him. An ecstatic sense of self-loss leads him to read everything for his literal-minded friend, who then laughs at him, feels sorry for him, and finally slaps him. “Have you lost your mind?” the friend asks, “No sane person would say things like this.”
The grand, cosmological nature of all kingdoms becomes obvious. Even kings, in other words, rule over something very limited in comparison with other heavenly bodies. Moreover, since Earth is divided among kings, the circumscribed their discussion of the planets becomes a reflection upon the relatively limited size of planet Earth, when compared with other heavenly bodies. Moreover, since Earth is divided among kings, the circumscribed nature of all kingdoms becomes obvious. Even kings, in other words, rule over something very limited in the grand, cosmological scheme of things. Earthly longings, especially for wealth and rank, are veils. “By
what means can one live, if one has nothing?” Suhrawardī asks. To this, the shaykh responds, “Whoever thinks in this way will not abandon a thing, while the one who abandons everything will not think in this way.”58 The master describes a rich man whose dying wish is to see his palace completed; to wish to see the completion of a palace in which the man knows he cannot live represents the ultimate in worldly futility.

The shaykh then gives his student an example of a proper perspective on wealth. A merchant goes out to sea with all his belongings on board. A whirlpool threatens the ship, such that the sailors must jettison many valuable jewels. The merchant’s fears alternate between losing his wealth and losing his life, until the wind settles, and he is brought to shore. Having made it safely, the merchant throws everything he owns into the sea. When asked about this peculiar action, he responds that, when on the ship, discarding his belongings would not have saved his life. But he has now realized that tranquility lies not in material wealth, but in one’s physical wellbeing. Moreover, he worries that, just as he has so quickly forgotten the horrors of his near drowning now that he is safe, one day he might forget this ordeal and seek wealth once again by sea. Throwing it all away ended his ability to trade and his career as a merchant, but thereby assured soundness of life. The merchant’s seemingly backwards logic provides the shaykh an opportunity to mention dreams, which often depict future events in reverse, so that the dreamed birth of a child can mean death.

A diagram of Suhrawardī’s master’s answer

When Suhrawardī asks for a parable about “the state of true men,” the shaykh replies that he cannot indulge him. Here Suhrawardī confesses that the tablet that the shaykh once showed him did not, before, bring him great joy, but now “whenever I look at it, my state changes, and I become so moved by ecstasy, that I cannot fathom how I have become that way.”59 The master informs him that such pleasures are like the pleasures of sex; someone who is not yet sexually mature cannot know them. Suhrawardī tells his shaykh
that this resembles the rapture of Sufis during their practice of *samāʿ* (audition). Here the shaykh describes the playing of the *daf* (a drum resembling a large tambourine) and the *nay* (a reed flute), and the manner in which melodies can correspond to the state of the listener. If this happens, the music strikes a sense of pre-eternal nostalgia, so that the soul begins to remember its origins. The soul, and not the ear, begins to listen, but in a realm appropriate to the soul, that is, the imaginal realm. Like the soprano’s shattering of glass, a correspondence between music and listener can temporarily undo the structures that veil us from our pre-eternal place with the Real.

The shaykh explains the dance-like movements of *samāʿ* that follow such ecstasy by comparing the body to a cage, and the soul to a bird within that cage. The bird of the soul cannot escape, so it makes the cage of the body move. The flailing of arms signifies an attempt to go higher than the feet will allow. The shedding of cloaks signifies an awareness of a realm beyond the material. Suhrawardi asks why a newcomer to a circle of Sufis in *samāʿ* is under their total control and can be asked to do virtually anything, from singing, to begging, to anything else. The shaykh explains that this reflects the situation of the newcomer, whose bird has flown, leaving only a cage: Since the person has indeed become a corpse, it is up to the group to do what they will with it. The aim of the dance, the shaykh concludes, is for the entire body to become a tongue expressing a state that the tongue itself cannot express; it is for this that the dancer is silent. Moreover, it is to quench the “fire of love” enkindled in the heart that the dancers drink water when the ritual is complete.

**AN ANALYSIS: VIRTUE AS A MODE OF KNOWLEDGE IN SUHRAWARDĪ’S ALLEGORY**

The relationship between knowledge and virtue is this allegorical narrative’s central theme. The process described—from potential knowledge to actual knowledge and, ultimately, knowledge of God—parallels verse 16:78 of the Qur’ān: “God brought you out of the wombs of your mothers when you knew not a thing; he made for you hearing, sights, and hearts, so that you might be thankful.” The tale begins at learning’s origins, the alphabet, and ends with a dance that is beyond demonstrative reasoning, one entirely focused on experience. That Suhrawardī has called the work “On the State of Childhood” tells us that, in large measure, this is a reflection on the entire process of learning, throughout life, especially focused on a time when we all knew not a thing. When Suhrawardī saw the tablet as a child, he knew it meant something; it moved and even agitated him, but he found no pleasure in it. When he saw that same tablet later in life, after having acquired experience, it moved him to ecstasy. In Suhrawardī’s model of learning, one continuously returns to an object of knowledge, acquiring familiarity. That familiarity actually brings the soul to realize things that it knew before it affiliated itself with the body. As the soul returns, taking flight from the body, objects of knowledge become clearer, more recognizable, and more pleasurable. The end goal is intimate familiarity with God.

In fact, the symbol of the “tablet” in this allegory illustrates Suhrawardī’s model of learning as an experience of self-knowledge. The “tablet” (*lawḥ*) in the tale has Qur’ānic connotations: God swears by “the pen” (Q 68:1) and mentions a “preserved tablet” (Q 85:22), so that the two have become complementary symbols of the *logos* by which God creates, in Islamic metaphysics. The Pen writes the divine words of creation actively and is often associated with the Active Intellect, while the Tablet receives those words passively and is often associated with the Universal Soul (which one might think of here as both the soul of the entire cosmos and the archetype of the human soul). Thus, in writing a secret for Suhrawardī on the tablet, his master plays the role of the Active Intellect. In a sense, he has shown Suhrawardī that which is written upon Suhrawardī’s own soul. The tablet, then, is a mirror; the teacher has written a secret corresponding to the secret within Suhrawardī, one that will take him years to uncover and understand.

The ethical dimension of all this, as is often the case in Islamic philosophical ethics, lies in mastering the proper relationship between soul and body. Suhrawardī gives an example of one unsuited to perfecting the intellect and uncovering the secrets of his teacher, namely, the unworthy tagalong friend. The friend’s slap
reveals him as subject to the dominating influences of his bodily faculties, in this case the faculty of anger. Internally, in terms of learning, one finds the forces of the body present in sensory input and estimation (wāhm), both of which can cause a person to reject profound truths. The duck and the salamander underline the fact that ethical disposition (and hence intellectual aptitude) is to a degree inborn; the duck is constitutionally inclined to that which is cool and wet, while the salamander is constitutionally inclined to that which is warm and dry. One cannot expect conformity to an extreme incompatible with one’s constitution, much as one cannot share secrets with the literal-minded.

The connection between bodily perfection and ethical perfection is more than an allegorical one. The major theme of the middle portion of the narrative is strict control over one’s diet, such that what a person (or a glowworm or sea cow) eats affects his or her disposition. Not only is this an allusion to knowledge, often compared to eating, it is also more literally advice to monitor food consumption, so one eats according to a careful regimen. Suhrawardi’s focus on food, both for the body and for the heart via the senses, gives us a peek into his spiritual training program. Monitoring the diet and the senses would almost definitely have supported the higher endeavors of the intellect, namely monitoring one’s thoughts, engaging in remembrance, and contemplating metaphysics. In using the diets of the glowworm and the sea cow to make this point, Suhrawardi alludes to a verse of the Qur’an in which the relationship between consumption and knowledge appears. The Qur’an describes honeybees as inspired and as “eating from every kind of fruit,” emitting “from their bellies a liquid of varying colors in which is a remedy for humans” (Q 16:69). An early Sufi figure, Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn ʿAṭāʾ (d. 922), uses this verse to discuss overseeing the “food” that enters the heart at every instant, which is closely tied to guarding one’s knowledge from the impurities of ostentation. If one does this, and one’s knowledge becomes sincere, then sincere action will follow, and such knowledge will be a remedy for the ailments of others, like honey. If one’s knowledge is adulterated by a sense of display, however, then like beeswax, it is suited only for fire.63 Eating is more than a metaphor for learning for Ibn ʿAṭāʾ and for Suhrawardi. Rather, it is a bodily realization of something that occurs in a more perfect way for the spirit. For both body and spirit, externals must be internalized to become a part of the self. Because of this, it matters greatly what exactly is internalized.

The body also appears center stage in Suhrawardi’s discussion of samāʿ and the dance that accompanies it. Rhythm and melody excite the inner senses such that the soul remembers its pre-eternal origins. Then the soul longs to return. The body’s movement in dance not only represents the soul’s frenzied hurry to ascend from the confines of the body, it also serves as an example of the body’s role in that ascent. Through movement, the body’s presence is offset by an affected loss of control akin to that of a corpse. The closest a living body can come to death, Suhrawardi tells us, is its ecstatic movement in dance. Through samāʿ and the movements of the body, the soul becomes habituated to ecstasy and disengagement from the body.

Suhrawardi’s ethics promotes increasing the light of the intellect until it outshines the light of the animal soul. Indeed, the contempt of the sea cow for the sun comes from a misunderstanding: The sea cow does not understand that all light on earth, even that of the sea cow’s beloved moon, originates in the light of the sun. The sun in Suhrawardi’s philosophy represents the Light of Lights, and the moon represents recipients of that light. When the sun rises, the moon disappears because it has been outshined, not because it has ceased to exist. So too, when the intellect becomes complete, or when the light of the Light of Lights shines upon a person, the lower soul disappears, which Suhrawardi says rather directly, “By day, the light of the night-gem [of the moon] vanishes, invalidating the light of the [lower] soul.”64 Nighttime in the narrative is the best time to acquire light, because it is during the night that worshippers stay up, sacrifice sleep, and engage in acts of contemplation. While this allegory describes illuminative achievement far beyond humoral ethics, the pillars of such achievement are built upon proper constitutional disposition, control of the diet, management of the bodily faculties, and the sincere pursuit of truth.

The virtues of philosophical ethics appear transmuted in this text, elevated by a Sufi framework. Temperance becomes an absolute avoidance of all worldly attachments. Courage becomes a lack of concern with means, trusting utterly in God. Justice becomes recognizing the abilities and ranks of every person, not burdening someone with what he or she cannot bear, and keeping the secret undisclosed. Wisdom, the allegory’s main theme, becomes the inner reality of human existence, something to be chased, discovered, and rediscovered, until one achieves a wisdom far beyond demonstrative reasoning.
ETHICS AS LIVED PHILOSOPHY: IN CONCLUSION

In his book *Reason Unbound: On Spiritual Practice in Islamic Peripatetic Philosophy*, Mohammad Azadpur argues that the Islamic Peripatetics, especially Avicenna and al-Fārābī, had certain ethical goals and methods or “spiritual practices” in mind that they located in the philosophical tradition that they inherited from the Greeks. Azadpur argues that we moderns can benefit from Islamic philosophy, including its “spiritual practices,” a phrase Azadpur traces to Pierre Hadot’s reading of Greek philosophy as a means to self-betterment. Azadpur’s argument is convincing, and it can qualify as an argument precisely because some degree of ambiguity exists in al-Fārābī and Avicenna’s writings. While both clearly had practical aims and even advice for how philosophy might be lived, the status given to developing the intellect through theoretical, discursive measures is so high that one might see spiritual practices as secondary, there merely for support, and not essential to their thought. Leo Strauss seems to have seen Islamic Peripateticism in such a manner, for example.

Yet, in the case of Suhrawardī, for whom philosophy as a program of experience becomes almost a trademark, there is no such ambiguity. It is thus fitting that Azadpur concludes his book with a discussion of Suhrawardī as the consummation of a lived philosophy taught by Avicenna and revised in more scriptural and even spiritual terms by Ghazālī. So prevalent are Sufi and ascetic practices, as well as a language of inspiration and allusions often tied to such practices, that a debate has arisen in Western scholarship concerning Suhrawardī’s philosophy: Is it primarily Sufi, or “mystical,” presented in philosophical language? Or is it at its core a modification of the Avicennan system, and “philosophical” and rationally oriented through and through? Scholars such as Henry Corbin, Jalāl al-Dīn Ṣuhbīyānī, Mehdi Ha’ir Yazdi, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr see Suhrawardī first and foremost as a mystic. Scholars such as Hossein Ziai, John Walbridge, and Mehdi Amin Razi generally see philosophy and mysticism as intertwined, such that philosophy is not secondary.

In either case, Suhrawardī’s emphasis on ascetic practices helps us see humoral virtue ethics as a precursor to a much more demanding regimen of constant contemplation and rigorous control of the body’s forces. It is not surprising that Suhrawardī found the finest expression of that regimen in Sufism and considered Sufis to be the heirs to Plato and other ancient philosophers. Indeed, parallels between Sufi practices and the ancient Greek (and especially Stoic) spiritual exercises described by Hadot abound. Setting conditions for oneself at the beginning of the day, taking oneself into account at the end of the day, remembering death, maintaining an awareness of the present moment, and meditating upon key philosophical principles are practices as salient for the Sufis as they were for the Stoics. Hadot’s reading of philosophy does indeed seem to be the finest way to see Suhrawardī’s program, as well as other thinkers (such as Mullā Ṣadrā, as discussed by Azadpur) who championed both Sufi practices and philosophical speculation.

According to Hadot, the Greek Christian term *askesis* (from which our “asceticism” comes) captures a set of “spiritual exercises” that Christians upheld, having inherited many of them—in form or in principle—from their Greek pagan forebears. Such exercises are “spiritual” insofar as they reorient a person toward a transcendent Other. Philosophy’s practical goal was to serve as a “therapeutic of the passions,” in that every philosophical school had its own set of formulae to induce personal transformation. Plato, for whom Socrates’ philosophically heroic death was a defining moment, held that the end of such a therapeutic lies in training to die—neutralizing the passions (desire and anger) in fortification of the intellect, so that a wisdom-seeker redirects her orientation toward universal and objective realities.

Among later Platonists, such as Porphyry (d. ca. 305 CE), specific practices, such as a vegetarian diet, aim to awaken realization and uncover the deepest and most endless fathoms of knowledge, such as the soul’s immortality.

Suhrawardī, in his “On the State of Childhood,” alludes to control of one’s diet in pursuit of illumination, much like Porphyry. Sufi practices—such as *samā*—not only function as part of a philosophical program, but can also be subjected to rational speculation and allegorical exposition, it would seem for further effect. Indeed, Suhrawardī’s writings are infused with an emphasis on spiritual exercises that yield knowledge and thus inner perfection, exercises quite often prevalent among Sufis. In his “A Day with a Group of Sufis,” for example, Suhrawardī proclaims his shaykh’s teachings of world-abandonment as a pathway to knowledge. Two spiritual practices lead to one’s mounting the “steed of contemplation” into the “field of knowledge of the unseen”: First, finding pleasure in the isolation of retreat (*khalwat*), and, second, redirecting awareness, so that one exchanges one’s sense of “being” for “not-being,” which is...
replacement of one’s sense of self for an awareness of the Other. Thus, while certain Sufis such as Rūmī might have rejected the ultimate truth-claims of the philosophers, Suhrawardī represents a nexus between Sufism and philosophy, going much further than Avicenna’s use of Sufi terms and practices, and embracing Sufi practices as a pathway to the completion of the intellect. It is fitting then, that this chapter on Suhrawardī might serve as a bridge between virtue in philosophy and virtue in Sufism.

NOTES

1 Ziai, “The Source and Nature of Authority,” p. 305, n. 3.

2 See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Shahrazūrī’s (fl. 1282) comments in Suhrawardī, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*, p. x. This is a parallel Persian and English text, including the original nine treatises (called *Nuh Risāla*) and Thackston’s translation. While I have referred to Thackston’s translations, the translations included here are my own and refer to the Persian text that he has edited, unless otherwise indicated. The same holds true for the other two parallel Persian-English books cited here, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* and *Partaw-nāma*.


4 Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination*, p. 82.


6 Ibid., p. 136.

7 Ibid., p. 132.


14 Ibid., p. 139.


17 Ibid., pp. 113–14.

18 Ibid., p. 113.


23 Marcotte, “Reason (ʿaql) and Direct Intuition (mushāhada) in the Works of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrwardī (d. 587/1191),” p. 223.


28 Amin Razavi, *Suhrwardī and the School of Illumination*, p. 83.


30 Kaukua, “Suhrwardī’s Knowledge as Presence in Context,” pp. 311–12. The example of one’s sister is a rephrased version of that described by Kaukua.

31 Ibid., p. 320.

32 More than simply an emphasis on mystical unveiling, Suhrwardī’s presentation of knowledge even reconsidered the manner in which we define things: As opposed to a Peripatetic, essentialist definition that sets the parameters for a thing in a handful of words, Suhrwardī argued that things are perceived and known directly and in stages, an idea later expounded upon by his adherent and interpreter Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 1311). See Walbridge, *The Science of Mystic Lights*, pp. 101–4.


34 Ibid., p. 148.


37 I read the word *mutawassiṭīn* as having a dual meaning. It refers to those who are “intermediate” in that they have not reached the full completion of those fully disassociated from the body; in that sense, they are neither “complete” nor “incomplete,” nor are they “luminous,” nor “bodily,” but right in the middle of all these categories. It also refers, however, to their achievements in lower-level humoral ethics, such that they have achieved a balance, which Suhrwardī, like Avicenna, calls *tawassut* (Avicenna, *al-Shīfāʾ: al-Ṭabīʿīyāt: al-Nafs*, p. 1:287). One can find Suhrwardī’s use of the word *mutawassiṭ* for the equilibrium in the faculties of desire, anger, and intellect that results in the “virtuous disposition” (*malaka fāḍila*) in *Partaw-nāma*, p. 72. Of course, their being called the “felicitous ones” (*al-suʿadāʾ*) underlines the point, since it means “those who possess *saʿāda*” (ultimate ethical happiness, an equivalent of Aristotle’s *eudaemonia*).

38 Suhrwardī, *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, p. 149.
39 Ibid., p. 149.

40 Al-Kutubi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Eschatology*, p. 94.


43 Ibid., p. 71.

44 Ibid., p. 72.

45 Ibid., p. 82.

46 Ibid., p. 72.


48 Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, p. 32.


50 Rustom, “Story-Telling as Philosophical Pedagogy.”

51 Suhrawardī, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*, p. 44. Here and below reference is to the Persian text.

52 Ibid., p. 45.

53 Ibid., pp. 45–6.

54 Ibid., p. 46.

55 The worm seems to be a glowworm, as mentioned in *Kalīla wa Dimna* (Pūrmāmdārīān, *ʿAql-i Surkh*, p. 344). These are not worms at all, but a species of beetle we call “fireflies” or one related to it. The female firefly glows but, unlike the male, cannot fly, so she has been described as a worm. The “sea cow” has been the object of some fascination, perhaps in part because of certain humanlike features. According to Georg Wilhelm Stellar, an eighteenth-century German zoologist, Aristotle and others made faulty claims about the sea cow or “manatee” as Stellar calls it, not to be mistaken for the actual manatee, which is a smaller, surviving species from the same order. The sea cow was believed to feed on grass or herbs on land, and to have nails like a human being (Stellar, *De Bestiis Marinis, or, The Beasts of the Sea*, pp. 40–1). As Stellar observes, it actually fed on seaweed and did not venture onto land, nor did it have fingers (or nails), and its head did not resemble a cow’s or a calf’s. Unfortunately, Stellar’s sea cows, which he observed in Alaska, are now extinct, on account of human hunting.


59 Ibid., p. 53.

60 Ibid., p. 56.

61 Ibid., p. 57.


64 Suhrawārdī, The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises, p. 47.


68 Azadpur, Reason Unbound, p. 119.

69 Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, p. 82.

70 Ibid., p. 83.

71 Ibid., p. 96.

72 Ibid., p. 100.

73 Suhrawārdī, The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises, p. 41. Here I have made use of Thackston’s translation.

The Soul’s Constant Returning: Repentance (
Repentance might seem out of place in a discussion of virtue or moral psychology. If one sees repentance as a moment in one’s life, a sudden and epiphanic decision, then it would seem to be more of a biographical event than a lasting feature, more of a determination to change than an indicator of change. Yet, in the context of Sufism, repentance is considered one of the stations of the path to ethical completion. Rather than a solitary resolution, repentance is a shift in perspective with lasting moral and psychological effects. It is an awareness of one’s place in existence—a constant spiritual intelligence that must be maintained throughout one’s life. To qualify for repentance, one must not only do good deeds but be humble of disposition, ever-cognizant of one’s shortcomings. With this proper outlook in mind, one can then move forward. It is probably for this reason that Sufi descriptions of a person’s progression toward the Real almost always begin with repentance or some variant thereof. It is also for this reason that our discussion of Sufism, virtue, and moral psychology will begin with repentance.

BEGINNING WITH REPENTANCE, BEGINNING WITH AL-ṢĀDIQ

Since Sufis trace their lineage and the science of the heart that comes to be known as “the science of Sufism” (ʿilm al-taṣawwuf) to the Prophet Muhammad himself, it is difficult to settle on any particular early figure to usher in this discussion of virtue ethics and storytelling in Sufism. The Hadith tradition has a rich panoply of sayings of Muhammad that appear in Sufi writings about the perfection of the self; one can also find sayings of Muhammad’s companions, quite especially ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661), and the generation that followed them. One among the generation following the Prophet’s own generation who particularly stands out, for example, is Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), who appears regularly in Sufi lineages and texts. The later Sufi ethicist Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996) referred to al-Baṣrī as the “imam” in that science which he presents in his book, the “science of certitude” pertaining to the heart, the science that we might call “Sufism.” Mostly fragments of his sayings survive, along with hagiographical narratives about him, and so it is difficult to present an extended account of the thought of al-Baṣrī on any particular virtue.

Yet some of the most distinctive language of Sufism emerges only a few decades after al-Baṣrī, at the time that Islamic philosophy was forming, as well as the science of alchemy. In this context of developing terminology, a specific name arises recurrently as a source of learning in Islam generally and Sufism specifically: Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765). While much of that which is attributed to him is probably apocryphal, it is difficult to reconstruct an unobjectionably accurate depiction of anyone in the earliest phase of the Sufi sciences. Most of the earliest figures (such as Hasan al-Baṣrī) appear quoted in treatises by the next few generations of masters. Thus, the remembered legacy of Jaʿfar in Sufism has much to offer the student of Sufi virtue ethics. It will introduce the reader to Sufism’s early theoretical development, its intricate treatment of intentionality, and its emphasis on narrative (whether in Qur’anic commentaries, hagiographies, or Hadith narrations) as a didactic method.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
Ja’far lived at one of the most crucial turning points in the history of Islam, one that would see the decline of Islam’s first dynasty, the Umayyads, and the rise of the Abbasids. During that time, Ja’far managed to distance himself from the many insurrectionist political movements surrounding him, instead becoming an authority in the religious sciences of his day. Praised by rationalists, traditionalists, legalists, and ascetics, Ja’far’s knowledge and practice of Islam became legendary. It was reported that he not only predicted future events and interpreted dreams, but could discern the thoughts and intentions of those around him before they were expressed.4 His fame as a religious scholar and pious ascetic seems to have dovetailed with what he represented, namely a line of pious imams from the bloodline of the Prophet Muhammad on his father’s side, which would include both Muhammad’s daughter Fātima (d. 632) and her husband ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, as well as the family of the revered first caliph of Islam (Abū Bakr ibn Abī Quḥāfa, d. 634) on his mother’s side. As a saint and polymath of the noblest lineage, Ja’far is later claimed by so many that association with him becomes somewhat of a motif not always given to substantiation.

We can also say that there developed a “Shiʿi” legacy and identity for him as well as a “Sunni” one, the latter of which appears more often in later Sufi writings. In numerous non-Shiʿi Sufi sources naming the major saints of the past, Abū Nuʿaym Iṣfahānī (d. 1038), Abū Bakr al-Kalāhdhī, ‘Alī Hujwīrī (d. ca. 1071), and Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 1221), Ja’far figures prominently.5 Thus, for example, ʿAṭṭār begins his list of hagiographical accounts in Tadhkira al-Awliyāʾ (“Memorial of Saints”) with Ja’far; not only to bring “blessings” upon his book as a whole, but also to start with the most major figure in Sufism after the Prophet’s generation, one who “has spoken more about the [Sufi] path than others from the Prophet’s family (Ahl al-Bayt) and has transmitted more in terms of Hadith.”6 ʿAṭṭār strongly emphasizes Ja’far’s antecedence to other Sufi figures, calling him the “model to all shaykhs,” the “absolute source of emulation,” “forerunner to the people of tasting,” “leader for the people of love,” and one who paved the way for recording the “secrets of realities.”7 Judging from his emphasis on Ja’far’s transmission of Hadith and contribution to the “subtleties of the secrets of revelation and exegesis,” it is likely that ʿAṭṭār has the early Qurʾān exegesis in mind that is discussed in this chapter, the exegesis of al-Sulamī in which Ja’far’s opinions are recorded.

Ja’far’s links to early Sufi figures, serving as their teacher and model, fall into three major categories: likely, possible, and historically impossible. Even that last category must be stated carefully, because it assumes the framework of academic historical methods, especially methodological naturalism. By “methodological naturalism” I refer to the presumption that although that which is supernatural might certainly be “true,” it will not be included as historical fact. In Sufism, encounters, guidance, and even initiatic chains include those who might not have ever met in a physical sense, or even have been conterminously living. In the case of Ja’far, such claims are made for Abū Yazīd al-Bāstāmī, a seminal saint in the Sufi tradition, who could not have met Ja’far physically based on the dates of his lifespan.8 In a realm beyond time and space, however, such meetings are possible. Al-Bāstāmī’s preternatural affiliation with Ja’far is of particular importance because it connects the two figures in the primary chain of affiliation associated with the Naqshbandī order, one of the largest living Sufi orders.9

Others who Sufi authorities have claimed learned from Ja’far include Mālik ibn Dīnār (d. 748), Dāʾūd al-Balkhī (d. 810).10 Among these affiliations, those of Sufyān and Shaqīq become echo in Shiʿi narrations. Sufyān comes to Ja’far on multiple occasions seeking to learn more details of the Prophet’s Sunna, and yet also receives reproof for what Ja’far deems to be his promotion of an excessive asceticism that lacks an awareness of the context of the Prophet’s world-renouncing practices, such that true renunciation should be hidden from others.11 A similar exchange between the two occurs in the Sufi text ‘Ilm al-Qulūb (Science of the Hearts), composed perhaps by Abū Ṭālib al-Makki or by someone in his circle, when Ja’far reveals to the suspicious Sufyān that, while he wears a silken cloak for others to see, he secretly wears a coarse woolen garment beneath it “for God.”12 Despite his possible leanings toward the emerging Ḥanafi approach, Shaqīq appears in the Shiʿi Hadith as a transmitter of the excellences of the Ahl al-Bayt, a verifier of the sainthood (and thus, for Twelve Shiʿi is, imamate) of Ja’far’s son Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 799), and, along with his teacher Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, an ascetic whose zeal for avoiding the pursuit of wealth stands corrected by Ja’far.13

It is, however, Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī’s (d. 1021, henceforth simply “Sulamī”) devotion to Ja’far al-Ṣādiq’s teachings that pertain most to this discussion, because of his Sufi
exegesis (tafsīr) in which Jaʿfar’s observations appear, one of the earliest Sufi exegeses. From a strictly historical perspective, to call Jaʿfar’s sayings “Sufi” is anachronistic. Sufism was a term initially applicable to an interior-oriented, ascetic movement in Baghdad in the ninth century. In the tenth century this movement began to merge with other movements in Iraq, Iran, and central Asia, movements focused on renunciation and the soul’s relationship with God.14 As a result of this growth, Sufism became an approach to Islamic thought so renowned for its laying claim to the perfection of the heart and the encounter with God that it was recognizable even when looking backwards, before its existence. This allowed, for example, ‘Alī ibn ʿAṭāʾ (d. 921–60), a disciple of Sulamī’s main source Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAtāʾ (d. 921–2 or 923–4), to lament that Sufism had become “a name without a reality, but it used to be a reality without a name,” referring to “Sufism” not as a historical phenomenon, but as the science of inner perfection that existed for the Prophet, his companions, and, before them, for humanity since the dawn of God–human relationships.15 It also allowed Sulamī, as a Shāfiʿī Hadith specialist and Sufi, to locate Sunni Sufi thought in the Qurʾanic readings of Jaʿfar, the imam of the Shiʿis, frequently using Shiʿi chains of narration and transmitters for his exegesis.16

DISCUSSION OF TEXTS

Sulamī’s materials mainly came from other texts, either in his possession or recited to him, but he was much more than a compiler. His careful structuring of his exegesis or tafsīr through selected sayings qualifies him as an author, so that we are reading Sulamī’s presentation of his saintly predecessors. In other words, the Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tafsīr (“Realities of Exegesis”) and the appendix that Sulamī wrote to it (Ziyādāt Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tafsīr, or “Appendix to ‘Realities of Exegesis’”), in which Jaʿfar features more prominently than others, present Sulamī’s own Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, that is, his understanding of what Sufism’s antecedents said about the Qurʾān. Hamid Algar has overviewed the manifold problems with attributing this text to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, and Gerhard Böwering has gone so far as to declare the author “pseudo-Jaʿfar.”17 Yet attribution to Jaʿfar for at least parts of the exegesis cannot be denied outright, according to the text’s translator into English, Farhana Mayer, whose arguments consider the content of the text itself and the possibility that Jaʿfar’s teachings might have been suited differently for various groups of students.18 Akbar Thubūt has also located some of the phrasings found in the exegesis within Shiʿi books, while still maintaining an overall skeptical stance.19 And while Paul Nwyia’s emphatic assertion that the exegesis mirrors one found in Shiʿi collections has been refuted convincingly, ‘Alī Zayʿūr offers a nuanced consideration of the possibilities of attribution.20 Zayʿūr considers ways in which Jaʿfar’s exegesis might have circulated among his elite students, and how it was written and disseminated either without the approval of that circle or because of an emerging trend to record on paper.21

Even though the exegesis’s appendix, Ziyādāt Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tafsīr, was only recently discovered by Böwering in a library vault in Sarajevo, the text clearly left its mark on generations of Sufi Qurʾān commentators following Sulamī, since we know that Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209) uses around five hundred quotations from this text in his seminal Arāʾis al-Bayān (“Brides of Elucidation”).22 Sulamī’s exegesis (the original and the appendix) seems to be one of the earliest sources for technical terms and themes that would be developed in the “science” of Sufism.23 Böwering compares the influence that Sulamī’s exegesis as a whole had on Sufism before the twelfth century to the influence that Ibn ʿArabi’s major writings had on Sufism after that point.24 Perhaps most interesting for Sufi approaches to the Qurʾān is Jaʿfar’s presentation of a theory of esoteric readings of the Qurʾān, a fourfold hermeneutic that preserves the comprehensive truth for those capable of receiving revelation.25

Another important “Sufi” text that I will consider in this discussion on repentance is Miṣbāḥ al-Shariʿa wa MiṣĪāt al-Ḥaqiqa (“Lantern of the Sharia Path and the Key to Reality”), which has been attributed to Jaʿfar. Muna Bilgrami has translated the text into English under the title The Lantern of the Path. Scholars have also questioned the attribution of this text to Jaʿfar, but a closer consideration of those doubts might support the veracity of this attribution. Mirzā Ḥusayn al-Nūrī al-Ṭabarṣī (d. 1902) undertakes a persuasive defense of Jaʿfar’s (oral) composition of Miṣbāḥ al-Shariʿa, in which he weighs the affirmation of his authorship among early Hadith scholars against the doubts of later ones.26 Of particular interest is that an influential judgment against this attribution was made by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1699). Yet al-Majlisī seems
to reject Jaʿfar’s authorship of this book out of his notorious intellectual aversion to Sufism, ignoring precedent cases in Shiʿi Hadith scholarship that might verify the attribution. Among those earlier scholars who affirm this book’s attribution to Jaʿfar is al-Majlisī’s own father, Muḥammad Taqī (d. 1659), who did indeed sympathize with Sufism. Shaqīq al-Balkhī has been named as a possible author of the text, in which case the text would be a case of the author projecting his wisdom into the mouth of his master, as some have thought Plato did with Socrates, for example.

AL-ṢĀDIQ AND REPENTANCE IN SULAMĪ’S EXEGESIS

Definitions of tawba or “repentance” abound, yet all agree that the human turns away either from disobeying God, or from everything other than God, returning to God. Tawba, in fact, means “turning back,” and Atīf Khalīl, who has written about repentance in Sufism, has also discussed the limitations in translating tawba as “repentance,” even though it is the most suitable English equivalent available. In Sufi readings of the Qurʾān, God turns back toward the servant first, awakening the servant’s desire to return to Him; then the servant turns in repentance; and then God turns back in forgiveness (see Q 9:118). In other words, while repentance often occasions discussions about the minutiae of intentionality, ultimately, there is a flicker of realization that starts with God, comparable to inspiration. Thus, according to Abū Bakr al-Kalâbādhī, who cites this verse as evidence, God’s aspirational desire (irādatuhu) for those who repent was “the cause of their aspirational desire for Him.” The verse is interpreted similarly in a short treatise by Sulamī, as well as by the later Sufi master Ibn ʿArabī, as part of a much more detailed spiritual cosmology than presented in earlier Sufism.

Most Sufi manuals will list repentance as the first station for the wayfarer. At the station of repentance, a person struggles between the calls of the lower self and the call of God, and yet such struggle seems to be the very purpose of human existence. In this regard, the Prophet Muhammad has been reported to declare, “By the one who holds my soul I swear, were you not to sin, God would do away with you and bring a people who would sin; they would seek God’s forgiveness, and he would in turn forgive them.” Much as Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855) contemplated the necessity of sin and even the cultivation of “negative capabilities” as a realization of essential human fragility, this narration points to the irony of the human condition: While one must strive to avoid sinning, the process of sinning, repenting, and being forgiven is crucial to the relationship between humans and God.

The perpetuity of repentance appears center stage in Misbāḥ al-Sharīʿa. “Repentance is the rope of God,” Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq says, “and the [very principle of] aid in his attentive care.” What follows this statement implies that this rope separating the Helper and the helped cannot be severed, even if it shortens for those—such as prophets—who have become closer to Him:

The servant must be continuously in repentance, in every state. [Therefore,] there is a different repentance for each of the categories of God’s servants. The repentance of prophets is a turn away from the innermost heart’s having been disrupted. The repentance of God’s friends is a turn away from the tinges of passing thoughts. The repentance of the pure is a turn away from the relief of being made cheerful. The repentance of the elite is a turn away from being occupied with anything but God the Exalted. And the repentance of the common is a turn away from sins.

Sins in the outward sense, as infractions against divine legislation, have inward counterparts of various grades. These inward counterparts can be summarized as failures to be utterly God-conscious, even in the subtlest manner. It is noteworthy, however, that Jaʿfar follows this passage with an in-depth discussion entirely focused on the lowest, or perhaps “primary” repentance, that of “the common,” namely the sinners. As tears of regret cleanse them from within, the repentant ones strive outwardly to make up for their past actions, exerting themselves through self-discipline and renunciation, undergoing a process that bestows knowledge upon them and raises their rank. Here Jaʿfar speaks of what might be called the station of repentance, for indeed he refers to the “rank (daraja) of the repentant ones” as a milestone; one must be careful not to regress and “fall” from this rank, he says.
There is a difference, then, between the *phenomenon* of repentance and the *station* of repentance. Repentance as a phenomenon characterizes the entire process of the journey itself. One is always and at every station turning away from oneself and toward God, such that even prophets—in this latter sense—repent. The sentiment that a person can never be free from the phenomenon of repentance is captured in a half-line of poetry quoted often by Sufi writers, such as Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 1221):

I said to her, “What sin have I committed?” She said in reply,

“There is a sin which no sin can be compared.”

While the “she” here is as unknown as the poem’s speaker, although sometimes imagined to be the female saint Rābiʿa, the meaning is clear. The need to turn away from oneself will exist as long as there exists a “self” separate from the beloved. In this sense, repentance might be a “virtue,” since the change that occurs in one’s will and self-awareness should be permanent and acquired after effort and practice.

The station of repentance is an initial phase in the soul’s journey to its Lord. Some Sufi masters argued that, once this station has been passed completely, then one has abandoned the wavering that defines the soul before its absolute repentance. In Sufi terminology, this was called “abandoning repentance” (*tark al-tawba*), which defined those who were so engrossed in God that they had become oblivious not only to their past faults, but even to their very own identities. For that reason, Ruwaym ibn Ahmad (d. 915) described the highest realization of repentance as “repentance from repentance,” or, in the gloss of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988), “repenting from even seeing good works and acts of obedience.” Abandonment of repentance or awareness of good acts seems to be partly about sincerity. The poet Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār considers at length the way in which love can become so encompassing that the lover loses his sense of self, causing him to “repent from reputation and [Sufi] states.” The association made between sincere love and a lack of self-awareness eventually became epitomized as the metaphor of drunkenness in Persian poetry:

You’re both a poseur and a hypocrite,
if you walk upon the path of love pretending,
but those, the silent ones, who tread on it
say so much, with all the hush they’re sending.
The true man’s tongue is only thought and sight
O how precise this vocabulary is!
His icy sighs, his tears, his face so white:
these symptoms three are true, and they are his.
In judging lovers drunk on the wine of yearning,
Desist from giving them a sinner’s sentence,
No hope for repenting for him who in love’s burning—
You just can’t make them fit: love and repentance.
Hearts in men by love alone survive,
The heart that’s not in love is not alive.
If Sanāʾī is no lover, then declare:

“His words amount to nothing but hot air.”

The poem, a ghazal by Majdūd ibn Ādam Ghaznawī ("Sanāʾī") (d. ca. 1131), considers the contrast between ecstatic love ('ishq) and conforming to social expectations, so it is little wonder that parts of it have been spuriously attributed to the paragon of renegade ecstatic love, Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922). While the poetic voice declares that repentance has no place in the drunken lover’s vocabulary, the poem does concern a turn away from everything and a turn toward one all-absorbing beloved, involving the sort of tears, pain, and inwardness that Jaʿfar prescribes for the repentant in Miṣbāḥ al-Sharīʿa, “spending his nights awake and his days in thirst.”

Certainly from the perspective of tone, the lover’s refusal to repent is antithetical to Jaʿfar’s sober descriptions of repentance. Yet, in another sense, the complete and utter turn toward the beloved (or the divine beloved, God) is the essence of the higher reaches of repentance, according to Jaʿfar. This can be seen in his comments on Abraham’s declaration, in his disassociation from idolaters, that “I turn my face toward the One who originated the heavens and the earth” (Q 6:79). Jaʿfar notes that Abraham’s declaration means, “I submit my heart to the One who created it, and I cut myself off from everything but Him.” Abraham is aware, according to Jaʿfar, that idols in their archetypal form represent the passions, that is, they represent desires for anything but the one divine beloved, and he has renounced them forever.

When, at the more primary station of repentance, we disassociate ourselves from the idols of the passions and yet are faced with the fact that our past selves worshipped them, even in the subtest of ways, then a sense of dissonance surfaces we call “regret.” Regret is in fact the essence of repentance: “[Merely] to regret is a repentance,” according to a hadith of Muhammad narrated by Jaʿfar’s father and discussed by the later master Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072).

Even the themes of ecstatic love, rejection, and retreat found in Persian poetic accounts such as Sanāʾī’s can be seen in Jaʿfar’s discussions of repentance. Thus, Moses asks God to show himself to him. It is a profoundly suggestive request, because it both resembles and yet reverses the demand of Moses’s recalcitrant followers that he “show us God out in the open” (Q 4:153). That which they sought out of disbelief he seeks out of conviction and ecstatic love. Like the lover of Sanāʾī’s poem, he has separated himself from others, and, like the lover, he is denied the intimacy he requests. God tells him that “you will not see Me,” but that he should “gaze upon this mountain, and, if it stands in place, then you will see Me” (Q 7:143). When God divulges Himself to the mountain, it crumbles, and Moses falls, losing consciousness. When he comes to, Moses declares: “Glory be Yours, I repent to You! And I am the first of those who believe” (Q 7:143). In Jaʿfar’s interpretation of Moses’ repentance, the prophet “disassociates himself from his intellect.” It is a process of declaring not only God to be transcendent, but the human intellect to be transcended, unable to fathom God’s essence. Hearing God, according to Jaʿfar, occurs on the plane of God’s attributes. To hear is to be exposed to someone’s effects, someone’s words; one can even hear someone indirectly. Yet to see is “to have a vantage perspective upon the essence”; vision is always direct, and thus cannot be applied to God. Moses’ turn toward God here is one away from his own knowledge, recognizing the limits of that knowledge. Sulamī tells us in his exegesis that “those who repent,” as described in Q 9:112, are those who “return to God in their entirety, away from everything they have of attributes and states.”

AGENCY AND SUBMISSION IN REPENTANCE
It is fascinating to see the way in which later, detailed discussions in Sufism can be found in “nucleus” form as pithy sayings attributed to the early saints, whether this occurs by projection or by sound historical fact. This correspondence can be seen in comparing Ja’far’s sayings to the important discussion of repentance found in the thirty-second chapter of Abū Tālib al-Makki’s Qūṭ al-Qulūb (“Nourishment for the Hearts”). According to Atif Khalil, who has considered this chapter in detail, al-Makki’s is the “longest single sustained treatment of tawbah, written from a Sufi perspective, currently available to us from the first four centuries of Islam.”51 According to al-Makki, writing roughly two centuries after Ja’far al-Sadiq, repentance, unlike some of the higher ethical stations, applies to all believers. It is not optional.52 Moreover, it requires a determined intention never to return to the sin; an attempt to compensate for the sin, through a good deed; and an awareness that one is responsible for the sin but also that the sin has emerged from God’s just decree.53 This last condition seems to offer a contradictory description of sin and repentance, such that one acts freely but lives within a framework determined by God. Determinism is one of the most difficult and debated points in Islamic theology, although it should be clear that choice or volition is a key part of al-Makki’s presentation of repentance. In fact, one can say that volition is an essential part of being alive for humans. Upon death, according to al-Makki, one’s desires—which cause one to sin—become null. It is then that a person will long to turn back toward God, but the doors of volitional acts will be closed, and it will be too late.54 This idea later becomes expounded upon powerfully by the Sufi master Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, who defines repentance as “a return to God, the Exalted, by choice, just as death is a return without choice.”55 Everyone repents or “returns,” in other words, but some do so by force, when they die and the soul returns to God involuntarily. Others return by choice, while alive, and hence die before they die. Ja’far too describes the death of the human lower soul as the ultimate form of repentance, using Q 2:54 as evidence, according to a later Egyptian Shafi’i Sufi commentator, Zakariyyā ibn Muḥammad al-Anṣārī (d. 1520).56

Material from Ja’far on human choice in the context of repentance in the Shi’i tradition is rich; so rich, in fact, that it would involve a lengthy discussion, one that would matter more to the study of Shi’i Islam than the study of ethics in Sufism. Yet one does find an incredibly pertinent saying attributed to Ja’far by the Egyptian Sufi historian Zayn al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf al-Munāwī al-Haddādī (d. 1621): “When you have sinned, seek forgiveness, for [sins] are nothing but lapses wrapped around the necks of men before they were created. But beware not to persist in it.”57 Ja’far here discusses a central issue in notions of repentance, namely, hope in God’s forgiveness accompanied by resoluteness not to return to the transgression in question. More interesting is the notion that one’s sins originate prior to one’s creation. This seems to support the notion of the “predetermination” of sin, emphasized in al-Makki’s discussion of repentance, as well as in Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī’s.58 Two factors might, on the other hand, encourage us to see this saying differently. First, there are Ja’far’s own views on predetermination, in which he advocates “a position between the two [determinism and free-will] in which is the truth,” even though his statements appear in Shi’i sources, and not those that would be favored by Sunni Sufis.59 Second is the language of the saying itself, in which “lapses” and the human being itself (or human “necks”) are connected closely. It is as if sins inhere within those in question, as inseparable parts of their being. Thus, another reading of the saying might be possible as well: A human, by nature of being human, has certain propensities to sin inherent in his or her very being. We might call this, today, our genetic makeup as developed in our moral environment. Alternatively, considering the conversation about premodern philosophical ethics preceding this chapter, we might call it our individual constitution as developed in our particular clime and society, called al-safiya in Ja’far’s terminology.60 In either case, assuming that God knows in advance when, how, and where each person will come to be, it makes sense to say that there are “lapses wrapped around” our necks before we are born, from the perspective of a divine creator standing outside of time.

This contradiction, that one is simultaneously free and subject to God’s will, is reflected in the very relationship at the crux of repentance, which is also a seeming contradiction. Repentance as a turning away from the self and back toward God is the ultimate act of humility, and yet, contradictorily, it bestows glory upon the servant. This becomes clear, once again, in al-Munāwī’s attribution to Ja’far of a saying: “Whoever seeks a glory that needs no tribe and an awe that needs no worldly power should find his way out of the ignominy of disobedience and into the glory of obedience.”61 In Ja’far’s presentation of self-perfection, much as one finds in the Qur’an and Hadith, worldly expectations are inverted. Submission is power, obedience is glory, and even servitude is lordship, as he clarifies in Miṣbāḥ al-Shari‘a: “Servitude is a precious gemstone the essence of which is lordship. Thus, whatever is missing in servitude is found in lordship, and whatever is hidden from lordship appears in servitude.”62 God’s power appears in human
servitude, so that servitude becomes an inverted mirror image of divine ascendancy. Without human admissions of neediness, God’s self-sufficiency does not become manifest.

In obeying and worshipping God, one becomes a servant-lord, that is, a servant whose admitted nothingness allows for God’s attributes of greatness to appear, through self-effacing acts. Ja’far makes this clear, as well, in Miṣbāḥ al-Sharī‘a: “Servitude means abandonment of all. Preventing the lower soul from that which it desires and compelling it to do that which it hates is the means to that. The key to this is abandoning comfort, loving seclusion, and taking a path toward neediness of God the Exalted. The Prophet said, ‘Worship God as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, He sees you.’”63 Countering the demands of the lower self (one’s passions) becomes a way to return to God, and returning to God—turning away from all but God—can become a way to see Him. Ja’far explains this in Miṣbāḥ al-Sharī‘a, indicating that God continues to appear, even as the servant perceives himself or herself going in and out of existence.64 The formula for drawing near to God and seeing him lies in the very letters of the word “servant,” or ‘ābīd in Arabic. The first letter, ‘āyn, is the servant’s knowledge of God (‘ilmuhu), which brings the servant to realize that he or she has no power or qualities of good, for all perfection exists with God. This brings the servant to return to God and distance himself or herself from all but Him. Indeed, the middle letter of ‘ābīd, the bā, stands for the servant’s distance (bawnuhu) from all but God. Lastly, comes proximity and direct vision: The last letter, dāl, stands for the servant’s “proximity (dunūwuhu) to God the Exalted, without qualification or veiling.”65 God’s beauty is the reward for the pains of turning away from the passions of the self and returning to Him.

CONCLUSION: REPENTANCE AS SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE HADITH

Within Sufism, an important debate developed about forgetting or remembering sins. Some argued that keeping one’s sins in mind, even after repentance, led to humility and a fear of returning to error, while others argued that remembering sins made too much of them, holding the forgiven person back from moving forward. Remembering a past sin might even tempt a person to commit it again, when it

The theme of remembering one’s sins becomes the topic of a hadith narrated by Ja’far in Shi’i collections. Since Ja’far would not have considered himself a storyteller, but was—in fact—celebrated for narrating accounts from his ancestor the Prophet Muhammad, or, in this case, from the Hebrew prophets perhaps as related by Muhammad, it seems fitting to end on this narration. The narration highlights important themes found in Sufism (such as the retreat from society), in addition to its consideration of repentance. Nevertheless, both historically and in terms of genre, the narration does not fall under the corpus of “Sufi texts,” and must be categorized instead as “texts attributed to Ja’far al-Ṣādiq.”

While the text is not “Sufi,” still, to overemphasize the distinction between the Shi’i Hadith corpus and Sufi texts is to miss the point when it comes to Ja’far al-Ṣādiq. Indeed what makes Ja’far’s case so interesting to historians of Sufism is the possibilities of interchange between two proto-traditions. Neither “Sufism” nor even “Shi’ism” meant what they mean today, although Shi’ism was much more demarcated as an affiliation in the eighth century than Sufism, in part on account of Ja’far’s teachings about the role of the “imām.” The interconnectedness between Shi’i teachings and Sufi texts has been seen already, for example, in Sulamī’s interest in Shi’i lines of narration, and in Sufyān al-Thawrī’s putative association with Ja’far for
the express purpose of gathering narrations going back to Muhammad, as well as in the possibility of Shaqīq al-Balkhī’s authorship of Miṣbāḥ al-Sharīʿa. Especially since this particular narrative considers the “spiritual intelligence” (as I will call it) of a prostitute, and since the association of Jaʿfar with the intelligence or intellect (al-ʿaql) even appears among Sunni Sufi writers, the hadith seems a fitting choice. My use of “spiritual intelligence” is meant to capture a difference in Jaʿfar’s notion of ʿaql, a word that I have previously translated as “intelligent.” In many of the reports traced to Jaʿfar, ʿaql is a moral entity, endowed with forces of virtue and disposed to know God, one at variance with the Neoplatonic sense of “intellect” that appears later in Islamic thought, and in line with that of another forebear to Sufism, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 912). This sort of intelligence might be thought of as a wisdom that is both practical and theoretical, one that reveals itself as moral and intellectual clarity of thought.

The narration appears in one of the most famous Shiʿi collections, al-Kāfī (“The Sufficient Book”) of Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī (d. 941). It is as follows:

There was a devout worshipper among the children of Israel who was not tempted at all when it came to the worldly, such that Iblis (Satan) gave out a snort of wrath and gathered his troops [of devils] before him. Then he said, “Who can take his case for me?”

One of them replied, “I can take him.”

“How will you get at him?” Iblis said.

“How will you get at him?” Iblis said.

“From the way of [the love of] women,” he replied.

“From the way of drinking and pleasures,” he replied.

“You’re not fit for him. He’s never even experienced women,” Iblis said.

“You’re not fit for him. He has nothing to do with such things,” Iblis said.

“You’re not fit for him. He would sleep but the devil wouldn’t. The man would rest, but the devil wouldn’t.”

The man began to admire him; his opinion of himself had begun to shrink; and he reckoned his own deeds as trivial.

“O God’s servant! From where do you draw the strength for such worship?”

He did not answer.
The man repeated himself.

Nothing.

Then he repeated himself once more.

So [the devil] replied, “O God’s servant, I committed a sin, and I have repented of it. Whenever I recall the sin, I find new strength for worship.”

The man said, “Tell me your sin, that I can commit it and repent, so, once I’ve done that, I too can find new strength for worship.”

He said, “Enter the city and ask for so-and-so the prostitute. Then give her two dirhams and be intimate with her.”

The man said, “Where would I get two dirhams? What would I know of two dirhams?”

So the devil pulled out two dirhams from beneath where he stood and handed them to him.

The man rose and entered the city, wearing his ascetic’s frock, asking around for the house of so-and-so the prostitute. The people directed him there. They thought that he had come to preach moral reform to her, so for that reason they directed him.

He came to her and threw the dirhams before her. He said, “Arise.”

So she did, and she entered her home, saying, “Come in.” She said, “You’ve called on me looking like one who doesn’t come to someone like me. So tell me what’s going on with you.” And he did.

Then she said to him, “O God’s servant, it is much easier to avoid a sin than to seek repentance for one. Not everyone who seeks repentance finds it. This must have been a devil who took human form for you. Turn away from this, and you won’t see anything anymore.”

Thus he turned away from it.

She died that very night. Morning arrived and upon her door was written, “Be present for so-and-so’s burial prayer, for indeed she is among the people of Paradise.”

The people were suspicious and lingered for three days without burying her, so doubtful were they about her case.

God, the Glorious and Exalted, revealed to one of His prophets—whom I [the narrator reporting from Ja’far al-Ṣādiq] do not know to be anyone but Moses son of Amram, peace be upon him—to “go to so-and-so and pray upon her, and command the people to do so as well, for I have forgiven her and guaranteed Paradise for her, because she kept My servant such-and-such from disobeying Me.”

The devout man’s mistake of course is that remembering one’s sin alone is never a means to grow closer to God. Rather, remembering one’s sin as an instance of one’s shortcomings might be. The difference between the two is important. Sinfulness emanates naturally from desires; it cannot be imitated by a conscious decision to disobey God for the sake of improving one’s rank. To turn away from sin and back toward God requires an earnest realization of one’s place as a very imperfect being in God’s universe. The devout man’s preoccupation with his own spiritual perfection, and especially outward acts of worship, places him in a category often found in the teachings of Ja’far al-Ṣādiq, namely, the unflagging ascetic who has little understanding of the lord he worships. The “spiritually intelligent” sinner always has a higher station than the spiritually dimwitted ascetic. In one account, for example, Ja’far tells of a man, again from the children of Israel (making it another reference to Hebraic wisdom), on a verdant, wooded island who
uses the island not for pleasure, but for the worship of God. When God reveals the man’s reward to an angel, the angel is surprised at its meagerness. Thus, the angel assumes human form and visits the man, who seems to be the only inhabitant of the island. It is not until the man tells the angel that he laments that “if only our Lord had a donkey,” then the island’s grass would not go unconsumed and wasted, that God reveals to the angel the wisdom of the human’s paltry reward. The man had indeed worshipped persistently, but the object of his worship was a deity deformed by ignorance and a lack of insight, and God rewards entirely “according to the measure of his spiritual intelligence (ʿaql).”

In this case, it is the prostitute who reveals her great spiritual intelligence, an intelligence that is at the heart of repentance. (Her profession places this narration among others in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions that consider the salvation of socially stigmatized female sex workers as examples of God’s mercy.) She knows sin firsthand. One gleans from her words that she also knows the difficulty of turning away from sin, once one has entered upon it. Moreover, she cares sincerely for one who has not yet tasted disobedience, and strives to reform him, even though everyone had thought that he might be trying to reform her. To couch the account in Qur’anic terms, the devout man has succumbed to the logic of Iblis, whose concern with his own superiority caused him to be rash. When God commands him to bow before Adam, Iblis instead vows to prove God wrong in His choice of Adam as His representative (Q 7:12–17). He betrays his own spiritual dimwittedness in failing to repent, instead blaming God for “misleading me” (Q 7:16; 15:39). On the other hand, the prostitute, like her ancestors Adam and Eve, knows her own inherent weakness, and, in fact, the weaknesses of all of the sons and daughters of this pair. Just as Adam and Eve, in their spiritual intelligence, somehow knew to blame themselves, admit their regret, and turn back toward God (Q 7:23), she too knows that repentance is not a tool or a mere technicality; it is a sincere movement of the soul. Even sins must be committed with sincerity for repentance to occur. It is fascinating that the story begins by having one protagonist, the devout man, but ends by redirecting its focus on the prostitute, so compelling is the purity of her action. Her action seems to qualify as a repentance that needs no formal repentance, a manifestation of heartfelt regret in which she turns another person back toward God. As one who guides others, she becomes prophet-like, subject to two instances of revelation: one inscribed on her door, and another communicated to the prophet of her age.

NOTES

1 Such objections have arisen in a different context. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) concedes his own set of challenges in his argument that the Christian sacrament of penance—analogous in certain respects to repentance (tawba)—is indeed a virtue. The objections to which he responds resemble the problem here that repentance might be seen as a passionate, sudden, and solitary turn away from sin. See Aquinas, Summa Theologica III, Q. 85, Art. 1, pp. 5:2533–2534, as well as III, Q. 85, Art. 3, ad. 4, p. 5:2536.


3 Indeed, early Sufi figures were often associated with alchemy, even if the degree and type of involvement for most of these figures is not entirely clear: Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Sufyān al-Thawrī, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, and al-Junayd, as well as most famously Jābir ibn Ḥayyān al-Ṣūfī (d. 815?) and his putative teacher Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. See Elias, Aisha’s Cushion, p. 188. In the case of Jābir and Jaʿfar, see al-Ḥāshimī, al-Kīmīyāʾ fi Taḥfīr al-Islām, pp. 191–6. Fascination with alchemy seems to have been based on the proposition that God has revealed Himself through the order of creation; to understand the former, an important early theorist such as al-Miṣrī says one must understand the latter. See Elias, Aisha’s Cushion, p. 182; Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.,” p. 57.


5 Algar, “Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq iii. And Sufism.”

6 ʿAṭṭār, Tadhkirat al-Awliyāʾ, p. 11. Interestingly, ʿAṭṭār follows the chapter on Jaʿfar with chapters on Uways al-Qaranī (d. 657) and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who both lived prior to Jaʿfar.
7 Ibid., p. 11.

8 Algar, “Ja’far al-Ṣādeq iii. And Sufism.”

9 While this chain of affiliation (sīlsila) is considered “primary” today, Naqshbandī writers have advocated other chains as primary. See Shah-Kazemi, Justice and Remembrance, p. 190, n. 2.

10 Algar, “Ja’far al-Ṣādeq iii. And Sufism.”

11 The Shi‘i collection al-Kāfī presents a generally negative view of Sufyān, even though he is a Hadith narrator in some entries. See al-Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, no. 7499 (pp. 8:564–5) for an account of his seeking advice on the Hajj, and nos. 8352 (p. 9:510) and 12,449 (pp. 13:18–19) for Ja‘far’s criticisms. One narration presents Sufyān and an unnamed friend seeking a sermon of the Prophet from Ja‘far, writing it down, but then destroying it upon realizing its dangerous Shi‘i implications; see no. 1059 (pp. 2:337–340). See also no. 1028 (p. 2:309). By contrast, Dā‘ūd al-Ṭā‘ī appears only once in al-Kāfī, as a reporter of a narration, no. 14,000 (p. 14:213).


14 Karamustafa, Sufism, p. 56.

15 Ibid., p. 100.


17 Algar, Review of Spiritual Gems, pp. 507–11.

18 Al-Sulamī, Spiritual Gems, pp. xxv–xxxi.


26 Al-Nūrī al-Ṭabarsī, Ḳhātimat al-Mustadrak, pp. 1:194–8. Those earlier scholars include Raḍī al-Dīn `Alī ibn Ṭāwūṣ (d. 1266)—who considered this book so important that in his al-Amān min Akhṭār al-Âsfār wa-l-Azmān he encouraged people to take it while traveling—as well as Taqī al-Dīn Ibrahīm ibn `Alī al-Kaf`āmī (d. ca. 1494) and al-Shahīd al-Thānī Zayn ibn `Alī (d. 1557–8 or 1558–9). The two later scholars are al-Majlisī (see main text) and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī (d. ca. 1693), both renowned Hadith scholars, but both also known for their hostility toward Sufism.


31 Al-Kalābādhī, al-Taʿarruf li-Madhhab Ahl al-Taṣawwuf, p. 158.

32 The treatise by Sulamī has been edited by Muḥammad Sūrī, based on a manuscript in the Malik Library of Tehran, dated 673 AH (1274–5 CE), and given by the editor the title “What is Sufism and who is a Sufi?“ (Maʿ al-Taṣawwuf wa Man al-Ṣūfī?). See al-Sulamī, Majmūʿat Āthār, pp. 3:328. For Ibn ʿArabī’s readings of the verse in question, see al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya, pp. 2:139, 2:589, 3:374, 4:302–3.

33 Al-Naysābūrī, Sahīḥ Muslim, no. 2749, p. 1470.

34 Mahn, Fortunate Fallibility, pp. 40–2.

35 Jaʿfar, Miṣbāḥ al-Sharīʿa, p. 97.

36 Ibid., p. 97.

37 Ibid., p. 98.


40 Al-Sarrāj, Kitāb al-Lumaʾ fi al-Taṣawwuf, pp. 43–4.

41 ʿAṭṭār, Manṭiq al-Ṭayr, l. 1281, p. 289.


43 Al-Hallāj (attributed), Dīwān-i Manṣūr-i Ḥallāj, p. 236.

44 Jaʿfar, Miṣbāḥ al-Sharīʿa, p. 98.

45 Al-Sulamī, Ziyādāt Ḥaqāʾiq al-Taṣawwuf, no. 91, p. 41.

46 Ibid., no. 152, p. 71; see also Q 4:27.


50 Ibid., p. 1:288.
52 Ibid., p. 301.
53 Ibid., p. 303.
54 Ibid., p. 301.
59 See al-Kulaynī, al-Kāfî, no. 410, p. 1:387; Gleave, “Ja‘far, ii. Teachings.” Many Sunni and Twelver Shi‘i narrations agree that—to some extent—God has determined the range of a particular human being’s actions, including sins. Theologically, things become much more complex and such narrations (and Qur‘anic verses) have been read according to a range of determinism and free will. For helpful discussions, see Schmidtke, The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology, especially chapters 1, 2, 17, 23, and 26. An excellent narration (or rather series of narrations) can be found in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, recording an otherworldly discussion between the prophets Moses and Adam, in which Moses blames Adam for his lapse, which caused the entire human race to be exiled from Paradise. To this Adam responds, “God selected you for His words and wrote for you with His own hand; do you blame me for something that God decreed for me forty years before creating me?” (al-Naysābūrī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2652, pp. 1425–6).
62 Ja‘far, Miṣbāḥ al-Sharī‘a, p. 7.
63 Ibid., pp. 7–8.
64 Ibid., p. 7.
65 Ibid., p. 8.
67 This view of “awakening” (yaqẓa) as a precursor to “repentance” (tawba) occurs later in Anṣārī’s thought. Originally, in an earlier treatise titled Ṣad Maydān, Anṣārī had made “repentance” the first station and “awakening” the twelfth, occurring after other changes. See Anṣārī Hirawī, Majmū‘a yi Rasā’i l, pp. 1:258, 1:266, for the references in Ṣad Maydān; see also Anṣārī Hirawī, Manāzil al-Sā’i rīn, pp. 16, 19.
68 One finds Ja‘far discussing the matter of the truly intelligent or rational (‘āqil) one with Abū Ḥanīfa in ‘Aṭṭār’s Tadhkirat al-Awliyā’ (p. 14). Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī quotes Ja‘far as proclaiming that “there is no property more useful than the intellect (al-‘aql) and no affliction greater than ignorance.” See Ghazālī, Iḥyā‘ Ulūm al-Dīn, p. 3:241.18.

70 Al-Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, no. 10,400, pp. 15:841–3. That the narrator (and not Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq) asserts Moses’ identity, albeit with some degree of doubt, is made clear in p. 15:843, n. 2.

71 Ibid., no. 8, pp. 1:27–8.

72 There is a well-known account in Muslim’s Ẓahīḥ in which God forgives a prostitute (also from the children of Israel) because she gives a thirsty dog water to drink on a hot day. See al-Naysābūrī, Ẓahīḥ Muslim, nos. 2244, 2245, p. 1233. The theme can be found, as well, in Jewish and Christian scriptures; see Joshua 6:17–25, Matthew 21:31–2, Luke 7:36–50, Hebrews 11:31, and b. Menaḥot 44a.

Chapter Seven

Distancing Oneself from the Worldly: Renunciation (Zuhd)

According to al-Muḥāṣibī and al-Sarrāj

It is best not to draw forced comparisons between Sufism and Aristotelian virtue ethics, but renunciation does provide an instructive parallel. The greatest challenge in renunciation is that a person ought to abstain from worldly pleasures entirely out of disinterest in them, not because one is tempted by them or sees them as having great value. Rather, a true renunciant acts out of a lucid sense that value resides in God alone. This renunciant sees the worldly (al-dunyā) for what it is, as though it has no essential worth. In this there is a telling similarity between renunciation and Aristotle’s explanation of the difference between temperance and continence (enkrateia, sometimes “self-control”). According to Aristotle, one person refrains from certain bodily pleasures because he or she lacks excessive and bad appetites.1 This person’s abstention from excessive and vile pleasures is completely internalized in that it has none of the pains of compelling oneself to abstain. Such a person acts through the virtue of temperance. Another person might refrain from certain pleasures because he or she knows that “appetites are bad,” but still desires them.2 Such a person has excessive and bad appetites but, out of knowledge, simulates the virtue of temperance in avoiding such things. This person has neither temperance nor virtue because his or her motivations do not come from disposition. Rather, this person has continence, which is certainly a good thing, but not the moral goal.3 Distinguishing temperance from continence mattered to Aristotle—and to contemporary virtue ethicists—because the difference between the two displays the nature of virtue.4 Similarly, for the thinkers discussed below, one cannot progress upon the path to God without renunciation, nor can one arrive at its higher moral realizations without true renunciation.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

One of the disagreements between two of Islam’s earliest schools of inner perfection concerned the question of earning one’s livelihood. The Sufis, centered in Islam’s capital of Baghdad, argued that one ought to avoid actively seeking sustenance as much as possible, for this was not only a distraction, but a slippery slope to worldliness. The Malāmatīs (meaning advocates of the “Path of Self-Blame”), centered mainly in Nishapur in northeastern Iran, argued that one must work for one’s living, remaining unattached to the worldly while still functioning as part of society. In their general approach the Malāmatīs or “Malāmatiyya” also differed strikingly from another important and popular ascetic school, one located in their region, the Karrāmiyya, whose devotions to God were public.5 Rather, in all things, the Malāmatīs
emphasized concealing one’s inner successes, always seeing the human soul as suspect to self-adulation and to fondness for the affirmation of others. For that reason, their path required the wayfarer to blend in. The Malāmatīs should neither dress differently than others nor eschew the demands of toil, living among the people and, in the words of Sulamī, “never differing from them in their marketplaces and pursuits of profit.”

Toward the end of the tenth century, Sufism became more prevalent in Nishapur. The Malāmatī school became redefined, eventually, as an expression of piety under the larger umbrella of “Sufism.” The spread of Sufism in Nishapur was tied to the spread of the Shāfiʿī legal school. As the school became more popular there, those Shāfiʿīs in Nishapur who identified with the Sufis of Baghdad made good use of the institutions of that legal school, a school that was better organized than what had existed before.7 These “Sufis” became more conspicuous than their Malāmatī counterparts, already inclined toward a lack of public visibility.8 The Malāmatī approach was brought into Sufism and in a sense eventually subsumed in it. The integration was not always smooth, and some continued to draw boundaries between the Malāmatīs and Sufism.9 Nevertheless, the Malāmatīs appeared as epitomizing an approach harmonious with Sufism, within an overarching Islamic framework of “sciences and states” as presented in Sulamī’s Treatise on the Malāmatīs (“Risālat al-Malāmatīyya”).10

Looking at these contemplations on interior conditions, we can determine that Islam’s earliest ascetics had serious disagreements about two related virtues. The first, zuhd, is disinterest in and indeed renunciation of the worldly.11 The second is trust in God, or tawakkul. These two are related in Sufi writings because renunciation should lead to one’s disassociation from worldly means, such as the pursuit of livelihood or concern with food. Unable to rely on such worldly means, one must completely trust, instead, in God.

We will first consider a discussion of the limits of renunciation by al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), a teacher to the seminal Sufi master al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 910) and a pioneer in Sufi moral psychology who wrote a century or so before al-Sarrāj. So early is al-Muḥāsibī in fact that he must be considered a “proto-Sufī,” because the term “Sufī” was then only beginning to gain currency and to refer to an identifiable group.12 Al-Muḥāsibī was originally from Basra in Iraq, a city associated with the earliest ascetic movement in Islam, a movement that precedes the Sufis of Baghdad and has often been associated with Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, though how much this movement owes to al-BAṣrī has come into question recently.13 Nevertheless, renunciation had become part of the spiritual climate of Basra. Conspicuous early on in Basra were the “Weepers,” that is, those who would ponder the Qur’an or the afterlife and shed tears, or do so reflecting upon the gap between God’s perfection and their moral imperfections.14 Indeed, Basra seems to have been a source of influence for other urban centers in the matter of renunciation.15 Although al-Muḥāsibī moved from Basra to Baghdad as a child,16 it is not unlikely that al-Junayd had his master al-Muḥāsibī in mind when he described the people of Basra as having been divinely bestowed with “renunciation and contentment.”17 Embodying a virtue directly related to renunciation, scrupulousness (al-wara’), which means taking great caution to observe the rights of God and others, al-Muḥāsibī was famous for refusing food that he considered doubtful. He even rejected his own inheritance on account of his father’s beliefs, beliefs that he deemed heterodox and which would then render the two of them as adherents to different religions who cannot inherit from one another.18 Al-Muḥāsibī himself was subject to the censure and shunning of others on account of his religious views, or, more specifically, his willingness to engage in theological speculation. Having been singled out as a deviant by the popular Hadith scholar and renunciante Baghdad Aḥmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), al-Muḥāsibī spent the last few years of his life concealed in his home. It is said that only four people attended al-Muḥāsibī’s funeral prayers.19

RENUNCIATION AS OBSERVANT DISINTEREST: AL-MUḤĀSIBĪ

In The Book of Issues Concerning Renunciation and Other Things (Kitāb Masāʾīl fī al-Zuhd [wa Ghyarīhī]), al-Muḥāsibī begins by addressing a question posed by a pupil, quite possibly al-Junayd, since al-Muḥāsibī often encouraged the latter to ask him questions.20 In responding, al-Muḥāsibī considers renunciation from a perspective that includes all interested parties: the self, one’s dependents, and God. The Qur’an’s definition of liberality, in a way similar to Aristotle’s mean, sets its boundaries as lying between
prodigality and stinginess (Q 17:26–9). Similarly, al-Muhāsibī’s treatment of renunciation assumes that his students will want to strike a balance. They will want to draw nearer to God while still observing the claims that other human beings might make upon them. On a larger scale, al-Muhāsibī needs to define renunciation in a manner that is balanced as well, one that manages to be feasible for all but also rigorous for the spiritual elite. He does this by constructing his definition on a famous hadith, using the terms and reasoning of that hadith without mentioning it. In this “Hadith of the Supererogatory Deeds” (Ḥadīth al-Nawāfil), God announces that His servant draws near to Him, first, through that which He has made obligatory for the servant:

My servant draws closer to Me using nothing more beloved of Me than that which I have made obligatory for him. Then, he continues to draw near to Me using supererogatory deeds, until I love him. Once I love him, I am his hearing by which he listens, his vision by which he sees, his hand by which he seizes, and his foot by which he walks.22

This hadith has presented, for many, a model of praxis that situates good deeds on two levels. There is that which is obligatory and basic; and there is that which is recommended and ideal. A person first progresses through the level of that which is basic, through simple obedience. Every person deserves to participate in good action, which is obedience to God, even those whose abilities or desires lead them to the minimum. There are, however, those who pursue higher and more rigorous acts, for whom there is little end in sight for their aspirations to do good. Progressing beyond the compulsory, these servants continue “to draw near” to God, in a secondary but more elevated way, through supererogatory acts, that is, those acts that God prefers but has not made obligatory. Ultimately, this process leads not only to God’s love for the servant, but also to the pinnacle of devotional experience, in which God has revealed Himself as all of the servant’s senses and faculties. Applying this division of acts into obligatory and supererogatory, al-Muhāsibī is able to maintain two strata of renunciation, one (the basic) for those who renounce the impermissible and another (the ideal) for those who renounce the impermissible and another (the ideal) for those who seek God’s friendship.

Thus, al-Muhāsibī begins by clarifying that God has “made obligatory on all His servants the renunciation of that which He has forbidden,” while also declaring as supererogatory the renunciation of permissible property in excess of one’s needs.23 One might include in the former category all impermissible things, from stolen wealth to intoxicating beverages; these demand renunciation. For the latter category, for those who want “to draw near” a person should never simply reject entirely that which God has permitted, nor should he or she cease to desire that which God has caused humans to desire out of nature. Rather, the most perfect understanding of renunciation, according to al-Muhāsibī, is one limited mainly to controlling one’s intake of food, as well as one’s consumption of property that is morally suspect and might evoke divine displeasure.

The true renunciant takes everything into account, from his intentions, to the needs of his family, to the source of his income.24 If the person does this successfully and is still unable to practice generosity and to give anything to others as charity, then he is “a treasurer among the treasurers of God.”25 Appearances do not, then, always reflect reality: While the actions of a person who has wealth but does not give of it might seem motivated by stinginess or greed, they can actually be motivated by a consideration of the rights of those in his care, and motivations matter. Such a person is a true renunciant, even if it appears that he has much. Conversely, one who gives much away, but is not concerned with the source of his wealth, nor with the needs of his dependents and kin, “is one who desires the worldly,” even if he has little.26 After all, only an ambition for spiritual rank, or—even worse—for social acclaim, could prompt someone to exceed the boundaries of the rights of others. Judging by the biographical accounts of al-Muhāsibī’s ascetic contemporaries, it seems that some did indeed give away large portions of their own wealth, leaving their families—they assumed—to God’s providence.

Correct renunciation for al-Muhāsibī lies in one’s outlook on the worldly, not in one’s shunning of material goods. More than merely an act or an attitude toward the worldly, true renunciation according to al-Muhāsibī is a more complete understanding of one’s place in the world and as God’s servant:

There exists the sort of person who has much but is not preoccupied with accumulating more. This person does not remember his worldly goods, because the [thought of the] afterlife has conquered his ambitions. He keeps the worldly in mind like one who seeks deliverance from it, and he possesses it like one upon
whom the fluctuations of inner states have no effect. His heart is occupied with remembering something other than the worldly, and he is grateful for that which God has bestowed upon him. If he is given of it, the appearance of blessings does not prevent him from being properly thankful for them. And if it is withheld, the descent of such a trial does not prevent him from looking [instead] upon the origin of the good. Thus, he is forbearing in tribulations, cognizant that the difficulty of his current condition is better for him than prosperity, and so he welcomes the trial [of poverty] with forbearance (al-ṣabr) and gratitude (al-shukr). In such a trial he knows that, if forbearance has overcome him, such that he was able to ponder the trial’s outcome and find good and blessings in it, then thanks are due [that God granted him forbearance]. He is also happy in prosperity, choosing for himself that which God has chosen for him. [Similarly,] when God sends down tribulations upon him, he will not refuse that which his Master has chosen for him, nor will he choose that which anyone other than his Master has chosen.

There also exists the sort of person who is destitute and whose renunciation shows on his body while his heart is busy with desire. He has deemed the worldly things in his possession as meager, even if they are great in quantity, while deeming great that which is in the hands of others, even if it is in reality meager. It has been narrated from one of the scholars that he once read in the wisdom [literature] of Jesus, peace be upon him, “We have seen among the destitute an intensity of love for the worldly, while seeing others who were wealthy yet lacked love for the worldly, like the select ones, Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon. When God wanted them to, they abandoned every last grain of sand.”27

Among early Sufi texts, the attention to detail here—in terms of both social context and the inner world of intention—is characteristic of al-Muḥāṣibī. Indeed, his moniker, “al-Muḥāṣibī,” refers to his meticulous “self-accounting,” his unflagging and exacting introspective analysis, which is on full display in The Book of Observing One’s Duties to God (Kitāb al-Riʿāya li-Huqūq Allāh), a portion of which has been translated by Michael Sells.28 One learns from The Book of Observing One’s Duties to God that renunciation is entirely a matter of one’s intentions. It is related to that which a person desires, not to that which he or she has. This idea is echoed in al-Muḥāṣibī’s Issues Concerning the Deeds of Hearts and Limbs (al-Maṣā’il il fī A māl al-Qulūb wa-l-Jawāriḥ). Here al-Muḥāṣibī describes renunciation as one of those convictions (iʿtiqād) that God has made incumbent upon the heart, paired with a disavowal of coveting, “regardless of the deeds of one’s limbs.”29 Much as in the teachings of the Malāmatīs (the People of Self-Blame), for al-Muḥāṣibī the true renunciant is indeed engaged in the world and in the worldly, because divine law has placed obligations upon him. Yet in the inner universe of the soul, this person fully realizes that everything is a transitory means to drawing nearer to an eternal divinity. That which probably made al-Muḥāṣibī’s account a model for later ones, such as Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī’s, is this graceful combination of the legal scholar’s concern for duties to others combined with the Sufi’s concern for the minutiae of intentionality.30 This concern with the soul and society, with the inner and outer dimensions of God’s commands, reflects al-Muḥāṣibī’s study of jurisprudence, especially the legal teachings of Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820), although he was not—as is sometimes asserted—under the tutelage of al-Shāfiʿī himself.31

There is one last point here to be made about renunciation in al-Muḥāṣibī’s treatise: It functions as part of a network of virtues. Renunciation should not keep one from being grateful for God’s blessings. In other words, gratitude (al-shukr), as a virtue, should not be sacrificed for renunciation. Renunciation should not cause someone to desire anything other than that which God wills for the servant, whether it be wealth or poverty. In other words, renunciation must occur in a context of complete satisfaction (al-riḍā) with God’s decree, which is another virtue. Lastly, because true renunciation requires this sense of satisfaction, the true renunciant is so disinterested in both the acquisition and deprivation of the worldly, that he or she has complete forbearance (al-ṣabr). When the worldly is given to him or her, or when it is taken away, the true renunciant remains steadfast in all the other virtues, unshaken by both prosperity and hardship.

A TRIPARTITE MODEL OF RENUNCIATION IN AL-SARRĀJ

Unlike al-Muḥāṣibī, the name of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988) has endured in the history of Sufism not because of associations or edifying stories told about his saintly personality, but rather because of one book, a book that helped give shape to Sufism as an Islamic science proper and defined the boundaries of
The book, The Book of Flashes on Sufism (Kitāb al-Luma’ fi al-Taṣawwuf), greatly influenced other important manuals on Sufism to follow, especially Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī’s Acquaintanceship with the Path of the People of Sufism (al-Ta’arruf li-Madhhab Aḥl al-Taṣawwuf). The author, al-Sarrāj, sought to consolidate various figures and approaches into a science, one harmonious within itself and with divine law, and exerted great effort in doing so. His investigation into the wisdoms of bygone spiritual masters took him far from his native homeland, in northeastern Iran, and westward, through regions of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, where he spoke with those masters who could recollect the great ones of the past. The time he spent teaching in Baghdad has left us with an indication of al-Sarrāj’s piety. Having stayed there for the entire month of fasting, leading others in strenuous nightly devotions, al-Sarrāj left without consuming the loaves that were brought to his quarters each evening, presumably living on nothing at all, so detached he was from the world. While the Sufi poet and biographer Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān Nūr al-Dīn Jāmī (d. 1492), who conveys this account, assures his readers that al-Sarrāj wrote “many compositions,” only his Book of Flashes remains. Yet the book became a vehicle in which many sayings and deeds of Sufi saints (called “friends of God”) made the important shift from oral tradition to the written word, a shift that had begun to occur for the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad in the two centuries prior. As Nile Green has indicated, a body of texts—especially one highlighting a named group of initial masters—facilitated the establishment of a Sufi tradition.

Repentance and scrupulousness (warāʾ), the two first stations on the path according to al-Sarrāj, are preliminary. They prepare one for those stages that follow, because those that follow are not necessarily required by divine law, at least not in the sense discussed by al-Sarrāj. For that reason, al-Sarrāj calls renunciation (zuhd) the “first step for those resolutely endeavoring toward God.” In this sense, al-Sarrāj means by renunciation the disavowal of permissible wealth and pleasures, while al-Muhāsibī focused on renunciation as a spectrum of disassociation, from the impermissible that must be renounced to the permissible that should be renounced to acquire God’s friendship. The concern for al-Sarrāj is with renunciation as the first real step for all the other stations. Because renunciation is foundational for “sainthood” (favored friendship with God), defects in one’s disinterest in the worldly spell trouble for what follows: “When one lacks firm foundations in renunciation, everything that follows is unsound, because the love of the worldly is the start of every moral error.” One might imagine, extending al-Sarrāj’s comparison to foundations, that a house constructed upon a faulty or tilted substructure would become more dangerous as it expanded in height. Similarly, love for the worldly will reappear later and much more devastatingly if not extinguished from the start. The definition that al-Sarrāj offers for renunciation clarifies that it goes beyond the basic requirements that exist for all Muslims: “Renunciation applies to abstaining from that which is permissible and available, since that which is forbidden or dubious must be abandoned by divine law.” Thus, renunciation is an abandonment of the worldly that goes beyond matters of obedience, as a means of seeking proximity with God. One is so wary of the worldly that even permissible pleasures are suspect.

As with al-Sarrāj’s other stations, renunciation has three grades: the renunciation (1) of the beginners, (2) of the elite realizers, and (3) of the most elite. In this threefold division, the first and second grades correspond to a collection of stages on a spiritual path. One progresses from station to station, from repentance to scrupulousness to renunciation to poverty to forbearance to trust and then to satisfaction. Then one progresses from novice fulfillments of these stations to more elite ones, leaving behind and hopefully not returning to those qualities that apply to beginners. This progression is very clear in al-Sarrāj’s writing, because at the conclusion of each station, he informs his reader that the station in question requires another station. “Renunciation,” for example, “necessitates embracing and willfully selecting poverty.” The highest grade of each station, however, corresponds to what we might call a realized “virtue,” that is, a consummate character trait—and not a transitory station. These virtues are not meant to be abandoned, so that one retains an accomplished version of repentance, renunciation, and the rest, simultaneously.

Usually the “beginner” realization of each station is done with greater effort and is less ingrained than advanced realizations of that station. As a person advances, the station becomes a part of his or her nature and requires less stringent self-regulation. The beginner practices the station in question by making some sort of change externally, either regarding his or her body or regarding his or her interaction with the outside world. This holds true for beginners in renunciation as well. For them, their “hands are devoid of property, and their hearts are devoid of that missing from their hands,” as al-Sarrāj notes, rephrasing a
definition of renunciation mentioned by al-Junayd, who modifies that stated by his own teacher and maternal uncle Sarī al-Saqaṭī (d. 867).42 In other words, beginners distance themselves from material possessions, because their outer situations directly affect their inner states. At a higher (but still intermediate) level, that of the realizers (al-muḥaqqiqīn), a person renounces not only goods, but also the benefits that might occur through renunciation. One benefit to be renounced is reputation; being an ascetic elicits reverence among the people and can lead to higher status in this world. There are also rewards in the hereafter. The intermediate person renounces both.43 The degree of intentionality here is higher, because the person in question has become distant not only from pleasures, comforts, passions, and material goods, but also from the subtler desires of the soul, especially self-affirmation in the eyes of others.

Lastly, we reach the highest grade of renunciation, that belonging to the most elite. Here those elites “renounce their renunciation and repent of it.”44 They have realized that the worldly is so devoid of value, so equivalent to “nothing,” that it does not even merit their concern to reject it. Disinterest in the world has become internalized to the highest degree, so much so that the excessive fear of attachment held by beginners and intermediates seems incongruous with reality. Rather, the person in question has become sincerely indifferent to the worldly, having awoken to its true form. Quoting the words of Yahyā ibn Muʿādh (d. 872), al-Sarrāj tells us that “the worldly is like a bride. He who seeks it is like the bride’s hairdresser. He who renounces it puts smut all over her face, tears out her hair, and rips up her clothes. But the knower, busy with God, pays her no heed.”45 Put simply, one can fan the flames of desire for the worldly, or stamp out the fire in exertion and exasperation. The first way belongs to intemperate seekers of the worldly, and the second way belongs to simple-minded renunciants. There is a third way, however, and it belongs to those aware of God’s beauty and thus aware of the worthlessness of the worldly: It is to walk away from the fire, giving no notice to that which has no value.

Noteworthy is al-Sarrāj’s ability to weave together dissimilar statements about renunciation, which seem to be at variance with one another, into a progression.46 In the model that al-Sarrāj creates from these statements, qualities that apply to beginners necessarily vary from qualities that apply to the most advanced. While he might seem to be engaging in an apologetics of synthesis, there are sometimes real connections between those he quotes. In other words, al-Sarrāj’s model is a product of over a century of communication and debate about the spiritual path.47

Interestingly, while al-Muhāsibī seems to assume that his audience will have an income and dependents in need of it, al-Sarrāj’s network of virtues seems to suit those who have chosen poverty. And poverty is here not meant in the metaphorical sense of meekness or a recognition of one’s ultimate neediness. Rather, the most basic stage of poverty for al-Sarrāj means that a person “does not own a thing, and does not seek—whether in terms of action or inner desire—anything from anyone, nor does he expect anything from anyone; if he is given something, he does not take it.”48 After this, in the intermediate stage, the person endowed with poverty will accept help, if offered, because his humility keeps him from disagreeing with others. Finally, in the highest stage, the person will in fact ask for help, because to do so brings joy to others.49 There is much evidence that some of those ascetics who wore woolen garments and thus self-identified as “Sufi” (which can mean “wool-wearer”) in the eighth and ninth centuries did indeed eschew labor and the acquisition of property, subsisting instead on the charity of others, a practice that aroused criticism.50

RENUNCIATION, ASCETICISM, AND ISLAMIC ETHICAL HISTORY

Christopher Melchert has argued that a shift occurred, especially in Iraq, as asceticism premised on observant fear of God took on traits of mysticism premised on an encounter with God. This paradigm draws from the writings of Max Weber (d. 1920), who was interested in the history of Western Christianity, especially the appearance of Protestantism and (argued Weber) the consequent rise of capitalism. As rationalism began to overtake Christian thought, beginning with changes in the monastic orders, Europeans and their American counterparts redirected their asceticism toward worldly ends.51 Martin Luther’s idea of a vocational calling had given “every-day worldly activity a religious significance,” such that later, among the Puritans, asceticism would become almost completely transformed into an avoidance of leisure and an
encouragement of regular and constant occupation.52 This process allowed for the world-centered purposefulness that would become the modern “spirit of capitalism.” As Christopher Adair-Toteff indicates, Weber saw the ascetic impulse in opposition to the mystical impulse. The ascetic focused on the world outside of the self, and on being an active vehicle of God’s influence. The mystic, to the contrary, focused on the world within, and on being a passive receptacle for God’s influence as opposed to the influences of the outer world.53 The spirit of asceticism that arose from Protestantism lacked mystical properties. It progressively took an interest in external affairs, that is, becoming in Weber’s words more “rational.”54

According to Melchert, after the middle of the ninth century, Muslim figures began to appear more frequently who advocated God’s immanence and communion with Him.55 In other words, public piety, formerly dominated by ascetics, now included prominent mystics. Those aligned with the older ascetic model showed resistance to the newer mystics, who seemed dismissive of obedience to God. Perhaps most famous was Ghulām Khalīfī (d. 888), who opposed the excessively anthropomorphic love language that had arisen in Iraq.56 Khalīfī would spearhead a campaign to try these Sufis for heresy, such that seventy to seventy-five of them, including some of the heroes of Sufism mentioned by al-Sarrāj, were summoned before the highest judge of Baghdad.57 The disdain for the emerging mystical trend was echoed loudly among the ascetic followers of ʿAlī ibn Ḥanbal.58 The Sufi figure al-Junayd was important here. He was able to render asceticism as part of a model in which both asceticism and mysticism appeared, though he considered the course of love in Sufism to be more exalted than mere asceticism when it came to knowledge and conduct.59 He also presented a mystical tradition that allowed for the sober study of Hadith, as well as a grounded, nonitinerant family life.60 Extreme renunciation (zuḥd) was equated with trust in God (tawakkul).61

There are objections one could make to this account, especially because one does see “ascetic” and “mystical” trends in both of these groups even before al-Junayd. For instance, the early female saint Rābīʿa al-ʿAdawīyya (d. ca. 801) exemplified both the ascetic and mystical traditions, even though she lived well before these disputes in Baghdad and Basra. While Rābīʿa went so far as to declare the study of Hadith a worldly activity, she has been also associated with the all-encompassing love of God, on account of statements quite likely made by her.62 Yet Melchert’s hypothesis does provide an explanation for a theme that surfaces in books on Sufi ethics: the portrayal of Sufis as true heirs to the Prophet Muhammad’s asceticism. As Sufis went on the defensive against more sober ascetics, they emphasized their status as the renunciants par excellence who embody Muhammad’s normative piety. For this reason, writers such as al-Sarrāj and Sulaḥī would include a non-Sufi renunciant such as Bishr al-Haffī (d. ca. 842) in the ranks of Sufis.63 Perhaps an indication of the success of al-Sarrāj and others in claiming renunciation for Sufism, the terms “Sufi” and “renunciant” (al-zāḥid) might have been interchangeable as titles in certain contexts.64 In stressing Sufism’s claim on renunciation, writers such as al-Sarrāj often celebrated saints who avoided work or marriage.

Critics of Sufis in both modern and premodern times, however, might cite avoidance of work and of worldly pursuits (especially marriage) as evidence that those Sufis who claim to be the Prophet’s spiritual heirs in fact reject acts that were part of his way of life.65 After all, the Prophet Muhammad is known to have engaged in work, first as a shepherd and later as a merchant, and he was also married. Ahmet Karamustafa reminds us that in reality early Sufis walked a fine line in that regard, assuming a more middling position. They held an avoidance of marriage and work as preferable, without ever denouncing either of these two practices that were indeed part of the Prophet’s biographical legacy.66 Some early Sufis worked and were married, while others did not, but Sufis did mostly avoid more extreme acts of renunciation current in their day, such as a collective withdrawal from society or constant travel and begging.67

Such tensions in interpreting engagement with the world have lingered throughout the history of Sufism. This appears later, for example, with one of the most distinctive of Sufi ascetic practices, “retreat” (khalwa), which often involves forty-day isolation in a cell, avoiding stimuli and social contact, and engaging in practices prescribed by one’s shaykh. Such retreat has been a periodic practice among a number of orders, including the Kubrawīyya, the Shādhiliyya, the Qādiriyya, and—an order whose eponym was thought to be especially fond of seclusion—the Khalwātiyya.68 Those remembered as the founding figures of the Naqshbandiyya order, however, saw this practice as dangerously close to seeking public
acclaim for ascetic feats and dangerously far from the Sunna of Muhammad.69 While some Sufis withdrew from society for forty-day-period after forty-day-period, Khwāja Bahā’ al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 1389) interpreted the Qur’an’s praise for “men undistracted from God’s remembrance by trade or barter” to be an injunction not for withdrawal, but for God-conscious societal engagement.70 Thus the Naqshbandī elders adopted a Malāmātī approach to the practice of retreat, and—according to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ṣā di Ali Kāshī fī (d. 1532–3)—retained the forty-day retreat as a one-time initiatic practice. They advocated instead “retreat in society” (khalwat dar anjuman, or al-khalwa fi al-jalva) as a more enduring practice, after the aspirant has made use of the initial forty-day retreat to overcome the five senses and the lower soul.71 “Retreat in society” means that the aspirant lives among others, engaging with them, while internally maintaining a sense of isolation and concentration on God. One might here use the popular expression often attributed to St. Paul, “in the world but not of the world.”

TO WORK OR NOT TO WORK: RENUNCIATION AND TRUST

Debates about renunciation and work affected our two writers as well. Misinterpretations of renunciation in the ninth century perturbed al-Muhāsibī. He repudiates such severe measures in a discussion of “promptings” (khaṭra/khaṭarāt) in his Book of Observing One’s Duties to God. “Promptings” are sudden inspirations of the heart that come from elsewhere—here from Satan.72 Injudicious hearts, al-Muhāsibī remarks, take such promptings as invitations to practice innovations in God’s religion (bid’ a) as opposed to normative customs (sunna).73 They abandon work.74 The enemy of humans, Satan, seeks to invite such people to innovations in their renunciation, satisfaction, and trust in God, in a manner that opposes the renunciation and trust of the pious forbears who should serve as models (al-a’īma al-mutaqaddimīn). Thus a “certain group” believes that renunciation means neglecting one’s family; failing to perform the filial duty of sustaining one’s parents in their old age; trusting in God while abandoning the act of providing for one’s wife and children; setting out for travel without taking provisions; satisfaction and even delight when tribulations befall Muslims; and forbidding medicine for cures and prayers for God’s help.75 One can see the pattern that worries al-Muhāsibī. These twin virtues of renunciation (zuhd) and trust in God (tawakkul) invite certain practitioners, who are starting in his time to become a cohesive and identifiable group, to take extreme measures never put into practice by the Prophet, his companions, and the earliest saints. In their eagerness to prove their trust in God alone, they renounce worldly means of success, pleasure, and even survival. Their excess in doing so has caused them to lose course and err from God’s religion.76 God’s religion, for al-Muhāsibī, must correspond to the more measured and socially responsible practices of Islam’s earliest period.

To forge a very different model of renunciation, one that supports abandoning work, al-Sarrāj also refers to Islam’s earliest period. The Prophet, after all, approved of a group of his select companions known as the “People of the Bench” (Ahl al-Ṣaffa), who did not engage in farming or trade, who virtually lived in the city’s central mosque, whose sustenance was only dates and water, and who wore tattered rags that barely covered them in prayer.77 Contrary to what critics of Sufis do, the Prophet did not enjoin them to work, but rather encouraged their conduct, even reciting the Qurʾan for them.78 The problem for al-Sarrāj is that whenever one is engaged in earning, one becomes embroiled in a battle between the worldly demands of work and the spiritual demands of trust. In fact, al-Sarrāj remembers witnessing a man complain to Aḥmad ibn Sālim (d. 967), a Sufi master in Basra who had been encouraging his audience to earn a living. “O shaykh!” the man called out. “We are either subjugated by earning or by trust!”79 Ibn Sālim responds that “trust is God’s messenger’s [Muhammad’s] inner state (ḥāl), while earning is his normative custom (sunna).”80 While this might seem to favor earning, the opposite is meant here. The “inner state” is the objective or aim of the Prophet’s normative customs. In this case, the Prophet has set an example of earning for his followers because “he knew they were weak” and would rather have his followers “come up short in terms of trust” than perish because they came up short in terms of seeking livelihood.81 The People of the Bench are proof that it is indeed possible to live an exemplary life without earning a living, even if that model is not for everyone.

Those worldly souls who blame the pious for this lifestyle have failed to understand them. This can be seen, al-Sarrāj tells us, when Ibrāhīm al-Khawwāṣī (d. 904) was taken to task for his companions: “Your companions say, ‘We take from God when we take.’ But we only see them taking from the people.” To this
al-Khawwāṣ replied, “Who is the One who rouses the people’s hearts so that they give without [my companions’] seeking anything from them or even asking them?” His companions have renounced the worldly to such a degree that they firmly believe everything to belong to God alone, so that God inspires people to give charity to them. Such charity is an instance of divine persuasion, attesting to the poor Sufis’ conviction that everything is indeed His. As can be seen from this example, renunciation’s end is trust in God. Indeed, such austere renunciation reveals a group chasing an ideal of trust in God that can only be caught through extreme measures. It is because trust is so elusive that al-Sarrāj uses the words of his predecessor Šahl al-Tustarī to describe trust in God as “all face” with “no back-of-the-head,” a virtue that “belongs only to the people of the tombs.” Like a person at a distance toward whom you run but who becomes more distant with each step you take, trust cannot be fully achieved. As a virtue, trust eludes humans because they are naturally predisposed to trust in or rely on worldly means to live. While trust is the higher virtue sought through renunciation, it only belongs to “the people of the tombs,” because once one dies then the soul has no choice but to abandon its hopes in the means of survival and wellbeing. Those in graves now have renounced the world completely, even if by force, and hence they trust solely in God. For al-Sarrāj, trust is the penultimate station, second only to satisfaction (ridā).

In defining the boundaries of renunciation, al-Sarrāj’s tone is not that of an original authority, like al-Muḥāsibī. While al-Muḥāsibī was surrounded by a proto-tradition, a tradition in formation that would have to deal with renunciation, al-Sarrāj is clearly interested in defending the integrity of a tradition that has already formed. Therefore, al-Sarrāj seeks to convey his predecessors’ extreme acts of world-denying asceticism, which he categorizes under “renunciation.” His descriptions of the practices of the masters of the past differ strikingly from al-Muḥāsibī’s more moderate presentation. Yet, when it comes to those living during his own time, al-Sarrāj shares al-Muḥāsibī’s concerns about excessive renunciation. Some renunciants, he tells us, go days and nights without food, and yet have not been trained in the proper observances of the path by a master. Instead of seeking advice, they imitate Sufis—their dress, their dance, and their woolen, ragged clothes—imagining that outer resemblance will make them among the “truthful” (al-sādiqīn, that is, those whose claims match their inner states).

The issue for al-Sarrāj is that renunciation without a master is not true renunciation. Tutelage under a Sufi master would teach such unwise souls that they ought first to cut off their attachments to the worldly, before renouncing it, and that excessive hunger to the point of starvation might even bring one to neglect obligatory actions or become a burden onto others, when one faints or becomes sick. The “reality of trust” in God does not come so easily. Indeed excessive and constant renunciation of food and other basic needs, devoid of the Sufi master and trainer, will cause spiritual sicknesses that cannot be remedied later. This is because such imitators have taken a mere tool of spiritual perfection (beginner-level renunciation) to be a permanent state, despite the fact that the evil of the lower soul cannot be made harmless, nor does that upon which the soul was constructed—namely, commanding evil—ever leave it completely. Thus, one who supposes that evil or the cankers of the lower soul’s human nature have disappeared from the lower soul—and that the possessor of that lower soul is thus safe—has indeed erred. The lower soul has been broken only temporarily through the hunger of seldom sitting for food.

Every single heart is “stained with the love of the worldly,” and every lower soul “is habituated for vanity and heedlessness.” It is not immoderate acts of renunciation that guarantee the soul’s felicity, but prescribed acts of renunciation. Therefore, al-Sarrāj’s eulogistic descriptions of immoderate acts of renunciation must be seen in this context: They are praiseworthy only when prescribed by one’s master and thus properly suited to that individual.

Indeed, renunciation, as with all other “virtues,” is applicable to each of us differently. The ideal does not apply to all. That which does apply to all is a general principle of renunciation: Renunciation redirects one’s attention from the passions of the self either to obedience or to contemplation of God, or to both obedience and contemplation. Scripture and tradition, from a certain perspective, both seem to justify the idea of a wide gamut of renunciation that can include everyone, from basic to very rigorous.
ARE TRUST AND RENUNCIATION “FACTITIOUS” VIRTUES?

From the perspective of virtue ethics, the unattainability of trust and renunciation that al-Sarrāj describes puts them in a strange category. While both trust and renunciation can be put into practice, they cannot be fully realized. (As you might recall, for example, al-Sarrāj describes trust in God as “no back-of-the-head” and only truly applicable to “the people of the tombs.” And he describes every heart as “stained with love for the worldly,” which makes absolute renunciation impossible.) Trust and renunciation do not represent achievable qualities; they represent unachievable standards that result in virtuous qualities. There almost seems to be in this some resemblance to what Mark Alfano has called “factitious virtue.” As a critic of virtue ethics, Alfano presents his version of the situationist challenge, namely that people are too influenced by nonmoral factors (such as moods or even the weather) when they act virtuously (or viciously) for virtuous traits to have real grounds as causative factors of upright conduct. Using evidence from social and psychological experiments, Alfano rejects the idea that virtuous and vicious action can be attributed consistently to character traits, since more often people have proven themselves influenced by accidental factors. Rather, Alfano offers, people can act morally because of conceptions of virtue, artificially constructed by the expectations and affirmations of others, as well as a degree of self-perception. It is not that most “honest” people find their motivation in an inherent trait called “honesty.” Instead, having learned of social expectations that one live up to a concept of honesty, many try to do so under particular circumstances. In this case, al-Sarrāj and his predecessors seem to be saying that there are certain expectations of the human soul that are too high to be achieved but that can effect virtuous propensities within the soul nonetheless. Like much of Sufi ethics, renunciation and trust do not fall neatly into that which we now call “virtue ethics.”

Unlike Alfano, however, our authors show little concern with having an elitist ethics. Not everyone is meant for the higher reaches of renunciation or trust in God, as al-Sarrāj recognizes. The drive to undertake such seriousness in renunciation requires a certain aptitude as well as the grace of God. Even the great renunciant and ethical instructor Ibrāhīm al-Khvawwāṣṣ, mentioned above, would have his pupils return to trade and the market after three days, if they began to resort to worldly means once their period of serious renunciation had started. Much of al-Sarrāj’s audience seems to be made up of merchants and craftsmen, judging by his many references to “trade” and the “market.” For this reason, and because most will not utterly abandon earning a living, al-Sarrāj includes advice for those who work. They must observe their prayers on time, conduct themselves with fairness, and take care of the affairs of other Muslims, especially the poor, all the while never allowing them to imagine that their “sustenance actually comes from” the work they do. Rather, God is—as trust dictates—the only true source of sustenance. Those who marry or have children should not impose their own austere renunciation on their families, providing for them, “unless their inner state is like his,” that is, unless they too have renounced the world. Admittedly, there is some room here for abuse. One might easily pressure one’s family to share one’s commitment to renunciation. The concern for al-Sarrāj, however, seems to be a different sort of abuse, namely a Sufi’s trying to circumvent a life of poverty through marriage. Al-Sarrāj warns his readers against marrying a rich woman and benefiting from her wealth. Instead, one should marry a woman who is destitute, so that one can provide for her in a way that conforms both to her standard of living and to one’s ascetic commitments.

SAINTLY STORIES OF RENUNCIATION: AL-MUḤĀSIBĪ MEETS AL-SARRĀJ

I have chosen al-Muḥāsibī and al-Sarrāj, because they represent two different reactions to renunciation, reflective of their differences in chronology and outlook. While al-Muḥāsibī forges a path, al-Sarrāj consolidates and advocates an established tradition or even a science. While al-Muḥāsibī presents renunciation in careful and systematic detail, al-Sarrāj aims to present a variety of teachings as a cohesive approach to life superior to other approaches. In his presentation of Sufis of the past, al-Sarrāj includes al-Muḥāsibī and his insights. For that reason, I conclude by relaying a short account of al-Muḥāsibī’s lived renunciation in al-Sarrāj’s manual on Sufism.
Most of the hagiographical narratives in al-Sarrāj’s book are brief, because his aim is to collect a compendium of such narratives and sayings as centered on key themes, not to provide an analysis of any one story. Despite their brevity, these hagiographical accounts comprise the most important variety of virtue-based storytelling in early Sufism and are indicative of a trend, apparent even outside of Sufi circles, to find models of virtue in the lives of previous generations. As Jawid Mojaddedi has shown, Sufi hagiographical collections reimagine the past to reinforce matters of doctrine and praxis that affect the audience of the author’s own time.100 In addition to exemplifying renunciation, this particular narrative indicates a standard of reverence between masters and pupils, as well as the politeness that must be maintained even when pursuing an exacting regime of renunciation:

Ja’far al-Khulḍī [d. 959], may God’s mercy be upon him, said, “I heard Junayd, may God’s mercy be upon him, say, ‘Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, may God’s mercy be upon him, entered my home. I did not, however, have any good food to give him.’”

“[Junayd] continued: ‘So I left and went to my paternal uncle’s house. I brought some food from there, carrying a morsel in my hand. He [al-Muḥāsibī] opened his mouth, and I placed some in his mouth. He was turning the morsel over, from one side of his mouth to the other, but he wasn’t swallowing it. Then he got up, left the room, and spat it out in the courtyard at the entry of the house.”

“‘So I went after him, and I said, “Dearest uncle! I saw that you didn’t swallow and then got up to spit it out in the courtyard.”’

“‘He replied, “Yes, my dear son. That is because there is an agreement between me and God the Exalted that whenever something turns up in an underhanded way, then swallowing it is not suitable for me. I was opening my mouth to make you happy, but it was not suitable for me to swallow, so I got up and spat it out in the courtyard.”’”101

The problem in this scenario is that al-Junayd went to his paternal uncle’s home with an ulterior motive. His visit was for the benefit of his guest at his own home and not purely for the benefit of his uncle. The intention behind the food that al-Junayd brought was hence impure, and intentionality permeates everything for al-Muḥāsibī. Everything, each morsel of food, is situated in a network of moral relations. Renunciation, then, becomes more than merely an inward-directed means to self-perfection. Rather, it becomes an orientation toward the good that involves a complementary orientation away from anything that hints of imperfection, from worldly attachments to products of impure intention. This means that renunciation involves scrupulous attention to detail (waraʿ). One must be vigilant about the minutiae of God’s expectations. Renunciation also involves trust; rejecting the food given to you requires a lack of anxiety about having nothing to eat.

This story also hearkens back to al-Muḥāsibī’s interpretation of renunciation as having a two-tiered quality, one tier for all Muslims, who must renounce the forbidden, and a second, higher tier for those who renounce the divinely disliked, the doubtful, and the distracting. There is a private agreement between al-Muḥāsibī and God. That private agreement is not divine law, which is between God and the entire human (or at least Muslim) community, but an individualized path. Al-Muḥāsibī’s saintly ability, moreover, allows him to know when something essentially permissible for others is actually not permitted for him. Nevertheless, he still maintains a sense of decorum and polite conduct (adab), pretending to eat for his doting student. Of course, since he is discovered in the end, one might say that his approach is flawed. Nevertheless, it is important that he at least attempts to be a sensitive friend (though I am inclined to agree that al-Muḥāsibī and his ilk seem to have made “poor dinner guests”).102

The narrative also tells us about al-Sarrāj’s presentation of saintly renunciation. For al-Sarrāj extraordinary achievements such as surviving for months without food, feats called karāmāt (“saint-miracles”) are noteworthy. Even so, the inner states achieved by the great ones through their quotidian efforts are even more miraculous and astounding. He says as much in the title of the chapter in question: “A chapter on mentioning the select ones, their states, which are not reckoned as saint-miracles but are indeed, in their significance, more complete and subtle than saint-miracles.”103 While his narratives include accounts of saints avoiding food for forty or even seventy days, al-Sarrāj wants to relay the marvels of the inner soul of
the saint. In this case, al-Sarrāj highlights al-Muhāsibī’s heightened intuitive ability to discern the intentions behind food, which reveals the perfection behind al-Muhāsibī’s states and actions. The renunciation of the student, al-Junayd, means that he is too poor to have food worthy of a guest. Al-Junayd is certainly being virtuous, attempting to serve his guest and master properly despite his poverty. Yet the renunciation of the master, al-Muhāsibī, involves a perspective above and beyond such virtue. The master’s renunciation has moved from being an act that involves effort to being a state supported by divine grace. God has given the master the ability to know and thus renounce sustenance that is even slightly or secretly imperfect.

NOTES

1 NE 7.2, 1146a, p. 121.

2 NE 7.1, 1145b, p. 120.

3 Conversely, a person who lacks continence is not like the intemperate person. The intemperate person rejects temperance and embraces excessive or bad pleasures knowingly, as a rational choice. The incontinent person can be described as impetuous or weak; he or she knows better, but fails when faced with pleasures and often regrets that choice. See NE 7.7–7.8, 1150b, p. 132; NE 7.9, 1152a, p. 135.

4 Thus, for example, Aristotle’s distinction between temperance and continence has been expanded upon in contemporary virtue ethics to form the view that virtue should be free from internal discord and aversion. Karen Stohr has called it the “harmony thesis.” Stohr brings this thesis into question and proposes instead a correspondence between one’s feelings and one’s correct value judgments. See Stohr, “Moral Cacophony.”

5 Chabbi, “Remarques sur le développement historique des mouvements ascétiques et mystiques au Khurasan,” pp. 51–2; Algar, “Malāmatiyya, 2.”


8 Karamustafa, Sufism, pp. 61–2; Green, Sufism, p. 50.

9 Karamustafa, Sufism, pp. 65–6.


11 Leah Kinberg outlines some of the difficulties in translating zuhd, which is an indifference to the worldly that is not necessarily asceticism; see “What is Meant by Zuhd,” pp. 36, 40. She also discusses the relationship between zuhd and tawakkul; see ibid., pp. 33–4.

12 Melchert, “The Ḥanābila and the Early Sufis,” pp. 354–5, 357. See also Green, Sufism, p. 29.

13 Suleiman Ali Mourad demonstrates that Ḥasan’s name was attached to certain sayings, for reasons ranging from admiration, to mistaken identity, to sheer forgery (Mourad, Early Islam between Myth and History, pp. 63–94).

14 Meier, “Bakkāʾ.”


18 Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam*, p. 49.

19 Ibid., p. 58.


21 Thus M. Ashraf Adeel sees virtue ethics in the Qur’an’s emphasis on moderation. See Adeel, “Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions and a Virtue Ethics of the Quran.”

22 The full text of the hadith has been abridged. See al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 6502, p. 1617.


24 Here Al-Muḥāsibī makes clear that he has men in mind, so the masculine pronoun has been used.


26 Ibid., p. 10.

27 Ibid., p. 10.


29 Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Masāʾ il*, p. 79.


32 Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, p. 120; see also Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, pp. 11–13.

33 Portions of Al-Sarrāj’s text have been translated by Michael Sells in his anthology, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (pp. 196–211), as well as by John Renard in a separate anthology, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism* (pp. 65–99). The entire text has been translated into German by Richard Gramlich (*Schlaglichter über das Sufitum*), which includes a very useful index to the text. For historical context about the relationship between these two texts, see Karamustafa, *Sufism*, p. 69.


37 Green, *Sufism*, p. 43.

38 Al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma’,* p. 46.
39 Ibid., p. 46. The words in italics refer to a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. This has been narrated by Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (Miṣḥāḥ al-Sharīʿa, p. 138), as well as by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī; for the latter, see Ismāʿīl ibn Muḥammad al-ʿAjūnī, Kashf al-Khafāʾ, no. 1099, pp. 1:344–5.

40 Al-Sarrāj, Kitāb al-Lumaʾ, p. 46.

41 Ibid., p. 47.

42 Ibid., p. 46.

43 Ibid., p. 47.

44 Ibid., p. 47.

45 Ibid., p. 47.

46 Sells, Early Islamic Mysticism, p. 197.

47 Thus, for example, there was great geographical distance between Ṭahā ibn Muʿādh (of Rayy, near modern Tehran, then Balkh and Nishapur) and al-Junayd (of Baghdad). See Jāmī, Nafaḥāt, p. 54. Yet, judging by a letter from al-Junayd to Ṭahā, the two corresponded about the mysteries of witnessing the divine. Moreover, Ṭahā clearly describes a scenario in which a “knower” (ārif) has progressed beyond the station of the ascetic or renunciant (zāhid). In other words, Ṭahā’s metaphor of the bride quoted above does indeed aim to describe a stage of renunciation beyond renunciation. See al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, Rasāʾil al-Junayd, p. 195.

48 Al-Sarrāj, Kitāb al-Lumaʾ, p. 48.

49 Ibid., p. 49.


52 Ibid., p. 40.


55 Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.,” p. 60.

56 Ibid., p. 65.

57 Jarrar, “Ghulām Khalīl.”


59 Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.,” p. 70.

61 Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.,” p. 62.


64 Makdisi, “The Hanbali School and Sufism,” p. 117.


68 Landolt, “Khalwa.”


72 These “promptings” in al-Muḥāsibī’s psychology are decidedly negative—initiated by Satan—and necessitate rejection. In al-Junayd’s sayings, the term is less negative; the promptings come from the purer part of the heart (al-sīr), but—as a distraction from purely passive contemplation—they still serve as a possible obstacle for the mystic (al-Junayd, *Rasā’il al-Junayd*, p. 91). Later in Sufi texts this term (or the term khāṭir/khavāṭir) comes to have more positive connotative possibilities. ’Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī defines the khatra as that which “calls the servant to his Lord in a way that he has no power to resist” (al-Kāshānī, *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, p. 26; see also al-Junayd, *Rasā’il al-Junayd*, p. 141). According to Mu’ayyad al-Dīn Jandī (d. ca. 1300), such bestirrings can come from any of four directions; they can be divine (ilāhī), angelic (malakī), from the lower soul (nafsānī), or Satanic (shayṭānī). See Jandī, *Naḥḥat al-Rūḥ*, p. 105.


74 Ibid., p. 130.

75 Ibid., p. 131.

76 While al-Sarrāj also deals with extremes and “those who err in the abandonment of food, in seclusion, in isolation, and other things,” his standard is clearly different from al-Muḥāsibī’s (al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, pp. 417–20). While al-Muḥāsibī warns against extreme renunciation, al-Sarrāj wants extreme renunciation to be done correctly.


78 Ibid., p. 134.

79 Ibid., p. 195.
80 Ibid., p. 195. This statement might be better understood in light of a similar one by Sahl al-Tustarī, as quoted by Abū Sa‘d ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Muhammad Khargūshī (d. ca. 1016): “Whoever discredits earning has discredited the normative custom of the Prophet (al-sunna), and whoever discredits trust has discredited belief (al-īmān).” See Khargūshī, Tahdīḥ al-Asrār fī Uṣūl al-Taṣawwuf, p. 112.


82 Ibid., pp. 367–8.

83 I have here used Michael Sells’s translation. See Sells, Early Islamic Mysticism, p. 208; al-Sarrāj, Kītāb al-Luma’, p. 52.

84 Al-Sarrāj quotes an unnamed source as having a similar understanding of trust: “Whosoever desires to give trust its due, let him dig a grave and bury himself in it, forgetting the worldly and its people, because none from among the [living] creatures can achieve the reality of trust in its completion” (Kītāb al-Luma’, p. 53).


86 Ibid., p. 419.

87 Ibid., p. 418.

88 Ibid., p. 418.

89 Ibid., p. 417.

90 Ibid., p. 419.

91 The Qur‘an posits a range of ascetic demands, and posits as well that the most demanding (that which applied to Muhammad himself) is quite rigorous. The Prophet Muhammad is commanded to stand in prayer for half the night, more or less (Q 73:2–4). The verses that follow, however, acknowledge that those who stand with Muhammad, trying to imitate his worship, might not be able to pray for such a length of time. The Prophet is commanded—for that reason—to recite that which is “easy” (Q 73:20). See also Q 4:28 and, in terms of fasting, Q 2:184–5.

92 Alfano, Character as Moral Fiction, p. 37.

93 Ibid., pp. 104–5.

94 Alfano takes issue with claims that virtue ethics is egalitarian, in part by pointing out elitist-minded defenses of virtue ethics when faced with the situationist challenge. See ibid., p. 63.

95 Al-Sarrāj, Kītāb al-Luma’, p. 196.

96 Ibid., p. 196.

97 Ibid., p. 200.

98 Ibid., p. 200.

99 While some have seen al-Sarrāj’s approach as defensive or apologetic, there are clear indications in his book that Sufism had become—by the time he was writing—a truly “Islamic” and one might even say “Sunni” movement. See Karamustafa, Sufism, p. 68.
Chapter Eight

Self-Awareness that Leads to Self-Loss:

Futuwwa

as a Compound Virtue in the Legacy of Anṣārī

Khwāja ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī of Herat (d. 1089) was destined for greatness, according to the hagiographer Jāmī.1 Upon meeting Anṣārī as a child, the immortal Khiḍr is said to have prophesied that Anṣārī’s voice would permeate the world, a prediction fulfilled by the seeming ubiquity of his writings.2 Anṣārī indicates that his upbringing was difficult, since his father, Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad (d. 1039), resented the ties of family life and abandoned his family to join his own Sufi master in Balkh. “What sin had we committed?” asks Anṣārī of his absentee father.3 Yet Anṣārī also remembers his father’s encouragement to achieve the illustriousness for which he was fated, for even as a child Anṣārī had an astonishing memory. He worked so diligently copying and memorizing Hadith accounts and their chains of transmission that he would forget to eat, so that his mother—who seems to have taken the lead in his education—had to put morsels in his mouth as he studied. Such tenacity ultimately resulted in his knowing 300,000 such Hadith accounts along with one million supporting chains of narration.4

THE “MASTER OF ISLAM”: TRADITIONALISM AND SUFI ETHICS

Anṣārī’s devotion to the Hadith was matched by his unwavering opposition to rational speculation. Anṣārī and others who valued the Hadith and Qur’an as the only certain sources of religious knowledge considered themselves to be the “People of the Sunna” (Ahl al-Sunna), while deeming those who engaged in rational speculation to be “People of Opinion” (Ahl al-Ra’y).5 His opposition to the theologians, most notably the Ashʿarīs, led to many conflicts, because of the volatile relationships between scholars and shifting rulers in Nishapur at the time. Tried for what the theologians deemed anthropomorphic readings of the Hadith, Anṣārī was exonerated but chose a self-imposed two-year exile. Later, he would be imprisoned.6 After a period of ease in which traditionalist scholars saw favor, Niẓām al-Mulk rose to power as a powerful vizier. The vizier was partial to the Ashʿarī theologians. Anṣārī found himself forbidden from teaching and was expelled from Nishapur, forced to live in Balkh. Anṣārī’s popularity, as well as his unflinching indomitability during interrogations, eventually pressured Niẓām al-Mulk to venerate him publicly.7

Because of his commitment to the inner path as well as to the Hadith, Anṣārī endures in two different categories of Islamic biography. The Sufis claimed him. The Ḥanbalīs also claimed him in their chronicles, in one case describing him as the “leader of the People of the Sunna in Herat.”8 Anṣārī’s case belies many contemporary imaginings of Sufism. Often such depictions present Sufis as free-thinkers of uninhibited tolerance, promoting an ecstatic and loving alternative to more rigid interpretations of Islam.9 Anṣārī
certainly advocated love for God, but his interpretive tradition advocated vigilant adherence to Islam’s scriptures in the face of that deemed to be speculative theological thinking and capricious hermeneutical embellishments. The Ḥanbalī school of thought had its share of scholars with Sufi affiliations, perhaps most famously ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166). Many of those Ḥanbalī scholars, Anṣārī included, saw no conflict between their twin allegiances to Sufism, on one hand, and to staunch traditionalist interpretations of Islam, on the other. Two later Ḥanbalī scholars, Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Shams al-Dīn ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), would see some conflicts between Anṣārī’s approach to Sufi ethics and their devotion to scripture. Yet both acknowledged his piety, even if Anṣārī’s “practice was better than his knowledge,” and Ibn Qayyim attempted to salvage that which was legitimate in Anṣārī’s writings by writing a separate manual.10

Objections of Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Qayyim aside, as A. G. Ravān Farhādi indicates, there is significant contemporary relevance in the fact that Sufism and Ḥanbalism were once seen as perfectly compatible. It tells us that those today who have inherited the Ḥanbalī emphasis on the Hadith and distrust of rational speculation, including Wahhabis and certain Salafi groups, might reassess a perceived antagonism between their tradition and all Sufi thought and practices.11 It also reminds us that Sufi ethics for authors such as Anṣārī was nothing other than an Islamic ethics that included counsel for the spiritual elite.

STATIONS, WAYSTATIONS, STATES, AND IMMEDIATE MOMENTS ON THE PATH TO THE REAL

The idea that a person is on a “path” to proximity and unification with God forms the most common metaphor for the process of self-perfection in Sufi ethics. An aspirant is called a “wayfarer” (sālik); an established method of such aspiration is called a “path” (ṭarīqa); and the process of making inner advancements is called a “journey” (sayr) or “wayfaring” (sulūk). In fact, delineating such a path distinguishes Sufism from other approaches to living morally in Islam and even qualifies it as an academic discipline, or “science.” Rather than being completely individualized or disordered, the science of Sufism offers guidelines that indicate a person’s progression and carry the weight of saintly insight and precedence.

When Anṣārī refers to “this science” (ḥādhā al-ʿilm) in his masterpiece, The Waystations of the Journeyers to the Real (Manāzil al-Sāʾirīn ilā al-Ḥaqq), he means precisely the science that outlines spiritual progression, from basic ethical precepts to self-loss and unification. In doing so, he is developing a genre begun by earlier Sufi masters. Two very early Sufi figures, Shaqīq al-Balkhī and Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad al-Nūrī (d. 907), composed shorter manuals that described stations of spiritual advancement. In the latter case, al-Nūrī’s focus was the stations of the heart itself, which undergoes a transformation that allows it to recognize God’s comprehensive unity.12 Major figures, such as al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 912), Muḥammad Niffārī (d. ca. 976–7), al-Sarrāj, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, al-Qushayrī, and al-Kalābādhī, contributed to the genre of writing about stations, so that Anṣārī considered his endeavor to be a refinement of the genre.13 One such text, called The Open Roads of the Knowers (Manāhij al-ʿĀrifīn) by Sulamī, presents the journey of Sufism in a number of ways, beginning—like Anṣārī—with a divinely sanctioned rousing from heedlessness (tanabbuh) that leads to acts of renunciation. Repentance for Sulamī is followed by exertion until the human will becomes purified of all selfishness.14 As in Anṣārī’s treatise, Sulamī creates larger categories for such stations: “Sufism,” according to Sulamī, “has three stations: acts of good conduct (ādāb), [virtuous] character traits (akhlāq), and spiritual states (aḥwāl).”15

The problem with previous such works, says Anṣārī, was that some explained principles without elaboration; others gave accounts of saints without extracting a theoretical application; others failed to distinguish between that which applied to everyone and that which applied to the spiritual elite; others mistakenly identified isolated and esoteric ecstatic sayings as indications of a more generally applicable station; and most did not address the matter of progressing degrees.16 In fact, Anṣārī probably improved on an earlier treatise he had written in Persian, The Hundred Fields (Ṣad Maydān), in composing his Arabic
manual, *The Waystations of the Journeyers*. In doing so, however, he relied on terms and categories developed by his predecessors. Four are of immediate importance:

1. **Maqām (station):** As a person strives for proximity with God, a certain set of spiritual characteristics can become permanent, and correspond to that person’s level or station on the path. Anṣārī reminds us that God has declared people to be of varying “degrees” (Q 3:163), with one thousand such degrees separating each human seeker from God.17 Just as the “angels in the heavens” occupy various ranks of proximity to God and perform individual functions based on that ranking, so too does the final station of the human seeker become his or her ultimate rank of proximity.18 Similarly, the wayfarer’s rank and function in devotional existence is his or her station.

2. **Manzil (waystation):** Any of the stations outlined by Anṣārī can function as a “waystation” if the aspirant is passing through, instead of stopping there.19 In other words, a waystation is a station temporarily occupied in one’s course of progression. It thus makes sense for Anṣārī to focus on “waystations” and pay little attention to “stations” in a book attempting to present the path in a cumulative sense, so that a person can know its every stage, from beginning to end. Of course, while Anṣārī recognizes that spiritual wayfarers are so diverse that “no definitive progression” and “no all-embracing objection” can apply to them, there is a basic division between foundations, middling achievements, and ultimate ends that can apply to most. In this sense, the progressing “waystations” correspond to a narrative of sorts—one that includes signs of beginnings (bidāyāt) and endings (nihāyāt), showing each wayfarer the pattern of what might be expected, while acknowledging that each individual experiences this narrative differently.

3. **Ḥāl (state):** The state is an inner condition defined by its transitoriness, immeasurably more transitory than a waystation. In fact, it is one of numerous modes of awareness and perception that comes upon a person often unexpectedly. A crude and perhaps inappropriate analogy might compare the “state” to a “mood,” if we were to see the “station” as a “personality,” with the rather crucial warning that we speak here of spiritual and not of emotional states. An excellent definition of the state can be found in a glossary by one of the foremost commentators on Anṣārī’s *Waystations*, namely, Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. ca. 1335): “The state is that which enters upon the heart purely as a bestowal by one of the foremost commentators, ʿAfīf al-Dīn Sulaymān al-Tilimsānī (d. 1291): Grammarians have a term for an adverb of time, such as “at night” or “nightly” (laylān), which they call a “receptacle of time” (ẓarf zamān). They call it a “receptacle of time” despite the fact that time cannot be contained.23 What can be contained or described in words are the movements and incidents that happen during moments of time. Anṣārī’s definition, al-Tilimsānī argues, comments insightfully on the very meaning of a moment in time, which is a receptacle for what occurs therein. In this case, the immediate moment is a container for the process of divine creation as it occurs for the wayfarer. It is the moment when “a state from among designated states... comes to be” within the heart, to use the words of al-Kāshānī.24 That is, it is the very moment when God bestows one of numerous forms of realization that causes the wayfarer to be focused entirely on the present.

4. **Waqt (immediate moment):** Anṣārī defines the “immediate moment” rather cryptically as “a name for the happening’s receptacle” (ẓarf al-kawn).22 It is explained thus by one of Anṣārī’s commentators, ʿAfīf al-Dīn Sulaymān al-Tilimsānī (d. 1291): Grammarians have a term for an adverb of time, such as “at night” or “nightly” (laylān), which they call a “receptacle of time” (ẓarf zamān). They call it a “receptacle of time” despite the fact that time cannot be contained.23 What can be contained or described in words are the movements and incidents that happen during moments of time. Anṣārī’s definition, al-Tilimsānī argues, comments insightfully on the very meaning of a moment in time, which is a receptacle for what occurs therein. In this case, the immediate moment is a container for the process of divine creation as it occurs for the wayfarer. It is the moment when “a state from among designated states... comes to be” within the heart, to use the words of al-Kāshānī.24 That is, it is the very moment when God bestows one of numerous forms of realization that causes the wayfarer to be focused entirely on the present.

There is another division incredibly important for reading Anṣārī’s taxonomy of spiritual progression. In the introduction to his *Waystations*, Anṣārī divides his readership into two different groups, those who seek and those who are sought, declaring all those who espouse some other way to God’s proximity to be false claimants.25 The seeker (murād) strives before God, impelled by love, guarded by modesty, and wavering between the two extremes of fear of God’s displeasure and hope in God’s mercy. The sought (murād) has made it to the beginning phases of union, progressing closer and closer and eventually relinquishing all that he or she has accomplished in favor of absolute self-loss. The struggles at the very highest waystations have to do with moving beyond one’s own sense of self-loss in unification with the Real. Thus, the waystations proceed from activity to receptivity, from seeking to being sought, or from willing changes to oneself to realizing God’s will for oneself. One goes from acquiring virtuous traits to negating those traits of the self to see them replaced by the traits of God. In this process, fear and hope become replaced by
contraction and expansion of the heart. One becomes less concerned with extrinsic chastisements and rewards and more concerned with God’s distance and nearness.

There is more complexity, however, to Anṣārī’s hundred waystations. It is true that they can generally be divided into those applicable to the former part of the journey (seeking), and those applicable to the latter part (being sought). That being said, almost all of the earlier waystations also have implications for those who are advanced. For this reason, Anṣārī divides waystations into categories pertaining to three ranks: common, elite, and elite of the elite.

The first rank, the “common” (al-ʿāmma), often strive for a basic degree of piety and have a basic degree of religious knowledge, or are those who have just begun their pursuit of nearness to God. According to Anṣārī, the uninitiated religious knowledge of the common is best kept on the level of literal readings of scripture. The highest degree for the common is that of certitude (al-yaqīn), the forty-fifth waystation, which is thus the first step one takes as an elite. This is because the defining characteristic of the common is their dealings with things that are manifest, mostly in the sensory realm, while certitude is an introduction to the unseen, that is, that which is beyond the manifest. The more select group, the elite (al-khaṣṣa), are those who have “entered estrangement,” that is, those who have become caught up in matters of the heart and its budding ability to witness the Real, but are still affected by its fluctuations. Lastly, there are those who have attained the witnessing of divine beauty and have begun the process of recognizing His absolute unity and the self’s nonexistence. They are the “elite of the elite” (khāṣṣat al-khaṣṣa).

Another complicating factor is that often Anṣārī discusses three degrees without signifying necessarily the three groups mentioned here. Rather, he means to indicate a range of accomplishments in that waystation, even if that range is exclusive to the elite and to the elite of the elite. This tripartite division of people became an important feature of Sufism by Anṣārī’s time, used by a devotee of Anṣārī—Abū al-Faḍl Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (fl. 1126). While Maybudī recognizes an unfinished exegesis by Anṣārī as the starting point of his own Persian exegesis, he attributes the tripartite division to much earlier Sufi figures.

Anṣārī’s waystations are, then, points of progression toward unity with God with multiple applications. Any given waystation cannot be defined. Rather, Anṣārī provides a cluster of attributes that (a) describes the waystation, (b) situates the waystation in relation to what comes before and after, and (c) divides the waystation as it applies to three general categories of progression. Thus, for a waystation such as futuwwa (“chivalry” or “youngmanliness”), which will be considered below, one can see it as the fuller achievement of that which has come before; the latent achievement of that which will come after; and yet also a set of qualities intrinsically valuable to those at any stage of the journey. As a metaphor, one might think of the word “afternoon.” Afternoon shares qualities with noon and with sunset; it might be thought of as a “developed noon” or an “undeveloped sunset.” Afternoon is more than a phase, however. It is experienced as its own time of day with qualities of value unto itself. Yet that experience differs depending on perspective, clime, culture, occupation, and so forth. For Anṣārī, of course, difference is not merely relative; difference is experienced from the perspective of beginners, elites, and elite-of-elites.
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SOUL, HEART, AND SPIRIT: FUTUWWA AS A PROPERTY OF THE SOUL

The notion of progression is important in appreciating Anṣārī’s contribution to Sufi ethics and moral psychology. His work, especially his *Waystations*, received acclaim and attention largely because the stations are ordered with a sense of care and precision not found elsewhere. *The Hundred Fields*, one of the first works in Persian to outline the Sufi stations, is an earlier work of Anṣārī’s, one that is probably an informal compilation of notes from his lectures, as might be the case with most of his Persian works.34 When it comes to considering the interrelations and categories of stations, it is not nearly as well considered and precise as the *Waystations*.35 Finally, *The Hundred Fields* lacks an important means of categorization found in the *Waystation*, namely the grouping of every ten waystations into a related unit, so that the ten units of the book also give an indication of more cumulative stages of evolution for the awakened self.

In *The Hundred Fields*, futuwwa (*futuwwat*) appears very early on in the progression; it is the fourth of 101 total “fields.” In *Waystations*, *futuwwat* is the thirty-ninth of 100 total “waystations.” As such, it is situated among other related waystations in the fourth unit of ten, the “Category on [Virtuous] Character Traits” (*qism al-akhlāq*). This category, according to the commentator al-Kāshānī, is mostly focused on the acquisition of properties that facilitate the soul’s proximity to God. Here al-Kāshānī means the soul in a technical sense, the soul as opposed to the heart, or the spirit, a distinction explained below. These properties of the soul—once acquired—allow the higher spiritual faculty, namely the heart (the vehicle of witnessing divine beauty), to become prepared for such proximity.36 In other words, while the fourth unit (on virtuous character traits) pertains to the soul, the fifth unit (on fundamentals of ascent) pertains to the heart. The former unit involves acquisition of traits of readiness, while the latter will begin the process of receiving the means of ascent toward the Real.37

A LATER INTERPRETER OF ANṢĀRĪ EXPLAINS THE SOUL, HEART, AND SPIRIT

Anṣārī relies on the terms *soul*, *heart*, and *spirit*, without much elucidation, seeming to assume that his audience knows what they mean. Some things are clear, however, from his discussions in the *Waystations*. First, as categories of human selfhood, the three are ranked. Initial ethical endeavors deal with counterbalancing and moving beyond the soul. Middling ethical endeavors deal with acquiring divine traits for the heart. And advanced ethical endeavors deal with annihilating oneself as one receives that which God has made inhere in the spirit. They appear described in the *Waystations* as follows. The soul (*al-nafs*) might be translated in Anṣārī’s writings as “ego” or even simply as “self.” It has certain innate flaws that hinder a wayfarer’s progress, flaws that—like the flaws in one’s deeds—become clearer as one progresses.38 It is trained through asceticism (*al-riyāḍ*a), which includes refining character traits by knowing proper action.39 The soul must be distrusted, blamed, restrained from its desires, accommodated only to avoid its rebellion, kept busy, taken to account, and forgotten in times of remembrance of God (*al-dhikr*).40 The heart (*al-qalb*) can acquire light.41 It also attaches itself to “holy attributes.”42 It has an eye, with which it gazes on God’s blessings, and it finds life in having a hopeful view of God.43 Its perfection is to be ever-present with God.44 The spirit (*al-rūḥ*) also has an eye, which can see more directly than the heart’s eye, a witnessing of the divine that overwhelms the spirit.45 It can be awakened by the flashing of a pre-eternal light, by the sound of the first divine call to all souls, or by being drawn directly to the Real.46 It rejoices in hearing a reply from Him.47

Anṣārī’s descriptions do not, however, provide definitions for soul, heart, and spirit. Definitions are useful because these terms became essential to the study of Sufi moral psychology. One commentator on Anṣārī—ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī—explains these faculties in a manner that certainly would not reflect Anṣārī’s own understanding of waystations, since al-Kāshānī belongs to a later and more Neoplatonic school of thought in theoretical Sufism. It is useful, nevertheless, in seeing how some Sufis came to envision these
faculties and interpret Anṣārī’s manual. Moreover, while such specialized usage would have been foreign to Anṣārī, the general contours do reflect patterns in the Waystations.

As al-Kāshānī explains elsewhere, the “soul” is the “vaporous substance that bears the faculty of life, love, and volitional movement.”48 It is an intermediary between the heart and the body. The soul develops in three general stages:

1. In its inclinations to the bodily natures and pleasures, which are the sources of vice, it is called “the commanding soul” or the “soul that commands to evil” (al-nafs al-ammāra; see Q 12:53). A person’s sense of piety, obedience, and attention to God is under the command of the lower faculties, and hence that person has little success in drawing near to God. The commanding soul is the soul’s first stage.

2. Then, as it takes on the luminescence of the heart, the soul begins to awaken from its heedlessness, but it is not decidedly awake; it wavers between seeking God and seeking creation.49 It bemoans its own dual inclinations and its failures to obey, as it struggles to seek God alone, for which reason it is called “the self-reproaching soul” (al-nafs al-lawwāma; see Q 75:2).

3. Lastly, the soul conforms to the heart, having been unburdened of its lower traits and having acquired higher, virtuous traits. It is finally at peace in being present with God, so that it no longer vacillates and it is here that God says to the soul, “O tranquil soul! Return to your lord, satisfied and satisfying; thus enter among My servants—enter My paradise!” (Q 89:27–30). For this reason, this soul is called “the tranquil soul” (al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna).

Once the lower soul has been quelled, the path’s concern (and the concern of the Waystations) is the heart. In his commentary, al-Kāshānī tells us that the heart (al-qalb) is an incorporeal intermediary between the realm of creation and the realm of divinity.50 The “spirit” (al-rūḥ) is the purest component of human existence. The spirit is the effect of the divine inbreathing in the human frame that brings the human to physical and spiritual life (Q 15:29, 38:72).

To explain all this, al-Kāshānī uses an allegorical verse of the Qur’an (24:35):52

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The allegory for His light is [that it is] as a hollow in which is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is like a brilliant star, lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil of which almost lights up without being touched by fire.

The soul must be purified; it is that human “self” that arises from being embodied. It is the oil-producing tree in al-Kāshānī’s reading of this parable, because oil is a fuel for light but is not itself luminous in the way that the lamp or glass are. Just as oil is an intermediary between matter and light, so too does the soul represent the conversion of bodily traits to spiritual ones. The spirit is a trace of divinity; it is pure light, even if it has become shaded by veils of human selfhood. It is the lamp in this allegory, that is, the source of light. Light itself—the very principle of luminosity—is God. Thus, the spirit is God’s light realized in the human being. The heart lies somewhere between soul and spirit. It is the human faculty that communicates with God and draws near to Him. For this reason, the heart is the glass in this allegory. Glass takes on light because some other source (here the lamp/spirit) shines through it. The glass/heart is not a source of light, but it can be lit up as though it were. It amplifies the light when clean, and dims it when tarnished. It becomes tarnished by the smoke of the oil, much like the heart becomes tarnished by associating itself with the desires of the soul. The oil-producing tree conveys light by yielding a substance that burns, while glass conveys light by being purely translucent. Similarly, the soul conveys light by yielding its animal properties, succumbing to spiritual duties, while the heart conveys light by being polished of the soul and transmitting the light of the spirit.
Here we return to the matter of *futuwwa*, because, according to al-Kāshānī, *futuwwa* is among the highest stages for the soul, in preparation for the even higher adventures of the heart. Support for that appears in the fact that Anṣārī categorizes it among the “traits” (*akhlāq*), a term pertaining to the dispositions of the lower soul. Yet, as we will see, *futuwwa* does indeed have implications for the advanced, namely, those who have surpassed the stages of extinguishing the commands of the lower soul.

**FUTUWWA IN THE HUNDRED FIELDS AND THE WAYSTATIONS**

The word *futuwwa* captures etymologically the virtues of an “upstanding young man” (*fatā*) in a way loosely analogous to “chivalry,” which captures the heroic code of a “horseman” or a knight. In *The Hundred Fields*, Anṣārī describes *futuwwa* as occurring through “living freely.” An alternative translation might be “living in the noble manner of a free man.” Both translations should convey the idea that, for Anṣārī, the possessor of *futuwwa* (*fatā*) is bound only to God and not to the gratification of any other master, even himself. *Futuwwa* is, in *The Hundred Fields*, characterized by an inclination to humble action. Anṣārī divides *futuwwa* into three categories, based on the object of that *futuwwa*. *Futuwwa* applies to the self, to others (other created beings, here humans), and to the Real. Regarding the self, the possessor of *futuwwa* does not admire the lower soul’s self-seduction or its adornments, avoiding self-congratulation. Regarding others, he does not blame them or single them out and reject them for shortcomings that he should know exist in himself. Regarding the Real, he puts forth his best effort in terms of servitude.

In *The Waystations of the Journeyers*, Anṣārī’s expectations for the possessor of *futuwwa* have become greater. *Futuwwa*, as the penultimate waystation in his unit on virtuous “character traits,” builds upon the achievements before it. One sees this, for example, by considering the four waystations that precede *futuwwa*. Truthfulness (*ṣidq*) is a purification of selfhood; altruism (*ṭābrī*) is choosing others over oneself; character (*khulq*) is engaging lovingly with others; humility (*tawāḍu‘*) is minimizing the self; and then one arrives at *futuwwa*. *Futuwwa* means being a leader in selflessness. Relief from the battles of the self, or “enjoyment” (*inbisāt*), follows *futuwwa* and in a way feeds these waystations coming before it, giving the journeyer the strength to move forward to the fundamentals (*uṣūl*) of ascent. The crux of *futuwwa*, for Anṣārī, is that one sees no virtue as applying to oneself, nor any due or right that belongs to oneself. The world owes such a person nothing. And, conversely, the person owes absolutely everything to something else, having nothing of himself or herself, ultimately owing all to God. The lowest achievement of *futuwwa* is to be incredibly forbearing regarding others. One does not quarrel, find fault, or hold grudges. One should feel a sense of humiliation when an enemy apologizes or seeks forgiveness to even “whiff the scent” of *futuwwa*. This is the sort of *futuwwa* that applies to the common. For the elite, *futuwwa* means drawing those who have wronged you to yourself, honoring those who have insulted you, and apologizing on behalf of those who have done you injustice, “not out of self-restraint,” says Anṣārī, but “with vastness of heart” that exceeds mere “toleration.”

The highest achievement of *futuwwa* in the *Waystations* is to transcend the intellect, since the intellect has no ability to witness divine beauty. Here the magnanimity and altruism of *futuwwa* have been translated into an earnest redirection of the self toward God. In the beginning sort of *futuwwa*, one abandons selfishness and seeks out one’s oppressors or enemies for the sake of forgiving them, embodying selfless action. In the higher, more elite sort of *futuwwa*, a person abandons all the intellectual resources of the self, all causality, and rejects any substitute for the One who has answered his or her call. For this reason, anyone who pursues the truth using rational argumentation cannot be a possessor of *futuwwa* in this last, highest sense. One sees that Anṣārī’s opposition to rationalists stems not only from his traditionalist convictions, but also from his understanding of the spiritual path: *Futuwwa* as a self-aware selflessness means acknowledging the limits of one’s ability to know.
As in English ballads about Robin Hood or contemporary American mafia films, sometimes cultures celebrate those heroes who undermine the imposed social order while still adhering to a moral code of their own.57 Virtues such as courage, loyalty, guardianship of the weak, and generosity prevail over conformity to unjust authority. The rise of futuwwa as a Muslim virtue began in such a context. While possibly extending earlier into pre-Islamic Iranian values, the notion of futuwwa became first widely known and lauded in its association with groups of men—at one point known as ʿayyārān (“vagabonds”)—famous for robbery, adherence to a strict code of truthfulness, advocacy of the preservation of women’s honor, and distinctive dress, specifically, initiatory trousers.58

Lloyd Ridgeon’s study of the topic tells us that as the term futuwwa became distinct from bands of young fighting men and idealized as a virtue, it was applied to a set of qualities that would describe an upstanding young man (or fatā). As a virtue, futuwwa has a composite quality, comprising multiple virtues that might be mentioned by Miskawayh or others.59 There are clusters of attributes to define futuwwa, though sincerity, truthfulness, independence, and guarding against sexual transgression are constant in defining it.60 Two virtues, however, seem to form the backbone of this compound virtue, especially in earlier Sufi texts such as Sulami’s Book on Futuwwa (Kitāb al-Futuwwa); courage and self-worth. Courage leads to the sort of valor one associates with combat and the welcome risk of hazard. Courage also leads to truthfulness. One who fears no one has no motivation to lie or to be hypocritical. Self-worth, as an awareness of one’s responsibilities and one’s worth in having such responsibilities, checks any inclinations to treachery—whether that means backstabbing, or violating the privacy or chastity of women under someone else’s protection. True self-worth also means that one does not overestimate one’s states or deeds, or become self-satisfied, smug, or arrogant.61 This dual sense of courage and self-worth brings a person to be respectful and self-defending, generous and independent of the favors of others.

Futuwwa as a compound virtue became “spiritualized,” to use Ridgeon’s term, in the Malāmatī and Sufi traditions, especially in Persian Sufism, as can be seen in the sayings of Abū al-Ḥasan Kharaqānī (d. 1034). Kharaqānī was a Sufi master legendary for his lack of schooling and his piercing wisdom. That wisdom had a transformative effect on our own Anṣārī, when at age twenty-seven he met Kharaqānī in 1033.62 Kharaqānī’s presentation of futuwwa influenced even later Sufis, such as Ibn Ῥaqqā, but the more immediate resemblance to Anṣārī’s discussion of futuwwa should be plain.63 When asked about the possessor of futuwwa, who in Persian is called a jawānmard (“young man”), Kharaqānī responds that it is “the person who pitches a tent at the side of hell on Judgement Day and takes the hand of the person that the Real has sent to hell.”64 In other words, the true possessor of futuwwa is self-sacrificing even when faced with eternal damnation and daring even when faced with the decree of God. The food and drink of such a person is “love for God,” and he is unable to see his own good deeds because of his submersion in the sea of his remembrance of God.65 For Sulami, futuwwa is typified by Abraham, who faces execution bravely in his resistance to idolatry as a “young man” (fatā) in the Qur’an.66 This connection between Abraham, thrown into a massive fire for his idol-smashing monotheism, and the values of futuwwa can even be found in a contemporary commentary on the Waystations by an Egyptian Sufi-Shāhīlī writer, Sayyid Maḥmūd Abū al-Fayd, al-Manūfī.67 Yet what Ridgeon calls the “patron saint” of futuwwa was ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, as can be seen in the writings of the most influential Sunni commentator on futuwwa, Shihāb al-Dīn ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 1234), not to be confused with the philosopher in Chapter Five. In support of his focus on ʿAlī among other pious predecessors, he quotes a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that “there is no young man (fatā) but ʿAlī.”68

In terms of the fraternities associated with the ideal of futuwwa, Erik Ohlander has shown that futuwwa as an institution received pivotal elaboration in the writings of al-Suhrawardī. This great codifier of Sufism seems to have tied an existing sort of fraternity, the futuwwa order, to another fraternity for which he was an authority, namely the residential Sufi order, that is, the Sufi order as an intentional community cohabiting a cloister (ribāṭ). The futuwwa order and futuwwa communal residences had laxer requirements than their Sufi counterparts.69 Futuwwa orders as described by al-Suhrawardī were very much brotherhoods, with hierarchies and processes of initiation couched in patrilineal language that assumes male participation.70
The ideal of *futuwwa* comes to exist within a patriarchal context. In that regard, it shares something in common with our English word “virtue.” After all, “virtue” derives from the Latin *virtus*, from the word *vir* “man,” so that *virtus* can be translated as “manliness.”71 As Myles McDonnell notes, manhood in most of the world’s cultures must be earned, and the Romans, who were no exception, initially used the word *virtus* as the attribute of valor on the battlefield.72 Influenced by Greek usage of the word *arete* to mean “moral excellence,” the Romans eventually extended the application of *virtus* to mean an all-inclusive excellence in the ethical sense.73 The moral trait associated with women was *puerlicita*, or “chaste modesty,” and *virtus* did not generally apply to women (or to slaves), except on rare occasions when women were thought to act as bravely as men, or after the word had come to signify a broader ethical excellence.74 Retaining its original connotation, the word *virtus* also comes to refer to ethical excellence in opposition to vice by the century before Christ, during the late Roman Republic, as notions of manhood begin to be less defined by military prowess than by qualities of self-control that characterized urban nobility.75

It is important to note that the Arabic and Persian analogue for *virtus* would not be *futuwwa*, but rather a virtue related to *futuwwa*, namely, *muruwwa* or “manliness.” *Muruwwa* was, according to Ignaz Goldziher, the paramount compound virtue of pre-Islamic Arabia. Goldziher surveys textual evidence to contrast pre- and post-Islamic values, beginning with *muruwwa*, which he describes as a largely Bedouin value that emphasizes personal and tribal glory, the protection of those under one’s care, hospitality, and retaliation.76 The Prophet Muhammad, Goldziher argues, reframed the Arabian notion of manliness in a God-conscious context that gave priority to asceticism, sobriety, and forgiveness.77 Toshihiko Izutsu takes special interest in the idea that “old Arab” values became translated into “Islamic” ones, and reminds us that the notion of “man” in a word like “manliness” is not universal and must be interpreted differently depending on such socially contingent circumstances.78

What is Anṣārī’s notion of manliness, then? Clearly, freedom and humility feature prominently in his notion of *futuwwa*, which might literally be translated as “youngmanliness.” Concerning manliness itself, Anṣārī does include *muruwwa* in *The Hundred Fields*, though not in his *Waystations*. This seems to be because he integrates the traits of *muruwwa* into his later discussion of *futuwwa*, divvying the traits of *muruwwa* among the waystations of *futuwwa* and those leading up to it, such as satisfaction (*ridā*), gratitude (*shukr*), and character (*khulq*). Anṣārī defines *muruwwa* as “being responsible and living righteously.”79 He explains that this means living in a way that is intelligent toward oneself, patient toward others, and needy toward God. In terms of interactions with others, Anṣārī emphasizes being satisfied with others according to their abilities, accepting their apologies, and seeking justice on their behalf to the extent of one’s power. With *futuwwa*, the seeker goes beyond helping others in this world, instead interceding for them with God, and goes beyond tolerating others’ faults, instead remaining constantly mindful of one’s own faults. *Futuwwa* is a more amplified realization of *muruwwa*.

Even though Anṣārī’s notions of manliness and *futuwwa* are abstract to the point that they could apply to women, they remain in a patriarchal framework. He introduces the waystation of *futuwwa* by alluding to the Qur’anic narrative about a group of “young men” (*fiyya*), stalwart in their belief and in their opposition to polytheism, who miraculous slumbered in their cave of refuge for three centuries (Q 18:13). Of course, it seems that Anṣārī reads the verse’s description that “they were young men who believed in the Lord” as “they were possessors of *futuwwa* who believed in their lord,” a reading that could be applied to males or females. Nevertheless, Anṣārī here seems to echo the patriarchal theme of “great men” that one finds in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures, one that also drives, for example, Sulamī’s glorification of prophets and saints as exemplars of *futuwwa* in his *Book on Futuwwa*.

It deserves mention, however, that Sulamī did present a female version of *futuwwa*, captured in the term *al-niswa* or “female possessors of *futuwwa*,” a notion that predates Sulamī by “at least a century.”80 They are mentioned in Sulamī’s book *Early Sufi Women* (*Dhikr al-Niswa al-Muta abhidāt al-Ṣufiyāt*). The many names and deeds of female ascetics, worshippers, and knowers indicate that women pursued the divine with a vigor no less than that of men, even if they remained mostly unacknowledged and even if certain male saints disliked hearing their accounts.81 Yet, as Rkia Cornell has argued, even Sulamī’s commemoration of great women falls under the category of “exceptionalism,” such that female achievement amounts to a rarity, and male achievement is a universal normalcy.82 Such exceptionalism is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of the hagiographical account of the great female saint and lover of God, Rābi’ā al-‘Adawiyya, in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Memorial of Saints* (*Tadhkirat al-Awliyā*). ‘Aṭṭār includes
in his chapter on Rābiʿa a careful justification for including a woman among the “ranks of men,” by commenting that according to the Hadith “God gives no notice to your forms”; that two-thirds of Hadith narrations come from the Prophet’s wife ʿĀʾisha; and that “when a woman is a man on the path to God the Exalted, she cannot be called a woman.”83 ʿAṭṭār’s acknowledgement of the ontological illusoriness of gender aside, this is exceptionalism at its best.

Yet futuwwa and muruwwa have been far too central to Sufi and even Islamic ethics to be left in the fetters of masculinity. Indeed, according to ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, muruwwa must be acquired before one attains futuwwa, and futuwwa must be acquired before one attains the highest rank in Sufi relationships with God, namely saṁthood (walāya).84 Saʿdiyya Shaikh has reasessed Sufi readings of gender, bringing to light traditional Islamic/Sufi grounds for social and ethical gender equality. According to Ibn ʿArabi, women possess the capacity for complete spiritual realization, even including the rank of the Complete Human (al-insān al-kāmil), but not only in a spiritual sense: Their perfection can even effect ritual imitation and create divine-legal precedence.85 Ibn ʿArabi acknowledges the social situatedness of gender, establishing that human perfection is ungendered.86 Thus, terms such as futuwwa or rījāl (“men”) can begin in a gendered context, but be reapplied to signify human perfections in ungendered ways.87 With Shaikh’s argument in consideration, one might use futuwwa and muruwwa—and the less frequent term for “manliness,” rajīliyya—to describe the finest human qualities applicable to everyone, while the terms still remain firmly rooted in Islamic and specifically Sufi ontologies and narratives of creation.

WHAT IS A QALANDAR?

The theme of futuwwa will be explored below in a treatise attributed to Anṣārī called Qalandar-nāma, meaning “The Treatise on the Qalandar.” The term qalandarī originally referred to those associated with a certain place of ill-repute, where errant souls gathered and participated in music and other morally questionable activities. Later it came to be a part of a constellation of terms that referred to wandering mendicants and antinomian ascetics, these terms including darwīsh (“pauper”), malāmatī (“blame-seeker,” altered from its original historical sense), and—later—rind (“roguish drunkard”) and gallāsh (“rascal”).89 One can see how the values of the qalandar tie into those of futuwwa: Truthfulness, courage, independence, and devotion to the divine beloved lead to the qalandar’s sincerity. The qalandar is so focused on his divine beloved that he pays no heed to the scrutiny of others. In Qur’anic terms, the qalandar in love with God does not “fear the blame of any blamer” (Q 5:54), a phrase often applied to qalandars, malāmatīs, and other outcast-lovers of God.90 Thus, he engages in activities disapproved of by society, such as wandering, begging, wearing chains, and shaving his facial hair.91 The core of futuwwa also lies in hiding one’s virtues, according to al-Manāfī.92 Much as one might show wilting flowers to jealous onlookers, protecting the beautiful flowers in the bunch for the beloved, the possessor of futuwwa preserves inner ethical beauties by displaying his or her shortcomings for others—a disguise that allows for ethical development unimpeded by the threat of self-admiration and devoted to the divine beloved alone. It is an approach to love taken to its extreme by the antiheroic saint Ḥusayn ibn Mansūr al-Ḥallaj, who described (probably apocryphally) futuwwa as embodied by three God-adoring outlaws hated by society: himself, the Pharaoh (of Exodus), and Satan.93

The pseudo-Anṣārī author of Qalandar-nāma lauds the practices of wandering and begging associated with the qalandar. In the second half of the treatise, which I have not included in the translated segment, the Anṣārī persona encourages men young and old to “go and survey the world in many expeditions”: “Break the chains of lunacy by taking a step of wisdom and discovering the hidden secret; circumambulate the world, so that by begging you can become a man, a person who has experienced pain.”94

The freedom of spirit that Anṣārī attributes to futuwwa can be seen here. To wander the world with only the clothes on one’s back takes courage and independence, traits that he associates with becoming “a man.” Moreover, evoking a recurring theme in Sufi writings, begging breaks one of arrogance. For this reason, masters sometimes assigned begging to Sufi initiates, especially those who were wealthy or haughty.95 Begging endows a young man with humility and sincerity: “Listen, boy! If you are a man of the path, then be a beggar at the door / And, in dirt-kissing humility, be like the boot at every step.”96 Embodying
Anṣārī’s advice, the “qalandar” in this text cares little what others think of him. Dismissed as having lost his mind, he walks his own path, even living in the wilderness. Yet his sense of independence endows him with more wisdom than those who absorb themselves in bookish learning.

THE TREATISE ON THE QALANDAR: AN AUTHORSHIP PROBLEM

This discussion will conclude by exploring futuwwa in a text that is probably not by Anṣārī.97 Rather, it is a text that an admirer of Anṣārī seems to have written, in which the great master has become the protagonist in a narrative attributed to him. Hence the treatise informs us most likely not of the historical Anṣārī but of his intellectual, religious, and literary legacy, somewhat akin to “the pastoral epistles” written in the voice of St. Paul.98

The text translated here is an homage, a reverential forgery. It brings together Anṣārī’s ethical theory, his constructed biography, and his reputed writing style. Hence the text might even be considered Anṣārī’s own from one perspective. Michel Foucault indicates ways in which an author’s name attached to a text has a “classificatory function,” the “author function,” one that assures the text’s place as a circulated and valued occasion of language.99 The author of the Qalandar-nāma seems to have had such functions of the author in mind. By exploring Anṣārī as both character and author, such “forgers” created texts with guarantees of value and longevity. This also tells us that Anṣārī as an author became an enduring figure with distinct characteristics in the history of Sufism, as occurred for other figures in Sufism.100

The author’s care in creating a viable “Anṣārī-persona” is astonishing. There is the writing style famously attributed to Anṣārī and made popular by the ethicist Saʿdī of Shiraz, one of rhymed and unrhymed Persian prose interspersed with poetry. There is also the theme—taken from Anṣārī’s biography—of the seeker pulled in two directions, between the love of studying scripture and the disavowal of scholarly prestige. This is captured not only in the narrative, but also in the text’s repeated focus on the Qur’an and on scholarly Arabic sources. Extending biographical motifs, the qalandar’s ability to jolt Anṣārī’s consciousness clearly resembles narratives about Anṣārī’s meetings with the mysterious Khaṭāb. The qalandar’s itinerant lifestyle parallels that of Anṣārī’s own absentee father, who pursued the uninhibited life of contemplation.101 Lastly, the idealization of springtime in this text mirrors Anṣārī’s penchant for seasonal metaphors (especially the “spring” of the soul) and his own comments that, having been born in spring, he “loves spring dearly.”102

The narrative is also in some ways a commentary on Anṣārī’s discussions of futuwwa, epitomizing Anṣārī’s definition of it as “living freely.” This selected portion is a translation of the first half of the Qalandar-nāma, the narrative portion. The second half develops the themes in this selection through didactic-homiletic poetry, along with advice in rhymed prose.

TRANSLATION: QALANDAR-NĀMA (“THE TREATISE ON THE QALANDAR”)

In the name of God the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.

All thanks and praise belong to the deity who is the creator of earth and time, who opens up vocal cords and puts the tongue to speech. So says the author of this composition, whose heart has been plundered, the poor elder (pīr) of storekeeping stock, ʿAbdallāh Anṣārī:

This occurred back in the beginnings of my education, when I sought proofs in strands of knowledge, and when in seeking the comprehensive secret, moments were not wasted. One day, while enduring repetition and pondering mysteries, I sat in school with a thousand Satanic suggestions in my heart. A qalandar came through the door, who ruled the Kingdom of Contentment like an Alexander. He wore felt and had imbibed passionate love. Like a fairy’s, his face was rosy. He greeted me and began to speak. Virtuous seekers of
knowledge and peddlers of transmitted words have failed to notice insights such as those he shared, despite their uttering sayings about the divine essence and attributes.

The qalandar said:

Hey all of you, forsaken and stuck in the mud of the river’s silt! Weary laggards bogged down in shouldn’t have and can’t! You have only insults for the Sufis and curses for the common people. What are these Hadith-transmitting pretensions you transmit to others? What are these claims that everything is “no”?! Till when will your guidance and setting others straight look like this? Is there not among you a rightly guided man (Q 11:78)? If only you had passed through these places and abandoned these homes, you would have plunged into the waters of acquisition, so that your interiors would have been verdant meadows. Refrain from disparaging elders, and you will become roses without thorns. Anyone who disparages elders will quickly become fuel for the fires.

The slow-sprouting seed in its infancy will, in short time and small space, shoot up and grow into a mature plant, a one-hundred-year-old tree.

The tree will show itself to the people of the world, saying: “I am the one who, in my infancy and in this lowly place, revealed my beauty from beneath this veil of soil and outpaced both [infancy and ground] in capturing the reed-shaft.”

The tree continues: “Alas, you have exposed yourself out of self-conceit! Don’t be juvenile. Take things slowly. While you might be on display for a few days, you lack proper conduct (adab). You will fall headlong. Remain until by the divine command, from which you can find such things as a harsh, icy wind in the summer month of Tīr, 103 you find yourself fallen and me standing upright. What I’ve said is all-encompassing, but it needs an innermost heart that listens. O young one, if you have dignity, then do not find fault with the elderly, for youth is nothing but shortcoming and distance, while old age is the realization of ‘white hair is light.’” 104

O you attached—like the second of a pair—to the head of a walking cane, good tidings!

Tidings for knowledge, clemency, wisdom, and the secret of all land creatures.

The planting of optimism and cultivating of hope in this day and age have been quenched by your liberality as if by the clouds.

I’d guess that from the splendors of virtue in the moments of your youth there are books, of yours, that would be a load for many camels.

Don’t deem the old broken man to be contemptible.

Haven’t you heard that treasure lies concealed beneath the ruins?

O Anṣārī! We have seen a person in the time of youth shatter, like the nearest ones, the rock of self-annihilation.

We threw down our books and gave our full attention to the qalandar. That good-natured soul placed before us everything he carried of ready or valuable tales, or the wonders of every town, bringing all of us to cling to his skirt for his assistance and to seek refuge in his domain. We begged him to pray for us—although the human has nothing except that for which he strives (Q 53:39). Once the sun began to depart, this wretch before you, ʿAbdallāh, ran after him, until the chain [of devotion connecting us] led me to a mountain. There, sometimes, his eyes would fall upon me unexpectedly. I put my head at his feet and
released a wellspring of tears. After I wailed loudly and wept for a long time, I said: “O good-natured treasure among the derelict! Give me some advice from the Decisive Book [the Qur’an], so that the demented might become sane and the moth might burn in the flame.”

He said:

O ’Abdallāh! The path of religion is a rough one. They [were so taken aback by the daring of Abraham to insult the idols of their forefathers that they] said: Have you brought us the truth, or are you among those who jest? (Q. 21:55) Indeed, in practice there are marvelous secrets, and “the effectiveness of a sword depends entirely on the one who wields it.”105 Knowledge coupled with practice is like the sun in the [spring-announcing] Aries. Knowledge that increases one in arrogance is like a tree that bears no fruit. Those suited to virtues who incline toward vices in their objectives and aims will find that God has increased their hearts in disease (Q. 2:10). Do not, out of curiosity, become beguiled by excess, and Satan is a deserting traitor for the human (Q 25:29). If you pay no heed, then you will be a staunch disbeliever, like the donkey bearing scrolls (Q 71:27 and 62:5). Since you won’t come back to life and since the Day of Resurrection lies ahead, get moving! In this borrowed life, you don’t want to be credited with disgrace, for the worldly is a gratification unattainable and a ruin best forsaken (Q 13:26). If you’ve washed the face of the heart and begun to seek knowledge from religion, then renounce the worldly and kick out from your heart the love you have for it, lest you fail in salvation because the worldly has become the most pressing matter for you. And the Hereafter is even greater in terms of differences in degrees of merit (Q 17:21).

That love-mad one then stopped speaking. He disappeared into the wilderness. From that time onward I have strived, but I have not become victorious over the self, and for this winter I have seen no sign of a vernal equinox.106

**FUTUWWA AND THE QALANDAR: CONCLUSIONS**

This treatise invites its audience to have the constancy, stillness, wisdom, and unselfishness more typical of the elderly, even in one’s youth. Despite one’s lack of experience and knowledge, and despite the urge to receive glory from others, a youth should learn rather than try to preach, absorb rather than reach for renown. Moreover, ethical practice (in the form of respect for elders) will yield knowledge. The study of religious sciences could offer the young Anšārī and his cohort great acclaim. An old vagrant offers them a glimpse of their future should they choose that route: They can haughtily reach for the sky, challenging their place in existence, and fall like an uprooted tree. Conversely, they can lower themselves and become humble sages. Here is implied the theme of “transcending the intellect” that Anšārī establishes as the highest reach of the trait of futuwwa. Of course, Anšārī’s intentions are for those at the furthest end of spiritual development, who must renounce what they know by reason to appreciate what they see by the heart. Nevertheless, the problems with knowledge are similar. Especially troublesome for the qalandar is the sense that these young students use their knowledge to judge others, instead of scrutinizing their own shortcomings. Acknowledging one’s moral flaws while excusing the flaws of others is essential to futuwwa, according to both Anšārī and Sulamī.107 Learning has made them interested in restricting the freedoms of others, while they should be exploring the freedoms of themselves—freedoms from all forms of worldliness.

As mentioned, futuwwa is a compound virtue, one that involves a sense of truthfulness and sincerity. The wandering qalandar clearly possesses truthfulness (ṣidq), in other words, a complete lack of pretense, hypocrisy, spite for others, or even concern for the admiration of others. Indifference to the scrutiny of others seems to be his defining trait. The metaphors in this treatise associate him with madness and wilderness, highlighting his place outside of social norms. Anšārī’s most profound commentary on such sincere truthfulness appears in the Waystations, as he compares a person’s ethical makeup to clothes.108 If your clothes are yours, then your deeds, states, and aims will be subject to God’s satisfaction. If, however, your clothes are “borrowed,” then your good deeds are sins; your truest states are lies; and your purest aims lead to nowhere. To have “borrowed clothes” means to have a false veneer, an ethical makeup that has
elements of pretense. The qalandar’s invitation to the young men is to shed these clothes of pretense and act in a sense of pure devotion to God.

Lastly, there is the important theme of respect for the elderly. Obviously those endowed with futuwwa protect the weak and defenseless, but the qalandar tells them to go beyond that. They are to learn from and imitate the person thought of as weak and defenseless, namely the old man. With age comes experience, and it is experience that outshines all other kinds of knowledge according to the qalandar, especially the knowledge of limits and religious injunctions found in books. While it might be strange to associate old age with such a sense of adventure, the treatise does so by preferring experiential learning to rote religious learning. The treatise encourages its audience to travel and to beg, to give themselves to the wide-open possibility of owning nothing. The qalandar exhorts the young men to embrace the courage needed to live freely, and—as will be recalled—living freely is the essence of futuwwa according to Anṣārī.

As a wise old man recalling a youthful moment of conversion, the Anṣārī persona in all of this is both a seeker and a master sought by others. He tells us of a time when he was lost and of a time when he was guided, but he also guides us, referring to himself as the “elder” or “master” (pīr). In this is the implication that experience becomes transmitted through human guidance. To attain futuwwa and other virtues, a young man needs an elder master, a shaykh of the way, or even a wandering ecstatic figure who awakens something within the person—as Kharaqānī is legendarilly said to have done with Anṣārī. Ironically, the youths here learn how to be daring from an old man, who teaches them that the bravest action a youth can take is to turn his back on the worldly and put knowledge into sincere practice.

NOTES

1 Jāmī, Nafaḥāt, p. 336. Jāmī’s hagiographical compendium describing Anṣārī’s life was, as a whole, greatly influenced by Anṣārī’s own Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya. See Algar, Jami, pp. 104–5.

2 Jāmī, Nafaḥāt, p. 337.

3 Ibid., p. 344; Anṣārī Hirawī, Stations of the Sufi Path, pp. 26–7.


5 Ibid., p. 339.

6 Beaurecueil, Khwādja ‘Abdullāh Anṣārī, pp. 87, 89.

7 Ibid., p. 112.

8 Mojaddedi, The Biographical Tradition in Sufism, p. 69; the translation has been altered for consistency with usage here.

9 Lipton, “Secular Sufism,” pp. 431–3. Concerning Ḥanbalī Sufism, see the bibliography for a number of essays by George Makdisi.

10 Ibn Qayyim echoed Ibn Taymiyya’s critical assessment of Anṣārī, because, for them, Anṣārī’s occasional preference for spiritual insight over traditionalist literalism left enough ambiguity for a group of Sufis with heretical monistic tendencies to appropriate his thought. See Anjum, “Sufism without Mysticism?” pp. 164, 166.


13 Al-Kāshānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, pp. 7–8 (Bidāfar’s introduction).


15 Ibid., pp. 2:156–7. See also al-Kāshānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, p. 17 (Bidāfar’s introduction).


19 Ibid., pp. 1:256–7.

20 Anšārī Hirawī, *Manāzil al-Sāʾirīn*, p. 4. In Sufi terms, this combination of consistency and variability results from a situation in which the Divine Beloved is one, while the lovers are various. Compare Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 334.


24 Al-Kāshānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, p. 638. Waqt can refer both to a general phenomenon that occurs throughout one’s journey and also to one specific waystation. See Anšārī Hirawī, *Manāzil al-Sāʾirīn*, p. 214, no. 72. Anšārī also uses the term “state” (*ḥāl*) in two ways: as a general phenomenon and in a more specific sense, applying to waystations that are divine bestowals, not earned through exertion. See al-Kāshānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, p. 563.


26 Ibid., p. 142, no. 44. As William Chittick indicates, love frames the entirety of Anšārī’s stations and is located as a later waystation (no. 61) only because of the preliminaries involved. See Chittick, *Divine Love*, pp. 292–3.


29 See ibid., pp. 143–4, no. 45.


31 Anšārī Hirawī, *Manāzil al-Sāʾirīn*, p. 4. See also his discussions on p. 138, no. 43, and p. 142, no. 44.
32 Ibid., p. 4.


34 Anṣārī Hirawī, *Stations of the Sufi Path*, pp. 42, 45. In this book Nahid Angha has provided a complete translation of *The Hundred Fields*, along with a very useful introduction and appendices. See also Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics*, p. 113.


37 Ibid., p. 424.


39 Ibid., p. 40, no. 9.

40 Ibid., p. 23, no. 3; p. 58, no. 15; p. 92, no. 27; p. 66, no. 18; p. 54, no. 13; p. 92, no. 27; p. 174, no. 58; p. 148, no. 47 (citing Q 18:24); p. 45, no. 11.

41 Ibid., p. 15, no. 1.

42 Ibid., p. 192, no. 63.

43 Ibid., p. 15, no. 1; p. 240, no. 83; p. 257, no. 91.

44 Ibid., p. 183, no. 61.


46 Ibid., p. 198, no. 66.

47 Ibid., p. 219, no. 74.

48 Al-Kāshānī, *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, p. 82.

49 Ibid., p. 82.


52 Ibid., p. 65.


54 Ibid., p. 1:261.


56 Ibid., p. 127, no. 39.

58 Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism*, pp. 11–12, 77–80. The figure of Fuḍāyl ibn ʿIyād (d. 803) is often mentioned as an early leader in *futuwwa*, one who was also ostensibly a “bandit” or ʿayyār. See Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics*, p. 108; Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism*, p. 18. Keeler’s corresponding note (p. 118, n. 10) includes many useful sources on the history of *futuwwa* not mentioned here.

59 Such “comprehensive virtues” can be found described in classical Islamic texts, such as in Shiʿi literature: “Nobility (karam) is a comprehensive term (kalima jāmiʿa) for praiseworthy character traits (akhlāq mahmūda),” says ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsā Bahāʾ al-ʾIrbilī (d. 1293–4). Attributed to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib himself is the saying “Manliness (murūwwa) is a comprehensive term (ism jāmiʿ) for the other virtues (al-faḍāʾil) and merits (al-maḥāsin).” For the first, see al-ʾIrbilī, *Kashf al-Ghumma*, p. 2:23. For the second, see al-Laythī al-Wāsiṭī, *ʿUyūn al-Ḥikam*, p. 67.

60 See Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz’s definition, for example, in al-Sulamī, *Majmūʿat Āthār*, p. 2:279. The *Kitāb al-Futuwwa* has been translated by Sheikh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahî al-Halvetî as *The Book of Sufi Chivalry*.


64 Ibid., p. 47. The translation is Ridgeon’s, but the word *al-Ḥaqq* has been modified for consistency with this book.

65 Ibid., p. 48–9.


69 These laxer requirements in Sufism are called *rukhaṣ* (sing. *rukhṣa*), as opposed to the more demanding standards of *ʿazāʾim* (sing. *ʿazīma*). The terms are borrowed from the language of legal scholars.


72 Ibid., pp. 10, 71.

73 Ibid., p. 110.


79 Anṣārī Hirawī, Majmūʿ a-yi Rasā il-i Fārsī, p. 1:259.


81 It is reported that Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar al-Ḥaddād al-Nīsābūrī (d. ca. 879–84) “used to dislike stories about the practitioners of female chivalry [futuwwa]” until he met Umm ʿAlī Fāṭima, the wife of Ahmad ibn Kaḏrawayh al-Balkhi (d. 854). See al-Sulamī, Early Sufi Women, p. 168.

82 See Cornell, “Soul of a Woman Was Created Below,” p. 266, as well as Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life, p. 81, as quoted in Cornell, “Soul of a Woman,” p. 266.

83 Ḍīʾārī, Tadhkirat al-Awliyāʾ, p. 61.

84 Murata, The Tao of Islam, p. 268.

85 Shaikh, Sufi Narratives of Intimacy, pp. 82–3.

86 Ibid., p. 216.

87 ibid., p. 218.

88 Shafīʿi-Kadkanī, Qalandariyya dar Tārīkh, p. 44.


90 The connection between love and the qalandar is made well by J. T. P. de Bruijn in Persian Sufi Poetry, pp. 71–6.


93 See Ridgeon, Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism, pp. 28–9; Shafīʿi-Kadkanī, Qalandariyya dar Tārīkh, p. 115.

94 Anṣārī Hirawī, Majmūʿ a-yi Rasā il-i Fārsī, p. 2:639.

95 Algar, “Begging ii.”

96 Anṣārī Hirawī, Majmūʿ a-yi Rasā il-i Fārsī, p. 2:641.

97 Muḥammad-Riḍā Shafīʿi-Kadkanī argues that the term for a qalandar individual in Anṣārī’s time would be qalandarī, while qalandar itself referred to the gathering place for these social outsiders until sometime after the mid-thirteenth century. See Shafīʿi-Kadkanī, Qalandariyya dar Tārīkh, pp. 40–2, 307. See also Utas, “The Munājāt or Ilāhī-nāmah of ʿAbduʾllāh Anṣārī,” pp. 84–5. Although Bo Utas does not mention the Qalandar-nāma, he does discuss a category of texts that applies. He rightfully notes that the
Waystations is the only work attributed to Anṣārī that is indubitably his. The scribe of this treatise notes that the version that he writes was completed “in the latter part of Rabīʿ al-Ākhir in the year 852 [June or July of 1448].” See Anṣārī Hirawī, Majmūʿ a-yi Rasāʾil-i Fārsī, p. 1:642.

98 Pervo, The Making of Paul, p. 83. Thanks to Eric C. Stewart for recommending this source.


100 One example would be Fakhr al-Dīn Ṣīrājī. See Baldick, “The Authenticity of Ṣīrājī’s ‘Uṣshāq-nāma’; Shafīʿi-Kadkanī, Qalandariyya dar Tārīkh, pp. 320–3.

101 Jāmī, Nafaḥāt, p. 344; Anṣārī Hirawī, Stations of the Sufi Path, pp. 26–7.

102 Reisner, “The Life of the Text and the Fate of Tradition,” p. 34; Jāmī, Nafaḥāt, p. 337.

103 Tīr corresponds to the zodiac sign of Cancer in June and July; for the Qur’anic reference to this wind see Q 69:6.

104 This is a hadith the complete version of which reads, “White hair is light. Whosoever plucks out white hairs has plucked out the light of Islam. When a man reaches forty years of age, God safeguards him against three afflictions: insanity, elephantiasis-leprosy, and malignant leprosy.” The hadith is recorded by Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Ḥibbān al-Tamīmī al-Bustī al-Shāfiʿī (d. 965). He comments that it has “no basis as being the speech of God’s messenger, may God’s blessings and peace be upon him” (Kitāb al-Majrūḥūn, p. 3:82).

105 This is a well-known Arabic saying whose origins I have not been able to locate.


107 Sulamī says that “it is among the traits of futuwwa that the servant witnesses his own shortcomings in every state and does not become satisfied with himself because of what is in that state” (al-Sulamī, Majmūʿ at Āthār, p. 2:272).

108 Anṣārī Hirawī, Manāzil al-Sāʾirīn, p. 118, no. 35.

109 Al-Tilimsānī, Sharḥ Manāzil, p. 1:307. Al-Kāshānī comments that actions with slightly impure intentions are not “sins” in the literal sense, but sins for the “near ones,” in his Sharḥ Manāzil, p. 383.

Chapter Nine

The Completion of Ethics: Self-Annihilation (Fān)

) Through the Lens of A
In this chapter, using mainly a narrative poem by Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār in light of writings by other Sufi authors, we will address a concluding question: Where does virtue ethics end? From the perspective of political science, ethics begins with the individual but extends to the management and wellbeing of groups of people. It ends in a virtuous nation composed on the model of the “virtuous city” (al-madīna al-fāḍila), a community al-Fārābī tells us will best nurture virtue and ultimately true happiness in its populace.1 Muslim thinkers have had a very rich intellectual history in the contemplation of politics and social justice, so rich, in fact, that inclusion within the purview of this book would be unfeasible. From an individual’s perspective, however, the authors hitherto mentioned have indicated varying ends for their soul-perfecting programs, ends that do share at least one trait: a distancing of oneself from the body’s lower forces. Many authors we have read would take things a step further and establish as a common end a relinquishing of notions of selfhood.

PLOTinus ON THE END OF ETHICS: A COMPARISON

A brief consideration of the views of the philosopher Plotinus (d. 270) on the end of ethics will help frame this discussion in a comparative context. Sufi theories of self-annihilation should not be conflated with Neoplatonism, of course. In that regard, ʿAṭṭār (like many other Sufis) could not be clearer about his disavowal of ancient philosophy as reinterpreted in Arabic:

Once the candle-of-religion has incinerated Greek wisdom

the candle-of-the-heart cannot light from such learning.

The wisdom of Medina suffices for you, o man of religion.

Cast dirt upon Greece in your care for religion.2

From ʿAṭṭār’s perspective, Greek philosophy and prophetic scriptural wisdom were at odds. In his presentation of spiritual perfection, ʿAṭṭār, like Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, advocated an interior journey modeled on the wisdom of Sufi masters. This was a purification of the heart, rather than learning terms and concepts that busied the mind and created doubt or false certitude without leading to the nullification of ego necessary for direct vision. Religion, in its scripture, practice, injunctions, and divine aid, gave a person all he or she would need to polish the heart’s mirror. For ʿAṭṭār, it was not cultivated reason that helped procure self-loss, but a sort of enamored “insanity.”3

Yet from the perspective of intellectual history, all branches of learning (even Sufism) were in conversation with one another. A modified version of Plotinus’s view circulated widely among Arabic-reading philosophers. Historical relevance aside, this comparison highlights resemblances between self-loss in Sufism and the ultimate aims or “ends” of Islamic philosophy, despite very significant incongruities. For Anšārī or Rūmī, rational contemplation is an impediment; the rational soul must give way to a completely receptive, higher faculty of vision. For Avicenna, rational contemplation is the end of the soul; the soul must become an acquired intellect. Nevertheless, even for Avicenna, a person moves beyond the self and allows the soul to mirror a higher intelligence. Both frameworks might be described as sharing some similarities with Plotinus’s pattern of ascent. That pattern continues to provoke interest today, in no small part on account of a study of Plotinus by Pierre Hadot. Hadot, much like ʿAṭṭār, argues for the practicality of reorienting oneself toward a “true self,” a divinity that is both origin and aim.
Plotinus in the *Enneads* describes two types of virtue: civic virtues and purifications.4 As civic virtues, wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice make us reasonable and upright in our interactions with one another. As purifications, these same virtues facilitate disassociation from the body and alignment with intellect, which makes us god-like.5 The soul’s opinions become independent of those of the body. This is wisdom. The soul refuses to indulge in the body’s experiences. This is temperance. The soul loses its fear of separation from the body. This is courage. Finally, with the body’s drives neutralized, the soul is ruled by reason. This is justice.6 In presenting this model, Plotinus expands on the comments of Plato in the *Theaetetus*, according to which evil must always “prowl about this earth” and a person must escape it to become “as like God as possible.”7

The soul’s becoming purified means, for Plotinus, a “stripping of everything alien,” in other words, losing everything that makes a soul somehow different from the intellect, in order to allow godliness to prevail upon it.8 To achieve conformity with the intellect, a person must also become absorbed in contemplation, and not simply maintain a nullification of bodily forces.9 Ultimately, by these means, the soul loses itself in “mystical union” (*henōsis*) with the perfect One, although scholars of Plotinus still debate whether this means an absolute loss of identity, or some preservation of selfhood as the soul becomes lost in God.10 Plotinus describes this contact as a direct vision that transcends reason. Contact comes and goes throughout one’s life, only to become permanent when one has ceased to inhabit a body through the body’s death.11

When brought into Arabic, Plotinus’s *Enneads* became misattributed to Aristotle on account of a scribal misreading, as well as a tendency to imagine Platonic thought as the completion of Aristotelian thought—a tendency that Arabic-writing philosophers inherited from others.12 Yet the text received great attention. Generations of philosophers and critics of philosophy read and reinterpreted each other’s Neoplatonic thoughts, from al-Kindī, to al-Fārābī, to the Brethren of Purity, to Avicenna, to Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, to Ibn ʿArabī, and on and on. That which we might call “Neoplatonism” has been rethought and reconfigured so often, in fact, that concepts from it have become a thoroughly integrated “Islamic” way of thinking about the cosmos, the soul, and existence—one sometimes only faintly resembling the Plotinus strain in its DNA, especially when that strain is found in Sufism.13

**SELF-LOSS IN A NAMED GOD**

The lasting impact of the Arabic translation of Plotinus was, it seems, the fulfillment of its translator’s hopes. Peter Adamson displays the careful decisions the anonymous translator made to forge an Islamically viable Neoplatonism. Perhaps most significant for this chapter, the translator or “adaptor” of the *Enneads* into Arabic presents all virtue as pertaining to the intellect, for the intellect is always virtuous. Moreover, according to that translation, God is the source of virtue. This contradicts Plotinus’s clear assertion that virtues do not pertain to the intellect or that which is beyond it, since “the principles There have no need of harmony or order or arrangement.”14 Virtue is a means to achieving such harmony and hence applies only to souls in need of ordering. It is not for the intellect and that beyond it, which are undifferentiated perfection.15 In Islamic theology, however, God does indeed have attributes, which can be likened to virtues. In a sense, then, the adaptor creates an “Islamic” hierarchy of virtue, in which God’s attributes become manifest by intellect and, following that, by human imitators.16 This change is critical to the success of Neoplatonism in an Islamic theological context. It also resembles a key difference between Plotinus’s self-loss and that which will be discussed here: Many Sufi texts describe the loss of one’s attributes of selfhood not in an utterly ineffable One, but in God, that is, in the absolute whose essence is ineffable, but who becomes manifest through named attributes.

Plotinus’s higher ethics is “cathartic” because all human attributes must be lost. In becoming purified of such attributes, humans strive to become like the ultimate Good, which is undifferentiated and undefined. The Good has no attributes other than being the Good. This does have a place in Sufi thought: For a thinker such as Ibn ʿArabi (and many others), even the divine attributes are multiple and various refractions of one undifferentiated divine essence. When an attribute (such as mercy) becomes realized through that divine essence, it becomes a divine name (such as the All-Merciful). When that name becomes realized through a human servant, it becomes a virtue (human mercy, or compassion). Ultimately, a human loses qualities of
human selfhood to reflect God’s names, and those names are ways in which God has disclosed His perfect undifferentiated being. In order to become truly compassionate, for example, a person must lose tendencies to be spiteful or indifferent (which result from human bodily existence). Being compassionate is not an acquisition of virtue, but a subtraction of human tendencies. This model holds true for Ibn ʿArabī, Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, and Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, as well as for ʿAṭṭār and other Sufi thinkers.

Yet—unlike with Plotinus—we can say that God has attributes, which are acquired by human beings. Why the difference? It would seem that, at least according to Ibn ʿArabī, the difference lies in revelation:

If we were left only the intellectual proofs used by rationalists in knowing the divine essence—that it is not such-and-such and not such-and-such—no created thing would love him. But when the divine reports came, in the languages of religious law, telling us that he is such-and-such and is such-and-such, in matters the outer senses of which contradict rational proofs, we loved him for the sake of these positive attributes.17

God does not only have negative attributes (al-ṣifāt al-salbiyya), such as incorporeality and dissimilarity to all things, but also positive ones (al-ṣifāt al-thubūtiyya), such as life, knowledge, power, will, sight, hearing, and speech.18 Reason knows that God must be above all things, even attributes, and so tells us of a deity of transcendence (tanzīḥ). Conversely, the heart—emboldened by God’s own words in revelation—loves a deity of immanence (tashbhīḥ). Can God be All-Seeing, when sight as we know it utilizes eyes? Reason immediately enters the scene and begins to negate: God’s seeing does not make use of eyes, nor does it involve the reflection of light, nor is it separate from the very existence of all things. And yet I know that the deity I love can see me. Moreover, when, having traversed stage after stage and practice after practice, I lose myself in constant remembrance of God, I know—according to a hadith—that God becomes my sight.19

This emphasis on knowing and personifying God’s names permeates Sufī ethical writings. In the context of Ibn ʿArabī, for example, William Chittick has discussed ways in which such a “theomorphic ethics,” one “identical with the spiritual path of the Sufis,” encourages the aspirant to assume the character traits of God (takhalluq bi-akhlaq Allāh), or, in different terms, “[to] assum[e] the traits of God’s names.”20 I have kept this discussion of assuming the traits of God’s names brief, in fear of veering into engrossingly complex theological issues, but one example from the writings of Ghazālī merits mention. Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī frequently champions a theomorphic ethics of God’s names throughout his writings, but undoubtedly the clearest case is The Most Resplendent Objective in Explanation of the Meanings of God’s Most Beautiful Names (al-Maqṣad al-ʿAsnā fi Sharḥ Maʿānī Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā), which has been translated into English.21

Here Ghazālī describes how a person might realize—in a human, servant-like, and imperfect way—each of God’s ninety-nine names listed as an elaboration of a famous hadith.22 Some, such as “the Gracious” (al-Lāīf), seem straightforward enough: A person should be kind and accommodating in his or her inviting others to God, just as God brings out beauty and order in a cosmos inclined toward decay, from which humans benefit and should be guided to Him.23 Others, such as “the Subduer” (al-Qahhār), need more thought before they can be applied to human actions. This name indicates the power that God has over all things, which becomes especially evident when arrogant humans oppose him. A human makes manifest this attribute when he or she subdues the human being’s foremost enemy, which is the lower soul (nafs) and its concomitant desires that lead to sin; this should be followed by subduing the body entirely to bring the spirit to life.24 To give one last example, “the One” (al-Wāḥid) points to God’s unity, indivisibility, and dissimilarity to all things. This name applies to a human who excels all other humans in some desirable trait (khasla), in some form of knowledge, or virtue, even though human preeminence is entirely relative. That is, a person is not absolutely preeminent for being good, virtuous, or knowledgeable in the sense that these things emanate from her, but instead preeminent relative to those in her species and the time in which she lives.25

When seen in this way, a person acquires a series of virtues reflective of God’s names. But, from another perspective, that person does not acquire attributes but negates his or her own, learning to see the falsity of his or her own selfhood. Ghazālī clarifies this in his analysis of the name Allāh, the name of God that comprehends not only all of His beautiful names, but also all things in existence:
It befits the servant for his portion of this name [Allāh] to become God-like (al-ta ‘alluh). I mean that one’s heart and determination become drowned in Allah, Exalted and Glorified, so that one sees none other than Him, pays attention to none other than Him, hopes in none other than Him, and fears none other than Him. How could it be otherwise when this name brings us to understand that He is the one true and real existent, and all other than Him is undergoing annihilation, perishing, and false—except through Him? Thus, to begin with, [the aspirant] sees his own soul as that which is the foremost of all that is perishing and false.26

Ghazālī is careful not to delve too deeply into this matter in his treatise. Its depths point to “secrets” like “an abyss in an ocean without shore,” secrets that begin by knowing that God knows Himself through our knowing Him, that God is the real Actor behind everything.27 It is for this reason, Ghazālī implies, that God declares to Muhammad in the Qurʾan that “you did not throw when you threw, but God threw” (Q 8:17). If one comes to realize this and to perceive that the self lacks actuality, and if that realization becomes so constant that a person’s sense of selfhood disappears, then that is annihilation (fanāʾ).

ANNIHILATION IN GOD AND SUBSISTENCE THROUGH GOD

Self-annihilation or simply “annihilation” (or “annihilation in God”) is a specific and technical term in Sufism, at variance with simply a general sense of losing one’s attributes of selfhood, which I have been calling “self-loss.” While self-loss might be applied to all the ways in which a person loses his or her own traits and sense of self in approaching God through His attributes, annihilation marks some completion of this process. It can be not only a stage in the path, but also a matter of perception, a realization. Complementary to annihilation is the phenomenon of “subsistence (baqāʾ) through God.” Subsistence occurs after annihilation. Through subsistence, the self-annihilated person engages with creation, living among others and interacting with them. He or she does so through acquired divine attributes, even as if through God, now that his or her “blameworthy attributes” have passed away.28 For most Sufi writers, this process means leaving behind states and stations.29 Beyond this, a person becomes annihilated from his or her own annihilation, inattentive even to her own situation as one annihilated and as close to projecting God’s own actions as a human being can be.30

Even though subsistence is the completion of annihilation, Sufi writings often refer to the entire process as “annihilation,” a practice that I have taken up in this chapter. In a technical sense, annihilation and subsistence are indeed separate, and subsistence is the superior achievement. Nevertheless, these two modes of being and awareness come as a pair. Although they often (but not always) occur in succession, they are always complementary—two sides of one coin, so to speak. ʿAṭṭār, for example, describes subsistence (baqāʾ) as the completion of self-annihilation, or becoming “annihilated from annihilation” (fanāʾ az fanāʾ).31 Once one loses one’s awareness of being annihilated, then one has achieved subsistence. Some sayings describe the relationship between subsistence and annihilation as a matter of perspective. “Subsistence belongs to the Real,” al-Junayd says (according to ʿAṭṭār), “and annihilation belongs to other-than-the-Real.”32 As the servant disappears, the Real takes the servant’s place. Annihilation means that the servant’s illusion of identity is effaced, while the servant’s subsistence through God means that the Real’s presence is affirmed.

It would be simplistic to suppose that self-annihilation and subsistence through God are the “end” for all Sufi ethicalists. Ansārī, for example, includes seven waystations after annihilation and subsistence. Despite this, the concluding waystations share qualities of self-loss with annihilation, in that they are increasingly complete realizations of self-nothingness and God-everythingness that culminate in a realization of divine unity (tawḥīd), the final waystation. For Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, the tenth and final “principle” of spiritual perfection is complete satisfaction (al-ridā) with God. This means satisfaction with His determinations and decrees, with intimacy with Him as well as the distance He might take from His lovers, and with all that which comes from Him, which is everything. Yet satisfaction—along with his other ten principles of seeking nearness to God—is but one facet of a comprehensive virtue, the virtue of all virtues, something Kubrā and others have labeled “volitional death” (al-mawt bi-l-irāda). Kubrā himself draws a parallel between volitional death and annihilation (fanāʾ).33 The terminus of the path for Kubrā is for a person to “die” from human attributes only to be given life through divine attributes.34 Thus, even if in a technical
sense self-annihilation is not always the final virtuous achievement, the phenomenon of self-loss certainly informs the final stages of most Sufi progressions of virtue. The overarching and broader topic of “self-loss” will allow us to explore annihilation in the context of other related endings for the soul, namely love, unification, and the oneness of God.

‘AṬṬĀR AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIRDS TOPOS

I have cast a net throughout this chapter wider than in previous chapters, allowing numerous Sufi voices to define the themes and terms that surround the concept of self-annihilation. This is because self-annihilation, as a concept, eludes definition. To get even a somewhat satisfactory picture, it helps to approach the concept from many perspectives. Nevertheless, the unifying text in this chapter is Farīd al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭṭār’s (d. 1221) long narrative poem, The Language of the Birds (Manṭiq al-Ṭayr), also titled The Stations of the Birds (Maqāmāt al-Ṭuyūr). From an allegorical perspective, arguably no other work better captures the trials, pains, and ultimate fulfillment involved in annihilating one’s ego-self.

Very little is known of ‘Aṭṭār’s biography. ‘Aṭṭār was his penname and he was an apothecary. No one can be certain that ‘Aṭṭār even had a Sufi master, although he has been spuriously associated with the “saint-maker” Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and, more possibly, with Kubrā’s student, Majd al-Dīn al-Baghdādī (d. 1219).35 ‘Aṭṭār spent his long life in the vicinity of Nishapur, in the northeast of modern Iran, which meant that his homeland was in the first wave of Muslim-ruled cities to be ravaged by the invading Mongols, who took the poet’s life.36 He does not feature in any Sufi initiatic lines, leaving instead a legacy of influence in the development of Sufi Persian poetry and Sufi symbols that is perhaps unmatched by any. Indeed, throughout his life, ‘Aṭṭār seems to have been especially drawn to books by and about Sufis, as well as poetry with Sufi themes.37

His interest in what might be called “literary Sufism” resulted in several long, didactic, narrative poems, as well as a dīwān or collection of mostly love poems, a collection of four-line (rubāʿī) poems called The Book of Selections (Mukhtār-nāma), and The Memorial of the Saints (Tadhkirat al-Awliyāʾ), an account in prose of the lives of Sufi predecessors. A number of works are falsely attributed to him. The four longer narrative poetic works that are verified as his are The Divine Book (Ilāhī-nāma), a book about renunciation, in which a king asks his six sons about their deepest desires, in order to teach them the shortsighted folly of longing for worldly pleasures or power;38 The Language of the Birds, discussed here; The Book of Affliction (Muṣībat-nāma), in which a wayfarer led by his master seeks deliverance from the suffering within himself by interviewing all the major entities in creation, including the angels, the divine throne, hell, humans, animals, and the inner psychological faculties, until he discovers that the answer lies in the ocean of his own spirit; and The Book of Secrets (Asrār-nāma), which is a collection of stories on Sufi themes not held together by any ostensible frame narrative.

The Language of the Birds is ‘Aṭṭār’s most treasured contribution to world literature. It not only left an enduring mark on Rūmī and other Persian poets, but became a valued text in the Ottoman and Mughal courts, and was translated into Turkish and Dakkani, eventually making its way into European languages as well.39 The text has received the attention of a number of English translators, most recently Peter Avery.40 Other works of ‘Aṭṭār also display his masterful poetic abilities of narrative and dialogue. Two have frame-tale structures, a trend that began in Persian literature after exposure to the Indian frame-tale, via Kalīla and Dimna, as mentioned earlier. Yet The Language of the Birds enjoys a certain frame-tale structure that harmonizes perfectly with the central theme of ‘Aṭṭār’s writings, the plight of the soul to find union with God and achieve self-realization in self-annihilation. The framing narrative (a flight of birds resembling the Prophet Muhammad’s heavenly ascent) was not new, despite ‘Aṭṭār’s ingenious use of it.41

Like many before him who told this story, ʿAṭṭār begins the narrative with the problem of birds in need of a king. One bird, the hoopoe (ḥudâhud), enters the congregation to announce a resolution: There is a monarch of a bird who is eternal, light-giving, omnipresent, and the source of all other beings and traces. That bird is the Sīmurgh, a colossal bird with feathers of restorative power. The hoopoe declares this with authority because he has—according to the Qurʾān—spoken with King Solomon and served him (Q 27:20–8), and is thus initiated into the divine secrets and able to serve as a guide to others. The Sīmurgh’s habitation is dauntingly far. He lives upon Mount Qâf, which, according to medieval Islamic geographical accounts, surrounds the oceans and the earth. It is made of emerald, or at least situated upon emerald, and it gives stability to the earth it encompasses. Inaccessibility is this mountain’s identifying trait.42

The birds meet to head out. The uninitiated birds are of manifold types, representing the varieties of souls, each with his or her own peculiar set of strengths and weaknesses, weaknesses that affect adversely the bird-soul’s ability to set out toward the king. The nightingale has a beautiful song, through which he expresses his undying love for the rose. Yet his fixation with the rose’s beauty—a metaphor for those absorbed in beautiful forms who do not proceed to meaning—keeps him from redirecting his attention to the Sīmurgh. The parrot’s fixation is on eternal life, and thus he suffers from the cowardice of all those afraid to lose their lives, whether on a journey or in other domains of risk. The peacock was once a bird of heavenly paradise, and his sole occupation now is a desire to return. Like those who see religion as a business transaction through which they can acquire otherworldly rewards, the peacock directs his concern toward paradise and not God, the source of paradise. The duck is obsessed with washing, much like those pietistic Muslims often consumed by the formalities of ritual, including ablutions. The partridge represents those who love wealth, on account of the bird’s association with colorful jewel-like stones. According to Persian legend, the humāy-bird’s shadow indicated that someone would become a ruler; thus, the humāy—here a self-absorbed ascetic—imagines that the Sīmurgh should come to him for investiture of the crown, a case of arrogance. The falcon represents the love of rank, since he has ready access to the arm of the king, who uses the bird to hunt. The heron, whose name (bītūmār) can mean “father of sadness,” suffers from melancholy. He cannot fathom anything but wallowing in his sadness by the sea, staring out into the dark water which—the heron fears—will lessen and lose its grandeur if he were to drink any, keeping him thirsty. The owl’s love of wealth, unlike the more mercantile partridge who traverses mountain tops for gems, resembles that of misers and hoarders; he occupies the ruins guarding treasure, unable to progress out of fear of losing what he has. The frail sparrow asks to be excused on account of his weakness, representing all those of insufficient spiritual ambition, those who cannot see the capacity for knowing God within themselves and deem themselves morally weak.

The hoopoe kindles their aspirations by telling them about a revered elderly Sufi master, the Shaykh of Ṣan‘ān, who fell madly in love with a young Christian. For her, he was willing to lose his saintly reputation, religion, friends, and salvation in the afterlife. He came back to God with an awareness that only the lover—willing to sacrifice everything and claiming nothing for himself—has the sincerity needed to escape the fetters of selfhood and know God. Thus inspired, the birds set out. Story after story ensues, as the hoopoe leads them along the arduous journey to the Sīmurgh. As doubts and confessions of ethical shortcomings arise, the hoopoe uses storytelling as counsel. The group must make it past seven valleys before arriving: the valley of seeking (ṭalab), the valley of passionate love (iṣḥāq), the valley of intimate knowledge (maʿrifāt), the valley of independence (istiqżām), the valley of declaring oneness (tawḥīd), the valley of perplexity (hayrāt), and lastly the valley of poverty and annihilation (faqr and fanā). Few make it. Some drown, others die of thirst, or of exposure to the elements, predators, or each other; others become too tired or distracted to continue. In the end, only “one out of every thousand arrives,” that is, only “thirty individuals, no wing or feather, suffering and enfeebled / broken of heart, nothing left but soul, infirm of body.”46

The thirty remaining birds finally catch a glimpse of the Sīmurgh, “surpassing the perception of intellect or intimate knowing,” which causes them to become paralyzed in bewilderment.47 At first, they are rejected—a theme encountered in ʿAlī Ḵaẓūlī’s (d. 1126) version of this tale as well. The herald of arms (chawush) advises them to return from whence they came, since the king does not need them, and their pursuit will only bring them pain. They become despondent, but then present a tale they had heard earlier, one of the moth’s willful annihilation in the flames of its beloved candle. While everyone had deemed the moth too weak, it had no choice but to throw itself into the flame. This realization changes things: Curtains of separation are lifted, and they see the world unveiled and illuminated. They are
presented with a written statement that describes their every living deed, so that they realize the treacheries they used to commit against their own souls. The shame and agitation they undergo on account of this document finishes things off for them. Freed from life and body, they are “purified from the all of the all.”48 They regain life through the light of the Presence and encounter the Simurgh.

‘Aṭṭār describes meeting the Simurgh as a vision of mirror-like reflection, imagery that we have come upon throughout this book. The birds look closer at this “reflection of the face of the Simurgh of the world” and notice that the Simurgh is none other than themselves.49 ‘Aṭṭār accomplishes this mirroring through language, in one of the most celebrated puns in Persian literary history: The Simurgh is really sī murgh, since sī means “thirty” and murgh means “birds.”50 This identification of the thirty birds with Simurgh causes the birds to “drown in bewilderment” so that “without the ability to contemplate they remained in contemplation.”51 Confused, they ask about this mystery:

Since their state was that they knew nothing from nothing

they asked, without verbal utterance, a question of that Presence.

They sought unveiling for this mighty enigma

a solution for this problem of we-ness and you-ness.

Without verbal utterance came speech from that Presence:

“This Presence so like the sun’s rays is a mirror;

anyone who approaches sees himself in it,

soul-and-body one comes to see soul and body in it.

Since you arrived at this place as thirty birds

you became manifest as thirty in this mirror.

If you were to come back as forty or fifty birds

in similar fashion you’d lift the curtain from yourselves.”52

For the birds, their annihilation bestows on them eternal greatness and the qualities of the Simurgh: “Erased in Him, in the end, they became forever— / shadow was lost in sun, and so in peace goodbye.”53 Having no identities of their own, they then acquire a new sort of identity. After the completion of their annihilation, a process that is both instantaneous and takes one hundred thousand centuries, the birds “regain selfhood” in that they find themselves in subsistence (baqā).54 In other words, they find new existence in the king, after having lost their own existence. The story then ends with ‘Aṭṭār’s final thoughts on self-annihilation, authorship, and ethical injunctions for undertaking such changes within oneself.

LOVE, SELF-ANNIHILATION, AND THE PAINS OF SEPARATION

At a point before the birds’ complete annihilation in the Simurgh, ‘Aṭṭār describes self-annihilation in terms of love. The poet calls his audience to become lovers who have no concern with their own wellbeing or with matters of good and evil. “Annihilation in passionate love” is to be so absorbed in the beloved that everything else falls away:
Once your interior becomes unified in self-loss (bī-khudī)
you’ll relinquish determinations of “good” and “bad.”

Once good and bad do not remain, you’ll be a lover—
then you’ll be worthy of annihilation in passionate love (fanā-yi ʿishq).55

ʿAṭṭār is not advocating the abandonment of all morality, or even the abandonment of religion—not necessarily. Rather, the true lover has no regard for social reputation or otherworldly reward. The lover’s only care is the beloved. This might indeed involve a disregard for determinations of right and wrong or good and bad, but not a disregard for the will of the beloved. When the beloved is God, and God commands righteous action, the lover will not become a wrongdoer. ʿAṭṭār’s point is that annihilation occurs in love, and absolute love is no holds barred. A lover must be willing to risk all in order to reach union with and annihilation in the beloved.

ʿAṭṭār illustrates this by describing a tale of moths and a candle, a common metaphor for self-annihilation in Sufi literature that can be traced to Ḥusayn ibn Mansūr al-Ḥallāj.56 Moths, drawn to sources of light, try to learn about a candle; one moth is willing to look from a distance, while another is willing to get closer. Neither of them hits the mark. Only the moth intoxicated in love, willing to risk all and burn in the flame of the beloved candle “from head to toe,” exemplifies the perfected knower.57

Here we have reached a very fine distinction. Complete self-annihilation would not best be described in terms of a suffering sort of love. The seeker and the sought are so united in complete self-annihilation that any distinction between them that would cause longing or pain has disappeared. Yet annihilation in the Real need not always be so complete or so perpetual. A person can claim annihilation of selfhood but still be an afflicted lover, yearning and suffering for the divine beloved or perhaps for the completion of his annihilation. In his extensive study of love in early Islamic texts, Divine Love, William Chittick considers the problem of unification and love, a problem also debated by those who study the ambiguous writings of Plotinus.58 As Chittick indicates, in the Islamic context, complexities surrounding identity, love, and pain undergo commentary in the Epiphanies (Sawāniḥ) of the great Sufi theorist on love in Persian, Aḥmad Ghazālī, brother to the Ghazālī of Chapter Three. Aḥmad proclaims that the entire purpose of stripping down one’s identity is to arrive at the purest form of love.59 Suffering is part of the process: It makes one’s ego as emaciated as a hair, until the lover disappears and becomes a hair in the beloved’s tress.60 Love wears away at duality until there is no lover and beloved left—only love itself.61 Thus, if the essence of the Real is Love, then annihilation in love is indeed annihilation in the Real. Chittick considers this as a topic under the rubric of asserting God’s unity (tawḥīd), which I will address in the next segment. His own discussion of the lover’s “nonbeing in tawḥīd,” however, indicates that—upon whichever term one chooses to focus—the ends of love in Islamic thought, which are also the ends of Sufi virtue ethics, concern self-loss.62

Not all forms of love in Islamic thought require self-loss. The Qur’an describes healthy love between individuals and selfless altruism inspired by love (Q 30:21, 76:8, and 59:9). The theme of a more sober sort of love for God can be found in the Qur’an too (Q 3:31 and 2:165). Yet these are preliminary sorts of love in the model offered by ʿAṭṭār and others. A poem attributed to one of the most revered figures in ʿAṭṭār’s thought—al-Ḥallāj—illustrates the annihilating sort of love, the same love described by ʿAṭṭār and Aḥmad Ghazālī. It begins with a call the pilgrim makes on the Hajj, a visitation to Mecca and its environs accompanied by certain rites. The call, labbayk, means something like “Here I am, at your service.” Labbayk is a testimony to the pilgrim’s abandoning absolutely everything in the service of God, who called out to the pilgrim’s soul long before he could respond to the invitation:

Labbayk! Labbayk! O my secret and my secret conversation!

Labbayk! Labbayk! O my intention and my meaning!

I called on you, no, you called me to you; so did
I cry out to you, or did you cry out to me?

O source of the source of my being, o utmost of my endeavors!

O my speech! My expressions! and my gestures!

O all of all of me and o my hearing! and o my sight!

O my whole and my divisions and the parts that make me up.

O all of all of me, and all of the all is perplexing.

and all of all of you is worn garb-like in my meaning.

O you to whom my spirit was bound and became destroyed

in ecstasy, such that I am hostage to my desires.

I weep out of grief for my disunion from my homeland

undertaken voluntarily. Even my enemies are wailing in sympathy with me.

I draw near, but my fear banishes me;

and a yearning that has settled in the hidden depths of my stomach disturbs me.

So what should I do in a vast expanse to which I’ve been consigned?

My master, the doctors have grown weary of my sickness!

They say: Cure him of it. I say to them,

People! Will you treat this disease with a disease?!

My love for my master weakens me and makes me sick,

So how can I complain to my master? My master!

Truly I look at him and the heart knows him.

So what can interpret him other than my gesticulations?

Woe unto my spirit for my spirit and what a pity for me

about me, for I am the source of my own calamity.

It is as if I am drowning, when his fingertips appear

to come to my aid, while he too is in an ocean of water.

There is no one who knows what I’ve endured

except for the one who alighted from me in my heart’s innermost blood.
That is the one who knows the prolonged illness I’ve undergone.

And in his wish is my death and my revival.

O extremity of what is sought! and what is hoped for! o my haven!
o life of my spirit and o my religion and my worldliness!

Say to me: I have freed you by ransom. O my hearing and sight!

Why be so obstinate in my distance and remoteness?

Even if you are hidden from my eye, enveloped in veils,

the heart will guard over you when in exile and far away.63

By beginning his poem with the famous pilgrimage cry, al-Ḥallāj might be said to interpret it; it is as if the word labbayk really means all that is said in this poem. Yet this interpretation goes so far beyond mere submission to God and so far beyond a healthy love for God that it becomes almost blasphemous. God constitutes the lover in all the lover’s divisions as well as the lover’s whole—God and al-Ḥallāj are seemingly one. This claim has led to some controversy and even, according to narratives surrounding the poet, to al-Ḥallāj’s execution. While historical evidence suggests otherwise, al-Ḥallāj became renowned in Sufi literature for having blasphemously proclaimed, “I am the Real.”64 Were this poem alone to be used as evidence, there might be some indication of heresy, particularly in the line “except for the one who alighted from me in my heart’s innermost blood.” The word that the poet uses (ḥalla, “to alight”) can mean “incarnation” (usually in the gerund form hulūl), in which divinity enters one body or person to the exclusion of others. In prevailing Islamic theological views, since God is self-sufficient, He cannot occupy a space, person, essence, or soul as opposed to another—since such would mean having a relationship of reliance on that entity. ʿAṭṭār and other Sufi writers have read al-Ḥallāj not as an advocate of hulūl or another heresy called “union” (ittihād), but rather self-annihilation. Unlike those concepts, self-annihilation is complete immersion in the realization that when “all” becomes purified of otherness, then God is all.65

The poet, in such a reading, sees that the barriers that create his identity—the barriers between God and other-than-God—are illusory. That does not mean that he limits God to one particular body, namely, his own.

The lover cries out on account of two things: his absolute absorption in the love of God, and a complementary sense of distance that causes pain and crying out. Annihilation in love is, therefore, both a state of self-loss and an agonizing process of further self-loss. Of course, the doctors—who represent rational individuals with tempered devotion to God—see al-Ḥallāj’s illness as an illness. The only way to cure the speaker of this poem would be to bring him out of this state of total absorption in the love of God, to have him accept the lie that there is something else out there worthy of attention. Then he would become “sick” like everyone else. His sickness is awareness. How could one trade in awareness for ignorance? Only lovers understand what it means to be trapped between torture and desire, between unity and separation. Others do not. The American songwriter Prince (d. 2016) has the lover say of the doctor trying to cure his lovesickness, “but he’s a fool.”66 Were Prince’s words to be applied to the source of beauty and perfection, instead of merely a human beloved, they would befit the knower of God.

The speaker describes, moreover, a love that seems to preexist him. He wonders who called out to whom: Did he cast the first glance, or had the beloved peeked coyly at him before he realized it? The speaker describes a homeland from which he has wandered and become lost, and his longing for return causes him to weep. That homeland is a knowledge of God that preexisted earthly life, a knowledge so intimate that one might call it a union with God that every soul enjoyed before coming into creation. This tells us something else of great importance regarding love of God, namely that it is innate and eternal, preceding the soul’s existence on earth. God, for al-Ḥallāj and many other Muslim thinkers, is to be remembered and rediscovered as God, not learned about anew. In this too there is a resemblance to Plotinus’s thought.67

According to a common reading of a Qur’anic verse (Q 30:30), God created humans with an innate
knowledge of Him (fiṭra), a knowledge that was instilled permanently within our souls—according to Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, to give one example—when we took a pre-eternal covenant mentioned in the Qur’an (Q 7:172). In terms of love, this means that we are destined to yearn constantly, to long for somewhere we vaguely remember. The more we remember, the more nostalgic we become, and the more such longing hurts. Another Sufi poet, ʿUmar ibn al-Fārid. (d. 1235), proclaims his longing candidly:

O garden from which the soul separated under duress!

Were it not for the solace of the eternal realm, I’d die from grief.

In other words, were it not for the fact that I will be reunited with You after death, this pain of separation would be unbearable, even deadly. This love is not only intense, it is haunting, like a remembered experience so simple and idealized, yet distant. Like bonds formed in childhood, this love calls a person back to his or her origins, erasing everything acquired since those origins. Thus the movement toward self-annihilation often involves a realization that God is the one original source of perfection and the one true object of love. If “there is no god but God,” then in fact “there is no beloved but God.” Being occupied with this divine beloved brings one to the peaks of ethical perfection, because one’s many lower desires become replaced by a singular desire to return to Him.

As one can see from al-Ḥallāj’s poem, the central problem in loving God is that the process of absorption in the divine beloved lacks absolute completion. The lover draws near, seems to disappear, but then reappears and suffers because of the distance involved. This causes pain. The metaphor of the moth consumed by flame conveys the pains involved in the process of annihilation in love; the moth suffers, burns, and disappears, but is still not one with the candle. Yet the most pervasive metaphor in Sufi literature (Persian and Arabic alike) for the pains of losing oneself in an unreachable divinity is the love of one human for another. A human beloved can be coy, uninterested, capricious, and yet the uniqueness of that beautiful beloved keeps the lover entranced. Analogously, the Real can hide from His lovers, cause hearts to be deprived of a sense of proximity, and seem infinitely distant even to those who have spent a lifetime drawing near to Him. It is for this reason that ʿAṭṭār follows the story of the incinerated moth with a story about a beggar who is tortured by inverted hanging for his infatuation with a beautiful prince. Even when faced with execution, he only desires to gaze upon the prince’s face. After being pardoned, the beggar beholds the prince one last time and gives up his life:

Once union with his darling became a fact,

he became completely annihilated and nonexistent.

The wayfarers know, while on the battlefield of pain,

that which annihilation-in-love has done to men.

There is a sense of shared suffering in ʿAṭṭār’s phrase “wayfarers know.” Only wayfarers and lovers can understand this peculiar agony. Reflection upon the pains of separation is supposed to create this sense of empathy and even ecstasy within the reader, one objective of Sufi recitals of erotic poetry. Reciting and commenting on erotic poetry or love poetry—far from being a pastime or a form of expression—was and still is a self-perfecting practice in Sufi circles. For many this is because one type of love (human-to-human) resembles the other (human-to-divine) so perfectly. Yet for ʿAṭṭār and other Sufi thinkers, it is not merely a matter of resemblance: Losing oneself in human-to-human love could also be a mode of preparation or even a means for losing oneself in the love of God.

A RETURN TO THE BEGINNING OF THINGS: TAWḤĪD AND SELF-ANNIHILATION
Among the valleys that the birds must traverse to reach the final valley of “poverty and annihilation” is that of *tawḥīd*, which means “to make one,” or, in this case, “to declare or recognize God’s oneness.” It is Islam’s central belief. While one might suppose that *tawḥīd* is a precursor to self-annihilation, it is more accurate to consider it a quality, a composite quality, needed for one to annihilate the self and subsist in the Real. *Tawḥīd* is, then, not only among the final stages of the soul’s perfection, but also a necessary and inherent part of self-annihilation.

To some readers, this might seem strange, since *tawḥīd* seems to be a rather basic theological doctrine. It is the most initial declaration of God’s oneness one makes as a Muslim: There is no god but God. Yet this is the ironic discovery of the journey exemplified in ‘Aṭṭār’s “thirty birds” pun. One arrives at the place where one began. For ‘Aṭṭār that place of arrival is the spirit, from which human existence begins and to which the wayfarer returns. ʿAbdallāh Anṣārī spells this out even more explicitly in the final waystation of the *Waystations*, wherein everything ends at the very beginning: The hundredth waystation is *tawḥīd*, namely, declaring God’s oneness. While *tawḥīd* has profound implications for the spiritual elite, for “the common”—says Anṣārī—*tawḥīd* means simply rejecting all forms of idolatry, polytheism, and false notions about God, such as the possibility of God’s having children.

In the beginnings of Islam, by calling his followers to the worship of the god worshipped by Biblical prophets, Muhammad was also calling his people toward the self-restraint, mercy, justice, and consistency of those who observed God’s revealed law, namely, the Jews and Christians. In this way, the theological declaration of *tawḥīd* had ethical dimensions. The ethical implications of the statement “there is no god but God” become fully realized in the many waystations and virtues leading to self-annihilation. *Tawḥīd* begins with obedience, but becomes realized as a constant inner state that affects all of one’s actions. In terms of basic obedience, the Qur’an mentions that a hazardous object of worship is one’s own desire: “Have you seen the one who has taken his whimsical desire as his god? Will you be an advocate for such a person?” (Q 25:43). The person who follows his or her desires becomes progressively engulfed by those desires. Then, that person cannot think rationally about his or her long-term wellbeing or about the intangible meanings behind creation. The call of the Prophet seems nonsensical to such a person, like the call of a concerned loved one to an adolescent experimenting with drugs, unable to imagine addiction and a decline in health. Instead, their slave-like absorption in desires makes them incognizant of everything that should matter (Q 45:23).

Yet the implications of God’s oneness and recognition of it go far beyond this, and the highest achievements of vision and perfection are inseparable from this most basic theological doctrine. For example, two different discussions of *tawḥīd* unfold in one of the most famous manuals on Sufism, that written by Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī. The author first establishes that the masters of this path have proper beliefs about God’s essence and attributes: God is unlike anything in creation; He precedes time itself, and no word can describe Him, since He Himself created words.73 People of the path, however, have a secondary sort of *tawḥīd*, one to which al-Qushayrī refers much later in his book, when discussing *tawḥīd* among various terms used by the Sufis. *Tawḥīd* has become a way of speaking, behaving, deciding, and thinking in which the human self has vanished. This sort of *tawḥīd*, as al-Qushayrī describes it, quoting an unnamed author, is “the extirpation of all ‘me’s, so do not say, ‘of me,’ and ‘by me,’ and ‘from me,’ and ‘to me.’”74

To see God as the only beginning and end of all actions and aims, and to see beyond the illusion that you independently have the power to make things happen, that is *tawḥīd*. Or, paralleling this observation, as al-Qushayrī quotes from Ruwaym ibn Ahmād (d. 915–16), “*Tawḥīd* is the erasure of human traces, and the isolation of divinity.”75 Ruwaym’s proclamation is perhaps best understood by considering the most famous Sufi description of *tawḥīd*, one that comes from al-Junayd, who said that *tawḥīd* is “the segregation of the eternal from the temporal.”76 It means that one looks beyond creation, attributing all that is perfect and undying to God. All imperfections, all that is temporal, have nothing to do with God. This easily applies to human action as well: While your lower and vicious actions are yours, the good you do is Godly, and in fact God’s action. Indeed, the Qur’an attributes Muhammad’s praiseworthy actions and speech to God in at least two places, according to some interpretations (Q 8:17 and 9:6). To isolate that which is eternal in the human self and erase that which is temporal would lead to a sense of God-resemblance similar to Plotinus’s description of “stripping of everything alien.”
Pierre Hadot’s argument that Plotinus presented not only a philosophy but also a “way of life” to his students, one that brought them progressively nearer to the Good through body and soul, has pertinence here. As described by Plotinus, a person reaches a state so purified of everything alien to the true self that all of his or her actions are “right action.” There is no likelihood of sin, although “our concern,” Plotinus says, “is not to be out of sin, but to be god.” Just as Plotinus practiced a way of engaging with the world around him that favored an association with one’s “true self,” that self which was the source of all things, including the body, so too does tawḥīd involve a spectrum of practices. At its most basic level, according to the ethical vision of Sufism, tawḥīd requires obedience to engage in a program (regular prayer, avoiding forbidden actions, performing charity and kindness) that counteracts those human attributes distant from God’s attributes. Yet in addition to these actions, one performs regular and supererogatory remembrance of God (dhikr), renunciation of all that causes forgetfulness, and a selfless attitude of absolute humility toward others. This, along with awareness of the realities one seeks, leads to the highest achievements of tawḥīd, in which the self becomes nullified.

For Ḥāḍīr, tawḥīd is a realization of God’s absolute oneness, in His essence and attributes, that is mirrored within the human spirit. Thus, the wayfarer in Ḥāḍīr’s Book of Affliction, in the completion of his journey, addresses “the final waystation for the wayfarers,” namely, meeting his own spirit:

[The wayfarer] said [to his own spirit], O reflection of the majestic sun,

o beam from the never-dying sunlight,

whatever results from absolute tawḥīd,

all of it has become realized in you.

Since you’re beyond intellect and intimate knowing,

you won’t fit into any explanation or attribute.

Since you’re without essence or attribute perpetually,

your attribute and eternal essence are perfected.

Tracelessness pure and namelessness are yours alone;

“Hidden of the Hidden” indeed suits your stature.

There is no created thing higher than you,

no beloved exists other than you.

In the ray of intimate knowledge’s sunlight

who can describe a mere [outshined] lamp?

Erased in erasure and lost in lost you are,

and it’s in your “lost” that a human can be found.

The spirit is an endless sea of perfection because it is, in a sense, nothing of its own. It is a conduit for all things divine, for it negates everything except one Reality. This is the essence of tawḥīd. By turning toward this spirit—this ray of divinity—inside oneself, a human finds his or her true self. The true self is only that part of oneself that mirrors God with the minimal amount of interference possible for a created entity (which describes the spirit). Therefore tawḥīd in its deepest sense means to recognize that nothing exists
but the Real, including one’s own traits. It is for this reason that, in order to be annihilated, the birds had to become “purified from the all of the all.”81

In The Book of Affliction, the spirit replies to the wayfarer. The spirit makes clear the nature of self-annihilation: It is a matter of sacrificing the selfhood of the soul (nafs) for the infinite divine Selfhood within the spirit, which ʿAṭṭār likens to drowning:

Now that you’ve arrived here, be a man.

Become drowned in my ocean—be singular!

Since I appear like an infinite ocean

I’ll be forever without limit and without end.

Here at the shore of my sea walk away from separations (farq);

Throw aside your love of life and drown yourself.82

When one loses all qualities of selfhood, becoming “poor” in having lost attributes of the ego-self, then one becomes drowned in self-annihilation. It is for this reason that the final valley for the birds is one of both “poverty and annihilation.” Poverty here means having nothing of oneself. Poverty, then, is akin to human majesty; it allows a person to claim nothing, so that that person must wear the king’s robes.

NOTES

1 Al-Fārābī, The Political Writings, p. 41, no. 61.

2 ʿAṭṭār, Mantiq al-Ṭayr, p. 439, ll. 4566–7. Medina is the city in which the Prophet Muhammad established and taught a community of believers.

3 “My entire dīwān is insanity; / this speech is strange to the intellect. / The soul does not become purified through estrangement / until it has discovered the scent of this insanity.” See ʿAṭṭār, Mantiq al-Ṭayr, p. 440, ll. 4579–80.


7 Burnyeat, The Theaetetus of Plato, p. 304.

8 Plotinus, Enneads, I.2.4, p. 1:137.


10 See Arp, “Plotinus, Mysticism, and Mediation”; Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy, pp. 104–5.


13 While Louis Massignon and Paul Nwyia have demonstrated the Qur’anic origins of many Sufi terms, Nile Green argues against a linear progression from Qur’an to conceptual development devoid of impressions from surrounding intellectual and religious settings. See Massignon, Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism; Nwyia, Exégèse coranique et langage mystique. See also Green, Sufism, pp. 25–29.


18 An excellent discussion of the divine attributes can be found in El-Bizri, “God: essence and attributes.” For a brief discussion in the context of Ibn ʿArabī, see Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, pp. 8–11, as well as Ibn ʿArabī, al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya, pp. 2:159–160, ch. 85.

19 The hadith is known as “the Hadith of Supererogatory Deeds” and was quoted in Chapter Seven. See al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, p. 1617, no. 6502.

20 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, p. 22.

21 See Ghazālī, The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God. The Arabic word maqṣid in this title has become pronounced as maṣṣad, although technically this is incorrect according to its morphological pattern.


23 Ghazālī, al-Maqṣad al-Asnā, p. 111.

24 Ibid., pp. 86–7.

25 Ibid., p. 144.

26 Ibid., p. 65.

27 Ibid., p. 59.

28 See al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla, p. 67. Here annihilation is the passing away of “blameworthy attributes,” while subsistence is the shining forth of “praiseworthy attributes.”

29 See ibid., p. 69. See also Mojaddedi, “Annihilation and Abiding in God.” Also useful is the translation of this portion of al-Qushayrī’s treatise in al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism, pp. 89–91.

30 Mojaddedi, “Annihilation and Abiding in God.”

31 See ʿAṭṭār, Manṭiq al-Ṭayr, p. 415, l. 3999; ʿAṭṭār, Dīwān, p. 25, Ghazal no. 37.


34 Ibid., p. 130.
35 Reinert, “ʿAṭṭār, Farīd-al-Dīn.”
36 Muhammad-Riḍā Shafīʿī-Kadkanī makes a strong case that ʿAṭṭār’s place of origin was Kadkan, a village in the jurisdiction of Nishapur. See Shafīʿī-Kadkanī, Zabūr-i Pārsī, pp. 35–6. Jāmī reports that ʿAṭṭār “became a martyr at the hands of the disbelievers, and his age at the time—they say—was 114 years.” See Jāmī, Nafahāt, p. 598.
37 Lewisohn and Shackle, ʿAṭṭār and the Persian Sufi Tradition, pp. xvii–xviii.
38 Shafīʿī-Kadkanī argues that this text has been mistakenly called Ilāhī-nāma, when its title is Khusraw-nāma. On the other hand, a different Khusraw-nāma that has circulated as having been written by this poet belongs to a different author. See Shafīʿī-Kadkanī, Zabūr-i Pārsī, pp. 38–9.
41 For the history of the bird-treatise topos in Persian literature, see Shafīʿī-Kadkanī’s essays in his introduction to ʿAṭṭār, Manṭiq al-Ṭayr, pp. 102–69.
42 Streck, “Kāf.” See also Peter Avery’s note in ʿAṭṭār, The Speech of the Birds, p. 470, n. 36.
43 Ritter, The Ocean of the Soul, p. 12, n. 8.
44 See Avery’s note in ʿAṭṭār, The Speech of the Birds, p. 478, n. 86.
45 In this way, the owl might resemble those ascetic hermits who hoard their spiritual discoveries and make those gains their occupation, instead of concern with reaching the Real. For the association of ascetics with owls, see ʿAṭṭār, Manṭiq al-Ṭayr, p. 179 (Shafīʿī-Kadkanī’s introduction).
46 ʿAṭṭār, Manṭiq al-Ṭayr, p. 422, ll. 4168, 4181.
47 Ibid., p. 423, l. 4182.
48 Ibid., p. 426, l. 4258.
49 Ibid., p. 426, l. 4262.
50 Hellmut Ritter comments on this tajnīs-i murakkab (which might be translated as “compound paronomasia”) in The Ocean of the Soul, p. 10.
51 ʿAṭṭār, Manṭiq al-Ṭayr, p. 426, l. 4270.
52 Ibid., pp. 426–7, ll. 4271–7.
53 Ibid., p. 427, l. 4286.
54 Ibid., p. 428, l. 4299.
55 Ibid., p. 417, ll. 4046–7.
56 See the Ṭāsīn al-Fahm (no. 2), in al-Ḥallāj, Majmūʿa-yi Āthār, p. 40. See also Massignon, La Passion d’al-Hosayn-ibn-Mansour al-Ḥallaj, pp. 2:840–1.

57 ἘΑΤΤΑΡ, ἘΝΤΙΣΙΟΥ ἘΝΤΙΣΙΟΥ, p. 416, l. 4025.

58 Emilsson, Plotinus on Intellect, pp. 101–103.

59 Chittick, Divine Love, p. 420. See also Ghazālī, Majmūʿa-yi Āthār, p. 116, ch. 4. This is my own loose paraphrase of ταρτόν-ι καμιλ bur ταφρύ-ι ʾishq mūtābad. Chittick translates this as “Perfect disengagement shines on the solitariness of love.”

60 Chittick, Divine Love, p. 421.

61 Ibid., p. 422.


63 Al-Ḥallāj, Dīwān al-Ḥallāj, pp. 118–9.

64 Karamustafa, Sufism, pp. 25–6.

65 For an explanation using the writings of ἘΑΤΤΑΡ, see Ritter, The Ocean of the Soul, pp. 609–12, 463–72.

66 Prince, “Nothing Compares 2 U.”

67 “The soul loves the Good because, from the beginning, she has been incited by the Good to love him,” Plotinus says. See Hadot, Plotinus, p. 54; Plotinus, Enneads, VI.7.31, p. 7:183.

68 This is Ghazālī’s reading of Q 30:30 in Ḥyάʾ, pp. 1:86:18–23. See also al-Junayd, Rasāʾil al-Junayd, p. 140.

69 Ibn al-Fārid., Dīwān, p. 133.

70 ἘΑΤΤΑΡ, ἘΝΤΙΣΙΟΥ ἘΝΤΙΣΙΟΥ, pp. 420–1, ll. 4135–6.

71 Thus, Ibn ἘΑΤΑΒΕ encouraged his students to reflect upon his own collection of erotic poems. See Sells, Stations of Desire, p. 37; Elmore, “Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī’s Personal Study List,” pp. 175, 179.

72 See Zargar, Sufi Aesthetics, pp. 85–112.

73 Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, pp. 41–3.

74 Ibid., p. 302.

75 Ibid., p. 302.

76 Ibid., p. 41. See also al-Kalābādhī, al-Ta’arruf li-Madhab Ahl al-Taṣawwuf, p. 153. The ethical stages of tawḥīd (and its counterpart shirk or “associating partners with God”) appear in one of Twelver Shi’i Islam’s most popular ethical manuals, Aḥmad Narāqī’s (d. 1829–30) Miʿrāj al-Saʿāda, pp. 91–5.

77 Hadot, Plotinus, p. 75; see also pp. 78, 88.

78 Plotinus, Enneads, I.2.6, p. 1:141–2.
Chapter Ten

Virtue in the Narrative Poetry of Rūmī

What follows is a consideration of the themes mentioned throughout this book in the context of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī’s narrative masterpiece, Mathnawī-i Ma’navī (“The Rhymed Couplets of Spiritual Signification”). Recounting a tale told by Rūmī, and some of its many digressions, this chapter aims to see ethics within the framework of storytelling. The focus will be on virtue, mostly in the Sufi sense, but when possible in the philosophical sense as well.

Rūmī composed his poems at a time when the various sciences he had studied, including scripture, theology, jurisprudence, and the Arabic language, had reached such levels of intricacy and specialization that students of those topics today still often defer to the masters of that time. Moreover, mystical didactic-narrative poetry and mystical love poetry had become genres of their own, aided by two poets beloved of Rūmī, ʿAṭṭār and Sanāʾī. Thus, Rūmī was not merely a poet. He, like Ghazālī before him, was a synthesizer in a time of intellectual fragmentation, and his poetry represents a culmination of scholarship much like a rope represents a taut winding of fibers. It is for this reason that a wide variety of Islamic learning can be found in his poetry.

Of course, Rūmī has become somewhat legendary for his antagonism vis-à-vis those who place all their trust in reason, epitomized by the philosophers. Perhaps equally famous is his reprimand of adherents to rational arguments, describing them as walking on stilts.1 In his Mathnawī, philosophers appear as spokespersons of fanciful thought, disbelief, corruption, and skepticism, who deny the existence of demons (dīw) while actually being demonic in form.2 One tale warns of a philosopher who denies God’s agency, only to awake physically blind because of his metaphorical blindness to divine omnipotence.3 The failures of philosophers and logicians contrast with those who purify their hearts. While philosophers have become “shackled by intelligibles,” Rūmī says, agreeing with Ghazālī before him, “the purified one, king-like, arrives mounted on the intellect’s intellect.”4 In fact, Rūmī’s explanation for the Prophet’s foreseeing—according to a narration—that most of those who attain salvation would be dull-witted was that they would be saved from the “ villainy of the philosopher,” that is, the villainy of the philosopher’s alluring arguments.5 Yet Rūmī’s work sometimes includes branches of knowledge pursued by the philosophers, such as their insights into virtue and humoral medicine. Rūmī uses these sciences often as a foil for statements about a spiritual knowledge that transcends them. Therefore, he might use the language of alchemical transmutation to extol a temperament with “hashish” in it, that is, a temperament privy to the super-rational.6 Or, he might put humoral terminology in the mouth of Satan, who claims to be a doctor on a par with “Galen,” in order to teach his audience that moral error often results from being baffled and misled about one’s ultimate wellbeing.7 In any case, if Rūmī’s poetry is a slice of a much larger thirteenth-century intellectual pie, it is instructive to see that philosophical virtue ethics and humoral medicine do at times appear as ingredients—especially humoral medicine, which was perhaps simply too practical to shun. Of course, scriptural ethics and Sufi teachings doubtless supersede other approaches to virtue in his writings.

THE LIFE OF RŪMĪ
Who was Rūmī? Franklin Lewis has written a definitive study of Rūmī’s life, works, and cultural legacy, which contains the best biography of Rūmī currently available. Born Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad in 1207 in Vakhsh, Rūmī received the title “Jalāl al-Dīn” (“Splendor of the Religion”) from his father, Bahāʾ al-Dīn Walad. Rūmī’s father was himself an ascetic and preacher versed in the Ḥanafī school of law and graced with dreams and visions. In search of patronage, Bahāʾ al-Dīn took his family to major centers of learning, Baghdad, Mecca, and Damascus, until he found his place in Āqshahr (near Malatya, a city of modern-day Turkey) and, eventually, the more important city of Konya. Rūmī inherited from his father the college and group of followers that he had established there. He also inherited from his father an approach to knowledge and the spiritual way, which meant that Rūmī did not engage in poetry and the ecstatic dance of God’s lovers known as samā’.

These two facets of Rūmī’s life, poetry and samā’, would change with the legendary arrival of Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī (d. ca. 1247). While the two had met briefly before, Shams’s relationship with Rūmī in Konya brought sudden changes to his life and, it seems, his worldview. They were confidants and interlocutors, and while often Shams played the role of a spiritual master or teacher, sometimes the guiding hand was Rūmī’s. We have, in English, a simple word for their relationship, neither tutelage nor allegiance, and lacking formally distinct hierarchies of sainthood: friendship. Shams had come from Tabriz, a place rich in mystics and ascetics, but he had been traveling from place to place searching for an authentic spirituality that he found in Rūmī, one that emphasized following the Prophet Muhammad. Rūmī, conversely, became drawn to Shams not only as a pure soul but also as a teacher of love and divinely inspired joy. The hagiographers describe Rūmī as having undergone a change from God’s worshipper to His lover; from renunciation of the world to knower of the divine; and from bookish shaykh to dancing poet.

In a mystery that became the stuff of legend, Shams left Rūmī and vanished, never to be found—having already disappeared temporarily once before. Outspoken about his grief over the loss of Shams, Rūmī did eventually forge another very intimate friendship with a goldsmith, Salāḥ al-Dīn Farīdūn Zarkūb (d. 1258), who served as Rūmī’s deputy, successor, and spiritual complement for about ten years. Following Zarkūb’s death, this position was occupied by Chalabī (Çelebi) Ḥusām al-Dīn (d. 1284), son of a prominent figure in a local futuwwa guild, or “Akhī” order, as they were called in Anatolia. Chalabī’s devotion to Rūmī brought the members of his Akhī order under Rūmī’s guidance.8 Rūmī, then, had established close relations not only with an influential Akhī order via Chalabī, but also with merchants (such as Zarkūb) and state officials, setting the stage for his order to become a central component of Anatolian religious life. It was Chalabī who encouraged Rūmī to write his massive narrative poem studied here, Mathnawī-i Maʿnawī, which amounted to six books of well over 25,000 double-lines.

Arguably none of the legacies Rūmī left rivals the Mathnawī. It is a poem said to be the Qur’an in Persian tongue, resulting in voluminous commentaries and occupying a foremost place in anyone’s canon of Persian literature, Sufi texts, or Islamic ethics.9 Above all, the poem captures the profundity of thought and perfection of character that brought Rūmī to be mourned not only by the masses of Muslims in Konya upon his death, but also by the city’s Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. Rūmī’s other living legacy, the Mevlevi order of “whirling dervishes” centered in today’s Turkey, took shape as a Sufi order proper through the efforts of his son Sulṭān Walad, who led Rūmī’s community after the death of Chalabī.

**INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN RŪMĪ’S POLYPHONIC STYLE**

The Mathnawī is a world of voices and perspectives. This complexity renders it fertile ground for considering virtue ethics in literary forms as opposed to other forms, such as treatises written in discursive prose. Rūmī brings in multiple voices when considering a topic or theme, and sometimes the poet’s own voice cannot be clearly discerned. (Indeed, to highlight the ambiguity of voice in Rūmī’s poetry, I will avoid quotation marks in my translation, despite the added burden for the reader.) The following few paragraphs provide some modest theoretical context for Rūmī’s “polyphonic” style of narrative poetry.

One of the qualities attributed by the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin (d. 1975) to the novel—dialogism—can perhaps be found in the writings of Rūmī, even if restrained by an overarching didactic voice. The
novel in its finest expression, according to Bakhtin, captures the actual way in which language works, such that genre weaves into genre, voice into voice, and the interactions of significations and viewpoints create out of this multiplicity some picture of a contextualized reality. Conversely, the “world of poetry,” says Bakhtin, is marked by singularity or “illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse.” One overarching poetic voice can only lend authority to other voices in the poem, but the unity of style and language (often a “language of the gods”) means that there is not as much of a place for other registers of language in the poem as there is in the novel. Bakhtin’s observations, which include lyric and narrative (especially epic) poetry, hold somewhat true in the case of Rūmī. Yet there is a multiplicity of voice and viewpoint in Rūmī’s poetry that might also offer us a picture of a contextualized reality. Of course, Rūmī’s poetry does not have the same sort of interwoven context and “heteroglossia” one finds in the more modern form of the novel. “Heteroglossia” is Bakhtin’s term for the way in which a primary language (such as a national language, or the driving language of a novel) incorporates various intersecting languages, voices, types of speech, or genres. In recognition of this interchange of perspective and voice (if not strictly speaking “heteroglossia”), Alan Williams describes Rūmī’s use of multiple voices as “dynamic and polyphonic.”

Williams traces seven different voices in the Mathnawī that replace one another, usually without notice: (1) the “authorial voice,” which initiates stories and determines direction; (2) the “storytelling voice,” which often switches to past tense to describe third-person characters and the events surrounding them; (3) the “analogical voice,” which comments on narratives, usually to make a pithy observation or to give an example; (4) the “voice of speech and dialogue of characters,” which introduces a polyphony of perspectives, usually easily distinguishable from the authorial voice’s perspective, but not always; (5) the “voice of moral reflection,” which is the authorial voice in didactic or even homiletic mode, often using quotations from scripture; (6) the “voice of spiritual discourse,” which redirects ethical contemplation away from human discourse and toward the soul’s conversation with God, the voice of absorption in love of the divine and self-effacement; and (7) the “voice of hiatus,” which is the voice calling the poet and his audience away from digressions, back to the narrative, and sometimes to silence, since Rūmī often “unsa ys” that which he has attributed to an ultimately indescribable, unknowable, and transcendent deity. This mystical phenomenon of unsaying (called “apophatic language”) has been studied by Michael Sells, and poetic silence—in the specific context of Rūmī—has been studied by Fatemeh Keshavarz.

While the correspondence is inexact, one sees in Rūmī’s use of multiple voices the quality that Adam Zachary Newton calls the “intersubjective dynamics of narrative,” wherein subjectivity and perspective resemble the intelligent world of multiplicity outside of the individual mind (or inside the multifarious and hence intelligent mind), as opposed to writings that have one dominating voice and perspective. The characters that appear in Rūmī’s narrative poems might stand on opposite sides of an ethical or theological issue, but the learning seems to be in their failures to agree as well as in the concluding didactic lesson that Rūmī will offer. In this way, Rūmī’s narrative poetry clearly affirms Newton’s claim that human selves “acquire meaning only through intersubjective horizons, horizons which surround textual as well as human encounter.” I will briefly return to this dimension of literary virtue ethics in the analysis of Rūmī’s poetry below.


What follows is a section from the sixth book of Rūmī’s Mathnawī exemplifying the relationship between the body, virtue, Sufi states and stations, other strands of Islamic ethical thought, and medieval Persian narrative literature. Instead of a particular focus or topic, Rūmī’s narrative directs this chapter. Hence the story begins with a key theme in the ethics of the Mathnawī, namely that the external world serves as a playground of sorts for the much more profound happenings of the internal world.

A certain ailing person went to the physician saying—Inspect my pulse! O man of wisdom,
For from the pulse one observes the state of the heart
because the hand’s vein is to the heart attached.

Because the heart’s unseen, when you need its parallel
look there, for it has a conduit to the heart.

The wind’s hidden from the eye, my trustworthy friend,
look for it in the dust and in the tossing of leaves,
To know, does the wind blow from the right side or the left?
The movement of the leaves speaks to you about its state.

So, you don’t know where to find the drunkenness of the heart?
Seek its signs in the droopy narcissus that is the drunken eye.
Distant as you are from the essence of the Real, you can still
discern it from the Messenger and his inimitable miracles,
miracles and grace-inspired marvels, incognito to most,
strike upon the heart from wise and purified elders, [...] making powerless the stranger, barred from the inner circle,
but making powerful the breath-sharing companion.

When you cannot find this happiness within your heart,
from outward things—at every breath—derive the inner meaning,
for effects are apparent to the human senses,
and these effects give you news about the effect-Causer;
the inner workings of every medicine are hidden to you,
as with every act of magic and device of the illusionists,
but once you gaze upon its actions and upon its effects
you lay it bare, even though it is unseen:

A force whose interiors are concealed to you
appears and emerges visible when it acts.

Now since so many invisibles appear by their effects,
why wouldn’t He appear through leaving traces, God to you?

Aren’t all causes and effects, from the kernel to the shell,
if you look into it, really the traces of Him?

You come to love things merely because of the effect they have,
so why have you lost communication with the Cause of all effects?

You love the creatures for the effects you imagine they’ve caused;
why not love the Monarch of the West and of the East?

No end to this speech is there, o King Qubād!19

May our insatiability for such things never find its conclusion.

A SUFI READING OF PULSE STORIES: HUMORS AND ETHICS IN THE FIRST PART OF THE TALE

In the lines quoted above, Rūmī begins his story of the Sufi and the Judge with reflections upon the medical practice of pulse-taking.20 For anyone unfamiliar with Rūmī, that the poet seems to digress before the story has even begun might be disheartening, though “digress” might not be an entirely appropriate word here. Rūmī’s objective is not storytelling for storytelling’s sake. Rūmī teaches, inspires, and provides examples for self-betterment. His long narrative poem, as a whole, according to its own preface, is the “roots of the roots of the religion,” and Rūmī’s most piercing observations about the religious sciences often occur in diversions from the narrative. One might imagine, for example, the weave of a homily, in which narratives lead into thoughts about life, scripture, and moral wellbeing.

One should not be too surprised that mention of pulse-taking, in particular, would lead Rūmī to an extended discussion of the relationship between the seen and the unseen. Signs from the body, as the Brethren of Purity pointed out, indicate the state of the soul, to which we have no direct access. There is no access to the heart but through the body. The body’s movements, moments of stillness, and consumption, as well as its function as a vehicle of speech, violence, and indeed all action, put it at the center of ethical and spiritual perfection, both for monitoring and for diagnosing the heart. This paradigm should explain the fascination of Rūmī and his contemporaries with the science of pulse-taking, which appears prominently in the Mathnawī. The first story in the entire poem, back in Book One (our narrative takes place in Book Six, the last book), after an introduction likening the homesick soul to a reed flute, is indeed another “pulse-taking” story.

In that story from Book One, a wise doctor cures a king’s beloved slave-girl by feeling her pulse, asking her questions that make her pulse quicken, and discovering the source of her sickness, namely, a handsome goldsmith whom she loved in Samarqand before the king took possession of her.21 Rūmī highlights in this story the failure of physicians who do not consider interior matters, matters of the heart, instead trying to remedy a particular imbalance in the girl’s humors that affects those who occupy themselves too much with thought or spend too much time awake.22 Conversely, the wise doctor, like the spiritual master, knows that the states of the soul triumph and cannot be hidden, or, as Rūmī says in a different narrative also using the science of humors, “the face’s color illustrates the state of the heart.”23 Such pulse narratives come to Rūmī through a long literary tradition that ties together the humors, ethics, and storytelling.24

In both of Rūmī’s pulse stories, though specifically in the lines quoted above, Rūmī frames his discussion of the outer–inner, body–soul, effect–cause as subservient to a higher moral imperative: the human’s
relationship with God. If Rūmī’s listener laments that he or she must worship a God that is transcendent and thus unseen, Rūmī advises gazing upon creation. The origins and movements of all things point to the creator behind them, much like leaves and dirt can show the unseen wind. God is, as the lines above show, the cause of all effects, the source of all traces, and thus the actual curative property for all medicines. The doctors in the king-and-slave-girl story, for example, miss this point, failing because they cannot fathom anything beyond the balance of humors, failing because they see the cure as coming from themselves and not God, as exemplified by their omission of the phrase “God willing” in their promise of a cure. If one looks thoughtfully into the happenings of the external world, one sees the happenings of the internal world; and if one looks into that, one might see the will of God.

This relationship between the internal and external forms the foundations of Rūmī’s virtue ethics. One alters and perfects the internal by controlling the external. To begin to do this, one must diagnose the internal—one must know one’s own character deficiencies and spiritual ills. To do that, one can observe the externals, namely, the actions, words, habits, and even bodily effects that result from the state of the heart. In order to do this, a person should be in communication with a spiritual elder, someone who can stimulate awareness in the initiate’s soul in miraculous ways. That elder can diagnose the heart’s ailments and prescribe cures. In doing so, he will reach the infirm heart using the aperture of the body: Fasting, silence, verbal repetition, prayer, stillness, and acts of obedience all begin with the body, but ultimately affect the soul or heart.

Yet Rūmī’s aim for his audience is not merely the attainment of virtuous soundness for its own sake. One must do so in order to know and even see God. To do this, also, one uses the visible world to witness the invisible. While this sentiment certainly appears in Neoplatonically influenced philosophical treatises, such as the writings of the Brethren or Avicenna, Rūmī’s influence can be found closer to home. His father, Bahā’ al-Dīn Walad, has a passage in his Maʿārif (Knowings) from which Rūmī has clearly drawn the abridged description of medicine in the lines quoted above (“the inner workings of every medicine are hidden to you”):

You come to know everything in the world through its traces. You know the medicine of heat, cold, dryness, and wetness, o little doctor, through the effects of heat, cold, wetness, and dryness you have seen. This is true even though the source of wetness, dryness, cold, and heat is never subject to sensory perception; you have not sensed it. So, it becomes evident that you see the traces from something hidden. Why, then, wouldn’t such a Presence, transcending all properties, be hidden?26

The words of Bahā’ al-Dīn—under whom his son studied—clarify the full import of Rūmī’s description of medicine. God appears only through His acts, effects, and commands, much like medicine only appears through its cure. In the words of the poet ‘Aṭṭār, a favorite source of influence for Rūmī, “What is medicine until the cure becomes visible? / What is the command until rain becomes visible?” In rain, one can witness God’s merciful but invisible command. ‘Aṭṭār probably (and Rūmī perhaps as well) has in mind a passage from the Qur’an, telling believers to “gaze upon the traces of God’s mercy, how He brings the earth to life after her death” (Q 30:50), a verse that the Sufi commentator Sahl al-Tustarī describes as referring outwardly to rain, while “its interior speaks of the life of hearts through remembrance.” Remembering God, communicating with him—which ends up being the main message of Rūmī’s lines above—clears away everything else, so that a person comes to see the divine source of all effects. Such remembrance can even come to a point where God’s servant does not even see his or her own agency, as can be seen in a statement of al-Junayd: “When intimate knowledge of God becomes immense, all traces of the servant disappear.” This experience in which a person realizes the illusoriness of selfhood—called fanāʾ (annihilation)—is a major theme in Rūmī’s writings and, as discussed in Chapter Nine, a final aim of progressing through Sufi stations.


The complex weave of moral perspectives and voices mentioned above becomes more apparent as Rūmī’s story continues. Perhaps the most valuable part of this narrative is the way in which humoral medicine and
ethics transforms into a much more difficult discussion of justice. Remember that Miskawayh defined justice as a power of administration when faced with the contending forces of the appetitive, irascible, and rational faculties. Rūmī presents a chain reaction that brings these faculties into conflict, one that begins with a simple slap.30

Come back from digressing and tell the ailing man’s tale,

with the perceptive physician, a concealer of flaws by nature:

He took his pulse and immediately came to understand

that there was no hope for the recovery of this patient.

He said—Do whatever your heart wants to do

until this ancient pain leaves this body of yours.

Whatsoever your mind craves, do not withheld

lest your forbearance and renunciation become a case of dysentery.

Think of forbearance and renunciation as pernicious for your sickness:

Whatever your heart wants, just give vent to it.

So too God Most High has told such sickly souls—

Do whatsoever you desire [Q 41:40], sweet old man.

[The sick man] said [to the doctor]—Leave! Hurry! Be well, my dear.

I’m going to do some sightseeing at the riverbank.

By the water, he was strolling, just as his heart desired,

in order to find an entryway to health.

At the bank of the waterway was sitting a Sufi,

washing his arms and face, adding purity to purity.

He saw the back of his neck, and, like one delusional,

had a hankering for slapping it.

Over the nape of that tamarind-soup-adoring Sufi31

he straightened his arm, preparing for a smack.

For—if I don’t drive away each craving until it disappears,

my doctor said that it’d become a malady.

I’ll unsheathe a slap for him battleground-style,
because, says the Book, *don’t throw yourself into destruction* [Q 2:195].

Forbearance and renunciation are self-destruction here, o you,
hit him good, don’t just stand there like everyone else.
A thunderclap erupted when [the sick man] slapped him.
The Sufi said—Hey, hey, you mother-disowned pimp!
The Sufi wanted to punch him twice, three times,
yank out each mustache and beard hair separately.
People are ill from squabbling and are incurable,
behind ramparts of slaps trapped, through the deceit of Satan,
ravenous for torturing the guiltless, they all are,
searching for weaknesses in the napes of one another.
O you who strike behind the necks of innocents,
don’t you see the retribution behind you?
O you who suppose base desire to be your prescription,
allocating slappings for those who are so weak,
you’ve been laughed at by the one who told you this was remedy,
the same one who ushered Adam to the [forbidden] wheat,
saying—Eat of this grain, you two seekers of assistance,
as a medication for you so that you two will live forever [Q 7:20].
He caused him to slip, and he slapped the back of his neck,
it boomeranged back to him and became his retribution.
He caused him to slip stumblingly into a very bad sliding,
but behind him, and grabbing his hand, was the Real.
A mountain was Adam, so even if brimming with snakes,
he’s an antidote repository, leaving him unharmed.
You who do not have even a speck of that antidote,
why such false hopes that you’ll be rescued in the end? [...]
Though a fortunate person, falling from a minaret,
caught the wind in his gown and found deliverance,
you’re uncertain, good soul, that such fortune will be yours,
so why have you thrown your self out upon the winds?

The central theme of this section falls more within the domain of divine command ethics than virtue ethics, but must be discussed nonetheless. For Rūmī, as for many Sufi writers, virtues are acquired within the limits of divine commands and even by means of obedience to those commands. Rūmī’s main point here is that God’s expectations and commandments increase the more one believes, that is, as one becomes worthier of obeying Him. Conversely, for those who disbelieve, God has lifted the burden of expectations and has said—as Rūmī notes, quoting the Qur’an—“Do whatsoever you desire” (Q 41:40). Here freedom to act is not a gift, but a curse, a divine disregard for the one who has turned away from God. The sick man believes that acting upon his impulses will save him. Little does he know that this freedom has resulted from a lack of hope for his deliverance. Having despaired of his patient’s recovery, the doctor wants to make sure that the terminally ill man enjoys the last few days of his life. The doctor’s prescription tells us that complete freedom is only for the hopeless. Restrictions maintain health, so those who have no hope for health have no need for restrictions. When it comes to the soundness of the soul or of the heart, restrictions serve the same purpose. So, if a person finds himself or herself enjoying absolute freedom from harm, poverty, pain, or the rigors of life, then that person should be suspicious of having been set free. In other words, a lack of burdens might actually be an allowance for one from whom God no longer expects anything, one whose trajectory no longer points to salvation. The same might be said for prosperity: The Qur’an makes clear that those who are given “wealth and sons” should not suppose that God is favoring them (Q 23:55–6). In fact, God gives the disbelievers time and resources to cement the decision they have made to disbelieve, so that these seeming blessings actually cause them to increase in their sins (Q 3:178). As a striking example, God announces that He would give even more of worldly pleasures (silver roofs, stairways, doors, and couches, along with golden decorations) to those who disbelieve in Him, were it not the case that then all of humanity would disbelieve (Q 43:33–5).

The patient embodies an ugly side of ethical egoism, the stance that people ought to act in their own self-interests. Humans value their own lives so much, Rūmī says, that they are willing to do anything—even injustice to others—just for self-preservation. This impulse to preserve oneself, Rūmī comments, was the very cause of Adam and Eve’s being duped by Satan. In the Qur’anic version of this narrative, Satan promises the two humans that they have been prohibited from approaching the tree (interpreted in commentaries as “wheat”) in Paradise only so that they do not become “two angels, or that you two do not become everlasting” (Q 7:20). Adam was God’s deputy and recipient of God’s spirit. He and his wife Eve repent, and God forgives them (Q 7:23, 2:37). One might, then, pursue the needs of the lower self and end up forgiven, though still not uncathed, since Adam and Eve were exiled to life on Earth. On the other hand, too much is at stake to take such risks. The narrative’s other leading figure, Satan, does not repent, blames God, and makes it his life mission—all the way up to the Day of Judgment—to prove God wrong in His selection of Adam as His deputy, ending up among the damned (Q 15:39). Once again, as in Chapter Six, we return to the significance of repentance as an ethical corrective in which a person turns away from self-centeredness.

From a social perspective, Rūmī is reacting to a very real dilemma in his day that occurred when medicine and divine proscription conflicted. It was quite common, for example, that classical Arabic physicians, influenced by their Greek predecessors as well as by experience, would recommend wine for certain diseases or as an analgesic despite its being forbidden in the Qur’an, which led to legal debates about the permissibility of wine for medicinal use. Such an action—or, even worse, harming another person to benefit oneself—will not lead to felicity. This is because one must always answer for one’s choices, even if requital is delayed until the Day of Judgment. In other words, sometimes the impulse for self-preservation leads to self-destruction.
ANTI-ASCETICISM AND FUTUWWA: THE STORY’S PROBLEM MATERIALIZES

Rūmī then shifts the direction of his narrative away from the problem of obedience and toward the problem of retribution.33

Although that Sufi, from anger, became replete with fire,
still, he fixed his eyes on the final consequences. […]

If what you seek is safety from deprivation,
close your eyes to immediates and look toward the very end,
to see being in place of all the things that are nonexistent,
see all beings as perceived, ontologically low.

Case in point: Certainly, any reasonable person
day and night is in pursuit, searching for naught—
in begging, seeking a generosity that is not,
in stores, seeking a profit that is not,
in fields, seeking an income that is not,
in plantations, seeking a date palm that is not,
in schools, seeking a knowledge that is not,
in monasteries, seeking a forbearance that is not,
deferring real existences until later,
seekers and slaves, they are, of nonexistents,
for the mine and treasury of God’s smithery
has nothing but nonexistence for its burnishing. […]

Said the Sufi—In reprisal for a mere nape
a person shouldn’t blindly lose his head.

This Sufi cloak of submission draped from round my neck
has taken the edge off the slap I have received.

The Sufi saw that his enemy was much afflicted
and said— Were I to punch him mercilessly
he would crumble like tin, with just a single blow,
then the king would order me arrested and punished.
The tent’s dilapidated, its framing pole broken,
looking for an excuse to fall down altogether;
a waste it’d be for this dead man’s sake, a waste,
for me to suffer retaliation beneath the executioner’s blade.
Since he couldn’t lay a hand on his adversary
he decided, instead, to take him to the Judge,
who is the scales of truth and its measure,
refuge from Satan’s subterfuge and tricks,
like scissors for feelings of hatred and quarrelling,
rending battle between enemies, their I-said, he-said,
whose magic charm traps the demon in a bottle,
whose Law quells every troublemaking.
Once the rapacious enemy beholds the scales,
he abandons headstrongness, becoming obedient.
Without those scales, given even more than his due,
his shrewdness won’t let him settle for his lot.
The Judge is mercy, a preservation from dispute,
a drop from the sea of the Resurrection’s justice,
a drop, however small and abbreviated,
displays the delicate grace in the water of the sea. [...]
Come back to the topic: The Sufi is heavyhearted,
anxious for comeuppance for the cruelty done to him.
You who’ve committed wrongdoings! Why so cheerful?
Have you forgotten the claims that the wronged will make against you?
Or perhaps you’ve forgotten your doings entirely,
because the curtains of heedlessness have fallen over you? [...] 

Went the Sufi after the man who had slapped him 
and grabbed his frock, just as would a plaintiff, 
dragging him, bringing him before the Judge, 
saying—Mount this accursed ass upon an ass [for a humiliation parade] 
or punish him with the woundings of the scourge, 
however your own judgment sees most befitting, 
for whoever perishes finished by your lashes, 
you owe no restitution; it’s subject to immunity. 
In the Judge’s discretionary and fixed punishments, whoever might die, 
the Judge has no liability, for he’s no lightweight: 
Spokesman for the Real and the shadow of His justice, 
mirror for every claimant and everyone facing a claim. 
He disciplines because there has been oppression, 
not for his own honor, anger, or revenue.34 
Because it’s for the Real and for the Day Postponed, 
even if a mistake’s made, your backing clan’s got the wergild. 
Liable is the one who hits for his own sake, 
protected is the one who hits only for the Real. 
Let’s say a father beats his son, who therefore dies, 
that father is for the wergild accountable, 
because he struck him to further his own gain; 
after all, the boy’s in service to his father. 
But if the teacher strikes the boy and he expires 
there’s nothing upon the teacher, do not fear, 
for he is the [father’s] proxy and so made secure. 
The ruling is thus for anyone granted security;35
service to the instructor was not obligatory for him, hence the instructor’s lashes didn’t aim to extract gain, but when the father struck, he did it for himself, he’s clearly not exempt from giving the wergild.

So cut the head off of selfhood, o ‘Alī’s Two-Bladed Sword,36 become ego-free, a self-annihilated dervish-like soul.

You’ll be secure once divested of self: All you do will be [the Prophet’s] you did not throw when you threw [Q 8:17],37 then the responsibility [for throwing] was the Real’s, not the Trusted [Prophet]’s, the elaboration of this [reality] came to light in jurisprudence.38 [...] Hurry on back to the Sufi and Judge discussion, and that oppressive, weak, and miserable man.

The Judge said—First ascertain the throne, [as they say,] before with the good and bad I decorate it.39 Where’s the striker? Upon what body part can I exact revenge?

He has become from sickness a phantasm.

The law is for the living and the capable,

what law is there for the dwellers of the graves?

In the case of the Sufi’s petition, the Sufi makes an argument that the Judge need not worry about the sick man’s dying as a result of his punishment. The Sufi is wrong, of course, but he makes a convincing case; he seems to know enough about Sharia to make a flawed argument seem solid. The Sufi’s interpretation alludes to the primacy of intention, an important theme in normative Islamic ethics. His point is that one exacting or decreeing corporal punishment is relieved of liability as long as the intention can have no trace of selfishness. The teacher’s corporal punishment of the student is intended to benefit the student, not the teacher, and thus the teacher is legally immune from accidental death or injury in this case. The Sufi’s presentation of corporal punishment parallels discussions in books of Islamic jurisprudence, as has been explored by Ayesha Chaudhry. According to one legal scholar of Rūmī’s own Ḥanafi school, Zayn al-Dīn ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Nujaym (d. 1563), the striking of a child is in the child’s own interests, and so, we might assume, is not subject to retribution or to “wergild” (a translation of the Arabic diya, meaning monetary compensation) if something goes wrong. Such measures would apply neither to the father nor to the teacher who might represent the father, punishing the child in his absence.40 Conversely, Shāfi’ī scholars, such as ‘Alī ibn Muhammad al-Māwardī (d. 1058) have maintained that the teacher who accidentally kills a child during corporal punishment is indeed responsible for wergild.41

Many of us, including myself, become disturbed when reading Rūmī’s casual description of flogging and possible death, especially that of a child. Two observations must be made here. First, if the Sufi’s words
seem insouciant and even cold, that is partly Rūmī’s point. The Sufi sees the law as rigid, blind, and unforgiving, when, in fact, the opposite turns out to be true. Second, our own view of the proper boundaries of punishment, while seemingly universal to us, results from social and historical factors in much the same way as that of the Sufi in Rūmī’s story. The French philosopher Michel Foucault’s (d. 1984) book Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison) considers European and American distaste for corporal punishment as indicative of transformations in the course of Western thought. Despite the fact that what the criminal endures (such as limits on food and basic comforts) might be said to maintain a “trace of torture,” nevertheless, the various Western penal systems go to great lengths to limit manifest forms of corporal punishment and to elevate the position of a judge from “punisher” to a role much more complex, a psychological, medical, and social administrator whose pronouncements for the criminal resolve something.42 Punishment has become obfuscated, buffered by all sorts of technical and bureaucratic consolations, from psychologists to tranquilizers. Needless to say, for Rūmī and his premodern audience, a lashing was not only a more appropriate punishment for a wrongdoer than an extended prison stay, but was also—perhaps oddly to us—more compassionate. Thus, for example, the poet Abū al-Walīd Ahmad ibn Zaydūn (d. 1070) comically argued that the only crimes deserving of around one year and five months in prison (500 days to be exact, which was the sentence he was serving at the time he wrote) would be in the category of praying to the Golden Calf of Moses’ people, leading the elephant with which the tyrannical Abraha attempted to destroy the Ka’ba, forswearing the first caliph, Abū Bakr, and assassinating the fourth caliph, ʿAlī, by means of a poisoned sword.43 Five hundred days would, conversely, be a moderate sentence for grand larceny (Ibn Zaydūn’s crime) by modern American standards.44

Where did the Sufi go wrong? How can a person make a convincing legal argument and yet still be morally mistaken? Clearly the Sufi lacks, in his spiteful attitude toward the sick man, that comprehensive virtue held most highly by Sufis, the virtue of futurowa discussed in Chapter Eight. Qualities of futurowa lacking in our Sufi are self-sacrifice, generosity of spirit, a lack of pettiness, and, generally, placing the needs of others over one’s own and overlooking one’s due.45 Indeed, the actions of the Sufi directly contradict a description of futurowa by an anonymous Sufi writer of the late tenth or early eleventh century: A possessor of futurowa should (1) care for the indigent, (2) remember his own blessings, and (3) forget his misfortunes.46 Rūmī’s character, the Sufi, is (1) indifferent toward his aggressor’s poverty and physical weakness, (2) forgetful of his own wellbeing (after all, the slap leaves no lingering physical effects), and yet (3) unable to forget the wrong done against him. The Sufi’s failure in futurowa can be understood best by seeing his actions in light of an explanation of the relationship between futurowa and Sharia by Shīhāb al-Dīn ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī, who might have met with Rūmī’s father.47

Many things are permissible under the Sharia but are not so according to muruwwa and futurowa, yet futurowa and muruwwa do not contradict the Sharia. But the attribute of the People of Futuwwa is that if someone commits evil against them, they perform a good deed in exchange. [But on the basis of] the Sharia they would perpetrate an evil act in recompense for an evil act.48

Important in the lines we are reading is that the Judge, who should represent Sharia, behaves with futurowa, while the Sufi, who should represent futurowa, demands the retribution of Sharia. Here al-Suhrawardī has in mind—by “Sharia”—the limits of the law, not “right action” overall. The limits of the law allow for retribution, but there exists a higher ethical standard, one that al-Suhrawardī identifies with futurowa.

Since Rūmī is often called a “Sufi” poet, his treatment of the Sufi character in this tale might seem surprising. Yet he attributes this kind of scrupulousness and pettiness to Sufis on more than one occasion in the Mathnawī. This is because, for Rūmī and for others, the word “Sufi” can indicate someone initiated into a spiritual path, exerting himself or herself in acts of devotion and self-denial, and yet far from having achieved what the knower of God (ʿārif) has achieved in terms of knowledge and thus virtue.49 This sort of “Sufi” is tied to the ascetic, who is often disparaged in Persian poetry as having a misguided fixation on his personal spiritual wellbeing. This fixation can strip one of futurowa—as well as of its concomitant virtues of selflessness and courage. One finds the figure of the futurowa-lacking Sufi in another of Rūmī’s narratives, in which a Sufi is too cowardly to carry out an execution.50 The Sufi appears in that story with many of the same characteristics as in this one: pious, but meticulous and excessively so; cowardly and hence, according to Rūmī’s description, “woman-like”; spiteful but lacking what Rūmī describes as the manly characteristics needed to carry out acts of armed conflict; and, generally, more focused on trivial
details than larger, more important matters. In both tales, the image used to capture the Sufi’s excessive attachment to the simple and hence trivial is the tamarind soup that he eats (*ḥamza*), a mark of dedication to asceticism that—like any food—could become habit-forming. The soup is a metonymic symbol for asceticism itself. In asceticism one aims to renounce pleasure, but such renunciation can itself become a gratifying and selfish pleasure. Moreover, since the ascetic deprives himself or herself and yet maintains selfish inclinations, those selfish inclinations are hidden more deeply within the self. The ascetic is either unaware of or indifferent to his or her own selfishness, leading to a hypocrisy that admits of no *futuwwa*. Such false Sufis, Rûmî tells us, have ruined the reputation of true Sufis, who do indeed exhibit courage.

NARRATIVE JUSTICE: THE CASE’S RESOLUTION

A common and stereotypical understanding of “mystical” poetry places Sufism in opposition to Islamic legalism. In this narrative, however, it is the representative of law—not the Sufi—who ends up as the most admirable figure mainly because of his justice, namely, his application of virtues, especially wisdom, in the public domain. As Rûmî presents it, the Judge, in stark contrast to the Sufi, reveals a justice higher than retributive justice.

The Judge said—The living realm’s my magistracy;
when have I been for grave-dwellers an arbiter?
Though he’s not been buried in external form
the graves have already crossed his family threshold,
You’ve so often seen a corpse within a grave,
Now see the grave within a corpse, blind one.
If adobe from a grave caves in on you,
when would the rational seek redress from a grave?
Don’t fixate upon wrath and rancor for a dead man,
look, don’t wage war with a drawing in the hammams.
Give thanks that you weren’t struck by one alive—
one spurned by the living’s been spurned by the Real.
The wrath of the living is the Real’s wrath and thrashing,
for that purified skin is living by the Real. [...]
A shame-parade’s not juristically sound for him;
can one set upon an ass a mere image of kindling?
To seat him upon an ass is unbecoming;
upon a bier for him is more beseeming.
What’s injustice? To place something out of place.

Be careful! Do not ruin him out of place.

Said the Sufi—So you think it fair
that he slapped me without bearing reprisal or a penny?
Is it right that this jackass-bear of a scoundrel
just go around smacking Sufis for nothing?
The Judge said—What do you own, more or less?
He said—In all the world, I have six dirhams.
The Judge said—Take three dirhams for expenditures,
give the other three to him without a word.
Wretched, ailing, indigent, and weak he is,
he’ll need those three dirhams for leeks and for bread.
His gaze fell upon the back of that Judge’s neck,
sweeter even than the Sufi’s nape,
he straightened his arm, preparing for a slap,
for—My slapping’s settlements have become cheap.
Nearing the Judge’s ear, as if confidentially,
he brought down upon that Judge a slap.
He said—Take all six, o my two foes,
I am free! Case closed and no more sickness!
The Judge was fuming, the Sufi said—Whoa now!
Your verdict is just; no error, to be sure.
O scholar of religion, That which you hate for yourself
why don’t you also hate for your brother, trusted one?
Don’t you know the pitfall you dig for me
you’re also digging for your own finale?
Haven’t you read *He who digs a pitfall* in narrations?
Act upon that which you’ve read, my dearest son.

This one decision of yours was such a judgment
that it brought a slap for you upon the neck,
Woe to you for your other adjudications,
who knows what will befall you, head to foot.
You show mercy to an oppressor, out of generosity?
Saying—For spending, three dirhams for yourself?
Chop off the oppressor’s hand! What makes it apt
to place within his hand the rule and reins?
You resemble that goat, o stranger to justice,
who nursed with her own milk the wolf’s cub.
The Judge said—Satisfaction is our duty,
no matter the violence decreed for any neck.
Inside, I am happy about what the scrolls prescribed [Q 54:52].
Though my face might be sour, as the Truth is bitter,
my heart’s a garden, my two eyes are its clouds:
At weeping clouds, the garden laughs, so blissful;
in drought years, the sun’s uncontrolled guffaw
brings the garden blight and loss of life.
You’ve read of the Real’s injunction to weep much [Q 9:82]:
why, like a roasted lamb’s head, are you still smiling?
You’ll illuminate the house, just like a candle,
if, like a melting candle, you shed tears.
The scowling face of a mother or a father
protects the child from every injury.
You’ve tasted laughter, you who laughs in frenzy;
now learn that weeping’s taste is a sugar hoard.
Since envisaging hell will move a soul to tears,

hell becomes more salubrious than heaven’s orchards.

Laughs have been sealed in instances of weeping:

In ruins you will find the treasure still intact.

Ecstasy’s in sorrows, though they’ve lost the way,

the Water of Eternal Life’s in shadows.

The justice of the Judge—as opposed to the retributive justice sought by the Sufi—might be called “narrative” justice, a justice that takes individual narratives (that is, real circumstances) into question. In this case, the Judge has no spot (mahall) to punish, because the sick man’s body has wasted away and left no invulnerable places to receive blows of corporal punishment. Only the living body is the Judge’s jurisdiction, while the soul is punished in the afterlife. Moreover, the sick man is poor and cannot be asked to pay a compensation for his crime. Even if he has committed an injustice, the sick man’s wellbeing and livelihood matter.

The Sufi sees justice as black and white. He avoids exacting retaliation because he fears punishment from the king, but he has no doubt that a strike merits a strike. Even in that, we see that his lower self calls him to more than one slap—yanking out every hair and punching the sick man numerous times. The Sufi has mastered self-control, so he refrains from taking such action. Rūmī makes clear, moreover, that such self-restraint is on account of habituation by mentioning the Sufi cloak of submission that he wears, which signifies his initiation into an order and his exertion in acts of renunciation and self-discipline. What the Sufi has not mastered, however, is a magnanimous forgoing of one’s due that might be necessary in the case of a dying poor man. This ability to have a panoramic view of the needs of everyone, both self and others, and make judgments that suit perfectly the circumstances of the moment is called, in Aristotelian virtue ethics, “practice.”57 It is defined by our own Miskawayh as “preferring that which is most virtuous and acting upon it with habituated constancy.”58 Thus, the Judge, who is also slapped, is able to restrain his anger because he, like the Sufi, has practiced managing the irascible faculty. But, very much unlike the Sufi, he has practical wisdom and can prefer the most virtuous course of action without effort. He can have mercy in this case, because this particular person’s affliction merits mercy. Justice is not the blind application of tit-for-tat retribution, but a consideration of each person’s specific situation.

Rūmī’s commentary parallels insights from virtue ethics, but also highlights an expectation that he and other Muslims had of judges. Wael Hallaq discusses ways in which premodern Sharia was not “law” in the modern sense, that is, in the sense that law must be fixed and based on precedents, because it was considered as malleable as the social and personal circumstances to which it responded.59 Moreover, Sharia was not “blind,” because those who were weak, sick, or poor—like the misguided slapper in Rūmī’s story—should be given preference over those who are privileged, healthy, and self-sufficient. The “law” of Sharia was what Hallaq calls an “ijtihadic process,” a constantly renewing and contextualized reinterpretation within the constant framework of scripture, jurisprudential principles, and community consensus.60 The notion of Sharia as state law, a legalized code with universal implications, was a product of colonization that actually began in the British dominance of India, especially in the late 1700s, when the British determined that indigenous law should be as codified as English law.61 Before this period, it would have seemed ridiculous to imagine law as divorced from “social and spiritual morality” or as a prerogative of legislators.62 Based on the contrast Hallaq describes between the fluidity of premodern interpretations of Sharia and the rigidity of modern state law, we might read as a critique of universal applications of law the Sufi’s interpretation of Sharia as an unforgiving code of “law.” It is also evidence that the misunderstanding of Sharia as a blind code of conduct and retribution has existed for some time.

Jurisprudential books tend to discuss punishment in precisely the same matter-of-fact, nonchalant manner as Rūmī’s Sufi does. Yet Rūmī is able to transform a legal discussion into a discussion of virtue, showing us that the practice of law did indeed rely on virtue, especially the virtues of the judges who applied the
law. Temperance is seen as comically lacking in the sick man, but possessed by both the Sufi and the Judge, who are able to hold themselves back from returning a slap. Yet each of those two—the Sufi and the Judge—has varying motivations, one external (the Sufi fears the king) and the other internal (the Judge has wisdom). Only the Judge possesses futuwwa—here very similar to “magnanimity”—for he comes as close to excusing the sick man as the boundaries of the law will allow. One key issue, Rūmī notes in the previously quoted passage, is self-interest, a point that the jurists themselves make about corporal punishment, but upon which Rūmī expands. A person must rise above not only self-interest but every kind of selfishness and even selfishhood, so that all of that person’s actions become expressions of divine will as opposed to self-will. In such a case, a person becomes unaccountable, because divine wisdom endorses each of his or her actions. Once these two wills become identical, divine wisdom impels each human action. This higher, more profound ethical truth “came to light in jurisprudence,” as Rūmī says, because all of jurisprudence is a nuts-and-bolts approach to higher ethical principles, a real-world realization of matters pertaining to the realm of pure spirit. Hence the connection between law and virtue can always be assumed—a point with which almost any legal scholar would agree absolutely. Rūmī, however, throws in a complication. The Judge has been liberal not with his own rights, but with the rights of someone else. Hence—the Sufi assumes—the Judge receives a slap because of divine retribution, a sort of fatalistic justice promised in the pseudo-hadith to which the Sufi alludes, “Whoever digs a pitfall for his brother will fall into it.” The Judge, on the other hand, ends up the true master of hidden mysteries by proving to the Sufi that a painful slap need not be punishment at all. Suffering leads to true happiness, because it leads to the soul’s maturity and perfection.

HUMAN JUSTICE AND DIVINE JUSTICE: THE TALE’S CONCLUSION

Rūmī has shown us in the person of the Judge that human justice is not simple. Human justice entails much more than the blind application of law that the Sufi continuously suggests. Rather, it is a twofold ability: first, to overcome the tugs of one’s lower nature, the irascible and appetitive faculties, gathering within oneself all virtuous qualities; and, second, to take all exigent circumstances into account, including the effects that a decision might have on all involved. In the case of divine justice, the Sufi, who sees matters as absolute, cannot fathom that good and evil both exist, when there is only one all-good creator who created all things. If this is the case, from where does evil come?63

The Sufi said—Since gold’s all from one mine,
why does this gold aid its owner, that brings harm?

Why’s one sober, while the other is drunk,
when it’s all been taken from a single hand?

Since the flowing rivers issue from one sea,
why does one sweet, the other so toxic taste?

Since lights all emanate from a constant sun,
how’d the difference arise between true and false dawn?

The Judge’s answer to the Sufi is that what appears to us as evil is in fact movement, the movement of all things in a grand, cosmological love-tragedy for God.

The Judge said—O Sufi, don’t be befuddled,
listen, instead, to a parable in explanation:
Just as the restlessness of passionate lovers
comes from the cold stillness of beloveds,
she [the beloved] like a mountain, fixed in self-sufficiency,
the lovers like leaves, fluttering helplessly,
her laugh provoking tears upon tears,
her dignity bringing many to lose dignity.
all of this “why” and “how” is like froth
rolling upon the why-less, how-less sea.

God is the beloved, and all created things are lovers. The divine beloved is still, while everything else
moves frantically, seeking Him, experiencing the ups and downs of existence. The reality of existence is so
far beyond comprehension that only humility has worth. It is best to admit intellectual defeat, because
neither reason nor the senses can understand what is in the “abode of bewilderment.” Humility, poverty,
and weakness are attributes in recognition of the order of things, in recognition of God as unknowable and
self-sufficient, and in recognition of creation as multiple forms of ignorance and neediness. For this reason,
the weak (and by extension those who suffer) are closer to reality than those who are perceived as strong.
Whether in word or action, they have admitted defeat.

Once the Judge raises this point, the Sufi begins to focus more on his own particular pain, asking why
suffering—everything from a slap to death itself—occurs. The Judge’s answer is that the vicissitudes of
good and bad in life have no worth when one considers their purpose. Life exists merely as a means to
know and come to love God, so one should not seek pleasure in this life. After all, worldly pleasure is
merely a diversion from the very purpose of the world. God has created humans for the sort of life in which
are both pleasure and pain, good and evil, guidance and temptation, so that people might choose morally.
Otherwise human achievement—“courage,” “wisdom,” “forbearance,” “truthfulness,” and “liberality”—
would be meaningless, says the Judge.

The Judge illustrates this point about suffering using a parable that relies on the humors and the ethical
mean. He recounts the tale of a “Turk,” a Turkic soldier from “Cathay” (Khiṭā), who hears of the
deceptiveness of tailors and their penchant for stealing cloth. He resolves to show that he cannot be
duped and even wagers money on it. Having located the wiliest of all tailors, Pūr-i Shush, he hands over his
fabric and makes his order. The Turk, as a stereotypical soldier, is governed by the irascible faculty.
Because of his sanguine nature (blood-dominated), he is quick to anger, what we would call “hot-headed.”
Yet this sanguine nature also makes him prone to other energetic states and actions, such as happiness and
boisterous laughing. In fact, his foolish attempt to outfox the tailor results from his becoming “warmer” and
“warmer” as his friends provoke him. The tailor uses the soldier’s sanguine nature to dupe him. Knowing
that the soldier will succumb to kindness and laughter, the tailor begins by welcoming the soldier in a
“warm” manner. Then he begins telling humorous tales. Each time the Turk’s laughter causes him to
close his eyes or fall, the tailor pilfers pieces of the valuable fabric. After the Turk begs him for a fourth
joke, the tailor shows mercy and replies that another joke would “make your caftan (qabā) too tight.”
That is, he has stolen all he can without sacrificing the Turk’s requested garment.

The characters represent ethically expressed imbalances that correspond to Miskawayh’s mean. Thus, the
soldier’s excessive courage brings him to undertake a foolhardy venture, trying to outsmart the smartest of
tailors. The tailor, too, suffers from an imbalance. His unchecked practical intelligence has made him
cunning and hence unjust. Yet Rūmī ably ties this into scriptural moral concerns. The tailor represents the
deceitful nature (ghurūr) of worldly pleasures. The Turk-soldier represents all of us who seek to avoid
worldly suffering and to enjoy worldly pleasure, when these are mere distractions. The wise seek closeness
with God, and they only suffer when they sense their infinite distance from Him.
The tale of the Sufi and the Judge ends with a profound consideration of such true suffering, the suffering of the lover of God, which is a sense of distance from the beloved.73

Relinquished desire no doubt brings bitter taste,
but less bitter than separation from the Real.

Though struggling and fasting are difficult, harsh,
still, they’re better than a distance that tests you.

How could pain remain that instant when the Kindly Bestower
would say—How are you holding up, My sick one?

All the suffering in the world will vanish upon that beatific meeting between the human lover and the divine Beloved, or perhaps even upon a realization that He is watching. Knowing that the Beloved has willed the pain of the lover makes such pain tolerable. God has cared enough to make the lover suffer. Suffering allows the obedient soul to conform to the will of God and implies a promise that if the soul bears it patiently, it will reach Him. Therefore, the enlightened lover of God enjoys an awareness of reality that mitigates and makes tolerable all suffering, by giving it meaning. For this enlightened person, the sort of worldly suffering expressed by the slapped Sufi is not suffering at all. Here Rūmī, and the many Muslim philosophers, mystics, and theologians who would have agreed with him, finds himself in conformity with ancient Greek thinkers, such as Socrates and the Stoics, who held that a virtuous person will find happiness despite the vicissitudes of life and fortune.74 The inner world of the self can be safeguarded from misfortune through rational reflection upon one’s place in the world. Plato more or less agrees, while acknowledging certain contributors to happiness outside of a person’s will.75

Although Aristotle labels “nonsense” the view that a virtuous person is happy even if tortured or enduring calamity, he does emphasize that happiness lies not entirely in fortune. Rather, happiness is in the virtuous life, which requires a bare minimum of good fortune.76 Hence, in ancient Greek ethics, the cultivation of virtues was in the best interest of each person. It was part of a program for good living, a way of life that emphasized “care of the self” (epimeleisthai sautou). This impulse in Greek thought, argues Foucault, was neglected by Western cultures, on account of a Christian asceticism that considered caring for the self to be opposed to self-renunciation. This was compounded by an Enlightenment philosophical trajectory that valued the Greek maxim to “know oneself” as part of a theory of knowledge and not a theory of practice that would demand self-care.77

This relates in a rather odd way to what the Judge presents to the Sufi: To bear and even enjoy suffering, to see the world as meaningless, is not only rational, it is in your best interest. To suffer in one way (grieving over distance from God) will benefit you, in large part by putting other forms of suffering in perspective. The Judge presents a “caring for the self” that still carries with it a markedly ascetic impulse. A person should acknowledge virtuous self-interest, and even suffering, while also acknowledging God’s awareness of that suffering. As the Biblical patriarch Jacob says in the Qur’ān, having wept for his lost son Joseph to the point of blindness, “I complain of my suffering and sadness only to God, and I know from God that which you do not” (Q 12:86). When read in light of Rūmī’s lines, Jacob’s words comment on the enlightened suffering championed by the Judge. I do indeed suffer—in other words—but for me suffering is part of a relationship, and that relationship benefits me more than my suffering harms me. In fact, contemplating that relationship alters my suffering, yielding greater realization of my dependence on the self-sufficient deity who created me, sustained me, and allowed this suffering within the larger context of my best interests. It is thus that the human–divine relationship transmutes suffering into virtue, namely, the virtue of forbearance (ṣabr).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: NARRATIVE ETHICS IN THE POETRY OF RŪMĪ
This example from Book Six of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* has indicated ways in which one narrative comprises multiple dimensions of ethics known to the author. These dimensions include Sufi ethics, “folk” ethics (through stories and jokes), Qur’anic ethics, legalistic Islamic ethics, and even, to some extent, philosophical virtue ethics. Yet the intersubjectivity of narrative allows Rūmī to treat these often-distinct approaches to ethics (which appear as multiple “voices”) as a unified whole, showing how they might have been an interconnected, lived ethics in his own time.

There is still much room to consider what, exactly, makes ethics in literary genres different from ethics in discursive prose. The narrative of a deluded sick man with an urge to slap Sufis seems to necessitate context in a way that abstract writing—such as in philosophical or Sufi treatises—does not. An ethical stance becomes more than a matter of contending moral theories; everything has situatedness and subjectivity. The sick man must slap to save his life. The Sufi, indignant at the harm done to him, holds himself back in order to seek a legal form of retributive justice. The Judge adjudicates from a distance. Unbiased and informed, he functions much like the “ideal observer” imagined by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (d. 1776). Yet the narrative throws subjectivity onto the Judge by having the sick man slap him as well. This allows us to see how the Sufi might have reacted, were he more knowledgeable and hence virtuous. That is, it forces the Judge to become a moral actor himself and not simply remain a judge of the moral actor. An extended dialogue between the Sufi and the Judge proves the former to be good, the latter to be beyond good; the former to be law-abiding, the latter to be just.

Every perspective in the story has value and deserves empathy, even if one (the Judge’s) ends up as wiser than others. The Judge’s wisdom derives in part from his panoramic mindset, his ability to view the situation from multiple subjectivities that include the circumstances, dues, and needs of all involved. The sick man needs mercy, while the Sufi needs to be taught to endure suffering patiently. Woven into the Judge’s perspective is that of the author (Rūmī), who projects the voice of a spiritual master well traveled in the ways of God. This voice addresses these manifold perspectives in universal terms. The multiplicity of perspectives deserving attention and empathy might be called “intersubjectivity,” with the added modifier of “limited,” because of this overarching authorial voice. On one hand, this “limited intersubjectivity” might be a function of Rūmī as an insightful author. On the other hand, it must be—to some degree—an indication of the way his contemporaries practiced ethical reasoning in arenas of contention, such as court cases. Such intersubjectivity, however limited, presents a snapshot of moral life in Rūmī’s world and the world of the authors studied throughout this book. It is a real-life application of multiple theories of Islamic ethics, theories touched upon in the previous chapters. Rūmī’s tales present these theories as an integrated, organic whole, providing layers of justification, motivation, and meaning for virtuous living.

NOTES

1 *MM*, 3:2128. References from *Mathnawī-i Ma'navī* are according to daftar and line number. As noted in the bibliography, I have relied on the edition of Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, further edited by Ghiyāth-Allāh A'ībī and published as one volume. I have compared this edition to that of Muḥammad Isti'īmādī (Tehran: Zawwār, 1990), published in seven volumes, and mentioned in the notes when Isti'īmādī’s edition might offer a better reading. To avoid confusion, Isti'īmādī’s edition is not mentioned in the bibliography.


4 *MM*, 3:2527.

5 *MM*, 6:2370.


11 Ibid., p. 287.


14 See ibid., pp. xx–xxix.

15 See Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. In the case of Rūmī’s lyric poems, Keshavarz has considered silence as a literary tool with a variety of purposes and applications, especially a poetic power to create by omission, to provoke the active participation of the audience by freeing the poem from the bonds of words. See Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric*, pp. 49–71.

16 Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, p. 33.

17 Ibid., p. 46.

18 MM, 6:1293–1300, 6:1310–20. In translating the poem, I have opted for a translation that leans more toward verse than prose, but allows for variation when meaning might be obfuscated or lost.

19 Kay Qubād is an ancient (and mythological) Iranian monarch, belonging to the era of the Kayānids, before the Achaemenid Empire. Rūmī uses him in the *Mathnawī* and in his *Dīwān* to praise a person (or his listener) as having kingly attributes.

20 For an excellent discussion of the relationship between pulse, health, and virtue in the Islamic medical tradition (as influenced by Galen), see Farage, “The Ethics of the Physician in the Galeno-Islamic Tradition.”

21 MM, 1:35–246.

22 MM, 1:53–4. The imbalance is one of excessive yellow bile (*ṣafrā*) as well as dryness (*khushkī*) in the brain, which are signs of a choleric or agitated melancholia. Compare Rūmī’s description to a passage by al-Suhrawardī, for example, which mentions the same symptoms (*The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*, p. 7, especially n. 2 on that page). See also al-Rāzī, *al-Ḥawī fī al-Ṭibb*, p. 1:48; Jouanna, “The Typology and Aetiology of Madness in Ancient Greek Medical and Philosophical Writing,” pp. 113–16.

23 MM, 1:1272.

24 The story of the king and the slave-girl resembles quite closely a historical legend told by Plutarch (d. ca. 120). That story is summarized in Horine, “An Epitome of Ancient Pulse Lore,” p. 214. Rūmī’s contemporaries might have known this story through the *Firdaws al-Ḥikma* (“Paradise of Wisdom”) of ʿAlī ibn Rabban al-Tabarī, a physician of the ninth century (see Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth wa Qiṣaṣ-i Mathnawī*, p. 2). Still, the near-definite source for Rūmī’s story about the king and the slave-girl is the *Chahār Maqāla* (“Four Discourses”) of Nizāmī-ʿArūḍī, in which he cites an incident in which Avicenna applies the pulse method to cure a lovesick young man, an incident that resembles the physician’s firsthand account in *The


26 Bahāʾ al-Dīn Walad, Maʿārif, p. 1:345, faṣl no. 221.

27 Ἄττάρ, Muṣḥbat-nāma, p. 183, l. 1452. In terms of influence, it deserves mention that the theme of a Sufi’s being slapped on the nape of the neck also occurs in Ἄττάρ’s poetry. See Manṭiq al-Ṭayr, p. 416, ll. 4032–5.

28 Al-Tustarī, Tafsīr al-Tustarī, p. 123.


31 As discussed below, the word ḥamza (here translated as “tamarind soup”) refers to a food associated with world-renouncing Sufis.


34 Here I have preferred Istiʿlāmī’s khashm or khashm (anger) to Nicholson’s shukhm (crop-yield). See Istiʿlāmī’s edition of MM, p. 6:75, line 1519. It is line 1513 in Nicholson’s edition, as cited here.

35 See Ayesha S. Chaudhry’s discussion of this issue according to Rūmī’s own school of Ḥanafī law (Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition, pp. 105, n. 33, 107), as well as the Shāfiʿī school, in which the teacher and father would both indeed be liable in case of a boy’s death (ibid., p. 122, n. 94).

36 Literally “o Dhū al-Faqār,” the name of a legendary sword used by ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib—the Prophet’s son-in-law and cousin—in Islam’s earliest battles. ʿAlī and, metonymically, his sword have an important place in Sufism and the Sunni spirituality of Rūmī, as heir to the Prophet’s spiritual secrets and as paragon of the possessor of futuwwa (futūwa). The sword captures the image of a spiritual warrior, brave, selfless, and absorbed in devotion to God.

37 “You did not throw when you threw, but it was God who threw” (Q 8:17). In Sufi texts, this part of the Qur’anic verse is used to illustrate how human action (here the Prophet’s throwing of a handful of earth and stones at the enemy) can be attributed to God, when the person acting has become so devoid of selfhood that God’s will has become that person’s will.

38 Here fiqh (“positive law”) has been translated as “jurisprudence” (which I have normally used for uṣūl al-fiqh) because Rūmī intends the cumulative process of deriving law.

39 This is a saying often used by those who study the narrations of the Prophet. It means that, before analyzing something, let us make sure it actually exists.

40 Chaudhry, Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition, p. 105, n. 33.

41 Ibid., p. 122, n. 94.

42 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, pp. 16, 22.

44 Ibid., p. 307.

45 A good reference in English for these qualities of *futuwwa* is al-Qushayrī, *al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism*, as translated by Alexander Knysh, pp. 237–42.


49 See Aflākī, *The Feats of the Knowers of God*, pp. xvi–xviii (O’Kane’s introduction).


51 *MM*, 5:3779, 5:3804.

52 Nicholson defines *hamza* as a wheat porridge, but, as Badīʾ al-Zamān Furūzānfar argues, such has never been the meaning of that word, whether in Persian or in Arabic (see Bahāʾ al-Dīn Walad, *Maʿārif*, pp. 2:187–8). The *Ilāhī-Nāma* (p. 398, l. 6361, and note on p. 716) of ʿAṭṭār suggests that *hamza* would be a simple food served in a bowl. The irony of the cowardly *hamza*-eating Sufi appears highlighted in the fact that the tamarind of this “tamarind soup” is shaped like a sword. See *MM*, 5:3776–7.

53 *MM*, 5:3806. That true Sufi is, for Rūmī, a historical figure named ‘Iyāḍī, who is probably Aḥmad Khidrawiyya Balkhi (d. 854) and whose struggles with his own lower soul coupled with his courage impel him toward heroic feats on the battlefield (see *MM*, 5:3780–3814). There is some confusion about the identity of this figure, but Abdülbaki Gölpinarlı, citing a correspondence noted by Furūzānfar between this passage and ʿAṭṭār’s *Tadhkirat al-Awliyāʾ*, favors this identification (Gölpinarlı, *Nathr wa Sharḥ-i Mathnawī-i Sharīf*, p. 3:424).


55 The hadith referred to here, as found in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, reads, “None of you has believed until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” See Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth wa Qiṣaṣ-i Mathnawī*, p. 550.

56 The scholars of the Hadith have determined that this saying cannot be properly attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, although, in terms of meaning, it is sound. The saying reads, “Whoever digs a pitfall for his brother will fall into it.” See Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth wa Qiṣaṣ-i Mathnawī*, pp. 62, 551.

57 Aristotle describes “practical wisdom” as the trait of one able to manage oneself, one’s family, and one’s city, because of both virtuous character traits and experience with particular situations. See *NE*, 6.8, 1141b–1142a, pp. 110–12.

58 Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlāq*, p. 95. While Avicenna also uses the phrase “practical wisdom” (*al-hikma al-amaliyya*), he offers little elaboration. It is clearly, however, the wisdom of the practical intellect, one subject to excess and deficiency, unlike the wisdom of the theoretical intellect, which has no excess. See Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of “The Healing,“* pp. 377–8. For a discussion that includes the context of al-Fārābī, see Legenhausen, “Ibn Sīnā’s Practical Philosophy.”

Conclusion

A Brief Case for Relevance

It is relatively easy to argue that the insights of Sufi ethicists about the heart and the stations to proximity with God have relevance today. Nothing that I know of has changed regarding the human being’s propensity to serve the lower self and be heedless. Any argument against the framework offered in Sufism would need to be theological or philosophical on a grander scale. One would need to think more broadly about one’s place in the universe and decide if, indeed, God created the human and did so with a purpose. Such arguments fall outside of this book’s purview, but, assuming that one takes a theistic position, surely Sufi writings about virtue have great worth. In fact, one might argue that if anything has changed, the field of reference for Sufi ethics has grown wider. While Sufis might have had a point that only the elite will strive for the highest reaches of ethical perfection, the circle of humanity has grown and with it perhaps the number of those willing to try. Moreover, while women were certainly engaged in the spiritual sciences, they will be increasingly more actively (or one might say “visibly”) engaged in the twenty-first century than they were in the tenth, writing about ethics and serving as leaders to a much higher degree than before. Today’s readers, reaching into premodern Sufi writings, can find examples confirming that anyone can join
the ranks of the spiritual elite, whether male or female, rich or poor, privileged or underprivileged in virtually any way, so that such spiritual elitism can also be interpreted as an egalitarian elitism.

Philosophical virtue ethics, the way I have presented it, does have a harder case to make for relevance. The understanding of human traits held by these philosophers usually relied on the factuality of a humoral model. Modern medicine and humoral medicine simply do not agree, and it is the former that has the backing of scientific evidence. To make certain insights of Avicenna or Miskawayh meaningful, one would need to translate the language of humoral propensities to one of psychobiological propensities as understood today. Noga Arikha makes such a case, arguing for the persisting significance of the humors, illustrating ways in which contemporary views of selfhood continue to rely on forces within the body. We have become more and not less interested in the influence of these forces on our emotions, now attributed to chemical changes in the brain. Moreover, the field of psychoneuroimmunology is a contemporary scientific acknowledgement that the mind affects the body, best illustrated in the case of the placebo effect. Arikha sees both humoral and contemporary medicine as telling us more than we realize about our most elemental yet self-defining concerns. Those concerns seem to change less over time than the means we forge to remedy them. By thinking of the soul as an incorporeal entity affected by its body, these philosophers left room for their version of virtue ethics to be adapted to what we know of the body and its relationship to ethical inclination. What they would have described as humoral traits influenced by one’s parents and place and time of birth we might describe as genetic traits also influenced by those factors. Moreover, to concentrate on desire (the appetitive faculty) and anger (the irascible faculty) as the two main sources of human moral corruption arguably works quite well when one considers the vices of our day, even if it does not fit as neatly into a biological scheme.

Premodern Islamic philosophical virtue ethics was premised on a psychology that envisioned the soul as coming to exist within the body, perceiving and knowing through the body, and cultivating virtues first by balancing the forces of the body. This was so even for those philosophers, such as Suhrawardi, who held a more Platonic view: Notwithstanding the soul’s ultimate origins elsewhere in an eternal all-soul, it still became an individual human soul from within the body. In this regard, philosophers presented a model of virtue that made sense of the body, its limitations, and the way those limitations might vary for each individual. Aware of these bodily limitations, aware even of the necessity of the brain and its segments for human cognition, they nevertheless argued that the human soul could achieve a mirroring of some transcendent reality. This marriage of embodiment and transcendence has great relevance for anyone interested in the relationship between body and self.

So much for the humors, but what about virtue, situatedness, and storytelling? This aspect of the way virtue ethics functioned, as part of a multidimensional and lived experience, might have the most to offer, especially when Islamic ethics becomes portrayed as monolithically rigid, scriptural, or motivated by political ends. At the time of this book’s composition, Islam is mentioned with frequent regularity—daily and even hourly—in the popular media, political debates, and almost every major form of public discourse. This in a country, the United States, in which the population of Muslims is around one percent of the nation’s total. Questions are being asked—questions about Muslim rituals and religious law that spring from assumptions about violence and misogyny. Fear across a wide segment of the population, here in the Americas and in Europe, has led to proposals and in some cases legislation that target Muslims and those very rituals and law that have come into question. The better-informed might dismiss the idea that Islam “is” this or that, and even the only moderately informed might know to separate the few from a much larger mass of people. Still, it sometimes seems that “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”

There will be a tendency among some, therefore, to read Islamic virtue ethics as a more humanistic, perhaps even secular, alternative to the rigid legalism of traditional Islamic law, a law that cannot find its place in the modern world, a law that so refuses to change that it endangers the cultures of adherent and nonadherent alike. Indeed, many have made a case—and sometimes a very strong case—that Islamic philosophical virtue ethics was not only humanistic, but humanistic to the point that philosophers cared little about conforming to traditional interpretations of Islam. Scholars such as Lenn E. Goodman, George Makdisi, Marc Bergé, Mohammed Arkoun, and Joel Kraemer have contended that there was an Islamic humanism that prevailed among ethicists and philosophers such as Miskawayh and al-Tawhidi. The turn away from such humanism is sometimes described as a turn toward traditionalism or voluntarism, but it is
almost always described as a turn away from revelation. It is also sometimes seen as a matter of regret, as expressed by Goodman, whose scholarship has been vital to this book:

Miskawayh has something precious that serious and committed Muslims and non-Muslims too would like to regain. Yet one cannot go back in time. If there is something to be recaptured in the humanism of Miskawayh, it will have to be recast once again, perhaps even re-created. Courtliness has had its say and its day, and if a new humanism is to emerge it will require new voices.7

Alexander Key has argued effectively, however, that “humanism” is an amorphous term. Humanism was not associated with the “secular” until religion and reason were seen to be at odds. The Italian humanists were, as Key indicates, focused on the human and on interiority, but they were also religiously committed. It was only later—after there appeared an Enlightenment notion of rationality that rejected religion’s truth claims—that humanism became secular.8 Efforts to fit premodern Islamic thought into a framework parallel to European intellectual history by locating secular “humanism” in the thought of these philosophers ultimately fail because they use “a post-Enlightenment European term for a pre-Enlightenment European movement to describe a tenth-century Islamic reality.”9 As we have seen, the world of scientific inquiry and the world of the spirit were inseparable for our authors. One might even say that “science” and “religion” were inseparable for them. Advocates of “Islamic humanism” certainly have a point in that philosophers often saw a more limited role for revealed truths. Nevertheless, while that might have been true for many philosophers, that was not necessarily always the case for philosophy. Pious and scripturally committed Sufi masters would also make use of philosophers’ teachings, especially their ethical teachings, just as some philosophers such as al-Tawḥīdī saw value in Sufism. A network of knowledge (and in our case ethical inquiry) was alive in a way that we can only try to know. It is a glimpse into that network that this book has aimed to offer.

Virtue ethics as studied here does not always fit well into certain alien molds, as much as we might hope—molds that are humanistic, secular, Western, or democratic. Rather, writings on virtue seem to have fit and to continue to fit into a much larger body of knowledge, a framework from which thinkers drew their own “Islamic” ethics. Evidence for this can be found in the stories that Muslims told, and those they still tell, which make use of various branches of moral learning more freely than what is observed in writings specific to one science or another. Those who advocated scripture or voluntarism cannot be excluded from this. Sciences such as philosophy and Sufism could be considered tools in almost any scholar’s toolbox, even if the overall epistemological architecture of that science contravened that scholar’s claims. Such was the case with Ghazālī’s use of philosophy. While he has been presented as appropriating humanistic virtue ethics, Ghazālī, like his later Shiʿi interpreter Fayd. Kāshānī (d. 1679), reminded Muslim readers that religious law and virtue ethics (both philosophical and Sufi virtue ethics) have a common goal, the achievement of ultimate happiness through the perfection of the soul.

For advocates of traditional Islamic law, Ghazālī’s intellectual mission typifies a recurring corrective in Islam, perhaps because of Islam’s rich and hermeneutically complex legal tradition: to caution readers not to lose sight of Islam’s larger ethical aims by becoming absorbed with ritual technicalities or divinely commanded limits. Such reminders can be found today to an even greater extent than in the past. New philosophical positions have meant that Muslim thinkers interested in “God’s law” often return to it with insights gleaned from the Western ethical traditions. Networks of ethical reasoning that exist today, moreover, mean that almost no moral decision can truly be made in a scriptural void, just as they could not in the past. The salience of certain single-minded interpretations of Islam often brings us to forget that on a day-to-day basis, a Muslim (like any moral agent) draws on multiple pools of knowledge and culture to make any decision or develop any habit.

Lastly there is the most glaring case for relevance, one perhaps so self-evident that it needs no discussion. Virtue ethics in both Islamic philosophy and Sufism responds to the profoundest of human desires, a desire that lies at the core of what it means to be human, the desire for self-perfection. The question of how to achieve self-perfection is so imperative that any calculated answer, and especially any collection of traditions that aims at this answer, merits deliberation. When Ghazālī tells us that “the soul of a human being is as a mirror,” he expects his audience to find “the Real” therein.10 Yet even if one looks for and finds something else, it seems a wasted opportunity not to look.
NOTES

1 Arikha, Passions and Tempers, p. 274.
2 Ibid., p. 291.
3 Ibid., pp. 286, 305.
6 See Alshaar, Ethics in Islam, pp. 4–9 for a summary of their positions, as well as Alshaar’s counterarguments, which build on those of Key as mentioned below.
7 Goodman, Islamic Humanism, p. 121.
8 Key, “The Applicability of the Term ‘Humanism’ to Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī,” p. 84.
9 Ibid., p. 85.
10 Ghazālī, Kīmīyā-yi Saʿādat, p. 1:47.

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In this bibliography, “AH” refers to *anno Hegirae* (in the year of the Hegira), while “SH” refers to the Persian solar Hegira calendar (*Shamsī-Hijrī*). Common Era dates for Arabic or Persian texts are included only when the publisher has provided them.

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*EIr*: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater. 1982–.


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Open Roads of the Knowers, The (Manāḥij al-ʿĀrifīn)

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