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BECOMING WHAT ONE IS: LIBERATIVE KNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN PERFECTION IN THE WRITINGS OF SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

Justin Cancelliere

Introduction

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whose career now spans well over half a century of vigorous scholarly activity, is among the contemporary world's most well-known and influential Muslim intellectuals. Born in Tehran in 1933 into a distinguished family, he was immersed in the culture and intellectual heritage of his homeland from an early age while also being exposed to Western philosophical ideas beginning at around age ten.¹ Upon emigrating to the United States in 1945, he enrolled in the Peddie School in New Jersey, where he excelled and became valedictorian in his graduating year. For college, Nasr studied physics at MIT before earning an MA in geology and geophysics from Harvard, where he went on to complete his doctorate in the history and philosophy of science under the supervision of I. Bernard Cohen, H. A. R. Gibb, and Harry Wolfson.

1. All biographical information has been drawn from Nasr's "intellectual autobiography" written for the Library of Living Philosophers as well as William Chittick's helpful summary thereof. See, respectively, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 3–85, and *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. William C. Chittick (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), ix–xiv.

After graduating in 1958, Nasr decided to return permanently to Iran. There, he quickly established himself as a prominent academic and, at the age of thirty, became the youngest full professor in the University of Tehran's history. He also undertook intensive study of the Islamic sciences, especially philosophy and gnosis (*'irfān*), under traditional masters, including the saintly polymath 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī. Nasr would continue to deepen his knowledge in this way for two decades until the revolution of 1979, an event that would lead to his exile and return to the United States, where, since 1984, he has held the position of University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University.

Regarding Nasr's published work, which now amounts to some fifty books and five hundred articles, its impact is in large part attributable to its characteristic harmonization of erudition and "extra-academic" insight, which he has brought to bear on an impressive array of subdisciplines within the field of Islamic Studies.² But if Nasr's contribution to the contemporary study of Islam is distinctive, it is so somewhat paradoxically given what one might say is the exceptional "normalcy," and hence relative anonymity,³ of his perspective vis-à-vis the Islamic tradition itself when the latter is taken in the fullness of its historical breadth and depth.⁴ As William Chittick has so aptly described them, Nasr's writings "offer a fresh interpretative stance not found earlier in the academic mainstream," but his basic position "was already familiar to those involved in careful readings of pre-modern Islamic texts, because it was simply an articulate re-expression, in a more universal and contemporary language, of the underlying presuppositions of the writings."⁵

Incidentally, this quality of Nasr's work is no less apparent in his treatment of ethics than it is in other domains about which he has written more by comparison.⁶ In fact, the subject subtly permeates his entire oeuvre—appropriately so in light of Nasr's characterization of his own principal concern. For even if, as he says, "that quest after a knowledge which liberates and delivers us from the fetters and limitations of earthly existence . . . dominates my intellectual life and is central to all my endeavors,"⁷ Nasr makes a point of emphasizing that "to speak of sacred knowledge without mentioning the crucial importance of the virtues as the *conditio sine qua non* for the realization of this knowledge is to misunderstand completely the traditional sapiential perspective."⁸ Said simply, Nasr is fully committed to the idea that what we know and what we do are intimately interrelated, and indeed

2. It is worth noting that Nasr's ideas have exerted considerable influence not only in Western academic circles, but also throughout the Islamic world and, indeed, globally. At present, his writings have been translated into over thirty foreign languages. For the most recent and currently definitive bibliography of his works, see Muhammad U. Faruque, ed., *The Pen and the Tablet: Works by and about Seyyed Hossein Nasr through His 85th Birthday* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2019).

3. In contrast to what has been referred to as the "cult of genius" characterizing modern, individualistic attitudes toward human achievement, Nasr affirms the principle according to which the realization of a person's most profound potentials entails a certain effacement before realities that transcend his or her individuality (see, e.g., Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition* [New York: HarperOne, 2012], 252). For the cult of genius, see Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. Harry Oldmeadow, trans. Mark Perry and Jean-Pierre Lafouge (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2015), 7ff.

4. Some readers will no doubt take issue with this impression, which can be disputed from two main angles: (i) a confessional point of view wary of Nasr's universalism (see n. 54), and (ii) an "anti-essentialist" position that prefers to speak of Islams, in the plural.

5. Chittick, introduction to *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, xiii.

6. See Nasr's comments in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 585 and 761.

7. Nasr, *Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 85.

8. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 312 (punctuation modified).

no reader of his books, whether sympathetic to his underlying commitments or not,⁹ can fail to notice the thoroughgoing holism governing his approach to the exposition of Islamic teachings. In reading him, one is struck by his conviction that everything really is connected to everything else, and not in the manner of a vague, cosmic-consciousness-style New Ageism.¹⁰ On the contrary, Nasr takes the traditional metaphysical and cosmological views he espouses—with all that they imply on the plane of human action and comportment—to be no more (or less) than elaborations of Islam’s fundamental insight, that of *tawhīd*.¹¹

In what follows, I will set forth the key features of Nasr’s understanding of the relationship between mysticism and ethics. First, however, we should get a basic sense of what he means by each term. For Nasr, Islamic mysticism,¹² or Sufism, is “the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam”¹³ and as such comprises a spiritual path or method (*ṭarīqa*) that leads those who walk it with sincerity to the Truth (*al-ḥaqīqa*),¹⁴ which is God, the Real (*al-ḥaqq*). Interestingly, it also fundamentally concerns knowledge of our own selves, or the mystery of our real identity:

Sufism seeks to lead adepts to the heart, where they find both their true self and their Beloved, and for that reason Sufis are sometimes called “the people of the heart” (*ahl-i dil* in Persian). Of course, the phrase “both their true self and their Beloved” does not mean any ultimate duality, for as Rūmī also said, in the heart there is room for only one I, which is both the root of our true self and the Self as such. Who am I? I am the I that, having traversed all the stages of limited existence from the physical to the mental to the noumenal, has realized its own “nonexistence” and by virtue of this annihilation of the false self has returned to its roots in the Divine Reality and has become a star proximate to the Supernal Sun, which is ultimately the only I. Having passed through the door of nothingness and annihilation, I come to the realization that at the root of my consciousness, of what I call I, resides the only I that can ultimately say I and that ultimately alone is.¹⁵

As for ethics, Nasr uses the term straightforwardly and without distinguishing, as some do, between the categories of the ethical and the moral, and nor would one expect him to given the association of this distinction—whether in scholarly circles or merely colloquially—with attempts to make sense of the normative dimension of non-religious modes of human life.¹⁶ Indeed, Nasr denies the very possibility of a properly secular ethics, since for him all real values are perforce of religious

9. In the interest of readability, I will err on the side of minimally qualifying my presentation of Nasr’s views. The relevant language (e.g., “for Nasr,” “according to Nasr,” etc.) should therefore be taken as implicit in passages where noticeably absent.

10. For “cosmic consciousness,” see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 241.

11. See, e.g., Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 74; idem, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2001), 1.

12. Nasr is comfortable with the term mysticism, though he does, in various places, address its ambiguity. See, e.g., *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 287–88.

13. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 5.

14. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 5.

15. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 10.

16. See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 95ff.

provenance,¹⁷ and any notion of an ethics divorced from this basis in authentic tradition is rendered meaningless thereby.¹⁸ Since for Nasr only religion is capable of providing objective criteria of discernment,¹⁹ all would-be secular ethical schemes are devoid of genuine authority *ab initio* and so forced to seek surrogate foundations in philosophically dubious premises that, as the passage of time has shown, are not liable to win the assent of the same broad swathes of human beings that have been and clearly still are inclined to accept traditional religious doctrines.²⁰

But if one were to single out the points of greatest importance to Nasr's perspective, two are most decisive. The first is that ethics is related in a fundamental way to metaphysics²¹—that is, to “the science of the Real”²² and not just to exoteric jurisprudence—and the second is the all-encompassing nature of the ethical domain, which embraces not only the internal behavioral dynamics of human collectivities but also man's²³ relationship to the totality of his terrestrial and even cosmic environment. I will take each in its turn.

No Virtue without Knowledge

In what he has described as his most important philosophical work,²⁴ *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr seeks to revive an epistemology based on revelation and gnosis.²⁵ Besides endeavoring to elucidate the respective natures of these twin sources of knowledge, Nasr both offers etiologies and suggests remedies for what he perceives as their neglect among modernist intellectuals. Significantly for our purposes, Nasr singles out the Greeks for special comment given the “providential role” played by their sages in the historical unfolding of the intellectual and esoteric dimensions of all three Abrahamic monotheisms.²⁶ As he says, the tradition of Orphic-Dionysian provenance associated with figures like Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus was to provide the sapiential schools of these religions with their broadly overlapping conceptual apparatuses, and it is for this reason that “the rediscovery of the sacred character of knowledge today would lead, almost before anything else, to a rediscovery of Greek wisdom.”²⁷ If this is true for Nasr, it is not on account of some Greek monopoly on philosophical truth; rather, it is simply the case that, in the Western context in which he is writing, what we call “Platonism” just happens to provide the time-honored theoretical “scaffolding” for the task of realizing in one's own being the truths with which he is most fundamentally concerned.

17. Nasr, *Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 31.

18. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 80. For Nasr's special use of the term “tradition,” see chap. 2.

19. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 36.

20. Nasr, *Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 31.

21. Nasr, *Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 227.

22. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 132–33.

23. As a rule, this word is intended in the sense of “humankind.”

24. Nasr, *Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 78.

25. Nasr describes gnosis—his preferred translation of the Arabic *al-ma'rifa* and Persian *'irfān*—as “the unitive knowledge of God not by man as an individual but by the divine center of human intelligence which, at the level of gnosis, becomes the subject as well as object of knowledge” (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, 12). Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Gnosis,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn Alexander Magee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 381–92.

26. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 44–45.

27. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 35.

Like his immediate intellectual predecessors, then, Nasr avails himself of the Platonic distinction between being and becoming in characterizing the path of spiritual realization as one of “becoming what one is.”²⁸ For him, the truth of the *shahāda*—“there is no god but God”—is perfectly well expressible in terms of *being*, in which case it arguably does no violence to Islam to affirm that only God really is,²⁹ hence the proliferation of debates among Muslim philosophers, Sufis, and rational theologians (*mutakallimūn*) concerning the identification of nondelimited Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) with divinity.³⁰ In any case, since Nasr wishes to root right action in knowledge, without which latter one would simply lack any criteria for determining what the former is supposed to be,³¹ any serious discussion of his ethical views has to begin with his epistemology, which, as we are coming to see, is thoroughly metaphysical.³² Indeed, for Nasr, to be is ultimately to know,³³ and “to know is to be delivered.”³⁴

Now, if only God actually possesses being, what explains the existence of the world? Remarkably, it is here—in the question of cosmogony—that one finds the key to Nasr’s ethics along with the pith of his “metaphysical anthropology,” which in turn grounds his approach to Sufism as a “path of knowledge.”³⁵ According to the influential Akbarī formulation of Sufi doctrine commended by Nasr,³⁶ God creates the world out of love,³⁷ and this love is thinkable in terms of mercy toward the objects of His own knowledge (*ma’lūmāt*)—a mercy whose principal “movement” is symbolized by the breath, in this case that of God Himself.³⁸

In this profound doctrine, the divine Breath constitutes the isthmus (*barzakh*) between God and what is other than Him, and this “Reality of Realities” is none other than the very substance of Man, which for Muslims is made known most eminently through the person of the Prophet Muḥammad.³⁹ In Chittick’s lucid summary:

The Reality of Realities, or the Highest Barzakh, exists as the object of God’s knowledge but, like any other reality, its *wujūd* is nothing but the *wujūd* of God. It is not identical with God, nor is it different from Him. Likewise, it is not identical with the total cosmos, nor is it different from

28. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 167, 182–83, 245, 274, 328.

29. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 7, 134, 326.

30. See, e.g., Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 315ff.

31. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 177.

32. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Standing before God: Human Responsibilities and Human Rights,” in *Humanity Before God: Contemporary Faces of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Ethics*, ed. William Schweiker, Michael A. Johnson, and Kevin Jung (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 320.

33. See Nasr, *Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 117.

34. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 309.

35. For which see Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 30. For the relation of this “gnostic” path to the other dimensions of the integral spiritual life, namely faith, virtue, grace, etc., see Nasr, *Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 662–63.

36. Albeit not in any narrow, partisan manner, it is important to note, since his perspective is first and foremost based on what he forcefully asserts is an essentially universal metaphysics. For Nasr’s avowal of the foundational status of the Akbarī doctrines of the “oneness of being” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and Universal Man, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2000), 133, and Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 230.

37. For discussion of the famous *ḥadīth qudsī* likening God to a “hidden treasure” (*kanz makhfī*) who “loves to be known,” see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 10–11, and *Garden of Truth*, 18–19, 42–43.

38. For discussion of this doctrine—that of the “Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-Rahīmān*)—in Nasr, see *Garden of Truth*, 15, 44, 93.

39. See Nasr, “The Prophet and Prophetic Tradition—the Last Prophet and Universal Man,” chap. 3 in *Ideals and Realities*.

the total cosmos. The cosmos makes manifest in differentiated detail all the realities that the Reality of Realities embraces, but its most perfect loci of manifestation are the perfect human beings and, most specifically, the prophet Muhammad. Hence the Reality of Realities, also called “the Breath of the All-Merciful,” is identical with the Muhammadan Reality. Those who come to know it as their own reality are the Muhammadan friends of God.⁴⁰

Such is the famous doctrine of the Perfect or Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).⁴¹ According to Nasr, this reality is the “androgynic prototype” both of the human state and of the cosmos, hence the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm;⁴² it contains all possibilities⁴³ and degrees⁴⁴ of existence within itself; and it is the unique locus of disclosure for all the divine Names,⁴⁵ or the mirror in which they are reflected and in which God contemplates Himself.⁴⁶ Through it, in virtue of a function “both revelatory and initiatic,”⁴⁷ man “is able to follow that path of perfection which will finally allow him to gain knowledge of the sacred and to become fully himself.”⁴⁸ It is “in that theophanic prayer of Universal Man in which the whole creation, both Heaven and earth, participate” that man “realizes his full pontifical nature” as the vicegerent (*khalifa*) of God on earth.⁴⁹

To sum up what has been said thus far: to realize the goal of human life is to become what one already is, and “what one is” is at once poverty and perfection. Or rather, in spite of man’s being nothing and God’s being everything, man is able to know God, and this through his ceasing to be other than what he is. To know everything—a totality to which he is beckoned by the hidden heart of his own intelligence⁵⁰—man must become nothing. For Nasr, all the various ethical demands made on man are rooted ultimately in his being “condemned” to undertake this becoming by the reality of his own immutable identity.⁵¹ In other words, the specifically ethical mores by means of which the Muslim orients him or herself toward spiritual excellence (*ihsān*) are simply the outward marks of this unitary, principial reality,⁵² which is mercy itself.⁵³ Islamic ethics are therefore not the result of an arbitrary divine will à la divine command theory. Rather, the injunctions of the Shari‘a and norms of the prophetic Sunna follow rigorously from the nature

40. William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), xxvii.

41. Although intimately related to the Quranic notion of *al-fiṭra*, or our “primordial human nature,” which also appears in the Hadith, the specifically Sufic doctrine of the Perfect Man is distinct from it on account of the properly transcendent aspect of its (i.e., the Perfect Man’s) integral meaning, which nonetheless embraces the individual domain by way of its “outward face.” In a word, the term *fiṭra* connotes the individual level of the human state in spite of its denoting a universal reality, the fullness of which is brought out and made explicit by the Sufis.

42. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 21.

43. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 187n36.

44. Nasr, *Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 65.

45. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 180.

46. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1999), 35.

47. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 21.

48. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 166–67.

49. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 176. For man’s vicegerency, see Quran 2:30.

50. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1997), 96.

51. Nasr, “Standing before God,” 319.

52. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 168.

53. Since for Nasr, following Sufi tradition, the transcendent reality of man coincides with the Breath of the All-Merciful, man is the nexus of the amorous relations described above and thus the root of all love. To realize fully one’s humanity is to lose oneself in Love (*Garden of Truth*, 93), since man is the love God has for His own Self.

of things, and this without excluding other possible prescriptive expressions of realities whose transcendent nature precludes their being exhaustible by any one given formulation or code.⁵⁴ Furthermore, even if Nasr accepts the idea that the reality of goodness in a sense precedes and determines God's willing activity (*irāda*), such a doctrinal heuristic does not contravene divine freedom, since ultimately God is that goodness which appears to us under the guise of a universal nature or archetype. Who He is and what He knows are distinguishable from one another only in being conceptualized *ab extra*—that is, from within the limitations of the discursive envelope of the integral intellect, which latter, according to Nasr, is capable of immediately apprehending the nondual nature of the divine Principle.⁵⁵

As vertiginous as Nasr's metaphysical epistemology no doubt is, its ethical import is seemingly alluded to by even the most commonplace colloquialisms, for example that of the "ethical bind." If revelation and tradition furnish the principles and provide the guidelines necessary⁵⁶ for living a moral life, the task of actually applying them in this or that situation is often far from straightforward, hence the need for cultivating the discernment that alone is capable of resolving the relevant antinomies. Notwithstanding the sophistication achieved by the Islamic legal tradition as a result of centuries' worth of sincerely striving to uncover and make known the nuances implicit in an all-comprehensive Law of divine origin, mastery of jurisprudence can only take one so far, since living well requires in the first instance a sound inward state—something attainable only through purification. For Nasr, real safety from the pitfalls attending the moral quandaries human beings inevitably find themselves in comes only through loosening the knots of one's own ignorance.⁵⁷ To live ethically therefore requires intimacy with our truest nature—the human norm or Perfect Man—as exemplified for Muslims by the Prophet. In entering existentially into the prophetic mold, the Muslim courts the moment (*waqt*) in which all oppositions find their resolution through the synthetic, reconciliatory power of a sanctified intellect, or rather that of the Intellect as such. For Nasr, to become truly human means to become simple, whole, one.⁵⁸ And, as he explains, the genuinely integrated person benefits not only himself through his purity but also the whole of society. He or she is "the hidden source for the regeneration of Islamic ethics and the integration of the Islamic community."⁵⁹

54. For Nasr's universalism, see "Principal Knowledge and the Multiplicity of Sacred Forms," chap. 9 in *Knowledge and the Sacred*, and "The *Philosophia Perennis* and the Study of Religion," chap. 5 in *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

55. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 134. It is important to emphasize that, according to Nasr, this special form of knowledge or gnosis involves the collapse of the distinction between the knowing subject and known object (see n. 25) and is thus eminently non-ordinary. Being comprised as it is of the most intense bliss (pp. 1–2), it is an ecstatic, supra-rational mode of consciousness.

56. For Nasr, there is no access to the inward dimension of religion in the absence of its "outward," exoteric practice. He is firmly committed to the idea that involvement in initiatic spirituality presupposes adherence to an orthodox religious tradition. See, e.g., Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 77–80, 316–18.

57. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 312.

58. Having retreated from the potency of past and future into the pure act of the "eternal now," the "knower through God" (*ʿarif bi'llāh*) "does not either act or think; rather his contemplation and meditation is combined with the purest and most intense activity" (Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 50).

59. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 51.

A Mercy to the Worlds

Since the Perfect Man is “the quintessence of all creation,” there is a very real sense in which the cosmos is a “great man” (*al-insān al-kabīr*)⁶⁰—a correspondence that throws the teachings of the Quran into wide relief when it affirms repeatedly that God does not wrong anyone, rather human beings wrong themselves.⁶¹ In comprising a reflection of us⁶²—or an exteriorization of our own essential, inward reality—the cosmos participates in our *raison d’être*, which is worship (*‘ibāda*).⁶³ As it is said in the Quran, “The seven heavens, and the earth, and whosoever is in them glorify Him. And there is no thing, save that it hymns His praise, though you do not understand their praise” (17:44).⁶⁴ If the prism of Man refracts the divine Light such that it is able to be reflected in the “mirror of non-being,”⁶⁵ it is only because man is nothing before God, and if the Perfect Man is perfect, it is due solely to his having become mysteriously qualified by God’s perfections⁶⁶ through the absoluteness of his poverty. So the vocation of man, one could say, is to be poor (*faqīr*).⁶⁷ If he fulfills it, the whole cosmos benefits, and if he puffs himself up with pride, all the creatures placed under his vicegerency sooner or later suffer for it.⁶⁸ As Nasr frankly states, “The history of the modern world is witness to the fact that the type of man who negates the Sacred or Heaven in the name of being a purely earthly creature cannot live in equilibrium with the Earth.”⁶⁹

From the outset it was said that Nasr sees the ethical domain as all-encompassing. Although its root consists in the relationship between each individual human being and God, the momentousness of this timeless encounter reverberates throughout the whole of manifested existence, which is to say that man bears responsibilities toward all things in virtue of his primordial responsibility before God. In the Quran one reads that the Creator “offered the Trust unto the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, and were wary of it—yet man bore it” (33:72). According to Nasr, they “could not bear it precisely because to be human implies the possibility of both the affirmation and the negation of the Divine Principle, and therefore the possibility of perdition in the deepest sense of the word, which other creatures do not face.”⁷⁰ The Quran further recounts the sempiternal occasion of man’s embracing his status as servant and yea-sayer as follows: “When thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, ‘Am I not your Lord?’

60. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 57, 67; Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 23.

61. As at 3:117, 10:44, etc.

62. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 167, 196.

63. Quran 51:56.

64. All Quranic translations are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

65. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1976), 111–12; *Garden of Truth*, 43–44; *Islamic Life and Thought*, 185.

66. For this notion of “becoming imbued with the Qualities of God” (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*), see Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 136, 246.

67. See Quran 35:15, 47:38.

68. For what Nasr himself says is his most complete treatment of the subject of the environment (*Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 80), see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

69. Nasr, *Order of Nature*, 271. See also *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 167.

70. Nasr, “Standing before God,” 301.

they said ‘Yea, we bear witness’—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘Truly of this we were heedless’” (7:172).

Now, if “wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God”⁷¹—if the cosmos is a theophany—the affirmational, witnessing aspect of man’s cosmic function normatively demands his “seeing God everywhere,”⁷² which in turn obviously necessitates treating all existent entities with the respect due to them as revelations of the Divine. Indeed, in Nasr’s view, ethics presupposes and is thus inextricably bound up with man’s sense of the sacred, which “is none other than his sense for the Immutable and the Eternal, his nostalgia for what he really is, for he carries the sacred within the substance of his own being and most of all within his intelligence which was created to know the Immutable and contemplate the Eternal.”⁷³ For Nasr, nature’s having become desacralized for “modern, but not necessarily contemporary, man”⁷⁴ is the result of the former’s loss of this spiritual sensitivity—an atrophy that in many cases applies just as much to professed believers as it does to agnostics and atheists. Concerning the intellectual-historical backdrop for this situation—one with its origin in the Christian West but which has since become global in scope—he explains how Christianity, in its struggle to establish itself as a vehicle of salvation for an entire civilization, found itself confronted by a world whose spiritual integrity had become compromised by widespread naturalism, hence this religion’s tendency toward distinguishing strictly between the natural and supernatural domains.⁷⁵ It is as though the “safe distance” from idolatrous dispositions established by this compensatory maneuver was destined to become unsafe, as it were, since it ended up resulting (generally and de facto) in a neglect of the role of nature in the Christian spiritual life.⁷⁶

The implication of Nasr’s analysis, which he makes explicit throughout his work, is that affirming and cultivating awareness of the transcendence of God is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the inspiration and maintenance of the moral dimension of any normal human civilization.⁷⁷ According to the well-nigh universal metaphysical doctrine, the Ultimately Real is immanent to its cosmic self-disclosures on precise account of its categorically transcending them. God enjoys the sovereignty of transcendence without being bound by it.⁷⁸ So to be truly pious and God-conscious finally requires being aware of God here and now, in all things. Like other traditionalist authors, Nasr severely criticizes both Cartesianism⁷⁹ and Kantianism⁸⁰—perhaps the two philosophical impulses most responsible for undermining modern man’s sense of the sacred⁸¹—while emphasizing the need

71. Quran 2:115.

72. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 191, 214. “Normatively” should be taken in a technical sense here as alluding to the *fiṭra*, or, more profoundly, to the Perfect Man (see n. 41), since Nasr is the first to acknowledge that Sufism is not for everyone.

73. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 76.

74. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 43. See also *Man and Nature*, 18.

75. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 55. See also *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 35.

76. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 55.

77. See Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 119–21.

78. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 134, 137.

79. See, e.g., Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 41–42; *Man and Nature*, 70–71.

80. See esp. Nasr, *Order of Nature*, 105, where he refers to Kantianism as “an intellectual suicide.”

81. “Most responsible,” that is, in terms of sheer historical decisiveness, since many of the most influential thinkers following in the wake of Descartes and Kant represent more serious stages of intellectual decline by comparison (see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 28, 42–43, 45).

for adopting traditional, holistic doctrines in their place if a society is to hope to even roughly approximate the ethical ideal, which entails an underlying attitude of mercy toward all beings,⁸² whether human or nonhuman, and indeed whether overtly animate or something as humble as a rock or patch of clay.⁸³ From Nasr's Islamic perspective, God intends and is pleased by man's availing himself of the bounties of nature,⁸⁴ but, like all things, she has her rights and will even "convey her chronicles" on the Day of Judgment.⁸⁵ Better, then, to listen even now—to "the 'silent music' to which Plato alluded,"⁸⁶ or to the truth proclaimed by all things—that we might be edified by the natural world,⁸⁷ and this ultimately for the sake of remembering who we are—"the highest goal" to which a person can aspire.⁸⁸

Conclusion

For Seyyed Hossein Nasr, man by his very nature stands before God, whether he realizes it or not, and this fact, for our author, contains the whole of ethics. By virtue of his "secret" (*sirr*), he is condemned to a perfection whose implications for the human state as lived by the individual radiate from the hidden center thereof out through the whole of manifestation. Although the infirmity characteristic of fallen humanity necessitates prophecy and revelation to apprise people of their ultimate end—with all that it demands of them—man as such is mysteriously already in possession of what it is he seeks through the facilitative grace and protective framework of divinely ordained religion. Indeed, the latter's profoundest possibilities converge in their actualization precisely on the attainment of that supreme, changeless knowledge in whose absence the outward, communal practice of Islam can only ever lose its vitality and equilibrium.⁸⁹

Since "gnosis lies at the heart of the Islamic tradition,"⁹⁰ Islamic ethics cannot consist solely in legal scrupulosity despite its clear importance from Nasr's point of view. On the contrary, "the destruction of the wholeness of human life so decried today, and the ever increasing and greater compartmentalization of the human mind and disintegration of the human psyche, are ultimately related to the loss of principial knowledge and the subsequent segmentation of what men learn and know. It is related to the loss of sacred science."⁹¹ So for Nasr, religious values depend

82. Hence the Quran's description of the Prophet as "a mercy unto the worlds" (21:107). The Hadith especially is replete with accounts of Muḥammad's tender behavior toward all manner of creatures—a disposition that traditional Islamic piety has not seen as being in any way at odds with his evident virility. For an explanation of the harshness required of the Prophet in certain circumstances, see Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, 61–62.

83. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 94.

84. As at, e.g., Quran 36:33–35, 71–73.

85. Quran 99:4. "She" here then would technically refer to the earth (*al-ard*).

86. Nasr, *Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 21 (see also pp. 305, 734). For what came to be called *musica universalis* in Plato, see *Republic* 617b–c, and, somewhat more allusively, *Timaeus* 35b–37a.

87. Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 121.

88. Nasr, *Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 667.

89. Contra the claims of various reformist and "fundamentalist" Muslims, whose views Nasr so ably criticizes. For the relationship between gnosis and the religious collectivity, see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 320.

90. Nasr, *Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 680.

91. Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 81 (punctuation modified).

for their survival on the presence of genuine sagacity, just as the latter presupposes the acquisition of the virtues, which literally comprise our mode of participation in a truth at once supra-human and more “us” than we are ourselves.⁹²

Given what for Nasr and the tradition he represents is man’s central, axial status in the universe, all things in a sense proceed from and return to him, by God’s leave. The realized human being is therefore the opening through which mercy, grace, and spiritual luminosity overflow out into creation from the realm of the Unseen. As for the collective or societal plane, the exemplary state of the Perfect Man serves to orient the aspirations of an entire sector of humanity⁹³ toward the truth of its own being, or toward “that illimitable spiritual freedom and liberation which alone is worthy of man if only he were to realize who he is.”⁹⁴

92. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 311–12.

93. I.e., that of his or her fellow “religionists.”

94. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 328.

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