

THE BOOK OF LANGUAGE

Exploring the Spiritual Vocabulary of Islām

Kabir Helminski

With an essay on *Truth and Knowledge*
by Prince Ghazi Bin Muḥammad
and Appendices
by Jeremy Henzell-Thomas



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Notes on Translation

In most cases we have attempted to transliterate Arabic words as they are pronounced. In quoted material, the spelling may vary according to the custom of the author. Throughout this book, references to the Qur^ʿān are in parentheses. These refer to the name of the *sūrah*, the *sūrah* number, and verses (*āyāt*). The first time the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ is mentioned in a paragraph, his mention is followed by the calligraphic symbol for *ṣalla Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*, “May the peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him.” When Muḥammad’s companions are mentioned, they are followed with the symbol for *raḍīallāhu ʿanhu* (may Allāh be pleased with him) or *raḍīallāhu ʿanha* (may Allāh be pleased with her). In material that is being quoted, we have used the symbols to replace these blessings, but have not added them if they were not present in the original text.

When quoting the Qur^ʿān or referring in the text to God, exalted is He, we have used the masculine pronoun. Please be aware that this is merely a limitation of language and that within the universe and understanding of the Qur^ʿān, God is without gender and far beyond any words or manner by which we might try to describe Him/Her. *Subḥān Allāhi Rabbil-ʿālamīn!*

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Introduction

The Function of Language

The Book of Language is an exploration of the language we use to express the fundamental truths of the human condition. Foremost in importance are those terms found in the Holy Qurʾān that describe the human being and spiritual development.

This “glossary” has three principal purposes. The first is to explore the spiritual vocabulary of the Qurʾān. The second is to build a more precise spiritual vocabulary in the English language. The third is to shed some light on how terms in one language may be translated into another language—especially Arabic to English, and English to Arabic. All three of these tasks are interrelated and illuminate each other.

Unless we can define and clarify a language for the purpose of communicating the essential spiritual truths of our human situation, it will be difficult to understand one another and to communicate about matters of fundamental importance to our souls. Much confusion, argument, disagreement, and misunderstanding can be avoided by clarifying our terms. Beyond that we may be able to reach deeper levels of communication and understanding if we have a language for our inner experience.

Wittgenstein said: “The limit of my word is the limit of my world.” The Roman poet and orator, Cicero, wrote two thousand years ago, “Before one discusses any subject whatsoever, one should first agree on terms.” Terms and symbols are the subject and medium of thought. The critical importance of terminology is that words become premises, and conclusions always follow premises, at least in logical thought. In classical logic, problems start when one has either false premises or false words to express them.

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Just as terms in the legal or scientific field require clear definition, so, too, in the field of human psychological and spiritual experience we need well defined terms. Fortunately, the basis for such a language already exists.

The Holy Qur^ʿān is believed to be a direct communication from God in the Arabic language. The explanatory power of its key terms is related both to how these terms are used in their various Qur^ʿānic contexts, as well as their etymological derivation from their Arabic root meanings. Both of these factors have contributed to making their meanings somewhat stable through time, unlike terms in English which are tied to no sacred reference point and undergo constant shifts of meaning with usage.

Nevertheless, although Qur^ʿānic Arabic has remained relatively stable in meaning over the centuries because it is determined by the usage of terms in this single text, the use of these same terms in vernacular languages such as Turkish, Persian, and Urdu can drift into other meanings and those new meanings can, in a sense, contaminate the understanding of the original Qur^ʿānic text. The shifting nature of meaning in other languages is therefore a obstacle to our understanding of the original Qur^ʿānic text.

Every field of knowledge requires its own specific vocabulary, a well-defined glossary for its own needs. English is a relatively undeveloped language for the expression of spiritual truths, especially when compared to certain languages like Sanskrit, Greek, Hebrew, or Arabic. These languages not only have a long history as vehicles for the expression of spiritual realities, they are also considered to be the recipients of revelation, by which we mean a direct communication from Divine Intelligence.

In order to be able to communicate with each other and to achieve a coherent knowledge, we would do well to have a spiritual vocabulary that is both precise and unified. To be unified means that each term in

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our glossary is related to the Whole, to the master truth of a coherent system, i.e., the Divine. To give one example, in the definition of “humbleness,” for instance, we find a relationship between this single word and the master truth of spirituality: *The awareness of our dependence on God, and our interdependence and need for other human beings. We are not the originators of anything but the reflectors of the attributes of Spirit; all of our qualities, virtues, and capacities have their ultimate source in God, upon Whom we depend.*

Ideally, every word of our spiritual vocabulary should clarify and support other terms and remind us of the essential truths of a comprehensive knowledge. While it is true that the Arabic language, for instance, may have a precision, depth, and allusiveness that English lacks, we still have an obligation to use the English language as well as we can. This is made all the more urgent as English has become the most widely spoken language on our planet.

Finding corresponding terms between two or more languages can never be exact. A glossary which clarifies the meanings of corresponding terms, however, can bring them closer and infuse one or the other with greater meaning. “Repentance,” for instance, has the root meaning to reflect on punishment (re-poena); the Islamic term for repentance, *taubah*, however, has the more positive root meaning of turning in a new direction.

If we can succeed at clarifying the underlying issues of translating Arabic to English and vice versa, we will also contribute to the understanding between languages that have been deeply influenced by Islam (Turkish, Persian, Urdu, Swahili, Indonesian), on the one hand, and European and other languages, as well.

For the most part, the translation of the Qur^ʿān into European languages has been determined by the conventions of Biblical translation. This brings up two concerns: one is the choice to translate into a “religious” dialect, as if God has a different vocabulary and prefers words like “thou” and “verily.” This sets sacred language apart from our human language, but unfortunately, to the ears of many, dresses God in the robes

of an English Vicar. No such equivalent language style existed in Arabic at the time of its revelation. As sublime as the language of the Arabic Qurʾān is, not everyone believes its translation requires this kind of artificial support. This, however, is a relatively minor issue compared to our second concern: the more substantive issues at the level of meaning itself.

On the one hand, there should be some continuity of meaning and terms within the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islām. On the other hand, since Islām understands itself to be a corrective to certain man-made distortions of religion that arose over the course of history, it should not be assumed that there is a one-to-one correspondence between terms such as “faith,” “religion,” or “sin,” for example.

A prime example would be the common translations of the terms *muʿmin* and *kāfir* as “believer” and “unbeliever,” in which the essential Arabic meanings of *īmān* and *kufr* are only obscured. Believer and unbeliever suggest to the Western mentality an acceptance or rejection of a particular theology or institutional religion. But the Qurʾānic terms suggest a more fundamental disposition and much subtler notions of a human psychological state. *Īmān* connotes, all at once, being faithful, secure, and having verified the reality of the spiritual dimension. *Kufr*, on the other hand, connotes being in a state of denial, ingratitude, and a stubborn reluctance to face reality. If we allow these terms to become one-dimensional, to mean little more than the mere profession of doctrinal belief, or its lack, we have lost dimensions of meaning which are essential to our spiritual well-being. We have lost the meanings of *īmān* and *kufr*, themselves.

One of the first examples of mistranslation that set me upon this path of trying to understand the issues of translation was the case of the word ʿAlaq. This word is used in the first *āyāt*s revealed to Muḥammad ﷺ: *Read, in the name of your Sustainer who created, created the human being from ʿalaq* (*Sūrah al-ʿAlaq* 96:1-2). Unfortunately, too often it has been translated in a very unscientific way as “blood clot,” which, for anyone acquainted with a minimum of biological science, brings discredit upon the revelation itself. If the Qurʾān is the word of God, cannot God give a better description of the origin of human life than from a clot? If we look into the Arabic word, however, we see that ʿalaqa means establishing

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some sort of relationship, and *‘alaq* also describes anything that has a linking capacity. In this age of bio-engineering are we really going to maintain a translation of “clot” for *‘alaq*, or can we find something general enough and yet able to convey some of the scientific accuracy that is actually implied by the term? *‘alaq* could, for instance, be descriptive of DNA’s double helix. It need not, however, be translated by something as specific as DNA, because as science develops, this understanding may be surpassed. The challenge is to find a translation that better embodies the meaning of some kind of substance that does not mislead us into unproductive areas of thought. A better solution would seem to be Muḥammad Asad’s translation: “germ cell.” This, at least, does not mislead and is more scientifically accurate. A somewhat long but more accurate and literal translation might be “an infinitesimal, clinging substance.” But, unfortunately, that’s eleven syllables in English to translate two in Arabic.

What, then, is the meaning of a word? Arabic words can usually be traced back to three-lettered roots, each associated with a family of meanings. Latin has a similar tendency to yield up many words from a single root: *sanctus* (“holy”) produces in English, for instance, sanctuary (noun), sanctify (verb), and sanctified (adjective).

When interpreting the Qur’ān and its language we might keep certain principles in mind.

First, if we accept the Qur’ān as the word of God, we will take seriously its exact wording. In other words, we will consider that particular words are used, and that more than one level of meaning might be conveyed by a particular word. We explore the text open to all its linguistic possibilities, holding God to His word, so to speak.

Second, we can look to the root meaning of words. In what ways was the word used at the time it was revealed? For example, God is called *Al-Jabbār*, which is usually translated as the Compeller, the Irresistible. We might first think that God is being described as an overpowering force, but if we explore the various contexts in which the word was used, we find that it is also used to describe the mending of a broken bone; in other words, that irresistible process of healing that Life is endowed with. Here we glimpse the purely beneficent dimension of *Al-Jabbār*.

Third, we should realize the limits of etymological analysis, just as

we would in another language. Because a word can mean something in a certain context does not mean that we can read that same meaning into another context. For example: the word “hard” in English can mean: 1. not easily dented. 2. demanding great physical or mental effort. 3. unemotional, as in “hard-hearted.” 4. causing pain or discomfort. 5. containing much alcohol, as in “hard liquor.” 6. shrewd, as in a “hard” customer. 7. stern, as in a “hard” master. 8. done with great force, as in a “hard” blow. Clearly, certain interpretations only apply to particular situations.

Fourth, we may look at the various contexts in which a word appears in the Qurʾān and in this way let the Qurʾān itself teach us. *Al-Furqān*, for instance, means “the criterion of discernment,” and at the same time it is offered in certain contexts as a synonym for a Divine Revelation, including the ʾInjīl (Gospel) and the Tawrah (Torah). This helps us to understand that the very purpose of revelation, itself, is to develop our capacities of discernment by offering objective criteria.

For anyone wishing to deepen the study begun in this book we would recommend studying the occurrence of key terminology as it appears in the Qurʾān. Kassis’ “*A Concordance of the Qurʾān*” has proven to be a very valuable tool, but also the new edition of Muḥammad Asad’s “*The Message of the Qurʾān*” has an excellent index that allows for the finding of terms in English, which can then be cross-referenced through the Arabic or Arabic transliteration. Those who can easily read Arabic will, of course, be able to do their own searches through various other resources and online.

Finally, we know very well what an enormous task we have undertaken and how this is only a modest beginning to a never-ending project. We hope that this may be an example to inspire others to reflect on the issues of sacred language, and to carry this kind of study much further in the future.

Kabir Helminski

What is a Human Being?

The structure of the self within an Islamic spiritual psychology

THIS ESSAY ATTEMPTS TO DESCRIBE AND CLARIFY the fundamental elements and structure of the human being. In a spiritual psychology, however, the human being is not viewed in isolation but in the context of a spiritual universe. The well-being and fulfillment of the human being cannot be separated from this larger reality.

Traditional Islamic spirituality provides a vocabulary that can help us to know and understand ourselves and our relationship to the Divine Being, Allah. From this vocabulary we can derive a sacred psychology that includes a model of the human being as well as a map of spiritual development.

To establish and clarify an appropriate vocabulary for understanding our human nature is a challenge that requires the cooperation of reason and revelation, the integration of human wisdom and divine guidance. If we can successfully present a true spiritual psychology, it will help to inform other areas of knowledge. This work will rest on a solid Qur^ʿanic foundation, and, at the same time, it should create a bridge toward contemporary psychological language and understanding.

No one who has studied the circumstances of the Qur^ʿān's revelation would deny that it proceeded from a deep level of inspiration, nor can one deny that it has its own inherent unity. This is part of its miracle: that the closer one looks, the more precision and order seem to reveal themselves.

Its terms are increasingly appreciated for their objective quality. If you gather together all the references to "heart" within the Qur^ʿān, for instance, you will see how they inform each other and suggest an objective and practical knowledge. The psychology of Islām, therefore, is not something formulated by the theorizing intellect; rather it is a unified

body of knowledge whose source is this inspired text as it has been understood by generations of wise human beings.

The outcome of this knowledge and practice is humanizing and life-enhancing. The principles of spiritual development expressed in the Qurʾān stand as remarkable tools in purely practical psychological terms. For the believer, however, there is the faith that one's actions and intentions *here* will resonate forever in an eternal dimension and that our choices here have consequences far beyond our immediate earthly life.

Psychology means "knowledge of the soul (psyche)." While modern psychology and psychotherapies have shed some light on certain aspects of emotion, motivation, and personality formation, nevertheless, an objective science of the soul still proves to be elusive. Even the best contemporary psychologies are, to a great extent, a collection of subjective and culturally determined conjectures. There are dozens of theories of personality, theories of learning, and so on, but contemporary psychology does not offer a coherent understanding of the human being and the purpose of life. Insofar as they claim to be scientific, these theories are rudimentary experiments that hardly begin to fathom the most important issues of meaning and purpose in life.

Here we must face the central question that separates those who defend and maintain a purely secular reality from those who believe in the great tradition of revelation on this earth. The secular materialists believe that human beings can construct an effective and satisfactory knowledge of the human psyche from the ground up, so to speak. Freud and Marx are the outstanding examples of this mentality for the twentieth century. The failure of Marxism as a solution to social and economic injustice is hardly a matter of debate. The failure of Freudianism as a model for human psychological well-being, though less dramatic, is no less noteworthy. Such systems as these were not without their elements of insight and truth, nor were their discoveries and critiques entirely irrelevant. However, their failure was that they could not offer a satisfactory model of the highest purpose of human life.

What we are witnessing in the new millennium is a cultural collapse of modernism. "Modernism" had reduced existence to an impersonal scientific process. The human being was conceived as a biological machine functioning within an impersonal universe. Hopes for human well-

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being were placed in scientific methodologies that addressed only the material aspects of existence.

Much of the contemporary world and its academic and social institutions now refer to a so-called “post-modern” era, a time when all value systems, religious beliefs, and intellectual orientations are viewed as mere subjective human constructs. In other words, from the post-modern point of view all claims for ultimate “truth” are suspect.

Muslims, however, live in a different universe, though not necessarily one of pre-defined and pre-packaged “beliefs.” The essential message of the Qurʾān is an encouragement to reflect on the signs of nature, to reason, and to open the heart to the Divine Presence. The Revelation offers certain propositions to humankind and asks that these be verified in our experience. Allāh, as Divine Intelligence, is guiding and educating human beings to the extent that they use their minds to reflect (*tafakkur*), use their intelligence (*ʿaql*), sustain remembrance (*dhikr*), and purify their own souls.

Primary Terms of Spiritual Psychology

The structure of the human individuality within an Islamic spiritual psychology can be understood through three primary elements: *nafs*, or ego-self; *qalb*, or heart; and *Rūh*, or Spirit. Together these form the human being.

The *nafs* is the self operating in the world, involved with actions and choices based on its own well-being, interests, and desires. The *nafs* faces insecurities, fears, and disappointments, as well as moments of happiness, pleasure, satisfaction, and peace. The *nafs* is the soul having an earthly experience.

There is another side of the human being, however, which is profoundly spiritual, able to access the divine qualities, knowing, luminous, conscious: *Rūh*.

Finally, there is *qalb*, the heart, the sensitive, knowing, feeling capacity of the human being. Although in some human beings the heart may be hardened, diseased, contracted, or numb, when it is healthy and open, the heart is the meeting place of these two different sides of human nature,

nafs and *Rūḥ*. Through the heart, the *nafs* receives energy, support, guidance, and inspiration from *Rūḥ*.

If the human being were visualized as a sphere, the ego would be like its surface, the heart would be its interior, and the Spirit would be its very center. The ego is the most superficial part of ourselves which, nevertheless, often vies for unquestioned control of our lives. The heart, as our interior, can be ignored and even denied. The Spirit, like a dimensionless point at the center of oneself, is like a portal to another dimension—the source of our life and consciousness.

In attempting to bring some clarity to these terms, we are faced with the problem that our English language uses them in vague, if not contradictory, ways. So we are compelled to create a spiritual glossary of our own.

The “I,” Ego, Self, Anima, Psyche (*Nafs*)

Why must we use several English words to translate one Arabic word? The subject of the human “I” or self seems an elusive one. It is convenient that we have one word, *nafs*, in the Islamic vocabulary to convey the idea of a “self.” The complexity and subtlety of the subject comes from the fact that the quality of the self, itself, can vary. We may experience our “I-ness” in very different ways, depending on factors like our “persona,” the degree of the social mask we wear, our psychological defenses, our own state of self-awareness, and our willingness to reveal ourselves to others. It is common to say, for instance, that one person has a big ego, while another seems self-less. In each case we are talking about the identity, the sense of self that a person exhibits.

Nafs is what we most often experience as “I.” People derive their sense of “I” from different sources. Some people, for instance, are completely “I”-identified with their nationality, or their religion. Others are identified with and draw their sense of self and self-worth from their social status, how other people view them. Still others identify with their own deepest values and this identification will give them a stability of identity that allows them to survive the ups and downs of life.

The kind of education we are proposing, an education that includes

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the “vertical” dimension of spiritual education, will result in a continuing transformation of one’s sense of “I.” What we take to be our “I” today, we should not be so quick to believe is our real and truest “I.”

Let us examine, for instance, this creature called “ego.” The ego, if carefully observed, reveals itself to be a complex of psychological manifestations arising from the body and related to its pleasure and survival. If the body is hungry, the ego acts to satisfy the hunger. If some threat to life or well-being is perceived, the ego mobilizes what is necessary to escape or confront it. The ego, at its most basic level, is ruled primarily by fear and desire.

If a person experiences cruel treatment as a child, the ego that is formed may be primarily concerned with defending itself, or perhaps inflicting cruelty on others. If a person is criticized, belittled, and shamed, the ego may lack confidence, self esteem, and self worth. If a person receives a healthy amount of love and attention, while learning to be a considerate human being, such a person may come into the world with a relatively healthy, balanced, and integrated ego.

All too often, however, the ego has no limit to its desires, whether these are appetites of the body or of the personality. The ego has an intimate relationship not only with the body, but with the socialized personality as well. The personality is like a veneer on the ego. It disguises the ego’s agendas and strategies and makes them more socially acceptable. Sometimes the more “education” a person has, the thicker is the “veneer” of personality.

The *nafs* (self) should be the receptive pole of the individual, assimilating what the active pole, Spirit, can give. When the self has become receptive to Spirit, it may be called the inspired self (*nafs al-mulhama*).

When the *nafs*, the ego, becomes the active pole, driving the individual with its incessant demands, then a human being is out of balance. The most disruptive and evil manifestation of the self is known as the commanding self (*nafs al-ammāra*). This kind of self manifests itself as ambition, self-importance, selfishness, rationalization, fantasy, delusion, self-righteousness, and aggression.

As we shall see, the self needs the purified heart (*qalb*) and the Spirit

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(*Rūhī*) to guide and inspire it in order that it might truly mature as a spiritual being. On the other hand, the spiritual part of ourselves also needs the basic energy of the self (*nafs*) to aspire toward spiritual development.

The optimal state of human well-being is when the self is in harmony with Spirit. This comes about when the self can follow the guidance of the heart, mobilizing the energy of desire in service of the heart, rather than trying to satisfy the demands of the selfish ego. Put another way, the self must be in submission to the heart which is guided directly by Spirit.

How shall we achieve this state of surrender? Traditional spiritual teachings propose ways, guidelines, and methods that essentially serve this one purpose: helping the self come into harmony with Spirit through the mediation of the heart.

The Heart (*Qalb*)

The heart may be experienced as the interior space within ourselves, which we know in a different way than through our normal thinking mind. The heart knows with a deep and empathic knowing, often accompanied by physical sensations as well. We talk about being heart-sick, or having a restless, wounded, or cold heart. We also talk about giving our heart to something.

The heart has the ability to sense the significance and value of things and events. Only the awakened heart can know the true dimensions of the spiritual universe we live in by experiencing all the subtleties the heart is capable of perceiving.

It is the midpoint of the individual person, between the ego self and Spirit. When it is healthy and awakened it receives all that Spirit has to give and transmits it to the individual self. The heart also includes many subtle faculties of perception.

On the other hand, if the heart becomes too dominated by the materialistic concerns of the ego, it becomes contracted and numb and no longer functions as a heart at all.

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Spirit (*Rūḥ*)

Rūḥ, Spirit (*pneuma*, Active Intellect, *nous*), can be understood as the non-individual aspect of the human being which is continuous with Divine Being itself. It is described in the Qurʾān as an impulse or command from our Sustainer: *Qul: ir-Rūḥu min ʾAmri Rabbī. (Sūrah Al-Isrāʿ 17:85)*

Spirit is the essence of life itself. It is like a non-dimensional point that is linked to the realm of Divine Unity and has access to the realm of Attributes, the Divine Names. Spirit is the source that nourishes the heart. Inspiration is the word that suggests the influence of Spirit on the human being.

Spirit dignifies the human being above animals, and even above angels. It is what enables Ādam to know the names of things and thus to participate in the creative power of God. *We have honored the children of Ādam. . . (Sūrah Al-Isrāʿ 17:70)*

The Servants of Spirit

Spirit's servants, or functions, include conscious presence, conscious will, and conscious love.

Conscious presence is that comprehensive state of awareness in which we can be aware of our thoughts, feelings, and actions. It exists on a level above these other functions—a level from which we can witness what goes on in our minds, feelings, and behaviors. It is a state that needs cultivation and development. Many aspects of modern life conspire to weaken it.

Conscious will is simply the ability to make a conscious choice, to have an intention. It implies a certain level of awareness and then it is up to our will-power to follow through with the intention or decision. Once again, we have relatively few opportunities to exercise this kind of will in modern life. Materialism, consumerism, and hedonism conspire to keep us acting unconsciously from mostly unexamined desires.

Conscious love is that better part of ourselves that can recognize and do what is right, regardless of self-interest, desire, or fear. Conscious love perceives and feels the unity of all life. The more conscious love we

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experience, the richer, deeper, and happier we are.

All three of these are essential aspects of Spirit which can enter the heart and transform the ego. Spirit has other important servants as well, including reason, reflection, wisdom, and conscience.

The individuality, the totality of the person, is the result of the relationship of these three: ego-self, heart, and Spirit.

The Structure of the Self

The human being can also be understood in terms of two fundamental axes. One axis we can call the conscious-unconscious axis. Another is the false self-essential self axis.

The four terms diagrammed below represent, in a necessarily simplified way, some fundamental dimensions of the human being. The movement from the false self to the essential self is a movement that increases awareness on the vertical axis of conscious and subconscious mind.

Conscious Mind

Ego, "I"

Personality

Intellect/Reason

Reflection

Awareness

False Self ⇔

⇔

⇔ *Essential Self*

Subconscious Mind

Emotion

Heart

Intuition

Creativity

Wisdom

We begin with a sense of self, an "I," something we all experience.

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Every time we say “I,” that “I” is making some claim for itself: “I am happy today.” “I am Fāṭīma.” “I am an American.” What this experience is like varies enormously from person to person, from a contracted, separate self to an expanded, spiritualized Self. This “I”, however, is a very small part of ourselves. It is only as much of ourselves as we are conscious of, or believe ourselves to be.

Beyond this “I” or conscious mind is a vast realm which can be called the subconscious. It might also be called the “supraconscious” if we want to emphasize that some of our higher impulses may originate from this realm, but for the sake of simplicity we shall use the familiar term “subconscious.” Commonly, in conventional psychology, the subconscious mind is viewed as a kind of warehouse of buried memories, conditioning, complexes, drives, and obsessions. From a more spiritual perspective this subconscious is also the heart, the source of wisdom and subtle perceptions. It is infinite, at least compared to the conscious mind, and is spontaneously in communication with other minds, with mind-at-large, and with Spirit.

Any true education should help us to understand and make use of the relationship between the conscious mind and the subconscious mind. Our conscious sense of who we are is the fruit of the totality of our memories, attitudes, and beliefs at the subconscious level of mind, whereas the ideas we consciously hold in awareness, the impressions we take into ourselves, and what we allow to occupy our attention will be transferred to the subconscious mind and become a part of who we are.

When we know and are convinced of this, we will be in a better position to assume responsibility for our conscious mind. We will better understand how intention, positive thought, and prayer can affect our whole being positively, while negativity, anger, and fear can create a toxic state of mind.

The other polarity which needs clarification involves the false self and the essential self. The basic premise of this model is that the conscious mind is often identified with the false self, which is the product of fear and selfishness. We can free ourselves of this false self and through conscious *presence*, *will*, and *love* come to live from our essential self. Both these terms, false self and essential Self, are relative and not absolute. From

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the perspective of the essential self we feel our unity with everything through love and through the finer faculties of mind.

Where we identify on the false self and essential self continuum influences our experience of “I,” as well as the condition of our subconscious mind. Clearly, someone whose life is ruled by vanity and greed and all the delusions they bring will have a different sense of self than someone who can remember his own mortality, his interdependence with the whole of life, and his dependence on God. The former will be enslaved to the tyranny of his own ego; the latter will experience an abundant and creative life, living from the essential self.

This could all be so simple, but for how long have we and generations before us made it so complicated? And yet we are created to know ourselves; we are created for this self-awareness; we are fully equipped for it. What could be more important than to know ourselves?

The Education of the Soul

Education as it is currently understood, particularly in the West, ignores the human soul, or essential reflective capacity at the heart of human beings. This reflective capacity is not some vague entity whose existence is a matter of speculation, but our fundamental “I,” capable of intention (*niyyah*), conscious presence (*hudhur*), vigilance (*taqwā*), remembrance (*dhikr*), and faithfulness (*īmān*). This soul, or essential self, has been covered over by the superficiality of our thinking processes which are oriented toward the outer world rather than the development of our innate human capacities. Materialism and commercialism have conditioned many human beings to the extent that they are almost solely preoccupied with satisfying the artificial and random desires of the consumer world, rather than knowing and exploring their own inner capacities. Today we are in great need of a form of education that would contribute to the awakening of the soul. Such forms of training have existed in other eras and cultures and have been available to those with the yearning to awaken from the sleep of their limited conditioning and know the potential latent in the human being.

The education of the soul, or the “vertical” dimension of education,

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is different from the education of the personality or the intellect. Conventional education is all about acquiring external knowledge and “making something of ourselves” in the outer world. The education of the soul involves not only knowledge, but the realization of a quality of being which is our deeper nature, and which includes conscious presence, conscious will, and conscious love. The education of the soul is the spiritual development of the inner human being through successive stages in which the quality of “I-ness” becomes more and more illuminated by Spirit (*Rūh*). It is a process of the self becoming more fully human and more fully spiritual at the same time.

What is most characteristically human may not be guaranteed to us by our species or by our culture, but is given only in potential. A person must *work* in order to become human. What quality makes us most distinctly human? What is most human in us is something more than the role we play in society, and more than the conditioning (whether for good or bad) of our culture. The human being has been shaped by the Creative Spirit and brought forth as a witness who could keep the covenant offered to it and fulfill the task which is the purpose of its life. The human being is the conscious caretaker and representative (*khalīfah*) of the Creative Spirit on the earth—with the potential for conscious presence, will, creativity, mercy, and love. By establishing the right relationship among the three essential elements of our being—self, heart, and spirit—we can fulfill the task of being completely human.

TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE

(Al-Haqīqah wal Maʿrifah)

Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
And above every possessor of knowledge, there is one with more knowledge.
(Sūrah Yūsuf 12:76)*

Introduction

THE BRANCH OF PHILOSOPHY concerned with knowledge, truth and *how we know* is known in English as *epistemology*. It is the first and most important of all the branches of philosophy and is the basis of all forms of knowledge and science. Thus it precedes all the natural sciences: understanding the nature of knowledge itself obviously comes before having knowledge of particular things. It is not an inherently easy subject, but in what follows we will try to summarize it without over-simplification.

However, even before we discuss *epistemology* we must first ask *what we are—what man as such is*—for it is illogical to want to know something existing *within* man without first knowing what man himself is. And evidently knowledge is something existing within man.

(1) **What is Man?**

The Human Being (*al-insān*) is comprised of three major elements: a spirit (*rūh*), a soul (*nafs*), and a body (*jism*). Each of these exists in its own plane or world and yet they are all connected.

1) a) *The Body*

Everyone knows, feels, and uses the body. It is the living, physical, and animal part of man. It is the part of man that breathes, eats, and moves, and enables him (or her) to exist in the Physical Universe (*‘Ālam ash-Shahādah*, the universe of witnessing). It is also the mortal part of man: that part of man which can become ill, grow old, and die. Indeed, physical death is nothing other than destruction of the body and its separation from the soul and spirit of man, which nevertheless remain intact:

Until, when death cometh unto one of them, he saith: My Lord! Send me back that I may do right in that which I have left behind. But nay! It is but a word that he speaketh, and behind them is an Isthmus (Barzakh) until the day when they are raised. (Sūrah al-Mu‘minūn 23:99-100)

1) b) *The Soul*

The soul (*nafs*) of the human being is really man himself, his or her particular personality, what makes him an individual. It is also, as the great ancient philosopher Plato (427–347 BC) said¹, immortal (*khālidah*): it survives man’s physical death. It is thus superior to the body, just as the world in which it exists (called the *barzakh*, as in the verse just quoted) is superior to the Physical World where bodies exist. Many scholars have described the soul’s relationship to the body as analogous to the relationship of a king to his kingdom, or a captain to his ship. It controls the body, makes its decisions, thinks for it, and stands in relationship to it like a kind of “inner witness.”

The soul has three major parts: “the soul that inciteth unto evil” (*an-nafs al-‘ammārah bis-sūu*) (*Sūrah Yūsuf* 12:53), “the soul that blames” (*an-*

¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245.

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nafs al-lawwāmah) (*Sūrah al-Qiyāmah* 75:2), and “the soul at peace” (*an-nafs al-muṭmaʿinnah*) (*Sūrah al-Fajr* 89:27). “The soul that inciteth unto evil” and “the soul that blames” are constantly struggling within man to lead toward evil and good, respectively. Plato likens their struggle to two horses fighting to take a chariot in different directions:

As to the soul's immortality, then, we have said enough, but as to its nature there is this that must be said. . . . Let it be likened to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their charioteer. . . . [I]t is a pair of steeds that the charioteer controls; moreover, one of them is noble and good, and of good stock, while the other has the opposite character, and his stock is opposite. Hence the task of our charioteer is a difficult and troublesome business.²

Now the ‘charioteer’ here is an allegory for “the soul at peace,” except the “soul at peace” does not become “at peace” and *return to its Lord* (*Sūrah al-Fajr* 89:28) until “the soul that blames” manages to overcome “the soul that inciteth unto evil,” or as Plato says, until “the wicked horse abandons his lustful ways³” and conforms to the reproaches of “the good horse” (which is nowadays known as the conscience [*dāmir*]). It is only then that the virtues, which are naturally in the soul, can manifest themselves freely, and that the soul can *Enter My Paradise...* (*Sūrah al-Fajr* 89:29).

Even modern psychology acknowledges that the soul has three parts which check and balance each other. The Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) called them the “id,” the “ego,” and the “superego.” These correspond roughly to Plato’s “bad horse,” “good steed,” and “charioteer,” respectively, except that Freud, being an atheist, did not ever imagine that the “id” could come to be truly “at peace” or could “*return to its Lord*.”

1) c) *The Spirit*

The word ‘spirit’ (*rūḥ*) has two meanings: the first simply means “the

² Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246 a-b.

³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 255.

life” within a body. The second, which is the one we are using here, refers to the spirit which is the inner witness of the soul and the body taken together. This spirit is the Divine breath within man. As the Holy Qur^ʿān says:

Then He fashioned him [man] and breathed into him of His spirit; and appointed for you hearing and sight and hearts. Small thanks give ye! (Sūrah as-Sajdah 32:9)

The spirit is superior to the soul (and of course the body) because it is not just immortal but free from individual personality and restrictions. Equally, its world, the *ʿĀlam al-Malakūt*, is superior to the world that contains the souls, for it is in the Hand of God and contains the essences of all things in the two worlds below it:

Therefore glory be to Him in Whose hand is the dominion (malakūt) of all things! Unto Him ye will be brought back. (Sūrah Yā Sīn 36:82)

Beyond this, however, little can be said about it because it is infinite and it comes from God:

They will ask you about the spirit. Say: The Spirit is by command of my Lord, and of knowledge ye have been vouchsafed but little. (Sūrah al-Isrā^ʿ 17:85)

Finally it should be said that, although it might seem strange that man has, in a certain sense, two subjectivities (the individual soul and the spirit which is beyond the individual personality), it is also a necessity. Otherwise how could every man be “I” by himself, and yet still be men like other men? And how could the soul really know itself but for the spirit that is beyond it; for as Plato says: “the eye cannot see itself.” Moreover, the fact that there is both a soul and a spirit also explains why, in the Holy Qur^ʿān, God promises every single pious person two paradises:

But for him who feareth the station of his Lord there are two paradises. (Sūrah ar-Raḥmān 55:46)

(2) **How Does Man Know?**

Each of man's 'parts' knows, or can know, the realities existing on its own plane through epistemological faculties naturally found within itself. These are the three main sources of knowledge.

2) a) *The Body's Knowledge*

The body, which is a physical entity, knows physical realities through its physical senses, and then "communicates" them to the soul. It sees through the eyes, hears through the ears, smells through the nose, tastes through the mouth, and feels through the skin; and all of these are forms of knowledge of the physical world. This form of knowledge is often called "sense perception."

2) b) *The Soul's Knowledge*

*By the sun and its brightness,
And the moon when it followeth him,
And the day when it revealeth him,
And the night when it enshroudeth him,
and the heaven and Him who built it,
And the earth and Him who spread it,
And a soul and Him who perfected it,
And inspired it [with conscience of] what is wrong for it
and [what is] right for it.
He is indeed successful who purifies it,
And he indeed is a failure who corrupteth it.
(Sūrah ash-Shams 91:1-10)*

The soul is a subtle (*laṭīf* or *khafī*) entity. In addition to the information relayed to it by the body and the physical senses (through the mind and its "physical seat," the brain) the soul knows in three primary subtle ways. These are the intelligence, the will, and the sentiment, which are called the "cognitive," "behavioral," and "affective" systems, respectively, by modern psychology. The intelligence is made for comprehending the true, the will is made for freedom of choice, and sentiment is made for loving the good and the beautiful. Put in another way, we could say that man's soul knows through *understanding* the truth, through *willing* the

good, and through virtuous *feeling*. True knowledge is thus not just mental comprehension, but rather feeling and willing, for to truly understand what is good, beautiful, and noble necessarily means to love it and to want it.

In fact, it is precisely these three faculties that set man apart from animals and explain why he is God's representative (*khalīfah*) on earth (God says in the Holy Qur'ān, *Sūrah al-Baqarah* 2:30: *Lo! I am about to place a khalīfah upon the earth...*). For on earth only man has an intelligence capable of true objectivity and of knowing the truth in its fullness. Only man has a will capable of total concentration, of complete freedom, and thus of absolute self-sacrifice. And only man has sentiment capable of sincere love, true goodness, and altruistic virtue. Man is born with these faculties in his soul, for these are essentially Divine gifts for *Verily God created Ādam in His own image*⁴, but they are only "unfolded" gradually as a child grows up: sentiment develops with consciousness almost inseparably from birth; the will and the intelligence start to develop shortly thereafter and become unfolded (if still inexperienced and unlearned) before puberty.

Each of the soul's three main epistemological faculties can then be divided into certain "modes": the will can be positive or negative, combative or ascetic, vigilant or self-disciplined, aggressive or cowardly. Sentiment can be active, passive, loving, peaceful, passionate, contented, confidant, grateful, hopeful, or happy. The intelligence, however, has four major modes: reason, which is objective; intuition, which is subjective; imagination, which is prospective; and memory, which is retrospective. On a different plane, these "modes" can be further subdivided into different "functions" and "aptitudes": as regards "functions," which are more essential, we can distinguish first between discernment (*tamayyuz*) and contemplation (*ta'ammul*), and then between analysis and synthesis. As regards 'aptitudes', we can distinguish between an intelligence that is theoretical and another that is practical, and then between one that is spontaneous and another that is reactive; or again, between an intelligence that is constructive and another that is critical. Finally, mention should be

⁴ *Musnad* Ibn Ḥanbal, 2: 244, 251, 315, 323 etc.; *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Kitāb Al-Isti'thān*, 1; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb Al-Birr* 115, et al.

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made of the linguistic faculty, which extends the intelligence outside of itself and permits communication.

Incidentally, it is these different faculties, modes, functions and aptitudes that explain why one student is naturally better at a given subject (but not at all of them) than another: in each person they develop slightly differently, leading to different gifts in different subjects. Also, since real knowledge involves loving and willing something, it is also clear that students who really like a subject and want to work at it, will do better than those who do not.

2) c) *The Spirit's Knowledge*

2) c) i) Revelation

The highest form of knowledge is that which accompanies Revelation (*wahy* or *tanzil*), for it comes from outside of man—from God Himself, who is Omniscient. It is the very Word of God. It is meant for all mankind or for a whole nation (*ummah*), but it only comes to Prophets and Messengers, (and is, in fact, what makes them Prophets or Messengers):

He hath revealed unto thee [O Muḥammad] the Scripture with truth, confirming that which was [revealed] before it, even as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel. (Sūrah Āl ʿImrān 3:3)

Lo! We inspire thee as We inspired Noah and the Prophets after him, as We inspired Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and we imparted unto David the Psalms; and messengers We have mentioned unto thee before and Messengers We have not mentioned unto thee; and God spake directly unto Moses. (Sūrah an-Nisā^c 4:163-164)

The Qurʾān tells us that, with the death of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, the Seal of the Prophets, the door of Revelation was closed, and there will be no more Revelation until the second coming of the Prophet Jesus ﷺ.

2) c) ii) Inspiration

Below the knowledge from Revelation is the knowledge that comes from the spirit (*rūh*) and whose source is also ultimately *from God* or from God's Presence (*ladun*):

[A]nd I know from God that which ye know not. (Sūrah Yūsuf 12:86)

Then found they one of Our slaves, unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and had taught him knowledge from Our presence. (Sūrah al-Kahf 18:65)

This knowledge is called Inspiration (*ilhām*)⁵. It is said to be infallible, direct knowledge of things as they truly are, in their own realities, unlike knowledge which comes from the soul of a person:

And I did it not upon my own command. Such is the interpretation where-with thou couldst not bear. (Sūrah al-Kahf 18:82)

The Holy Qur'ān says:

Is he who payeth adoration in the watches of the night, prostrate and standing, bewareing of the Hereafter and hoping for the Mercy of his Lord...? Say: Are those who know equal to those who do not know? But only men of understanding will pay heed. (Sūrah az-Zumar 39:9)

2) c) iii) The Heart

In discussing spiritual knowledge mention must be made of the heart. In fact, the word "heart" has two meanings: one is the physical heart that pumps blood around the body. The second, which is the one that concerns us in this context, is the subtle heart that is the means by which spiritual knowledge is communicated to the soul.⁶ For this reason it has sometimes been described as a bridge between the soul and the

⁵ It is also often called "unveiling" (*kashf*).

⁶ Hence the *ḥadīth*: "Hearts are God's vessels on earth, and most beloved unto Him are the finest and clearest of them." (Al-Hakim At-Tirmidhī, *Nawadīr al-Usul fī Ma'rifat Aḥadīth ar-Rasūl*, IV, 34). See also Ḥanbal's *Kitāb az-Zuhd*.

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spirit, to which only the pure have access, all other people having a kind of ‘rust’ over it which prevents them from accessing it. The Holy Qur^{ān} says:

They have hearts, but do not understand with them. (Sūrah al-A^ṣrāf 7:179)

It is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts within the breasts. (Sūrah al-Ḥajj 22:46)

What, do they not ponder the Qur^{ān}? Or is it that there are locks on their hearts? (Sūrah Muḥammad 47:24)

They would trick God and the faithful, and only themselves they deceive, but they are not aware. In their hearts is a sickness. (Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:9-10)

No indeed; but what they were earning has rusted their hearts. (Sūrah al-Muṭaffifīn 83:14)

He has written faith upon their hearts. (Sūrah al-Mujādalah 58:22)

It is He who sent down tranquility into the hearts of the believers, so that they might add faith to their faith. (Sūrah al-Fath 48:4)

Then, even after that, your hearts were hardened and became as rocks, or worse than rocks, for hardness. For indeed there are rocks out from which rivers gush, and indeed there are rocks which split asunder so that water floweth from them. And indeed there are rocks which fall down for fear of God. God is not unaware of what ye do. (Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:75)

All of this also explains why the Prophet ﷺ said: “The intelligence of the *kāfir* (the denier, conventionally called ‘the unbeliever’) is half the intelligence of the *mu^cmin* (the person of faith, conventionally called ‘the believer’).”⁷

⁷ Sunan An-Nasā’ī, *Al-Qasamah*, 38.

Since only believers can have access to the heart and to spiritual knowledge, and since unbelievers can have no access to this higher kind of knowledge, it can be said that the intelligence of unbelievers is only half that of believers, no matter how clever they are in the remaining half.

Immanuel Kant and his Denial of the Heart and of Spiritual Knowledge

The reality of the heart and of spiritual knowledge was well known all over the ancient world and in the West. Even in the Gospel, Jesus ﷺ is reported to have said:

And Jesus answered him, The first of all commandments is, hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy understanding, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second commandment is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.⁸

(Note here also that the basic faculties of the soul are the same as those described above: the *heart*, the *soul*, *love*, the *will*—which is the source of *strength*—and the *intelligence* or *comprehension*.)

Despite this widespread traditional knowledge of the spiritual faculty, there have always been people who have doubted the reality of the heart—or have accepted it without being fully convinced—for the simple reason that they themselves never had any experience of it, nor personally knew anyone who has (indeed, few people ever do). However, the first person not only to deny the soul's existence but to try to prove philosophically that it could not possibly exist was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), Kant argued that knowledge of things in themselves (which he called “pure reason”) was logically self-contradictory and humanly impossible and thus that metaphysics, which is the formal doctrine of this kind of knowledge, was merely empty specula-

⁸ *The Gospel according to St. Mark* 12:29–31 (see also *Deuteronomy* 6:5 and *Matthew* 22:37–9).

tion. Of course Kant was right in one sense: “direct” or “pure” knowledge is impossible on the level of the soul, because although the soul is quite adequate to knowing truths in an indirect sense, it can never fully free itself of its preconceptions and its individual perspective.

Consider a chair. Any chair. Everyone knows what a chair is, but no one sees it exactly from the same angle. And no one sees it from all angles at once. And when one sees it, one does not, merely through seeing it, immediately know all its properties or its age or its history. One does not know its inherent nature. It could be just about to collapse, but one may not know that simply by looking at it. Moreover, one does not know the chair directly in itself, but rather through an image one has of it in the soul transmitted through the eyesight, the memory, or the imagination. But that image is sufficient to enable us to go and sit on it, or to pick it up, or to tell someone we have just seen a chair, or to know that the chair is not a table or a ladder or even a bunch of grapes. Thus the soul has real and true knowledge but not pure or direct knowledge.

From the perspective of Islamic metaphysics, the spirit does mysteriously have pure knowledge, because this knowledge ultimately comes from God, albeit it exists on a different level than that of the soul. Kant’s mistake was to assume that just because he did not have such knowledge, or did not know anyone who had it, then no one *could* have it. His argument was like that of someone who had never been to China, nor known anyone who had ever been to China, suddenly saying not only that China does not exist, but actually trying to prove that it does not exist. Unfortunately, however, after Kant, belief in the existence of spiritual knowledge among philosophers all over the world weakened and continues to weaken among philosophers—and even among believers—to this day.

2) c) iv) The Intellect (*al-^oAql*)

There is, however, one kind of spiritual knowledge that is accessible to all men. This is knowledge of the Intellect. First, however, it should be pointed out that the word ^o*aql* in Arabic now has at least three different meanings. The first quite simply means the mind (*adh-dhihn*) which, itself, is a general term indicating unspecifically the general intelligence, consciousness, and comprehension of a soul. This is the sense of the term

used in the *ḥadīth* quoted above (that “the intelligence of the unbeliever is half the intelligence of the believer”). The second means specifically the faculty of logic in the soul, as mentioned earlier and discussed later. The word is often used by philosophers in this particular sense. The third, which is the sense we are concerned with here, means a ray of knowledge or intelligence that comes ultimately from the spirit, through the heart down through the depths of the soul even to the very body. If we compare light to knowledge, the sun to the spirit, the moon to the soul, and the earth to the body, then the Intellect can be compared to a ray of light in the night that comes from the sun, hits the moon, is reflected off it, and finally is projected onto the earth.

When this ray is at the level of the heart, then we simply identify it with the heart itself, and when it is at the level of the soul, we identify it above all with intuition, which we have already mentioned as providing us “subjective knowledge.” It is this intuition which provides believers with mysterious perception (*baṣīrah*) of things and insight (*firāsa*) into people. The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Beware the insight of the believer for he sees through God’s light.*⁹

It is also this intuition that enables us to contemplate things by holding them in our mind without thinking rationally about them, but only by contemplating (*ta^cammul* or *tadabbur*) them passively, and then suddenly to understand them. This is the sense of the term *‘aqila* that the Holy Book uses in verses like the following:

Lo! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of night and day, and the ships that run upon the sea with that which is of use to men, and the water which God sendeth down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death, and dispersing all kinds of beast therein, and in the ordinance of the winds, and the clouds obedient between heaven and earth, are signs for people who use their intellects (ya^cqilūn). (Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:164)

Finally, when the intellect is “at the same level as” the body it produces animal instinct. But what is instinct? To understand this properly

⁹ *Sunan At-Tirmidhī, Kitāb Tafṣīr Al-Qur^cān, Tafṣīr Sūrah al-Ḥijr (15:6).*

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we must ask the following questions: when one drives a car, or merely walks down the street, having a serious conversation, who is talking? Then who is driving? How do we dodge when something is thrown at us? And how do migratory birds fly alone, sometimes for the first time, all the way across the world to a specific place where they meet other birds? How do newborn crocodiles (and other animals) that are abandoned by their parents have the skills to survive?

Let us consider the first question first: if the soul is concentrating the intelligence and the will on the conversation, then it is obviously not these faculties that are driving the car or operating the legs. Certainly, it is not the spirit or the heart, for spiritual knowledge is of a different nature, as we have said. It is not the body, for the body in itself cannot think. As for what is nowadays called the subconscious, these are merely the tendencies and the desires of the ego and thus part of the soul, which is otherwise engaged, and which anyway has no active capacity to think other than through the intelligence. Thus it is something else. In fact, this something else is none other than the intellect, albeit in a fragmented and distant form, and it is this that explains all the questions asked above. In fact it is through this intellect that God ultimately gives each thing—animals and humans alike—the innate knowledge it needs to survive and to be fully itself, and although we commonly call it animal instinct, it is actually often miraculous. The Holy Qur^ʿān reminds us that God inspires even animals:

And thy Lord inspired the bee, saying: Choose thou habitations in the hills and in the trees and in that which they thatch. Then eat of all fruits, and follow the ways of thy Lord, made smooth for thee.... (Sūrah an-Naḥl 16:68-69)

2) c) v) Visionary Dreams (*ar-Ru^ʿ yā aṣ-Ṣāliḥa*)

We must not forget to mention visionary dreams in this section because they are seen not only by Prophets, like the Prophet Abraham (in *Sūrah aṣ-Ṣaffāt* 37:102), the Prophet Joseph (in *Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12:4), and the Prophet Muḥammad himself ﷺ (in *Sūrah al-Faḥ*, 48:27; *Sūrah al-Anfāl*, 8:43), but also by ordinary believers, from prisoners in jail (*Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12:36) to kings (*Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12:43). The Prophet ﷺ said: “The visionary

dream of the truly believing Muslim is one forty-sixth of prophecy.”¹⁰

This means that visionary dreams can provide real knowledge to believers. Muslims faced with an apparently irresolvable question can pray for a dream using the method known as *istikhāra* (see Glossary of Arabic terms) to ask God what to do. (This however requires certain conditions: one must believe; one must have a genuine need and not merely a desire to have a vision; one must have exhausted all other means of resolving the question including reflection, consultation, prayer and supplication; and one must be resolved to submit to the answer whatever it is).

It should be noted, however, that obviously not all dreams (*manāmat*) are visions: the vast majority of dreams are confused, “psychic dreams” (*ʿaḍghāthu ʿahlām*, in *Sūrah Yūsuf* 12:44) which are merely a kind of mental “playback” and “information processing,” often including the day’s memories, imaginings, emotions, physical sensations, associations, and so on.

The Prophet ﷺ said: “Visions are from God, dreams are from the devil.”¹¹ Indeed, visions are distinguished from ordinary dreams by their clarity and intelligibility; by their occurring at “blessed moments” (such as at the time of *fajr*, just before sunrise) often with the person awake towards the end of the vision; by their revealing blessed elements from outside of worldly time and space such as Prophets and Angels (the Prophet ﷺ said: “Whoever sees me in a dream has really seen me”¹²); by the “imprint” that they leave, which often lasts right through the day; and by their usually coming for a specific merciful purpose such as to give good news, to encourage, to comfort and console, or to warn of a danger. The Prophet ﷺ said: “Nothing remains of prophecy except glad tidings (*mubashshirat*). They said what are glad tidings? He said: True Visions.”¹³

¹⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ* Bukhārī, *Kitāb At-Taʿbīr*, 4.

¹¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ* Bukhārī, *Kitāb At-Taʿbīr*, 3.

¹² *Ṣaḥīḥ* Bukhārī, *Kitāb At-Taʿbīr*, 10.

¹³ *Ṣaḥīḥ* Bukhārī, *Kitāb At-Taʿbīr*, 5. It should be noted, incidentally, that visions are symbolic in form and that one needs to know how to interpret them. The best book on this subject is *Muntakhib al-Kalām fi Tafṣīr al-Aḥlām* by Ibn Sirīn (33-110 A.H.; 653-729 C.E.)

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2) d) *Summary of the Three Main Sources of Knowledge*

In one of the most famous passages in Western literature and philosophy, Plato tells the story of certain prisoners in a cave as a parable for man's condition.

Compare the effect of knowledge and the lack of it upon our human nature to a situation like this: imagine men to be living in an underground cave-like dwelling place, which has a way up to the light along its whole width, but the entrance is a long way up. The people have been there since childhood, with their necks and legs in fetters, so that they remain in the same place and can only see ahead of them, as their bonds prevent them from turning their heads. Light is provided, burning some way behind and above them. Between the fire and the prisoners, some way behind them and on a higher ground, there is a path across the cave, and along this a low wall has been built, like a screen at a puppet show in front of the performers who show their puppets above it. . . . See then also men carrying along that wall so that they overtop it, all kinds of artifacts, statues of men, reproductions of animals in stone or wood fashioned in all sorts of ways, and, as is likely, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent.

These prisoners are like us. . . . Do you think, in the first place, that such men could see anything of themselves and each other except the shadows which the fire casts upon the wall of the cave in front of them? . . . If they could converse with one another, do you not think that they would consider these shadows to be the real things? . . .

Consider then what deliverance from their bonds and the curing of their ignorance would be if something like this naturally happened to them. Whenever one of them was freed [he would first turn around and see the puppets and then, after climbing up the path of the cave to the real world] would see objects in the sky . . . the light of the stars, the moon and the light of the sun during the day. . . .

The men below have praise and honours from each other, and prizes for the man who saw the most clearly the shadows that passed before them, and who could best remember which usually came earlier and which later, and which came together, and thus could most ably prophesy the future. . . .

If this man went down to the cave again and . . . had to contend again with those who had remained prisoners . . . would he not be ridiculed? Would it not be said that he returned from his upward journey with his eyesight spoiled, and that it was not worthwhile even to attempt to travel

upward? As for the man who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow lay their hands on him and kill him, they would do so.

The realm of the visible should be compared to the prison dwelling, and the fire inside it to the power of the physical sun [in real life]. If you interpret the upward journey and the contemplation of things above as the journey . . . to the spiritual world, you will grasp what I mean. . . .¹⁴

Thus, from the Islamic perspective, we have three levels or sources of knowledge in ascending order of reality: the knowledge of the body or the physical senses, and these are the shadows of the puppets; the knowledge of the soul (when it is virtuous and thinking correctly, and has *certainty*, as will shortly be discussed) and these are the puppets themselves; and spiritual knowledge, and this is the knowledge of the ‘real things’ of the ‘real world’, the moon, the stars and so on. The men who are chained and believe nothing but the shadows and set great store by them to the extent that they want to kill anyone who disturbs them, these are the materialistic people who believe only what their physical senses transmit to them and who, with their prizes and honours, are merely playing an empty game. God says in the Holy Qur^ʿān:

Know that the life of this world is only play, and idle talk, and pageantry, and boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children....
(Sūrah al-Ḥadīd 57:20)

The people who have seen the real things and try and warn the prisoners, these are the Prophets and Messengers, and the hostility they meet is like the hostility of most people towards their own prophets that we find expressed in the Qur^ʿān. And finally, the cave is this physical world from which only faith in the messages of the Prophets frees us and gives us real knowledge!

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, 514-517.

The Glossary

Definition of a definition: A definition is a statement of what a thing is. It has to cover all kindred aspects of what is being defined, and should be free from all aspects which don't agree with it. In other words, a definition is a statement that should include all the “friends” of the defined and exclude all its “antagonists.” Furthermore, a definition, like a lens, helps us to see the clear outlines of what is being defined. Finally, a definition can situate a word in a context of coherent meaning and show its relationship to other key terms within that greater structure of meaning.

Terms in Arabic

These are terms whose meanings are either central to understanding the Qurʾān or have acquired an important meaning in the tradition of Islamic spirituality. They are offered to clarify their etymological origins and Qurʾānic contexts and thus create a richer understanding of their usage.

ʿAbd: عبد The servant and worshipper. *ʿIbada*, from which *ʿabd* is derived, suggests worshipping, serving, and knowing, all at the same time. The true servant of Allāh, *ʿabdullāh*, is the one who knows Allāh and therefore can truly worship and serve Him. *I created jinn and humans only to worship Me* (Sūrah adh-Dhāriyāt 51:56).

Ādāb: أدب Courtesy, appropriate behavior;. In our context it is a subtle discipline of mind and body that expresses humility, respect, patience, and sensitivity.

Although Islamic education is often defined as *tarbiyah*—a “nurtuing” process—Al-Attas prefers to regard it as *tāʿdīb*, a word related

ing” process—Al-Attas prefers to regard it as *tāʿdīb*, a word related to *ādāb*. He defines this term in its true sense (before its restriction and debasement of meaning to “a context revolving around cultural refinement and social etiquette”) as “discipline of body, mind, and soul” which enables us to recognise and acknowledge our “*proper place in the human order*” in relation to our selves, our family, and our community. This order is “arranged hierarchically in degrees (*darajāt*) of excellence based on the Qurʾānic criteria of intelligence, knowledge, and virtue (*iḥsān*).” In this sense, *ādāb* is “the reflection of wisdom (*ḥikmah*)” and “the evidence (*mashhad*) of justice (ʿ*adl*).... Within the dual nature of man’s own self, the *ādāb* of his lower animal soul (*an-naḥs al-ḥayawāniyyah*) is to recognise and acknowledge its subordinate position in relation to his higher rational soul (*an-naḥs an-nāṭiqah*).”

Ādam: آدم The first human being, who stands for all human beings. The significant quality of *Ādam*, or the human being, is that he has been bestowed with the knowledge of the divine names (*Sūrah al-Baqarah* 2:33), and that all the Angels, *Malāʾika*, were asked to bow down before him (*Sūrah al-Baqarah* 2:34). The story need not be understood literally to pertain to a specific person or pair of historical human beings; rather, this is the story of humanity itself, and *Ādam* is its representative.

It is widely believed that *Ādam*, understood as the first human created by Allāh, (whose story is narrated in the Qurʾān regarding his exit from *Jannāh*) was also the first Prophet, or *Rasūl*. This, however, is not mentioned in any verse of the Qurʾān, nor is the name of Eve or *Ḥawwāʾ* mentioned in the Qurʾān.

Al-ʿAdl: العدل The Just, one of the beautiful names of Allāh. At the heart of Islamic understanding is this Qurʾānic verse, *wa tamaat kalimatu Rabbika ṣidqan wa ʿadlān*, “And the Word of your Lord is fulfilled and perfected in truth and in justice.” (*Sūrah al-Anʿām* 6:115)

ʿAdl (Justice) comes from the Arabic verb ʿadala, which is usually translated as “to proportion,” “to create in symmetry,” or “to be equitable.” A sense of justice comes from viewing life’s situations from the

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divine perspective beyond personal prejudice. God addresses the Prophet David ﷺ, *Behold, We have made thee a vicegerent on earth: judge, then, between men with justice, and do not follow vain desire, lest it lead thee astray from the path of God.* (Sūrah Ṣād 38:26) In other words we are not to allow subjective opinion to influence our sense of justice.

A second very important point derives from the notion that God's Mercy has precedence over His Wrath. Therefore, Mercy is an essential aspect of Justice. The faithful are often reminded that if they wish Mercy from their Lord, they must show mercy. Another hadith says: "God gives a reward for gentleness which He will never give for harshness."

In actual fact we are faced with the dilemmas of justice throughout our lives: to what extent do we strive for justice for others and ourselves, and to what extent do we bear with patience what may seem to be injustices done to us? The spiritual virtue of resignation applies to those circumstances that we are helpless to change, but which we must trust are in harmony with the most comprehensive Divine Justice, even if we cannot perceive it. On the other hand, we are commanded to work equitably for justice, though never from a sense of personal vindictiveness. Justice is for all of humanity and Mercy has the final word.

°*Adhāb*: عذاب Chastisement, punishment, torment.

The essential meaning of this word is the kind of punishment that serves as a warning to others and prevents the offender from continuing the offense. It is not merely arbitrary torment nor vindictive retribution. This might lead one to reflect that being veiled from God's signs is its own punishment and brings with it inevitable consequences. *God has placed a seal on their heart and hearing, and their vision is veiled. Their punishment is great.* (Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:7)

Ahl: أهل The People. According to Muḥammad Asad: The term *ahl* denotes primarily the "people" of one town, country, or family, as well as the "fellow-members" of one race, religion, profession, etc. In its wider, ideological sense it is applied to people who have certain characteristics in common, e.g., *ahl al-ilm* ("people of knowledge," i.e., scholars), or who follow one and the same persuasion or belief, e.g., *ahl al-kitāb* ("the

followers of [earlier] revelation”), *ahl al-Qurʾān* (“the followers of the Qurʾān”), and so forth. (Asad, *Sūrah ash-Shūrā* 42:45, note 46)

Ahl aṣ-Ṣūffā: أهل الصفة The people of the bench. These were companions of the Prophet who lived in voluntary poverty in the *Masjid* (mosque) in order to devote themselves to spiritual development. They are thought to be an inner circle who received spiritual teachings from Muḥammad.

Aḥmad: أحمد The Celestial Name of Muḥammad, meaning “the Most Praiseworthy of those who praise Allāh.”

Al-Akḥfā: الأخرى The innermost consciousness. A term from Islamic metaphysics which literally means “the most secret.” It is said to be the inner human reality that is experienced by those who purify their consciousness and penetrate to the core of their being where they are closest to God.

Al-Ākhirah: الآخرة The Hereafter, Eternity. The afterlife is what the soul will experience after death, and what we should keep in mind during this life. It is the state where we will experience certain things mentioned in the Qurʾān: the Bridge, the Scales, the Garden, and the Fire. The spiritual development of the soul will determine the conditions and quality of our experience of the Hereafter.

For the traveler on the spiritual path these realities may be experienced, to some extent, even here in this life. It is the state of inner expansiveness that we can know in this life by emptying ourselves of worldly and egoistic concerns and preoccupations. The *Ākhirah* will be experienced to the extent that we are virtuous, freed from the limitations of our physical existence, and able to live in the state of remembrance, *dhikr Allāh*.

Akhlāq: أخلاق Positive traits of character, especially those noble and beautiful qualities that were perfected and modeled by the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. See also: *Khuluq*.

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Alast, Covenant of: عهد أَلَسْتُ While human beings were subsisting within God prior to creation, God asked them "Am I not (*alast*) your Lord?" And they all answered "Yes! We testify!" At the Resurrection it will be determined whether each individual remained faithful to his original testimony. In other words, did his actions reflect his pre-creation acceptance of servanthood and God's Lordship? Or did his actions demonstrate that he lived the life of a denier, one whose life was a denial of the Covenant of *Alast*?

‘Alaq: علق An infinitesimal, clinging substance; a germ cell. This word is used in the first *āyāts* revealed to Muḥammad: *Read, in the name of your Sustainer who created, created the human being from ‘alaq* (*Sūrah al-‘Alaq* 96:1-2). Unfortunately, too often it has been translated in a very unscientific way as “blood clot,” an objectionable translation, for anyone acquainted with a minimum of biological science. If we look into the Arabic word, however, we see that *‘alaqa* means establishing some sort of relationship, and *‘alaq* also describes anything that has a linking capacity. In the age of bio-engineering are we really going to maintain a translation of “clot” for *‘alaq*, or can we find something general enough and yet able to convey some of the scientific accuracy that is actually implied by the term? *‘Alaq* could, for instance, be descriptive of DNA’s double helix. It need not, however, be translated by something as specific as DNA, because as science develops, this understanding may be surpassed. The challenge is to find a translation that better embodies the essential meaning and that does not mislead us into unproductive areas of thought.

Allāh: الله The Divinity; the God of all religions, who is beyond any description or limitation. All of manifest existence reflects the qualities and will of Allāh. Allāh is the essential Truth (*Al-Ḥaqq*) of existence. The Qur’ān, which refers to itself as “guidance for humanity” (*Sūrah al-Baqarah* 2:185), speaks so often and in so many contexts about God, and all of these contexts must be interiorized into a wholeness in order to do justice to the comprehensive notion of Allāh. The word “Allāh” is used 2,697 times in the Qur’ān.

The Qur’ān works by drawing our attention to certain evident

facts—primarily the beauty, order, and intelligence evidenced in human nature and the natural world—and turning these facts into “reminders” of the existence of a benevolent intelligent Being.

In the Qurʾān, *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ* offers us the most concise indication of the essential attributes of the Divine.

*SAY: “He is the One God:
God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All That Exists (aṣ-Ṣamad).
He begets not, and neither is He begotten;
and there is nothing that could be compared with Him.” (Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ
112:1-4)*

Muḥammad Asad comments as follows: This rendering gives no more than an approximate meaning of the term *aṣ-Ṣamad*, which occurs in the Qurʾān only once, and is applied to God alone. It comprises the concepts of Primary Cause and eternal, independent Being, combined with the idea that everything existing or conceivable goes back to Him as its source and is, therefore, dependent on Him for its beginning as well as for its continued existence.”

The fact that God is One and unique in every respect, without beginning and without end, has its logical correlate in the statement that *there is nothing that could be compared with Him*—thus precluding any possibility of describing or defining Him. Consequently, the *quality* of His Being is beyond the range of human comprehension or imagination: which also explains why any attempt at “depicting” God by means of figurative representations or even abstract symbols must be qualified as a blasphemous denial of the truth.

°*Amal*: عمل Work or action. Spiritual development is a kind of Work. When knowledge combines with action, true well-being is attained. According to the words of the Prophet ﷺ: “He who acts upon what he knows, Allāh will make him inherit that which he does not know.”

This word also has the deeper sense that what we do with intention, sincerity, and a sense of meaning is true “action.” In other words, °*amal*, true action, is not just “going through the motions,” it is something from

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deep within us. The Qur^ʿān reminds us continually that there is a connection between keeping faith (*amānu*) and righteous action (*ʿamilu*): *wa ʿāmanu wa ʿamil uṣ-ṣāliḥāt*.

***Amānah*:** أمانة Trust. This is the ultimate trust or covenant between Allāh and the human being. *Verily, We did offer the trust [of reason and volition] to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains: but they refused to bear it because they were afraid of it. Yet man took it up; for, verily, he has always been prone to be most wicked, most foolish. (Sūrah al-Aḥzāb 33:72)* (It would seem that Allāh is not without a certain wry sense of humor here. And yet the honor and burden of responsibility continues to rest with this foolish humanity. ~Kabir Helminski)

Asad continues: The classical commentators give all kinds of laborious explanations to the term *amānah* (“trust”) occurring in this parable, but the most convincing of them are “reason,” or “intellect,” and “the faculty of volition”—i.e., the ability to choose between two or more possible courses of action or modes of behavior, and thus between good and evil.” (Asad, *Sūrah al-Aḥzāb* 33:72, note 87)

Behold, God bids you to deliver all that you have been entrusted with unto those who are entitled thereto, and whenever you judge between people, to judge with justice. Verily, most excellent is what God exhorts you to do: verily, God is all-hearing, all-seeing! (Sūrah an-Nisā^c 4:58) “To judge with justice” [is] in the judicial sense, as well as in the sense of judging other people’s motives, attitudes and behavior. The term *amānah* denotes anything one has been entrusted with, be it in the physical or moral sense (Rāzī). If one reads this ordinance in the context of the verses that precede and follow it, it becomes obvious that it relates to the message or—in view of the plural form *amānāt*—to the truths which have been conveyed to the believers by means of the divine writ, and which they must regard as a sacred trust, to be passed on to “those who are entitled thereto”—i.e., to all mankind, for whom the message of the Qur^ʿān has been intended. This, of course, does not preclude the ordinance from having a wider scope as well—that is, from its being applied to any material object or moral responsibility which may have been entrusted to a believer—and, in particular, to the exercise of worldly power and political sovereignty by the Muslim com-

munity or a Muslim state (to which the next verse, 4:59 refers). (Asad, *Sūrah an-Nisā*^c 4:58, note 75)

Amr: أمر Guidance, directive, indication. *Al-amāratu wat-t² amūr* means a sign post made of small stones in the desert to indicate either the boundaries or to show the direction. *They will ask you about the Spirit; say to them: the Spirit proceeds from the Directive (al-Amr) of my Rabb.* (*Sūrah al-Isrā*^c 17:85)

Arabic has two words to indicate the Divine creative process. Amr is God's directive energy even before it manifests in physical form. Its creation or manifestation in the physical world is described by the word "khalq."

The laws that determine how things will manifest in the universe are from the world of Divine Planning (^c*Ālam ul-Amr*), but they are expressed and realized in the world of creation (^c*Ālam ul-Khalq*).

°Aql: عقل Intellect; reason, understanding. It is the principle of reason that distinguishes us from animals, for although animals are not completely devoid of it, it is in the human being that reason can govern other faculties such as instinct, desire, and emotion. However, °Aql or Intellect has many degrees: Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 595/1198), the chief interpreter of Aristotle, expressed the idea that °Aql operated at all metaphysical levels, from the Cosmos (the grand totality of all spiritual levels) to the Macrocosm (all of material existence) to the Microcosm (the human being). True Intellect, however, can be veiled or obscured by that kind of compulsive intellectuality that is mere thinking devoid of the cognitive power of the Heart.

From Asad's commentary: *Give, then, this glad tiding to My servants who listen to all that is said, and follow the best of it: for it is they whom God has graced with His guidance, and it is they who are endowed with insight!* (*Sūrah az-Zumar* 39:17-18) According to Rāzī, this describes people who examine every religious proposition (in the widest sense of this term) in the light of their own reason, accepting that which their reason finds to be valid or possible, and rejecting all that does not measure up to the test of reason. In Rāzī's words, the above verse expresses "a praise and commendation following the evidence supplied by one's reason (*hujjat al-°aql*), and of

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reaching one's conclusions in accordance with [the results of] critical examination (*naẓar*) and logical inference (*istidlāl*).” (Asad, *Sūrah az-Zumar* 39:18, note 22) See also: **Taffakur**.

Al-[°]Ārif: العارف The knower (of Allāh). The one who has been granted Divine Knowledge, *ma[°]rifah*, which is a light that Allāh casts into the hearts of whomever He will. This knowing includes truly knowing oneself according to the *Ḥadīth Qudsī*: “Whoever knows himself, knows his *Rabb* (Sustainer).”

[°]Arsh: عرش Throne (of God). *And you will see the angels surrounding the throne of [God's] Almightyness, extolling their Sustainer's glory and praise (Sūrah az-Zumar 39:75).* Whenever the term *al-[°]arsh* (“the throne [of God]”) occurs in the Qur^{ān}, it is used as a metaphor for His absolute dominion over all that exists. The term [°]*arsh* (lit., “throne” or, more properly, “seat of power”) denotes God's absolute sway over all that exists; hence, the expression *dhu'l-[°]arsh* may be suitably rendered as “He who is enthroned in His almighty.” Since God is infinite in space as well as in time, it is obvious that His “throne” ([°]*arsh*) has a purely metaphorical connotation, circumscribing His absolute, unfathomable sway over all that exists or possibly could exist. All Muslim commentators, classical and modern, are unanimously of the opinion that the use of [°]*arsh* in the Qur^{ān} is metaphorical and is meant to express God's absolute sway over all His creation. It is noteworthy that in all the seven instances where God is spoken of in the Qur^{ān} as “established on the throne of His almighty” (7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 20:5, 25:59, 32:4, and 57:4) this expression is connected with a declaration of His having created the universe. (Asad, *Sūrah az-Zumar* 39:75, note 77; *Sūrah al-Isrā[°]* 17:42, note 50; *Sūrah al-A[°]rāf* 7:54 note 43)

They who bear [within themselves the knowledge of] the throne of [God's] almighty, as well as all who are near it, extol their Sustainer's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and ask forgiveness for all [others] who have attained to faith (Sūrah Ghāfir 40:7). “All who are near it” is literally “around it”: cf., Zamakhsharī's explanation of the expression *ḥawlahā* occurring in 27:8 in the sense of “near it.” In his commentary on 40:7, Bayḍawī states explicitly that the “bearing” of God's throne of almighty-

ness (*al-^carsh*) must be understood in a metaphorical sense: “Their carrying it and surrounding it [or “being near it”] is a metaphor of their being mindful of it and acting in accordance therewith, or a metonym for their closeness to the Lord of the Throne, their dignity in His sight, and their being instrumental in the realization of His will.” The rendering of the above verse reflects Bayḍāwī’s interpretation. As regards the beings which are said to be close to the throne of God’s almightiness, most of the classical commentators—obviously basing their view on the symbolic image of “the angels surrounding the throne of [God’s] almightiness” on the Day of Judgment (39:75)—think in this instance, too, exclusively of angels. But whereas it cannot be denied that the present verse refers *also* to angels, it does not follow that it refers *exclusively* to them. In its abstract connotation, the verb *ḥamala* frequently signifies “he bore [or “took upon himself”] the *responsibility* [for something]”: and so it is evident that it applies here not only to angels but also to all human beings who are conscious of the tremendous implications of the concept of God’s almightiness and hence feel morally responsible for translating this consciousness into the reality of their own and their fellow-beings’ lives. (Asad, *Sūrah Ghāfir* 40:7, note 4)

Al Asmā^cul-Ḥusnā: الأسماء الحسنة Attributes, the Most Beautiful Names; *ṣifāt*. And God’s [alone] are the attributes of perfection: invoke Him, then, by these, and stand aloof from all who distort the meaning of His attributes: they shall be requited for all that they were wont to do!” (*Sūrah al-A^crāf* 7:180) This passage connects with the mention, at the end of the preceding verse, of “the heedless ones” who do not use their faculty of discernment in the way intended for it by God, and remain heedless of Him who comprises within Himself all the attributes of perfection and represents, therefore, the Ultimate Reality. As regards the expression *al-asmā^c al-ḥusnā* (lit., “the most perfect [or “most goodly”] names”), which occurs in the Qur^ʿān four times—i.e., in the above verse as well as in 17:110, 20:8, and 59:24—it is to be borne in mind that the term *ism* (name) is, primarily, a word applied to denote the substance or the intrinsic attributes of an object under consideration, while the term *al-ḥusnā* is the plural form of *al-aḥsan* (“that which is best” or “most goodly”). Thus, the combination of *al-asmā^c al-ḥusnā* may be appropriately rendered as “the attributes of

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perfection”—a term reserved in the Qurʾān for God alone.

Limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything that men may devise by way of definition (Sūrah al-Anʿām 6:100). Utterly remote is He from all imperfection and from the incompleteness which is implied in the concept of having progeny. The very concept of “definition” implies the possibility of a comparison or correlation of an object with other objects; God, however, is unique, there being *nothing like unto Him* (42:11) and therefore, *nothing that could be compared with Him* (112:4)—with the result that any attempt at defining Him or His “attributes” is a logical impossibility and, from the ethical point of view, a sin. The fact that He is undefinable makes it clear that the “attributes” (*ṣifāt*) of God mentioned in the Qurʾān do not circumscribe His reality but, rather, the perceptible *effect of His activity* on and within the universe created by Him. (Asad, *Sūrah al-Aʿrāf* 7:180 note 145; *Sūrah al-Anʿām* 6:100 note 88)

Āyah: آية Sign, Symbol, Message, Verse. According to Muḥammad Asad: *Truly did he [the Prophet] see some of the most profound of his Sustainer’s symbols (āyāt, pl. of āyah) (Sūrah an-Najm 53:18).* The term *āyāt* is used in *Sūrah al-Isrāʿ* 17:1 in reference to the same mystic experience, namely, the Ascension. *Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Inviolable House of Worship [at Mecca] to the Remote House of Worship [at Jerusalem]—the environs of which We had blessed—so that We might show him some of Our symbols: for, verily, He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing.* Although the term *āyah* is most frequently used in the Qurʾān in the sense of “[divine] message,” we must remember that, primarily, it denotes “a sign [or “token”] by which a thing is known” (*Qāmūs*). As defined by Rāghib, it signifies any perceivable phenomenon (irrespective of whether it is apparent to the senses or only to the intellect) connected with a thing that is not, by itself, similarly perceivable: in brief, a “symbol.”

When Gabriel tells Mary she will conceive Jesus, she is told: *So that We might make him a symbol unto mankind and an act of grace from Us (Sūrah Maryam 19:21).* One of the several meanings of the term *āyah* is “a sign,” or, as elaborately defined by Rāghib, “a symbol.” However the sense in which *āyah* is most frequently used in the Qurʾān is “a [divine] message”: hence, its metonymic application to Jesus may mean that he was destined

to become a vehicle of God's message to man—i.e., a prophet—and, thus, a symbol of God's grace. *No message of their Sustainer's messages ever reaches them without their turning away from it* (Sūrah Yā Sīn 36:46) or *no sign of their Sustainer's signs* since the noun *āyah* denotes “a message” as well as “a sign.” The word *āyah* is also used to denote a “verse” of the Qur'ān because every one of these verses contains a message.

Miracles are in the power of God alone (Sūrah al-An'ām 6:109). It is to be noted that the Qur'ānic term *āyah* denotes not only a “miracle” (in the sense of a happening that goes beyond the usual—that is, commonly observable—course of nature), but also a “sign” or “message”: and the last-mentioned significance is the one which is by far the most frequently met with in the Qur'ān. Thus, what is commonly described as a “miracle” constitutes, in fact, an *unusual message* from God, indicating—sometimes in a symbolic manner—a spiritual truth which would otherwise have remained hidden from man's intellect. But even such extraordinary, “miraculous” messages cannot be regarded as “supernatural”: for the so-called “laws of nature” are only a perceptible manifestation of “God's way” (*sunnat Allāh*) in respect of His creation—and, consequently, everything that exists and happens, or could conceivably exist or happen, is “natural” in the innermost sense of this word, irrespective of whether it conforms to the ordinary course of events or goes beyond it. Now since the extraordinary messages referred to manifest themselves, as a rule, through the instrumentality of those specially gifted and elected personalities known as “prophets,” these are sometimes spoken of as “performing miracles”—a misconception which the Qur'ān removes by the words, *Miracles are in the power of God alone*. (Asad, Sūrah an-Najm 53:18 note 12; Sūrah al-Isrā' 17:1 note 2; Sūrah Maryam 19:21 note 16; Sūrah Yā Sīn 36:46 note 25; Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:106 note 87; Sūrah al-An'ām 6:109 note 94)

Awliyā': أولياء The friends of Allāh; the saints. They are those who have been made pure by Allāh and who are able to sustain remembrance of Him. The *awliyā'* are honored because they contain and reflect the attributes of Allāh.

'Ayn al-Yaqīn: عين اليقين The eye of certainty, which is equivalent to the eye of the heart. This is the second of three stages of knowledge or

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“certainty.” The first is *‘ilm al-yaqīn*, the knowledge of certainty, which is knowing from being told about something. *‘Ayn al-yaqīn* is the certainty that comes from actually seeing or experiencing something. *Ḥaqq al-yaqīn* is the certainty that comes from a deep familiarity with something.

Baqāʿ: بقاء Subsistence, the realization that your existence is supported by the Divine. This term is associated with its complement, *fanāʿ*, which means annihilation of the self in the Being of Allāh. This is the experience of certain mystics who experience the dissolving of the self into the Divine Presence, which is said to be followed by the experience of “subsistence.”

All that dwells upon the earth is perishing, yet there subsists the Face of your Sustainer, Majestic, Splendid (Sūrah ar-Raḥmān 55:26-27). Al-Ghazālī wrote: “Each thing has two faces, a face of its own, and a face of its Lord; in respect to its own face it is nothingness, and in respect to the Face of God it is Being. Thus there is nothing in existence save only God and His Face, for everything is perishing except His Face.” See *Fanāʿ*.

Barakah: بركة Effective grace; spiritual energy. When it is said that a person has *barakah* it suggests the ability of putting into action the divine attributes of supra-conscious mind.

Barakah is spiritual influence, blessing, or grace. Certain persons, places, and things can be the vehicle for *baraka*, while others may dispel it. It comes from the root meaning “to settle,” implying the Divine influence that God sends down. It is found in many greetings such as *bāraka ‘llāhu fīk* (“May God bless you”).

Barzakh: برزخ Interworld, lit. isthmus. In Islamic metaphysics this is an intermediate visionary realm between material existence and pure meaning; *mundus imaginalis*. The *Barzakh* is the locus of imaginal experience. It is here that the spiritually-developed soul receives inspiration, guidance, and wisdom in the form of dreams and visions. The *Barzakh* is also what contains the soul in the afterlife: *There is a barzakh (barrier) until the Day when all will be raised from the dead (Sūrah al-Mu‘minūn 23:100).*

Başīrah: بصيرة Seeing, insight. According to Asad: Derived from the verb *başura* or *başira* (“he became seeing” or “he saw”), the noun *başīrah* (as also the verb) has the abstract connotation of “seeing with one’s mind” and so it signifies “the faculty of understanding based on conscious insight” as well as “an evidence accessible to the intellect” or “verifiable by the intellect.” (Asad, *Sūrah Yūsuf* 12:108 note 104; see also *Taffakur*)

I have gained insight into something which they were unable to see (*Sūrah Ṭā Hā* 20:96). It is to be noted that the verb *başura* (lit., “he became seeing”) has the tropical significance of “he perceived [something] mentally,” or “he gained insight,” or “he understood.” (Asad, *Sūrah Ṭā Hā* 20:96 note 81)

Now had it been Our will [that men should not be able to discern between right and wrong], We could surely have deprived them of their sight, so that they would stray forever from the right way: for how could they have had insight? (*Sūrah Yā Sīn* 36:66) The verb *başura* (“he became seeing” or “he saw”) is obviously used in its tropical sense of “perceiving [something] mentally.” According to Ibn ‘Abbās, as quoted by Ṭabarī, the phrase *annā yubşirūn* signifies “how could they perceive the truth?” (Asad, *Sūrah Yā Sīn* 36:66 note 34)

They perished because Satan had made their sinful doings seem goodly to them and thus had barred them from the path of God despite their having been endowed with the ability to perceive the truth (*Sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt* 29:38). Thus, the Qurʾān implies that it is man’s “ability to perceive the truth” (*istibşār*) that makes him morally responsible for his doings and, hence, for his failure to resist his own evil impulses—which is evidently the meaning of “Satan” in this context.

The Eye of the Heart can discern values and receive spiritual knowledge. True Seeing is an attribute of God that is shared with the spiritualized human being. *Say, This is my path. I call to God on clear evidence and by insight, I and whoever follows me.* (*Sūrah Yūsuf* 12:108).

The above *āyāh*, often used as a pledge of loyalty (*bayʿat*), points to the degree of insight that was given to Muḥammad, and that is available to those of his community who follow him.

“Fear the discernment (*firāsa*) of the believer (*muʿmin*), for he sees

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with the light of God.”²⁵

Al-Bāṭin: الباطن The Inner (*Sūrah al-Ḥadīd* 57:3); one of God’s names. *Bāṭin* can also mean what is hidden, esoteric, or initiatory. See also: *Zāhir*, the Manifest.

Bayān: بيان Articulate Thought and Speech. *The Most Gracious has imparted this Qurʾān [unto man]. He has created man: He has imparted unto him articulate thought and speech* (*Sūrah ar-Raḥmān* 55:1-4). The term *al-bayān*—denoting “the means whereby a thing is [intellectually] circumscribed and made clear” (Rāghib)—applies to both thought and speech inasmuch as it comprises the faculty of making a thing or an idea apparent to the mind and conceptually distinct from other things or ideas, as well as the power to express this cognition clearly in spoken or written language (*Tāj al-ʿArūs*): hence, in the above context, “articulate thought and speech,” recalling the “knowledge of all the names” (i.e., the faculty of conceptual thinking) with which man is endowed (see 2:31...). (Asad, *Sūrah ar-Raḥmān* 55:4 note 1)

Bidʿah: بدعة Unjustified innovation in matters related to the *sharīʿah*, the sacred law. For some Muslims, this term has come to mean the insidious innovation of ideas or religious practices that did not exist during the lifetime of the Prophet. *Bidʿah*, in this sense, is considered a major sin. However, given the changing circumstances of human life, most exponents of Islamic law acknowledge the possibility of positive innovation, *bidʿah ḥasanah*, bearing in mind that such an innovation would be in harmony with an essential Islamic spirit. An example of such an innovation might be the use of electrical power in amplifying the *adhān*, the call to prayer. It is important to note that nowhere in the Qurʾān, itself, is the term *bidʿah* used to signify a sin.

Dalāl: ضلال Going astray. [*This, then, is*] the parable of those who are bent on denying their Sustainer: all their works are as ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day: they cannot achieve any benefit whatever from all

²⁵ At-Tirmidhī, “Tafsīr al-Qurʾān,” 6.

[the good] that they may have wrought: for this [denial of God] is indeed the farthest one can go astray (Sūrah Ibrāhīm 14:18). According to Muḥammad Asad: Literally, “this, this is the straying far away.” The definite article in the expression *aḍ-ḍalāl al-baʿīd*, preceded by the pronouns *dhālika huwa*, is meant to stress the extreme degree of this “straying far away” or “going astray”: a construction that can be rendered in English only by a paraphrase such as that used in this translation. It is to be noted that this phrase occurs in the Qurʾān only twice, in this passage and 22:12, and refers in both cases to a denial, conscious or implied, of God’s oneness and uniqueness.

They who will not believe in the life to come are [bound to lose themselves] in suffering and in a profound aberration (Sūrah Sabāʿ 34:8). *Ḍalāl*, literally “error” or “going astray,” can be translated here as “remote aberration.” The construction of this phrase points definitely to suffering in *this* world (in contrast with the suffering in the hereafter spoken of in 34:5 *whereas for those who strive against Our messages, seeking to defeat their purpose, there is grievous suffering in store as an outcome of [their] vileness.* (The particle *min* (lit., “out of”) which precedes the noun *rijz*, “vileness” or “vile conduct,” indicates that the suffering which awaits such sinners in the life to come is an organic *consequence* of their deliberately evil conduct in this world.) For whereas the concept of “aberration” is meaningless in the context of the life to come, it has an obvious meaning in the context of the moral and social confusion—and, hence, of the individual and social suffering—which is the unavoidable consequence of people’s loss of belief in the existence of absolute moral values and, thus, in an ultimate divine judgment on the basis of those values.

[But the keepers of hell] will ask, “Is it not [true] that your apostles came unto you with all evidence of the truth?” Those [in the fire] will say, “Yea, indeed.” [And the keepers of hell] will say, “Pray, then!”—for the prayers of those who deny the truth cannot lead to aught but delusion. (Sūrah Ghāfir 40:50) According to the classical commentators, the answer “Pray, then!” implies no more than a refusal on the part of the “keepers of hell” to intercede for the doomed sinners, telling them, as it were, “Pray yourselves, if you can.” It seems to me, however, that we have here an indirect allusion to the sinners’ erstwhile, blasphemous devotion to false objects of worship and false values—the meaning being, “Pray now to those imaginary