

The End of Islamic Philosophy: A Poem with Commentary

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Over the years, scholars of Islamic philosophy have been discussing the deep need for a greater engagement with the broader intellectual scene, not just in terms of historical interest, but as a way of bringing this branch of Islamic thought into the arena of public discourse as a living reality. Of course, one of the greatest challenges facing anyone who wishes to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Islamic philosophy is that of language. Seyyed Hossein Nasr summarized the problem several decades ago, and also offered a way of approach:

[I]slamic traditional teachings are couched in a language which is not easily understood by many contemporary men, especially those with a modern education. The old treatises were usually written in a syllogistic language which is no longer prevalent today. What must be done is to disengage the content of Islamic philosophy from the language which is now not well received and to present it in terms more conformable to the intellectual horizon of our contemporaries. What is needed essentially is a re-presentation of the whole body of Islamic wisdom in a contemporary language. Thus those who seek for various problems the solution offered by this form of wisdom will find it without the barrier of unfamiliar language or thought structure.¹

Thankfully, today there are a number of prominent examples of works in English, from a variety of perspectives, which have sought to achieve this goal.² In what follows, I attempt to add a voice to this growing body of literature. I thus do not attempt to analyze an Islamic philosophical text or a cluster of texts in order to discuss some aspect of Islamic intellectual history. Rather, what is to follow is itself an Islamic philosophical work as opposed to being a work about Islamic philosophy.

I have chosen the medium of poetry, along with a commentary on this poem, as my primary vehicles of expression. Although the use of poetry as a didactic tool is quite

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany, 1981), 155-156. See also the pertinent remarks in Caner Dagli, "On the Possibility of an Islamic Philosophical Tradition in English" in Mohammad Faghfoory (ed.), *Beacon of Knowledge: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Louisville, 2003), 65-72.

² See, in particular, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur, 1995); William Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani* (New York, 2001), chapters 2-3; Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2007); Dagli, "On Beginning a New System of Islamic Philosophy," *Muslim World* 94, no. 1 (2004): 1-27; Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (Albany, 1992); Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany, 2006), parts 1-2, and 4.

unconventional amongst Muslims writing in English,³ this does not hold true for older Islamic languages such as Arabic and Persian, where poetry was commonly employed for pedagogical purposes. There are scores of texts in medieval Islamic civilization on Arabic logic, rhetoric, prosody, medicine, music, and grammar, as well as texts in Islamic law, the Quranic and Hadith sciences, theology, mysticism, and philosophy which present the fundamentals of their respective science in poetic form, and which may then be elucidated upon by the author (and/or another author) by way of a commentary (*sharh*).⁴ There are also many examples where a primary text (*matn*) in the Islamic sciences was put into versified form (*nazm*) in order to facilitate memorization of that text.

This piece intends to outline the main goals and contemporary relevance of philosophical thinking in Islam in what is certainly now an Islamicate language, namely English. In a sense, I seek to emulate the style of these aforementioned medieval texts because of their great pedagogical efficacy. An ancillary intention is to engage in an artistic mode of presenting philosophy, just as many of the Muslim philosophers of the past have done, such as Ibn Sina, the Ikhwan al-Safa', Ibn Tufayl, and Suhrawardi. And this is of course not unique to the philosophers of Islam. We find the same tendency to philosophize through artistic expression in thinkers as diverse as Plato and Nietzsche.

Presenting Islamic philosophy in this fashion has the merit of being able to give Muslims the correct kind of intellectual basis from which they can go on and engage other disciplines *as Muslim thinkers*—not just in the fields of philosophy and theology, but also in the social sciences, disciplines in the humanities, and the physical and life sciences.⁵ Another objective behind the present undertaking is that the poem and commentary serve as teaching-texts for those who wish to learn about Islamic philosophy in order to employ its tenets in their own philosophical quests and projects of self-discovery, regardless of whether or not this leads them to an engagement with the public sphere and other contemporary forms of knowledge.

Some may see the poem and commentary as being concerned with the explication of philosophical mysticism rather than philosophy proper. This of course all depends on what we mean by the term “philosophy.” If we consider someone like Plato, Plotinus, or St. Augustine to be “philosophers,” then what is presented here is undoubtedly philosophy. Following the lead of Suhrawardi in his *Hikmat al-ishraq (The Philosophy of Illumination)*,⁶ it can be said that my presentation of Islamic philosophy here brings together discursive philosophy (*al-hikma al-bahthiyya*) and divine philosophy or metaphysics (*al-hikma al-ilahiyya*). Indeed a long-standing way of doing philosophy in the Islamic intellectual tradition itself, this approach is best-characterized as “creating a bridge between the rigor of logic and the ecstasy of spiritual union.”⁷

³ Some exceptions include Muhammad Legenhausen, <http://gom.academia.edu/MuhammadLegenhausen/Poems> (accessed April 15, 2014) and Nasr, *The Pilgrimage of Life and the Wisdom of Rumi* (Oakton, 2007), part 1 and *Poems of the Way* (Oakton, 1999).

⁴ With respect to medieval Islamic philosophy in particular, the philosophical poetry of Nasir-i Khusraw, Omar Khayyam, Afdal al-Din Kashani, and Mulla Hadi Sabziwari come to mind. See, respectively, Alice Hunsberger (ed.), *Pearls of Persia: The Philosophical Poetry of Nasir-i Khusraw* (London, 2012); Mehdi Aminrazavi, *The Wine of Wisdom: The Life, Poetry and Philosophy of Omar Khayyam* (Oxford, 2005); Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy*, 127-135; 141-143; 145-147; 153; 159; 161-162; 168-170; Sabziwari, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari*, translated by Toshihiko Izutsu and Mehdi Mohaghegh (Delmar, NY, 1977).

⁵ See the pertinent remarks in Nasr, “Autobiography” in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Lewis Hahn, Randall Auxier, and Lucian Stone Jr. (LaSalle, IL, 2001), 137-138.

⁶ Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, translated by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Provo, 1999), 3.

⁷ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present*, 47.

The End of Islamic Philosophy

From the Necessary did all things proceed,
contingent, mutable, and ever in need.
Issuing forth from a realm most sublime,
they sank in the flow of the river of time.
In the cosmic crypt they emerged in an instant,
bodily in origination, spiritually subsistent.
Traversing the arcs of descent and ascent,
the circle of existence reveals His intent.
Yet questions come and ideas collide,
uneasy in the mind they reside.
Such is the story of modern man,
living life confused, without a plan.
Of what use is the study of philosophy,
if not taken from the niche of Prophecy?
To see this way as mere artifact and history,
obscures its lasting and profound mystery.
And Muslim name but secular mind,
produce not knowledge of an Islamic kind.
'Illa, ma 'lul, cause and effect,
upon these notions your system erect!
From Mashsha'is, Ishraqis, Sadrians and others,
take what you need, but of wisdom be lovers.
Through the tools of logic sharpen your mind,
with the science of poverty intellect's fetters unbind.
For man is not just mind and thought,
but a soul affected by actions wrought.
Hence the need of return to the purest way,
of those who discerned night from day.
'Twas the Intellect's Light to which they clung,
ascending on Heaven's ladder, rung by rung.
Why harp on the problem of time and eternity?
You yourself become eternal, then you will see.
If you wish to master the art of seeing,
first understand the primacy of Being.
Of all things its concept is the best-known,
yet its reality remains forever un-shown.
We are all modes of Being, rays of Light.
Awaken to this reality, O soul, take flight!
For the realized one alike are coming and going,
as he witnesses things through the All-Knowing.
His body and soul transcend time and space—
like a star, shining in the firmament of No-Place.

Commentary

The End of Islamic Philosophy

The title of this poem may seem to announce the “death” or cessation of Islamic philosophy. This would, in fact, not be the first time such a view was posited. It had been the going Orientalist narrative for some two hundred years, based on the opinion that Islamic philosophy ceased to exist after Ibn Rushd. But it is now well-known that Islamic philosophy did not die after Ibn Rushd in any fashion whatsoever. Indeed, the phase of Islamic philosophy after Ibn Rushd in the eastern lands of Islam has been witness to an incredible and enduring heritage.⁸

By **end of Islamic philosophy** is meant the goal or *ghaya* of Islamic philosophy.⁹ The title of the poem also calls to mind many other books in English which, for one reason or another, announce the “end” to any given topic. Thus we have books such as *The Meaning and End of Religion* by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama, and *The End of Education* by Neil Postman.¹⁰ So this poem is an attempt to outline what is important about the Islamic philosophical tradition as a lived reality today, what its goals are, and what its methods are to attaining these goals. Yet a double-pun is intended here, as is the case with Postman’s *The End of Education*: there is a sense in which “end” does refer to seizure and even death. The title thus carries with it something of the ominous, a boding of an actual end. This is to suggest that, if the end or goal of Islamic philosophy is not realized by Muslims today, then the Islamic philosophical tradition may in fact come to some kind of an end, at least on one level if not entirely.

Any philosophical worldview that ceases to provide meaning for a sufficient group of intelligent individuals runs the risk of coming to an end, of becoming a relic of a distant past, or of becoming a moribund, uncreative system which is unable to address pressing issues of the present and the future. Indeed, many Muslim intellectuals today do not make use of the rich

⁸ Over the past six decades, a number of important works have sought to document the history of Islamic philosophy (both before and after Ibn Rushd). See Hans Daiber’s *Bibliography of Islamic Philosophy* (Leiden, 1999 and 2007). For current efforts, see Peter Adamson’s “History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps” podcast series, which deals extensively with the Islamic world: www.historyofphilosophy.net/ (accessed May 1, 2014)—Adamson’s podcasts on the history of Islamic philosophy will also be published as a separate volume: *A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps: Philosophy in the Islamic World* (Oxford, 2015). Also in progress is *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* edited by Khaled El-Rouyaheb and Sabine Schmidtke (New York), which gives coverage to the most important texts in the Islamic philosophical tradition. Another ongoing project is the major four-volume work edited by Ulrich Rudolph (with the assistance of Renate Würsch) wherein the entire history of Islamic philosophy, from the eighth to the twentieth centuries, is dealt with: *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie: Philosophie in der islamischen Welt* (Basel, 2012-) (this entire set will eventually be translated into English). The most comprehensive collection of Islamic philosophical texts in English translation is the astounding five-volume anthology edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mehdi Aminrazavi: *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia* (London, 2008-2015).

⁹ The title of this poem is not to be confused with ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s *Nihayat al-hikma* (*The End of Philosophy*), where he employs the Arabic word *nihaya* or “end” to refer to the more complex problems one encounters in Islamic philosophy after some degree of specialization and grounding in the discipline. His introductory textbook, entitled *Bidayat al-hikma* (*The Beginning of Philosophy*), is available in a fine English translation: *The Elements of Islamic Metaphysics*, translated by Sayyid ‘Ali Quli Qara’i (London, 2003).

¹⁰ We also have the propagandistic work by Sam Harris, one of the main representatives of the New Atheism: *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York, 2005). Two of the best replies to this movement (from different vantage points) can be found in Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend, 2008) and David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, 2009).

resources of their own intellectual tradition, and this for a variety of reasons. But when they do discover that to which they are (in potential) heirs, they often find that there is plenty of material there for them to come away with meaningful responses to their contemporary predicaments, not the least of which is the answer to the meaning of life. Therefore, it is hoped that this commentary—however brief—will outline the goals and ultimate end of Islamic philosophy as a living tradition.¹¹ My primary audience is Muslim intellectuals, students, and would-be-philosophers, while also attempting to broadly address the concerns of anyone interested in what the late Pierre Hadot had referred to as “philosophy as a way of life.”¹²

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v. 1

From the Necessary did all things proceed, contingent, mutable, and ever in need.

The basic starting point of our inquiry is the given-ness of the situation of existence (*wujud*). There are things, in other words, that exist, what we call existents (*mawjudat*). Now what is their mode of existence? In other words, how do they exist? Have they always been there, or have some of them always been there, while other existents came about later? This kind of thinking leads us to the question of *causes* of existents.

Before moving in this direction, however, we need to clarify some basic terms. The two key terms here are “necessary” and “possible.” There is another term, “impossible,” which applies to anything that cannot be in any way whatsoever (for example, a square circle, which would entail a logical contradiction based on the different definitions of these two shapes). But this need not concern us here. With respect to the two key terms “necessary” and “possible,” Ibn Sina explains the difference between them in this manner:

The necessary existent (*wajib al-wujud*) is that existent which, when it is supposed to be non-existent, an impossibility results from this supposition. The possible existent is that existent which, whether it is supposed to be existent or non-existent, an impossibility does not result from either supposition. The necessary existent is that whose existence is necessary. The possible existent is that which does not have necessity in it in any respect, that is, in neither its being nor non-being. This is what we mean in this context by “possible existent,” even if by “possible existent” that which exists in potentiality could be meant....

Moreover, the necessary existent may be necessary in itself (*wajib bi-dhatihi*), or may not be necessary in itself. As for the necessary existent in itself, it is that which, by virtue of itself and not through another—whatever it may be—an impossibility is entailed when its nonexistence is supposed. As for a necessary existent not in itself, it is that which, were something other than it to be posited, it would become a necessary existent. For example, four is a necessary existent not in itself, but when two and two are posited; and burning is a necessary existent not in

¹¹ On this note, it is worth consulting the penetrating remarks in Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*, 151ff.

¹² See his *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited by Arnold Davidson and translated by Michael Chase (Malden, 1995). Cf. John Cooper, *The Pursuit of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton, 2013).

itself, but when the coming together of the active potentiality in nature and the passive potentiality in nature are posited, that is, the one burning and that which is burned.¹³

This explanation is surely abstract for most people. Let us look at an example in which necessity and possibility figure more concretely. Take a person, for example. She exists, and we know that she has come to be in the world through the union of her parents. But if her parents were to cease to exist, she would still be alive. This is because her parents are accidental causes (*al-‘ilal al-‘aradiyya*) and not essential causes (*al-‘ilal al-dhatiyya*). Whether her parents are alive or not, the child is dependent on so many other factors to actually sustain her existence at every moment, particularly her cells. Her cellular structure is dependent upon molecules, which are dependent upon atoms, which are dependent upon subatomic particles, etc.¹⁴ This all points to the fact that her existence, from cradle to grave, is, in actuality, necessitated through many other layers of *simultaneous, sustaining causes*. Her existence is, thus, “necessary through another” (*wajib bi-l-ghayr*). As should be clear, her existence is not necessary in itself (*wajib bi-dhatihi*). Rather, it is possible or **contingent** in itself (*mumkin bi-l-dhat*) and necessary through another. This is because she could equally not have existed, but when all of the right factors came together and she came to exist, her existence became utterly dependent upon the simultaneous essential causal presence of a host of *other things* for it to be sustained at every moment.

This same example applies to every other kind of existent: they are all contingent in themselves and, through essential causation, necessary through other, simultaneously existing, sustaining causes. If all things participate in this kind of derivative, essentially ordered causal series, from *what* is this series *ultimately* derived? It is impossible for there to be an infinite regress of essential causes because it would be a contradiction to maintain that there are *derivative* existents which themselves are ultimately *underived*. This, then, takes us to a cause which is not contingent in itself and necessary through another. Rather, it is necessary in itself (*wajib bi-dhatihi*) and is the causer of all other causes (*musabbib al-asbab*). That which is necessary in itself is thus not subject to cause and effect, since it is the ground of all causation. In other words, it cannot not be, while all other things ultimately depend upon it for their existence. This being is referred to as the Necessary Existent or the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*) (namely God), and is akin to the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle.¹⁵

There are different cosmological doctrines in Islamic thought which explain how it is that the world of contingency came about **from the Necessary**. Some of the Muslim thinkers speak of all things being created by God (*khalq*), while others speak of all things issuing forth from God or emanating from Him (*fayd*). Still others attempt to present a reconciliatory view between creation and emanation. Whatever position one takes, it is clear that all things **proceed** from God, the Necessary. Since all things are utterly dependent upon the Necessary for their own existence, they are characterized by an ontological poverty vis-à-vis the Necessary. They are thus **ever in need** of the Necessary, both for their existence in the first place, and for their subsistence

¹³ Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-Najat*, edited by Majid Fakhry (Beirut, 1985), 261-262. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

¹⁴ I am drawing here on an internet resource which, in the context of a proof for the existence of God, gives a superb account of essential causation using the example of a cat: www.ismailignosis.com/2014/03/27/he-who-is-above-all-else-the-strongest-argument-for-the-existence-of-god/ (accessed May 16, 2014).

¹⁵ See Aristotle, *Physics* 8 and *Metaphysics* 12.7 in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, 1986).

as existent things. This is one of the meanings of the Quranic verse, *God is the Rich, and you are the poor* (Q 47:38).¹⁶

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v. 2

**Issuing forth from a realm most sublime,
they sank in the flow of the river of time.**

Let us take the opportunity here to shed light upon another term. When we look at something, we can ask two questions: is it? And what is it? The first question takes us to the issue of existence or being (*wujud*), which was dealt with in the commentary on v. 1. The second question, what is it?, takes us to the notion of quiddities (*mahiyyat*). Each thing has a quiddity (*mahiyya*) which defines it and makes it what it is. Thus, the quiddity of a particular horse is particular to it alone, even though it may share in other aspects with other horses, who all belong to the same species (*naw'*), namely “horse.” But that particular piebald horse we are speaking about, shorn of its accidents, has its own quiddity, which points to its very specific nature. The fact that that particular piebald horse has a quiddity means that we can distinguish between *what* the horse is (quiddity) and the fact that it *is* (existence). This, in fact, applies to all **contingent** (v. 1) things, since the quiddity of a contingent thing is always distinct from its existence. Indeed, Ibn Sina lays out a very strong argument for the existence of God based on the fact that, unlike contingent things, the quiddity of **the Necessary** (v. 1) and Its existence are not distinct.¹⁷

With respect to the first hemistich of v. 2, it is interesting to note that Ibn Sina begins his famous poem on the soul with the lines, “The soul descended upon you from the dwelling most high,”¹⁸ in other words, **a realm most sublime**. Often, this realm is referred to as the Divine Presence (*hadra*). Human beings all came from the Divine Presence, meaning they have always been objects of God’s knowledge, forever fixed in His “mind.” As objects of God’s knowledge, which the school of Ibn ‘Arabi refers to as fixed entities (*al-a‘yan al-thabita*)—and these are nothing other than the quiddities we have just encountered—they were brought into physical existence in accordance with God’s knowledge of them, which is to say they left the Divine Presence and thus **sank in the flow of the river of time**.¹⁹

¹⁶ All translations from the Quran are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York, 2015).

¹⁷ For the argument, see Avicenna (Ibn Sina), *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, translated by Michael Marmura (Provo, 2005), 8.4. In this commentary I will not attempt to directly address the question of the status of quiddities vis-à-vis existence, which is indeed a thorny problem in medieval Islamic thought. Suffice it to say that some have argued that quiddities form the basis of reality and from which we abstract concepts like existence (*wujud*), whereas others have argued that quiddities are not actually real, but “arise” in accordance with the different levels of *wujud* (for the implications of the latter position, see the commentary on vv. 17-19).

¹⁸ For a rendering of this poem, see Arberry, *Avicenna on Theology* (London: 1951), 77-78. An interesting medieval Ismaili commentary upon Ibn Sina’s poem on the soul can be found in ‘Ali b. Muhammad b. al-Walid, *The Soul’s Fall and Liberation: An Ismaili Commentary on Ibn Sina’s Qasidat al-nafs*, edited and translated by Wilferd Madelung and Toby Mayer (London, forthcoming). It should also be noted that the ascription of this poem to Ibn Sina has been called into question in modern scholarship. For a recent discussion, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna’s Philosophical Works*, 2nd edition (Leiden, 2014), 386, 533.

¹⁹ A profound discussion of the river of time and its relationship to the loss of knowledge appears in Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, 1989), 1ff. Also consider this statement by Marcus Aurelius: “There is a river

Time implies change and mutability, and thus the fall of man, caught up as he is in the flow of time, implies a change in state, from being with God to being away from God. We sank in the downward flow of this river because we have lost our true identity, which is for us to know ourselves as God knows us, and thus to be with God in the Divine Presence. In other words, we have forgotten God by virtue of being in the realm of change and hence multiplicity. That original abode from which we came can be accessed while in the realm of change and time, so long as one remembers his true self, as the Prophet said, “He who knows himself knows his Lord.”

To know one’s self thus means to remember one’s self, and to remember one’s self means that one knows his own existence, which is tantamount to God’s remembering the person, since His knowledge of what the person is the person’s very existence. Mulla Sadra explains it in this manner:

Since forgetfulness of God is the cause of forgetfulness of self, remembering the self will necessitate God’s remembering the self, and God’s remembering the self will itself necessitate the self’s remembering itself: *Remember Me, and I shall remember you* (Q 2:152). God’s remembering the self is identical with the self’s existence, since God’s knowledge is presential (*huduri*) with all things. Thus, he who does not have knowledge of self, his self does not have existence, since the self’s existence is identical with light, presence, and perception.²⁰

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v. 3

**In the cosmic crypt they emerged in an instant,
bodily in origination, spiritually subsistent.**

Through God’s creative command (*amr*) *Be!* (Q 2:117) all things came into being, meaning all objects of His knowledge that He willed to be brought forth into concrete existence emerged. God’s Command is often linked to a concept (i.e., *ibda’*) which is derived from one of the Divine names, namely *al-Badi’*, the “Unique Originator” (Q 2:117 and 6:101). The cosmos came about through the Divine Command **in an instant** or, more technically, “a single instant” (*duf’a wahida*), as many Islamic philosophical and mystical texts state.

Cosmic crypt is a term taken from Henry Corbin.²¹ It refers to the prison-like state of the cosmic situation of the individual as he finds his soul “trapped” in the realm of distance from God, away from the **realm most sublime** (v. 2). To this effect, the Prophet is reported to have said that “The world is a prison for the believer and a paradise for the unbeliever,” and that “The world and all that is in it is accursed, except for the remembrance of God.”

of creation, and time is a violent stream. As soon as one thing comes into sight, it is swept past and another is carried down: it too will be taken on its way” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, translated by Martin Hammond (London, 2006), 31).

²⁰ Cited from Rustom, “Philosophical Sufism” in *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Richard Taylor and Luis Xavier López-Farjeat (New York, in press). See also the pertinent remarks in Ha’iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy*, 155-156. For an exploration into the concept of self-awareness in Islamic philosophy (with particular reference to Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, and Mulla Sadra), see Jari Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2015).

²¹ Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, translated by Willard Trask (Irving, 1980), 16-28.

The second hemistich of this verse is a reference to a well-known doctrine of Mulla Sadra which states that the soul is “**bodily** in temporal **origination**, spiritual in subsistence” (*jismaniyyat al-huduth ruhaniyyat al-baqa*). One of the implications of this principle is that the soul does not somehow “inhere” in the body. Rather, the soul and body have an intimate relationship such that the soul can be spoken of as itself being “embodied” while in the cosmic crypt. This is to say that the human body is nothing other than the soul in its terrestrial, fallen state. Yet, since the soul is spiritually subsistent and made for Heaven (see commentary on v. 15), as it rises back to its true home (v. 2) it discards the material body, which is one of the soul’s lower possibilities. The soul continues to “carry” its body with it on its upward journey—not a material body, but the “formal,” intellectual body, which is the flipside of the non-formal, spiritual aspect of the soul. Finally, the soul reaches a stage in its upward ascent in which the formal aspect of the body and the substance of the soul coalesce, and all that is spiritually subsistent is the soul. Sadra explains that, in this world,

the human is the totality of soul and body. These two, despite their diversity in way station, are two existent things that exist through one existence. It is as if the two are one thing possessing two sides. One of the sides is altering and extinguishing, and it is like the branch. The other side is fixed and subsistent, and it is like the root. The more the soul becomes perfect in its existence, the more the body becomes limpid and subtle. It becomes more intense in conjunction with the soul, and the unification between the two becomes stronger and more intense. Finally, when intellectual existence comes about, they become one thing without difference.²²

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v. 4

Traversing the arcs of descent and ascent, the circle of existence reveals His intent.

Harking back to the mention of two bow-lengths or arcs (*qawsayn*) in the Quran (Q 53:9), **the arcs of descent and ascent** respectively refer to the Origin (*mabda*) and Return (*ma’ad*) of the human soul. There is the arc of descent (*al-qaws al-nuzuli*), by virtue of which the human soul entered into **the cosmic crypt** (v. 3); and then there is the arc of ascent (*al-qaws al-su’udi*), by virtue of which the human soul will ascend back to the Presence of God, its original home (v. 2).²³ With respect to the Return (derived from Q 28:85), since we are all aspects of God’s knowledge and are what we are by virtue of God’s knowledge of us (see commentary on v. 2), we *belong* to Him in the most fundamental sense of the term, and will thus go back to Him, since all things must be returned to their rightful owners. This is in accordance with the Quranic verse, *Truly we are God’s, and unto Him we return* (Q 2:156).

²² Cited from Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, edited by Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (Albany, 2012), 231. However, it must be also noted that there are still imaginal and subtle bodies with which the soul will remain associated in the afterlife. For the imaginal nature of embodiment in the afterlife, see Rustom, “Psychology, Eschatology, and Imagination in Mulla Sadra’s Shirazi’s Commentary on the *Hadith of Awakening*,” *Islam and Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 9-22.

²³ For more on this anthropology, see Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, chapter 21 and Hamid Parsania, *Existence and the Fall: Spiritual Anthropology of Islam*, translated by Shuja Ali Mirza (London, 2006).

When the two arcs come together they form a circle, what is known in Islamic cosmology as **the circle of existence** (*da'irat al-wujud*). Since the start of a circle and its end are indistinguishable, the circle of existence demonstrates to us that the Origin and the Return are ultimately one, since we go back to where we began (just as if we were to draw a circle, starting at a certain point, we would end up at that point when closing off the circle). This is what is meant by the well-known saying (often attributed to Junayd) that “The end is the return to the beginning.”²⁴ Of course, there is also an entire journey along a circle, and each position along the circle’s two arcs, whether downward or upward, reveals a different aspect of the circle. Going through the circle of existence, beginning in the Divine Presence and then returning to God, one comes to know in the final analysis why they were brought into this world and what the ultimate purpose of their existence was. Yet, the possibility of traversing the multiple states of existence is open to some individuals even before undergoing physical death. They are the ones who have truly understood the purpose of existence (see vv. 14-15, and 20), which reveals to them **His intent** at each moment.

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v. 5

**Yet questions come and ideas collide,
uneasy in the mind they reside.**

v. 6

**Such is the story of modern man,
living life confused, without a plan.**

In C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* (written in 1942), he describes **modern man** as having “a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head.”²⁵ If this was the situation over seven decades ago, what kind of predicament must contemporary man be in, where there are many more “incompatible philosophies” before him on his platter and which he will likely ingest, unless he guards his “diet”? Thus we have a unique situation in which **ideas collide** in the **mind** of modern man on account of the plethora of contradictory worldviews available to him, and through media which themselves are often quite harmful.

A related, major cause for this confusion is the absence of God in one’s life. Ahmad Mashhur al-Haddad thus referred to contemporary man as having mental instability or psychic imbalances (*hawsat*) on account of relinquishing the remembrance of God.²⁶ Indeed, it is not uncommon to find many people with mental disturbances today, or, at minimum, in a state in which they live **life confused** and hence **without a plan** in the ultimate sense of the term. This is something which is also related to the general dis-ease many people feel in their artificial

²⁴ See, inter alia, Mulla Sadra, *The Elixir of the Gnostics*, edited and translated by William Chittick (Provo, 2003), 54. For Sadra’s use of this saying in the context of his soteriology (developed in conversation with Ibn ‘Arabi), see Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mulla Sadra* (Albany, 2012), 108, 155-156.

²⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, 2002), 185.

²⁶ Hamza Yusuf, “Foreword” in Imam al-Haddad, *The Prophetic Invocations*, translated by Mostafa al-Badawi (Burr Ridge, 2000), xi.

surroundings and societal structures, built, amongst other things, upon what Uwe Poerksen refers to as “plastic words.”²⁷

To escape this state of confusion and to live life with a real plan is the first step in the right direction. The following autobiographical statement by Marcus Aurelius is very instructive in terms of how we are to order our priorities, and what our attitude should be towards those things which impede our realization of these priorities: “I do my own duty: the other things do not distract me. They are either inanimate or irrational, or have lost the road and are ignorant of the true way.”²⁸

*

v. 7

Of what use is the study of philosophy, if not taken from the niche of Prophecy?

Seeking to not live life **confused, without a plan** (v. 6), one route people commonly take up is the study of philosophy since they believe it will provide them with answers to life’s “big questions.” Since this poem and commentary primarily addresses contemporary Muslims, focus will here be upon the study of philosophy amongst them, although in broad outlines what is said about Muslim receptions of philosophy today can also be applied to members of other religious communities, who often struggle with cognate issues.

Before taking up the study of philosophy, Muslims must ask themselves what *kind* of philosophy it is that they wish to study and for *what purpose*.²⁹ In a famous prayer of the Prophet, he seeks refuge in God from “a knowledge that does not benefit.” This means that there are forms of knowledge which are, at minimum, beneficial and not beneficial. Since philosophy gets at the core issues that lie at the nature of things, it can indeed be considered a discipline that may lead to answers to life’s big questions. Yet, what is meant by “philosophy”? This is where the understanding of Islamic philosophy (and all traditional philosophies) is starkly different from what is generally understood to be “philosophy” today (with all of its variations).

The Islamic philosophical tradition is a coming together of the wisdom inherent in the sources of Islam and the philosophical heritages of the ancient Greeks and of Late Antiquity in general. As this poem has tried to demonstrate, Islamic philosophy is fundamentally concerned with God (v. 1), and the Origin and Return of the human soul (vv. 2-4). This means that the work of the human being in this world, placed as he is between the Origin and the Return, is of utmost importance with respect to the entelechy or unfolding of his immaterial soul. Such positions are not necessarily shared by the vast majority of philosophical worldviews in vogue today.

From the perspective of the Islamic philosophical tradition, therefore, these worldviews, while useful on some level, are not “beneficial” in an ultimate sense. There is a famous saying in Islam to the effect that “Philosophy springs forth from the **niche of Prophecy**” (*tanba’u al-hikma min mishkat al-nubuwwa*). Since Prophecy comes from and leads to God, that which

²⁷ See Uwe Poerksen, *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language*, translated by Jutta Mason and David Cayley (University Park, PA, 2004).

²⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 50.

²⁹ See the pertinent remarks in Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition* (San Francisco, 2010), 166ff.

comes from it, namely philosophy (in the world of Islam that would be Islamic philosophy), is a truly beneficial form of knowledge, since it will lead to God.

*

v. 8

**To see this way as mere artifact and history,
obscures its lasting and profound mystery.**

It is common for scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to study the Islamic intellectual heritage out of historical interest. Such an approach is extremely beneficial for a proper understanding of the history of philosophy. And, as is evidenced by the boom in scholarship in recent years on the post-Avicennian Islamic intellectual tradition,³⁰ this approach often leads to some very fascinating discoveries with respect to the thought of a number of Islam's greatest intellectual figures, the development of important philosophical and theological concepts, and the manner in which the rational sciences in Islam were incorporated into the structure of Muslim institutions of higher learning.³¹ This recent research into the development of Islamic intellectual history indeed helps paint a sophisticated and nuanced picture of the development of Islamic learned culture into the modern period.

What the study of Islamic intellectual history cannot do qua its own discipline is address *why* or *how* the issues taken up in Islamic philosophy are relevant to the lives of Muslims today. Indeed, there is now a move away from these kinds of historical paradigms by a number of leading contemporary scholars, some of whom are also historians of Islamic thought.³² Scholars given to such a pursuit thus acknowledge that it is a gross disservice to humanity to view Islamic philosophy **as mere artifact and history**. All of this signals that Muslims, who are heirs to the Islamic tradition, should *a fortiori* be able to study the history of Islamic philosophy while also being fully invested in discovering its **lasting and profound mystery** as it relates to their lives *today*. This will then pave the way for their meeting with God, both *now* and *tomorrow*.

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³⁰ See the works listed in note 8 above, as well as Thérèse-Anne Druart's online bibliography of medieval Islamic philosophy and theology (updated annually): <http://philosophy.cua.edu/faculty/druart/bibliographical-guide.cfm> (accessed May 12, 2014).

³¹ A work which is sure to be revealing on all of these fronts is Robert Wisnovsky's forthcoming *Post-classical Arabic Philosophy, 1100-1900: Metaphysics between Logic and Theology* (Oxford).

³² Some particularly noteworthy examples include Mohammad Azadpur, *Reason Unbound: On Spiritual Practice in Islamic Peripatetic Philosophy* (Albany, 2011); Salman Bashier, *The Story of Islamic Philosophy: Ibn Tufayl, Ibn al-'Arabi, and Others on the Limit between Naturalism and Traditionalism* (Albany, 2011); Christian Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie islamique?* (Paris, 2011); Taylor and López-Farjeat (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*. One can also profitably consult the volumes in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka's series, "Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology in Dialogue." Information on these volumes can be found here: www.springer.com/series/6137 (accessed May 14, 2014).

v. 9

**And Muslim name but secular mind,
produce not knowledge of an Islamic kind.**

v. 10

**'Illa, ma'lul, cause and effect,
upon these notions your system erect!**

It is commonplace to find Muslims who are pious, but whose thinking on some of the most important issues are quite antithetical to the tenets of the religion. Thus it is not unusual to find someone with a **Muslim name** who reads the Quran religiously (as he should), but who also subscribes to some secular theory which negates the very category of transcendence upon which the Quran is based. Such bi-polar tendencies amongst many would-be Muslim intellectuals end up making them look like second or third-rate thinkers with serious inferiority complexes (at best). At worst, these tendencies lead them to theorize about Islam, but from a secular vantage point and quite typically without the requisite training in Islamic thought to really understand the implications of their positions vis-à-vis the worldview of their own religion. Consequently, they do not produce **knowledge of an Islamic kind**, but, rather, something of a mishmash which, in the final analysis, does not satisfy Muslim thinkers deeply engaged with their own sources, nor secularists who subscribe to the forms of knowledge which have shaped the thought of these would-be Muslim intellectuals.

One of the greatest remedies to this kind of difficulty is for Muslims to first learn their own sources well, and to learn how to think *properly*. This entails the study of such things as the relationship between **cause and effect**; how definitions are derived; the relationship between substance and accident and form and matter; the different categories that take in all existents, such genus, species, and differentia, etc. This will allow them to hone their thinking skills and help wrestle their minds away from subscribing to secular worldviews built on theses which are ultimately contradictory to the very *raison d'être* of being a Muslim (see also the commentary on v. 12).

To be sure, Muslims who study contemporary philosophy without a strong grounding in their own philosophical tradition are completely unprepared to respond to these philosophical worldviews from within the perspective of their own intellectual heritage, including its aims, goals, and understanding of reality. It is only through the study of Islamic philosophy from its own perspective, a thorough study of which trains one to think *Islamically*, that one may be able to obtain beneficial knowledge (see also commentary on v. 7). Through such grounding, one may then **erect** a philosophical edifice or **system** that will allow her to provide genuine Islamic responses to any given number of issues in contemporary philosophy.

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v. 11

**From Mashsha'is, Ishraqis, Sadrians and others,
take what you need, but of wisdom be lovers.**

Since philosophy is the “love of wisdom” (*philosophia*), a Muslim should study her own philosophical heritage with a view to understanding its **lasting and profound mystery** (v. 8),

which is another way of saying that she should see philosophy as a way of life, to cite Hadot again. There are many important philosophical schools in the history of Islam, a number of which continue to inform the lives of people, particularly in Iran.³³

Today, Muslims may, with sound judgement and to the measure of their interests and capacities, **take** from the different Islamic intellectual schools what they **need**. This means that they do not necessarily have to be adherents to one strictly-defined school of philosophy, theology, or theoretical Sufism (which, at any rate, often interpenetrate one another). This is a possibility that is present in the Islamic intellectual heritage, such that we find a variety of key Muslim intellectual figures who could not easily be characterized as belonging to only “one” intellectual school. We notice this in the writings of Ghazali, a number of followers of Suhrawardi (**Ishraqis**), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and Liu Zhi.

Of course, one must be consistent in their thought and the positions they take, and not be overly eclectic to the point that their positions are no longer recognizable by any of the schools upon which they do choose to draw. With this caveat in mind, if one wishes to be reasonably eclectic in their approach, that itself is a valid way of doing Islamic philosophy. Alternatively, if, for instance, one wishes to be a hard-and-fast philosophical theologian in the Ash‘arite tradition, or take after the Peripatetics (**Mashsha’is**), or identify with the followers of Mulla Sadra (**Sadrians**), then there is of course room for this, including a number of important contemporary examples.

The operative principle in the pursuit of Islamic philosophy today is that Muslims be **lovers of wisdom**. As the Prophet said, “Wisdom is the stray camel of the believer—wherever he finds it, he has the most right to it.” And the goal of wisdom is, as stated earlier, self-knowledge, which leads to knowledge of God. Shams al-Din Tabrizi, far from being a philosopher in any usual sense of the term, put it well when discussing the goal of one’s endeavours: “You must bind yourself to knowing this: “Who am I? What substance am I? Why have I come? Where am I going? Whence is my root? At this time what am I doing? Toward what have I turned my face?”³⁴

One of the implications of the present verse being commented upon is that one should not spend too much time in philosophical debate and intellectual argumentation. That is meritorious, but only to a degree. An excessively cerebral approach to the content of Islamic philosophy and theology, and even theoretical Sufism, can harm the soul and may, in the worst possible situation, lead to pride over one’s intellectual abilities. There is a degree to which one must be able to submit their complaints, intellectual concerns, fears, hopes, aspirations, disagreements with peers and rivals, and all else to God. Recall that, as a young man, when Ibn Sina was unable to solve a logical problem, he would go to the mosque and pray, asking God to show him the answer.³⁵ The symbolism of the prayer is most apt here. In the act of prostration (when the servant is closest to his Lord, as the Prophet said), the chest, the “locus” of the heart, is literally above the head, the “locus” of the “mind.”

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³³ For an overview of the prominent role played by philosophy (both Islamic and Western) in Iran today, see Legenhausen, “Introduction,” *Topoi* 26, no. 2 (2007): 167-175.

³⁴ Cited from Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 53.

³⁵ Ibn Sina, *The Life of Ibn Sina*, edited and translated by William Gohlman (Albany, 1974), 29. Readers interested in this work are advised to consult, alongside it, the important corrective by Joep Lange: “Avicenna’s Concupiscence,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 23 (2013): 277-289.

v. 12

Through the tools of logic sharpen your mind,
with the science of poverty intellect's fetters unbind.

v. 13

For man is not just mind and thought,
but a soul affected by actions wrought.

v. 14

Hence the need of return to the purest way,
of those who discerned night from day.

Ibn Sina defines **logic** as “a theoretical art that allows one to know from which form and matter a correct definition (which in reality is called ‘definition’) and a correct syllogism (which in reality is called ‘demonstration’) are derived.”³⁶ Logic thus helps one to clearly define terms and concepts, and allows one to arrive at correct syllogistic and therefore demonstrative knowledge. Logic is conceived by Ibn Sina as being concerned with secondary intelligibles (*al-ma‘qulat al-thaniya*), since it allows one to arrive at judgments of lesser known things through primary intelligibles (*al-ma‘qulat al-ula*) or concepts that are known immediately to the mind. An alternative view amongst Muslim logicians, particularly al-Khunaji, is that the subject matter of logic is not concerned with secondary intelligibles, but with things that are known by way of conception and assent (*al-ma‘lumat al-tasawwuriyya wa-l-tasdiqiyya*).³⁷

What is clear from either definition of logic is that logic is fundamentally concerned with ordering our thoughts correctly, just as grammar is the science which allows us to correctly order our speech. As al-Akhdari says in his famous primer on logic in rhymed verse:

Logic's relationship to thought
is like grammar's relationship to speech.
For logic raises the veils, saving the mind
from egregious errors and misunderstandings.

In his commentary upon al-Akhdari's text, al-Damanhuri explains this in crystal-clear fashion:

Logic strengthens one's perception and protects one from error. For it is a set of rules which protect one's mind from committing errors in thinking. Whoever cultivates the principles of this discipline will not be assailed with errors in his thinking, just as if one cultivates the principles of grammar, he will not be assailed with errors in his statements.³⁸

³⁶ Ibn Sina, *Najat*, 44. Cf. the translation in Ibn Sina, *Avicenna's Deliverance: Logic*, translated by Asad Ahmed (Karachi, 2011), 4.

³⁷ See the insightful discussion on these two conceptions of logic in Khaled El-Rouyaheb, “Post-Avicennan Logicians on the Subject Matter of Logic: Some Thirteenth and Fourteenth-Century Discussions,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 22 (2012): 69-90.

³⁸ Shihab al-Din al-Damanhuri, *Idah al-mubham fi ma'ani al-Sullam* (Damascus, 1993), 27-28. Cf. Ibn Sina, *Avicenna's Deliverance: Logic*, 4-5.

Logic thus allows one to **sharpen the mind** in order to think clearly and systematically—both prerequisites for genuine Islamic intellectual activity. Without knowing the science of logic well, one may build an entire intellectual edifice on faulty assumptions, categories, or definitions, not to mention incorrect premises that do not follow through to conclusions, or which do follow through to conclusions, but conclusions which are false (or even conclusions which are true, but based on false premises). This is something that is noticed in contemporary discourses in Islamic thought on a variety of issues, where in many cases ideas and entire thought-systems are built off of the flimsiest of propositions. Recall here St. Thomas Aquinas’ remark (in a different context, and paraphrasing Aristotle): “[A] small error in the beginning is a great one in the end”³⁹

The study of logic is thus key for training the intellect. Now what is meant by “intellect” (‘*aql*’ in Arabic, *khirad* in Persian)? An important distinction is here to be made between two types of intellect, that of the partial intellect (‘*aql-i juzwi*’) and what we can call the capital “I” Intellect.⁴⁰ Afdal al-Din Kashani (commonly known as Baba Afdal) explains their difference as follows:

The name of the subsistent spirit that has a relation with the Essence is “Intellect” (*khirad*). Certainties come through it, and through it can be known permanence, subsistence, and the endless. This is not the partial intellect (*khirad-i juzwi*), whose trace can be found in human individuals and through which one can know more from less, up from down, and the like. This state can be found over a long period and through correct thought.⁴¹

The Intellect is without limitation, and is therefore boundless.⁴² Potentially accessible to all of us, it is nothing other than the Light which emanates from God, and which lies within us, in the depths of our being. Accessing the Intellect as such thus allows man to ascend the scales of knowledge, obtaining a greater awareness of transcendent realities, and, of course, of God Himself.

As for the partial intellect, it is something which implies limitations. The partial intellect is what is normally associated with the operations of the mind. It can be considered as a fragment of the Intellect, and hence its “partial” nature. This aspect of human cognition gives us the ability to pin down ideas, and allows for them to become fastened to ourselves (the word ‘*aql*’ in Arabic comes from a root that denotes the tying down or fettering of a camel). The partial intellect can thus be a very good thing, since it is through the use of it that one can gain command and mastery over any particular subject. Yet the partial intellect also implies limitations by virtue of its ability to only grasp those things which it *can* tie down, or which come under its purview. But **man is not just mind and thought**. This means that there is an entire other method of

³⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, translated by Peter King in Aquinas, *Basic Works*, edited by Jeffrey Hause and Robert Pasnau (Indianapolis, 2014), 14. Epictetus’ observation is also instructive in this context: “[I]f we haven’t learned with precision the criterion for other things and how other things are learned, will we be able to learn anything else with precision? How could that be possible? (cited from Brad Inwood and Lloyd Gerson (eds.), *The Stoics Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia* (Indianapolis, 2008), 197.

⁴⁰ For the cosmological aspect of the Intellect, see the commentary on v. 15.

⁴¹ Cited, with modifications, from Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy*, 165.

⁴² Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, *al-Risalat al-hadiya* in Gudrun Schubert (ed.), *Annäherungen: Der mystisch-philosophische Briefwechsel zwischen Sadr ud-Din-i Qonawī und Nasir ud-Din-i Tusi* (Beirut, 1995), 162.

“knowing,” related to the Intellect itself, that directly addresses man’s soul, which is **affected by actions wrought**.

Many of the great masters of Islamic thought, those **who discerned night from day**, insist that this method of knowing is the highest form of knowing, and is **the purest way**. It is called, amongst other things, **the science of poverty** (*danish-i faqr*). It is to this science or way of knowing that the Prophet alluded when one of his Companions told him that he loved him. “Then prepare for poverty,” the Prophet replied. It was stated earlier that all things are “poor” and **ever in need** (v. 1) of God (see also the commentary upon v. 1). The highest form of knowing corresponds, somewhat paradoxically, to a kind of unknowing, where one realizes his existential situation as someone who is ontologically poor or indigent, and thus nothing before God. It is this science alone, according to Rumi, that will be of ultimate use on the day the soul returns to the **realm most sublime** (v. 2). In his *Masnawi*, Rumi says:

Of all the sciences, on the day of death,
it is the science of poverty that will yield provisions for the way.⁴³

One can develop a kind of psychological attachment to the partial intellect, which is surely one of its main pitfalls. At its heightened state, this can even lead a person to deny the necessity of the science of poverty. In other words, thought and reflection can lead one to know God on one level. But man is not just characterized by these two things. He must not stop there in other words, since he has a soul which is affected by the actions he performs. Surely even a small degree of religious activity has a great affect upon the soul. Thus, the more one “does,” the more one’s soul may “become.” The highest form of action is to die to the self, a kind of “undoing” which implies **the need of return to the purest way**. The partial **intellect’s fetters**, therefore, are meant to be untied by embracing the science of poverty.

Amongst the Sufis, this science refers specifically to the spiritual path (*tariqa*) and all that this entails. Amongst the Islamic philosophers, it can also refer to the spiritual path (indeed, many philosophers, such as Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, were practicing Sufis). More generally, the science of poverty denotes the philosopher’s quest for cultivating his theoretical and practical faculties to the point that he reaches a state of detachment in which he is able to disengage form from matter (*tajrid*), thereby partaking in pure actuality and unbounded intellectual contemplation.⁴⁴

What is common to both approaches is the notion of practice, which here entails the dawning of the virtues (which are God’s to begin with) through self-purification (*tazkiya*) and the remembrance of God (*dhikr*). Thus, wayfaring on the path to God and the undoing of one’s existential fallen state through practice (see also commentary on v. 2) is common to both the Sufis and the philosophers. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, who held Sufism in high esteem but did not actually take the spiritual path himself,⁴⁵ explains well the fruits of the life of practice:

⁴³ Rumi, *Mathnawi-yi ma ‘nawi*, edited, translated, and annotated by R.A. Nicholson as *The Mathnawī of Jalāl’uddīn Rūmī* (London, 1925-1940), 1.2834.

⁴⁴ There are some distinctions and fine-points that are necessarily being glossed over here, such as the role of the soul’s unification with the Active Intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘‘al*) as a result of the soul’s complete *tajrid*. For a helpful discussion, see Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy*, 90-94.

⁴⁵ Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabi wrote a well-known letter to Razi in which he invites him to the spiritual path, urging him to give up his excessive reliance upon the partial intellect for which he had developed so notorious a reputation. See Rustom, “Ibn ‘Arabi’s Letter to Fakhr al-Din al-Razi: A Study and Translation,” *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 25, no. 2 (2014): 113-137.

[I]f one preoccupies oneself with cleaning one's heart from the remembrance of anything other than God, and perseveres in God's remembrance both by the tongue and spiritually, there will appear in his heart radiance and light, an overwhelming state and mighty power. Lofty, transcendent lights and Divine secrets will manifest in the substance of the soul. These are stations that, unless one attains them, one will be unable to apprehend in detail.⁴⁶

A clarification is in order here: the spiritual life does not bestow something "different" from what logic or sound reason bestows. Rather, it affords a kind of understanding of the nature of things, a window into the way things "are," in a *direct manner* which reason can indeed comprehend, but which the intellectual life alone, shorn of the complementary spiritual practice, can only attain theoretically.

*

v. 15

**'Twas the Intellect's Light to which they clung,
ascending on Heaven's ladder, rung by rung.**

During the Prophet's ascension (*mi'raj*) to the Divine Presence, *he saw the greatest of the signs of his Lord* (Q 53:18). The word *mi'raj* in Arabic literally means ladder, and thus the act of ascending carried out by the Prophet on **Heaven's ladder** took place in stages or **rung by rung**, much like one gradually progresses on a ladder when climbing it. These various degrees of the Prophet's ascension (which served as an inspiration for Dante's *Divine Comedy*) are figured in the levels of Heaven that he visited, meeting a different Prophet along the way and acquiring new forms of knowledge as he continued his ascent.

In order to ascend to Heaven, one must cling to the **Intellect's Light**, just as the great masters of the past have done, namely **those who discerned night from day** (v. 14). As a cosmological concept, the Intellect or Universal Intellect (*'aql-i kulli*; cf. the commentary on v. 14) is associated in texts of Islamic thought with the Muhammadan Reality (*al-haqiqah al-Muhammadiyah*) or the Muhammadan Light (*nur Muhammadi*).⁴⁷ Some speak of the Intellect as being the eye through which God looks upon the world, while others speak of the First Intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*), in accordance with the traditional doctrine that "none proceeds from the One but the one" (*la yasdurru 'an al-wahid illa al-wahid*).⁴⁸ Nevertheless, these understandings are very much in keeping with the identification of the Intellect with the Muhammadan Reality or Light, for they are all different ways of describing the first entity to emerge from God (in His manifest aspect). This is also a point that is made in different contexts by many authors, such as 'Ayn al-Qudat, Ibn 'Arabi, Dawud al-Qaysari, and Mulla Sadra.

⁴⁶ Cited, with a slight modification, from Shihadeh, "The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Din al-Razi" in Shihadeh (ed.), *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh, 2007), 114. See also the pertinent remarks in Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, 162.

⁴⁷ Some authors distinguish between the Muhammadan Reality and the Muhammadan Light, and/or between the Muhammadan Reality and the Muhammadan Spirit (*ruh Muhammadi*). For the latter distinction, see Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, 1994), chapter 2.

⁴⁸ For this teaching, see Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 9.4, 5-11. A rejection of it can be found in Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, translated by Michael Marmura (Provo, 2000), 65ff.

One can only ascend Heaven's ladder by following the Prophet, who is the physical manifestation of that light which comes from God. This is why Q 3:31 tells the Prophet to instruct the believers, "*If you love God, follow me, and God will love you.*" In undertaking this journey on Heaven's ladder, man thus undergoes his own *mi'raj* or ascension to Heaven. In fact, it is not uncommon for one to encounter the Light of the Prophet himself as he ascends to God, which would be tantamount to meeting the most manifest aspect of the Face of God.

Ibn Tufayl appears to allude to this idea in his famous philosophical novel *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* (*Life, Son of the Awakened One*), where he recounts how Hayy arrived at a profound understanding of the nature of God through meditation and contemplation, and through an intense study of nature and its concomitant parts. Hayy reached such a stage that he encountered something that was neither God nor other than God, and was the direct result of his total annihilation of the self:

After pure absorption, total annihilation (*al-fana' al-tamm*), and the reality of arrival (*wusul*), he witnessed the highest sphere which does not have a body. And he saw an essence, free from matter. It was not the essence of the Real One, nor was it the soul of the sphere; but it was not other than them. It is like the form of the sun which manifests itself on one of the polished mirrors—it is not the sun, nor is it the mirror; but it is not other than them. In the essence of that disengaged sphere he saw perfection, splendour, and beauty too great to be described by the tongue, and too subtle to be clothed in letters or speech. In the final analysis, he experienced delight, happiness, rapture, and joy on account of his witnessing the essence of the Real.⁴⁹

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v. 16

**Why harp on the problem of time and eternity?
You yourself become eternal, then you will see.**

This verse is partly inspired by a wonderful story—related here from memory—concerning Javid Iqbal, the son of Muhammad Iqbal. Javid visited his father in the last moments of his life. At that time, Iqbal was unable to clearly see those around him. When his son came to him, Iqbal asked who it was that was visiting him. On this, his son replied, "It is me, Javid." Now, *javid* in Persian means "eternal." Upon hearing this answer, Iqbal said, "No, you are not Javid until you become *javid*." One way to understand this statement is that we are not who we really are until we actually become what we always have been and are supposed to be, namely "residents" of the **realm most sublime** (v. 2).

It is natural for those with a philosophical penchant to be interested in questions that pertain to time and eternity, and there are a number of brilliant expositions in the history of Islamic philosophy which treat these issues with great sophistication and subtlety. Mir Damad, in

⁴⁹ Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* (Beirut, 2009), 83-84. It should be noted that in the best-known English translation of this work, the point here is lost because the translation of this passage is incorrect in several places. See *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*, translated by Lenn Goodman (Chicago, 2009), 152. For a helpful discussion of Ibn Tufayl's thought, see Taneli Kukkonen, *Ibn Tufayl: Living the Life of Reason* (Oxford, 2014).

particular, offered a way to reconcile the debate over whether the universe was created in time or was eternal through his doctrine of the perpetual incipience of the world (*huduth dahri*).⁵⁰

There are, however, a number of problems that arise whichever way one understands the nature of God's relationship to the world (*rabt al-qadim bi-l-hadith*). One method of addressing this problem, and which is found throughout the history of philosophy in varying forms, is to argue that time does not relate to God since He stands outside of time, and thus is continuously in a series of "nows." This does not solve a number of other problems, however, such as how God, who is outside of time, *can* relate to the world of time and change. Indeed, one proof that this is a philosophical problem that cannot be easily or perhaps satisfactorily resolved on an intellectual level is that we are still asking this question. In other words, we still **harp on the problem of time and eternity**, and with little promise of an ultimate answer.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine reports a response given by someone to the question, "What was God doing before creating the world?" The answer, we are told, is that God was creating Hell for those who inquire into such questions! St. Augustine clearly does not agree with this answer because, as he says, it makes the questioner of such things a laughing stock, while the respondent is praised for giving a dismissive answer. St. Augustine then goes on to offer a wonderful exposition of the relationship between time and eternity as it relates to God and the world.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the report conveyed in the *Confessions* also drives home the ultimate futility of asking such questions—a question of this nature, as ridiculous as it might seem on one level, can only be met with as ridiculous a reply.

As we find in Islamic civilization, traditional Indian civilization was also confronted, for different reasons, with the problem of whether or not the world is eternal. Addressing one of his disciples who had been plagued with this and other metaphysical questions, the Buddha put forth a scenario: a man is struck with a poisonous arrow and a surgeon visits. But before the surgeon pulls out the arrow, the man insists that he know a list of things such as the name, social status, and race of the man who shot the arrow, as well as the material from which the bow and arrow were made. "All this would still not be known to that man," comments the Buddha, "and meanwhile he would die." The Buddha then tells his student that such questions are ultimately not beneficial, since they will not lead to man's deliverance⁵² (see also commentary on v. 7).

If Muslims work on returning home, ordering their thought and practice in such a way so as to gain the beneficial and thus necessary kind of self-knowledge that will take them there (see vv. 12-13), they will become characterized by eternity, effectively "becoming" **eternal** (see commentary on v. 21). Then they **will see**, which is to say that they will consequently be able to understand the purpose of their lives along the **arcs (v. 4) of the circle of existence (v. 4)**, just as **those who discerned night from day (v. 14)** have done.

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⁵⁰ See his *The Book of Blazing Brands*, translated by Keven Brown (New York, 2009). An introduction to Mir Damad is forthcoming: Sajjad Rizvi, *Mir Damad* (Oxford).

⁵¹ For the joke and St. Augustine's assessment of it, as well as his treatment of time, see *The Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1991), book 11.

⁵² The entire tale can be found in Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (Boston, 1995), *sutta* 63.

v. 17

If you wish to master the art of seeing,
first understand the primacy of Being.

v. 18

Of all things its concept is the best-known,
yet its reality remains forever un-shown.

v. 19

We are all modes of Being, rays of Light.
Awaken to this reality, O soul, take flight!

The first step in being able to properly see (v. 16) is to correctly understand the nature of existence (see also commentary on v. 1). Mulla Sadra's doctrine of the **primacy of Being** (*asalat al-wujud*)⁵³ is a philosophical explication of the doctrine of the oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*). A correct understanding of the primacy of Being can give one a clear picture of the nature of reality, and how it is that God, who is Being (*wujud*), is related to the world without there being any kind of change introduced into His nature.

Concerning the basic outline of the doctrine of the primacy of Being, v. 18 is a paraphrase of the famous verse by Mulla Hadi Sabziwari which summarizes the entire doctrine in the pithiest of forms. Concerning Being, he says:

Its concept is amongst the **best-known** of **things**.
Yet its reality lies in utter obscurity.⁵⁴

The concept (*mafhum*) of being is "amongst" or is the best-known of all things, which is to say that the "idea" of being occurs to all us naturally or self-evidently (*badihi*). We all know what being is because we are mired in it and are ourselves "beings." Yet when we seek to understand its reality (*haqiqah*), the situation is altogether different. *Where* is being such that we can define it and trap it into some kind of conceptual grid amenable to analysis? We can point to individual instances of being, that is, to *beings*, amongst which we ourselves are also counted. Yet none of this reveals being as such.

If we seek to give a definition of being, this too is impossible, since the very ground of our definition would rest on the reality of being itself. And it is a basic logical axiom that a definition cannot contain the term that it is seeking to define. So *where* is being? It is everywhere, including the "every" and the "where." Yet by the same token, it is no-where, since its reality is not completely manifest, which is to say that it will remain **forever un-shown**; or, as Sabziwari would put it, its "reality lies in utter obscurity."

Now, this position is based on the idea that the word being or existence is a synonymous term (*ishtirak ma'awi*), not a homonymous term (*ishtirak lafzi*). That is, the word being can and

⁵³ A most helpful introduction to the fundamentals of Mulla Sadra's ontology can be found in his *The Book of Metaphysical Penetrations*, translated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr; edited, introduced, and annotated by Ibrahim Kalin (Provo, 2014). Two excellent surveys of Sadra's philosophy can be found in Ibrahim Kalin, *Mulla Sadra* (Oxford, 2014) and Sayeh Meisami, *Mulla Sadra* (Oxford, 2013).

⁵⁴ Sabziwari, *Sharh-i Manzuma*, edited by Mehdi Mohaghegh and Toshihiko Izutsu (Tehran, 1969), 4. Alternative translations of these lines can be found in Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present*, 297 (note 29) and Sabziwari, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari*, 31.

does apply to any and all things. Thus if we say that a car exists, or a building exists, or God exists we are using the same word to denote the same meaning in each of these contexts. The contrary view, that the term being is homonymous, entails that when we say a car exists, or that a building exists, or that God exists we actually mean different things, even if the term “exists” is present in each of these statements. One of the most ardent supporters of the homonymous nature of being was a younger contemporary and rival of Mulla Sadra, Mulla Rajab ‘Ali Tabrizi. This is the gist of his argument against the idea that being or existence is a synonymous term:

Sharing of [the terms] “existence” and “existent” between the Necessary and the contingent is homonymous, not synonymous, for if the meaning of “existence” and “existent”—which are self-evident concepts—were shared between the Necessary and the contingent, that meaning would apply to the Necessary Being, or part of its essence, or an accident of its essence. Thus, we say that the essence of the Necessary Being cannot, [at the same time,] be that existence which is a self-evident concept, a contingent quality, and [that which] is dependent upon the essence of the contingent.⁵⁵

An answer to this kind of objection raised by Mulla Rajab is that what we actually witness are **modes of Being** in being’s deployed or expansive state (*al-wujud al-munbasit*), which itself undergoes gradation (*tashkik*) not with respect to predication only, but *in its reality itself*. This means that being is a single term that takes on various gradations in its own reality, and which never compromises its actual unity. Thus, being is not simply a term that can apply to God and nothing else. Rather, it can apply to God and to everything else (synonymy), but in varying degrees of its meaning, thanks to the gradational nature of the deployment of being. This means that the cosmos consists of the various degrees of intensity and diminution of being (modes of being), and this is how quiddities, which have no reality in and of themselves, emerge (cf. the commentary on v. 2)

Since being is identified with light (*nur*) by some of the major schools of Islamic metaphysics, another way of framing this is to say that **all** of us are **rays of Light**. Clearly some rays are stronger than others, just as the rays of the sun partake of varying degrees of intensity based on their level of proximity to the sun. The reality of Being on the other hand is identified as the aspect of God that does not manifest Itself, or Absolutely Unconditioned Being (*wujud la bi-shart maqsami*). Another way of speaking of Being in its state of being forever un-shown is to refer to it as the Essence of Exclusive Oneness (*al-dhat al-ahadiyya*). One of the implications of this doctrine is that the order of time, change, and causation is not related to Being as such (see also commentary on v. 1), but to Its deployed or manifest state. Therefore, change is never introduced into the Divine nature.

It is fitting at this point to introduce another aspect of the term *wujud* (being or existence). The word *wujud* comes from an Arabic root that means “to find.” Something that is found is “there” in some sense, which means that it exists. Thus, we can translate *wujud* as both “being” and “finding.” Yet the root of the word *wujud* also gives us terms such as “consciousness” (*wijdan*) and “joy” or “bliss” (*wajd*). There is thus a deep connection between being/finding, consciousness, and bliss: that which Is “finds” Itself, and, through this Self-

⁵⁵ Mulla Rajab ‘Ali Tabrizi, *On the Necessary Being*, translated by Mohammed Rustom in Nasr and Aminrazavi (eds.), *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, 5:290.

awareness, is in bliss.⁵⁶ There are a number of important metaphysical doctrines which emerge from this understanding. One of them is that the cosmos is the theatre of God's manifestation or the display of the different modes of *wujud* in which He sees Himself in an objectivized manner rather than in a purely subjective manner (as the supreme Subject, God is not bound by any limitations—one aspect of His All-Possibility is thus “self-negation,” which implies manifestation and objectivization).

Another implication of the nature of *wujud* as implying being, consciousness, and bliss is that all things in existence, all modes of *wujud*, are modes of consciousness and also bliss. With particular respect to all things as being different modes of *wujud* and therefore different modes of consciousness, we thus have a cosmic picture in which all things, even seemingly inanimate things, participate at least on some level in consciousness, and are thus “aware” in varying degrees. In other words, since God is consciousness and all things are modes of His consciousness, all things participate in being conscious, but of course at lesser levels.

It is not only from this perspective that an argument can be made for the conscious aspect of things. Even such a strict Peripatetic as Nasir al-Din Tusi argues for the conscious behaviour of natural agents or non-animate things. In his commentary upon Ibn Sina's *al-Isharat wa-l-tanbihat* (*Allusions and Reminders*), wherein he responds, point-by-point, to the criticisms raised against Ibn Sina by Razi in his commentary upon the same text, Tusi puts forth his argument. The context here has to do with final causality in natural agents and natural forces, and whether they are in any sense aware of their final cause or direction to which they tend, namely their *teloi*. Natural agents, Razi argues, are not aware of their *teloi*, for this would imply that they have some kind of consciousness. Yet if they are not aware of their *teloi*, then how can it be that they tend in some direction as opposed to another? This leads Razi to argue that natural agents do not have *teloi*, and by doing so he is attempting to undercut the Peripatetic emphasis on the nature of necessity in causation, to which, as an Ash'arite, he cannot subscribe.⁵⁷ Referring to Razi as “the learned commentator,” Tusi first summarizes his contention, and then offers his own shocking response:

The learned commentator contends [the fact] that Ibn Sina and his followers affirm *teloi* for natural agents and natural forces which have no consciousness. But, [he argues,] it is not possible to say that the *teloi* are existent in the minds of the natural agents and natural forces, nor can it be said that they are existent *in concreto*, since their existence is dependent upon the existence of effects. So if these *teloi* are not existent and the non-existent is not a cause for the existent, then there is no way out of this except to say that there are no *teloi* for natural agents.

The answer to this is that so long as the nature does not, in its essence, require a thing like some kind of place, for example, then the body will not move so as to attain that thing. Thus, the existence of that thing is required by the nature, this being

⁵⁶ The parallel between *wujud*, *wijdan*, and *wajd* and the Hindu philosophical notion of *sat*, *chit*, and *ananada* (literally “being, consciousness, bliss”) was first noted by Nasr many years ago (see also his insights in *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 1ff). Cf. the related observations in Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, 2013), 43, 248 and Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, 2006), 92.

⁵⁷ For a translation of Razi's argument, see Toby Mayer's masterful study (which is currently being prepared for publication): “On Existence and its Causes: The Fourth *Namat* of Avicenna's *Isharat* and its Main Commentaries” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2001), 118 (note 91) and Razi, *Commentary on The Book of Directives and Remarks*, translated by Robert Wisnovsky in Nasr and Aminrazavi (eds.), *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, 3:193-195.

an established fact which indicates the existence of that thing for it in potentiality, as well as some sense of consciousness of it before its existence in actuality, which is the final cause for its act.⁵⁸

Incidentally, Sadra attempts to defend Tusi on this point,⁵⁹ but it is not entirely clear that he is able to provide a convincing case. What is clear from the foregoing commentary on these verses is that if one can discern the multiple orders of reality which emerge as a result of the manifestation of being, he will be able to awaken to the reality of being, and, by extension, the reality of consciousness. By virtue of this discernment, he will be able to tie the seemingly disparate orders of reality together, seeing all things as so many manifestations of the One Being whose Face remains hidden behind the tresses of its modes of manifestation.

As the bird of one's soul begins to **take flight**, it intensifies in *wujud*, becoming more real, aware, and conscious. To be sure, this cannot be attained only through a sound intellectual perception of things. Rather, one must also be proficient in **the science of poverty (v. 12)**, which will enable him to lift himself from the cosmic scene as a seemingly "other," knowing agent in order to see what is really "there." It is to this that Hafiz alludes in his famous poem:

Between the lover and Beloved there is no barrier.
Hafiz, you yourself are the veil. So lift what stands in between!⁶⁰

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v. 20

**For the realized one alike are coming and going,
as he witnesses things through the All-Knowing.**

v. 21

**His body and soul transcend time and space—
like a star, shining in the firmament of No-Place.**

The first hemistich of **v. 20** alludes to a verse in Mahmud Shabistari's profound metaphysical poem *Gulshan-i raz* (*The Rosegarden of Mystery*).⁶¹ Having ascended on **Heaven's ladder (v. 15)** with the help of the **Intellect's Light (v. 15)**, the realized one or the sage has **become eternal (v. 16)**, and can thus see all things as so many manifestations coming from a

⁵⁸ Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Sharhay al-Isharat* (Qum, 1983), 194. I have taken much help reading this passage from the translation in Mayer, "On Existence and its Causes," 118.

⁵⁹ See Roxanne Marcotte, "Al-Masa'il al-Qudsiyya and Mulla Sadra's Proofs for Mental Existence," *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, no. 2 (2011): 171-175.

⁶⁰ The text of the poem in which these lines occur is accessible here: <http://mastaneh.ir/hafez/ghazal/ghazal-266> (accessed April 28, 2014). Cf. Plotinus' statement to the effect that the One, who "has no otherness is always present, and we are present to it when we have no otherness" (Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.9, "On the Good or the One," 8.45-47 in Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, 1988)).

⁶¹ Mahmud Shabistari, *Gulshan-i raz*, edited by Javad Nurbakhsh (Tehran, 1976), line 9. See also the commentary upon this verse in Shams al-Din Muhammad Lahiji, *Mafatih al-i'jaz fi sharh Gulshan-i raz*, edited by Muhammad Rida Barzgar-Khaliqi and 'Iffat Karbasi (Tehran, 2012), 13. A very helpful set of select translations from Lahiji's commentary upon Shabistari's poem can be found in Lahiji, *Commentary on the Secret Garden of Divine Mystery*, translated by Mohammad Faghfoory in Nasr and Aminrazavi (eds.), *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, 4:479-495.

realm most sublime (v. 1). On account of having attained the highest level of disengagement or *tajrid*, such an individual's **body and soul** are no longer confined by **time and space**, and **coming and going** are consequently the same to him. In other words, he sees no difference between the spatial referents which normally characterize time and change (time being defined as the measurement of change between two points). Indeed, on account of the Divine knowledge that it contains, his soul is now strengthened to the point that he is no longer subject to the kind of change that other souls experience. Razi explains it in this way:

The soul is the locus of knowledge of God, which is the greatest elixir that brings about eternal subsistence. Since, [through knowledge of God,] the soul is characterized by subsistence and purity, it is free from change and annihilation.... Whenever the light of the knowledge of God shines into the heart of man, and God's qualities of majesty and greatness are unveiled to him, his soul is strengthened and his [rational] faculty perfected.⁶²

This above point also implies that **the realized one** does not live a life that is antithetical to the body, but rather sees his own body and the bodies of others as nothing other than the loci wherein God's wisdom can be found. All dimensions of reality, be they body and soul, or even time and space, contain the traces of the craft of the Divine Artisan:

In the body are hidden mysteries—
the artisanry of the King of the world.
Go, read the signs of His wisdom
in the body and soul, and in time and space.⁶³

Such an individual's entire being has thus become holy, what the Islamic philosophers would refer to as having become "deiform" or "God-like" (*muta'allih*). The deiform ones fully realize Plato's statement that time is "a moving image of eternity."⁶⁴ They behold everything from God's perspective, who is **the All-Knowing**. We can even say that they **witness things** not as themselves, but as God Himself. This of course does not imply any kind of substantial unity between the servant and God, which is impossible. Jacques Maritain explains the situation very well: "By vision, the creature becomes the true God Himself, not in the order of substance, but in the order of that immaterial union which constitutes the intellectual act."⁶⁵

The soul, now a completely actualized intellect, has become completely disengaged from matter and can thus see the wisdom in all orders of reality, including matter itself. The soul thus stands in the station of "you did not throw" (*maqam ma ramayta*). This is an allusion to the famous Quranic passage where God tells the Prophet that he did not throw (the dust at the Quraysh at the battle of Badr) when "he" threw it, but that it was God who threw it (see Q 8:17). This is to say that the realized one is in the station of *baqa'* or Divine subsistence, which is why he is known as one who "subsists through God" (*baqi bi-llah*).

⁶² Razi, *al-Matalib al-'aliya min al-'ilm al-ilahi*, edited by Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Shahin (Beirut, 1999), 7:139.

⁶³ Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford, 1996), 235 (Persian text).

⁶⁴ Plato, *Timaeus* 37d in Plato, *Complete Works*, edited John Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, 1997). For a substantial treatment of this teaching, see Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany, 1993), chapter 3.

⁶⁵ Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, translated by Gerald Phelan (Notre Dame, 1995), 271.

Subsisting through God, the person thus realized has left the world, even though he remains in the world. He has plunged into the Ocean without a shore (*bahr la sahila lahu*) or the Ocean of nonexistence (*darya-yi 'adam*), never to return. His individual “waves” have ebbed back forever into the Ocean from which he originally came, and he is now coloured by “colourless-ness” (*bi rangi*). Where is such an individual? Like the reality of Being, he is no-where, and, because he is with the Source of all things, he is also “every-where.” His trace is the traceless, and his place is the placeless. He stands in the station of No-Station (*la maqam*) and **No-Place** (*la makan*). Since in Islamic thought No-Place is identified, amongst other things, with the ever-blinding reality of the intensity of God’s Light or what is called Black Light (*nur-i siyah*), the realized one shines **like a star** in the **firmament** of the Divine Blackness:

Neither this body am I nor soul,
Nor these fleeting images passing by,
Nor concepts or thoughts, mental images,
Nor yet sentiments and the psyche’s labyrinth.
Who am I then? A consciousness without origin,
Nor born in time nor begotten here below.
I am that which was, is, and ever shall be,
A jewel in the crown in the Divine Self.
A star in the firmament of the luminous One.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (San Francisco, 2010), 10.