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SEEING IS BELIEVING: SUFİ VISION AND THE FORMATION OF THE ETHICAL SUBJECT

Richard McGregor

Islamic poetics has long recognized that the eyes do more than passively relay to the mind the images that fall upon them. Love poetry often refers to the language of the eyes and their capacity to communicate a variety of emotions. In their subtlety, the eyes express intimate feelings better and, we may assume, less dangerously than words do. Ibn Ḥazm tells us that lovers have a complete code, but as befits affairs of the heart, reversals and contradictory emotions are never far off. Through its intimations, the eye “cuts off, but connects; it promises yet threatens; it scolds, but welcomes; it commands and forbids; it promises secrecy, but then betrays; it causes joy and grief; it asks and answers; it holds back and yet gives generously.”¹ Ibn Ḥazm describes some of these signs and their associated meanings—for example, to close the eyelid in a wink signifies consent—but also admits that the majority of these gestures cannot be described, although he implies that we can all intuitively grasp their meanings.

I begin with this description not to promise an inventory of body language or a pre-modern theory of the gaze, but rather to draw attention to an important dimension of Islamic practice: the vast and complex range of devotional vision. If you’ve ever been in love, you know what Ibn Ḥazm is talking about when he

1. Ibn Ḥazm, *Ṭawq al-ḥamāma fi’l-ulfa wa’l-ullāf* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2014), 18.

describes the power of the beloved's eyes to say important things. A quick glance over the literature will reveal that there are many ways to approach the phenomenon of vision, and the Sufi tradition has developed a wide variety of them. After all, mystics not only look at mundane things, as do you and I, but they also strive to see more, to look beyond. Mysticism and religion itself promise that there is more to this world than its immediate appearance. In the following pages, I propose an overarching framework within which these Sufi explorations of vision take place, paying special attention to how vision is linked to the ethical and, more specifically, to the construction of the virtuous self. To begin, I turn to an account in the Quran of ecstatic vision in which Moses tries to see God and of the drama that ensues. This is the departure point for an exploration of the relationship of Sufi conceptions of the self and their relation to vision, which brings me, finally, to a claim about the central role of virtue in the evolution of a Sufi's visionary ability. In addition to discussing the classical and medieval Sufi masters, these explorations draw upon key insights from modern philosophy, and in particular, upon theories of the sublime and virtue ethics as developed in the latter half of the twentieth century. This discursive and conceptual framing will show how vision and ethics have been woven together through the Sufi understanding of the structure of the self and the nature of the divine Other, a connection the equivalent of which has yet to be found in modern philosophy.

According to the scriptures, while wandering in the desert after having escaped Pharaoh, the children of Israel asked Moses for a graven image to worship, similar to the idols they had seen other communities worshipping. Moses was summoned to his Lord and commanded to complete a month's fasting to which were added ten additional days. These forty days of self-denial prepared him for his meeting (*mīqāt*) with God: "And when Moses came at Our appointed time, and his Lord addressed him, he said, 'Lord show Yourself to me, that I may look upon you (*anzur ilayk*).' He replied, 'You will not see Me, but look upon the mountain. If it remains in place, then you shall see Me.' But when his Lord revealed Himself (*tajallā*) to the mountain He turned it to rubble, and Moses fell to the ground unconscious; when he recovered, he exclaimed, 'Glory unto You! I turn to You in repentance; I am the first among believers.'" (Q 7:143) This account is dramatic—as any attempt to actually see the face of God would be—and it brings out several notions that will be key to our discussion. The first is the preparation for the meeting. By virtue of his prophetic mission, Moses was summoned to meet his lord, but he was further prepared by forty days of fasting. Moses then asked to see God, at which point he was told such a request was hopeless. However, in a curious formulation, God told him that if the mountain stood firm, his request would be granted. Quite obviously, the most literal sense here does not hold; God knows full well it will not remain in place. It seems the destruction of the mountain is intended not as a test, but rather as a visual communication to Moses. In other words, the Lord answers that Moses will not see Him, but that he will see the destruction of the mountain, the force and drama of which will overwhelm him. Moses emerges from the encounter chastened but not disappointed. God's answer was not a simple "no." Indeed, Moses has been

granted a divine vision. The encounter may have been mediated—by Moses’s swooning, and the standing in of the ill-fated mountain—but Moses’s reaction makes it clear that this was a transformative visionary event. The implication here is that a divine “vision” is rather more complex than simply laying eyes on God.

Practice Makes Perfect, or *Riyādat Al-Nafs*

Progress along the mystical path is a complicated phenomenon. One key concept is that of *riyādat al-nafs*, or training of the self. Every aspirant must undergo a transformation, often over several stages, in order to approach the divine. As Sufism became institutionalized in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, refined models for spiritual improvement formed around various saintly founders. These mystical orders were called *paths*, or *ṭuruq*, each one offering a distinct approach to the stages of ascension and the states of spiritual transformation that await the adept. The connection between religious experience and techniques of disciplined behavior has been known in the Near East from ancient times. Seclusion, fasting, and control of the senses have long been bridges to visionary, liminal, and transformative experiences. As we saw above, a long period of fasting prepared Moses for his visionary encounter. Subsequent Sufi disciplines have incorporated supererogatory prayer, fasting, and forty-day retreats (*khalwa*) among their practices.

Of course, the adept’s task is to make headway along her prescribed *ṭariqa*, but progress is never guaranteed. Human fallibility, as we know, can thwart even the most noble of intentions, but more importantly, a question of agency arises. Specifically, the Sufi theories of spiritual progress embrace an ambiguity inherent in an encounter that makes room for both the effort of the seeker and an omnipotent divine grace. Individual commitment is part of the picture, but divine will is essential. The Sufi path may be a human construction, but providence will ultimately determine one’s success or failure. Some devotees were famous for their discipline on the path, while a few others were essentially gifted their spiritual states. This system accommodates both human initiative and divine will. Significantly, vision is also negotiated within this theatre of contested agency.

A statement by al-Hujwīrī (d. cir. 465/1073), on the one hand, privileges vision that does not come thanks to human initiative. Of the two kinds of contemplation (*mushāhada*), he tells us, one results from the individual’s perfect faith, which leads his bodily eye to a vision beyond which his spiritual eye discerns the divine Agent. This, he calls the demonstrative (*istidlālī*) approach, founded upon the evidences of God, but centered on human achievement. He contrasts this with a second kind of contemplation which tilts more fully toward the divine and is the fruit of an ecstatic state (*jadhbī*).² Here, the human agent, as the subject of rapture, is transported and sees only the divine. Contending with the same binary, Ibn ‘Aṭā’

2. ‘Alī ibn ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb of al-Hujwīrī “The Revelation of the Veiled”: An Early Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Wiltshire, England: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2000), 330.

Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309), distinguishes between a lesser form of sanctity (*walāya*) and a greater.³ Although the forms are on a continuum rather than being diametrically opposed, the lesser is centered around pious action (*aʿmāl*), while the higher is largely a gift of God (*minan*). Thus, by virtue of one's commitment to the discipline of the path, spiritual progress can be made toward one's lesser *walāya*. In Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh's lesser sanctity, one sees nothing other than God, while the perspective from greater sanctity (*walāya kubrā*) includes creation within one's vision of the divine. Here the binary has been reversed. As Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh puts it, "God does not want you to look upon creation with an ordinary eye; you must see creation as a theophany (*zuhūr*) . . . He who contemplates God in creation is an elite (*mukhaṣṣaṣ*) and perfected servant."⁴ The essential insight here is that the Sufi path offers ways to spiritual improvement that are mirrored in complex visionary capacities.

We shall return to the procedures of ethical training shortly, but first, let us consider the training of the Sufi eye. The third-/ninth-century master Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī described his own progress, saying "'On my first pilgrimage, I saw only the temple; the second time, I saw both the temple and the Lord of the temple; and the third time, I saw the Lord alone.'" To which al-Hujwīrī adds, ". . . what is truly valuable is not the Kaʿba, but contemplation and annihilation in the abode of friendship, of which things the sight of the Kaʿba is indirectly a cause."⁵ A cursory reading might want to see the Kaʿba here as an empty symbol—something that fulfills its purpose by pointing to its otherworldly referent. However, I would suggest that there is more at play here than simple sign reading. The real significance of the passage is that it describes Abū Yazīd's development as an accomplished mystic. As he refines his vision, he isn't looking at different or better things; he is simply seeing better. Al-Hujwīrī explains the significance, saying, ". . . the true object of pilgrimage is not to visit the Kaʿba, but to obtain contemplation (*mushāhada*) of God."⁶ How then does one train the eye to its greatest potential? Al-Hujwīrī's answer, in short, is *mujāhada*, or the struggle of self-mortification. Abū Yazīd was looking at the same thing, but now he was seeing it differently thanks to his developing spiritual capacity. We shall consider this capacity more systematically below, along with what it means to "see" God.

Pulling back to a wider perspective, let us consider more carefully the implications and the boundaries at play between the viewer and the divine subject. We shall see in the following pages that within Sufi viewing practices, the existential division between God and creation is maintained, and yet despite this categorical boundary, higher vision remains possible. More specifically, while the human viewer cannot grasp the divine as a representational form, a form of aesthetic experience—in particular, that of sublime vision—will allow for substantive visual interactions.

3. For a survey of the levels of *walāya*, see pages 37–41 of Richard McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: the Wafāʾ Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn ʿArabi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004).

4. Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī, *Laṭāʾif al-minan fī manāqib al-Shaykh Abī al-ʿAbbās al-Mursī wa-shaykhihi al-Shādhilī Abī al-Ḥasan* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1979), 40.

5. Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 327.

6. Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 329.

To say that God is simply beyond the scope of human vision doesn't seem very controversial. Al-Hujwīrī dismisses some unnamed Sufis who, he says, mistakenly claim that “. . . spiritual vision and contemplation represent such an idea (*ṣūra*) of God as is formed in the mind by the imagination either from memory or reflection.” This belief, he concludes, “. . . is utter anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) and manifest error.”⁷ Any rendering or representation, no matter its source, will fail to encompass God, reducing the divinity to the imaginary capacities of the human. Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) describes this divide in terms of an inescapable incommensurability between God and creation: “The Divine Reality is elevated beyond the reach of every contemplating eye, for there is always a trace of creation in the eye of the contemplator.”⁸ By nature, the divine is categorically distinguished from His creation, and known only indirectly by signs of His dominion and rule.⁹ Ibn 'Arabī and other Sufis would wrestle endlessly with this challenge, preserving the distinction between God and creation while exploring modes of knowing and models of being that might bridge that gap. One of the challenges is for humanity to escape the paradigm in which it conceives of divinity simply in terms that make sense to our capacities as limited and created beings. We are, thus, forever veiled from God, as Ibn 'Arabī puts it, by our own natures.¹⁰

This divide, nevertheless, may be crossed by those who have achieved an advanced spiritual station, whether it be by self-annihilation, indirect vision, or seeing by an alternate interior faculty. Although our eyes will forever be limited in their capacities, Ibn 'Arabī tells us that attaining the final stages on the spiritual path—the condition of self-annihilation—in effect releases us from that condition and, hence, those limitations. In a hadith report, the Prophet Muhammad advises the following: “Worship God as if you see Him, for although you do not see Him, He sees you.”¹¹ Ibn 'Arabī reads the middle of this passage against its received meaning, turning “for although you do not see Him,” into “if you are not, then you see Him” (*fa-in lam takun tarāhu*). From this, he concludes: “seeing Him only happens with your extinction from yourself,” (*bi-fanā'ika 'an-ka*).¹² It is this new or altered state of the self that is the seat of a visionary capacity that can overcome the existential chasm separating the Creator from creation.

In an echo of the classic Sufi binary of the interior/esoteric versus the exterior/exoteric, others indicate this capacity by distinguishing between vision centered in the eye and vision of the heart. In an overview of positions that exegetes and jurists have taken on the possibility of seeing the divine in this world, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) lists arguments supporting it, predicating it on vision by the heart (*qalb* or *fu'ād*), distinct from common vision (*bi'l-abṣār*).¹³ According to al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), the beatific visions of the afterlife are presaged in this world, but only for

7. Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 332.

8. Ibn 'Arabī, *Kitāb al-Fanā' fi'l-mushāhada* in *Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2001), 17.

9. Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkīyya* (Cairo: Bulaq, 1911): 4:39.

10. Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkīyya* 4:2.

11. *Sunan al-Nasā'ī*, *Kitāb al-īmān wa sharā'i'ihi* (47); *bāb šifat al-īmān wa'l-Islām* (6).

12. Ibn 'Arabī, *Kitāb al-fanā' fi'l-mushāhada*, 22–23.

13. Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, Dār al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1938), 7:54 (on Qur'an 6:103).

the spiritual elite. As he puts it, this is the, “unveiling of the heart here below.”¹⁴ Ruzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209), an enthusiastic visionary himself, qualified Moses’s experience on Mount Sinai along just such lines. Recognizing the existential barrier between God and Moses, Ruzbihān claimed the prophet received an indirect vision in which the crumbling mountain acted as mirror of eternal power and limitless beauty.¹⁵ Regarding his own visions, Ruzbihān is more explicit. He relates one episode in which he approached God seated on a holy mountain, telling us “he was unveiled and there manifested from him the lights of the beautiful attributes . . .” Ruzbihān provides these and other details, but in the final analysis, he confesses that the subject cannot be reduced to any representation or discursive form. Despite the rich imagery provided, Ruzbihān says, “He graced me in a form that I cannot tell to any of God’s creatures . . .”¹⁶

Ruzbihān described a kind of seeing beyond saying. Within the mystical system developed by Ibn ‘Arabī, this phenomenon is explained with the help of the idea of the predispositions (*i’tiqādāt*). These are the divinely ordained inclinations or tendencies that determine the existential forms. In his system—known in shorthand as that of the oneness of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*)—the predispositions serve the crucial function of distinguishing creation in its particulars from “being” more widely conceived. One implication of this doctrine is that as individuals we tend to see the world and, thus, make sense of it in accordance with our predispositions. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing; it distinguishes us as individuals. We imagine and try to “see,” divinity in our peculiar and delimited ways. However, Ibn ‘Arabī tells us, those of the highest spiritual stature, at the station of divine proximity (*ahl al-qurba*), can escape the delimiting frames of their predispositions and embrace undifferentiated divine self-manifestations.¹⁷ However, as was the case with Ruzbihān’s experience, this is not an engagement that leads to language or images. Ibn ‘Arabī would remind us that we need our predispositions—our subjecthood, our limited individual perspectives—in order to communicate. If we ascend to undifferentiated phenomena, we will literally have nothing to say about it.

I suggest a useful comparison here may be made with the modern idea of the sublime. Briefly, the term “sublime” was coined to describe the indeterminacy of certain experiences out of which arise impressions that cannot be formed into ideas, images, or words. In such interactions, our everyday representational thinking fails us, yet we remain deeply engaged even to the point of being overwhelmed in the face of such phenomena.¹⁸ Modern accounts tend to describe sublime reflection in relation to the wonders of nature and exceptional artwork or architecture, but the concept also captures nicely the power (and the discursive limitation) of what, as we saw earlier, the Sufis call the eye of the heart, or vision beyond any “predisposition.” The sublime addresses some of the philosophical

14. Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 165–75.

15. Kazuyo Murata, *Beauty in Sufism: The Teachings of Ruzbihan Baqli* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017), 114.

16. Ernst, C. *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 55.

17. Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyya* 3:116–118. Chodkiewicz makes much the same point in his article “The Vision of God,” trans. Cecilia Twinch, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 14 (1993): 53–67.

18. Kirk Pillow, *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 294.

challenges of engaging with a timeless and immaterial deity. In the Sufi account of such engagements, where the otherness of God must be preserved and yet bridged, a sublime vision that makes room for the reality of the experience while keeping it beyond conceptual reduction works rather well. I will return to the sublime in later sections of this paper to point out some of its weaknesses as a comparative concept, but in the interim, let us return to the Sufi visionary and, more specifically, to the viewer's faculties that are enlisted in the construction of the virtuous self.

The Structure of the Self

In light of the modern conflation of mind with self, the complexity of the premodern and ancient models of the self/soul (*nafs*) would benefit from some elaboration. As we shall see, complicating the situation was the variety of positions on the form and capacities of the self within Islamic discourse. The Quran presents at least three different characteristics of the *nafs*.¹⁹ The first is the self that “incites to evil” (*al-ammāra bi'l-sūʿ*) (Q 12:53) and is presented as suffering from perpetual temptation. The second is the “blaming self” (*al-lawwāma*) (Q 75:2), which carries with it a sense of self-reproach and thus introspection. The third characteristic is serenity, yielding the “soul at peace,” (*al-muṭmaʿinna*) (Q 89:27), which is reassured of its abode in the hereafter with God. In the Quran, these three references are disconnected, describing the soul in rather different contexts. Nevertheless, the reception of this typology may be divided into two camps. The first is the ascetic world-view, which saw the blaming and inciting selves as the worldly characteristics of the soul, which at the Resurrection would be transformed into “souls at peace” and reassured of a beatific afterlife. The second was the Sufi perspective, which took these three characteristics as the stages through which the soul might rise if properly trained in mystical exercises.²⁰ The Islamic understanding of the self and its components, however, typically developed rather more complex models.

In his tenth-century *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, perhaps the most important philosophical treatment of ethics, Miskawayh describes the soul as consisting of three faculties: that of rational reflection, that of desire and appetite, and that of anger. When properly exercised, each faculty (*quwwa*) will attain a specific virtue. When the rational faculty pursues sound knowledge, it will achieve the virtue of wisdom. When the desiring faculty is harnessed, it yields temperance, and when the faculty of anger is moderated, it attains to the virtue of courage. If these faculties and their virtues are together cultivated successfully, the virtue of justice will emerge.²¹ These four virtues are entities in their own right, but they also include the many lesser virtues that lead to a life well lived.

19. For an in-depth survey of the *nafs* in its Quranic context, see Gavin Picken, “Tazkiyat al-nafs: The Qur’anic Paradigm,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 101–127.

20. Sara Sviri, “The Self and Its Transformation in Ṣūfism,” in *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, ed. David Shulman and Guy S. Stroumsa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 196–197.

21. Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, ed. Constantine Zurayk (Beirut: AUB Press, 1966), 15–16. The Greek formulations of the self are clearly part of the Islamic inheritance but remain beyond the scope of this discussion. See Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 61–66.

Various models were developed, and some represented significant departures from their precedents. In the eleventh century, ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d. 481/1089) developed a structure of the self that mirrored a cosmology, beginning with the corporeal and extending upwards to the celestial. For al-Anṣārī, the most basic element of the self was the soul, which, when subjected to discipline, would support the capacities above it. The heart was the next capacity, which was less corporeal, and could take in God’s blessings through its capacity of gaze. The third aspect, the most ethereal, was that of the spirit (*ruh*), capable of a more direct visionary encounter with God.²² This model of the self would lie behind later developments in Sufism, which all, in one way or another, were predicated on the ascension and improvement of the self beyond the material and towards the divine.

The great commentator on Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 730/1329) attempted to reincorporate the Quranic model, noted above, into al-Sulamī’s (d. 412/1021) structure of progressive capacities. For Kāshānī, the *nafs* inciting to evil must be kept in check by its capacity for self-reproach (*nafs lawwāma*). This control will allow the loftiest dimension, the *nafs muṭma’inna*, or peaceful *nafs*, to dominate.²³ While these are three dimensions of the same entity, Kāshānī insists that only the third and highest level represents the divine breath that was blown into inert clay when God created Adam (Q 38:72). As we shall see below, Sufi models of the self often held disparate and apparently distinct components together in such uneasy combinations.

The structures and layers of the self, as we have seen, have appeared in various models, and yet an internal tension has persisted in all. A problem clearly suggests itself here, which pits one aspect of the self (the higher) against other aspects (the lower). We might be wondering how one part of the self can gain any real distance from other parts of the same self. How can the higher self of the Sufis subdue, discipline, or overcome the things that make it what it, itself, is? The strength of the modeling we have been discussing, however, lies in its embrace of that tension. In fact, a shifting and evolving core of the self is celebrated as a marker that sets humanity above the perfected and celestial angels. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 320/932) illustrates this by comparing the static nature of the angels to that of the changing states of humans. In their worship of God, the angels are “blissful but unchanging, while humanity serves Him, changing from one state to another (*min ḥāl ilā ḥāl*), each of which is (a form of) service.”²⁴ Thus, the only fixed condition is humanity’s relation to the divine, not the human self, which is subject to change. We shall return to the structures of these changes below.

In his description of the *nafs*, al-Ghazālī points to a similarly divided structure. On the one side, there are the lower inclinations and desires, and on the other stands the subtle but permanent self. We are told there are several meanings at

22. Cyrus Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 213.

23. Zargar, *Polished Mirror*, 214. For a modern version amplifying the stages of the *nafs* from three to six, see ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, *al-Madrasat al-Shādhiliyya al-ḥadītha wa-imāmuhā Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1968), 402–407.

24. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍa wa-adab al-nafs*, ed. A. J. Arberry (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb al-Ṣūfiyya, 1947), 78.

play around the term *nafs*, and that two are directly relevant to the discussion at hand. “By one meaning, the *nafs* consists of the faculties of anger and desire . . . This usage prevails among Sufis since, by *nafs*, they mean that in which the blameworthy qualities are gathered. They say one must fight against the *nafs* and break it.” The second meaning of *nafs*, al-Ghazālī tells us—although it is not obvious that it is less prominent among Sufis than anyone else—is the true and essential self. We are told the *nafs* is also “the subtle substance (*laṭīfa*), which . . . is the true human (*hiya al-insān bi'l-ḥaqīqa*).” This *nafs* is the essence and self of humanity (*hiya nafs al-insān wa dhātihi*), but it also changes in aspect or, as al-Ghazālī says, in its state. It may be the essence, and yet “. . . it is described in various ways because of its various states (*aḥwālīhā*).” The higher *nafs* will attain to better states as it resists its lower counterparts. The three-part Quranic schema we saw earlier is put forward, but here the soul at rest (*muṭmaʿinna*) is a state the higher *nafs* may attain to. The contrast with the lower self is again rather dramatic, and seems to be a difference in kind, and not simply of degree. These tensions within the *nafs* suggest that only one part of it can attain to salvation and perfection, while the others cannot. Al-Ghazālī tells us the lower self, whether it be self-reproaching (*lawwāma*) or inciting to evil (*al-ammāra bi'l-sūʿ*), will never approach divinity and must remain among the party of Satan.²⁵

The self remains internally complex, with its various parts at odds with each other. The goal however is not for one part to utterly displace or destroy its rivals. It is the self’s engagement with this inhering tension that is an opportunity for the Sufi. Al-Sulamī records inherited wisdom on the matter; thus: “Ibrāhīm Ibn Shaybān was asked: ‘What is the sign of one who admonishes (*yaṣṣaḥ*) his *nafs*?’ He said, ‘He pushes it toward what it hates and what is contrary to its inclination, never satisfied with it. To each who works to bring his *nafs* into harmony and resists his selfish desires, God will grant success.’”²⁶ Here, the prescription is for continuous engagement between one’s competing aspects. Parts of the *nafs*, then, are a permanent counter-weight to the attainment of virtue; more an ecosystem of balanced rivals than a drive for conquest and purity. It may never be possible to attain full reconciliation of faculties and impulses—but, al-Sulamī’s shaykh tells us, it is precisely such efforts that God encourages. As we shall see, it is out of this work that the virtuous self may emerge.

Self, Praxis, and Back to Self Again

With its internal tensions, this structure is the jumping-off point in a sequence that links the faculties of the self to ethical action and, in turn, reconnects those acts back to the character of the self. As we shall see, this dynamic solves the problem of how the *nafs* can be the initiator of its own changes, which is to say how the self that is the essence—as we saw al-Ghazālī call it—of the human can engineer its own transformation.

25. Abū al-Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 1992) 3:10.

26. Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *Jawāmiʿ ādāb al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Ethan Kohlberg (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1976), 33.

We noted above Miskawayh's classification of the faculties. In his discussion of the state of the soul, which he calls its character (*khulq*), he notes first that there are two kinds, one malleable and the other unchanging. He gives examples of the unchanging: the irascibility of the short-tempered individual and the timidity of a coward. However, the other "is that which is acquired by habit and self-training. It may have its beginning in deliberation and thought, but then it becomes, by gradual and continued practice, an aptitude and a trait of character."²⁷ A similar connection is made by al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) who likens the returning motion, the impact of the inculcation of a virtuous habit, to a brand. He tells us, ". . . virtue is a matter of discipline . . . the student of virtue must advance to the acts demanded by that virtue in order that an affection and a habit may appear in his soul, represented by his ability to cause such acts to proceed perfectly and with ease. At that moment, he is marked by the brand of the virtue in question."²⁸ Thus, in search of virtue, once our faculties are in balance and we manage to regularly take right actions, those practices will imprint the virtues they represent upon us as if they were indelible.

Al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) also frames the virtuous in this outward and return movement. He tells us that the individual intentionally cultivates dispositions (*isti'dādāt*) which, when oriented toward the good, beget and ingrain virtuous habits. If we set up evil dispositions, we will invite vicious habits in return.²⁹ Al-Ghazālī tells us that virtues are not single gestures coming from our knowledge (*ma'rifa*) or a single act (*fi'l*), but rather represent a condition that has taken hold in the *nafs*. It is as if a loop has developed in which the self is the seat of the virtues, which generate virtuous acts, which in turn reinforce their integration, their anchoring (*hay'a rāsikha*), in the self.³⁰ Elsewhere, on the same theme, he describes the impact of these deeds and thoughts as traces left upon the heart.³¹ Three centuries later, Ibn Khaldūn would identify this trace in terms of an aspirant's deeds imprinting images upon the self.³² Elsewhere, he provides more detail on the process. When the self initiates a deed, it feels the effect of that deed as an attribute (*ṣifa*), but when the deed is repeated, it becomes a condition (*hāl*), which, when often repeated, becomes a habit (*malaka*). These attributes and conditions in turn, "give the self its special coloring (*lawn*) that defines it."³³

For the Sufi tradition, the outward expression of virtues became a significant concern. Many systems were developed, as we noted earlier, which schematized these states, conditions, and their stages. Scholars have explored the connections between virtues and the steps on the Sufi path in some detail, so here I will leave them aside.³⁴ Instead, I would like to explore further the procedure I've been

27. Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-akhlāq*, 31.

28. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *The Nasirīan Ethics*, trans. G. M. Wickens (New York: Routledge, 2011), 111.

29. Majīd Fakhry, *al-Fārābī, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 94.

30. Ira Lapidus, "Knowledge, Virtue, and Action: The Classical Muslim Conception of Adab and the Nature of Religious Fulfillment in Islam," in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 58.

31. Lapidus, "Knowledge, Virtue, and Action," 47.

32. 'Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifā' al-sā'il li-tahdhib al-masā'il* (Beirut: al-Maṭba'a al-Kāthūlikiyya, 1959), 38.

33. Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām al-Shiddādī (Casablanca: Bayt al-Funūn wa'l-'Ulūm wa'l-Ādāb, 2005) 3:250, 293.

34. Zargar, *Polished Mirror*, 8 and Atif Khalil, "Contentment, Satisfaction and Good-Pleasure: *Rida* in Early Sufi Moral Psychology," *Studies in Religion* 43, no. 3 (2014): 372.

describing in which when the self initiates a virtuous action, that action is realized, and finally—if the deed becomes a habit—there is a feedback effect upon the *nafs*. Some Sufis have called this feedback a marking of the self which, on each occasion, leaves a trace, while another has called it the branding of the heart. I point to this imprinting upon the *nafs* since it is a key moment in the construction of the ethical subject. My claim is that the Sufi ethical tradition, thus conceived, aligns with what modern philosophy, following an Aristotelian model, has come to call virtue ethics.

In brief, virtue ethics can be contrasted with two rival ethical models: the first is deontology (from the Greek *deon*, or “being necessary”), which measures actions in relation to a set of rules or stated duties; the second revolves around the outcomes of acts, and can be called “consequentialism.” Plato and Aristotle developed virtue ethics, prioritizing the formation of a virtuous self through education and training over the inculcation of rules.³⁵ This model does not speak directly to what is the proper act in a specific circumstance, but rather to how a virtuous self can be formed which will respond ethically to future events.

Although marginalized in the nineteenth century, by the mid-twentieth century, virtue ethics had made a comeback. The appeal, Julia Annas argues, was the model’s reclaiming the value of the self in relation to the coercive and often inflexible logic of rule systems. An opening presents itself here to consider that relation and the benefit of the individual selves involved, against a one-size-fits-all approach.³⁶ This version of ethics mirrors the complex theory of the *nafs* considered above. Rather than a self that operates in a straight line, as a monolithic agent, the *nafs* is constantly in flux, with its relationship to its outward acts and the world around it constantly evolving. Annas also underlines the value of habituation or training. Virtue ethics embraces the complexity of ethical training that is at play in the cyclical looping we saw above with the self both initiating and being deeply marked in turn by ethical actions. Of a virtue put into practice, we are told, “You need to learn it from other people, but you need to learn how to do it for yourself.”³⁷ This learning is more than the acquisition of a concept or the will of an ego. Annas is making a point here about the origin of the ethical impulse, which sheds light on the *nafs* that is at once the initiator of acts and is marked by them. She is saying that virtue isn’t just a concept we acquire which makes us virtuous; it must also be taken into ourselves and allowed to transform us.

The Virtue of the Sublime Gaze

At the outset of this discussion, we noted the drama of Moses at Sinai and pointed out that his vision of God was not a case of seeing in the same sense we commonly

35. Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012 edition online). See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 220, and chapter 11 of Robert Pippin, *Interanimations: Receiving Modern German Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

36. Julia Annas, “Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing,” in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 78, no. 2 (2004): 70.

37. Annas, “Applying Virtue to Ethics (Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Lecture 2014),” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2015): 3.

use the term. My position there was that the Moses story demonstrates a seeing that cannot be said—that is, a vision across the existential divide which, therefore, cannot rationally encompass or represent its intended object. We saw earlier the Prophet’s enjoining to worship God as if you see Him—as if such a vision were possible. Ibn‘Arabī and others claimed this is possible, but only after one’s extinction from one’s self (*fanāʾ*). This is how some of the exegetes we noted understood Moses to have “seen” God—i.e., through his swoon. Thus, such seeing is possible, yet it remains beyond our ordinary sensate and discursive boundaries.

When one has made progress along the Sufi path, and the virtues have become habitual, Ibn Sīnā tells us, we become “one of the people of witnessing and not of speaking.” For this gnostic, the moments of overwhelming self-extinction are constant. That is to say, the self, the virtuous impulse, and right action are in a continuous cycle with one another. Here, one becomes “bright-faced, friendly, and smiling,” continually acting in virtuous ways: “The gnostic has no inclination to anger toward the misdeeds of others, and is, instead, filled with mercy . . . The gnostic is courageous . . . He is generous . . . and forgiving.” The ethical and visionary are bound up in this perspective, for the gnostic now “sees in everything the (divine Truth).”³⁸

Earlier, I noted the usefulness of the concept of the sublime in describing these phenomena. The sublime helps illustrate the procedures of Sufi visionary practices but, we shall see, it fails to account for the ethical. The act and the ethical subject are essential components of the dynamic equation of the components of the Sufi self. Kirk Pillow calls the human responses to the overwhelming sensory experience “sublime reflection,” which assume an indeterminacy because they escape conceptual determination. However, Pillow makes room for the imaginative productions resulting from these encounters. One of these productions that Paul Crowther identifies is “mystical discernment,” which involves an understanding of the indirect meaning of these sublime communications. Though such sublime communications are indeterminate, a mystic brings with her a world-view and religious tradition and its ways to interpret the uncontrollable and inexpressible sublime.³⁹ Pillow and Crowther, however, do not address this grounding of the indeterminate sublime in the mystical or, indeed, in any other form of discernment.

One interesting intervention, headed in the right direction but still rather preliminary, is Iris Murdoch’s suggestion that an ethical space is opened up where visionary experience approaches the sublime, which generates a self-forgetting within the subject.⁴⁰ This opening, however, seems to be more descriptive than explanatory. It describes a space that, elsewhere in the tradition of aesthetic theory, is filled right back up with an ego-centered ethics. Putting a finer point on earlier Kantian positions on the implications of sublime experiences, Crowther tells us the “moral insight” that is generated confirms and recognizes the individual as

38. Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1996) 4:829, 843, 846–848.

39. Kirk Pillow, *Sublime Understanding*, 294, and Paul Crowther, *How Pictures Complete Us: The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Divine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 85.

40. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 2.

superior in spite of being overwhelmed by their sublime experiences. Those selves come away from the encounter with overwhelmed senses, but confirmed in their rational thought. With our capacity to live through and then reflect upon our experience with the sublime, “we feel ourselves, accordingly, as transcending the limitations imposed by our embodied existence.” And elsewhere, those selves survive the encounter and are then taken to be the, “ultimate and infinite in humans,” and thus, “the human being is more than mere nature.”⁴¹

The ethical substance emerging from these claims appears rather flimsy in comparison with the Sufi models we have been tracking in this study. Murdoch’s appeal to a selfless opening awaits substantive ethical content, while the Kantian-inspired triumph of the thinking subject who survives the discombobulating encounter with the sublime keeps us within ourselves, trapped with our own subjectivity. In contrast, as we have seen above, the Sufi construction of the ethical self was a foundational and substantive starting point. Sufi reflection on the phenomenology of vision recognized the limited dimensions of the sublime and made way for a more fulsome practice. That is to say, it recognized the key role of the self in the sublime, but also aspired to connect that self out to the world and beyond.

Al-Suhrawardī’s (d. 549/1191) comments on liminal experiences make this point clear. He tells us that it is possible for someone who does not undertake spiritual exercises to occasionally attain ecstatic or sublime mystical flashes (*lawā’ih*). One can do so if “one waits on festival days, when people go out to the prayer-field and great noises, exaltations, and loud shouts take place, and the sound of cymbals and clarions prevails. If one is endowed with vision and a sound nature and recollects holy states, one will experience a very pleasant sensation.” At this point, we only need to be attentive and open to the possibility of the overwhelming of our senses. In the heat of battle, if one’s “mind is slightly clear, even though one may not be ascetically disciplined, one will experience something of this state—provided that one recollects, during that time, holy states, and recalls the souls of the departed, the vision of the divine might, and the ranks of the hosts of heaven.” Galloping on a warhorse, rushing into battle, “in such a state, too, an effect will be produced in one, even though one may not be an ascetic adept.” We need only be in the proper mindset and open to our supersensible dimension in order to engage with the sublime. However, if one were to embark on the Sufi path, one should know that these experiences are best woven into one’s devotional practices and ethics. Al-Suhrawardī tells us that, “These flashes do not come at all times, as there are periods when they cease altogether. But the more ascetic exercise is increased, the more the flashes come until one reaches the stage wherein one recalls something of other-worldly conditions in everything one sees.” Integrating, or reconnecting, one’s spiritual discipline with the deeper dimensions of the self not only colors our vision of the world, but also encourages spiritual discipline. In fact, such reintegration is the solution to apathy or spiritual weariness: “When the ascetic practitioner is afflicted by languor, he seeks assistance through subtle contemplations and pure

41. Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 153, 137, 138.

recollection against impure thoughts in order to regain his former state.”⁴² Al-Suhrawardī’s examples confirm what our modern philosophers would identify as sublime encounters, but his is a system that includes the Sufi conception of the *nafs*, which embraces a two-way connectivity between the virtuous self and proper actions.

The Sufi visionary practice that I have surveyed above began with a statement about seeing the divine. Here, a theological issue presented itself: from our creaturely perspective, the divine is categorically removed from us. In the afterlife, things might be different, but for now, we stand at an existential distance from our Creator. Sufi visionary practices, however, have developed resolutions to this challenge, but also, in fact, have constituted part of the intertwining of the human self with the divine. We saw that virtue ethics, with its emphasis on the production of an ethical self, brought the link between the self and the practice of virtuous acts into focus. Virtue of act and self thus becomes a single phenomenon. Here visionary practice, which attains to God by *fanā*², or a similar non-representational encounter, is predicated upon virtuous capacity. Mystical vision, then, like any other virtuous gesture, is as much about the self as it is about its object—an object that remains in view, but also forever unseen in this life.

42. Shihābuddīn Yahya Suhrawardī, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*, trans. Wheeler Thackston (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1999), 95–96.

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