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The Worldview of Islamic Philosophy

Philosophy's relation to the Islamic tradition has often been debated in modern studies. A good number of the experts consider the relation tenuous, and others disagree. The difference of opinion has much to do with differing understandings of the key terms of the debate. No one seems to have doubted that at least some of the philosophers are in fact doing "philosophy" in the Greek tradition. The questions arise because of the label "Islamic" or "Muslim" and disagreements on the nature of Islam. Some scholars have held that philosophy and Islam have little to do with each other, and others maintain that philosophy plays an important and even essential role in the Islamic tradition. Typically, those who hold that Islam and philosophy are incompatible have a rather narrow definition of what constitutes Islamic belief and practice, while those who see no essential conflict define their terms much more broadly.

When considering this discussion, which comes up quickly in most general works on Islamic philosophy,¹ we need to remember that, by and large, the Western experts have been trained in the history of Greek and Western philosophy, not in Islamic thought, which means that they have understood philosophy's role largely in Western terms. They have also tended to have a modern preconception about the mutual hostility between religion and philosophy. For many modern scholars, after all, religion is beneath the dignity of the intellectual, whereas true philosophy represents a grand quest for truth on the part of those too enlightened to fall for religious dogma. Some of the well-known experts have told us that the philosophers had to hide their true beliefs in "esoteric" formulations and bow to the rhetorical needs of their times, because their teachings went against the grain of the religious tradition. In this view, it is irrelevant that, on the surface at least, most philosophers considered philosophy a legitimate way to understand and practice Islam and that they saw no contradiction

between Islamic faith and the philosophical quest. Such statements in the texts are considered window-dressing to fend off the criticisms of benighted dogmatists.

There is, of course, a great deal of evidence to show that philosophy was not compatible with the religious sentiments of a large body of Muslims, but there is also evidence that many of the philosophers considered themselves sincere followers of the Koran and the Prophet. Many of those who attacked philosophy, such as the enormously influential Ghazālī, were themselves highly sophisticated advocates of philosophical thinking. Their objection was not to the training of the mind that philosophers underwent, but to certain specific conclusions many philosophers reached, conclusions that they considered not only hostile to the teachings of Islam, but also unwarranted by the philosophical evidence.²

One needs to remember that the theologians and jurists who attacked the philosophers often attacked their theological and juridical opponents with the same vehemence. Islam's intellectual territory was always hotly contested by several schools of thought, and the philosophers appear less as a unique school than as one of the contending factions. As for the philosophers' need to toe the rhetorical line, this varied from time to time and place to place, but it was largely a matter of adhering to the political correctness of the day. My own sense of Islamic history is that at many times and places, indeed, in by far the majority of times and places, the philosophers could say and write anything they wanted, because no one really cared, given that the vast majority of people had no interest in such erudite issues. The situation then was not much different than the situation now; there was both a pressure not to question sacred cows publicly, and an abysmal ignorance on the part of most people about what the quest for wisdom might demand.

Philosophical Issues in the Islamic Tradition

To grasp why many Muslim intellectuals over the centuries have considered philosophy an integral part of the Islamic tradition, we need to have some understanding of what this tradition entails.³ Like other religions, Islam addresses three basic levels of human existence: practice, understanding, and virtue; or body, mind, and heart; or, to use the well-known Koranic triad, *islām* (submission), *īmān* (faith), and *ihsān* (doing what is beautiful). These concerns are patently obvious to anyone who has studied the Koran or the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet), and Muslims have always considered the "search for knowledge" that the Prophet made incumbent on the faithful to pertain to all three of these domains.

Islamic practice is rooted in the Sunnah or model of the Prophet, who demonstrated how the Koran could be applied to everyday life. Islamic understanding is rooted in investigating the objects of faith that are identified by the Koran—God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, the Last Day, and the "measuring out" (*qadar*) of good and evil. Islamic virtue is grounded in the attempt to find God present at all times and in all places, just as the Prophet found him present. Practice pertains to the domain of the body, understanding to the mind or "intelligence" or "intellect" or "reason" (*ʿaql*), and virtue to the heart (*qalb*), where one is able to experience the reality of God without any intermediary.

The domain of practice came to be institutionalized in the Sharia (Islamic law), whose experts, commonly called the “ulama” (*‘ulamā*)—the “knowers” or “scholars”—were trained in the science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The domain of understanding developed into three basic approaches to knowledge, which can be called “Kalam” (dogmatic theology), “theoretical Sufism,” and “philosophy” (*falsafa*). The domain of virtue, the most inward of these domains, stayed for the most part hidden, but nonetheless it took on the broadest variety of manifestations. To it belong personal piety, devotion to God, love, sincerity, “godwariness” (*taqwā*), and many other human qualities bound up with the interior life. The major institutional manifestation of this third domain is Sufism, but it also shows itself in many other realms of Islamic culture and civilization, including the general Muslim love for beauty (and therefore art on all levels, from clothing to music to architecture) and the extreme concern to observe the *adab* or “courtesy” of every situation.

The word *adab*, for which we have no adequate English equivalent, refers to proper and beautiful deportment and correct behavior, both physical and verbal. It denotes a broad domain that includes all the little courtesies and politenesses, observance of propriety and good manners, elegant handling of social situations, accomplishment in belles lettres and poetry recital, skill in calligraphy and music, care to observe one’s social and professional duties, and perfect harmony between outward behavior and inward attitude. I stress its importance because it plays a significant role in Bābā Afḍal’s exposition of the nature of virtue and the quest for human perfection.⁴

The domain of submission and practice that is governed by the Sharia concerns every Muslim, because this domain defines a Muslim qua Muslim. The first and primary practice is the “witnessing” (Shahadah, from Arabic *shahāda*), the verbal attestation that there is no god but God and that Muḥammad is his messenger. The rest of Islamic practice and faith follows upon this, and many theologians have argued that uttering the Shahadah is the only thing really essential in being a Muslim.

The second domain, that of faith and understanding, addresses what it is that Muslims are bearing witness to. When they say, “There is no god but God,” what does this mean? Who or what is God? No one can have faith in God without a concept of “God,” though it is perfectly possible to observe the rules of the Sharia without faith—for reasons of social solidarity, prudence, or hypocrisy, for example.

The third domain, that of virtue and the interior life, pertains to deepening of practice and faith so that these permeate the soul and lead to the perception of God’s reality and presence in all things. Hence the Prophet’s famous definition of *iḥsān* (“doing what is beautiful”): “It is that you serve God as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He sees you.”

It should be obvious that anyone with a mind will not be willing to accept that “There is no god but God” without having a clear idea of what God is. The sentence must make sense. The three schools of thought that have addressed the issues of faith—Kalam, theoretical Sufism, and philosophy—were concerned to make sense of this and many other Koranic statements.

The objects of faith came to be discussed under three basic rubrics, known as the “three principles” of the religion—asserting unity (*tawḥīd*), prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and the “return” to God (*ma‘ād*). Muslim intellectuals who investigated and ex-

plained these issues can be classified more or less according to the point of view they adopted. The terms *Kalam*, *theoretical Sufism*, and *philosophy* simply indicate in a rough sort of way three basic perspectives. In earlier Islamic history, it is usually clear which perspective an author is advocating, but in later texts, the perspectives tend to be more and more mixed. Already in Ghazālī, we have a thinker who cannot be classified according to this scheme, because he writes works from each point of view, and he sometimes mixes the perspectives.

More than anything else, the three intellectual perspectives differ in their methodology and goals, not in their objects of investigation. All three schools of thought wanted to understand God, prophecy, and the return to God. But both the dogmatic theologians and the philosophers considered *ʿaql* (intellect, reason) as the primary means whereby one achieves this understanding. The theologians insisted that the Koran must be the first point of reference, and their goals were more or less “apologetic”; their stance was to defend the truth of the Koranic accounts. For their part, the philosophers did not consider it necessary to refer to the Koran, since, they maintained, intellect alone is sufficient to achieve the final goal, which, in short, is “wisdom,” or knowledge of things as they are combined with practice that accords with the knowledge. As for the Sufi thinkers, they considered the Koran the primary source of knowledge, but they held that rational investigation was not adequate to achieve a full understanding of the Koran, because such investigation could only be a purely human effort. People should rather devote themselves to God, who would personally undertake to teach the meaning of the Koran to his devotees if and when they reached sufficient worthiness to understand—according to God’s will and grace, not the devotees’ efforts. God’s own teaching was called by various names, such as “unveiling” (*kashf*), “true knowledge” or “gnosis” (*maʿrifa*), and “witnessing” (*mushāhada*).

The philosophers may not have agreed with the formulations and stances of the dogmatic theologians and the Sufis, but they did not disagree that the three principles of faith designate important issues that must be grasped if we are to make sense of the world and ourselves. They did not accept *tawḥīd* simply on the basis of belief. Rather, they undertook to demonstrate the fundamental unity of reality using a variety of arguments. Discussion of *tawḥīd* is bound up with the explication of how the world is related to the “First” (*al-awwal*) or the “Author” (*al-bāriʿ*)—Koranic divine names that are typical philosophical designations for God. Study of the world, then, or “cosmology,” becomes part of the quest to grasp *tawḥīd*. So also, one must know who it is that knows and how it is that the knower can know, so “epistemology” is also an essential dimension of all philosophical investigation. Moreover, to prove anything at all one must have a set of guidelines for the rational process, and this is the role of “logic.”

Any reflective thinker must ask how it is humanly possible to know the First, which is typically understood to be an order of reality totally different from that of things. The religious tradition speaks of prophets, who are the necessary vehicles for providing knowledge of God’s reality and the guides to achieving the fulfillment of human life. For the theologians, faith in prophecy was a starting point for their position. But the philosophers considered the necessity of prophets a legitimate issue for debate, and the conclusions reached by some of them were harshly criticized by theologians and Sufis.

Whatever position the philosophers took on prophecy, they never avoided the issue. After all, the questions it raises are utterly essential to any conception of the validity and usefulness of knowledge: What is it that human beings should strive to know? Can they come to know what they should and must know on their own, or do they need to be instructed? If they need to be instructed, what is it that establishes the competence and authority of the teacher? Is it true that, in the acquisition of real knowledge, people must have recourse, directly or indirectly, to those designated human beings whom the religious tradition calls “prophets”? If it is true, why is it true? What are the special characteristics of prophetic knowledge that make it inaccessible to human intelligence functioning on its own?

Finally, the third principle of Islamic faith—the return to God—is even more basic to the philosophical quest. The philosophers often discuss it under the heading, “The Origin and the Return” (*al-mabda’ wa’l-ma’ād*), since talk of our return demands talk of our origin, that is, how we got here in the first place. While investigating human nature’s relation to the cosmos, the philosophers addressed all the issues connected with death and resurrection, a domain that is sometimes called the “compulsory return.” In doing so, they strove to understand how the world is connected to the First and how it undergoes various stages of unfolding—what we might call its “devolution” and subsequent “evolution.” In their view, the very nature of the Origin leads to a Return by a corresponding trajectory.

Ultimately, all the philosophical concerns hover around the issue that is sometimes called the “voluntary return.” People will be returning to the First Origin whether they want to or not. The philosophers held that people should strive to return by a route that allows for the full development of the potentialities of human nature. This alone could bring about the happiness and wholeness of the “self” or “soul” (*nafs*) in both this world and the next. They undertook voluminous investigations of the nature of the soul and related issues, such as self-knowledge, freedom of choice, and the achievement of human “perfection” (*kamāl*) or “completion” (*tamām*). For most of them, philosophy was the way to ensure a proper and congenial homecoming to the First. Here they commonly employed the Koranic term “felicity” (*sa’āda*), which is the standard expression in the Koran and Islamic texts in general for the happiness of paradise.

Historians of philosophy have sometimes obscured what was at issue in discussions of the voluntary return by translating the word *sa’āda* as “eudaemonia,” thereby suggesting that the concept was borrowed from the Greeks and would have been strange to ordinary Muslims. Certainly the arguments and the technical vocabulary of the philosophers would have been strange to ordinary Muslims, just as the analogous Christian arguments in the premodern world would have been strange to ordinary Christians, and just as contemporary philosophical discussions are strange to most people today. Nonetheless, the notion of an ultimate happiness that is contrasted with an ultimate misery or wretchedness is utterly basic to Islamic thinking, philosophical or not. It is precisely this that determines the urgency of both the religious and the philosophical quest, not social or political considerations. When “All is perishing but the face of God,” as the Koran puts it, the affairs of this world have little ultimate significance. The philosophers never forgot that philosophy is preparation for death. Certainly the affairs of this world need to be taken care of, but

always with full awareness of the body's disappearance and the soul's subsistence. Any rational person would want to act in keeping with his or her own ultimate good, which is to say that activity must focus on the important things, which are those that have a positive effect on the soul's becoming and its final destination.

Intimately connected with discussion of the soul's return is the domain of "ethics," *akhlāq* in Arabic. The Arabic word is the plural of *khuluq*, which can perhaps best be translated as "character" or, in the plural, "character traits." This word derives from the same root as *khalq*, which means "creation," and which, in the usual unvowelled Arabic script, is written exactly the same as *khuluq*. The very use of this word shows that "ethics" has to do with the soul's created nature. It follows that understanding the nature of proper behavior is inseparable from understanding the reality and purpose of creation. In other words, ethics is not simply a moral issue, but a cosmological and ontological one as well.

Islamic ethical teachings have much in common with the ethical teachings of other traditions, no doubt, but the philosophic (and also Sufi) rationale for these teachings reaches back to the underlying nature of reality itself. The praiseworthy character traits that must be achieved have nothing "conventional" or "artificial" about them—though practical instructions and legal rulings certainly do have an eye on convention—because these traits were not invented by human beings. Rather, they pertain to the nature of things. Here human freedom is the wild card, which means that character traits will be shaped by individual choices. It is these choices that the philosophers want to direct toward the *summum bonum*, which they often call the "Sheer Good" (*al-khayr al-mahd*)—a common philosophical name of God.

Quality and Quantity

For modern readers, the premodern mind is especially difficult to penetrate. This is largely because over the past two centuries, scientific thinking has become totally dominant, and along with it the idea that the only valid knowledge is that which comes by way of the empirical and experimental sciences. It has not been uncommon for contemporary scholars to hold that medieval metaphysics and logic may have something to teach us, but that medieval cosmology was an imaginative construction having no connection with scientific laws or the real world, and hence of little interest to us moderns. This helps explain why historians of Islamic thought have paid scant attention to cosmology and psychology, while they have devoted a great deal of energy to those aspects of the philosophical enterprise that possess what we recognize today as a "scientific" flavor, especially mathematics and astronomy.

If in the recent past the aims and goals of much of the scholarship in the history of Islamic philosophy have been determined by the truth claims of science, this does not mean that scholars now investigating the history of ideas necessarily accept the exclusive authority of the scientific worldview. This is not the place to enter into the ongoing debates about the epistemological status of empirical science, but it should be clear to anyone with some knowledge of the contemporary scene that the earlier belief in its inerrancy and exclusive possession of the truth has largely been aban-

done. However, the type of thinking that has been promulgated by “scientism”—that is, the belief that science alone can offer real and rational explanations for things—permeates most of the modern disciplines and filters down into the furthest reaches of education and popular culture. Even if many professional philosophers have long since seen through the claims of scientism, it remains a major stumbling block for modern readers who want to grasp the nature of premodern world views in general, and Islamic philosophy and cosmology in particular.⁵

Scientism is a stumbling block because it has established the opinions that determine the worldview of the vast majority of people. The idea that science alone offers true and reliable knowledge is so deeply entrenched in popular culture that it is difficult to dispute the conclusions of Rustum Roy, a distinguished physicist and a critic of the endemic scientism of modern culture. As he is fond of pointing out, science has now become our “theology” and technology our “religion,” and there are few people in the intellectual establishment who risk incurring the anathema that is pronounced on heretics.⁶

There are many ways to conceptualize the manner in which scientific thinking stands in the way of grasping the goals and purposes of the world’s wisdom traditions. One way that I have found especially useful is that outlined by the contemporary Sufi philosopher René Guénon in his prescient book, written in 1945, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*. A parallel understanding often surfaces in the well-known philosophical novel by Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Both authors speak in detail about the contrast between “quality” and “quantity,” though their viewpoints are far from identical. In order to clarify the peculiarities of premodern thought that are omnipresent in Islamic thinking, it may be useful to investigate the relationship between these two concepts in Islamic terms.

Pure and absolute quality is the ultimate, unitary Reality that gives rise to all qualities and all quantity. It is, in short the unadulterated light of Being, or the Essence of God. This Absolute Quality can only be conceptualized in terms of specific, relative qualities, which are commonly called the “divine attributes,” or the “divine names.” Quantity is born from the fact that Absolute Quality in its utter undifferentiation can be understood in terms of many specific qualities, such as necessity, firstness, knowledge, will, power, and creativity. In religious terms, the one God has “ninety-nine” names, and these are the root of the quantity and multiplicity that appear in creation.

When the First gives rise to the universe, it does so in terms of its qualities. The universe itself is the place of plurality, differentiation, and dispersion. The more we study and analyze the universe, the more we see the multiplicity that allows us to discuss discrete and distinct things. By and large, the modern scientific disciplines have sought explanation on the quantitative side of things, and thus mathematics is the key discipline. The “quantitative side of things” is the appearance of things as discrete individuals that can be further subdivided and analyzed. The drive of modern physics to find the ultimate particles is a good example of this perspective taken to an extreme. In contrast, the “qualitative side of things” represents everything that allows phenomena to be conceptualized in terms of the qualities that derive from Pure Quality, especially the eminently human qualities such as awareness, compassion, wisdom, and justice.

Investigating the quantitative side of things is perfectly legitimate, of course, and the modern scientific disciplines illustrate how practical such investigation can be. It is illegitimate only to claim that this alone is real knowledge and that the elucidation of the qualitative side to reality tells us nothing of significance. This is precisely “scientism”—to hold that real knowledge comes from empirical science alone. This way of thinking, though attacked by many intellectual currents in the modern world, still permeates modern education, and it has left us with a legacy of an almost compulsory quantification. As a result, people tend to see the world around them and their own selves only in terms of discreteness and reification. They look at things, and they cannot see them as anything but things—never as signs or markers or pointers or symbols. From grade school they are taught to believe that things are real in themselves, and that this reality can be expressed only scientifically, which means mathematically and quantitatively. If some qualities, such as colors, can be expressed in numbers, they are real, but those qualities that cannot be expressed quantitatively—and most cannot—are unreal.

Given that the scientific worldview sees reality in quantitative terms, the further away from quantification we move, the less real our discussion appears. This means that the qualities and characteristics of our humanity that even today have a certain primacy—such as love, generosity, compassion, justice, and their opposites—are taken out of the realm of real things and placed on the side of the subjective and, ultimately, the indifferent. What is considered real is, on the one hand, what the scientists say is real, and on the other, raw power, which is the domination of quantity and accumulation over everything that pertains to the qualitative domain. The end result has been the dehumanization of the scientific and technological realms, not to mention those realms that are built on the scientism that purports to extend science into all human life. This is especially obvious in the modern academy, where the social sciences contend for respectability through quantification, and where so much of the theorizing in the humanities has been reduced to issues of political, social, and psychological power.

It is a basic perception of Islamic thinking that reality lies in “quality,” that is, at the opposite end of the scale from what can be grasped through quantitative investigation. The further we move from the domain of pure quantity and the more we ascend beyond the possibility of quantification in the direction of the One Quality, the more we are dealing with real issues. In other words, the more we turn away from the dispersion, multiplicity, and discreteness of the quantitative realm, the more we can focus on the coherence, unity, intelligibility, and inherent luminosity of the qualitative realm. As a result, we are moving in the direction of the first principle of Islamic thought, *tawhīd*, which is the assertion of reality’s unity. In discussing *tawhīd*, we are talking about how the realities that fill the universe are related to the One. In other words, to grasp *tawhīd* is to find the reverberations of the One both in the cosmos and in the soul, and these reverberations are seen precisely in the harmony, coherence, and pattern established by real qualities.

If the Islamic view of things understands reality to lie on the qualitative side of the scale, the scientific worldview sees reality as immersed in the quantitative domain. For the Islamic philosophers, this is to be entranced by the images and

obscurations and to be unaware that reality is to be sought in the intelligible luminosity of the One Real. As the outstanding historian of the Platonic tradition, A. H. Armstrong, writes,

Our consciousnesses are nowadays pretty firmly settled on the bottom of the lake, down among the broken lights and shadows and reflections. We cannot be as sure as the ancients of our ability to raise our heads above water into the light of the eternal. . . . One reason for this lack of confidence is that the brilliant and technically admirable developments of philosophical discourse in modern times have made it very much less likely than even Plotinus thought that the path of discursive reason will lead us to awareness of rather than disbelief in an objective eternal reality quite outside and independent of the dreams and images of the lake, or the *psyché*.⁷

The Islamic philosophical disciplines all focus on pulling things together, finding the grand patterns that unify, searching out the source of the broken lights and reflections, lifting the head above the water, and seeing the objective eternal reality outside the images it throws. The quest is to perceive the light of the Supreme Good that is reflected and refracted in the world. Real knowledge comes from grasping the relationships and connections that are established by the luminous rays of that God who is “the Light of the heavens and the earth” (Koran 24:35). The way to find these relationships and connections is to see multiplicity as coming forth from the eternal qualities, which are the realities rooted in the First Real (*al-ḥaqq al-awwal*). The goal is always to find a qualitative coherence with roots in unity. Quantification can play no more than a secondary role. Even in the ancillary sciences such as astronomy, where quantification is a necessary aid, the objective is to understand the coherence and unity of the grand celestial patterns that appear to the eye, not to analyze the things qua things.

Generally speaking, modern science has no use for any quality that cannot be quantified, which may help explain the contempt with which many hard-nosed scientists look upon the social and psychological sciences. They sense that quantification is being applied where it does not belong. It follows that the vast majority of the issues that were important to the Muslim philosophers in their attempt to grasp the reality of the natural world seem irrelevant to scientists and, with even more reason, to scientism. Since the modern *zeitgeist* is infused with scientific thinking, the philosophical arguments upon which cosmology was based seem subjective and imaginary, or strangely abstract and irrelevant to what is actually happening in the real world in which we live.

The Islamic philosophers would respond to the scientific objections by pointing out that the issue is an ancient one: how do we know what is real? What could ever lead us to think that quantification provides us with explications of the “real” world? Certainly, quantification has its uses, and modern technology is living proof of this. But are the uses to which quantification has been put the proper ends of human endeavor? Are they any proof that “reality” has been grasped? What, after all, is a human being? If we do not know what is real, if we do not know what it means

to be human, and if we do not know the purpose of life, how can we conclude that we are putting things to their proper use?

In one passage Bābā Afḍal explains why he has not entered into any detailed discussion of individual things. His rationale is simply that reality does not lie on the side of quantification, but rather in the direction of the universal principles and fundamental qualities. To focus on the individual things turns people away from the real issues that face them in their own becoming. Only by turning back toward the One Origin can they hope to achieve their true human status.

There was no reason to talk in more detail, with more and longer explanation, because tracking down and bringing forward the individuals of the particular world and the temporal and locational state of each keeps people distracted from universal existents and meanings. If there is assiduousness and constancy in reflecting upon this, the goers and lookers will become heedless of the final goal of going and looking. They will make the particular bodies and the states of the individuals the focus of their seeing and insight and envisage them as the settling place of their seeing. (*Muṣannaḥāt* 237; HIP 239)

For Bābā Afḍal specifically and Islamic philosophy generally, understanding the human situation and grasping the value of knowledge depends upon “the final goal of going and looking.” In contrast, the modern disciplines see the real issue to lie in “the particular bodies and the states of the individuals.” But if we do not know the final goal, how can we understand the bodies and states in any more than a contingent and arbitrary way? The final goal has to be stated before the appropriateness of activity can be judged. In most modern thought, the dilemma of needing a goal to make meaningful judgment yields the practical solution of asserting that all goals are individual and without ultimate meaning. The result is the omnipresent relativism that filters into every domain of thought and culture. In contrast, Islamic philosophy never lost sight of the fact that “absolute relativism” is a contradiction in terms. There always remains an absolute point of reference that allows for secondary and relative goals to be given their proper place. This absolute point of reference is the One Real, from which all things come forth.

Bābā Afḍal maintains that understanding the final goal of human endeavor depends on self-knowledge. But the self cannot be investigated in the quantitative terms of the modern disciplines. One might reply that various schools of psychology do investigate the self. However, the more they attempt to do so, the less their pretensions to be “scientific” are taken seriously in the academy. By and large, those who do dare to mention concerns such as “self-knowledge” are quickly relegated to the domain of pop psychology and New Age fluff. No one can deny that many contemporary thinkers have been deeply concerned that the modern perspective of “knowledge for control” or “instrumental rationality” has opened a yawning chasm that prevents appreciation of the premodern and traditional viewpoint, that of “knowledge for understanding” or “wisdom.” But this concern rarely filters down to the cultural and educational institutions that function to indoctrinate society into the current worldview.

Basic Qualities

The Muslim philosophers think that to speak about phenomena in quantitative terms is to put the cart before the horse. The patterns that we perceive everywhere demand unifying principles behind the patterns, and these in turn must be tied together by higher principles and ultimately by the supreme principle. On the level of principles, the only role for numbers is to illustrate the gradual unfolding and differentiation of qualities. Many of the philosophers showed great interest in the Pythagorean tradition precisely because of their appreciation for numbers as a means to express the underlying order and hierarchy of reality. In chapter 3 we will see a few examples of the utilization of numerical reasoning for these sorts of ends by the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', and so also in Bābā Afḍal's *Book of the Everlasting*.

The foundational qualities or principles that are closest to absolute unity are the grand realities discussed in Islamic philosophical and theological thinking, though the language used to name these realities diverges widely according to the perspective. Kalam and theoretical Sufism speak of foundational qualities largely in terms of the divine attributes established by the Koran. Thus we have attributes such as mercy, compassion, knowledge, life, power, desire, speech, justice, forgiveness, vengeance, gentleness, severity, pardon, wrath, and so on, all of which are derived from Koranic names of God.

The early philosophers tried to avoid the religiously tinged language and preferred instead words and expressions that have a "rational" rather than a "revelational" sound to them. Nonetheless, many of their basic investigations of primary qualities employ terms that are also Koranic divine attributes. After all, the Koran is liberal in ascribing names to God, and the philosophers had no choice but to express themselves in the language that the Koran itself had fixed and established. Even when the philosophers chose designations for God not found in the Koran, there are few important Arabic roots that the Koran does not employ, and the use of any term derived from any of these roots has a resonance for those who have memorized and recited the book from childhood—and this includes most educated Muslims, and many of the uneducated.

To take an example of a philosophical discussion of foundational qualities, let us look at the third book of Avicenna's *Dānish-nāma-yi 'alā'ī*, which deals with the basic attributes of existence, that is, *ilāhiyyāt*, literally "the divine things," or, as it is often loosely translated, "metaphysics."⁸ After a general introduction on the concept and reality of "existence" and a review of basic terminology needed to discuss existent things—such as substance and accident, quality and quantity, universal and particular, one and many, priority and posteriority, cause and effect, finite and infinite, possible and necessary—Avicenna turns to the major topic of the work, which is the Necessary in Existence, that is, God. Then he proceeds to analyze seven attributes that must be ascribed to any reality whose existence is necessary: unity, eternity, knowledge, desire, power, wisdom, and generosity. Finally he directs his attention to the soul's felicity and to the qualities that are found in the cosmos. Notice that six of these seven attributes are explicitly attributed to God by the Koran and the seventh by the Hadith literature, even if most of the surrounding discus-

sion—the preliminary issues, the manner of discussing these attributes, and the subsequent psychological and cosmological issues—are shaped by the philosophical tradition, rooted in works based on Greek originals.⁹

Avicenna and other philosophers considered these divine qualities the most basic realities in the universe, because they are closest to what is necessary in existence, that is, the Origin of the cosmos, the First, the Author, or, in one word, God. The only knowledge that gives us true insight into the real nature of things is understanding how the qualities of the underlying Reality permeate the universe. The further we move from God's unity toward the world's multiplicity and quantity, the more dispersed, ephemeral, and unreal the qualities become. Talk of "evil" only comes into play at the level of dispersion and incoherence. It is not without significance that Avicenna ends the just-cited book with a four-page section called, "Making clear the cause of the deficiencies and evils that occur in what undergoes generation and corruption." His basic point is made in one short sentence: "The root of evil is not to be."¹⁰ And it should be obvious that "what undergoes generation and corruption"—that is, everything that appears and then disappears, no matter how long it may take—is precisely the object studied by all modern disciplines and, in Avicenna's terms, the least real of all domains and the most mixed with evil, because it is the furthest removed from the Necessary in Existence and the nearest to nonexistence.

The fact that philosophical discussion pertains to a qualitative domain is especially obvious in ethics. None of the human qualities discussed in Greek or Islamic ethics can be quantified. For some of the Greeks and many of the Muslims, virtues such as justice, courage, continence, and wisdom are among the foundational qualities of reality itself. They partake of the unity of the ultimate reality, and they can only be fully grasped and actualized to the extent that a human being conforms to the nature of things. But since ethical traits stand at the opposite extreme from the constantly changing, altering, decaying, and disappearing stuff of our own sense experience, they are totally averse to quantification. Hence, from a modern point of view, morality can never be "scientific," which is to say that ethics cannot be taken seriously. If the realists and experts are not concerned about ethics, why should anyone else be concerned?

Only the dissolution of societal equilibrium pushes the scientistically minded to recognize that morality has a certain useful role to play—it keeps the rabble in check. This acknowledgment goes back to a utilitarian, instrumental point of view. It does not seem to occur to modern ethicists, or even to those philosophers who still take ethics seriously, that the human qualities that are the basis of "ethical" activity are far more real and far more rooted in the underlying nature of things than any of the objects studied in the modern sciences, whether these be quarks or genes, because the objects studied by modern science simply throw light on how the scientists conceptualize the mechanisms of the realm of generation and corruption. The result of this undeniably useful and utilitarian conceptualization is the ever greater ability to manipulate the world for ends that always remain within the domain of generation and corruption itself. In contrast, ethics in the true sense of the term belongs to the realm of the divine attributes that never change, and the actualization of these attributes within the human soul serves to deliver the soul from the domain of generation and corruption into the qualitative realm that underlies all things.

In short, the Muslim philosophers have never been interested in things per se, and often they were not even talking about things in any sense that we would recognize, despite the fact that they employ words that appear to refer to things. In fact, they were talking about the qualities and characteristics that appear in things. As a result, qualities that are utterly unscientific and “unreal”—such as generosity—can enter into the heart of cosmology. This is why Avicenna, for example, can discuss love as a cosmological principle (in his well-known treatise, *Fī ḥaqīqat al-‘ishq*, “On the reality of love,” and elsewhere).¹¹

Ontology: Being and Finding

The Muslim philosophers often say that their subject matter is *wujūd*, that is, “existence” or “being.” Their approach differs from that of other scholars because it addresses existence per se, without regard to anything else. Every other discipline investigates things that exist in some mode or another. Other scholars simply assume that their objects of study exist, then investigate them as existing things. They do not ask what it means for things to exist, and they cannot ask this question inasmuch as they are specialists in their own disciplines. If they do ask the question, they have entered the realm of philosophical reflection. Thus zoologists study animals, and they are certainly interested in other sorts of existent things, such as minerals and plants, but it is no concern of theirs to understand what it means for these things to “exist.” As zoologists they cannot ask how these things partake of or manifest the qualities of existence per se, as represented most perfectly by the Necessary in Existence. Linguists study language, which has modes of existence in the mind, on the tongue, and on paper. They are interested in the interrelationship of these existential modalities, no doubt, but they do not and cannot, as linguists, address the ultimate rooting of language in existence itself.

In short, philosophy was considered the one science that could have an overview of all the sciences, because it studies the one thing that is presupposed by every other discipline. Nothing can be discussed and studied unless it exists—even nonexistence must have a mode of existence for it to be mentioned. Philosophy’s overarching scope helps to explain why so many of the medieval philosophers were polymaths. To know philosophy thoroughly they had to know everything, because everything exists in one mode or another.

The philosophers often classified the sciences by ranking them according to the object of their study. The “higher” the object of study, the more elevated and eminent the science. Hence biology is more eminent than mineralogy, because living things are higher than and include in themselves inanimate things. Theology, which investigates God as existent, is higher than psychology, which investigates the nature of the soul. From this perspective, philosophy is the highest of all sciences, because it investigates the underlying reality of absolutely everything, God included, and hence it gains an overview of everything that may or may not exist or that does in fact exist.

As pointed out earlier, Bābā Afḍal does not concern himself with investigating the Necessary in Existence or any of the divine attributes *in divinis*. In particular, he pays almost no attention to the aforementioned branch of philosophy known as

“divine things” (*ilāhiyyāt*) or the study of “Lordship” (*rubūbiyya*).¹² Hence he has nothing to say about the First in itself. He does not ascribe “existence” to God, thus sidestepping one of the most vital of philosophical issues throughout Islamic history: if God exists and the world exists, what exactly does this word *exist* mean?¹³

When Bābā Afdal does mention God outside the context of set Arabic phrases, he typically uses the Persian word *khudā* (“God”) or the Arabic *haqq* (“the Real”), and occasionally Persian *īzād* (“God” with overtones of ancient Persia). In discussing existence and its levels, he situates God outside the scheme by referring to him as the “Essence” (*dhāt*), the “Ipseity” (*huwiyyat*), and the “Reality” (*ḥaqīqat*). “Existence” is then God’s effulgent light. Historians of philosophy would quickly insert here that his perspective is that of Neoplatonic emanationism. But even if we want to file him away in this specific cubbyhole, we can still ask how exactly he goes about explaining the nature of things. What is the logic of his “emanationism”? Does it help us make sense of the writings of other philosophers? More importantly, does it help us make sense of our own perception of the universe, either directly, or by way of the arguments that we need to offer if we want to prove him wrong? These questions deserve to be answered.

In discussing existence itself, Bābā Afdal uses two basic terms as synonyms—Arabic *wujūd* and Persian *hastī*. I translate them respectively as “existence” and “being,” partly to indicate that he is employing two different words, but also because *existence* and *being* in English have the same sort of linguistic relationship that *wujūd* and *hastī* have in Persian. Both *existence* and *wujūd* are loan words with philosophical and learned connotations, while *being* and *hastī* are gerunds derived from the basic “to be” verb of the language.¹⁴

In Arabic, the word *wujūd* gradually came to be the preferred technical term to discuss existence, although early on other terms such as *anniyya* (or *inniyya*), “that-it-is-ness,” and *huwiyya*, “he-ness” or “ipseity,” were also used. The literal meaning of the term *wujūd* is “finding” or “foundness.” It is a verbal noun from *wajada*, “it found.” The passive form, *wujida*, “it was found,” is commonly used to mean, “it was there,” i.e., it existed. The word *wujūd* has maintained its literal sense in Arabic, and even in philosophical contexts it may have much more to do with finding than with existing.

The fact that the word *wujūd* rather than any other term came to be preferred for existence/being certainly has something to do with its literal meaning. The terms *anniyya* and *huwiyya* make no sense in everyday Arabic, because they are coined terms known only to scholars.¹⁵ *Wujūd* is used in everyday speech, and the verbal form is used more than a hundred times in the Koran. Everyone knows what it means, at least in the ordinary senses of the word. So, this term came to be employed at least partly because of its familiarity and commonplaceness—just as existing things are familiar and commonplace. Another reason is that it does not have the limiting quality of “that-it-is-ness” or “ipseity.” These terms do not allow existence to be anything more than “to be” or “to be there.” *Wujūd* suggests that there is more to existing than just being there. If a word can be applied to everything that exists, it should imply something of the richness of what existing can mean. Use of the word suggests that “to be”—divinely and also humanly—is not only to be there, but also “to find.” Just as the First Being finds all things, so also do humans find by their very being.

These reflections on the use of the term *wujūd* are not simply speculations on my part. They are borne out by a good deal of evidence. The piece of evidence most relevant here is the manner in which Bābā Afḍal explains the meaning of the term. Remember first that in his way of looking at things, existence pertains to the cosmos, that is, to everything other than God, not to God himself. The cosmos “is there” and everything within the cosmos is also there. But things in the cosmos are not all there in the same way. In order to illustrate that the word *wujūd* has different meanings depending on which sorts of things we apply it to, Bābā Afḍal points out that it has two basic senses—“to be” (*būdan*) and “to find” (*yāftan*). If we want to understand how the word applies to something, we need to situate the thing in relation to these two meanings.

Bābā Afḍal constantly employs the Persian verb *yāftan*, “to find.” On occasion he adds the intensifying prefix, *dar*, which gives the word the literal sense of something like “to find out,” but which I usually translate as “to grasp” and occasionally as “to perceive.” Sometimes he seems to be using the word *yāftan* as a synonym for Arabic *wujūd*, and sometimes for Arabic *idrāk*, which means to grasp, to overtake, and in technical contexts, “to perceive.” The connections between existence, finding, and perceiving are already clear in the word *wujūd*, which can mean any of these. It follows that when Bābā Afḍal talks about the “found” (*yāfta*), he means both the “existent” (*mawjūd*) and the “perceived” (*mudrak*). As for the “finder” (*yābanda*)—that which finds the object that is found—it must be something that exists, but there is more to its existence than simply existing, because it also finds. Thus, to say that something is “found” is simply to say that it is there, but when we speak of a “finder,” we know that the finder must be found before it can find.

Toward the beginning of *The Book of the Road's End*, Bābā Afḍal divides existence into these two levels—“to be” and “to find.” Then he subdivides the levels according to potentiality and actuality.

If we look at the world around us, we see that existent things can be ranked in degrees. “Potential being” is like a tree in a seed, or a table in a tree. “Actual being” is the tree itself, or the table itself. Being in these two senses can be observed everywhere, but it does not begin to exhaust what *wujūd* may imply. Hence we move on to *wujūd* as finding.

“Potential finding” belongs to the soul, which has the capacity to find, know, and be aware of the things and itself. “Actual finding” belongs to the intellect, which is the human soul that has turned its resources to the task of knowing self and others and has reached the fullness of its own selfhood. For such a soul, nothing exists but actualized finding. It has found self and, along with self, all objects of the self's knowledge, which are the things of the universe. Thus self is aware of all things as present in self, and nothing escapes its purview.

The move from potential finding to actual finding entails an ascent to a higher level, just like the move from the potential being of a seed to the actual being of a tree. At the higher stage of finding, the soul is called “intellect.” This is the philosophers' “Agent Intellect,” which they consider to be the furthest limit of human aspiration, the utter fulfillment of human felicity, and the final goal of creation. As Philip Merlan points out in discussing the beginning of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, “Omniscience—this is the ultimate goal of man's search.” He continues by remarking

that the tendency of modern readers to take such statements as hyperbole misses the seriousness and import of the ancient philosophical quest. "There is a kind of knowledge which is in some way all-comprehensive. God possesses it—man should try to acquire it. Only when he succeeds, his longing to know will be satisfied. Man desires and is able to divinize himself."¹⁶ Even the word *divinization* appears only slightly excessive in the Islamic context, since one can claim that it corresponds with Arabic *ta'alluh*, "being like unto Allah" or "deiformity," a word that is often used to explain the final goal of the philosophical quest. Mullā Ṣadrā's best known title is Ṣadr al-Muta'allihīn, which can be translated as "the forefront of the divinized ones," or "the leader of the deiform."

Notice that in Bābā Afḍal's description of the levels of existence, finding is proof of being found, which is to say that awareness is proof of existence. If this sounds like Descartes's *cogito*, so do various other statements of the early Muslim philosophers.¹⁷ What is interesting, however, is not the similarity of the idea, but the conclusions that are drawn from the premise, the results that rise up from the philosophical perspective. Bābā Afḍal's basic conclusion is that knowing is being, truly to know oneself is truly to be, and truly to be is to be forever.

The picture of human nature that arises from this explanation of the word *wujūd* is this: Humans were given the potentiality to know themselves so that they might bring this potentiality into actuality. The final goal of human life is to make our potential knowing—which is already an actual existence—into an actual knowing, in which case we will know what always and actually is, and this is nothing but God's eternal radiance, a radiance that is precisely human intelligence. To know actual existence fully and totally is to be identical with actual existence fully and totally and to be fully aware and conscious of self. At this level one can speak of the "unification of the intellecter, the intelligible, and intellect." Once achieved, this being-*cum*-awareness can never be lost, which is to say that the actuality of existing and knowing will never return to potentiality, any more than a tree will shrink back to being a seed.

In a similar classification of existence found in *The Rungs of Perfection* (*Muṣannafāt* 21; HIP 252–53), Bābā Afḍal looks at things in terms of apparentness (*paydā'ī*) and concealedness (*pūshīdagī*). He divides the things into four levels: possible (*mumkin*), existent or found (*mawjūd*), finder (*yābanda*), and the one who is aware of self through self (*ānka az khwud bi khwud āgah buwad*). The possible thing is hidden both from itself and from the world, as the animal is hidden in the egg, or the shirt in cloth. The existent thing is apparent to the finders, but not to itself, like every sort of inanimate object. The finders find the existent and apparent things, but they do not find the finder of the existent things. They are represented by all the degrees of soul, from plant, to animal, to human. Finally, the finder of self looks back and sees the self gazing upon self, thus achieving the unification of self and self's object. "This is the rank of the existence of the intellect."

In another classification, upon which Bābā Afḍal bases the structure of *The Book of Displays* (*Muṣannafāt* 153; HIP 238), he divides the found things into four basic sorts: deed (*karda*), doer (*kunanda*), known (*dānista*), and knower (*dānā*). The deeds are all things in the corporeal world, or the bodies of everything that has a body. The doers are the souls and spirits that animate the bodies and perform activities. The known things are the disengaged realities (*ḥaqā'iq-i mujarrad*), that is, all things in-

asmuch as they exist eternally in knowledge without corporeal actuality, or everything known to intellect. Finally, the knower is the soul inasmuch as it is identical with intelligence. The fully actualized knower has achieved “joining” (*paywand*) or “conjunction” (*ittiṣāl*) with the First Intellect, which is both the origin and goal of all existence. As Merlan remarks in discussing conjunction as a philosophical issue from Aristotle onward, “The full *conjunctio* is the moment in which man becomes omniscient.”¹⁸

In his frequent discussions of the gradations of existence, Bābā Afḍal cites examples from the outside and inside worlds. The ascending qualities that we perceive when we compare minerals, plants, animals, and humans represent the external unfolding of the movement from the utter potentiality of matter (*mādda*) to the full actuality of the form (*ṣūra*) that is disengaged from matter. Each higher level contains in itself all lower levels. Plants have the qualities and perfections of minerals, plus specifically vegetal attributes such as growth. Animals have the mineral and plant qualities, plus specifically animal attributes, such as “appetite” (*shahwa*) and “wrath” (*ghaḍab*)—terms that were translated into Latin by the words that have given us “concupiscence” and “irascibility.” Each higher level perfects and completes the lower level, which is to say that each one actualizes a previous potential. The human soul or self is the actuality of all the animal perfections. It in turn may gradually be transformed until it becomes intellect, which is the full actuality of knowing, or the knower that knows all things in itself and, by knowing them, encompasses and possesses them as its own.

Psychology: Soul and Intellect

What is important for the Muslim philosophers is the qualities that appear in the things, not the things themselves. The qualities give each thing its own “specificity” (*khāṣṣiyya*), that is, the attributes and characteristics that set it apart from other things. Whether or not a thing is there, its specificity is always real, because the specificity is a unity of qualities that derive from the Necessary in Existence, the Eternal Real. One of the philosopher’s tasks is to know the thing’s reality (*ḥaqīqa*), that is, the thing as it is in itself, which is the unity of its individual specificities. Whether or not the thing that has these specificities exists in the external world is secondary to this discussion. In other words, first we establish a thing’s quiddity (*māhiyya*)—its “what-it-is-ness” or “whatness”—then we can ask about the status of its existence.

One can say that the philosophical concern with qualities and specificities, rather than with quantifiable things, means that the cosmological thinking of philosophers like Bābā Afḍal is not “scientific,” but rather logical, psychological, and epistemological. In other words, the philosophers focus not on things as found in the external, physical realm, but on the things as known. It is true that they constantly speak of “things” (*ashyāʾ*), but this is because this is the least specific word that one can employ, and hence it can refer to anything and everything, including all the invisible and spiritual things that have no reality whatsoever in scientific thinking. The philosophers offer what appears to be a graphic description of the things of the universe, but this is much more “mythic” than “scientific,” because the described

things are not discrete objects, but rather—much like the “gods” in more primal worldviews—bundles of known qualities. The philosophers are not chiefly concerned with the sensory appearance of the universe, nor with its unfolding over time, but rather with the interrelation of attributes and specificities that can be perceived with the senses and situated in relation to other phenomena with the rational mind.

It follows that Islamic cosmology is not discussing the cosmos per se, but rather the human self and the nature of our awareness of what we call the “cosmos.” (To think, by the way, that Stephen Hawking and the other heroes of scientific cosmology are discussing anything but their own understanding is hardly a reflective move on our part.) The philosophers knew very well that any description of the cosmos goes back to the structure of the human psyche and thought. Bābā Afḍal for one reminds us repeatedly that what we understand of the world is nothing but our own understanding. Perception and finding are not situated “out there,” but “in here.” As he writes in one passage, “Nothing can be reached through the meaning of speech but the meaning of self” (*Muṣannaḥāt* 694; HIP 138).

Descriptions of the cosmos are descriptions of our own perception and understanding, not of the cosmos. If we find the “thing-in-itself,” which can be a more or less adequate translation of Arabic *ḥaqīqa* (“reality”) or *māhiyya* (“quiddity”), we are not finding it “out there,” but rather “in here.” If the reality that we find does in fact correspond with what is outside our awareness, this is precisely because the world out there and the world in here derive from common principles and common roots. By no means does this position lead to some form of solipsism or idealism in which the subject alone would be real, nor does it lead to Kantian agnosticism. The philosophers maintain that everything that exists in any manner whatsoever is real and knowable. The discussion has to do with the degrees and modalities of knowledge and reality.

The philosophers are searching for a knowledge of things that cannot be doubted, what Bābā Afḍal calls “certainty” (*yaqīn*). The only knowledge that truly allows for escape from doubts is knowledge without any intermediary—not even the intermediary of the soul, the imagination, or the senses. This sort of knowledge is located in intelligence alone, and every intermediary adds to the doubt and unreliability. As Bābā Afḍal puts it, “‘Certainty’ is *theōria*’s return from other than self and arrival at self. This is why certainty is not nullified, and certainty cannot be left behind. But before it reaches self, *theōria* is agitated and muddled. This is called ‘doubt’” (*Muṣannaḥāt* 237; HIP 239).

Practically everything we know we know through intermediaries, and the more the intermediaries, the less likely that the knowledge is true. If the senses qualify as “instruments,” all the more so do the paraphernalia of modern research (not to mention the paraphernalia of the modern media). By nature, the paraphernalia interfere with the perception and even the phenomena, and this was well enough known long before Heisenberg threw his monkey wrench into modern physics (though perhaps not by physicists). Some seek refuge from doubt and uncertainty in common acceptance and expert opinion, but the experts typically think that most of their own colleagues do not know what they are talking about, even if they try to maintain a unified front for the sake of professional standing. In short, the least reliable knowledge is knowledge by hearsay, and upon it we build our world. One

should not blame the philosophers for striving to reach beyond hearsay, opinion, instruments, and sense perception to seize on what can be known for sure.

The philosophers do not think that their investigations of the reality of the cosmos and the soul would be obscure to any rational, reflective person. From their perspective, we need no instrument other than a reflective soul and functioning senses to grasp the true nature of the cosmos and the self. The senses provide us with adequate input to allow us to trace our way back to the root of all things. The fact that most of the possible data actually escapes our senses is irrelevant to the issue—in any case, most of the data will always escape us, no matter what instruments we use and no matter how big our computers (even if we accept the hypothesis that data received through the added intermediary of instruments has the same status as data received through sense perception). The question is simply whether or not sense perception provides a sufficient basis upon which to begin the task of returning to the Root of all roots, the First of all firsts, the Author, the Real. The philosophers answer in the affirmative, as do all reflective Muslims—though, in contrast to some of the philosophers, the latter would insist that people also need the help of the divinely revealed books.

In short, the philosophers hold that everything necessary for attaining the final goal of human life is, in principle, given to every human being. If we want to understand the true nature of the cosmos, it is sufficient to have functioning senses, a rational mind, and the desire to understand. Then we can undertake the quest. The basic givens needed for the search are known to any thinking person. Introspection will lead anyone to see levels of perception and awareness within self, and these levels of awareness reflect the structure of the outside world.

Both the inside and the outside come from the same Origin, and both follow the same route in getting here. It is this that allows us to perceive and grasp what is outside ourselves. But it must be remembered that we ourselves will never be able to go “outside” ourselves. To criticize medieval cosmology because it fails to provide us with “objective” knowledge is a red herring. All knowledge pertains by definition to the subject, whether or not it is empirically verifiable in the sensory domain. Indeed, there is no way to translate “objective” and “subjective” back into the premodern Islamic languages (and probably not into any other premodern languages either).

The usual way of discussing the internal levels of the soul is to describe the differentiations among the things that we perceive in the outside world. The discussion depends upon a simple observation of things without any intermediary other than our own senses and cognitive faculties. It is clear to everyone that stones are different from flowers, and flowers different from turtles. We all know that these three belong to different realms of the outside world, realms that in Islamic thought are often called the “progeny” (*muwalladāt*)—the three kingdoms of minerals, plants, and animals. The fact that the exact dividing lines between the realms may be obscure was recognized and simply taken as a natural consequence of the fact that these are our own conceptualizations of the world. The world will not necessarily bend to our needs simply because we want to make sense of it, especially not in all the minute and evanescent details of the realm of generation and corruption. The three kingdoms are called “progeny” because they are born or “progenerated” (*tawallud*) from

the marriage of heaven and earth, which are the high domain and the low domain, or the spiritual realm and the bodily realm, or the invisible world and the visible world. The progeny are differentiated by the qualities that become manifest through the activity or lack of it that we are able to observe with our senses.

It is here that the discussion turns to the faculties or powers or internal characteristics of the progeny. Each domain has a set of invisible attributes that may or may not become fully actualized in any given individual. But the traces of the attributes and qualities are there to be witnessed. On the mineral level, the basic quality is “nature” (*ṭabīʿa*), which is an invisible power that keeps the inanimate things in their own specific attributes and characteristics, until they are acted upon by forces outside themselves. When inanimate things are acted upon by other things, such as plants and animals, they may then be assimilated into a higher power that allows for activity within the thing’s self (*nafs*). Nature may be called a power, but it is not a “self” in this sense, because inanimate things show no trace of awareness and finding.

Only in plants can we begin speaking of “self.” The term employed, *nafs*, is usually translated in philosophical texts as “soul,” but in Arabic the word is the reflexive pronoun, corresponding exactly with English *self*. Thus we have the plant, animal, and human selves, or souls. This soul is also called a “spirit” (*rūḥ*), that is, an invisible, life-giving force that allows things to move and function.¹⁹

In both plants and animals, we observe many characteristics in addition to those possessed by inanimate things. Each of these characteristics is called a *quwwa*, which is commonly translated in this context as “faculty” or “power,” but which I prefer to translate here as “potency.” A potency is a power or ability possessed by a *nafs*, a soul or self. It is the name given to a specific characteristic of a soul, and indeed, the soul itself is often called a potency, as is the intellect.

This word *quwwa* is one of the more difficult terms to deal with if we want to preserve consistency in translating philosophical texts. It is usually rendered in several ways according to its three basic senses—strength (or power), faculty, and potentiality. However, it is not at all clear that the authors of the texts saw any real differences among these meanings, even if the dictionaries and glossaries did specify them. Rather, the philosophers seem to have considered *quwwa* a single reality whose exact characteristics vary according to the situation. In the sense of “strength,” *quwwa* is a divine attribute, for God is the Strong (*al-qawī*), and it is also a human and animal attribute, in which case it is contrasted with “weakness” (*ḍaʿf*). As “faculty,” *quwwa* is a power of the soul, whether the soul dwells at the plant, animal, or human level. Thus we have the faculties of growth, nourishment, reproduction, hearing, sight, smell, memory, reflection, intellect, and so on. As “potentiality,” *quwwa* is contrasted with “actuality,” and the philosophers—following the Aristotelian tradition—constantly discuss how things move from potentiality to actuality.

In previous works I have followed the usual practice of translating the term *quwwa* according to context, whether as strength, potentiality, or faculty. However, the more I study the philosophical writings, the more I am convinced that the clear demarcation among the English meanings is simply not present in the one Arabic term. The authors used a word that they thought had the same basic meaning in every context, though its implications and connotations might differ. In the present

book, I use the English word *potency* to translate *quwwa* for all three meanings. Although it is not common to say that smell and touch are the soul's "potencies" rather than its "faculties," the meaning is clear enough, especially with forewarning.

When used in place of faculty, the word *potency* has the advantage of suggesting something that is obvious in the original Arabic but not clear in the standard translation: Although the faculty is there, it is not necessarily being put to use, nor is it necessarily *actualized* in any real sense. We have the potency of sight, but our eyes may be closed, and in any case we do not actually see everything that we might possibly see. Moreover, each of us actualizes this potency in different degrees and different ways. An artist "sees" a tree in a far different way than a botanist. In short, every "faculty" is a potentiality whose degree of actuality can be investigated and discussed. The soul itself is a "potency" because it can be more than it is. If the intellect is also a potency, this is because all human beings have the faculty of intelligence to some degree, but this is not to say that they have come anywhere near to actualizing its full perfection.

I have also attempted to maintain a certain consistency in translating the word *fi ʔ*, the complement of *quwwa* in the sense of potentiality. Although *fi ʔ* contrasted with *quwwa* is normally translated as "actuality," and otherwise as "activity" or "act," I preserve it as "act" throughout. I make an exception to this rule for the phrase *bi-fi ʔ*, "actually," which is contrasted with *bi-quwwa*, "potentially." Thus, although it is usually said that things move from potentiality to actuality, in these texts one will read about movement from potency to act. With this translation, it will not be possible to forget that *fāʔil*, the active participle of *fi ʔ*, needs to be translated as "actor" or "active." The intensive form of this active participle, *faʕ ʔal*, is normally translated, following the Latin, as "agent" or "active." To distinguish it from *fāʔil* ("active" or "actor"), I translate it as "agent" throughout. Nonetheless, "fully actual" often does a better job of getting across the sense of the Arabic. Thus *al-ʕaql al-faʕ ʔal*, the Agent Intellect, can perhaps best be understood as the "fully actual intellect."

When people begin to employ their power of reflection (*fikr*) and thought (*andīsha*) to investigate the world around them, they see that inanimate things have no *nafs*, which is to say that the qualities that they ascribe to inanimate things are there without the need for any internal power to bring them into view. On the plant level, a number of internal potencies and powers immediately make themselves apparent, the most obvious being growth and nourishment. If these powers are not present, the plant is withered and dead, which is to say that it has no more potencies than an inanimate thing. Animals have many more potencies, and human beings are distinguished from animals by potencies such as speech and rational thought that are not found in any of the other progeny.

Every higher level embraces all the qualities and potencies of the level or levels below it, and each is distinguished from the lower levels by what it adds to them. Thus all three progeny belong to the realm of "nature," which rules over their inanimate parts. Then plants add certain potencies to nature, animals more potencies, and human beings add specifically human powers to all these potencies.

Typically, the discussion of increasing levels of potency is carried out in terms of "soul" (*nafs*) or "spirit" (*rūḥ*). Thus we have the plant, animal, and human souls or spirits. Each level is described in terms of the potencies it carries. Each higher level

has the potencies of the lower levels. A plant has a vegetal soul, an animal has both vegetal and animal souls, and a human being has in addition the human soul. This is not to say that animals have two souls and human beings three in some quantitative, reifiable sense. It simply means that the animal soul has the potencies of the plant along with those of the animal, and the human soul possesses the potencies of the animal soul.

In ourselves, then, we find what we observe in the outside world. This is the gist of the famous correlation between “microcosm” or human being and “macrocosm” or universe. The argument is philosophical, and those who discuss it are asking their readers to reflect upon themselves and see within themselves every quality and potency that they discern outside themselves. If “heaven and earth are within you,” this should not be understood in some quantitative, concrete sense. The issue is rather the qualities and characteristics that we ascribe to heaven and earth. We can ascribe potencies and characteristics only because our intelligence embraces their reality, so they belong to us. Only intelligence can recognize intelligence, and by recognizing it, it can recognize everything that it embraces, which is all that is intelligible, that is, the whole of reality.

If the animals are within us, this is because we possess all the animal potencies and attributes, and therefore we know the animal qualities and can actualize them as our own—as when people act like dogs, pigs, snakes, or asses. It is precisely their potencies that animals actualize through their activity, and it is precisely these same animal potencies that human beings actualize through the acts that they share with animals, such as eating, drinking, and mating, or when they act like beasts instead of humans.

The human soul is defined by specific potencies not found in the other progeny. This soul is often called the “rational soul” (*naḥs nāṭīqa*), a term that I prefer to translate, more in keeping with the sense of the Arabic, as “rationally speaking soul.” Bābā Afḍal and Avicenna, among others, render this expression into Persian as *naḥs-i gūyā* or *naḥs-i gūyanda*, “talking soul.” What gives the human soul this characteristic is its relation with intellect or intelligence, which allows for the articulation of awareness in speech.

The human soul is potential intellect, whereas the Agent Intellect is actualized intellect. This means that the human specificity—that which makes human beings human—can only be understood in terms of the human entelechy, or the perfection and completion that we are able to actualize through what lies within our own potency and possibility. We can put our soul to work toward its own proper aim and final goal and, if we do this successfully, we will become truly human by achieving awareness and knowledge of the principle of all awareness and knowledge, which is nothing but the enduring intellect, the eternal radiance of God.

Bābā Afḍal’s understanding of how the levels of existence are related to soul and intellect is epitomized in one of his short essays:

The “existent” is either aware or not. What is not aware is the rank of the body and the level of nature.

What is “aware” has either particular awareness, or universal awareness. What has particular, sensory awareness is the rank of nature and the level of

the soul. What has universal, intelligible awareness is the rank of the soul and the level of the intellect.

When the body reaches the level of nature, nature the level of soul, and soul the level of intellect, then the bodily, concealed existence disappears. It is joined to and appears with the spiritual, clear existence. *And peace be upon those who follow the guidance [20:47]. (Muṣannaḥāt 638)*

One of the domains where we have been totally conditioned to dismiss premodern ways of looking at things as “unscientific” is biology. Bābā Aḥḍal’s frequent references to the various levels of soul often touch on issues that would be discussed nowadays in botanical and zoological terms, especially when he talks about the characteristics of plants and animals. In reading such passages, we need to remember that the purpose is to point to various qualities and characteristics in the world around us that manifest the potencies of soul. These potencies are found in living things in different degrees, and they are present in all human beings, since the human soul brings together all the potencies of the lower realms. We should put on hold everything that we have learned from biology classes or the science pages of the *New York Times* and instead we should try to see the world in the qualitative terms in which it is being described to us.

In *The Book of the Everlasting*, Bābā Aḥḍal interprets many Koranic verses in terms of imagery drawn from the animal realm. In order to do so, he divides animals into four basic sorts. If I had been working from an Arabic text, I probably would have translated the Arabic terms as “human beings, beasts, birds, and reptiles,” and readers would understand these words according to modern scientific classifications of living things. However, Bābā Aḥḍal translates these words into Persian in a way that reminds us that he does not have in mind the classifications of the past two centuries or so, in which a tremendous quantification has taken place at the expense of our ability to see the animals as they used to be presented in myths and fables—as living beings with divine attributes. Thus Bābā Aḥḍal speaks of the four types of animals as humans, four-footed things (i.e., quadrupeds), flyers, and crawlers. These nonscientific, literal translations allow us to keep in mind that Bābā Aḥḍal and many other philosophers had no interest in differentiating sparrows from bats and dragonflies, or lizards from scorpions and centipedes. Rather, they are pointing to certain sorts of attributes and qualities that appear in certain living things, and the phylum or family to which the thing belongs makes no difference. The issue is first the qualities as found in the outside world, and then how these qualities are also found in human beings. They are asking what we can learn about ourselves by observing the world around us with the help of our innate intelligence.

Cosmology: Origin and Return

Bābā Aḥḍal discusses both psychology and ontology in terms of a progression of existence and awareness that culminates in the perfection of intelligence and being, which, in their full actualization, are identical. In each case, there is a clear unfolding from the lowest, inanimate level, to the highest, self-aware level, which is the

fully actualized intellect. Given that both the study of the soul and the study of existence focus on the ascent to actuality, we also need a discussion of how things came to exist in a state of potentiality in the first place. A preliminary, theological type of answer would say that God created things the way they are, so he put them there in the stage of potency.

The philosophers, however, were never satisfied with simple-minded catechisms. In their terms, one might say that the Necessary in Existence brings about the existence of the world of possible things because of what is demanded by its seven essential attributes: unity, eternity, knowledge, desire, power, wisdom, and generosity. However, things do not appear in their present form all at once, a point that is obvious to everyone. When the First puts them where they are, it does so gradually. In putting them there, it brings them from somewhere. Since at its level there is nothing other than the Necessary in Existence, they can have no other source than the Necessary itself.²⁰ The Necessary brought them into existence in stages, and there is a definite order and arrangement to these stages. Once the order has been established, it provides a broad outline of the route whereby things go back to where they came from.

As already noted, the discussion of coming and going is commonly named *al-mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*, “the Origin and the Return,” a frequent title of chapters and books. It needs to be kept in mind that the second term, *ma'ād*, is the most common designation for the third principle of Islamic faith—the Return to God, or “eschatology” in a broad sense. As noted, the Return is investigated both inasmuch as it is compulsory for all human beings and inasmuch as it is voluntary.

In discussing the Return, the philosophers set out to demonstrate logically something that coincides with a basic human intuition. People know innately that they have “come up” and can go up further. An adult has come up from childhood, a child from the womb, and a knowing person from ignorance. People can assist their upward climb by their own efforts. They can climb up through their aptitudes and talents, and they can set their goals as high as their aspirations reach. All concepts of education, learning, improvement, progress, evolution, and directed development are based on this fundamental understanding that things can be changed in an “upward” direction. The idea is so central to human life that people rarely reflect upon it, but simply take it for granted. Muslims and followers of other traditions are no different. It is self-evident that there is, or there can be, an upward movement. In the Western monotheisms, among others, the upward orientation is established in terms of the celestial realms of the cosmos and in terms of paradise, the happy domain after death. Refusal to undertake the upward movement is correlated with the lower reaches of existence and with hell.

The philosophers address the upward, returning movement in terms of both ontology and psychology, but they discuss the downward, originating movement mainly in terms of cosmology. The question is this: Where did this world come from and how do we happen to be here? In answering the question, the philosophers elaborate upon an intuition that is as basic to premodern humanity as the perception of upward movement. This is that nothing can go up that has not come down in the first place. As Bābā Afḍal puts it in passing, “Whatever does not fall from heaven does not rise from earth” (*Muṣannaḥāt* 325; HIP 206).

We are now down. The proof is that we aspire to higher things, and we often achieve them. But if we are “down,” our aspiration must correspond to something within us that knows what it means to be “up.” True knowledge of upness presupposes real awareness of what upness is, and that in turn means that something of the up must have come down to us.

Mythic formulations of the upness that preceded our present condition are practically universal. The scientific notions of evolution and progress may be the only examples of myths that speak of the upward movement without acknowledging the primal descent. In the modern myths, we situate ourselves at the top and look back at the bottom. The alpha is one thing, far behind and below us, and we are the omega, or at least the current omega. In the premodern myths, people saw themselves as situated on a trajectory that began on high, with God or the gods. Then human beings came to be low, and now they are in the process of going back in the direction from which they came. The alpha and the omega are ultimately one.

Some versions of the modern myth suggest that the process has its own necessity—we have been forced up because of the impersonal laws of nature, and we will keep on going up as we evolve further. Most versions of the premodern myths offer no guarantee of an ascent, not at least in any meaningful future. If there is to be an ascent, people must strive to achieve it. We can as easily move further away from the Origin as we can move closer to it. We can be left in dispersion and multiplicity indefinitely, becoming as it were the last blades of grass that the bodhisattvas will deliver. Even versions of the premodern myths that speak of an inevitable return to the personal and loving God, as does the Islamic, insist that human beings must exert their own efforts if they are to return by a route that will leave them happy with the journey. If they are not ready for the climb, they will go back under constraint, and they will suffer because of the lack of congruity and harmony with what they meet on the way and at the destination. Bābā Afḍal explains suffering in the afterlife along these lines.

The underlying rationale for the premodern myths is the perception of invisible qualities in the self and behind the things that appear to the senses, that is, the understanding that there is more to existence than meets the eye—not simply quantitatively, but even more so qualitatively; not simply in terms of physical inaccessibility, but also in terms of spiritual distance. The myths acknowledge a realm of superior, luminous things that we can glimpse through the beauty and goodness that we find in ourselves and in the world. We have to reach up for it to have it, and those who reach with sincerity, love, and devotion achieve it more fully than those who go through the motions perfunctorily, not to speak of those who make no attempt. In short, the world is perceived as bathed in supernal qualities, and a whole and healthy human soul is understood as one that is drawn in the direction of those qualities, which are the source of all awareness and everything that is good, beautiful, desirable, and lovable.

The rationale for the modern myths seems to be the inability to see anything beyond quantity. All so-called qualities, if real in any way, are explained away in reductionist, quantitative terms. By indefinite division and analysis—by taking things back to genes or social conditioning or atomic particles—we can explain away all the echoes of the divine that were seen by “primitive” and “backward” peoples.

In our privileged position at the peak of the evolutionary upsurge, we alone finally understand the truth behind the cosmos, or we alone understand that the cosmos is absurd. Holy Mother Science has allowed us to see clearly that premodern cultures were laboring under primitive illusions and living in self-serving dreams, inventing myths to act as psychological crutches. We do not reflect on the psychological crutches provided to us by the myths of science and superiority.

To us as moderns it appears obvious that there is no “qualitative” difference between human beings and other life forms, because all so-called differences can be reduced to biological and evolutionary common denominators. But, since we all know that you cannot add rocks together and get plants, then heap plants one on top of another and get animals, we posit an impersonal divinity known as “Chance” that puts all these together through an omnipotence known as “Time” to yield at the peak of its creative powers our marvelous, all-knowing and all-reducing egos.

In short, perception of quality allows people to see things as diaphanous screens within which the gods are dancing, but inability to see anything but quantity breeds a sort of thinking that understands only in terms of accumulation or reduction to the least common denominator.

For Islamic thinking in general, knowing the qualitative domain toward which we are aspiring demands knowing the qualitative domain from which we have descended. Those who want to have beauty and love aspire to it because they have a sense of what it means, and that sense drinks from the same well as beauty itself. But in order to find the goal, one has to know the route by which knowledge of the goal and aspiration toward it have reached us in the first place. Bābā Afḍal explains this in one of his letters:

You must also know that searching out and exploring things and investigating the origin and return of the self do not arise from bodily individuals. If searching and yearning for the meanings and the road of reality arose from human individuals inasmuch as they are individuals, this wanting would be found in every particular individual, but such is not the case. This is because the wish to encompass both worlds is fitting for someone for whom it is possible to encompass them. But it is impossible for any particular individual in respect of individuality to encompass another individual, especially both worlds. Hence this wish does not arise from the individual. Rather, it arises from the soul that is radiant with the divine light. (*Muṣannafāt* 688; HIP 150–51)

The philosophers investigated the Origin in order to understand the Return, the two basic movements demanded by *tawḥīd*. Asserting that the ultimate reality is one demands recognition that it is both first (*awwal*) and last (*ākhir*), both alpha and omega. Everything comes from the Real and returns to it. In order to discover how we will return to the First, we need to discover how we came to be separated from the First. To do so, we need to grasp the true nature of our potencies, including the senses and intelligence. We also need to ask if the compulsory return that is driving us toward death is sufficient for the achievement of true humanity, or if—what seems much more likely if not self-evident—we need to employ our cognitive and practical powers to achieve that humanity, just as we employ them to achieve everything else that we achieve.

It is often forgotten that Islamic philosophy is not just theorizing or, let us say, premodern gropings at scientific questions—gropings that helped give rise to the scientific and objective approach to things that has been perfected in modern times. This evolutionary understanding of the role of Islamic thought in world history, popular in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, has largely been abandoned by specialists, but it still shapes the general perception of Islamic thinking in relation to the history of science and philosophy. Such an approach immediately assumes that the Muslim philosophers' own goals were naive and immature, which is to say that we moderns are intelligent, sophisticated, and superior.

Alternatively, scholars may employ the presupposition of philosophical and scientific progress to show that, in fact, the philosophers were moderns before their time, but they were forced to hide their enlightened awareness beneath the obfuscations of the religious majority. To think this way is again to pat oneself on the back, but, more important, it is to ignore the basic issues, which are philosophical. What were the philosophers trying to say? Did they or did they not assert *tawhīd*? Did they or did they not apply their philosophical approach to certain practical issues that have an immediate relevance to human becoming and to the achievement of an ultimate, otherworldly, felicity?

The claim is often made that the philosophical issues are determined by historical circumstances and must be investigated historically. But this claim is itself a philosophical position, and if it is true, then there are no exceptions, and the claim must be investigated historically. If we do not allow that it is possible to ask questions that transcend historical conditioning, we are stuck with an endless succession of motives and hidden agendas, with each new theory to be exposed in its own turn. Our hermeneutics of suspicion will show that philosophical thinking is nothing but historical determinism, historical determinism nothing but psychological conditioning, psychological conditioning nothing but economic stratification, economic stratification nothing but gender politics, gender politics nothing but sociology, and so on in an endless samsara of reductionism that knows no nirvana save tenure and promotion. What is certainly true is that whatever religious, historical, social, psychological, economic, biological, and physical necessities there may have been in premodern times, there are no fewer in modern times. Once we claim that people in former times were historically conditioned and therefore had nothing important to say, then we might as well give up talking.

If we come back to philosophical issues as they are posed in the texts, we see that the Muslim philosophers considered the study of the human soul indispensable in the quest for wisdom and that they looked for the roots of the soul in the First. They considered ethics an important science, because ethics is nothing if not the investigation of how the soul achieves balance within itself and harmony with the First in keeping with the manner in which it emerged from the First at the origin. The soul's appearance in the world is compulsory in the sense that none of us were asked if we wanted to come. Or, in the light of a certain Neoplatonic approach, human freedom was already manifest in the choice of the soul to come into this world. Whether or not we chose to come, we have come, and now we must go back to where we came from. We have sufficient freedom to make some choices, and that freedom must be put to good use if there is to be any possibility of achieving ultimate happiness.

According to the philosophers, human beings in their present situation are in the process of going up, which is to say that they are moving from the pure potency of the egg toward the pure actuality of the disengaged intellect. Because of the compulsory return that has brought them to adulthood, they have gathered together the stages of inanimate nature, the plant soul, and the animal soul, so they possess the potencies of all these stages. They now stand at the level of the human soul, so they have the freedom to direct their own ascent. No one is forcing them to make the choice to continue the upward movement. If they prefer to do so, they can stay where they are and go about actualizing the animal characteristics to a degree undreamed of by any non-human animal. If they want, they can try to fulfill their potencies of appetite and wrath—or, as the medievals would say, “concupiscence and irascibility,” and as we moderns would more likely say, “lust and ambition.” The world, after all, is a vast arena of beckoning opportunities.

Unquestionably, human beings possess the potency of intelligence. To deny this in any sort of meaningful way would be to contradict oneself. Given that people have the potency, they can employ it as they see fit. But this is not to say that their use of it is indifferent or that all will necessarily be for the good. Just as they need discipline and guidance to become pianists or basketball players, so also they need discipline and guidance to become fully intelligent, which is to say, fully human, since intelligence alone is their uniquely *human* characteristic. And the only way to become intelligent in the full sense of the term is to bring the soul’s potency into actuality, that is, to reach the stage of the intellect in act.

This is not to suggest that intelligence is the only human characteristic. Rather, it is the highest human trait and the pinnacle of human possibility, because—in Bābā Afḍal’s terms—the fullness of intelligence is identical with the fullness of being. It perhaps needs to be stressed, however, that the soul has two perfections, the theoretical and the practical, and both need to be actualized. Practical perfection demands the realization of ethical and moral being, or the actualization of all the virtues (*faḍā’il*). Neither theoretical nor practical perfection can be achieved totally in isolation. The final perfection of intelligence cannot be reached without perfecting all the soul’s aptitudes, and most of these are named by the names of the virtues—generosity, compassion, justice, forgiveness. Ethical activity and beautiful character traits are inseparable from striving for human status.

In order to move from potential intellect to actual intellect, people need to know what they are striving for. They must make the decision to undertake the quest. As Bābā Afḍal puts it in a short essay,

The wayfarers have three incontestable needs: One is an elevated aspiration, second a potent mind, and third an appropriate desire. If there is no high aspiration, they will not be able to see a station higher than they. If there is no capable mind, they will not dare to allow the high station to pass into the heart. If there is no appropriate desire, they will not be able to arrive at that which their high aspiration has caused to pass into their potent mind. Incontestably, these three have been designated. (*Muṣannafāt* 644)

For the religious tradition in general, knowledge of the final goal toward which people should aspire is provided by the Koran and the Hadith, and knowledge of the

praxis that allows the goal to be achieved is provided by the Sunnah and the Sharia, that is, the exemplary model established by the Prophet and the legal teachings that codify praxis into do's and don'ts. But for the philosophers, knowledge of the final goal and of the praxis necessary to achieve it require thought and self-reflection (*fikr, tafakkur*). To the extent that people put the potency of their own intelligence to work by coming to understand the nature of things, they will actualize this potency and gradually move from potential intellect to actual intellect.

Philosophical discussions of the Return focus on the two basic ways of going back to the First—the road that people will be compelled to follow and the road that they are free to follow if they choose to do so. Discussions of the Origin center on how they arrived at their starting place. If they can go up to intelligence, then they must have come down from intelligence. If they can go up to intelligence by ascending through the stages of soul, then they must have come down to this world by descending through the stages of soul. The Return is the mirror image of the Origin. In later texts, Origin and Return are often discussed as the two arcs of a circle, the “descending arc” (*qaws nuzūlī*) and the “ascending arc” (*qaws šu'ūdī*). This discussion is basic to theoretical Sufism, though the terminology is often different from that found in philosophy and varies from school to school.

The descending route of the Origin is well known. The basic outline is the same as that already present in the Arabic Plotinus: intellect, soul, heavenly spheres, four elements. Bābā Afḍal sticks to this simplest of schemes, though some of the philosophers had developed it into several degrees, as did Fārābī and Avicenna, who spoke not of one intellect and one soul, but of ten intellects and ten souls, corresponding to the nine spheres and the sublunary realm. Among Sufis, Ibn al-‘Arabī spoke of twenty-one stages from the First Intellect down to earth (that is, the lowest of the four elements), at which point, the movement turns back upward.²¹

One should not be thrown off track by the language of these discussions and think that, for example, the philosophers are reifying the concepts of intellect and soul, much as people today reify the concept of God; or that they are describing the planets and celestial spheres with anything like the concerns of modern astronomy. Discussion of intellect and soul has to do with what we can retrace in our own selves, and discussion of the spheres has to do with what we can discern with the naked eye. By studying the heavens, the philosophers want to know what we can learn about things that are “up” by looking in that direction. The upness of the physical domain is an analogue of the upness of the spiritual domain, which is to say that what is “up” in terms of our sense perception is a marker of realities that are “up” in respect to our intelligence and understanding. If we look up in the outside world, we see the planets and stars, and if we look up in the inside world, we see soul and intelligence. The key is looking, gazing, thinking, reflecting, pondering, meditating, contemplating.

The religious tradition provides an explicit reading of the heavens in terms of a spiritual ascent in the accounts of the Prophet's *mi'raj*, his climb up through the heavens and beyond to the presence of God. This mythic ascent is of primary importance for Islam's origins, given that it marks the fruition and fulfillment of the Koran's descent. The Koran came down so that those who take it to heart may go up. As the Prophet is said to have remarked, “The daily prayer [*ṣalāt*] is the *mi'raj* of the be-

liever," which is to say that Islamic praxis, of which the daily prayer is the central and most essential act, is the road by which one ascends back to the Origin. Avicenna wrote a treatise analyzing the *mi'raj* as a philosophical journey, and Ibn al-'Arabī has a long section in which he contrasts what, from his point of view, the philosophers achieve through the reflective *mi'raj* and what the followers of the prophets achieve through the spiritual *mi'raj*.²²

In the accounts of the *mi'raj*, each of the seven planets that the Prophet visited can be understood as a sphere of spiritual influence populated by one or more prophets and hosts of angels. To reach God, the Prophet needed to pass through each of the spheres, thus actualizing the spiritual potency designated by each prophet and angel. Ultimately he reached God himself. In Bābā Afḍal's reading, the *mi'raj* describes the way to perfection, and the final meeting with God represents the soul's coming to encompass all things, such that it no longer fits into any genus or species. In *The Rungs of Perfection* he writes as follows about the final stage of the philosophical journey:

It is self that is present with self. The self is the self's seen, seer, and seeing. Through this predominant seeing, it makes everything below self the same as self. . . . This is the utmost end and the final goal of all utmost ends and final goals. . . . The saying of the companion of the stations of the *mi'raj*—upon whom be blessings and peace!—when he put behind him the degrees of the going and reached his final goal, coming near to the Origin of the existents, means this state: "I do not enumerate laudation of Thee; Thou art as Thou hast lauded Thyself." It is as if he wants to say, "It is not I who have known You that I might praise You. You are the knower, the recognizer, and the praiser of self as You should be recognized and praised." (*Muṣannaḥāt* 37–38; HIP 262–63)

In short, discussion of the heavens pertains to the investigation of the qualities and characteristics that are "higher" than we are in our corporeal—though not our intellective—nature. Inasmuch as the heavens pertain to the Origin, they represent descending stages through which the self, in coming down from intellect and entering the womb, becomes more and more distinct from other selves and more and more immersed in multiplicity. Inasmuch as the heavens pertain to the Return, they represent stages that the self must pass through in order to actualize its potential, harmonize its diverse powers, unify its multiple aptitudes, and rejoin the intellect from which it arose.

The philosophers were able to read this sort of significance into what they saw of the celestial spheres because they were reflecting upon themselves. They saw that they themselves, beginning in the womb, had risen up from mineral, to plant, to animal, to human, and that they were now striving to rise up to the fullness of self-knowledge, the intellect that knows itself and all things. In their view, the way to achieve a truly useful knowledge of the celestial spheres—that is, useful in the quest to become human—is to investigate how the heavens display the qualities and characteristics of our intellective nature. It is of course true that everything in the universe displays such qualities and characteristics; this is how Muslim thinkers understand the repeated Koranic reference to the "signs" (*āyāt*) in the heavens, the earth,

and the soul. But the heavens are higher on the scale, because they are up. They are closer to the unity and simplicity of the First, which is why some philosophers maintained that they are incorruptible, that is, that they do not pertain to the corporeal realm, the world of generation and corruption. Hence, to study the heavens is to study realities that bring together many other realities and embrace and encompass the evanescent world below. The heavens reflect much more directly than the sublunary realm the nature of the intelligent self, which is incorruptible and everlasting.

When reading historical surveys of Islamic philosophy, one is sometimes left with the impression that the (First) Intellect and the (Universal) Soul—that is, the initial stages of descent from the Origin—were concepts lifted from Neoplatonic sources without much reflection on the part of those who did the lifting. The two can appear as rather odd suppositions that have nothing to do with the real world, though it is understandable, we may be led to believe, that the unimaginative Muslims, relying as usual on the Greeks, should borrow this notion as an easy and ostensibly “rational” explanation for the origin of the universe. But there is no reason to think that these ideas were adopted without critical assimilation. Philosophy is nothing if not the sober consideration of what we can actually know, the sifting of supposition and opinion from real knowledge. It is a certain breed of historian that has seen philosophy as the unreflective reception of ideas from the past as if they were precious artifacts.

A similar point can be made about those who have read the Koranic accounts of paradise and hell as crude anthropomorphisms that appeal to the basest instincts of primitive bedouins. The fact that we ourselves may read the accounts this way says more about us than the ancient Arabs. Myth happens to be the richest and most direct manner of expressing the inexpressible, as all cultures recognize. Myth speaks of the first truths in a graphic, concrete language, without the constraints of philosophical, theological, or scientific abstractions. Precisely because of the richness and polymorphism of its imagery and symbolism, it provides an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

The only strange thing here is that many historians would like to imagine that the interpretations of the myths are nothing but afterthoughts, rationalizations that allow the more thoughtful members of society to make sense of the beliefs of the common folk. There is some truth in this idea, but to take it as the only explanation presupposes a progressive reading of history, a “from the bottom up” theory of development that is congenial to modern thinking and therefore plausible to us, but that makes no sense to the tradition.

Revelation is precisely knowledge that comes from the top down. The myths have come down, which explains why intelligence rises up to them with such alacrity and makes such sense of them—and why it cannot do without them, even if it must manufacture its own. The interpretations are already implicit in the myth, because the myth is closer to pure intelligence than are the explanations. This is part of what Fārābī was getting at in his discussions of the active imagination that is bestowed upon the prophets, allowing them to express the truths of the intellectual world in the garment of concrete language, accessible to all.²³

If we are to make any sense of the First Intellect and the Universal Soul as the dual progenitors of the cosmos, we have to reflect upon what the philosophers were

trying to say. We cannot reify these terms and talk about them as if they represent some sort of primitive “animism”—a notion that is itself the product of modern evolutionary thinking—that posits a few invisible forces beyond the visible universe marked by the spheres. The discussion is not just about what is “out there,” but also about what is “in here.”

As human beings, we know innately that all things have been born from the Universal Soul, because our own souls embrace nature along with the plant, animal, and human potencies. We know that the First Intellect is the all-embracing origin, because it is precisely our own intelligence that knows all this, arranges all this, becomes all this, and embraces all this. If our microcosmic intelligence is able to conceive of the whole world, it can do so only because it is already, at some level of itself, an intelligence that conceives of the whole universe. What goes up must have come down.

If we are able to conceive of the whole of existence and achieve a unity of vision by moving up through its levels, the world itself must have been conceived in a unity of vision before it came to be differentiated. Only a primary unity of realities can explain why the universe is such a seamless whole, so much like a grand, living organism. The arguments and proofs that are offered to make these points pertain precisely to our own experience of self-consciousness and our own awareness of the natural world.

A useful way to conceptualize the Origin and Return is to think of them as complementary movements demanded by *tawhīd*. The Origin is centrifugal, the Return centripetal. The presence of both movements keeps the universe in balance. Things move out from the First Real just as light appears from the sun, and they return to the One just as objects perceived by the senses pass by way of the mind into self-awareness.

In the First, multiplicity is unified by the intense brilliance of being and consciousness. By the time things appear on the elemental level, the light is obscured and the consciousness dimmed. In the First, all things are present as “realities,” “quiddities,” or “forms.” In the visible world, the immersion of the forms in matter conceals them from all but discerning eyes.

The centripetal movement is that of intelligence, which appears first as a dim reverberation in the soul and moves back toward its origin by reflecting upon the objects of its awareness. It gains in strength like a fire that gradually begins to blaze. In the movement toward the sheer consciousness of the center, the realities and forms found in the sensory world are loosened and disengaged from their matter, and slowly they come to be known by intelligence knowing itself. The movement is one of ever-increasing awareness and consciousness, until the knowing self finally knows itself as the only self that knows, the fully actualized intellect that is nothing but the First Intellect in respect of the Return.

Looking at things as discrete objects keeps intelligence involved in the centrifugal movement. The more people focus on differentiation, analysis, control, and manipulation, the more they forget the intelligible side to things and the more they become involved in the material realm. This is the general thrust of modern learning, and the net result is rapidly increasing dispersion in all fields of knowledge. The exponential rise of information and data, which would appear to Bābā Afḍal as the

last flickerings of the intelligible light as it becomes almost totally obscured, is perhaps best exemplified by the “information revolution” brought about by computers.

Looking at things as manifestations of hidden realities and as descents of intelligible forms ties things back to the centripetal movement of intelligence seeking its source. Wisdom is found in seeing the coherence of the whole, in which the centrifugal and centripetal movements are complementary. Ignorance is not knowing that everything plays a role in the cosmic drama and that the parts can only be understood in terms of the whole. To ignore the Center is to be overcome by the centrifugal movement and to dissipate one’s intelligence in the peripherals.

Hierarchy: The Ranks of Human Possibility

Given that the soul contains the possibility of actualizing all the realities known to intellect, given that intellect at root knows the whole of creation, and given that the soul has relative freedom of choice, it follows that the soul can become just about anything in the universe. In other words, human individuals can adopt as their own any of the qualities and characteristics created things display.

The full actualization of the soul’s potency is called “intellect,” and this is the entelechy of human beings, their perfection and their highest good. But in fact, few people actualize the full human potency, and the result is that almost no one becomes a true sage or what Bābā Afḍal sometimes calls a “complete human being” (*ṡardum-i tamām*).²⁴ He finds the key characteristic of human “completion” (*tamāmī*) or “perfection” (*kamāl*) to lie in bringing together all things of the universe in self-awareness and self-finding.

Human beings in all their diversity represent the broadest display of attributes and qualities that can be found in the universe—by which I mean the universe as we know it and actually find it through our senses, not the universe that we can speculate about or imagine to exist at the other end of all those light years (and even that is part of us, for we do the imagining). The manifold qualities and characteristics of this diverse humanness are often discussed under the heading of ethics, as already mentioned. They are also discussed in treatises on politics, which consider what might be the nature of a proper society and how it is possible to govern such a society appropriately. The philosophers often discuss proper social order on the analogy of the balanced human microcosm, which brings together all the parts of the world in a harmonious whole. In both the macrocosm and the microcosm, hierarchy reigns, and so also in society—even though none of the philosophers thought that the existing political structures were anything near the ideal. One important related discussion, with which Bābā Afḍal often occupies himself, is the division of human beings into types that play different roles in society according to the degree to which they actualize or fail to actualize the human potencies. By studying the nature of human activities, we can discern the various qualities that we carry in ourselves, and we can judge how we and others measure up to the ideal of human perfection and fully actualized intelligence.

Bābā Afḍal maintains, in short, that human beings can be divided in hierarchical terms. The peak of human perfection is achieved by those who join with the Agent

Intellect. The potency for intellectual actualization can itself be divided into two sorts, in keeping with its focus. An intellect that looks toward the First Real and engages in the reflective task of knowing itself is called a “theoretical intellect” (*‘aql nazārī*), and one that looks toward the activity, practice (*‘amal*), and work (*kār*) that we carry out in the world is called a “practical intellect” (*‘aql ‘amalī*).

“Theory” (*nazar*) should not be understood in any of its modern meanings. To forestall the natural tendency to read this word in contemporary terms, I translate the Arabic term as *theōria*, with the hope of reminding readers that the original Greek word meant to gaze and to look. English dictionaries do tell us that theory meant, archaically, “direct intellectual apprehension,” but even this is not adequate to convey what Bābā Afḍal and, I would maintain, the Muslim philosophers in general had in mind.²⁵

Bābā Afḍal clarifies his understanding of the word *nazar* by the way he translates it into Persian. The fact that he translates it is already significant, given that the word had been used in Persian from early times. In both Persian and Arabic, it means look, gaze, consideration, theory, speculation, contemplation. But in Persian there is something abstract about the term, if only because it has no Persian root and tends to be used in bookish contexts. Bābā Afḍal translates it as *bīnīsh* or “seeing,” which is the verbal noun from *dīdan*, the everyday Persian word meaning “to see.” This word has a down-to-earth concreteness that few loan words can have, because it refers to an act designated by the most commonplace of words. If *nazar* is attributed to the mind, a Persian speaker thinks of an abstraction, like we do when we think of “theory” in English. But if *bīnīsh* is attributed to the mind, a Persian speaker is forced to think of the mind as another kind of eye. When Bābā Afḍal translates the Arabic expression *‘aql nazārī* (“theoretical intellect”) as *khīrad-i bīnā* (“seeing intelligence”), the reader has a very different feel for what the philosophical enterprise is all about. It pertains to the real world of seeing, not the abstract world of theorizing, contemplating, speculating, and supposing.

Bābā Afḍal’s use of the term *seeing intelligence* should itself be enough to indicate that “theorizing” as it is understood today has little to do with what he is discussing. He stands squarely in the Neoplatonic tradition, where conceptual thought is a tool to open up an inner faculty of unhindered contemplation. But once the inner vision is achieved, thinking can only be a pale and imperfect reflection of the reality. As Armstrong explains, “We can only go beyond thought through thinking. But a psychic [i.e., soulish] life and world confined to or totally dominated by discursive reasoning would for Plotinus be as squeezed, cramped and confined as the life and world of Blake’s Urizen.”²⁶

For Bābā Afḍal, the theoretical intellect sees things as they are in themselves, because it has actualized the potency that it received from the First Intellect, which is the principle of the whole universe, embracing everything in its vision. At the highest stage, the seeing intelligence and the First Intellect have joined together and become one, for the ascending arc of the circle has come back to the point from which the descent began.

The seeing intelligence does not “think things out,” as theoreticians certainly do. It simply sees realities and quiddities as they are. According to Avicenna, the theoretical intellect sees with the light of the Agent Intellect just as the eye sees with

the light of the sun. He develops the analogy toward the end of his discussion of the soul in his major work, *al-Shifā'* ("The Healing"), and somewhat differently in the short summa, *al-Najāt* ("The Salvation").

The human soul may be a potential intellecter and then become an actual intellecter. Everything that emerges from potency into act emerges only through a cause that is in act and that makes it emerge. Hence there is a cause that makes our souls emerge from potency to act in regard to the intelligibles. Given that it is the cause for the bestowal of intellective forms, it is nothing but an actual intellect that itself possesses the disengaged origins of the intellective forms. Its relation to our souls is the same as the sun's relation to our eyes. Just as the sun is actually seen by essence and makes what is not actually seen come to be seen actually, so also is the state of this intellect in our souls.²⁷

This [Agent Intellect] is related to our souls, which are the potential intellect, and to the intelligibles, which are the potential intelligibles, just as the sun is related to our eyes, which are potentially seeing, and to colors, which are the potentially seen. When the [sun's] trace, which is the ray, reaches the potentially seen things, they become actually seen, and eyesight becomes actual seeing. In the same way, a potency is effused from this Agent Intellect upon the imagined things, which are potentially intelligible, so as to make them actually intelligible and to make the potential intellect an actual intellect. So also, the sun by its essence makes to see, and it is a cause of making the potential seer become an actual seer.²⁸

When Bābā Afḍal translates "practical intellect" into Persian, he calls it the "working intelligence" (*khirad-i kārgar*). It is the ability to do things in a rational and coherent manner by means of understanding the material with which one is working and the acts that one performs. It is actualized to different degrees by all those who perform any sort of rational activity, but the levels of its perfection begin to appear more clearly in artisans and craftsmen. More important for the Return, the practical intellect allows people to actualize beautiful character traits by acting correctly toward God and other human beings. "Ethics" is precisely the domain where people use their practical intellect to perform actions that aid in the full actualization of the soul.

In short, a primary classification of human beings can be made according to the distinction between theoretical and practical intellect, as will be seen in several passages from Bābā Afḍal's works. One of his short essays epitomizes the classification that he provides in *Rungs of Perfection* (3.3 and 3.4):

In the rank of the practical intellect, people are in two levels. First is the level of the folk of the professions, those proficient in artisanry, and the expert craftsmen and masters. Second is the level of the ascetics, the folk of worship, and those who yearn for the house of the afterworld.

In the same way, people in the rank of the theoretical intellect are in two levels. First is the level of the knowers of the mathematical sciences. They are a tribe who are not content with hearsay and who come out from the circle of

following authority. Second is the level of the remotest waystation and the utmost end of all seeking. This is the practice, character, and knowledge that belonged to the prophets—upon them be peace! (*Muṣannaḥāt* 644)

Notice that Bābā Afḍal subdivides each of the two groups according to whether people focus on things of the sensory world or on things of the intellective world. By “ascetics” (*zuhhād*) he certainly has in mind many of those whom historians commonly call “Sufis,” and indeed, the point has often been made that early Sufism stresses an ascetic tendency that was present in the Prophet and some of his followers. The term points to what I would call “practical Sufism” as opposed to “theoretical Sufism.” Practicing Muslims, whether or not they are formally affiliated with institutionalized Sufism, perform a whole host of religious activities, and the “ascetics” are those Muslims who do these activities especially well and skillfully, just as “craftsmen” are those who make things especially well and skillfully. Artisanal expertise has degrees that become manifest in the beauty of the work of art, and so also ascetic expertise has degrees that become manifest in the beauty of the soul and of outward acts.

On the theoretical level, Bābā Afḍal again divides people into two sorts. The first are those who focus on the “mathematical” (*riyāḍī*) sciences, which include arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. These sciences were considered essential for philosophers as a preliminary “training” and “exercise” (*riyāḍa*) of the reflective faculty. The mathematical sciences focus on numbers, which have no presence per se in the world of the sensibles. Understanding the nature of numbers allows people to lift their gaze beyond the sensibles and begin grasping the intelligibles. The ultimate goal in these sciences was to help the soul disengage (*tajarrud*) itself from attachment to and dependence upon forms embedded in matter (*mādda*), that is, the objects found in the corporeal world. Then the soul will be ready for the real task, which is to understand the highest discipline—the knowledge of *tawḥīd* and the first things.

According to the just quoted passage, people who develop the seeing intelligence by studying the mathematical sciences are not satisfied with easy explanations and do not accept things as true because some cleric or expert has said they are true. They do not belong to the circle of those who “follow authority” (*taqlīd*). This term is often employed in a juridical sense, as when a Muslim believer follows the opinions of any of the schools of law (*madhhab*) or a legal expert (*muftī*, *mujtahid*), and this is considered necessary and praiseworthy. In this sense of the word, it is the opposite of *ijtihād*, the activity of a *mujtahid*. However, when the term is used as in this passage to refer to the second domain of religion, which is understanding and faith, it is the opposite of *taḥqīq*, “verification” or “realization.” For the proponents of the intellectual schools, especially theoretical Sufism and philosophy, the only real understanding is that which is gained through verification, and to follow authority in one’s understanding is to have no understanding at all. It is clearly to the circle of the “verifiers” that Bābā Afḍal is ascribing those who study the mathematical sciences.

Following authority, then, is accepting something as true on the basis of hearsay and simpleminded belief. Verification is to strive to understand for oneself. If verification sounds much like what modern-day scientists are supposed to do, this helps explain why this term is used nowadays in Persian to designate “(scientific) research.” But the “research” that Bābā Afḍal means here is a far cry from what most

people—including even the best of scientists outside their fields of expertise—do today or at any time, since in most things people simply follow the authority of the experts, or the zeitgeist, or the media, or their friends, or whoever it is that teaches them how and what to think. Nowadays, given the inordinate amount of factual data that informed individuals are supposed to assimilate, it is impossible not to follow authority in practically everything that we know—or rather, everything that we think we know. From the point of view of the proponents of *taḥqīq*, what we *actually* know is in effect nothing, because we know nothing whatsoever with absolute surety. As Bābā Afḍal points out at the end of his treatise on logic,

We find the vast majority of people admitting that they do not know any judgment with certainty. If you ask them about certainty, they will answer, “We find no certainty in self.” They can provide no example of a statement of certainty, except for a small group who have passed beyond some of the levels of possibility in certainty and arrived at preparedness. (*Muṣannaḥāt* 578; HIP 307)

The “small group” Bābā Afḍal has in mind seems to be those who achieve the stage of “mathematical knowledge,” but that is not the highest stage of the theoretical intellect, because those who achieve it do not thereby have the wherewithal to grasp *tawḥīd* and the nature of the soul in its ultimate becoming. Hence Bābā Afḍal places the type of knowledge achieved by the prophets at the highest level, and he clearly understands this to be the knowledge known by the fully actualized intellect. His position on the superiority of the prophets, by the way, is no different from that of many of the other philosophers. We will see Avicenna saying the same sort of thing.

Bābā Afḍal elaborates upon this brief discussion of the stages of human perfection in several works, most fully in *The Rungs of Perfection*. Given that only those at the highest stage have achieved full perfection, he explains the different sorts of partial perfections as well as the various sorts of imperfection. His basic terminology is related first to the levels of soul (vegetal, animal, human) and its diverse potencies, and second to ethics and character traits. Each praiseworthy character trait represents the actualization of one potency in equilibrium with others, and each blameworthy character trait represents the failure to actualize a potency, or a disharmony and disequilibrium among the potencies that have been actualized.

A clear and simple example of a division of human types based on ethical considerations is offered by Bābā Afḍal in *Four Headings from the Alchemy of Felicity*, his abridgment of Ghazālī’s work. Most of what Bābā Afḍal says in his own original compositions on the topic can be read as elaborations of Ghazālī’s position. However, this does not mean that he was necessarily inspired by Ghazālī, since many detailed versions of the discussion can be found in earlier texts. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, for example, were especially fond of this type of reasoning.

An Anthropocosmic Vision

In concluding this chapter, let me again try to suggest what lies at the heart of the philosophical tradition that is epitomized by Bābā Afḍal. Certainly, the goal is to know

oneself in terms of the First Real, the Absolute Being that brought the universe into existence, and then to act in accordance with what this knowledge demands. This is precisely “wisdom,” which embraces the theoretical and practical sides of the human self. But what sets this vision apart from modern thought and puts it squarely at the center of a human project whose permutations can be seen in all the great premodern civilizations is the focus on what might best be called “anthropocosmism,” to use the evocative expression that Tu Weiming employs to describe the Confucian worldview.

The Islamic philosophical tradition can only understand human beings in terms of the unity of the human world and the natural world. There is no place in this tradition to drive a wedge between humans and the cosmos. In the final analysis the natural world is the externalization of the human substance, and the human soul is the internalization of the realm of nature. Human beings and the whole universe are intimately intertwined, facing each other like two mirrors. The quest for wisdom can only succeed if the natural world is recognized as equivalent to one’s own self, just as one must see the whole human race as the external manifestation of the potencies and possibilities of the human soul.

Islamic philosophy never developed and utilized all the “scientific” insights of its great masters that have so often been studied by Western historians of science. Many of these historians, and even more so the modern-day Muslims who have followed in their footsteps, have lamented the “decadence” that prevented Islam from pursuing the “progressive” course of the early philosopher-scientists. They all tell us that once the works of the Muslim scholars were translated into Latin, they were instrumental in the development of philosophy and science in the West, which in turn led to the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. But the claim that the Muslims failed to capitalize on the insights of the early thinkers need not be taken as a shortcoming on their part. After all, this is simply to say that the Islamic intellectual tradition remained true to itself. It held and continued to hold that human beings and the world must never be driven apart, as they are by the Cartesian method, for example. There could be no justification for the objectification of the natural world, for considering it as an “object” without divinely ordained rights. For Muslim intellectuals down through the eighteenth century, the cosmos remained sacred and inseparable from the human self. Any transgression of the natural world would be a betrayal of human nature, and to “rape the earth” in the modern manner could only be a rape of the human soul and a surrender of any claim to human status.

The Enlightenment project of instrumental rationality depended for its success on the bifurcation of the human and the cosmic, for only then could the world be seen as a great collection of inanimate objects that humans were free to manipulate and control as they wish. The net result has been a whole culture that sees itself as alien to the natural realm and drives people to search ever more desperately for unspoiled nature. The existential angst of so many modern intellectuals, who find themselves beleaguered by a hostile universe, is utterly inconceivable in the Islamic intellectual tradition, for which the universe is nothing if not a nurturing womb.

It is not without significance that the philosophical tradition has been largely moribund in most of the Islamic world for at least the past century, just as theoretical Sufism—which developed a parallel anthropocosmic vision—is the least preva-

lent of the many forms of Sufism in modern times. In place of these traditions, Muslim intellectuals, who are now most commonly trained as doctors and engineers, have adopted modern ideologies. Those who have clung to their own traditions have for the most part specialized in Sharia (Islamic law), which has nothing to say about God, the cosmos, or the human soul. And a large number of those who have tried to revive an Islamic intellectual tradition that would not simply be a warmed-over Western ideology have done so by appealing to Kalam, which does indeed discuss the divine attributes, but which asserts a radical transcendence that precludes any sort of anthropocosmic vision. Hence Kalam leaves the door open to treat the universe as an object to be manipulated. It is intuitively recognized as the one theological methodology that can be interpreted such that it allows Muslims to abandon most of their intellectual tradition and adopt science and ideology in its place.

The vast majority of modern-day Muslim intellectuals, like most of their counterparts in the West, have considered science and technology absolutely desirable for the sake of human progress and happiness. No questions are raised about the utter alienation from the world and God that scientific thinking inevitably brings down upon a culture, the flattening of intellectual horizons that takes for granted a human-centeredness without God or a living cosmos. Few have seen that scientific thinking is largely responsible for the negation of any human possibility beyond the mundane in the name of an “inevitable” development—one that has no justification other than that it must be brought about because it can be brought about. It is hardly necessary to begin naming names, since the whole project of modern society, East and West, to the extent that it is called upon to justify itself, still clings to the prevailing myths of evolution and progress.

Fortunately, however, there is much to be hopeful about in the modern world, not least the fact that more and more people are recognizing that something important has been lost. The recognition of loss is the necessary precondition for gain.