



Nature along Man's Journey of Return

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Abstract

This paper examines some key aspects of the formal and figurative discourse on ‘nature’ as manifested in the philosophical tradition and with reference to contemporary life. Instead of building a straightforward, self-enclosed argument for the sake of argument, it will demonstrate how someone living today may arrive at certain kinds of judgments in the light both of our collective human inheritance, of which Ḥikma is a major element, and a philosophical reasoning that penetrates into areas of life with which philosophy is not directly or primarily concerned but which are of fundamental importance to all human beings. It begins by sketching a picture of the present historical moment, which many specialists consider a historical anomaly precipitated by the abrupt rise to world domination by a single geographical region. A few basic themes relating to ‘nature’, which by tradition has been approached either figuratively or formally, will then be discussed. Their upshot is that for man to live ‘naturally’, he cannot reduce his own nature to that of other animals. Every being has its particular nature. Therefore, the concept of nature cannot be considered only unconditionally or as something common to all animals. Finally, this paper poses two basic questions: Why has our necessary—but equally ‘natural’—separation from the nature of other beings been allowed to go as far as it has? Are we so alone in our modern troubles that we must cast off our human inheritance and pretend to reinvent the universe at every turn?

Keywords

Nature, environment, climate change, Qūnawī, Ibn ‘Arabī, Mullā Ṣadrā, ‘Aṭṭār, wilāya, biological clock, Islamic philosophy, philosophy of nature, Prescractics, Ibn Zakariyā’ al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ghazālī, medical tradition, Galen.

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Introduction

What is this thing we call nature? When we notice it, it inspires us with its grace and beauty. Sensing its protective embrace, we break out in loud renditions of ‘Let’s save the Environment’; then, at the slightest inconvenience, we curse and mercilessly try to subdue it. Is it sensible, philosophically, even to call it a ‘thing’ (*shay*, *Ding*), if by ‘thing’ we intend nothing more than the rural and urban environments we happen to live in? Will all the observable qualities and phenomena of those environments gathered together establish ‘nature’ in our minds as a distinct reality? Or, would their tabulation merely return us to whatever *appears* agreeable or menacing to us at any given moment, or whatever lends itself to empirical investigation? Such an approach is clearly inductive and empirical, being the domain of empirical science not that of philosophy, which by tradition has been entrusted with another kind of mission than that of simply sorting out particulars in a given situation and then hypothesizing or moralizing about them.

Instead of presenting either an empirical or a hermetic argument, as commonly practiced nowadays, I shall begin by drawing a general picture of the species of society in which the debates over nature have erupted due to unprecedented challenges; followed by a discussion of some basic themes relating to nature in the Hikma learning tradition, in particular the philosophical significance of the allegorical representation of man and nature. Early on, this representation was developed parallelly with the formal (theoretical and empirical) investigation of nature expressly for the twin purpose of summarising the Hikma learning tradition’s own vast body of knowledge and ensuring a certain openness towards whatever ‘reality’ or ‘realities’ are under discussion.

While I do not take the contemporary world as essentially the product of any single historical or geographical actor (Shaker, 2017), there is no question that a novel type of social formation with strong social and cultural co-opting powers has emerged in the last two centuries, with numerous extensions across the world. Cast as the apogee of an ‘enlightened modernity’ or ‘the end of history’ (Francis Fukuyama), this social formation nevertheless could not survive long without hyper-consumption, predatory behavior and the commodification of everything under the sun. In hindsight, the systematic cultivation of the basest human instincts is nothing but a historical anomaly that has all but upended the order of our most recognizable human qualities. Pushing boundaries in every direction in this way, however, has not altered the fundamentals of man’s relation with nature. I shall argue that, in the end, we shall never fully appreciate the depth of humanity’s predicament today or the prospects of recovery without assistance from our millennial human inheritance.

An unusual moment of history: 1850 to 2023

Scientists have for decades been amassing data on millions of years of environmental changes. They have provided us with a detailed picture of the extent and speed at which human beings have been turning this jewel of a planet into ash. In stating this I do not mean to moralize the issues on our plate in the manner of a manipulative media journalist. But pretend as we do to stand above ‘nature’ as its proud conquerors here and as its saviors there, in slavish emulation of the binary Puritan/hedonistic American mindset, which is perfectly familiar to sociologists,¹ no scientific expert I know of seriously claims that the earth’s average temperatures have *always* fluctuated in tandem with human activity. On a geohistorical timescale, we honestly do not measure up to very much. On the miniature canvas of human history, the greatest environmental impacts of our ancestors manifested themselves *locally*. In fact, the periodic swings in temperatures indicate no direct correlation with human activity at all before our time.

All this changes abruptly around 1850, however. From this date onwards, the two histories—man’s and Earth’s—converge into a single trajectory. All the data charts show an abrupt, almost vertical spike in temperatures that coincides perfectly with a historical anomaly. Historians treat 1850, in particular, as the pinnacle of the colonial era during which a handful of Atlantic mercantilist states subjugated an unsuspecting humanity and dismembered its vast interconnected economy. There are many empirical reasons why this western European secession constitutes the true beginning of our much-fabled ‘Modernity’. But it proved also to be the harbinger of societal decline of a novel sort. Baudelaire (d. 1867), the poet of Paris and one of the earliest to espouse this bewitching moment of history, portrayed the advent of what he called Modernity—namely, France’s post-Revolutionary agony and decadence—with some of the most striking imageries of the devil.²

Human consequences

Social scientists—both classical (e.g., Ibn Khaldūn) and ‘modern’ ones—routinely strike mechanical theories to explain or even predict human behavior. From a totally different vantage point, Ḥukamā’, like Ṣadrā, who do not consider themselves directly concerned with the ‘practical’ arena (*a māl*),

1. ‘Western’ social scientists like Christopher Lasch have studied the sociopsychological and cultural expressions of this social formation *ad naseam*.

2. Hoping for redemption but leery of the devil’s proddings, Baudelaire reserved his most despairing lines for a ‘modernity’ that many found deeply disturbing (cf. Baudelaire, 1863).

nevertheless insist that the outcomes of behavior cannot be known or predicted with absolute certainty. In his discussions on the paradigm of man (*anmūzaj*),¹ Ṣadrā—much like his two predecessors, Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) and Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274)—argued that man could not foresee all the consequences of his actions, any more than his intellectual faculty could grasp unaided the ‘realities of things’ (*haqā‘iq al-ashyā‘*)—distinct considerations. After all, man is not privy to a knowledge of, literally, everything for some sort of inductive empirical leap except *in potentia* under the unique aspect of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). But this has nothing immediately to do with empirical prediction. Apart from physical objects, then, what kind of things are ‘visible’ to human beings that enable them not only to approach their world for practical ends but also to fathom their own human purpose in it, as pondered by al-Fārābī (d. 950)?

To be clear, I shall not mean by practical outcome what ‘practical’ means in the everyday, but instead whatever flows from a *beginning* point—be it the foundation of a house, an original awareness (*sha‘r*), an intuitive grasp (*badiha*) of an object of concern, or any other pre-given knowledge/being that logic can represent as a premise—towards an endpoint (*ghāya*). Much has been said about the eligibility of intuition for this role because it is a kind of noetic root, but it is too narrow, ephemeral, and unreliable to be taken on its own terms. In any event, epistemology is only part of the problem and serves merely to give illustration to the basic problems of philosophy, not to supplant them. This is important when inquiring into what human beings *understand* by ‘nature’, but not quite why they arrive at this understanding and what they intend to do about it.

Technically, facultative perception has two absolute poles: the ‘object’ intuitively grasped and the ‘subject’ who views it. What lies between them as a third zone was said to constitute, as far as philosophy was concerned, the only range of knowing-and-being available to the human being and his or her faculties. Moreover, this range had to be consonant (*munāsib*), though not identical, with God’s knowledge. By contrast, contemporary philosophy seems to operate under the absolutist assumption—unprecedented in the annals of philosophy—that the ‘object’ introduces nothing more than the empirical/inductive parameters of a subject-matter, while the ‘subject’ introduces only what the observer is able to imagine, suppose or ascertain to his satisfaction *qua perceiving subject*. The latter subjectivist assumption corresponds to John

1. Ṣadrā’s thoughts on the paradigm (*anmūzaj*) are found in al-Shīrāzī, 1976, pp. 204-214; 1984, pp. 504-520; 2011, vol. 3, pp. 86-99, vol. 3, pp. 319-337; and 2004, pp. 285-299. Also, cf. Shaker, 2020b, pp. 48-53, pp. 445-482; 2018, pp. 115-143; 2020a, pp. 485-505.

Stuart Mill's psychologistic interpretation of logic. Mill's interpretation helped extend the parameters of logical validity—as opposed to the force of the inference itself—to the thinking subject in a way that made room for social science, which had not hitherto been known outside the Islamicate world.¹

Restricting philosophy to these two antipodal *mental* categories leads us to a thorny question about ‘nature’: How could we simultaneously be part of nature and separate from it? Piecing together an empirical answer would require an inductive leap akin to that assumed by Wilfrid Sellars and Bertrand Russell, who is best remembered for claiming that ‘induction’ was *the* method of philosophy, though without intending this as a purely empirical claim. Enlisting ‘science’ as the standard of all true knowledge, however, they both jettisoned longstanding principles established for reasoning across fields and levels of vision, for safeguarding the relative autonomy of each (e.g., Ibn Sīnā, Leibniz, Frege), and for safeguarding the integrity of what reality is in question. But can we be as confident as they that the consequences of thinking are visible strictly under the aegis of *empirical* science and its *interpreters*?

How can this be so, given the radical reorientation to which we bear witness in the contemporary era and its incalculable consequences for society and popular culture? One major consequence of this orientation is the ease with which popular beliefs and superstitions—like the belief in ghosts and the paranormal²—coexist with ‘science’. In the US and France, the belief in the supernatural and in UFOs has been statistically dominant at least since the 1970s. Intellectual sophisticates too harbor their own brand of superstition, but my point is that everything lacking spatial dimensions is routinely taken in the same literal/material sense attachable to any item in the physical world. What lessons, may we ask, has the Ḥikma learning tradition, which has never vented such rampant materialism but which has founded the empirical and exact sciences we take for granted today, drawn concerning what is logically unprovable yet *real*?

In a word, this tradition sought to temper the natural human attraction to what is real and to channel it partly towards the realization, say, of ‘practical’ projects like building a hospital here or building a logical argument there. Instead of giving words their proper measure and articulating important questions with a view to advancing the dialogue or the conversation, the tendency nowadays is to superimpose, pre-emptively and uniformly, a

1. The most important expositor of social science and the study of civilization was Ibn Khaldūn, whom ‘Western’ scholars have long crowned the founder.

2. By ‘superstition’, I mean what in belief or action is extrinsic to the stated purpose (e.g., remedying an ailment) (al-Ghazālī, 2011, p. 1304).

literalist ontology upon words. ‘Ghost’, ‘soul’, ‘tree,’ and ‘bus’ can then be claimed to exist *naturally* on the same plane, whether or not they have any reality.

Selfhood and nature

Speaking literally about what is natural demands the same kind of evidentiary proof as for any physical phenomenon. According to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), however, ‘*nafs*’ (self) and selfhood do not refer to the body, either as a whole or a part of it (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 2000, 7.39). He warned against juxtaposing the logical ego, the self, or the spirit with matter (i.e., any divisible multiplicity), including the faculties which the self is traditionally said to govern. This line of thinking rested on developments that predated his time. His namesake, the famous physician Ibn Zakariyyā’ al-Rāzī (d. 924), duly noting Galen’s hesitation about whether the soul or self was a substance or an accident, proceeded to shred a few of the latter’s most famous hypotheses (Ibn Zakariyyā’ al-Rāzī, 2006, pp. 14-15). One of Galen’s theories, for instance, reduced the self to an entity belonging to a corporeal mixture and to nothing more than ‘a vapor of the blood and the spirit (*rūḥ*) in the interstices of the brain or in the mass of the brain’ (Ibn Zakariyyā’ al-Rāzī, 2006, p. 14). Ibn Zakariyyā’’s broader charge was that certain of Galen’s speculations obfuscated his stated purpose of explaining physiological processes, being extrinsic to the object of explanation and to the goals of medicine itself.

That aside, there is a very good reason why physiology/anatomy figured so large wherever medicine and philosophy overlapped: namely, the problem of the internal organs and limbs.¹ The burning question there had been how the bodily parts developed from a single original source—a single efficient principle—called ‘nature’, and yet are explainable according to their functions and interactions. All this required considerable *empirical* investigation, one of philosophy’s oldest and most important tributaries (but not its domain).

Al-Ghazālī’s works are filled with medical tropes. A couple of centuries later, Qūnawī likened the self and the body to the ‘opposite’² scales of a balance, but without a hint of the reductionism previously ascribed to Galen, much less today’s ramshackle speculations about things like ‘consciousness’, ‘soul’, ‘god’ and whatnot. He applied his philosophic reasoning to the ‘secret’ (*sīr*) by which the intellective self and the human body (a composite mixture,

1. On ancient Greek philosophy and medicine and Ibn Zakariyyā’’s critique of Galen, see Shaker, 2020b, pp. 348-416.

2. ‘Opposite’ (*muqābil*) is not a contrary (*didd*), which implies mutual exclusion.

implying change and impermanence) may be said to be connected as ‘opposites’ on a balance, among other issues (Qūnawī, 2006, p. 86).¹ As a whole being, *Man* (*insān*, before specification by gender) constituted the highest balance (*mīzān*, or criterion), and it was up to ‘natural man’ endowed with faculties to organize everything falling within his compass by reaching up to ‘intellective man’, albeit under a different aspect than that of his earthly particularities.²

Several implications flow from this for philosophy. Although man must turn his gaze to the dynamics of life around him, he can do so without at the same time tying all his thoughts to the everyday. The ‘self’ represented the furthest limit of simplicity for man as his beginning point. So being, it governed the body only indirectly. Between the self and the body, the philosopher had also to consider the animating spirit (*rūh haywāni*), where the spirit’s connection with the natural human mixture (*mizāj tabī‘i insāni*) included the causality by which the *simple* self was said to govern the *composite* body and through which man aspired to become a complete being (Qūnawī, 2006, p. 86).

For his part, Ibn ‘Arabī distinguished ‘nature’ from its elemental composition and stressed that the ‘world of nature’, comprised of the natures belonging to created beings, alluded to all the forms found on a *single* mirror (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1980, p. 78). And he inferred that God supported the prophet ‘Īsā with ‘the Sacred Spirit’ (*al-rūh al-quds*), wherewith he ‘made him emerge as a spirit in a fixed form of man’ (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1968, vol. 1, p. 168). ‘Īsā was thus ‘a spirit supported by a spirit which was cleansed of the tarnish of ontic being’ and which breathed life into the dead—hence his association with ‘life’. Ibn ‘Arabī noted that *eternal* life, the root, lived *everlastingly* (timelessly as such), and that ‘everlasting’ and ‘eternal’ become distinct from each other only under the aspect of ‘the existence of the living world and its creation’ (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1968, vol. 1, p. 168), including the fact that one had to exist in it, to begin with. The knowledge of this was attached *vertically* to the spirital world of meanings and the Command; and *horizontally* to the creational world of nature and corporeal masses, where knowledge was divided into sense, nature, spiritual meanings, and divine knowledge, each level distinct but not divorced from the others (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1968, vol. 1, p. 168). An additional factor, by which the heart itself was said to ‘live’, also impinged upon knowledge due to the natural humor (*al-mizāj al-tabī‘i*)—for example, the knowledge that God

1. Ṣadrā had much to say on this relation (cf. al-Shīrāzī, 2004, p. 265ff).

2. Ṣadrā describes the faculties of man as ‘shadows’, mere likenesses of man’s self (cf. al-Shīrāzī, 2011, vol. 3, p. 530).

is the Mercifier (*al-rahim*). Someone able to discern the liberating force of His mercy for all human beings was likely to request the cessation of his bondage to the base pursuits ‘tainted’ by his facultative knowledge (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1968, vol. 1, p. 350). On this score, Ibn ‘Arabī asked a very pertinent question: If, by departing from nature’s ordinance (*ḥukm*) for the human being, the sapient person departed from his humanness and towards the world of his sanctification (*‘ālam taqdīṣīhi*), above the higher spirits, can we then say that such a person at that level can lead other persons (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1968, vol. 1, p. 426)? This is a more focused question that the one I shall later pose. Nevertheless, he answered that it was so only in the *unconditional* sense—i.e., without further specification.

Interestingly, something similar to that departure from humanness figured in the works of the Enlightenment’s German defenders and critics, including those of a young and ambitiously materialist thinker, Karl Marx, but with very different consequences than in Ḥikma. Hegel famously argued that man’s exterior, as expressed in his social institutions, was oppressively dehumanizing (Yack, 1992, p. 185; cf. Shaker, 2017, p. 376). He argued that although man was definable by his ability to oppose his ends to the ends given by nature, the complete and purposeful institutionalization of *man’s* humanity in society did not occur in concert with nature and even contradicted his humanity in a basic way. But where Hegel held out the possibility of *exterior* reconciliation with his contemporary world, in the anglophone world a Puritan-like literalism turned the German Idealist warnings about the dehumanization of humanness and the denaturation of nature into a full surrender to the material world, in my view.

This typically German debate does not come as a surprise, given that the new class of German intellectuals at the time was perhaps the closest in Europe to Latin Scholasticism and ultimately to Islamicate thought. But it did not completely adhere, it appears, to the empirical strictures laid out even before Ibn ‘Arabī’s time that had helped regularise the various senses of ‘nature’. One such stricture was precisely the physician al-Rāzī’s criticism of Galen’s wayward physiological explanations. He laid bare the pitfalls that dogged Galen’s otherwise important contributions to ‘empirical medicine’, as the most authoritative ancient schools of medicine were known. I mention this point for two reasons. First, the sort of speculations that Galen indulged in have not vanished today. But they are more consequential today, seeing how little our literalist muddles have enlightened us about an environment that, though seriously degraded, is so complex that we are at pains to break away from it even mentally. And second, the concept of life, of which we are a part and which—strictly from a philosophical perspective—allows us to sit at the helm of the created world, to boot, sometimes operated as an alternate term to

'existence' with respect to the createdness of things (Ibn 'Arabī, 1968, vol. 3 pp. 490-491).

When Ibn 'Arabī argued for the synonymity of nature, life, and existence at some level,¹ he was not insinuating some kind of new biological theory about the material universe. Let us recall some key aspects of his complex argument, then. When one speaks of '*imān*' (roughly, faith), existing and knowing went hand-in-hand because they converged precisely where 'life' was integral to the knowledge said to be *for the sake of man* and *his discernment (fiqh)*, not for the sake of any other being.² More explicitly, he declared that there is not a thing, whether standing on its own or not, that does not extol *his Lord His praise* (Q. 17.44) (Ibn 'Arabī, 1968, vol. 3, pp. 490-491). When life is taken as existence in this general sense, neither life nor existence can have a contrary. But the fact that existence-as-such has no contrary implies that there is only existence in the most general sense of the word. By the same token, there is only life. Existence is contradictable only in the existentialization (*ījād*), within the realm of the living and dying things. Nothing stands still in the world: only upon analysis do we mentally distinguish what is fixed as a singularity and what is fixed as the multiplicity of a thing. Since neither exists in this unconditional form in the material world, they must come together again if human thought and action are to have any meaning for human beings, let alone be of any practical use whatsoever.

Since I am not here engaging in empirical theory-building, the quasi-philosophical question posed by the old Hippocratic schools in physiology/anatomy can be posed anew in our present context: Under what circumstances may one speak of a single fixed 'nature' and multiple 'parts' within the same being?³ That a single nature must be fixed *in concreto* cannot be correct as a factual statement. In the physical world, there is no such thing as an absolutely immovable, Archimedean-like point in space by which all the things it overlooks can be evaluated and the status of their existences determined on the same terms. There is always a third, intermediate zone—between the knowing and the being—with which no life can be said to

1. If there is only life, there is only existence, in the sense that it has no opposite (Ibn 'Arabī, 1980, p. 170).

2. Su'ād al-Hakīm represented his main argument, gathered from his statements on this subject in the following syllogism (al-Hakīm, 1981, p. 364):

Every thing extols God His praise
Every thing that extols is alive

Every thing is alive

3. On the historical background of this problem, see Shaker, 2020b, pp. 365-416.

begin, let alone properly *operate* as a being in its own right rather than as something assembled from two opposing halves or other elements occurring in the mind.

Let us retrace our steps. Through our limited faculties, we perceive either the object intended as a whole or ourselves seeing that object. The only matching terms recognized in logic for these two unequal sides are ‘conceptualization’ (*taṣawwur*) and ‘assent’ (*taṣdīq*, or judgment)—one is a fixed concept, the other an inferential process. In philosophy, they are supposed to be dynamically related to a single point of origin.

The intermediate zone I am referring to, beyond this logical approach, is where human beings apply the bulk of their synthesizing/analyzing skills, from tallying up the cost of purchased items to judging the veracity of a proposition, to speaking about God, the Hereafter and other ‘intangibles’. It was crucial to those who, starting with the Presocratics, sought a proper accounting for both the phenomenal world that human beings behold and the intangible ‘things’ that no eye can directly see, but without surrendering everything to the mental *abstraction* of either. Intermediation implicates both sides of the equation, as it were, not just knowing and not just being; not just the subject and not just the object (in modern parlance); not just the unconditional and not just the contingent or delimited (*muqayyad*). It accounts for how the mind is able to *distinguish* between things, *relate* them to each other, and *subjoin* one to the other, since life does not flow like mechanical gears.

Moreover, an opposition (not a logical contradiction) exists between the active mode of ‘nature’, ‘existence’, ‘hiddenness,’ and every substantive object of thought, on the one hand, and its unconditional or absolute aspect, on the other. When the thing is considered in itself, or unconditionally (i.e., not according to its relations), all other mental operations (involving *taṣdīq*) are technically laid aside to privilege the viewer’s grasp of the thing, which grasp is then passive and, in experience at least, mediated primarily by the perceptual faculties. Absent the unconditional thing’s relation to its ‘parts’ or to other things, this thing remains abstract and distant, arguably, even from itself.

For example, ‘God’ is absolutely unknowable as He knows Himself in Himself beyond His relation to the world and its relation to Him. But this God is already ‘dead’ and *other* than God. This is true of everything. However, when the ‘thing’ (including God, in the *Hikma* parlance) is thought and known to be *real*, in some non-sensorial sense, its unconditional *and* its operational modes must both come into view in such a way that its unconditionality can direct thinking back to what perceivable knowledge is subjoined to it but under a new and aspect of *activity* (and therefore agency). Finding the cause, one grasps both the object and its observed properties and accidents in a new but degraded ‘whole’.

The lost discourse on nature

The discourse on ‘nature’ owes its coherence in no small part to the highly versatile root word *t-b-*, from which a number of important concepts like ‘*tabī'a*’, ‘*tab'*’, ‘*tab'a*’ and ‘*tibā*’ are derived. This coherence agreed well with the concept of juncitiveness (*jam'iyya*), where after Ibn ‘Arabī everything was comprehended as ‘living’, keeping in mind that Ibn ‘Arabī did take the latter solely in the biological sense. The highest, most comprehensive junction (*jam'*)—so called in the formal vocabulary of philosophy, as opposed to the figurative or allegorical discourse we shall consider shortly—was what God’s creative knowledge *subjoined* to man, who constituted a central metaphysical point; thus, it was not His knowledge of Himself as He is in Himself. God’s knowledge was creative, in a maximal and plenary sense, because it was identical to ‘existence’, from which ‘knowledge’ was distinguishable only from the creaturely perspective. *Subjoined* thus, man’s vision was likened to a mirror image of the divine vision—never identical with God’s knowledge or reality. In short, without subjunction (*idāfa*) and everything said to be subjoined, there is no real knowledge *for the sake of man*; on the contrary, all knowledge would remain hidden in God’s secrecy and God’s knowledge of Himself.

This is partly why Qūnawī emphasized the qualification of hiddenness and existence with a ‘subjunctive unconditional’ (*al-muṭlaq al-idāfi*) taken in the active mode, from which man’s own general agency is derived. Short of this, no syllogism would be possible by which to express the causal relation between any two *realities*, let alone two realities taken in their respective unconditionalities. The ‘realities of things’ manifested themselves according to a different, more original causality than that of the material world and thus required a more foundational pattern of reasoning. Social interaction did not escape this analysis, since the realities of human beings too were subjected to an interior causality (Qūnawī, 2002, pp. 74-75), being subjoined to the same essential oneness.

It is in this rich soil—not in medieval Occitania, as wrongly taught in ‘Western’ colleges devoted to ‘liberal education’—that science in the Islamic world developed in close tandem with philosophy into the forms we take for granted today. It was no longer beholden to the ancient Hippocratic schools’ comprehensive but speculative explanations of observable natural processes, since pursuing philosophical comprehensiveness within the field of medicine any further would have gone against the grain of both empirical observation and philosophy. True, Aristotle had granted philosophy sole authority to establish the logical subject matter of every rational discipline. But *Hikma* sought, also, to attune the knowing subject to the heartbeat of the human

community, as well as to the prerogatives of proper reflection. Knowledge for the sake of man and *shahāda* (witness, beholding) entailed this, too.

As mentioned, there is a further, allegorical side to this wide-ranging debate, besides the formal. Although it availed itself of *natural* symbols differently from the utopian schemes emanating from the Enlightenment, there was no desire to reshape philosophy to the specifications of science in the brazen manner of Auguste Comte or Wilfrid Sellars. Besides analyzing concepts, philosophy was missioned with making the thinking person acutely conscious of the *aḥwāl*—the circumstances or circumstantialities—that bear upon both thinking and the consequences of thinking playing themselves out in the world of the living. Although a philosopher was not expected to specify thinking's *existential* consequences, the full extent of which in any case lay outside the bounds of one's faculty to inquiry into things, neglecting them in the realm of *being*—hence ‘beingness’ (*mawjūdiyya*), which defined the framework of philosophical inquiry after *Al-Shifā*—belied any philosopher or claimant to prophethood pretending to live among—let alone to guide—other human beings. The human being's beingness encapsulated his abode on earth (leaving aside for now the centrality of the Perfect Man) because no philosopher believed that human beings could thrive on mere ideas, any more than they could (at the opposite extreme) by imitating the animals, who excelled in eating, chasing, fleeing, flying, etc. The prophet Mūsā eventually had to return from the summit, albeit only to find his flock below worshipping a golden calf.

Besides its unconditionality, the word ‘*t-b-*’ in the philosophical discourse acquired an intensive form, ‘*tabī'a*’, which, comparably with the active mode of ‘existence’, referred to the nature that the human being is not only born into, but from which he must *separate* to some degree if he or she is to live like a *human being*—that is to say, the nature of the human being is not that of another species. Nevertheless, there are different kinds of separation and different ways to express separation and reunion along the journey of human existence. In all this, on the one hand, the Qur'ān remained the main textual source *and* the central event in man's existential drama, with the supporting evidence provided by the Prophet's *ahādīth* and apprisements and the sayings of notable spiritual figures. Given the Qur'ān's irreducible existential encompassment of the knowing-and-being, its contents act like a window onto the world before man's eyes, though it should be noted that the word ‘*tabī'a*’ figures nowhere in the Qur'ān.

And on the other hand, the philosophical and literary writings are replete with allegorical symbols drawn from the natural environment—gardens, creatures of the wild, etc. The idea of the garden, for example, was especially prominent in Persian poetry and *'irfān*, not because gardens were ‘naturally’

occurring phenomena or places where man could live idyllically and indistinguishably from his natural surroundings, as Rousseau had it, but partly because they signified pleasurable ease for people, in sharp contrast to the *disorder* that people often left behind them; and partly because man's harmony with 'nature' occurred only under the aspect of the 'garden', not unconditionally. Disorder is a kind of breach that negates man's own nature, which is only one kind of nature. As a negation of nature, it was said to lead to the abyss, far away from man's proper finality. How the Hereafter might be related to the 'now', in this world, would however be too complicated to discuss in detail here. Suffice it to say that Ibn 'Arabī, who had so much to say on this subject matter, wrote, 'To the sapient person (*al-'ārif*), there is no separation in the [divine] manifestation between this world (*al-dunyā*) and the Hereafter based on anything but encompassment by the universal veil, which from our vantage point is the veil of Inviolability (*hijāb al-'izza*)—or, if you will, the outer garment of grandeur (*ridā' al-kibriyyā*)' (Ibn 'Arabī, 2006, p. 88). It was thus possible to hold, at once, that the final resolution of everything in the world occurred only in the Hereafter, and that—short of this otherworldliness—our imperfect natural world might still be viewed as 'complete' or even 'perfect', at any given moment, in the synthetic sense of having reached this moment *as the selfsame thing*, not as something else or as the same thing in tatters, which would render it fatally *unnatural* even to itself.

Many complications impinge on the question of the Hereafter, as famous lines that 'Attār wrote in his epic poem '*Mantiq-e tayr*' demonstrate. Attār is a good example of how imageries drawn from nature were used allegorically to disclose the hidden dynamics of human existence, which dynamics related closely to the return to God and to the Hereafter. During the journey led by the Hoopoe:

Another bird said: '[...] The path seems full of terrors and despair.
Dear hoopoe, how much further till we're there?'
'Before we reach our goal,' the hoopoe said,
'The journey's seven valleys lie ahead;
How far this is the world has never learned,
For no one who has gone there has returned [...]'
(Attār, 1984, p. 166)

Attār does not claim that this journey *is* the world visible to the naked eye, for it constitutes an intermediate zone between what remains unseen and what is visible. The visible world may 'resemble' nonexistent contingency, and nonexistent contingency may mimic what is unconditional; however, beyond attributional semblances, the unseen and the visible differ fundamentally from each other. Pending a cause or mover, a contingent thing will never come to

existence by its own devices, any more than a thing can solely from its own matter.

In the philosophical jargon, along this journey, the highest world (*al-‘ālam al-a’lā*) signals a causal connection with the world below it. Besides this ‘vertical’ causality, there is the ‘horizontal’. For example, no rational person would deny the efficacy of human activity in this world (*dunyā*) if he or she expects to do anything while living. For, if collective and individual effort exhibited no power at all, what would be the point of doing anything? Why should we cultivate the soil when we could stroll down Paradise Lane, cheerfully oblivious to our own footfalls before giving up the ghost, but also crushing the life out of the lowly ants that we barely make out from the majestic heights of our hollow panoramic vision? Few of us would deny that arguing for the absolute powerlessness of the human being flies in the face of some pretty straightforward facts of life. But that is not to say that, with all our technological savviness today, we have successfully avoided the scale of devastation to which the efficacy of human powers is liable to lead when society is made to run like a pilotless train. Pilotless does not mean leaderless. Human conduct is most destructive by the disorder it so ‘rationally’ creates—as *realistically* portrayed perhaps on Picasso’s surrealistic canvasses.

Navigating the headwaters between knowing and being has been characteristic of our millennial traditions—their philosophies, practical sciences, and all their other civilisational achievements. But the ‘journey’, as I like to call it, also includes what cannot be touched, seen, or heard, but which the modern age has relegated to the realm of the ‘imagination’, ‘illusion’, ‘fiction’, or more recently, the category of ‘values’ so recklessly misused in the moralization and manipulation of public opinion. All that is automatically deemed false or nonexistent—though the social scientist might judge it ‘useful’ in some sense—even when it is *known* to be true and/or real—as if we needed proofs on paper to confer existence upon things, in the first place.¹ And when the intention is to ‘manage’ the natural environment, ‘engineer’ a new society, or redesign the human identity from top to bottom based on some ideological blueprint, the ephemeral imagination is suddenly and magically valorized for its wonderful ‘creativity’. This intention is bounded by man’s short modern experience, which I have always argued consists in sweeping his past into the dustbin. Modernist worldviews are secessionist in intent in precisely this way.

1. On this method of argument, see Qūnawī, 2002, pp. 22–24, and my upcoming translation of this book.

Biological clocks

Under this light, do we not do ourselves a great disservice, further, by choosing to forget that we are *not* the real authors of the world before us, however formidable our technological powers might seem at first flush? We have inherited the world *in toto* from our forebears, to start with. As a final word on ‘human efficacy’ and the magic wand of proofs, therefore, let me make the following points:

One, the difference today—as I first hinted—is that no rational person of *conscience* can fail to suspect the dramatically negative character of human efficacy at this stage of history. Two, the trouble with a conscience untamed by the experience and wisdom acquired since our ancestors first became sedentary is that it quickly degenerates into a war of headstrong moralizers. By contrast, someone with a conscience who lacks the technical knowledge or skills, but remains unswayed by the dictates of ideology, should still be able to recognize that something is not quite right in what human beings are presently doing, with or without clinching proofs. When the obvious can no longer be denied, moralizing each other becomes nothing more than a tactic by which to manipulate societies that are caught in collective inertia, for ends that have little to do with our living environment. Are we not warranted to worry about the extinction of whole segments of natural life on earth? If not, we certainly know that outside of nature’s embrace, we would be left to our own devices. Let us think about this for a moment. Can a part of nature that seeks separation from nature be anything but a definition of death? All life on earth may not perish along with this part, but we can hardly say the same about the conditions of our own survival, given the enormous and continually expanding resources needed just to maintain an illusive modern cornucopia.

Human beings have special needs that can only be fulfilled within the artificial space needed for cooperation and division of labor. After all, they are not equipped with the same ‘tools’ as other lifeforms: claws, fangs, fur, wings, prodigious sight, etc. Without their probing minds and collaborative instincts, they are no match for the lowliest natural organism. They learned long ago to mimic the fauna of the wild, not because they wished to walk on all fours but, to invoke the best qualities of animals by *ritual* means. Indeed, ‘ritual’ can be applied to a whole range of human activities. By definition, it is not a practical activity like rolling out a car off an assembly line. Yet, something about ritual can still be transposed to other types of activity, since every purposeful activity requires methodical movements. These two functions wedded together roughly defined the spirit in which the ancient ‘religious’ rituals surrounding ancient metallurgical techniques, for example, were once performed. My point is that it makes more sense for the human being to re-enact the flight of a bird

using a ‘flying machine’ than to try growing feathers. It is what is most *natural* to the human being.

Al-Ghazālī sought to dispel the dangerous confusions that arose when people’s behavior was akin to that of a lower animal or a heavenly angel, which are opposites. ‘There is nothing more illogical,’ he wrote, ‘than someone who, when having to choose between being a donkey or Jibrīl, prefers the echelon of the donkey to that of Jibrīl. And there is no concealing that what resembles a thing is also drawn to it’ (al-Ghazālī, 2011, p. 1302). The self’s striving to obtain the pleasures of the beasts would then be greater than its striving to obtain those of the angels. ‘Such are those about whom it is said, “These people are like the livestock—nay, more meandering”’ (Q. 7.179), he said, ‘since it is not within the livestock’s capacity to quest for the echelon of the angels.’ We must, for sheer survival, separate ourselves from ‘the natural world’, and this is perfectly in keeping with our own nature and ultimately nature itself since we cannot separate from the natural world to the point of losing all connection to it.

That is not to say that what is human and what is natural are all that easy to determine outside of our biology and chemical processes. For example, the precise moment, if any, when we became ‘human’ may never be known on a historical timescale. The only surviving human species on earth—*homo sapiens sapiens*, in Latin—must have been around between 400, 000 and 700, 000 years. But this is mostly speculative because any time range would not likely cover more than the approximate lifespan of those subspecies we know have gone extinct. Besides, one cannot assign a starting point for speciation as one would a car on the assembly line. The human species may not even have the same internal clock as those extinct species, though the longer the lifespan, the more nature is likely to find the mechanism for a good cleansing, as it were. The natural world protects against wayward species by reaching right inside their biology to limit the cancerous growth. Faster than we can destroy the earth, we are liable—like hapless children—to drain the vitality of our ‘subspecies’ in dubious pursuits. In this, nature is always ready to oblige.

‘Wilāya’ as man’s inner history

Whether or not man can meet his current challenges, Ibn ‘Arabī approached the pattern of man’s earthly life based on *wilāya*. Man is said to share with God the name ‘*walīy*’, which is derived from ‘*wilāya*’, and ‘*mudabbir*’ (regulator) is semantically close to it. ‘*Wilāya*’ (sometimes pronounced ‘*walāya*’) operates somewhat like a principle that governs the inner ‘history’ of man’s being from the beginning of his earthly existence to his ‘future’ end. This understanding is as characteristic of philosophy as it is of *Kalām* and the

religious sciences, as true of the Shī'a learning tradition as the Sunnī. The underlying principle is exactly the same since God is said to be the true ‘*wālī*’. But it does not amount to a biological theory of any kind.

In general, a ‘*wālī*’ is a governor (*hākim*) who judges (ordinates) and thus metes out justice, etc., and the imperative of whom is always on the side of the good (Qūnawī, 2008, pp. 347-348). Qūnawī adds that the dignified role of the governing leader (*al-imām al-hākim*) appointed for ‘*wilāya*’ has an infinite number of levels, the highest being that of the ‘Major Leadership’ and ‘the Greatest *Wilāya*’ (*al-imāma al-kubrā*). That said, the all-encompassing unconditional ‘*wilāya*’ primarily belongs to God. Human beings may agree or disagree on who was a *wālī* in the past, but no one saw any benefit in naming specific persons in the future.

Ibn ‘Arabī does not apply ‘*wilāya*’ based, as he notes, on man’s unconditional affinity (*al-mudāhāh*) with the world. He applies it instead to what lies opposite to ‘unconditionality’ from the perspective of created beings and regulation (Ibn ‘Arabī, 2006, p. 31)—that is, in the knowing and being. This is not easy to explain, because he is not quite referring to created being in the flesh. He explicitly aims to throw light on everyone from the writer (*kātib*) to those secure in something, the alms-givers, the travelers, and so on. Central to his treatment are two basic questions: Where, in the human epitome and thus in the spiritual genesis, is the station of the Guided Leader (*al-imām al-mahdī*) connected like water and clay with the Prophet’s Household? And where in this epitome does the seal of the sanctified (*khatm al-awliyā*) lie?

He confesses that whenever he speaks of these matters, he is obliged to mention the idea of ‘two worlds’, but only for the sake of anyone seeking to learn about ‘the foremost figure’ who cognizes and intellects those matters, so that one might be aligned with its secret deposited in man (*ibid.*, 32). It is based on reflection. And he explicitly denies that the aim here is to work towards a cognizance of what is exteriorized in ontic being (*al-kawn*)—as frequently claimed today about the things observed and causes. Not a slave to words, his aim is more didactic: to notify whoever is inattentive to what comes to light from this human designation¹ and Adamic person (*hādhā al-‘ayn al-insānī*).

The idea behind ‘*wilāya*’, then, is not to lay out man’s external history, much less to depict him as a hapless product of his material circumstances. That the beings of the flesh are, in Sadrā’s words, causally dependent on a higher intelligible world of realities was crucial to understanding the major

1. ‘*Ayn*’, what serves to designate something, being its essence or the selfsame thing.

and minor cycles of *wilāya* demarcated by Ibn ‘Arabī:

Know that *wilāya* is the sphere that circumscribes all [other spheres]; therefore, it is uninterrupted and possesses the *general* notification [or scope]; whereas the legislative prophethood and [office of] messenger come to term. In Muḥammad, [prophethood] comes to term, so there is no [legislating] prophet after him. (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1980, p. 134ff)

Briefly, *wilāya* encompasses the twin office of messengership and prophethood as any interior (*bātin*) encompasses its own exteriorization, interiority being the more fundamental. The last prophet, Muḥammad, embodies both dimensions—like water and clay. He was equally a *walīy*, *‘arif*, *‘ālim*, etc. since he spoke on his own behalf as well as delivered the message of God. That said, Ibn ‘Arabī distinguishes the Seal of the Prophets from its other name, the Seal of the Sanctified. Because *wilāya* is connected with prophethood, its legislative function, it takes on the name of general prophethood (*nubuwwa ‘āmma*). In this sense, every prophet is equally a *walīy*. Since the line of previous prophets ends with the *Seal* of the Prophets, however, the continuous *wilāya* of the prophets is higher than any temporal *nubuwwa* (prophethood). Only the Seal of the *wilāya muḥammadiyya* closes the sphere of the prophetic inheritance (*wirātha*) bequeathed by Muḥammad.¹

Although none of this commits him to serial time, it must not and does not contradict the knowledge that man will come to a temporal end, like all things big and small. That Muḥammad should be the last prophet itself gives hint that, ultimately, *all* things must come to pass before the Day of Accounting (*yawm al-hisāb*). Until that ‘day’, only ‘general prophethood’ will remain active, since *wilāya*—its other name—continues to branchiate through particular individuals. Here, three important functions flow from ‘*walīy*’, those of the *muhaqqiq* (one in whom the divine names and attributes are confirmed), the *‘arif* (sapient), and the *wārith* (heir of the prophetic inheritance) (Chodkiewicz, 1986, p. 65).

The childhood of man

Like the hoopoe, the mature (actualized) intellect persists in order to guide the self and all selves in every knowing and acting, but for purposes that transcend mere appearances, individuals, and particulars. In that journey, we must note, while the self has to ‘negate’ the tarnishes and imperfections of this world for

1. The *wārithūn* are those who inherit ‘Muḥammad’s knowledges, stations and states’ (Qūnawī, 2002, p. 7).

sheer survival and transcendence, al-Ghazālī—even in his most self-abnegating mood—insisted that *dunyā* was itself *blameless*, for it too was a gift from God, and a gift from God could not be spurned or declined. Because the goal was reunion, not just the separation from worldly temptations.

Man was said to lose sight of the path of reunion and reconciliation whenever he entangled himself with the objects that his mind conjured up and mistook for absolutes—a tell-tale sign of superstition. To Ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī, even an intellect totally immersed in the unconditionality of things, or alternatively on the world of disparate appearances, was a faculty pushed too far to excess by some lower faculty or other. To illustrate this, he also used the allegory of the child at play, as others did in the early discourse on the reunion, the divine fulfillment of love, and knowledge.

Have you ever watched a child at play? I mean really looked into the child's eyes and wondered what those diminutive hands were doing? Perhaps the child was trying to mimic the adults. The imagery may delight us, but Ḥikma made use of it to clarify something about the existential predicament of man. In fact, the self's entanglement with matter was how Ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī *figuratively* explained the 'world' as coming into being. This is the existential drama to which the principle of *wilāya*, in a very different language, elsewhere assigned a temporal order above worldly time. His influential version of the allegory depicts the human 'self' as a child who, playing innocently in the garden, acquires a desire for 'matter'. This garden is filled with life's temptations, symbolized by the scorpions, snakes, etc., residing in it. As a philosopher, not as a medical figure whose authority incidentally lasted in England well into the modern era, al-Rāzī calls into question the ambiguous argument that the world is 'eternal' (Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, 1977). But he places the intellect ('*aql*) in the thick of 'being'—that is to say, in the garden, which represents man's peculiar journey from 'childhood', not from some obscure biological inception.

In relation to man, we must recall, intellect was what opened up to that which philosophers since the Presocratics had recognized as the knowing-and-being. This is arguably what interested al-Rāzī, rather than the five pre-eternal factors in themselves (*qudamā'*, timeless elements or principles), which he listed for the purpose of his allegory: time, space, God, self, and matter. He reasoned that the state of rest (*rāha*), which raised man above worldly pleasures and pains, was the self's true home—in the sense that the self, on receiving its intellect, must forsake the excesses of its passions for an equilibrium that is not subject to life's vicissitudes. The reason behind the self's fall in this garden ought to be of interest to a 'modern' world that seems, from this perspective, to mistake the throes of material consumption for a 'pleasurable' walk.

In other literary works, the animals along this journey are made to talk from a station of wisdom, much like the intellect. In Attār's *Conference of Birds*, for example, the hoopoe was the only guide capable of answering the other birds' inquisitive questions. Suhravardī wrote *Gharb va gharbiyya* in a similar vein, this time about the search for 'a great' ancestor. And Ibn Sīnā's *The Bird*, written in the first person, was about the self in the guise of a bird freed from a cage by other birds that were in pursuit of 'a great king'. On the other hand, al-Junayd, instead of using natural symbols, made Iblīs say that man was to him like a ball in a child's hands (Junayd, 2007, p. 91). It may at first seem preposterous to conflate childhood with Iblīs (the 'prince of despair', as it were), for whom everything but God is mere play. But his parable was meant only to show, in the starkest terms possible, that those unable to control their passions became playthings to themselves and to other people. Man can be an angel or a devil—his choosing.

In short, the encounter with the natural desires leads to two very different alternatives: decorous concealment of the self for the love union, or the infatuation with material things and other 'substitutes' for self-gratification. And divine love was widely viewed, subjunctively, as the root of human love; conversely, without human love, the divine cannot be known. But what was really loved was ultimately the 'self of the self' (*jān-e jān*), otherwise called the beloved of the interior (*ma 'shūq-e bātin*) (Rûzbehân, 1991). Man knew his Creator by way of this root, rather than according to any biology. Forsaking excesses is, in fact, what all the branches of human inheritance teach, including Buddhism and Hinduism. Here, '*ilm al-hikma*' places special emphasis on the idea that forsaking is only a negative condition pending man's positive reconciliation with the divine both on earth and in the Hereafter.

What was most intriguing about al-Rāzī's depiction of the self's 'fall' was that the self's desire for matter should also be the cause that set the world's creation in motion, as I noted. 'But for this cause [i.e., the self's desire for matter], there would not be a world,' he declared (Abū Hātim al-Rāzī, 1977; Ibn Zakariyya al-Rāzī, 1982, pp. 20-21). An avid reader of Plato's *Timaeus*, he concluded that 'before' the *existential* drama of the world's temporal creation, only the five most basic 'pre-eternal' factors subsisted, timelessly (or analytically, not existentially). But since he was equally keen, elsewhere in his writings, to show up the utility of knowledge for man and the created intellect's own role in the procurement of knowledge, he placed the human intellect ('*aql*') in the lap of existence. It was important to untangle practically useful knowledge from the prophetic source that guided all expressions of wisdom from the root. This comes out clearly in his famous debate with Abū Hātim, a well-known Ismā'īlī dā'i. On the one hand, while 'useful' pertained directly to man, it was only part of what it meant for man to live naturally. On

the other, as his interlocutor stressed, the prophetic source was necessary if man was to live naturally in the world, where ‘natural’ did not imply that man’s welfare was indistinguishable from that of other animals.

Conclusion: someone is playing dead

Like our ailing environment, modern society is ridden with extremes.¹ In the resulting moral chaos, people try instinctively to maintain a semblance of normality in their private lives. Consumers may thrill to the exquisite morbidity of mass entertainment, but they are constantly on the lookout for tidbits of anything ‘natural’, ‘organic’, etc., as opposed to what is unnatural, inert, or downright toxic. Under extreme circumstances, however, talking about the ‘natural kingdom’, from which we think we pretend to have exited on becoming biologically human, is liable to be expressed in a language of apocalyptic lunacy, though there is no wisdom in hastening the end of the world or to repair to underground bunkers out of blind fear.

In the main, the idea of ‘nature’, which has served many purposes over the centuries, has helped focus the discourse on ‘existence’ and man’s place in it. In this paper, I have selected themes that are historical and circumstantial in character and others that are drawn directly from the Hikma learning tradition. Let me, in conclusion, leave the reader with two unanswered questions: Why has our necessary—but equally ‘natural’—separation from nature been allowed to go as far as it has? Are we so alone in our ‘modern’ troubles that we must cast off our human inheritance and claim to reinvent the universe at every turn? Too many people, imagining nature as existing ‘out there’, have difficulty comprehending that degrading ‘nature’ is essentially to degrade oneself and one’s fellows. Man is basically staring at his own tortured self when he callously and unbendingly demeans the life around him. Let us cut through the gossamer of mediatic propaganda to a longstanding *reality*: as our only living environment goes, so goes human civilization. All our fancy technological gadgetry has not altered the core relationship with nature, of which we remain no more than a measly *physical* part.

Finally, the collective inheritance I have been evoking, let me now say, consists of more than just cultural artifacts or whatever is unearthed from the past. In Hikma, the prophetic inheritance (*wirātha nabawiyya*) is continuous with the all-encompassing existential light bequeathed by God, who is ‘light upon light’. Ibn ‘Arabī teachings on the *wilāya* that we have considered are based on this understanding, which has nothing to do with the hollow universalism/cornucopian dreams that have been peddled since the now-

1. The late historian Eric Hobsbawm called it the ‘age of extremes’, the title of his book.

expired Age of Enlightenment, *l'Âge des lumières*.

Man continually *returns* as he ventures forward, and vice versa. The consequences of his thoughts and actions make up his earthly path, or as Baudelaire would have it, the prime matter. But is this living subject today in the full bloom of his youth or senile? Even a child glancing a little farther than the end of his or her nose understands that wanton behavior leads to pain. In fact, pain is precisely what a child in a serious temper tantrum against the parent might wish to inflict: *Do what I want, or I'll destroy everything!* Only, the actor presently shouting this extortion is not someone's child but a stranger in our midst who neither believes nor disbelieves in our humanity.

Interestingly, al-Rāzī cautiously noted that those skeptical of the Hereafter were still capable of earning their livelihood, though they could not see beyond that range and were more apt to fall into life's pitfalls. In hindsight, the language he used may not have been one of mystical love, but he grasped the finality of man somewhat as did the greatest Ḥukamā', for whom the closest one gets to a 'proof' for *any* 'tomorrow' is wherever one stands on the path of life that returns from origin to origin. In this sense, the future has been with us all along. If so, it is indeed possible to glimpse the consequences of what we choose to do and think. In any event, the 'nature' inside and outside us is certain to remind us of those consequences.

For some unearthly reason, though, a few 'adults' in our time have taken it upon themselves to declare not only that nature is dead matter, to be manipulated at will, but also—on behalf of all religions—that even God is dead. Carefree but insistent on 'saving' the world, our *intellectuels publics* mollify a hungry public with: *God is dead whether we like it or not, just like the past; so, let us get on with the practical things of modern life.* As if the whole of humanity had to undergo a sort of Nietzschean rite of passage, like a 'searing' (*kayy*) at the onset of a malady. Nietzsche himself must be turning in his grave at the voice of this garrulous group of intellectual philanthropists.

In the end, as Ibn 'Arabī proclaimed, the physician has to serve nature as the messengers of God and as the heirs serve the divine Command in general. He serves it by 'assisting' it (Ibn 'Arabī, 1980, p. 97); although he may end up also assisting nature to increase the malady, in which case, seeking health, he must restrain nature, keeping in mind that health too comes from nature (Ibn 'Arabī, 1980, p. 98).

Ethics declarations

Conflict of interests

The author has no competing interestss.

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