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## What Does it Mean to be Human? Adam's Secret and the Wisdom of Divinity

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*O Oneness! You are the endless, rolling sea!  
It is You who is seen among the many waves.  
Though You have given Yourself a thousand names, a hundred  
thousand forms,  
whatever is said – the sky, the stars, the spirit of the body –  
is You, only You!<sup>114</sup>*

### *Our Strange Situation*

Perhaps we all have those late-night conversations, as the earth exhales and hushed darkness draws out our deeper questions. We take leave of our 'nine to five' lives and discover a precious space to share our wonderings with a friend. The millions of stars in the night sky call us to reflect on the vastness of our universe, and together we fumble at the meaning of our existence. Such musings are almost inevitable. We find ourselves in an outlandish situation: hyperconscious mammals engaged in an incredible range of activities on a suspiciously ideal planet in some remote corner of the galaxy. We are impelled along by powerful instincts, unavoidable suffering and an unrelenting quest for satisfaction – which we all pursue in our own way (usually with mixed results). And then we leave this world entirely, forever, with no idea of where we are going, often just as we start to get the hang of it.

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<sup>114</sup> Ahmet Hilmi, *Awakened Dreams: Raji's Journey with the Mirror Dede*, translated by Refik Algan and Camille Helminski (Boston, 1993), p.53. (I've slightly modified the rendition for the sake of flow.)

Our situation could, of course, just be an elaborate accident of unconscious matter and energy, sort of bouncing around in improbably complex ways in an inexplicably gratuitous amount of space. And yet we cannot avoid encountering moments of meaning. A phrase of music elegantly falls together, touching off in us a profound sense of our human condition, with its poignant balance of pain and beauty. Or we feel the unmistakable, simple goodness of sharing a meal with those closest to us. The question follows: What is the nature of this meaning we encounter? Do we imagine it and then impose it upon an otherwise meaningless situation? Admittedly, when one is in the midst of a meaningful moment it may not matter that much. There are a whole host of things that are likely best left without overthinking them. I do not need to make much sense of watermelon on a hot afternoon, for example. I should probably just enjoy devouring it and move on. If you're like me, however, you can't quite resist the larger questions. Where do these experiences of meaning, goodness and pleasure come from? Why is this watermelon *so* good? This song *so* beautiful? Alternately, when things go wrong and we experience illness, accident, anxiety or loss – why must we suffer so terribly? Why are these experiences *so* bad? Put differently, why is our world so rich in a range of qualities, tastes and experiences? And who exactly are we who encounter them? Just what is going on here?

*The Gemstones of Wisdom* opens with a chapter on Adam, addressing these basic questions about what it means to be human. Abrahamic religions point to Adam as a symbol of our human condition, and so he is an appropriate figure through whom to consider what our human situation is all about. His story is first told in the Hebrew Torah, which names Adam as the original human being created by God (Genesis 1: 26–30), a sort of archetype of humanity. Not so much accounting for the mechanics of human origins, the Torah instead describes the *meaning* of being human through story. It tells us that Adam is made in the image of God, formed of a mixture of dust and spirit, and given dominion over the earth. He is first placed in a primordial paradise – the Garden of Eden – though warned not to eat from the tree of duality, of good and evil. God creates a companion

for him, Eve, from his rib. A serpent ends up convincing Eve to try the forbidden fruit, which she does, and then gets Adam to do the same. God of course finds out and banishes the pair from the garden, to face the trials of earthly life. So begins the human saga.

The Qur'an tells the story of Adam's creation in seven places throughout the text, closely resembling the Torah narrative. Like the Torah, the Qur'an says Adam is a creature set apart from and over the rest of creation.<sup>115</sup> The Qur'an describes Adam as God's deputy (*khalifa*) on earth. It says God blew his spirit into Adam and, as a sign of his elevated status, commanded the heavenly hosts to bow before him (2:30–7; 38:71–2). They all do so, with the exception of a single *jinn*<sup>116</sup> named Iblis (from the Greek *diabolos*).<sup>117</sup> This is the Qur'an's satanic figure, banished from heaven as an open enemy of humanity, jealously seeking to prove to God that Adam is not so great after all, vowing to debase and misguide him and his descendants.

Interestingly, even the angels protest Adam's creation, asking how God can place on earth a creature who will *work corruption there and shed blood* (Q 2:30). God responds enigmatically, *Truly I know what you do not*, and then explains that He has taught Adam *all of the names*, which Muslim commentators have generally explained as referring to either the names of the essences of creation or the Divine names. In either case the names are considered to be a reference to the possibility of comprehensive knowledge, or enlightenment. The human being emerges then as a paradoxical figure, one who has an unparalleled potential for knowledge and wisdom, alongside a tendency towards misguidance, corruption and violence: the human condition is an inherently high-stakes situation.

The Qur'an also mentions Eve (or *Hawwa'* in Arabic), but, in an interesting divergence from the Torah, does not blame her for the fall

115 For more on this see 'Chapter Five: The Poetics and Politics of Adam and Eve', in Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill, 2012), pp.141–72.

116 Jinn are described both in the Qur'an and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Not so much demons (though some can be demonic), they are unseen beings (made of a sort of fire) that exist alongside us, with freewill like humans, meaning that some are genuinely good and can be allies to human beings and others quite the opposite.

117 Fitzroy Morrissey, *A Short History of Islamic Thought* (New York, 2022), p.14.

from the garden (Q 7:27). Instead, the Qur'an squarely blames either Adam or the primordial pair together.<sup>118</sup> Nor does the Qur'an include the Torah narrative of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, though this story did make its way into reports (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Ibn 'Arabi basically subverts this story of Eve being created from Adam's rib, by first affirming it as true, but then suggesting that Eve is created from the best, choicest part of Adam, and hence woman represents 'humanity 2.0' in a sense, or the 'cream' of the human 'crop'.<sup>119</sup> In the seventh chapter on Jesus we will see that Ibn 'Arabi understands Jesus's creation through Mary without a human father as completing the circle that began with Eve's creation from Adam without a human mother, all four figures then intimately linked in our cosmic human drama.

Ibn 'Arabi opens his chapter on Adam with a bold commentary on the meaning of being human. In what could be seen as a radical act of anthropocentricity, he tells us that we humans – these sensitive, anxious mammals – are the whole *point* and *end* and *purpose* of the vast universe and its remarkably accommodating planet Earth. All of existence exists so that Adam can come into being. Human beings fulfill the purpose of the sun and the stars, the planets, plants and animals. As Hazrat Inayat Khan put it, 'the human personality is the end-product of the life process'.<sup>120</sup>

Now, before commencing a collective pat on the back for being so cosmically significant, we should qualify that, according to Ibn 'Arabi, humans fulfill the purpose of the universe *in principle*. Extrapolating from the Qur'an's description of Adam, Ibn 'Arabi suggests that we are born with a radical potential for enlightenment, though very few of us come anywhere close to actualizing it. Those who do succeed in realizing our Adamic nature have historically been venerated as prophets and saints, gurus and buddhas, sages and shamans, beloved

118 Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York, 1999), pp.23–5.

119 Shaikh notes that, for Ibn 'Arabi, 'women are the choicest part of man', with 'a subtle level of relational priority and refinement over men and the "masculine," a position that is a continuous thread in his thought'. *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, p.159.

120 Inayat Khan, *Mastery through Accomplishment*, p. 13.

for the inestimably positive effect they have on those fortunate enough to encounter them. Despite the rarity of the full human flowering, our task is to actualize as much of our innate cosmic potential as we are able.<sup>121</sup> If the question of meaning is paramount, in the works of Ibn ‘Arabi the answer couldn’t be more clear: human life is inestimably meaningful, with the descendants of Adam having quite possibly the most meaningful sort of existence imaginable.

Like many medieval Jews, Christians and Muslims, Ibn ‘Arabi utilized the language of alchemy to describe this process of fulfilling our human nature. We only need to eliminate the accidental defects that hamper the natural inclination of the soul, which seeks to reach its goal; to transform itself from base metal into the pure gold of its divine essence. Correspondingly, a spiritual guide is like a physician who intervenes to help rebalance the elements of the self, removing ailments and prescribing remedies, so that the soul’s inherent gold can reveal itself. In his largest work, *al-Futuhāt al-Makīyya*, or *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn ‘Arabi writes:

Just as metallic bodies are graded in degrees because of the defects that befall them while they are being formed, and yet they [all] seek the rank of completion, for which their realities became manifest, likewise, the human being is created for perfection. Nothing can divert [them] from this completion except the defects and ailments that befall people, whether that is within the provenance of their own nature or due to accidental matters. So be aware of this!<sup>122</sup>

In a profoundly positive vision of the human state, Ibn ‘Arabi suggests here that despite whatever dysfunctional predispositions we may have – the maladaptive character traits, problematic personal proclivities or annoying neuroses that we all seem to carry to some

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121 Rumi described this as though a king had sent us to a foreign land to carry out a single task, but rather than do this one thing, we do everything else beside it. If we do not accomplish this one task, Rumi continues, it’s as though we’ve taken the finest sword and used it to hang wet clothes on (paraphrasing a bit here). For the actual discourse of his on this, see A. J. Arberry, translator, *The Discourses of Rumi (Or Fihī Ma Fihī)* (Ames, IA, 2000).

122 Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Alchemy of Human Happiness (fi ma’rifat kimiya’ al-sa’ada)*, introduced and translated by Stephen Hirtenstein (Oxford, 2017), 61–2.

degree – underlying all of these personal ‘defects and ailments’ is the pure gold of our deepest essence, the Adamic archetype seeking its natural wisdom, beauty and perfection.

To better understand this vast human potential and how it fits within Ibn ‘Arabi’s broader philosophy, we turn now to the three pillars of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought: 1) *God*, 2) *the world* and 3) *the human being*, all of which are organically linked through the concept of being or *wujud* in Arabic.<sup>123</sup> This wonderful Arabic word *wujud* can mean both ‘finding’ and ‘what is found to be’. The term then encapsulates both the subjective *experience* of being (finding all of this stuff going on) and its objective *facticity* (all of the stuff found). We will see that for Ibn ‘Arabi the experience of the world and the world itself are ultimately one and the same, because both finding and what is found fall within being as such. Interestingly, the term *wujud* is derived from the same linguistic root as *wajd*, the Arabic word for ecstasy. The Arabic language itself then seems to suggest that being is both the finder and the found existing in ecstatic unity.

### ***The Three Pillars of Sufi Philosophy: God, the World and the Human Being***

Ibn ‘Arabi begins the *Gemstones* by addressing that most basic of philosophical questions, what theologian John Wippel calls the ‘ultimate why question’, which can be put as follows: *why is there something rather than nothing?*<sup>124</sup> Although the very facticity of our world sort of begs an inquiry, we rarely pursue it. Why is there anything at all? Why is all of this stuff going on? Even if we can offer some explanation for why there is something rather than nothing, we are still left with the profound question of why what exists is so staggeringly *elaborate, complex, functional, beautiful, balanced* and

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123 Mohammed Rustom states, ‘The central concern of the school of Ibn al-‘Arabi is with Being.’ ‘Philosophical Sufism’, in *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy* (New York, 2016), p.400.

124 John F. Wippel, editor, *The Ultimate Why Question: Why Is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever?* (Washington, D.C., 2011).