

The Notion of Man from the Islamic Intellectual Tradition and Modern Science

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In the Islamic intellectual tradition, everything is rooted in the One Supreme Reality. Everything that exists comes from this One Reality. In this ultimate Reality, there is no distinction between subject and object, or consciousness and existence. All that exists, the universe and everything it contains, comprises only that Reality's Names and Forms, including man¹. This Reality lies beyond the material world man lives in. The basis of this tradition is *tasawwuf*, the process of realization or actualization of who one is in the light of God, and consequently, the transformation of oneself following the example of Prophet Muhammad (*saw*). In this understanding, man is a sacred being—at once body and soul, complete and whole, for in him lie the Names and Attributes of God. Hence, this tradition considers both the ontological and epistemological aspects of who man is.²

¹ In the traditional usage, the term "man" refers to humanity as a whole. In this article we use "man" in this traditional gender-neutral sense.

² Both matter and non-matter. For Avicenna, followed closely by Aquinas, this ontology in which the whole range of beings is studied—substances and accidents, causes and effects, one and many, universal and particular, is metaphysics or the "first philosophy in as much as all the other [lower] sciences, receiving their [scientific] principles from it, come after it." Metaphysics is also known as "theology or divine science, so called because its principal object [of enquiry] is God," where God is the "cause" and "end" of metaphysics. See R. E. Houser, 'Avicenna and Aquinas: Essence, Existence, and the *Esse* of Christ', *The Saint Anselm Journal* 9.1 (Fall 2013): 1-21.

Modern Western thought, on the other hand, has reduced man to its basic physical and biological elements. In this view, the basis of every existent thing is matter, evolving from simple to more complex ones. There is no Transcendent Reality, for this has been replaced with the “mind” responsible for cognition and thought. In other words, only the natural aspects of man are studied—as a reductive epistemology.

In this article, we consider these two worldviews to cast light on the understanding of who man is.

The Islamic Intellectual Tradition and Man

The *ghayb* is a realm that is beyond the reach of human perception or conception—consisting of everything that is hidden from man’s physical senses and awareness. The worldview of Islam is founded on *al-ghayb*. Indeed, the *shahāda*, the testimony of faith, starts with it—the Reality of God. To have *īmān*³ (usually translated as “faith” or “belief”) to a Muslim is to have certainty or certitude in Allāh, His Angels, His Books, His Apostles, the Last Day and the Divine Decree—both good and bad.

Al-Ghayb, usually translated as “the unseen,” or “the invisible” can also be understood as “the concealed.” The concealed is contrasted with “*al-shahāda*,” “the visible” or “the witnessed.” The Qur’ān 59.22 mentions these two worlds or presences; while God is “Knower of the unseen and the witnessed,” human beings know only the witnessed. Hence, an inner intelligence or certainty (*īmān*) is needed to know the “concealed.” Though aspects of Reality are concealed or hidden, the goal is for people to perceive them as present for it is from this higher realm that everything flows into the witnessed world of the *dunyā*, i.e., the world of man.

Just as God is the First—who existentiates all that exists, He is also the Last—the journey’s end. Indeed, the circle of being begins and ends with Him. God is the ground of being, and everything that exists can only exist as an aspect of that Divine Reality, hence as an aspect of Divine Unity. “He is God, other than whom there is no god... unto Him belongs

³ Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhīd: Its Implications for Thought and Life (US: IIIT, 1992)*, argued that these English words “faith” or “belief” have elements of untruth, doubt and suspicions, while *īmān* (from the Arabic root, “*amn*” meaning “security”) signifies conviction, absolutely free of doubt of probability, of guessing and uncertainty. In other words, *īmān* is synonymous with *yaqīn* (certainty of the truth).

the Most Beautiful Names...” (Qur’ān 59.22-24). Man and cosmos⁴ are His creations, always dependent and in need of Him, created with the purpose of serving Him (Qur’ān 21.16).

Tradition asserts that when the Absolute gives the Divine Command, *Kun!* (‘*Amr!*’), from the realm of *al-ghayb*, the universe unfolds and the Divine Names and Attributes manifest their traces. In this understanding, creation is the Self-Disclosure of God.⁵ It is the exteriorization of the Divine Principle, with each level unfolding hierarchically through successive levels. Each unfolding level reflects a higher level, and bears the divine traces from which all things originate. Hence, the universe and all that exists consists of signs (*āyāt*) and traces (*āthār*) of the Originator of the heavens and the earth.

This cosmogonic unfolding of the universe has its beginning with God as *al-Aḥad*—the Transcendent Unity, Unknowable in His Essence and is therefore not the subject of any knowledge. But He is also *al-Wāḥid*—the immanent and inclusive, and encompasses all things. So, *al-Aḥad* and *al-Wāḥid* both connote oneness or unity, but its ontological intensity or mode of manifestation is subject to gradation. The former is absolute, infinite and total—His Essence, whereas the latter is relative and finite, differentiated—His Names and Attributes. From *al-Wāḥid* the universe unfolds into subsequent levels (presences or worlds)—Spiritual, Imaginal, and Sensory, and finally to the Perfect Man. This is known as *tanazzul* or the descent of Being, the particular manner that the One Being of God manifests or makes Itself known through Five or

⁴ The term “cosmos” refers to “the universe, the world,” and it comes from the Latinized form of the Greek *kosmos* meaning “order, good order, or orderly arrangement.” The Ancient Greek perceives the universe as one holistic interacting entity and this understanding is maintained throughout the article.

⁵ The Qur’ān (59.24) depicts this three-stage cosmogonic unfolding of the universe (“He is God, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner; unto Him belong the Most Beautiful Names...”). As the Creator, He measures and proportions things out before they come into existence; as the Maker, He originates and brings them into existence or being; and as the Fashioner, He gives to things whatever forms that He wills and shapes that He chooses.

Six Presences⁶ from complete inwardness (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) through various degrees to outward manifestation (*‘ālam shabāda*). In other words, there is a hierarchy of existence in the Divine Order, from the highest spiritual realm to the lowest material realm. In a similar manner, to comprehend the Word of God, the Qur’ān, reference again must be made to the *ghayb*, for it too descends from the same Source. This is the foundational principle of Islam—*al-tawhīd*—that everything comes from God, is sustained by God and returns to God.

Implicit in this understanding of the descent of being from the concealed or unseen world to the visible world are three main points:

1. The unity of existence, from the one Being of God where all that exists are His Names and Attributes,
2. Who man is—an embodied meaning, who has been created whole, and
3. The correspondence between the cosmos and the Perfect/ Universal Man, each consisting of several worlds, from the most hidden/concealed to the most manifest, or from the subtle (*latīf*) to the coarse (*kathīf*).

Each of these points is considered below.

Unity of Existence

God is the Absolute, the Eternal, the Living, the Creator, the First and the Last, among other names. Everything that exists is from the one Being of God. Every existent thing or creation bears the divine signs and traces, but, of course, in more muted forms the further away it is from the Source. This is *tawhīd*, where God as “...the Absolute is Infinite; therefore He radiates and in radiating He projects Himself, the content of

⁶ Al-Qūnawī, Ibn ‘Arabī’s foremost disciple, did not include God’s Essence as a “Presence” for it is beyond all entification. Hence, he reported only five presences. But, if the World of Divine Essence is included as the First presence, as is done by Sa’īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (see William C. Chittick, ‘The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qūnawī to al-Qayṣarī’, *The Muslim World* 72 (1982): 112-115, six presences are then reported. Furthermore, if *al-Wahdab*, the Divine Solitude that stands ontologically between *al-Aḥad* and *al-Wāḥid* is added, seven presences can be counted. While there may be different interpretations of the Divine Presence, the overall scheme remains roughly the same. Check also *Fakhrud-dīn Irāqī: Divine Flashes*, tr. By William C. Chittick and Peter Lamborn Wilson (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1982) 3-32.

this projection being the Good.”⁷The Absolute, from the *‘alam al-ghayb* makes itself visible through existentiating things; similarly, the Infinite discloses itself through its inexhaustible multiplicity; and Perfection shows itself through the qualities of things.⁸ To understand this is to realize that He is the Cause of all being and actions. In a sense, every existent thing in the world is interconnected, entwined and entangled. While in the visible world this entanglement is not obvious, in the *ghayb* relationships exist among all things for all are derived from the One, and each has a unique place to fill and a role to play in order to complete the picture of oneness in the world.

God is *Wujūd*.⁹ There is no one word to describe *Wujūd* in English, though it is usually translated in English as “Existence” and “Being.” While He is at once Existence and Being, these two terms raise difficulties because in Arabic *wujūd* literally means “finding” and “to be found.” *Wujūd* cannot be seen as inert, unconscious, passive or arbitrary because no object can be found without an active finding, and only that which is found exists. Hence, *wujūd* is not simply “to exist” or “to be,” but also “to be alive” and “to be conscious.” *Wujūd*’s essential attributes include awareness, perception and consciousness, which are literal meanings of the term. In other words, it is “finding the Real in ecstasy,”¹⁰ when the self is effaced in the full consciousness of Him. The ambiguity that is associated when using the word *wujūd* is, according to Henry Corbin, due to the confusion between *wujūd (esse)* and *maujūd (ens)*; i.e., between the act of finding and that which is Found.¹¹

⁷ Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human* (Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1982).

⁸ The Absolute, Infinite, Perfection, are the three intrinsic dimensions of Reality.

⁹ While James W. Morris translates *wujūd* as “being” in his *al-Hikma al-‘arsbiyya*, others like Sajjad H. Rizvi, for example, is more cautious and differentiate “between Being, the absolute prerogative of the One, and existence, a derivative mode of Being that applies to contingent beings” (Sajjad H. Rizvi, ‘Mysticism and Philosophy: Ibn ‘Arabī and Mullā Ṣadrā’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard R. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), 224-246.

¹⁰ Ibn ‘Arabī, see William C. Chittick, ‘Reason, Intellect, and Consciousness in Islamic Thought’ in *Reason, Spirit and the Sacral in the New Enlightenment: Islamic Metaphysics Revived and Recent Phenomenology of Life*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (US: Springer, 2011), 11-35.

¹¹ Bakri Aladdin, ‘Oneness of Being (*Wahdat al-Wujūd*): The Term and the Doctrine’, URL= <https://ibnarabisociety.org/oneness-of-being-wahdat-al-wujud-aladdin-bakri/>. Together with *wajid* (finder), *maujūd* (found) and *wujūd* (the act of finding) are three sides of the self-same reality (Chittick, ‘Reason, Intellect and Consciousness,’ 29).

In his *Misbkāt al-Anwār*, al-Ghazālī, explained the meaning of *tawhīd* using the term *wujūd*. He described the outcome of the spiritual ascent of the gnostic as "...see(ing) through direct witnessing that there is nothing in *wujūd* save God and that 'All things are perishing except His Face.'"¹² Hence, *wujūd* belongs only to God.

In relation to God, the cosmos with all that exists in it can be likened to images and forms on a screen, where figures or forms move in and out on the screens against multiple backdrops. Just as the cosmos is related to God, these figures and forms are related within their respective narratives of the period, with the screen acting as the veil of the mystery of destiny. Thus, the cosmos is manifest through its many sensual forms while simultaneously unmanifest through its underlying life that exists continuously due to God's self-disclosure. In other words, He is *Wujūd*.

Man as Embodied Meaning

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, man is the last of God's creations. His starting point, like other creations, is from the One Being—*Wujūd*—in a time beyond time, where he has made a pact with Him (Qur'ān 7.172) before coming into this world as an embodied existence. That pact, however, was accompanied with the responsibility of honouring the Trust (Qur'ān 33.72). To do so, man was created in the most beautiful stature (*aḥsan taqwīm*, Qur'ān 95.4).¹³ But, if he fails to live up to this honour, he is reduced to the lowest of the low (*asfal sāfilīn*, Qur'ān 95.5).¹⁴ Man, then, is constituted of both worlds—the celestial and the terrestrial. Indeed, he is God's supreme creation, with everything in

¹² See William C. Chittick, 'Rumi and wahdat al-wujud' in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, eds. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70-111.

¹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (California: Allen and Unwin, 1972), writes that the Sufi commentator, Kashifi explains *aḥsan taqwīm* to mean man was created in "...the most complete and perfect theophany, the most universal and all-embracing theatre of divine hierophany, so that he may become the bearer of the divine trust (*amāna*) and the source of unlimited effusion" (25).

¹⁴ The reverse, *asfal sāfilīn*, relates to the world of natural passions and heedlessness (Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 25).

creation meant to serve him.¹⁵

Razi¹⁶ mentioned these two constitutions in the creation of Adam. When Adam's bodily frame was completed, and it was time for the spirit to be joined to the frame, God breathed of His Spirit (Qur'ān 15.29, 38.72), giving rise to the *nafs*¹⁷ (self or soul), man's true nature, which lies in-between the body and spirit. That is why human experience is always soulish or imaginal (*nafsānī*); i.e., simultaneously bodily and spiritual because his reality is in-between. While the spirit is from the world of spirits (*malakūt* or the celestial world), the body is from the sensible world (*mulk* or the terrestrial world). In other words, God created man by bringing two opposing realms together giving rise to a third entity, the in-between *nafs*.

While man lives in this world, he is *not* of this world. He is both human and divine; for his body is of this material world but his soul is immaterial. In this world, he has to transform himself from potentiality to actuality, to be attired in God's Names and Attributes to make himself beautiful. Only in being beautiful can he reflect something of the Divine Beauty. But the reverse can also occur. If the *nafs* takes delight in bodily desires and becomes attached to them, he will fall to the "lowest of the low" — *asfal sāfilīn*. Because both are his nature, man has a choice in deciding his path. That is why man's life in this world is considered as a journey—*mabda' wal-ma'ad*—a journey of becoming or actualization

¹⁵ God has made all things subservient to man, Qur'ān 45.12-13, "God it is Who made the sea subservient unto you, that the ships may sail upon it by His Command, that you may seek His Bounty, and that haply you may give thanks. He made subservient unto you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth—all together. Truly in that are signs for a people who reflect." These verses are supported also in a Hadith Qudsi, when God says, "O Son of Adam! I created the things (of this world) for you. And I created you for Me. So let not that which I created for you distract you from that for which I created you."

¹⁶ Najm al-Din Razi, *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return*, tr. by Hamid Algar (New York: Caravan Books, 1982).

¹⁷ This divine act of inbreathing results in the *nafs*, which can be seen as a metaphor for God endowing man with life and consciousness. The higher dimension of the inward human reality is the *ruh* while the lower dimension is the *nafs*. The former is the origin, while the heart and soul came into being only after the attachment of the spirit to the bodily frame (Najm al-Din Razi, *The Path of God's Bondsmen*). In addition, Najm al-Din Kubra writes on the soul, heart and spirit, "Soul, heart, and spirit give expressions to a single thing. However, soul is used when that thing is defiled and hardened, heart when it becomes purified, and spirit when it gains nearness to God..." (298). See Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

of the Divine Names so as to return to his *fiṭra* (primordial nature).¹⁸

Had he remain as either *aḥsan taqwīm* or *asfal sāfilīn*, there would be no journey for in the former, he is already in the best of stature and close to the Divine while in the latter he would be no different from other earthly creatures that are fixed in its station, hence limited in time and space. In his journey of knowing or of realizing his potential, Ibn Arabi¹⁹ distinguished between “completion” and “perfection.” According to him, though “animal-man” is complete in creation, it is imperfect with regards to the full possibilities of the human situation. So, to reach perfection, man has to be guided by the Creator through His prophets.

Man is the only creature who can recognize God fully in respect of His One Self and His Names because he was created in His image²⁰—the breathing of His Spirit into him (Qur’ān 15.29). That is why the soul,²¹ man’s real self, is never fixed; it is always moving, shifting, and fluid, to be able perceive the ever-changing self-disclosure of God. Due to its constant state of flux, the soul is always in a state of becoming, being, or image. Hence, man is always bonded to God. He can be seen as a limited “self” in the Self of the One Being, a limited breath connected to the One Breath. “So remember Me; I will remember you. And be grateful to Me and do not deny Me” (Qur’ān 2.152). For those who sever that bond, i.e., forget or remove Him, the soul no longer has a place. Subsequently, “God makes them forget their own souls” (Qur’ān 59.19), with serious repercussions for what remains is only the animal-man, one that speaks.²² This is indeed the paradox of man; he is at once both an *‘abd* (slave) and *khaliḥa* (bearer of trust), neither a simple animal nor a pure angel

¹⁸ It is the journey of the soul to return to its original state for it is the soul that God wants. In contrast to other creatures who are born in a “known station” which does not change, man’s station is only known at his last breath. So, each person journeys to reach the station for which he has been created. The journey can also be seen as going back to one’s *Fiṭra*; of purification, polishing or shedding of the many states of ‘I’ so that there is no more duality between subject and object, of the *qalb* moving to the Divine Presence, etc.

¹⁹ William C. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* (US: State University of New York, 1989).

²⁰ The word “image” in Arabic does not mean a fixed picture. Rather, it is like a moving shadow of a living, breathing Being. That inbreathing is the knowledge of God’s Names, present in potentiality and to be realized or actualized during his time in this world.

²¹ Al-Ghazālī calls this the *qalb*, to indicate its constant fluctuations and transmutation or *taqallub*.

²² Because it was man’s soul that made the pact with God (the Covenant of *Alast*, Qur’ān 7.172), when man forgets Him, it implies that he forgets his own soul, with the implication that he no longer considers himself a metaphysical being. Hence, the once sacred man is replaced by a more psychological one.

but something forever suspended in between.²³

Correspondence between Cosmos and Man

Man cannot know God as He *is*, for that reality is beyond humanly constructed images, ideals and names, utterly and completely transcendent (Qur'ān 42.11, 112.4). As the ground of Being, that reality is without name and form—sheer *Wujūd*. The Real, however, can be known via His Names and Attributes. The Qur'ān states that Adam was taught all the Names (Qur'ān 2.31), implying that he understood everything that exists is from the one Being of God—the Cause of all being and acts, as well as the connection between God and all existence.

Both man and cosmos are the Self-Disclosures of God. Both are created upon the Divine image, upon the Greatest Name, Allāh²⁴ (*al-ism al-a'zam*), which contains all the divine and beautiful attributes of God. Every name of God is reflected in the cosmos, just as they have been inscribed in man within his *fiṭra*. While the Names are displayed in their full splendour within the cosmos in a differentiated manner,²⁵ in man these names are brought together in an undifferentiated mode. So, in the former, they are made manifest for all to behold, but within man the names are hidden, just as God is at once both revealed and concealed. Cosmos and man are mirror images of the other. Man is active due to his knowledge of the names of all things, while the cosmos is the passive object of his perception.

This intimate relationship between the human soul and cosmos has been coined the “anthropocosmic vision” by Tu Weiming in his discus-

²³ This paradox is recognized by Nietzsche in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* when he quotes: “Man is a rope, stretched between beast and Übermensch.” Similarly, Ernst Cassirer in his book *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (Yale University Press, 1944) also recognized this contradiction in man. To him, “Contradiction is the very element of human existence. Man has no “nature”—no simple or homogeneous being. He is a strange mixture of being and nonbeing. His place is between these two opposite poles” (28). The only approach to know his nature is via religion.

²⁴ Also known as the “all-comprehensive name” (*al-ism al-jāmi*) because it brings together all the other Divine Names. Only “Allāh” is a truly universal name. See William C. Chittick, ‘Microcosm, Macrocosm and Perfect Man in the View of Ibn ‘Arabi’, *Islamic Culture* LXIII, 1-2, (1989): 1-11.

²⁵ The word, cosmos or world is Arabic for *ālam*, which Chittick says has the meaning of “that by means of which one knows,” or “that by means of which the Creator is known.” See Chittick, ‘Reason, Intellect, and Consciousness,’ 16. This is why the created order is also known as “the cosmic Qur’ān” (al-Qur’ān *al-takwīnī*) to be distinguished from “the written Qur’ān” (al-Qur’ān *al-tadwīnī*).

sion of Confucian thought, a term later was taken up by Chittick, who relates it to Islamic philosophy.²⁶ This vision, in the Islamic tradition, is explained by attending to God's Names and Attributes found throughout the cosmic order as well as those latent within the self.

That is why man has been asked to do the *dhikr*. The practice of *dhikr* or invoking the Most Beautiful Names of God is the means of remembering Him through the metaphysical transparency of the Names. Since these Names are already in man, though in potentiality, by *dhikr* he actualizes them, making his remembrance of God at once God's remembrance of him. In this remembrance and recognition of what he has forgotten, he rids himself of his amnesia, thereby following the Prophet on his *mi'raj* to recover his own primordial self. This is the reason for the significance of these Names; they are the link that connects man with the Divine. Thus, man cannot totally forget his inner theomorphic nature, for in him lies the reality of the human state itself.

It is this vision of the interconnectedness between man and cosmos with God that informs man of his place in the cosmos and the reason for his existence. To know oneself is to realize one's primordial nature—of both nobility and sacredness, while at the same time of poverty and bondsmanship before God. This is the meaning of the human state—that man stands at the crossing of the horizontal (*islām*) and vertical (*īmān*) dimensions of existence, and from this awareness can move inwards—depth (*ihsān*).²⁷

Modern Science and Man

By contrast, the current philosophy of modern or scientific man proceeds from the bottom-up, so that man is reduced to his basic physical and biological elements, with consciousness understood as a

²⁶ This term was used to distinguish between the East Asian worldview and the anthropocentric western worldview. The term "anthropocosmic" is meant to portray that early Chinese thinkers see human beings and the cosmos as a single, organismic whole, where the "... goal of human life is to harmonize oneself with heaven and earth and to return to the transcendent source of both humans and the world." In this vision, subject and object are not separated. The aim of knowledge is to understand the world and ourselves or "to learn how to be human" (see William C. Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2007), very similar as to how we are to understand ourselves within the Islamic intellectual tradition.

²⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Who is man? The perennial answer of Islam', *Studies in Comparative Religion* 2, URL = http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/Who_is_Man-The_Perennial_Answer_of_Islam-by_Seyyed_Hossein_Nasr.aspx

mere epiphenomenon of existence, reduced to its material elements which are then subject to study using the scientific method. To understand how this happened, we need to go back to 16th Century Europe.

The Reformation/Renaissance was the time when the West was trying to redefine the “new” man. Even before the Reformation sparked by Martin Luther in 1517, the Church (or the Roman Catholic Church as now known) was both politically and spiritually powerful. The popes and the priestly class lived more like kings than spiritual leaders. They commanded armies, made political alliances and enemies, and even waged war. The original religion was manipulated, imbued and shrouded with superstitions, irrationality, and “mysteries” for the personal gain and interests of the Church.

In medieval Christian thought, nature though once perfect had been corrupted in the “fall” and has become evil, due probably to its pagan past in its early move north-westwards.²⁸ This was evidenced by the decadent naturalism of the Roman world with its profane glorification of the human body and of the natural world. Christianity was forced to react by considering man chiefly in terms of its corruptibility and its association with “the sins of the flesh,” a reminder of the original sin.²⁹ Hence, man’s earthly life was portrayed as inevitably prone to striving, suffering and death. This constant reminder and its feelings of guilt as well as people’s bondage to the Church made this a dark period in Western civilization.

It was during this time that Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) inspired a new world religious movement and liberated the masses from the old religious bonds. At the same time, new philosophical insights advocated new ways of thinking that encouraged people to look for rational and logical interpretations of the world, rejecting revelation as a source of knowledge, facilitating the Scientific Revolution. Observation of the natural world soon replaced irrational religious doctrine as the source of understanding of the universe and

²⁸ Ralph W. J. Austin, ‘Some Key Words in the Islamic Concept of Man’, *Studies in Comparative Religion* 10, no. 1 (1976), http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/Some_Key_Words_in_the_Islamic_Concept_of_Man-by_R_W_J_Austin.aspx

²⁹ *ibid.* At the same time, however, it gives rise to the ascetics who live a life of devotion and self-denial, as a counterbalanced to the “fall.” This, however, did not happen in Islam, for man is not seen as a fallen being.

in doing so, laid the foundations for modern science and a new theory of the physical world.

By the 17th Century, the dominant narrative was no longer based on the self, but rather on a new approach to science. In this approach, natural objects were regarded as machines operating according to mathematical and deterministic laws of physics to be manipulated and resolved. Starting with the radical theoretical innovations of Kepler and Galileo, and ending with Newton, a new reality of the world was conceived. Modern science, as envisioned by Galileo would focus on the tiny impenetrable atoms that are the basis of macroscopic objects, using the language of mathematics for a quantified knowledge of nature. In doing so, Galileo did away with secondary qualities of natural objects due to their subjective nature and focused instead on their more objective primary qualities.

Descartes (1596–1650) continued with this new vision of reality completing the total mechanization of nature by replicating within the human self through philosophy what Galileo did to the external physical world through science. He separated the mechanical world/*res extensa* from the world of thought/*res cogitans*, resulting in the well-known Cartesian mind-body dualism, which has a strong bearing on how man is later conceived. He viewed the human body and brain as a machine, though acknowledging that humans have an immaterial soul, which he termed as “mind.” As the latter is immaterial, the former is emphasized. To this Cartesian metaphysics, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) added another dimension; i.e., the methodology of scientific inquiry. This methodology was basically reductionist; “...it applies, not to reality as such, but to the means by which we propose to grasp and harness reality.”³⁰ Thus, science was reduced to mere quantification—to counting, measuring, and enumerating, which are purely activities. The consolidation of these two—Cartesian metaphysics and Baconian reductionism—completes the picture of what defines modern science.

To further break free from the Christian doctrine of original sin, John Locke (1632–1704) introduced the notion of the *tabula rasa*, the idea that at birth the human mind is simply a “blank slate” without rules for processing data. Both data and rules are formed solely by one’s sensory

³⁰ Wolfgang Smith, ‘Science and the Restoration of Culture’, URL = <https://isi.org/modern-age/science-and-the-restoration-of-culture/>

experiences. In other words, the human mind is thereby free to author its own contents. And, this idea culminated with Rousseau's romanticism that allowed others to free their own creative minds, characterized by individualism, a love of nature, and of freedom.

By the end of the Enlightenment era, modern science had effectively reduced man from spirit to mind, mind to brain, and brain to anatomical structures. Thinking, which is what now defined man, became merely "...an epiphenomenon of the neuronal machinery of the brain." In other words, theories that consider the understanding of the self or person based on the persistence of an immaterial substance were either marginalized or rejected, and replaced with views of the mind as a dynamic natural system subject to general laws of growth and development. God as the Source of all existence was no longer seen to be transcendental, but was reduced to the reality of the natural. Consequently, the physical world lost its spirituality and became a "machine" where everything moved along mindlessly by the motion of inanimate objects that passed on momentum, no longer by God.

After the Enlightenment, the idea of a universe that was governed by physical laws, rather than God became a reality. Philosophy showed that governments no longer need to be structured round the idea of divine right to be legitimate; what was required was merely the consent of the people. Put differently, this implies that moral theories could henceforth exist without any reference to God—a momentous event at the time. Without a Transcendent God,³¹ science became the source for all morality, value, or order in the universe. So, Nietzsche could famously claim, "God is dead and we have killed him (i.e., our idea of God)," which to him removed the basis for existential meaning.³² From the 18th century onwards, science has formed the worldview of the West. Its ubiquitous presence permeates now everyday life right to its inner core, impinging upon basic beliefs, values and aspirations.

³¹ The once transcendent God is now replaced by a god of one's own creation, a personal god or a god of one's beliefs.

³² To Friedrich Nietzsche ('Twilight of the Idols' in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and tr. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), without a God, the basic belief system of Western Europe was threatened, as he says, "When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident... Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole." In other words, the removal of the system put most people at the risk of despair or meaninglessness.

In this worldview, all is flattened to only this material world, where living things are assumed to evolve from simple to more complex cells. It is a bottom-up approach, with no vertical causation³³ because God as the transcendent Being has been replaced by science. There is only horizontal causation that operates “in time” by way of a temporal process. In other words, the current universe, based on science, is created by man’s instruments and consists only of activities; devoid of ontology and a higher purpose.

Modern man lives in a world of modernism, opposing a normativity based on divine existence, with its own modernist ethos.³⁴ For modern man, with the immaterial and the transcendent out of the picture, and in view of the solidity of the material world, his worldview is completely exteriorized. So much so that he is convinced that the body is the real person, and everything else like thought, personality, feelings, etc. are merely by-products of a physical reality. As shadows cast by a body, when the object that casts the shadow is annihilated, the shadow disappears. Once the body dies, that is the end of the person.

The modern man then, is a wounded man, for reduced to materiality, he is spiritually empty. He is no longer whole, for in forgetting his own soul, he becomes divided and lives a broken life. As one commentator has noted, having “...live[d] behind a wall long enough, the true self you tried to hide from the world disappears from your own view! The wall itself and the world outside it become all that you know. Eventually,

³³ Wolfgang Smith, in *The Quantum Enigma: Finding the Hidden Key* (New York: Sophia Perennis, 1995), says that physics does not deal with the universe as a whole; it only describes the cosmos as “atomized” within a spatio-temporal fragmentation. Put differently, it starts with the cosmos being fragmented/divided (to describe the universe we are in). He talks about vertical causality with two primary differentiations, ontology and etiology. Vertical causation is the primary mode of causality originating in the highest ontological sphere, and hence, is not subject to time. It acts instantaneously. The horizontal causation operates “in time” by way of a temporal process, and is an effect of the vertical. So, there is a hierarchy between the two. But, the present understanding of the universe is only based on horizontal causation. He discusses more on vertical causation in his recent book, entitled *Physics and Vertical Causation: The End of Quantum Reality* (New York: Angelico Press, 2019).

³⁴ The elements of the modernist ethos include (i) materialism or the reduction of reality to only the sensory or the immeasurable to only the measurable, (ii) secularization or the desacralization of the public sphere or the erosion of conscience as reflected in the reduction of morality to the pragmatic as well as the marginalization of religion, and (iii) scientism that reduces all epistemology to empirical rationalism, alienating man from his innermost self. See M. Ali Lakhani, ‘Editorial: What is Normal?’ *Sacred Web* 17 (2006): 7-15.

you even forget that the wall is there — and that hidden behind it is someone called 'you.'³⁵ That “real you,” the objective, ontological reality of selfhood which is whole and complete, has been kept under wraps for so long that man no longer recognizes it. The emphasis on “objective” knowledge has not only devalued the inner life or knowledge of the self but has also dismissed it as unscientific. Put another way, one cannot be whole and be fully human by living only half a life.

This forgetting of one’s own soul is the direct consequence of severing ties with a transcendent God, the ground of all being. When God is removed, the soul too disappears, and man now becomes his own god, to do as he pleases.

Juxtaposing the Two Views

The modern philosophical foundation of the West is based on natural science, built exclusively on the basis of experience. It dissects or breaks down things, with the idea of possessing and mastering them through technology, for its aim is purely utilitarian. Its basic assumption is that by means of material and quantitative analysis it could discover the true nature of things and thereby exploit them.

The traditional point of view, however, sees experience or the measurable and enumerable nature of things as nothing without their essential qualities—that core of truth which remains unaffected by temporal circumstances. In other words, as a human being, man is subjected to a life of meaning, a life that needs to have spiritual and moral significance—an ethical life, based on an awareness of the central reality of who he is based on the transcendent order as the ultimate source of ethical and moral values, and hence an unchanging criterion of good and evil. In contrast, modern man, having rejected the transcendent together with the morality established through revelation, is unable to study ethics or human relationships because these have been conceived of only in an atomistic manner.³⁶ The objective reality of things cannot be severed

³⁵ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (US: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

³⁶ Ethics as good character and manners in relating to God, oneself and others as taught by the Prophet (refer to the Hadith “I have only been sent to perfect good moral character” as well as Qur’ān 62.2). But, now ethics has become an external code of conduct, an objective set of rules to be followed, or nothing more than a moral exoskeleton that one puts on and off when required.

from the knowing subject just as God is at once the Knower (*al-ʿālim*) and the Known (*al-maʿlūm*). In other words, the actual reality of things is inconceivable without knowledge of God, the Origin (*mabda*) and the Return (*maʿad*) of all things. So, studying only the objective reality of things is sheer ignorance because what such study disregards is more central and real than what it considers.

In the Islamic tradition, the purpose of science is to study the material, physical things in a way that will lead to remembrance—primarily of who the Lord is as affirmed in the covenant (Qurʾān 7.172). The aim is not to explain the world, rather to acquire knowledge of God’s creation in order to better know God, for everything in the world acts as a sign pointing to Him.

Hence, knowledge is meant for man to reflect on himself (Qurʾān 30.7) and the world he lives in (Qurʾān 30.8), for he lives simultaneously in two distinct “worlds.” One is the world of matter and energy—measurable and scientifically explainable. The other is the subjective experience as *insān*³⁷ with consciousness as the foundation of existence, the ground of being, with God’s Names inscribed within the *fiṭra*, where every quality in creation refers back to God. This is the part that has been discarded in Western science’s empirical description of reality.

This point was raised by Wolfgang Pauli (1900-1958) who argued that the mechanical world conceived in the 17th century was made possible only because it focused exclusively on the quantitative world of matter which could be subjected to the deterministic laws of causality,³⁸ thus, describable by science. To Pauli, however, this is only half the picture for he believed reality has two sides; the rational-critical and the mystical-irrational. The former, better known as science “seeks to understand,” while the latter “looks for the redeeming experience of oneness.”³⁹ He believed both to reside in the human soul and “each will always carry the other... within itself as the germ of its contrary”⁴⁰ akin to the black

³⁷ The word “*insān*” is Arabic for human being. *Insān*, according to linguists, has two roots; the first is “*nīsyān*” means “to forget,” while the second “*unsiyab*” means “intimacy, to love, to be loved, to become close, to relate.” The Qurʾān uses *insān* to refer to human beings when non-physical features and qualities are intended. In other words, *insān* refers to the inward or subtle dimension of human beings.

³⁸ This is the cosmos—orderly, purposeful and teleological. See Al-Faruqi. *Al-Tawḥīd*, 50-55.

³⁹ Kalervo V. Laurikainen, *The Message of the Atoms: Essays on Wolfgang Pauli and the Unspeakeable* (Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag Berlin, 1999), 173.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 173.

dot in the white *yang* that represents the male in the Chinese *yin-yang* symbol of life, and the white dot in the black *yin*. Life consists of balancing between two opposing forces—*yin* and *yang*, the feminine and masculine, the irrational and the rational, body and soul—which in reality are complementary, interconnected and interdependent. This is akin to the recent argument of McGilchrist⁴¹ on the lateralization of brain function, where the left hemisphere is seen to be more logical, analytical and quantitative whereas the right hemisphere more intuitive, holistic and qualitative. Both were present earlier in Western thought, but the onslaught of modern science in the 17th Century severed that relationship. For science to be rational and objective, the irrational-mystical or intuitive-imaginal element of reality had to be suppressed and excluded. Reality in this truncated aspect is made up of only the former. Thus, in a mechanical world, reality is devoid of any spiritual life. While in the past, knowledge of the world was integrated, modern science created a fundamental rupture and has struggled to restore the unity.

The world of modern man is that of matter and materiality, with duality present in everything he perceives. It lacks a higher dimension or hierarchy for existence has been conflated to only one dimension, that of matter. The absence of verticality has compelled man to expand his universe horizontality so as to provide the illusion of progress and knowledge, because the belief is that everything begins and ends in/with this world. There is nothing beyond, no transcendent or a higher power. For in forgetting God, modern man forgets who he is—his true self, the immaterial soul that knows its Lord, buried deep within him. As such, he does as he wills, without restraint, sowing corruption (*fasād*) as he is no longer guided by a higher power.

Science, as the study of “signs,” of symbols that are an immanent expression of the Divine by which man may be lead back to God, is lost.⁴² After the Enlightenment, science became an amalgam of Descartes’ philosophy and Bacon’s empiricism. Likewise, man too,

⁴¹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World* (Perspectiva Press, 2021).

⁴² Before Hume, these three lines of inquiry—the Divine, Metaphysics, Science—were one, and they were hierarchically ordered. Science then, was the study of “signs,” where “signs” or “symbols” are seen as immanent expressions of the Divine. In this sense, signs/symbols act as the vehicle that directs understanding from the physical towards the supra-physical levels of reality or from the human to the Divine (Timothy Scott, ‘The Traditional Doctrine of Symbol,’ URL = <http://religioperennis.org/documents/Scott/Symbol.pdf>).

became disconnected, lacking a critical spiritual dimension, resulting in an incomplete and deluding representation of reality. But it is this reality that is currently the dominant view.

Henceforth, an inversion of order is observed. The moral order, that includes the domain of revelation, ethics, morality, spirituality and all the higher principles that govern the human condition, becomes subservient to both the worldly (social-political system) and economic (wealth and riches of the state) orders.⁴³ In this sense, all things have values only to the extent that they can be monetized, quantified, measured, exploited, and amassed as symbols of wealth, power, pride, and so forth. Values become relative, deferring to the dictates of the market and socio-political order. In other words, modern living entails vying for increase, competing, boasting of wealth, gathering it without right and withholding it from those to whom it rightfully belongs; i.e., what the Qur'ān calls *takāthbur*—the greed for more and more to keep the *nafs* satiated (Qur'ān 102.1-2). No wonder, modern man is broken!

Putting Things in in their Proper Places

Modern man is of this world and remains in this world. Traditional man, on the other hand, lives in exile; he is in this world for a duration, for he knows that he is *not* of this world. In this world, he exists as a single being, having a dual nature, at once body and soul. It is man as *insān* that remembers his Covenant with God for at its core lies the spirit. The body is not able to do so due to its darkness. It comes into existence only in this world as a mount for the *insān* to go through its earthly journey. For without a physical body, man cannot actualize his potentials, for he lies between potentiality and actuality. Like a child in his playpen, he is entrapped within the socio-historical cultural context of the period he lives in. This is his playing field: it exists as a means for him to actualize his potential and to become fully human; in other words, to enable him to remember and interpret the meanings of the Names that have been inscribed in his being by God when he was bestowed the gift of existence.

⁴³ Usually, in premodern societies, the economic order is regulated by principles of the moral order executed and implemented by the socio-political order.

There are three books man has to learn to read while in this world. First is the scriptural Revelation which, for Muslims is the Qur’ān, the Word of God that descends from on High—the vertical dimension. Second is *al-Āfaq*, the macrocosmic Revelation or the Book of Nature—the horizontal dimension. Third is *al-Anfus*, the microcosmic Revelation—the Book of the Soul, his real self, the in-between—comprising of both the vertical and horizontal dimensions (Qur’ān 41.53). The Qur’ān can be considered as a book of “signs” (*āyāt*), man being the only creature able to decode the signs, because his immaterial soul lies between body and spirit. As such, the soul traverses two worlds, the lower sensory world and the higher spiritual world. It is this quality that makes man unique and capable of seeing symbols and understanding what they symbolize. Every sign points towards something beyond itself. The cosmos, the “great world” is a sign denoting that God exists,⁴⁴ for “the clearest of denotations is a thing’s denoting itself by its own manifestation.”⁴⁵ Within man too, are signs.⁴⁶ For Muslims, the Qur’ān, the “clear book” (12.1), is the key to understanding the other two books.⁴⁷ In other words, to understand the signs, reference must be established through the Qur’ān, for that which the signs indicate is none other than the Divine.

Currently, there is an “intermingling of spheres,” where *al-āfaq* and *al-anfus* have been conflated. In the world of *al-āfaq*, time splits; from *Dabr*, which is God’s time to *waqt* (*anfus* or spiritual time) and *zamān* (*āfaq* or clock time). In this understanding of time, *al-āfaq* is the cosmos (man’s horizontal plane), which is this world.⁴⁸ Here, Time is observed and measured—it is the external, linear understanding of time as the

⁴⁴ The Arabic word *‘ālam* meaning world is derived from *‘alāma* meaning mark or sign.

⁴⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī, Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 164.

⁴⁶ For Ibn ‘Arabī, “Our signs in the horizons” refers to everything outside of the human being (i.e., the entire cosmos) while those “within themselves” to all that is within the human being, a microcosm in which are brought together all of the realities of the cosmos. Concerning this reality, Ibn ‘Arabī writes, “...when we come to understand these two affairs together, we come to know Him and it becomes clear to us that ‘He is the truth.’” (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard & Mohammed Rustom, ed. *The Study Qur’ān: A New Translation and Commentary* (US: HarperOne, 2015), 1170-1.

⁴⁷ See William Chittick, Ibn ‘Arabī, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>. This is the reason for understanding Nuzul al-Qur’ān (descent of the Qur’ān) from a higher realm revealed unto the heart of the Prophet (*saw*). See Noraini M. Noor and Aziuddin Ahmad, “Nuzul al-Qur’ān,” *Sacred Web* 47, no. 1 (2021): 57-87.

⁴⁸ Each individual, however, is trapped within his/her time and socio-historical context.

24 hour-period of the clock that seems to be unfolding. The Qurʾān, the Word of God, is not of this world. It descended into the heart of the Prophet (*saw*) in an instant of Time from on High, and was later revealed by Gabriel over the next 23 years according to the circumstances of the Prophet's time.⁴⁹ The soul is *al-anfus*, but in this world, man is both body and soul, so he is *al-anfus* in *al-āfaq*. Because of this unique nature, he traverses both temporal dimensions, a vertical spiritual *waqt* time that connects him with God, and *zamān*, that horizontal time that links him with his fellow creatures.⁵⁰ This is the confusion: man does not know that he is both a child of *waqt* (*fiṭra* spiritual being) and a child of the clock (physical time). So, as *insān*, in this world he has to constantly move in and out of his *waqt* time into *zamān* time, and vice versa, like a Mobius strip moving in and out as a whole.

As *al-anfus* in *al-āfaq*, he lives in this world till “a term appointed may be fulfilled” (Qurʾān 6.60) to complete the purpose of his creation: to be “the means and the instrument for the manifestation of God's essence and attributes.”⁵¹ To do so, he has to know, to be and to do, for action counts for nothing unless it be an expression of a knowing and of a manner of being. These three, knowing (knowledge as *ʿilm*⁵²), being (*anasa*⁵³) and doing (*amāl*), are what the soul is here for. In other words, man cannot *be* without simultaneously living a contemplative and active life.⁵⁴ Contemplation here

⁴⁹ *ibid.* 72-73.

⁵⁰ Thus, there are three understanding of time: *dabr* is God's time—eternal and heavenly; *waqt* is human or *anfusikum* time—a moment; and *zamān* is the physical linear time that enables man to live in this world (*ibid.* 73). See also Gerhard Bowering, ‘The Concept of Time in Islam’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 141, no. 1 (1997): 55-66.

⁵¹ Najm al-Din Razi, *The Path of God's Bondsmen*, 316.

⁵² Although the Arabic “*ilm*” is commonly translated as “knowledge,” there is a difference between them. In the English usage, knowledge refers to facts, information, and data acquired through experience or education. *ʿilm* is an all-embracing term that is not primarily a question of “what is known,” i.e., “knowledge” as “information,” but the consciousness, awareness, discernment and wisdom of the knowing subject (Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 386). In other words, *ilm* can be seen as *maʿrifā*—enlightened inner knowing as a state of consciousness versus conceptualized formal knowledge.

⁵³ Man is *anasa*, from the root of the Arabic word for human—*insān*: to experience and perceive, to be intimate, become familiar and loved.

⁵⁴ Though complementary, contemplation is superior to action. Refer to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ‘The Complementarity of Contemplative and Active Lives in Islam’, in *Contemplation and Action in World Religions: Selected Papers from the Rothco Chapel Colloquium “Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action,”* ed. Yusuf Ibish and Ileana Marculescu, (US: Rothko Chapel, 1977) 195-204.

refers to “a knowledge that relates the knower to higher modes of being,”⁵⁵ which in the final analysis is what reconciles opposites within metaphysical harmony—the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This is why the Qur’ān consistently exhorts its followers to contemplate.

Hence, the journey is of experience and experiencing, not of an observer observing. In order to return to the Origin, man has to be in the form that he was at his origin (*Alast*)—the witnessing soul, imbued with meaning.⁵⁶

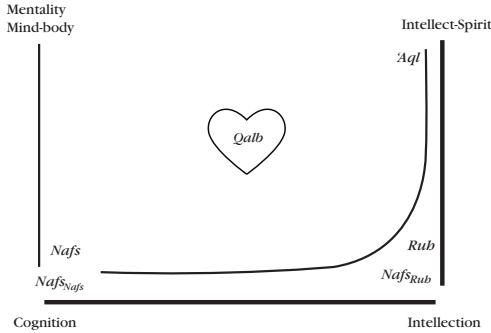


Figure 1: The journey of the soul

Figure 1 depicts man’s journey in this world. On the left is man as *basbar* where his *nafs* is at its lowest level of awareness or consciousness of God (*NafsNafs*). When he journeys or transforms himself, the *nafs* moves to the right, the *rūh* (*NafsRuh*). This is a journey within the self, from the gross to the subtle, body to spirit.⁵⁷ This journey is seen as

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 195.

⁵⁶ At *Alast*, the Subject is the Object, no thing, no body. Body is only in this sensory world. *Fiṭra* is *wajb kbass*—the face that saw God at *Alast*. “Allāh created the human being in His own image,” meaning that which is in God’s image is man’s soul, about which Allāh says: *wa nafakbtu fibi min rubi* (Qur’ān 38.72, “And I breathed into him of My own soul”). So to journey back (the Return), the Subject must be the Object again, in the form he came down, for at death, the body perishes but the soul remains. For the soul is in-between the body and *ruh*, a *barzakh* (i.e., a *badd*/barrier where man has the vestige of both sides—Day of Covenant and Day of Judgement). In other words, the soul at the Day of Judgement should be the same as the soul at the Day of Covenant (at *Alastu*). This is the beauty of man—his liminality (in-betweenness).

⁵⁷ But, of course, the soul can never cross into the spirit, for the soul as the knowing subject is always in-between (see William C. Chittick, ‘The In-Between: Reflections on the Soul in the Teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi’, in *The Passions of the Soul in the Metamorphosis of Becoming*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003) 29-38.

taking place within the heart (*qalb*), due to its quality that is always in a state of fluctuation (*taqallub*⁵⁸). Hence, it has the remarkable capacity to embrace God's perpetual self-disclosures via the faculty of imagination.⁵⁹

This inward horizontal journey can be seen as a preparation for the soul's vertical ascent, when it surrenders itself to God. This ascent is the journey of return to the Source. While the horizontal journey is within man's temporal time in this world (the *zamān*—the physical linear time of this world), the vertical journey is beyond time and space (*waqt* time, considered as a moment with respect to *Dabr* or God's eternal and heavenly time). It is based on this vertical dimension, that single moment when man surrenders himself to God, that he begins the upward ascent—to realize himself. In this sense, the journey is applicable only to traditional religious man, who sees himself as both human and divine.

Taking into account the two views, Figure 1 shows the conflation that usually occurs in writings on the nature of man. Because modern man is founded on individualism and rationalism, reason is the sole authority for the attainment of truth. He no longer needs recourse to a higher principle as that has been severed. Hence, there is no longer any distinction between "*intellectus* and ratio"⁶⁰—these are seen to be synonymous. In other words, just as modern man has been reduced to

⁵⁸ This is why al-Ghazālī used *qalb* (heart) to depict the soul for the heart is never constant, it is always in a state of flux, *taqallub*, constantly "turning" or "being turned" according to the way God makes Himself known. In other words, the heart or *qalb* acts as a mirror to the divine revelation. Furthermore, it is only in the Heart that the perplexity caused by certain apparent contradictions can be a basis for intellection; i.e., it can serve as a means/stepping stone from the mind to the Heart, for the Heart can intuit what the mind cannot think.

⁵⁹ In other words, as explained by Ibn 'Arabī, this infinite capacity of the heart is due to its connection to the All-Merciful as seen in the following hadith of the Prophet (*saw*), "Verily, the hearts of all the children of Adam are like a single heart between two fingers of the All-merciful. He turns (*tasrīf*) it wherever He desires. O God, O Turner of Hearts, turn our hearts toward obeying Thee!" Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 106-107.

⁶⁰ Ratio is discursive reason (logical thought that includes examining, abstracting and drawing conclusion) while intellect or *intellectus* is contemplation (involves the activity of the soul that is able to envisage what it sees). In the Arab language, both are referred to as *al-'aql*, though bearing in mind the relation and dependence of the former on the latter. During the Renaissance, with the separation of philosophy and revelation, these two forms of knowing which were initially one also became severed. Currently, modern man's knowing is exclusively by ratio. Both forms of knowing are needed for man to be fully human as he is both body and soul. Though he exists in time and space, he is beyond time and space. That is why only man has the ability to truly know for he is a theomorphic being.

only the horizontal level of existence, his inward and outward aspects have also been conflated. In reality, cognition occurs at the *basbar* or body side (mind-body based on the physical senses, left side of Figure 1), while intellection is at the intellect-spirit side (right side of Figure 1). These two can be likened to, respectively, the usual forms of rationally-acquired knowing and belief based on the senses, and *ma'rifa*, or the mystical intuitive knowledge of spiritual truth. Man consists of both aspects—senses and intellect.

Table 1 (next page) summarizes the characteristics of the three levels of reality that correspond to man's body, soul and spirit, respectively. For modern man, only the left side is applicable, for in severing the transcendental, there is no longer any place for God or soul. Thus, he creates his own god. Likewise, his "spirituality" has no transcendent or Divine dimension, and it too is created by the self as an appendage or as an added-on experience to give purpose or meaning to life for man alone is the measure of all things. In other words, it is not "*spiritus*."

On the other hand, the three columns of Table 1 depict man within the Islamic tradition, for he is constituted of all three. He "is the integral and summary reflection of the Divine Name—or Divine Word—Allāh."⁶¹ What makes him different from the rest of creation is the gift of the soul—that consciousness which enables man to break through the world of appearances and enter the spiritual beyond (middle column of table). That liminality, known by different names such as *bayniyya*, *kbayāl*, *mundus imaginalis*, the hidden third, indeterminacy, borderlands, and so forth, denotes the in-between nature of the soul. Like a *barzakh* or isthmus (Qur'ān 55.19-20, 25.53), the soul acts as a bridge between that which can be grasped by the senses and that which lies beyond. As an in-between, it has a double, paradoxical nature, so that everything that it perceives both exists and does not exist at the same time, like an image in the mirror, perceived to be simultaneously "there" and "not there." As with Ibn Arabi's seeing with "two eyes,"⁶² the physical eye and the eye of the heart, the paradoxical polarities of existence are reconciled

⁶¹ William C. Chittick, 'The Words of the All-Merciful', *Parabola* 8, no. 3, (1983): 18-25.

⁶² With one eye, one sees God as utterly transcendent, remote, sublime and dissimilar, the *mysterium tremendum*, beyond all utterance and description (*tanzīb*). With the other eye, he sees God as always present and intimate, the beloved of all lovers, the center toward which all things move (*tasbīb*). Seeing with two eyes is to strike a balance between opposites and extremes; i.e., uniting while cherishing differences at the same time.

in a meeting of opposites—*coincidentia oppositorum*. In short, this is the space where matter and non-matter meets, when spirit becomes corporealize and corporeality is spiritualized—the link between the Infinite and the finite. The right column of the table also indicates the vertical levels of existence starting from *wujūd*.

Table 1: Body, soul and spirit and their corresponding characteristics

<i>Basbar</i> /physical body	A new creation (<i>khalqan ākbāra</i>) called “man” ⁶³ — soul	Spirit
Mind-body (outward)	In-between (body and spirit)	Intellect-spirit (inward)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man’s current vocabulary lies here • Thinking (<i>tafakkur</i>)–reason/discursive thought 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bayniyya</i>⁶⁴ (in-betweenness) • <i>Al-khayāl</i>⁶⁵ (imagination) • <i>Mundus imaginalis</i>⁶⁶(imaginal) • The hidden third⁶⁷ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No vocabulary; meaning as opposed to form • Intellect (<i>‘aqliyyab</i>)–awareness which is characterized by (Continued next page)

⁶³ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Sūrah Al-Nisā’ (4):58 and Sūrah Al-Mu’minūn (23):12-14* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2015). Or, as stated by Razi, the soul of every human being is of the spirit of God. Being metaphysical, the soul does not follow rules, and because of its entanglement with the body, man cannot remove it, so he needs to know how to govern (*tabdīr*) himself.

⁶⁴ Because the knowing subject is in-between, the knowledge known by the self is also in between. See Chittick, ‘The In-Between: Reflections on the Soul in the Teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī’, 30.

⁶⁵ This is the soul’s power or faculty, a mode of knowing between pure intellection and sense perception (See William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1994). Lying between the two, the world of imagination combines the characteristics of both. Hence imaginable forms are like images in a mirror; visible, but not there. The form’s illusive nature is derived from “... its intermediary function between the pure and the gross, the spiritual and the physical, the meaningful and the sensible. The world of imagination is the level of existence where this duality is resolved; where the pure is embodied and the body is purified. Imagination is the world where meaning and form are wedded, generating a new world that at once unites and separates its parental domains, just like the twilight zone which unites and separates light and darkness” (Samer Akkach, ‘The World of Imagination in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Ontology’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24, no. 1, (1997): 97-113 .

⁶⁶ This is Corbin’s “...intermediary ‘eighth climate,’ the world where the body is spiritualized, and the spiritual is embodied...” (*The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, tr. by Joseph Rowe (California: North Atlantic Books, 1998). See also Henry Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imagenal*, trans. Ruth Horine, URL = <https://www.amiscorbin.com/bibliographie/mundus-imaginalis-or-the-imaginary-and-the-imaginal>.

⁶⁷ Basarab Nicolescu’s hidden third, the liminal zone between subjectivity and objectivity, the space between binary oppositions that is invisible. The Hidden Third is a-logical, meaning that it is not based upon logic or reasoned argument. Nicolescu sees the hidden third as the human link with the sacred. See Basarab Nicolescu, *The Hidden Third*, tr. by William Garvin (New York: Quantum Prose Inc., 2016).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognition is via sensation or knowledge of certainty (<i>'ilm al-yaqīn</i>, Q102:5) • Sense-based external analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indeterminacy⁶⁸ • Borderlands⁶⁹ (John Herlihy) 	<p>absolute certainty or the truth (<i>Haqqul yaqīn</i>, Qur' ān 56:95), that goes beyond the limits of reason</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inner Knowing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiplicity (<i>katbra</i>) 	<p>The eye of certainty (<i>ayn al- yaqīn</i>, Qur' ān 102.7)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oneness of Being/Existence (<i>Wabdat al-wujūd</i>) • Ontology • <i>Anfusibim</i> (undifferentiated/whole) • Meaning is hidden/concealed (<i>Batin</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Epistemology • <i>Āfaq</i> (differentiated) • Form is manifest (<i>zabir</i>) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Aḥad, Shabāda, Waḥda, tawḥīd, taqwā, makḥafah, maḥabbah, ma'rifah, etc.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deism (one's construction of one's personal god) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journey⁷⁰ (<i>mabda' wal-ma'ad'</i> origin to return, through the world) • Starting point is <i>Wujūd</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No journey to undertake 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qur' ān (oral communication, open, fluid and dynamic)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting point is matter 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Muṣḥaf</i> (codex, a closed text) 		

Conclusion

God is the One Supreme Reality who is known by many Names. These are the Names of Essence (*Asmā' al-Dhat*), Attributes (*Asmā' al-Ṣifāt*) and Acts (*Asmā' al-Af'āl*), popularly known as the 99 Beautiful Names (*Al-Asmā' ul-Ḥusnā*) of God. Created upon the name “Allāh,” man is the

⁶⁸ Heisenberg's uncertainty principle says when we observe something what happens is that it immediately loses the momentum of its particles and “falls” into place; i.e., it becomes an observable entity created by our observation of it. In other words, reality is based on the way we observe it, not as potential, but as a set of stationary, concrete signs. Because we have close this gap between potentiality and actuality, we have problems to grasp what is happening as potentiality becomes actuality—that gap which is our consciousness. This whole idea of the quantum world consists of two very different states (one when observed, the other when not), where the world is both a real place filled with solid objects, while simultaneously it is a surreal, almost inconceivable, place. So, that gap is the connection. See Baranna Baker, ‘Signs of Probability: A Semiotic Perspective on the Heisenberg Principle’, *Semiotica* 205 (2015): 87–93.

⁶⁹ “Borderland” is the isthmus that separates these two paradigms of knowledge into two distinct realms of experience—the world of science and the world of spirituality. The former represents the cognitive and rational world of the mind and the senses, while the latter refer to the intuitive and emotive worlds of the intellect and the heart. See John Herlihy, *Borderlands of the Spirit: Reflections on a Sacred Science of Mind* (US: World Wisdom, Inc. 2005).

⁷⁰ That is, to attain to the state of perfection or to be fully human is to adorn oneself with the *akblāq* of Allāh—His Names and Attributes.

repository of these divine and beautiful Names of God, to be actualized in this world. As stated by Nasr,⁷¹

We are beings who know, love, and act, and there is an interplay between our being and our knowing, loving, and acting. Ontologically our being comes before everything else, but existentially our knowing, loving, and acting are the realities that fill the moments of our lives and of which we are aware. Our soul knows, loves, and acts - the latter primarily through the body. Moreover, knowing and loving both affect our actions and are often expressed through them. Furthermore, all three affect our mode of being while our mode of being and level of consciousness determine what we know and can know, what we love and can love, and how we act.

In other words, on the human level, these Names become man's knowing (*ilm*), being or loving (*anasa*) and doing (*amāl*). All three aspects are entwined and entangled, and all three affect the soul for it is the soul that returns to Him. Action is crucial because it is in the doing that man shows his obedience and surrender to God,⁷² and that action is dependent on knowing and being, and vice versa. This is why al-Ghazālī says, "Knowledge without action is insanity and action without knowledge is vanity."⁷³ It is the only way to know and love God.⁷⁴

By severing himself from the Divine, modern man is reduced to living only in a single level of reality. In other words, without the vertical dimension, he cannot be whole because it is only a higher principle that can integrate various elements on a lower level of reality.⁷⁵ Because man is constituted of body, soul, and spirit, the body cannot be integrated without the presence of the soul, and likewise the soul by the spirit.

Everything in this world issues from God, the One (*al-Aḥad*), from

⁷¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (US: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 85.

⁷² In his explication of Qur'ān 6.71-72, Razi says that of all human actions, the following three are the best: (i) to submit to God, (ii) to perform the prayer, and (iii) to reverence God. Submission (*islām*) together with faith, is the best of the "acts of the heart," prayer is the best of the acts of the limbs, and reverence is the best of the "acts of omission" (because it makes one fearful or mindful of God, hence avoiding sin). Refer to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Qur'ān*, 366.



⁷³ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Dear Beloved Son*, Ninth Counsel-Action, 8, URL = <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d5c9ccd82cb3e0001da8600/t/5dde4110499be068a56600a0/1574846739087/Dear-Beloved-Son-Ghazali.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Nasr, *The Garden of Truth*, 84.

⁷⁵ William C. Chittick, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2007).

the *ghayb* to the manifest, from *wujūd*, top to down, with the Qur’ān and the Prophet (*saw*) as guides. Hence, from the Islamic intellectual tradition, the narrative for man’s purpose in this world is already given. In contrast, modern science has to create a storyline for man’s origin. Table 2 (below) summarizes the contrast between these two views of man with regards to his actions, being and knowledge.

Table 2: Relation between knowing, being and doing from the two views

Man from Modern Science	ACTION or DOING	Man from the Islamic Intellectual Tradition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation is matter • <i>Basbar</i>/body (blank slate) • Bottom-up approach (to create a narrative) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation is God, <i>Wujūd</i> • <i>Insān</i> (embodied meaning, His Names) • Top-down approach (narrative is already given) • Knowledge, Being, Action are entangled
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Being” as things • Doing (actions that are efficient and machine-like) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Becoming” meaning • <i>Amāl</i> (practice or good works, based on truth and consciousness)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance is based on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>ṭabīʿat</i> (habitual) ○ commercialism ○ consumerism 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance (Qur’ān 15.29) is based on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Al-Asmā’-ul-Ḥusnā</i> (the Beautiful Names of God) ○ Beauty and virtue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Darwinian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ human resource ○ economic man 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Anasa</i> (a state of being) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>makārim al-akblāq</i> (noble character traits) ○ <i>takballuq bi-akblāq Allāb</i> (assuming the character traits of Allāh)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remains in this world <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ in this world and of this world 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clay (from this world) and <i>ma’na</i> (His Breath – meaning), as an integral whole <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ in-this-world but <i>not</i> of this world

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being exists only on a single horizontal level, no hierarchy 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being has several levels of hierarchy from <i>al-ghayb</i> to the manifest world to the Perfect Man
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context of being here is existential; needs to create oneself 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context of being here is ontological; man is not creating himself, only going back to his <i>fitra</i>.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge, information, data • only epistemology 	KNOWLEDGE OR KNOWING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ilm</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ epistemology in the service of ontology ○ knowing and loving God
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letters, strings, words, signs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ meaning is put into the form (becomes fact) ○ life of the body 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning, whole <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ embodied meaning (is truth) ○ life of the spirit

76

The existential journey that man is asked to undergo is that of realizing God's Names, Attributes and Acts (Qur'ān 2,30), a journey of becoming *anasa*, a state of being, of experiencing and perceiving, as well as of divine intimacy. To be *anasa* is to know and to conform to His Names which are already inscribed within man's *fitra* but due to his immersion in this world, the Names are no longer perceptible and remembered. In this journey, where "men and women (are) merely players (with their various) exists and entrances", man takes on the many worldly roles that Shakespeare so eloquently describes in *As You Like It*.⁷⁷ In playing the many parts, man forgets his primary purpose, to the extent that his *fitra* is completely obscured. Man is indeed his own veil⁷⁸ unless he

⁷⁶ See Chittick, "The Five Divine Presences," 112-115. Modern science has reduced or flattened these levels to only one, i.e., man in this manifest world because the levels above are within the *ghayb*, which cannot be captured nor expressed.

⁷⁷ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It (All the world's a stage)*, URL = <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56966/speech-all-the-worlds-a-stage>

⁷⁸ "Mulla Sadra likens the condition of man in this world to that of an embryo in a womb. While the child is in the mother's womb, he is actually in this world but he is separated from it by the walls of the womb and does not know of its real existence in the world. Similarly, while man is in this world, he is actually in the next world but the "walls" of this world or the limited consciousness of the true condition of his own being confines him to this world only." (Zailan Moris, *Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason in the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 106-107.

undertakes the journey of becoming consciously adorned with the perfection of the Divine Names, for they are the keys for his existence and salvation. Else, he remains only an animal-man, “complete” but “imperfect.”

It is for man to choose his stature in life: to conform to the divine, or not. The following quote summarizes three kinds of man who exist:

Know that the kingdom has three divisions: the kingdom of the people of this world is fear and awe, the kingdom of the people of the Next World is yearning and love, and the kingdom of the people of Allāh is between the *kaf* and the *nun*. They speak of Allāh’s command to the thing, “Be!” and it is. The kingdom of the people of this world is by creation, for creation, and with creation. The kingdom of the people of the Next World is by creation for Allāh. The kingdom of the people of Allāh is by Allāh, for Allāh, and in Allāh. “Whoever intends something, his *hijra* is to what he did *hijra* for.”⁷⁹

In other words, man can opt to remain only in this world, focused solely with the next world or the in-between that he is meant to be.

⁷⁹ Sidi ‘Ali al-Jamal, *The Meaning of Man: The Foundations of the Science of Knowledge* (Cape Town: Madinah Press, 2005), 99.