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MOHAMMED RUSTOM (OOC-000806536)
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PHONE:
FAX:
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SPIRIT, BODY, AND IN-BETWEEN

William C. Chittick

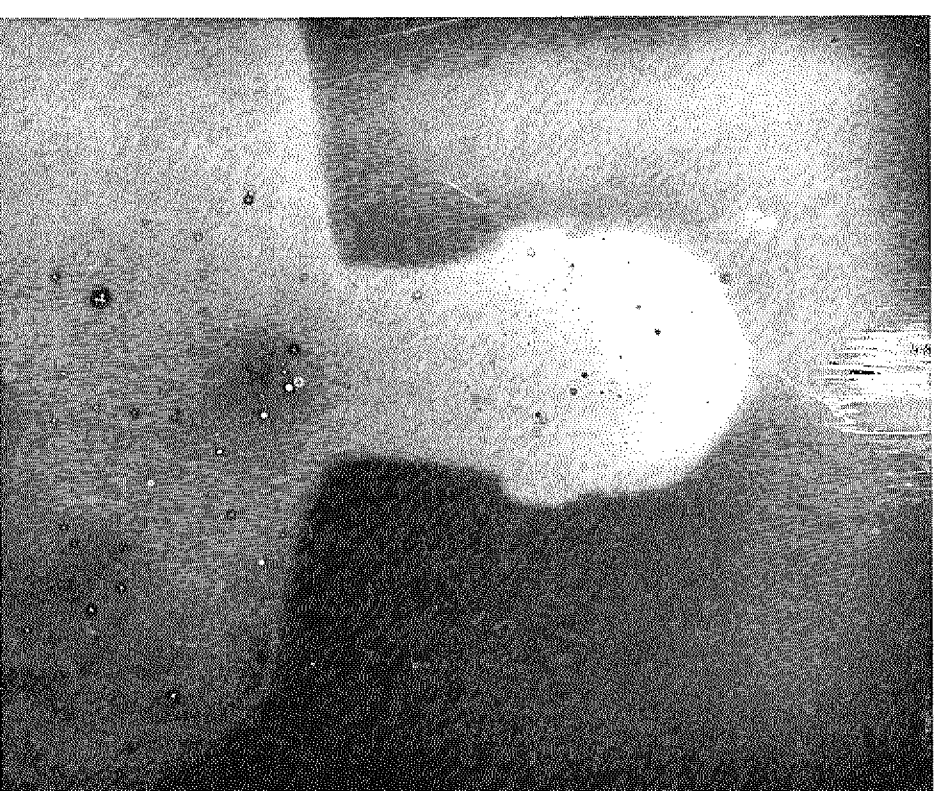
BEFORE GOD BLEW OF HIS OWN SPIRIT INTO CLAY,

there was no soul—only spirit and body. The soul is neither spirit nor body, but rather an ambiguous something that wavers in-between. It is alive and dead, awake and asleep, luminous and dark, one and many, wise and ignorant. Each soul is a unique image of the unity of God and the multiplicity of his attributes. The exact manner in which a soul is configured depends upon the relative predominance of oneness and manyness, and this changes constantly throughout its life. When the soul falls into forgetfulness and ignorance, multiplicity and dispersion predominate. When it lives in wakefulness and awareness, unity and integration increase.

The Koran tells us that when God created heaven and earth, he also created “what is between the two.” The ambiguity of this intermediate realm helps establish a more subtle understanding of the relationship between spirit and body. God created human beings as he created the universe, with both unseen and visible dimensions. He shaped Adam’s clay “with his own two hands” and then blew into him of his own spirit. His two hands can be understood as unity and multiplicity, mercy and wrath, light and dark. The divine inblowing is associated with the creation of Adam in the divine image and God’s teaching him “all the names” (Koran 2:31).

The universe is a single, multi-layered reality. Its unseen dimensions are home to spiritual beings such as angels, and its visible dimensions to minerals, plants, and animals. Its in-between realms are the dwelling place of beings that are neither fully spiritual nor fully corporeal, such as demons. The human microcosm is structured in the same way: spirit, body, and in-between. The last is commonly called “the soul” and is nothing other than the locus of our awareness and selfhood.

Islam has no concept of original sin; in Koranic terms, Adam’s problem was that “He forgot” (20:115). The Koran calls the cure of forgetfulness *dhikr*, “remembrance,” and also calls the prophetic messages by this same word, *dhikr*, though here it is usually translated as “reminder.” *Dhikr*, then, comes from the side of God to awaken the soul to the spirit’s realm, and *dhikr* is also the soul’s response to the divine initiative and its means to achieve awakening. The final outcome of the soul’s becoming is determined by the creative tension between spirit and body, light and darkness, remembrance and forgetfulness,



FRONTPIECE

A DRAWING BY ADAM FUSS
FROM MY GHOST

understanding and ignorance. Rumi puts it this way:

The states of human beings are as if an angel’s wing were brought and stuck on a donkey’s tail so that perhaps the donkey, through the radiance and companionship of the angel, may itself become an angel.¹

THE GENESIS, BECOMING, and destiny of the soul are frequently discussed under the rubric “origin and return,” which is understood as the descending and ascending arcs of the circle of created existence. The descending arc traces out the movement of existence from the initial unity of the divine breath to the multiplicity of its

reverberations in the material realm. The ascending arc describes the stages by which existent things return to their origin. In the case of human souls, the return is divided into two sorts: compulsory and voluntary.

The compulsory return is followed by each human being in the ascending arc that is the natural course of corporeal and spiritual development. The major stages are birth, death, the isthmus (separating this world from the next), resurrection, judgment, and paradise or hell. Those who return by choice do so by undertaking the praxis and remembrance necessary to reintegrate themselves into the realm from which they descended. Those who refuse to go back freely pass through similar stages of development but are likely to end up in a different world. “Paradise”

designates the fruit of successfully completing the voluntary return, and “hell” the fruit of rebelling against the natural course of events.

SURRAWARDI (d. 1191), founder of the Illuminationist School of philosophy, and Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), “the greatest



ANGELS PAYING HOMAGE TO ADAM, 1560
PERSIAN MINIATURE FROM MALAIS AL-USSH SHAK
SAFARID DYNASTY (1502-1736)

master” of the Sufis, both engaged in comprehensive analysis of the in-between realm of the soul, which they often called *khayal*, image, or imagination.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s view, spirit and body are the heaven and earth of the human microcosm. The soul is the intermediary realm

ISLAM HAS NO CONCEPT OF ORIGINAL SIN; IN KORANIC TERMS, ADAM’S PROBLEM WAS THAT “HE FORGOT.”

in which everything is an imperfect image of what lies beyond and beneath. What lies beyond is the spirit, and what lies beneath is the body. The in-between is neither heaven nor earth, neither invisible nor visible, neither spirit nor body, but an imaginal (not imaginary) isthmus. In order to take advantage of human embodiment, people need to delve fully into this mysterious realm, which is, as Ibn ‘Arabi puts it, “an ocean without shore.” Within the soul the divine breath lies in wait for the seekers. There alone do the lovers find the Beloved. Rumi makes the point in his own typical fashion:

Have you heard about the king’s edict?
He wants all the beauties to come out from
their veils.

This is the command he gave: “This year
I want sugar *zery* cheap.”
What a year! What a blessed day!
What a king! What laughing good fortune!
Now it’s forbidden to sit in the house—
the king is strolling in the square!
Come with us to the square and see
a joyful banquet, manifest and hidden.
Tables have been set with plenty—

all sort of sweetmeats, barbecued chicken,
Serving boys standing like moons before
the cup-bearer,

minstrels playing music sweeter than life,
But the souls of the lovers have been freed
from cup and table by their love for the
king.

You say, “Where is this?” Right there
where the thought of “where” arose?

THE FULLNESS OF HUMAN POSSIBILITY pertains much more to the unseen realms of the king’s banquet than to the visible realm of activity. Even the most mundane of our goals is driven by the desire for invisible qualities, such as pleasure and happiness, or prestige and power. The invisible, spiritual side of the soul gradually comes to predominate over the visible, corporeal side during the compulsory return, when invisible attributes and powers gradually display their signs in the developing embryo and then in the infant. Vegetal life appears through growth and differentiation, animal powers through volitional movement. The specifically human characteristics make their appearance somewhat later in intelligence, discernment, and speech.

Islamic law becomes incumbent only at puberty, when the compulsory return needs to be augmented by the voluntary return. The soul has now achieved sufficient independence to shape its own becoming; despite constraints placed upon it by physical embodiment, vegetal and animal characteristics, genetic predispositions, the law of karma—and whatever else you want to name—these are not absolute. The spirit, deeply buried though

THE IN-BETWEEN IS NEITHER HEAVEN NOR EARTH, NEITHER INVISIBLE NOR VISIBLE, NEITHER SPIRIT NOR BODY, BUT AN IMAGINAL (NOT IMAGINARY) ISTHMUS.

it may be, has no essential connection with the bodily realm. To the extent that its light shines in people’s awareness, they have a say in what they do.

The soul is an imaginal realm from the beginning, which is to say that it is born of spirit’s light and matter’s dark-

ness. Though it is dependent on the body's clay for the initial manifestation of spirit within itself, it gradually increases in substantiality to the point where it no longer needs a body to make its qualities manifest. Premonitions of its independence are experienced in dreams, which give us clear insight into imaginal reality.

The unity of dreams stems from the oneness of the spirit's light, and the multiplicity of the external, sensory realm, whose representations have been stored by memory. In dreams bodily and spiritual attributes are thoroughly mixed. The five senses truly function, but what we observe does not exist in the external, visible world, only in the invisible and multitudinous unity of our own selfhoods.

Mulla Sadrā (d. 1640) epitomizes the soul's nature in a famous dictum: "The soul is bodily in origination and

IN THE CASE OF HUMAN SOULS, THE RETURN IS DIVIDED INTO TWO SORTS: COMPULSORY AND VOLUNTARY.

spiritual in subsistence." The multiplicity that we experience stems from the external world, but the singularity of the conscious self derives from the divine breath. The soul is both one and many, and everything it knows and experiences is located within itself, which is to say that its perception and understanding are essentially imaginal, a merging of the body and spirit.

The creative activities of the human species externalize the soul's imaginal realm, giving rise to culture and civilization. It is the soul's destiny, however, to be released from its connection to the outside world. According to Sadrā, natural death takes place when

the soul discards what it no longer needs. Bodily attributes continue to play a significant role in the soul's posthumous becoming because, by definition, it combines spirit and body in a unified whole. The fact of its having discarded its physical shell has no effect on its essential nature.

ACCORDING TO IBN 'ARABI AND OTHERS, the next world turns the soul inside out. What is spiritual and invisible here—the selfhood constructed from beliefs, thoughts, character traits, and memories—becomes bodily there. What is bodily here—the external characteristics that make us human—becomes invisible there. In the posthumous realm we experience our own selfhoods in corporeal and psychic forms that accord with our own soulful nature. This helps explain why, says Sadrā, we will cease being human after the resurrection. Instead, we will be divided into four broad genera, each with many species: angels, demons, predatory beasts, and dumb brutes. These four correlate with the basic tendencies of the human soul: ascending, descending, active, and passive.

Let me end with another quote from Rumi, who sums up this dimension of Islamic thought with his usual magic:

There are thousands of wolves and pigs in our existence,
godly and ungodly, beauty and bastard.
The ruling property belongs to the predominant:
If gold is more than copper, then you are gold.

The character that predominates in your existence
will of necessity give you form at the resurrection.¹

¹ FIHI MA FIHI (Furuzanfar edition), p. 107.

² DIWAN (Furuzanfar edition), ghazal no. 1903.

³ MATHNAWI, Book 2, vss. 1417-19.

THE SPIRIT AND THE SOUL

Jack Gilbert

It should have been the family that lasted.
Should have been my sister and my peasant mother.
But it was not. They were the affection,
not the journey. It could have been my father,
but he died too soon. Gelmetri and Gregg
and Nogami lasted. It was the newness of me,
and the newness after that, and newness again.
It was the important love and the serious lust.
It was Pitsburgh that lasted. The iron and fog
and sooty brick houses. Not Aunt Mince and Pearl,
but the black-and-white winters with their girth
and geological length of cold. Streets ripped
apart by ice and emerging like wounded beasts when
the snow finally left in April. Freight trains
with their steam locomotives working at night.
Summers the size of crusades. When I was a boy,
I saw downtown a large camera standing in front
of the William Pitt Hotel or pointed at Kaufmann's
Department Store. Usually around midnight,
but the people still going by. The camera set
slow enough that cars and people left no trace.
The crowds in Rome and Tokyo and Manhattan
did not last. But the empty streets of Perugia,
my two bowls of bean soup on Kos, and Pimpaporn
Charonpannith lasted. The plain nakedness of Anna
in Denmark remains in me forever. The wet lilacs
on Highland Avenue when I was fourteen. Carrying
Michiko dead in my arms. It is not about the spirit.
The spirit dances, comes and goes. But the soul
is nailed to us like lentils and fatty bacon lodged
under the ribs. What lasted is what the soul arc.
The way a child knows the world by putting it
part by part into his mouth. As I tried to gnaw
my way into the Lord, working to put my heart
against that heart. Lying in the wheat at night,
letting the rain after all the dry months have me.

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