

The Perfect Human (al-insan al-kamil)

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The Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*)

Richard Todd

The Islamic mystical doctrine of the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) – whose bodily existence is deemed to mark the culmination of the cosmic process of divine self-disclosure – has had a lasting impact on Sufi thought and practice from the late medieval period onwards. It has also filtered into the wider culture of the Muslim world, including most notably the political theology of South and Southeast Asia. Strikingly esoteric in character, this theory forms the linchpin of the complex and highly influential system of philosophical Sufism developed by the thirteenth-century Andalusian mystic Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers, for whom the perfect human is the endpoint of the spiritual path, the summit of the Sufi hierarchy, and the final cause of God’s creation insofar as he manifests the divine treasures that would otherwise have remained hidden in God’s unmanifest Essence.

The present article begins with an exploration of the scriptural elements and philosophical antecedents – from the concept of the microcosm to Aristotelian teleology – underpinning Ibn ‘Arabī’s classic depiction of the perfect human as a mirror in which God’s attributes are reflected. This is followed by an investigation of the key roles this theory plays in later Sufi discussions of metaphysics, spiritual realization, and theological anthropology, in which the perfect human’s metaphysical essence is the boundary between the divine absolute and the determinate realm of creation.

Drawing on primary sources in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish, the article examines how Sufis use the concept of the perfect human to develop a metaphysical understanding of the rank and status of the Prophet Muḥammad, as exemplified most famously by ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī’s *al-Insān al-kāmil fī ma‘rifat al-awākhir wa-al-awā’il* (The Human Who is Perfect in the Knowledge of Things Last and First). It considers the extent to which Sufi authors conceive of the perfect human as an entity that, in essence, transcends gender. It also offers an analysis of Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī’s portrayal of the degrees of theosis beyond human perfection, before ending with an investigation of the perfect human’s historical impact on Muslim political theology.

Keywords: Islam, Sufism, Perfect human, Sufi metaphysics, Theological anthropology, Political theology, Caliphate, *al-insān al-kāmil*, Ibn ‘Arabī, Mughals

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1 Introduction

Rooted in the mystical anthropology of the prolific and often controversial Sufi author, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), the concept of the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*, the Arabic term *insān* is not gender-specific) has had a lasting impact, not only on Sufism, but also on the wider culture of the Muslim world, including most notably the political theology of Mughal India.

For Ibn ʿArabī, the perfect human, who has been created in God’s image, is both the vital spirit of the cosmos and the mirror in whom God sees His own names and attributes made manifest. For major representatives of Ibn ʿArabī’s school – such as Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. c. 811/1408) and ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazāʾirī (d. 1300/1883) – the perfect human becomes the linchpin of their complex systems of Sufi metaphysics. In their writings, as we shall see, the *insān kāmil* is a universal entity of prime importance. In its metaphysical essence, it constitutes both the boundary and portal between the divine absolute and the realm of created being. In its physical and corporeal form, it marks the culmination of the cosmic process of divine self-disclosure, whereby God reveals Himself through the manifold degrees of existence. As such, the perfect human is the final goal of God’s creation. Its spiritual rank is the highest stage of self-realization and the summit of the Sufi hierarchy; and though its outward appearance may change from one era to another, its underlying reality is always identical with the timeless spirit of the Prophet Muḥammad, the *insān kāmil* par excellence.

So central is the concept of the perfect human in the philosophical Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī’s school (arguably more important in practice for the school’s adherents than the oft-debated notion of the ‘oneness of being’, or *waḥdat al-wujūd*, a phrase Ibn ʿArabī never actually employed) that on more than one occasion we find it being used to epitomize Akbarian Sufi thought in general. (‘Akbarian’ is a modern adjectival form derived from Ibn ʿArabī’s traditional epithet, *al-shaykh al-akbar* or the ‘Greatest Master’). Thus, ʿAzīz Nasafī (d. c. 689/1290), a figure whose Persian writings did much to popularize Ibn ʿArabī’s ideas in the eastern part of the Muslim world, gave the title *Kitāb al-Insān al-kāmil* (The Book of the Perfect Human) to what is actually a wide-ranging collection of epistles on diverse aspects of Sufi theory and practice. In a similar vein, ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī called his broad compendium of Sufi doctrine *al-Insān al-kāmil fī maʿrifat al-awākhir wa-al-awāʾil* (The Human Who is Perfect in the Knowledge of Things Last and First). Of the sixty-three chapters in al-Jīlī’s *al-Insān al-kāmil* – a work on a par with Ibn ʿArabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Gemstones of Wisdom) in terms of the role it has played in establishing human perfection’s place in the intellectual and political culture of the post-classical Muslim world – only one (chapter sixty) is explicitly devoted to the eponymous theory of the perfect human. In the opening lines of the chapter in question, however, al-Jīlī is at pains to impress on his readers this theory’s quintessential character: ‘you should know’, he

asserts, 'that this chapter is the mainstay (*'umda*) of the chapters in this book; indeed, the entire book is but an explanation (*sharḥ*) of this chapter' (Al-Jīlī 1949: 44 [vol. 2]).

A similar structure to al-Jīlī's, and similar sentiments, appear in another of our key primary sources, the *Miftāḥ ghayb al-jam' wa-tafṣīlihi* (The Key to the Unmanifest Side of Synthesis and to Its Manifest Detail) by one of the major architects of the mature doctrine of the perfect human, Ibn 'Arabī's disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī. As in al-Jīlī's *al-Insān al-kāmil*, the doctrine of the perfect human in the *Miftāḥ* is presented as the natural conclusion to the detailed metaphysical and cosmological expositions that form the main body of the book, since all cosmological degrees – from the celestial intellects to the material world – are deemed constituent elements of the perfect human's existence; and it was for the sake of his existence that the world was brought into being. Thus, 'the [*Miftāḥ*] concludes', so al-Qūnawī explains, 'with the mention of some of what is comprised in the state of the perfect human, and of his rank and unmistakeable signs; for he is the final cause (*al-'illa al-ghā'iyā*) [of God's creation]' (al-Qūnawī, *Miftāḥ*; 1995: 11).

As will become clear in due course, al-Qūnawī's distinctive elaborations on the concept of the perfect human circulated widely in the ever-expanding Muslim world of the late medieval and early modern periods. We shall encounter, for instance, his signature premise that the perfect human comprises within himself all 'divine presences' (*ḥaḍarāt*) or 'levels of being' (*marātib al-wujūd*) in Sufi works originating from as far apart as Bosnia and Sumatra. It is noticeable, too, that al-Qūnawī's theories quickly start to inform what was to become a long tradition of commentaries on his master Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* – the text regarded as the classic source for the doctrine of the *insān kāmil* – especially the characteristically Qunawian idea that the key to understanding the perfect human's nature lies in his being a physical manifestation of the first determinate hypostasis of the divine absolute. Clearly present, not surprisingly, in the early *Fuṣūṣ* commentary by al-Qūnawī's disciple, Mu'ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 690/1291), this Qunawian influence is evident, likewise, in the well-known commentaries of Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 750/1351) and Abdullah Bosnevī (d. 1054/1644), two major Akbarian authors of the Ottoman era. But it is also apparent in the Turkish commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* authored by a celebrated representative of the school of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), the Mevlevi Sufi author Ismail Rusuhi Ankaravi (d. 1041/1631; see Ankaravi, *Zūbde'tü'l-fuhûs fî nakṣi'l-Fusûs*, MS Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, Special Collections Research Center, Islamic Ms 682, fols. 10–16), a fact which indicates that both the basic concept and the elaborate doctrine of the perfect human were apt to travel beyond the confines of Ibn 'Arabī's school.

Before, however, exploring the doctrine's features and developments in more detail, it is important to begin by taking stock of its *locus classicus* – the opening chapter of Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* – and the scriptural and philosophical elements on which it draws.

2 The *locus classicus*: Ibn ‘Arabī’s chapter on Adam in the *Gemstones of Wisdom*

Tied as it is to the quasi-divine character ascribed to the primordial human being in the Qur’anic accounts of his creation, the emergent concept of the *insān kāmil* appears at the very outset of the first chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, which deals with the nature of Adam. Though couched in the *Fuṣūṣ*’s sometimes peculiar and often obscure style and idioms, the elements that would become the leitmotifs of the mature and fully elaborated theory are nonetheless recognizable: uniquely comprehensive in nature, the primordial human was brought into being so that God might contemplate His own attributes in the entity created in His own image. Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

Since God – glory to His transcendence – wished, regarding His innumerable and most beautiful names, to see their concrete existence – or if you prefer you could say to see His own concrete existence – in a comprehensive entity (*kawn jāmi‘*) comprising all things [within itself] [...] the mirror of the world had to be burnished. Adam, therefore, is the very burnishing (*jalā‘*) of that mirror and the spirit of that form (*rūḥ tilka al-ṣūra*). The angels [for their part] are some of the faculties (*quwā*) of that form, i.e. the form of the world, which is referred to in the terminology of the folk (*qawm*) as the ‘great human being’ (*al-insān al-kabīr*). (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980: 48–49)

Already discernible in these first lines – with their conscious evocation of the Qur’anic link between Adam and the ‘names’, and their mention of the ancient philosophical notion of the macro-anthropos – are echoes of some of the scriptural verses and philosophical currents that play a role in shaping Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory. Key among such sources is the enigmatic passage from Sūrat al-Baqara (2:30–34), in which God commands the angels to prostrate themselves before His newly created deputy:

And when thy Lord said to the angels, ‘I am making a deputy (*khalīfa*) on earth.’
They said, ‘Wilt Thou set therein one who will do corruption there, and shed blood, while we proclaim Thy praise and call Thee holy?’
He said, ‘Assuredly I know what you do not.’
And He taught Adam the names, all of them. Then he presented them unto the angels and said, ‘Now tell me the names of these, if you speak truly.’
They said, ‘Glory be to Thee! We know not save what Thou hast taught us. Surely, Thou art the All-knowing, the All-wise.’
He said, ‘Adam, tell them their names.’ And when he had told them their names He said, ‘Did I not tell you I know the unseen things of the heaven and the earth? And I know what you reveal and what you were hiding?’
And when We said to the angels, ‘Prostrate yourselves before Adam’; so they prostrated themselves, save Iblīs; he refused, and waxed proud, and so he became one of the unbelievers. (Qur’anic quotations from A. J. Arberry’s translation with minor modifications)

For Ibn ‘Arabī, as for other Sufi exegetes, the mysterious ‘names’ in this passage are the names or attributes of God, i.e. the ‘most beautiful names’ (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) mentioned in Qur’anic verse 20:8. If Adam is capable not only of knowing these names in their entirety – a privilege that eludes even the angels – but also of manifesting them, it is because God created him, as a well-known hadith affirms, ‘in His form’ (*‘alā ṣūratihī*). (For a discussion of the relationship between the divine ‘form’ and God’s names, see Chittick 1989: 1–3.) ‘All the names’, says Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘in the divine form (*al-ṣūra al-ilāhīya*) are made manifest in this human constitution, wherefore it possesses the rank of comprehensiveness and synthesis regarding this [domain of] existence’ (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980: 50; this article follows the earliest extant manuscript of the *Fuṣūṣ*, MS Istanbul Evkaf Müzesi 1933, in preferring the singular noun *al-ṣūra* over the plural *al-ṣuwar* in ‘Afīfī’s published edition).

As for the philosophical influences on Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory, there is – as already indicated – a clear reference in the *Fuṣūṣ*’s opening chapter to the notion of universal sympathy between the human being and the cosmos at large. Derived from Hellenic philosophy, most notably Plato’s *Timaeus*, and Late Antique Hermetic texts, the concept of the human microcosm was adopted by the authors of Islamic alchemical and philosophical writings, such as the Jābirian corpus and the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’* (Epistles of the Sincere Brethren) – works with which Ibn ‘Arabī was familiar – and was also elaborated upon by the celebrated Sufi theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in his *Kīmīyā’ al-sa’āda* (Alchemy of Happiness) and *Mishkāt al-anwār* (Niche of Lights; on this topic, see Lory 2023: 234–249; on the conceptual history of the microcosm in Western philosophy, see Allers 1944: 319–407). Given, moreover, that prior to Ibn ‘Arabī the depiction of the cosmos as an *insān kabīr* or macro-anthropos is (with the exception of al-Ghazālī) rarely encountered in the literature of Sufism proper, it would appear that by ascribing its use to the *qawm* or ‘folk’ – i.e. the school or group to which the author belongs – Ibn ‘Arabī is extending, in his case, the scope of the term *qawm* to cover not only Sufis but also Muslim Neoplatonists and Hermeticists, such as the Sincere Brethren (on the philosophy of the Sincere Brethren, see Callataÿ 2005), a secret society of tenth-century Muslim philosophers who routinely use the terminology in question, as evidenced by the following passage from their *Epistles*:

The intelligible natures of all the previously mentioned simple and composite entities come together in the composition of the human being. For the human being is composed of a gross corporeal body and a simple spiritual soul. For this reason, the [ancient] philosophers (*ḥukamā’*) called the human being a ‘microcosm’ (*‘ālam ṣaghīr*) and the world a ‘macro-anthropos’ (*insān kabīr*). (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ wa-khillān al-wafā’*; 1928: 188 [vol.1])

Ibn ‘Arabī holds that the close harmony between the human constitution and the form of the cosmos is a natural consequence of humanity’s being created in God’s image, since the divine necessarily comprises the inchoate realities of the world within itself. In the first chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*, our author links man’s capacity to reflect God’s names and the composition of the cosmos to the ‘two hands’ mentioned in the following Qur’anic passage from *Sūrat Ṣād*:

When thy Lord said to the angels, ‘See, I am creating a mortal out of clay. When I have smoothed [his shape] and breathed My spirit (*rūhī*) into him, fall you down in prostration before him!’

Then the angels prostrated themselves all together, save Iblīs; he waxed proud, and was one of the unbelievers.

Said He, ‘Iblīs, what prevented thee from prostrating thyself before that which I created with My own two hands?’ (Q. 38:71–75)

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the ‘two hands’ represent the world’s form and that of God or the Real (*al-ḥaqq*). Since the perfect human alone appears in God’s form, he alone is fit to be His deputy:

It was therefore only in order to increase his honour and nobility that God [referred to] both His hands in relation to [the creation of] Adam. That is why He asked Iblīs: ‘what prevented thee from prostrating thyself before that which I have created with my two hands?’ And what is that but precisely [a reference] to his comprising both forms (*ṣūratayn*) [within himself]? Namely, the form of the world and the form of the Real (*ṣūrat al-ḥaqq*), for these are the Real’s two hands. Iblīs [by contrast] is but a part of the world and therefore does not possess this comprehensiveness (*jam‘īya*). That is why Adam is a deputy (*khalīfa*) [of God], for if he did not appear in the form of the one for whom he is deputizing [...] he would not be a deputy [...] Thus, deputyship (*khalāfa*) truly applies to none save the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), for [God] established his external form from the realities and forms of the cosmos, and He made his inner form in His own image (*ṣūra*), Most High is He! (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980: 55)

Focusing on another aspect of Adam’s creation, as depicted in Qur’anic verses 38:71–75, Ibn ‘Arabī draws an analogy between the latent character of the world prior to Adam’s existence therein and the latent character of Adam’s body prior to the inbreathing of the divine spirit. He writes:

For when the Real – glory to His transcendence – had brought the world into being, the existence of the world in its entirety was that of a dull, smooth, spiritless form, like an unburnished mirror. Yet it is a feature of God’s wise artistry that He never smooths a place save it receive a divine spirit (*rūḥ ilāhī*), a [process] expressed as insufflation (*naḥkh*). (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980: 49)

The perfect human’s arrival in the world, according to our author, is therefore the final act in the world’s creation, an act that at once brings the world fully to life and actualizes its

capacity to reflect its Creator's attributes, like a craftsman's burnishing of a mirror. Thus, 'the world', so we are told, 'was made complete (*tamma*) through his existence; for he is to the world what a gemstone (*faṣṣ*) is to a signet ring' (Ibn al-'Arabī 1980: 50; this article has followed MS Evkaf Müzesi, and the *Fuṣūṣ* commentators, in reading *tamma* where 'Afīfī's edition prefers *qiyām*). It is to be noted, moreover, that the perfect human's existence in the world is by no means deemed to end with Adam. On the contrary, for Ibn 'Arabī and his followers there must always be a perfect human in the world for as long as the world is destined to exist, since the world is 'preserved' (*maḥfūz*) through his living presence (see Ibn al-'Arabī 1980: 50). As the thirteenth-century interpreter of Ibn 'Arabī's thought, 'Azīz Nasafī, phrases it:

Now know that this perfect human (*insān-i kāmīl*) has many names [...] O Dervish, they call him [...] Imam, and caliph, and pole (*qutb*), and companion of time (*ṣāhib-i zamān*) [...] and great antidote (*tiryāq-i buzurq*), and greatest elixir [...] There is always a perfect human in the world, and there is never more than one [at a time]. For all beings are like a single body of which the perfect human is the heart; and beings cannot be without a heart. ('Azīz Nasafī, *Majmū'ah-yi rasā'il mashhūr bih kitāb al-insān al-kāmīl*; 1962: 5)

Although chapter one of the *Fuṣūṣ* has come to be regarded as the doctrine's *locus classicus*, this is not to say that Ibn 'Arabī's treatment of it is confined to that work alone. The theory appears in numerous passages of his multi-volume *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya* (The Meccan Illuminations), where it tends to be expressed with greater clarity and in a manner more closely resembling its subsequent iterations at the hands of Ibn 'Arabī's followers than is the case in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. The following passage from the *Futūḥāt* is indicative in this respect; and it is also worth noting that Ibn 'Arabī links the concept of the perfect human to Muḥammad in this instance through the mention of the gift of 'comprehensiveness of speech', which, according to a hadith, is one of Muḥammad's distinctive privileges:

God did not create the heavens, the earth, and what lies between, in vain. Nor did He create man without a purpose. On the contrary, He created him so that he alone should be in His form (*ṣūra*). Everyone in the world is ignorant of the universal whole, cognizant of only a part thereof, save the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmīl*), and he alone. For God 'taught him the names, all of them', and granted him 'comprehensiveness of speech' (*jawāmi' al-kalīm*). Hence his form was perfect and complete, and he combined within himself the Real's form (*ṣūrat al-ḥaqq*) and that of the world. He is therefore a boundary (*barzakh*) between the Real and the world, a mirror set aright. God sees His own form in the mirror of the human being, and [His] creation sees its form therein likewise. Whoever attains this rank thereby attains the degree of that perfection in relation to which there cannot possibly be anything more perfect. (Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*; 1998: 386 [vol. 3])

Finally, regarding the mention of the attainment of degrees of perfection (*kamāl*) at the end of this passage, it is worth noting that Platonism and Hermeticism are not the only

philosophical influences apparent in the Sufi doctrine of the perfect human. Although not explicitly acknowledged by its authors – and while it may simply be due to the permeation of Avicennian ideas into Muslim intellectual discourse in general – it is clear that the Sufi concept of human perfection owes much to the Aristotelian teleology of the Muslim philosophers (*falāsifa*). In a similar vein to the theory of the microcosm, the term *kamāl* rarely appears in Sufi literature before Ibn ‘Arabī. It abounds, however, in the writings of Muslim Aristotelians, such as al-Fārābī (d. 338/950) and Avicenna (d. 428/1037), central as it is to the core Aristotelian premise whereby the perfection or entelechy of individuals resides in the complete fulfilment of their specific nature. On this score, however, it is important to bear in mind that whereas, for the philosophers, the specific perfection of human beings resides in the full actualization of their intellect, for Ibn ‘Arabī’s followers it consists, as we shall see, in liberation from all determinate states of being.

3 The mature theory of the perfect human

Chiefly due to the considerable influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, the distinction between determinate and indeterminate states of being plays a fundamental role in the mature doctrine of the perfect human. For this doctrine’s proponents, the key to understanding the perfect human’s nature lies, as already mentioned, in his being a physical manifestation of the ‘first [ontological] determination’ (*al-ta‘ayyun al-awwal*), or in other words, the first determinate hypostasis of the divine absolute. This is the level at which God is conceived of as knowing Himself and, by that token, all the determinate possibilities comprised in His indeterminate Essence. Insofar as the perfect human’s metaphysical rank is deemed identical with this ‘first determination’, the pioneering *Fuṣūṣ* commentator, Mu‘ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī, says of him:

He is the boundary (*barzakh*) between the seas of necessity and contingency, and the dividing line (*al-ḥadd al-fāṣil*) between determination (*ta‘ayyun*) and non-determination (*lā ta‘ayyun*), constraint (*taqayyud*) and absoluteness (*itlāq*). By dint of his completeness, the perfect human comprises, in an all-encompassing and actualized unity, all these totalities [within himself]. (Mu‘ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*; 1982: 64).

And, expanding on the relationship between God’s self-knowledge and the manifest form of the perfect human, al-Qūnawī writes:

He is a perfect mirror of the Real, in which the Real appears, in terms of His essence, names attributes, effects, and aspects, in a manner analogous to the way in which He knows Himself through Himself and in Himself. (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, *Risālat al-Nuṣūṣ*; 1983: 42)

In the mature doctrine articulated by successive generations of Ibn ‘Arabī’s followers, God’s self-knowledge is also equated with the divine ‘form’ (*ṣūra*) in which God created

the perfect human being. Thus, for example, the prominent later Akbarian theorist, Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, asserts that ‘the Real’s form is the form of His knowledge of Himself’ (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, 1911: 164 [vol. 1]). Moreover, for anyone who might be tempted to construe ‘form’ in the sense of a delimited image or shape, the Emir takes care to remind his readers that God necessarily transcends all such limitations:

Whenever ‘form’ [or ‘image’] (*ṣūra*) is ascribed to the Real – sublime is He – what is meant thereby is solely His names, not [the idea] that He has a delimited image or shape – far is God above that. [In the hadiths] it has been reported that ‘God created Adam in His form’. Now the gnostic (‘*ārif*) is God’s deputy (*khalīfa*), and a deputy must perforce appear in the form of the one for whom he is deputizing – such [a form, in this instance,] being His names and attributes. If anything from these attributes is missing, then by that measure will his deputyship (*khalīfa*) fall short. The gnostics all vary in this respect, but the one who manifests the attributes and names completely is the perfect deputy (*al-khalīfa al-kāmil*) and there is only ever one [such deputy] at any time, namely the perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*). (Al-Jazā’irī 1911: 48 [vol. 1a])

Lofty though the perfect human’s metaphysical rank and point of origin may be, it is in his physical existence on earth, nonetheless, that the ultimate goal of creation is achieved. For this goal – according to the theorists of the doctrine of the *insān kāmil* – resides in the ‘bringing to light’ (*istijlā*) of the manifestable objects of God’s self-knowledge, namely the determinate possibilities comprised in His unmanifest and indeterminate Essence. As is the case in the *Mashāriq al-darārī* (Rising-places of the Stars), a Persian synopsis of al-Qūnawī’s teachings written by his student, Sa‘īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. c. 699/1299), the concept of the ‘perfection of bringing to light’ (*kamāl al-istijlā*) is often explained in terms of the well-known *ḥadīth qudsī* (divine hadith) that explicates the purpose of God’s creation: ‘I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created the world’ (on the use of this hadith in Sufi metaphysics, see Eschraghi 2008). Insofar, then, as he marks the full manifestation of the possibilities comprised in the ‘first determination’, the perfect human, according to this perspective, brings to light the treasures that would otherwise have remained hidden in the Divine Essence – a process that al-Qūnawī, for his part, likens to multiplicity’s manifestation of the possibilities concealed in arithmetical unity.

In addition to being equated with God’s self-knowledge and the divine form, the first determination is also linked to the underlying reality of the Prophet Muḥammad – considered by later Akbarian Sufis, especially from ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī onwards, to be the *insān kāmil* par excellence. From this standpoint, the first determination is referred to as the ‘Muḥammadan reality’ (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadīya*), ‘Muḥammadan light’ (*al-nūr al-muḥammadī*), or ‘Muḥammadan spirit’ (*al-rūḥ al-muḥammadī*) (see Izutsu 1984: 236–238; on controversies in some modern Sufi circles regarding the use of these terms, see Hoffman 1995: 54–68). Tying the concept of the Muḥammadan spirit to the teleological

function of the perfect human, the seventeenth-century Malay Sufi Shams al-Dīn al-Sumatrā'ī (d. 1039/1630) writes:

Know that the first being that God Most High – glory to His transcendence – originated was a simple, spiritual, singular substance (*jawhar*) – non-spatialized in other words – namely God's deputy (*khalīfa*) [in the world], which is also the owner of the body (*mālik al-badan*) in the [human] microcosm. It is the Real's mirror, in which God beholds Himself in man (*al-insān*). (Shams al-Dīn al-Sumatrā'ī, *Jawhar al-ḥaqā'iq*; 1945: 249)

There is, however, another aspect to the Muḥammadan reality's role in bringing to light the determinate possibilities concealed in the Divine Essence, one that 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'irī links to the perfect human's function as the 'dividing line' – a term we have already encountered in the passage from al-Jandī cited earlier – between the determinate realm of conditioned existence and the indeterminate absolute. He writes:

This Muḥammadan reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiya*) has many names by dint of the abundance of its facets and aspects [...] One of them is the 'first determination of the Real' – sublime is He [...] and another is the 'dividing line' (*al-ḥadd al-fāṣil*) [...] This is because it divides between that of the Real which admits of determination (*ta'ayyun*) and that which does not. [At the same time] for that which does admit of determinate existence, it is a locus of theophanic manifestation (*majlā*). Now this dividing line is necessary to ensure that the [divine] name the 'Outwardly Manifest' (*al-zāhir*) and its sway endure in perpetuity. For without it, the [determinate] details [of the manifest world] would seek to return to the unmanifest (*al-ghayb*) and the universal whole – since all things yearn for their roots. (Al-Jazā'irī 1911: 163–164 [vol. 1])

Hence, while the perfect human fulfils the goal of creation by manifesting God's attributes and bringing the divine treasures to light, he also plays a part in stopping the manifest world from simply returning to its unmanifest origins before its allotted time.

Elaborating on the perfect human's role as a *barzakh* or boundary between the determinate and the absolute, al-Qūnawī holds that, like all boundaries, the *insān kāmil* combines within himself, in a state of 'overall unity' (*aḥadiyyat al-jam'*), the respective natures of both the domains he serves to demarcate. Accordingly, al-Qūnawī describes him in symbolic terms reminiscent of the Roman god Janus. 'He has', says al-Qūnawī, 'two faces' (*wajhān*). One, so we are told, is turned towards the absolute and 'does not differ from it'. The other is like a mirror turned towards creation, in which the created world sees itself reflected (see Todd 2014: 96–97, 167–168).

Finally, although it was suggested earlier that the concept of the *insān kāmil* has arguably proven more important to the adherents of Ibn 'Arabī's school than that of the Oneness of Being or *wahdat al-wujūd* – a phrase, after all, that Ibn 'Arabī never used – this is not to say that the ontological perspective for which this phrase came to be used as a label is entirely absent from Akbarian discussions of the perfect human. Indeed, in the following

passage from his esoteric *Tafsīr* (or commentary) on the Qur'an, the fourteenth-century Akbarian Sufi 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. c. 729/1330) expressly links the doctrine of the Oneness of Being (or what later became known as such) to that of the *insān kāmil*:

If they but knew Him as He should be known, they would realize that His servants (*'ibād*) and everything else have no existence save through Him. All [things] exist through His Being, and Being is His alone. [Wherefore] the whole visible world (*jamī' 'ālam al-shahāda*) is His outwardly manifest aspect (*zāhiruhu*) and the world of the unmanifest is His hidden inwardness [...] So why would it be inconceivable that some of His attributes appear in a mortal human locus of manifestation (*mazhar basharī*)? Nay [more than that], there is in fact no place of manifestation for the totality of His inwardly hidden knowledge and wisdom other than the perfect human being. ('Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*; 1978: 386–387 [vol. 1])

In this regard, it is also worth noting that, from the perspective of 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī's esoteric understanding of Islam, it is precisely the recognition that God's attributes appear most perfectly in human beings that elevates Islam above other religions. For al-Jīlī, only Christianity comes close to Islam on this score, though in his view Christians limit the possibility of God's attributes appearing in a human locus of manifestation to Jesus and Mary. He writes:

[The Christians] are nevertheless closer than anyone else to the community of Muḥammad (*al-muḥammadiyūn*), for whoever contemplates God in man (*al-insān*) does so more completely than all those who contemplate God in other kinds of creatures. (Al-Jīlī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*; 1949: 81–82 [vol. 2])

4 Sufi anthropology: the doctrine of the perfection of the last

Closely connected to the perfect human's role in achieving the perfection of the abovementioned 'bringing to light' is a principle that al-Qūnawī calls the 'perfection of the last' (*kamāl al-ākhirīya*). At first sight, the basic premise of this doctrine appears paradoxical. Man's physical existence, so it claims, comes at the very bottom of the hierarchical chain of being precisely because his metaphysical starting point is higher than that of any other created entity, angels included (see Todd 2014: 107–109). In his treatise on the forty (according to his enumeration) levels of existence, the *Kitāb Marātib al-wujūd* (The Book of the Levels of Existence), 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī presents this paradox as follows:

The fortieth level of existence is that of the human being. With him the levels culminate, the world is completed, and the Real – glory to His transcendence – appears in His most complete theophany, in accordance with His names and attributes. For man is the lowliest of beings in terms of his rank in [the realm of concrete] existence, yet he is the highest in terms of his rank in the [domain of] perfections. Of no one else is this true. We have already

explained how he combines within himself the realities of things divine and created [...] and whatever you see or hear in the external world is but a subtle prolongation (*raqīqa*) of the human being. (‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *Kitāb Marātib al-wujūd*; 1956: 10)

For al-Qūnawī, and indeed for the Akbarian school generally thereafter, the paradox is explained by reference to the all-embracing comprehensiveness (*jam’īya*) implicit in man’s metaphysical rank. Like arithmetical unity in relation to the series of numbers that it generates, man’s metaphysical rank contains the entire hierarchy of determinate states of being within itself. In this connection, the celebrated *Fuṣūṣ* commentator Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī writes:

The rank (*martaba*) of the perfect human consists in the synthesis (*jam’*) of all [existential] degrees, whether divine or cosmological: from universal and individual intellects and souls, and the degrees of nature, to the lowest points to which existence descends. (Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*; 1966: 24)

The implicit comprehensiveness of man’s metaphysical rank is therefore – so al-Qūnawī and his followers argue – reflected, specifically, in the actual comprehensiveness of his bodily existence. As the sum product of the chain of being, he contains the entire chain within himself.

It is in the perfect human’s physical existence, then, in the elemental world of bodies, that the ‘perfection of bringing to light’ is achieved in its fullest form. In this regard, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī holds, like al-Qūnawī, that while higher degrees of existence, such as the world of spirits, may be intrinsically ‘nobler’ (*ashraf*), the manifestation of Being in corporeal degrees is nevertheless ‘more complete’ (*akmal*) (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, 1911: 154 [vol. 1]).

5 The Prophet Muḥammad’s place in the theory of the perfect human

For Ibn ‘Arabī’s school, the general principle of the ‘perfection of the last’ holds true, likewise, for Muḥammad’s place at the end of the line of prophets. Though he is the last prophet to appear in terms of his physical existence, his underlying metaphysical reality – the *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiya* – is nonetheless identical, so Ibn ‘Arabī asserts in his *Kitāb ‘Anqā’ Mughrib* (Book of the Fabulous Gryphon), with the animating spirit (see Q. 32:9; 38:72) that God breathed into Adam after fashioning his body, a claim Ibn ‘Arabī reinforces by invoking the hadith in which Muḥammad states that ‘I was a prophet when Adam was still between water and clay’ (see Chodkiewicz 1993: 69). Conceived of as the primordial and abiding spirit of both prophethood and human perfection, from Adam onwards, the *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiya* is made fully manifest at the end of the cycle of prophethood in the person of Muḥammad, whose corporeal existence closes the cycle, just as his spiritual

reality had started it. Hence, in the chapter on the 'singular wisdom' (*ḥikma fardīya*) associated with Muḥammad – the last of the twenty seven chapters in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* – Ibn 'Arabī states:

His wisdom is singular because he is the most perfect being (*akmal mawjūd*) in this human species. That is why things begin with and are sealed with him. He 'was a prophet when Adam was still between water and clay'. Then through his elemental genesis he was the seal of the prophets. (Ibn al-'Arabī 1980: 214)

For Ibn 'Arabī, the Muḥammadan spirit is therefore the wellspring from which prophecy has flowed through the ages. Just as Muḥammad's metaphysical primordially is reflected in the comprehensiveness of his existence, so is the spiritual primordially of Muḥammad's prophethood reflected in the unique universality of his mission – as a prophet to humanity as a whole – and in the attendant fact that his *sharī'a* comprises all previous systems of law, both revealed and human:

Since Muḥammad's rank is that of [universal] mastery (*siyāda*) [...] and since he was given this status 'when Adam was still between water and clay', we therefore know that he has assisted every perfect human characterized by the [founding of] a system of law, be it divinely inspired or rooted in human wisdom (*man 'ūt bi-nāmūs ilāhī aw ḥikmī*) [...] So when he came forth [as a mortal prophet and lawgiver] he was like the sun, in whose light all other lights merge. Thus, of his laws (*sharā'ī*), which his deputies (*nuwwāb*) had delivered [through the ages], he confirmed some [parts] and abrogated others. (Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*; 1998: 140 [vol. 3])

Yet, although Ibn 'Arabī equates, as we have seen, the 'Muḥammadan spirit' or 'Muḥammadan reality' with the spirit of the primordial *insān kāmil*, he does not, as Fitzroy Morrissey has noted, apply the term *insān kāmil* directly to Muḥammad himself. This practice, however, changes dramatically in the writings of 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī. In al-Jīlī's works, Muḥammad is explicitly identified as the *insān kāmil* par excellence in whom all perfect humans participate, regardless of their individual identities, a view that would later be shared by other Akbarians, including 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'irī (see Morrissey 2020: 131, 135, 150). Al-Jīlī famously writes:

Know, may God preserve you, that the perfect human is the pole (*quṭb*) around whom revolve the spheres of existence from start to end. He is one [and the same] from the dawn of existence to the end of time. He has, however, a variety of raiments (*malābis*) and appears in the temples (*kanā'is*) [of different religions]. Wherefore, the name he has in one garment (*libās*) is not the same as the name he has in another. Even so, his original name, which is [properly] his, is Muḥammad; and [accordingly] his agnomen (*kunya*) is Abū al-Qāsim, his characteristic name (*waṣf*) is 'Abd Allah, and his honorific (*laqab*) is Shams al-Dīn. But he has other names in other raiments. Indeed, in every era (*zamān*) he has a name appropriate to the garment [he dons] at that time. [For my part] I met him – God's peace and grace be upon him – when he was in the form (*ṣūra*) of my master, Shaykh

Sharaf al-Dīn Ismāʿīl al-Jabartī, though I did not know [at the time] that it was the Prophet, for I knew him as the Shaykh. (Al-Jīlī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*; 1949: 46 [vol. 2])

In keeping with this doctrine – and also as a mark of *adab*, or traditional etiquette – al-Jīlī explains in another passage from chapter sixty of *al-Insān al-kāmil* that

whenever the term ‘perfect human’ occurs in my writings [on its own and] without qualification, then what I mean thereby is Muḥammad, may God’s grace and peace be upon him; [this I do] in due deference (*taʿadduban*) to his [spiritual] station, which is the highest, and his [cosmological] place, which is the most complete and most splendid. (Al-Jīlī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*; 1949: 44 [vol. 2]).

It is to be noted, too, that the perfect human being is routinely identified in the writings of Ibn ʿArabī’s school with the traditional Sufi notion of the ‘pole’ (*quṭb*), or chief of the esoteric hierarchy of Sufi saints. For al-Qūnawī, the pole’s spiritual function in relation to humanity is like that of the heart in relation to the body; and for his master Ibn ʿArabī ‘the unique [and enduring] pole (*al-quṭb al-wāḥid*) is the spirit (*rūḥ*) of Muḥammad, may God’s grace and peace be upon him; it assists all prophets and envoys – may God’s grace be upon them all – and poles from the beginning of humanity to the day of resurrection’ (Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*; 1998: 204–205 [vol. 1]).

6 The theory’s influence on Sufi practice

As is the case with their metaphysical and cosmological systems, the doctrine of the *insān kāmil* quickly became an integral part of the Akbarian school’s treatment of the nature and purpose of Sufi practice. When theorizing the goals and methods of the Sufi path (or *ṭarīq*), Akbarian authors tend to shift their focus away from the psychological introspection (the classic doctrine of spiritual ‘states’ and ‘stations’) that characterized Sufism’s formative period. Instead, the Sufi initiate’s spiritual progress is typically mapped against a framework of onto-cosmological principles and hierarchical states of being (see Todd 2023: 332–364).

To some extent this shift of perspective may be attributable to Neoplatonic elements in the Akbarian school’s philosophical Sufism. Al-Qūnawī’s concept, for instance, of spiritual ascent (*miʿrāj*) achieved through a gradual dissolution (*taḥlīl*) of the ontological constraints that bind the Sufi wayfarer to a particular state of being is strongly reminiscent of the Neoplatonist Proclus’s notion of anagoge; and al-Qūnawī also draws on the Fārābian concept of intellectual ascent achieved through the individual mind’s ‘conjunction’ (*ittiṣāl*) with the universal intellects.

Central to al-Qūnawī’s discussion of spiritual progression is the idea that humans, like any other corporeal entity, are composed of multiple levels of being or ‘divine presences’

– from the realm of material and subtle bodies to the domains of spirits and abstract intelligibles – while their consciousness (*wijdān*) is usually confined to the physical world of the senses (*‘ālam al-ḥiss*). By ‘casting off’, however, the ‘accidental limiting conditions’ that restrict their consciousness to the physical and individual state, they rediscover the higher and universal states of their being; and this process culminates in the attainment of the station of the perfect human.

This doctrine has proved influential. It is evident, for instance, in a key sixteenth-century work of Indian Sufism entitled *al-Tuḥfa al-mursala ilā rūḥ al-nabī* (The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet), a treatise which, in turn, had a major impact on the development of Sufi thought in Southeast Asia. The *Tuḥfa*’s author, Faḍlallāh al-Burhānpūrī (d. 1028/1619), writes:

If he ascends (*‘araja*) and all the aforementioned levels [of being] appear in him with all their expansive plenitude (*inbisāṭihā*) then he is called the perfect human. This ascent and expansion occur in their fullest guise in our prophet Muḥammad – may God’s grace and peace be upon him – which is why he is the final seal of the prophets. (Faḍlallāh al-Burhānpūrī, *al-Tuḥfa al-mursala ilā rūḥ al-nabī*, in *Kitāb Nukhbat al-mas’ala sharḥ al-Tuḥfa al-mursala*, by ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, MS Princeton Garrett 3115Y, fol. 8a; Al-Nābulusī [n.d.]

Al-Qūnawī’s influence is evident, too, in ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī’s account of the Sufi’s apotheosis and subsequent return to the world of creation after completing the *mi’rāj al-taḥlīl*:

When the wayfarer (*sālik*) divests himself (*tajarrada*) of every [mode of] individuation (*ta’ayyun*) – whether of body, spirit, or heart – and his [individual] self disappears (*faniya*), he thereby arrives at knowledge (*‘ilm*) of God Most High and acquires such sciences and mysteries as no mind ever imagined. At this point, God either keeps him unto Himself or sends him back [to the world], whereupon he dons again his old garments, which he had cast off [during his journey]. He dons them [anew], yet this investiture (*labs*) differs from the first time he wore them. For the first investiture [consisted of] divinity (*ḥaqq*) appearing in creation (*khalq*) in such a way that it was divinity inside [the garments] but it appeared outwardly to be a created being. In this second investiture, however, it is divinity appearing in the guise of divinity. This, then, is [the secret of] mystical divestiture (*insilākh*) and the ascent of unbinding (*al-mi’rāj al-taḥlīl*). (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, 1911: 96 [vol. 1]).

Noteworthy, likewise, in ‘Abd al-Qādir’s monumental *Kitāb al-Mawāqif* (The Book of [Spiritual] Waystations) is the way he uses the Akbarian theory of the perfect human to interpret pre-Akbarian Sufi litanies. Thus, in the passage below, he uses the key concepts of the ‘first determination’ and the ‘Muḥammadan reality’ to clarify enigmatic phrases in the well-known *al-Ṣalāt al-Mashīshīya* (Prayer of Ibn Mashīsh), which was composed by the twelfth-century Moroccan Sufi (said to be the pole of his age) ‘Abd al-Salām ibn Mashīsh

(d. 625/1228), and has subsequently been used as one of the standard daily litanies of the Shādhilī Sufi order. ‘Abd al-Qādir writes:

In one of my visions, I saw myself sitting in a white dome, speaking to people I could not see. We spoke about the words of the pole ‘Abd al-Salām ibn Mashīsh – may God be pleased with him – when he says: ‘and make the greatest veil (*al-hijāb al-a‘zam*) the life of my spirit (*rūhī*), and his spirit the secret of my reality (*sirr ḥaqīqatī*)’. I said to them: ‘with this, the Shaykh asked that the “greatest veil” – which is the Muḥammadan reality, and the first determination (*al-ta‘ayyun al-awwal*), that is designated by many names depending on its [different] aspects and facets – should be the life of his spirit [...] Hence, what the Shaykh sought and meant thereby is that his spirit be a complete locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) and a perfect mirror for the universal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-kull*), which is the greatest veil and the Muḥammadan reality’. (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā‘irī, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, 1911: 102–103 [vol. 1])

For the Akbarian school generally, then, the final goal of the Sufi path is synonymous with the attainment of human perfection. This is achieved, so al-Qūnawī asserts, through a final epiphany (*tajallī*) known as the ‘self-disclosure of the Essence’ (*al-tajallī al-dhātī*). Free of all other existential determinations, the Sufi arrives, by dint of this epiphany, at the level of the very first ontological determination of all – God’s self-knowledge – beyond which there is only the boundlessness of the absolute. Al-Qūnawī writes:

The Real’s intellection of Himself (*ta‘aqqul al-ḥaqq nafsahu*) [...] is the broadest of determinations (*awsa‘ al-ta‘ayyunāt*). This is what is contemplated by perfect [human beings] (*al-kummal*). It is the self-disclosure of the essence (*al-tajallī al-dhātī*). (Al-Qūnawī, *Risālat al-Nuṣūṣ*; 1983: 18)

Having cast off the limits that bound them to a particular state, perfect humans are, so our author affirms, in full command of all the levels of their being. Present in all worlds – however lofty or however low – they are, by virtue of their freedom from determination, not constrained by anything:

They are not confined within paradise (*ghayr maḥṣūrīn fī al-janna*) or indeed within any other worlds (*‘awālim*) or presences (*ḥaḍarāt*), as I have indicated elsewhere. Though they appear in whichever loci of manifestation they wish, they transcend nonetheless all constraints, limitations, spatial locations, and times, even as their Lord does. (Al-Qūnawī, *Risālat al-Nuṣūṣ*; 1983: 66)

7 The perfect androgyne: sex and gender in the theory of the perfect human being

At the outset of this study, it was noted that the Arabic term *insān* is not gender specific. Hence ‘perfect [or complete] human’ for *insān kāmil* is a more appropriate rendering than ‘perfect man’. But there is more to this nuance than the issue of appropriate translation alone. Firstly, it naturally raises the question of whether Sufi authors themselves saw

the rank of *insān kāmil* as one that could be occupied by both men and women. (On Ibn ‘Arabī’s treatment of this topic, see Shaikh 2012: 81–94). In this regard, we note that male Sufi authors sometimes refer to a hadith stating that (the Virgin) Mary and Pharoah’s wife Āsiya both achieved perfection. The female Sufi author, and Mughal princess, Jahanara (d. 1092/1681) is more emphatic. In her Persian treatise, *Mūnis al-arwāḥ* (The Confidante of Spirits), she describes the metaphysical state of the *insān-i kāmil*, who is lost in the divine absolute, and then affirms that the term *insān-i kāmil* can apply to women, too, since God does not discriminate between his saints (*awliyā’*) according to gender (see Alam 2021: 276).

Secondly, there are also grounds to consider whether Sufi theorists might have construed the notion of a ‘complete’ or ‘perfect’ (both senses are conveyed by the term *kāmil*) human as necessarily implying the union of both genders. On this score, it is worth observing, for instance, that the *insān kāmil* of the doctrine’s *locus classicus* – the first chapter of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ* – is the primordial androgynous human being, envisaged prior to its separation into male and female. More telling, perhaps, is the following curious passage from al-Qūnawī’s *Miftāḥ ghayb al-jam’*, in which he suggests that, under the right circumstances, the physical union of a man and woman reproduces the ‘form’ (*ṣūra*) of a complete human being:

When there is harmony between the effects (*aḥkām*) of all the [hierarchical] degrees of equilibrium – by which I mean the intelligible, then the spiritual, then the imaginal (*mithālī*) and angelic (*malakūṭī*), and then the elemental, physical and sensorial – and when none of these degrees overwhelms the others in such a way that their influence disappears under the sway of the dominant [degree]; and when all these influences meet in the conjugal union (*nikāḥ*) of a pure, non-perverted human being and a bride (*mankūḥa*) of pure constitution, in a place appropriate for what we have mentioned, and also after the partaking of a pure and balanced meal, then the form of a complete human being appears (*zāharat ṣūrat insān kāmil*). (Al-Qūnawī, *Miftāḥ*; 1995: 44)

8 Super-perfection (*akmalīya*)

Although the rank of the *insān kāmil* is deemed the highest degree of spiritual perfection attainable by human beings qua human beings, this is not to say that, for the theorists of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school, the possibility of further spiritual progress does not exist. Beyond the station of human perfection, so they affirm, are the endless degrees of ‘super-perfection’ (*akmalīya*, literally ‘more than perfection’), where the *insān kāmil* loses himself completely in the boundless indeterminacy of the absolute.

Whereas the attainment of the rank of *insān kāmil* is said to be a journey (*safar*) to God, and the perfect human’s role as God’s deputy on earth a journey back *from* God – in which the *insān kāmil* appears, nonetheless, in the form of the one for whom he is deputizing – the degrees of super-perfection, for their part, are an endless journey *within* God’s

Essence. In such a case, so al-Qūnawī asserts, the human has vanished, leaving God behind as his deputy in the world. In keeping with this symbolism, al-Qūnawī, audaciously to be sure, transposes this deeply esoteric doctrine onto the terms of a prayer habitually recited by Muslims (following the Prophet’s example) when setting off on a journey: ‘Lord, be a deputy (*khalīfa*) for us, in our family and our home’. Al-Qūnawī writes:

The utmost end of all of that, after realizing this perfection, resides in [the servant’s] being immersed so deeply in the degrees of super-perfection (*akmalīya*) that he vanishes in God. [When this happens] the servant (*‘abd*) is inevitably lost in a state of oblivion (*ghaybūba*) in the unmanifest depths of his Lord’s Essence (*fī ghayb dhāt rabbihi*). [Outwardly] it is now the Real who must appear in [the servant’s] place in all divine and cosmological levels [of existence] and in every attribute, state, affair, and act, that had [previously] been ascribed to this human being in respect of his humanity [...] [Faced with this outward appearance] most of the folk of spiritual insight (*ahl al-istibṣār*) imagine [despite their insight] that the condition and status of deputyship (*khalīfa*) [still] apply to the servant [who is thus deputizing for God], whereas in reality the opposite is true [...] Whoever has attained this state [...], and has thereby passed beyond the station (*maqām*) of the journey *towards* God and the journey *from* God to His creation, the journey of such a one remains (*baqiya*) in God without destination or end. Wherefore, he gives the Real absolute power of attorney in all his affairs (*thumma ittakhadha al-ḥaqq wakīl mutlaq ‘an amrihi*), saying: ‘God, thou art both the companion on the journey and the deputy (*khalīfa*) [I leave behind] with [my] family (*ahl*) [at home]. Thou art enough for me on my journey within thee, and as my substitute in all things – and how excellent a representative (*wakīl*) art thou!’ (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, *I’jāz al-bayān fī ta’wīl umm al-Qur’ān*; 1988: 301)

9 The theory’s political dimensions

It is in the sphere of political theology, above all, that the concept of the *insān kāmil* has filtered beyond the confines of Sufism into the wider culture of the post-classical Muslim world. In the case of the Mughal emperor Akbar (d. 1014/1605), it was – according to the testimony of one of his courtiers, ‘Abd al-Qādir Bada‘ūnī (d. 1024/1615) – a direct conversation between Akbar and a Sufi of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school, a certain Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn, that initiated the trend of applying to Akbar the title *insān-i kāmil*. Although enthusiastically endorsed by Akbar’s chief ideologue, Abū al-Faḍl ibn Mubārak (d. 1011/1602; see Ibn Mubārak, *Akbarnāmah*; 1877: 5 [vol. 1]), this practice was a source of annoyance for others, including Bada‘ūnī (see al-Bada‘ūnī, *Muntakhab al-tawārīkh*; 1990: 265–266 [vol. 2]) and the eminent Indian Sufi theorist, and contemporary of Akbar, Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624), whose followers sought to apply the title to him instead.

Prior to the Mughal adoption of this title, the doctrine of the *insān kāmil* found political traction in Southeast Asia, where it played a role in shaping local Muslim notions of kingship – a fact that seems to have been facilitated by perceived similarities with pre-existing Buddhist and Hindu theories regarding the spiritually enlightened or divine nature of the ideal raja. (For more on this topic, see Milner 2022).

But are there any grounds in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers for conceiving of the perfect human’s function as a political role in the realm of temporal power? For Ibn ‘Arabī, the perfect human of the age is necessarily God’s esoteric deputy in the world, and hence the spiritual pole or chief of the esoteric hierarchy of saints. But it may also happen – though it is not the norm – that he is an exoteric holder of power at the same time. In an intriguing passage from the *Futūḥāt* (notable for its strong Sunnī overtones), he gives examples of exoteric caliphs – a list that includes the Umayyads Mu‘āwīya ibn Yazīd (d. 64/684 CE), ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101/720 CE), and the ‘Abbāsīd al-Mutawakkil (d. 247/861) – who were also the esoteric poles of their time:

Among them are those whose governance (*ḥukm*) is manifested externally [in the temporal realm], and who assume the rank of exoteric caliphs (*al-khilāfa al-zāhira*), just as they attain the rank of esoteric caliphs (*al-khilāfa al-bāṭina*) by dint of their [spiritual] station (*maqām*), like Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, Mu‘āwīya ibn Yazīd, ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, and al-Mutawakkil. Then there are those whose caliphate is exclusively esoteric with no temporal authority in the external [world], such as Aḥmad ibn Hārūn al-Rashīd al-Sibtī and Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī. Indeed, most poles have no temporal authority in the external world. (Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*, 1998: 9 [vol. 2])

10 Conclusion

Despite its remarkably esoteric character, the concept of the perfect human has left a lasting impression on the thought and culture of the Muslim world. Emblematic of the far-reaching influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school of philosophical Sufism, it has proved central to many of the quintessential Sufi works of the post-classical period and has influenced the way that generations of Muslim mystics and rulers have conceptualized the relationship between God and man.

Attributions

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