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On Cultivating Gratitude (*Shukr*) in Sufi Virtue Ethics

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Abstract

Gratitude or *shukr* is one of the most central of Islamic virtues, the importance of which is underscored by the fact that the defining notions of “faith” and “disbelief” revolve around the pivots of *shukr* and *kufr* (= ingratitude). The article focuses on treatments of the virtue within the Sufi tradition, and even here, with a concentration specifically on the importance attached to its cultivation within the inner life of the spiritual aspirant. This is accomplished through an analysis of authors ranging from al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 905–10) and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996) to Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240) and Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 1493). In the process the article examines the semantics of *shukr* in Arabic as defined in the lexicographical tradition, its use in the Qur’an, definitions of the virtue in Sufi literature, the various strategies devised by a wide range of authorities on how to go about integrating the virtue within one’s life, and finally, what are believed to be the consequences or “karmic effects” of both gratitude and ingratitude for blessings (*shukr al-ni‘ma* and *kufr al-ni‘ma*).

Keywords

ethics – gratitude – moral psychology – *shukr* – spiritual psychology – states and stations – Sufism – virtue ethics

In a well-known Muslim tradition, the Prophet was once asked why he continued to exert himself so tirelessly in his nightly devotional prayers, to the point that his feet had grown swollen, when God had already forgiven him his faults, both of the past and future. “Shall I not be a thankful servant (*‘abd^{an}*

shakūr^{an}?)” he famously replied.¹ The story, frequently cited in literature on gratitude,² highlights the central place of *shukr* in Muslim piety. Indeed, the significance that is attached to the virtue is attested to by the fact that faith and belief (*īmān*) appear within the ethical *Weltanschauung* of the Qurʾān as forms of gratitude, with disbelief and infidelity as corresponding types of ingratitude. Even a cursory survey of the language of Muslim scripture quickly reveals that *kufr* is employed in the text to refer both to disbelief and unthankfulness—that it stands as the antonym both of *īmān* and *shukr*. In the words of Toshihiko Izutsu, “one and the same word, *kāfir*, comes to mean a different thing according to its use as the contrary of *shākir*, ‘one who thanks,’ or as the contrary of *muʾmin*, ‘one who believes.’ In the first case it means an ‘ingrate,’ and in the second ‘unbeliever.’” The observation leads to his broader conclusion that in Islam, “one of the keynotes of belief is gratitude, thankfulness. And this is the counterpart of the Qurʾānic conception of God as the gracious, merciful Lord of men and all beings.” The Qurʾān, he adds “never tires of empha-

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- 1 The tradition is found in the canonical sources (A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane*, 6 vols. [Leiden: Brill, 1936–69], 3:167) and often appears in the context of commentaries on Q 48:2, “That God may forgive you your faults (*dhanb*), of the past and the future.” See, by way of example, Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-qurʾān*, 30 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifā, 1996), 26:43; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Arnāʾūṭ, 4 vols. (Riyādh: Maktabat Dār al-Salām, 1998), 4:234–235. For a discussion of what it means to seemingly ascribe *dhunūb* to the Prophet, see (in addition to above) Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 32 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), 28:68–9. Michel Chodkiewicz offers a penetrating discussion of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s interpretation of this verse in *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn ʿArabī, The Book and the Law*, trans. David Streight (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 43–4.
 - 2 For some uses of the tradition, see Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz, *The Book of Truthfulness (Kitāb al-ṣidq) [with Arabic text]*, ed. and trans. by A. J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 46 (Arabic text, section on *shukr*); al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *ʿIlm al-awliyāʾ*, ed. Sāmī Naṣr (Cairo: Ayn Shams University, 1981), 151 (*bāb ikhtilāf al-nās fī al-ṣabr wa al-shukr*); Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Saʿīd Nasīb Makārim, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1995), 1:416 (*sharḥ maqām al-shukr*); Qushayrī, *Risāla*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. Sharīf (Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2002), 332 (*bāb al-shukr*); Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, 5 vols. (Aleppo: Dār al-Waʿy, 1998), 4: 125, 135–6 (*kitāb al-ṣabr wa al-shukr*); Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, n.d.), 2:253 (*manzilāt al-shukr*); idem., *Uddat al-ṣābirīn*, ed. ʿIṣām al-Dīn al-Ṣabābaṭī (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2002), 126 (*tanāzuʾ al-nās bayn al-ṣabr wa al-shukr*). The tradition is also cited in the chapter on *shukr* in ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī’s *Ghunya* (Damascus: Maktabat al-ʿIlm al-Ḥadīth, 2001), 653. However, the entire section on gratitude is more or less drawn from Qushayrī. See also Ibn Manẓūr’s entry on sh-k-r in the *Lisān al-ʿArab*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, 16 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1997), 7:170.

sizing the purely gratuitous act of benevolence on the part of Almighty God, which He bestows. In return man owes him the duty of being thankful for his grace and goodness. *Kāfir* is a man who does not, would not show any sign of gratitude in his conduct.”³

The term *kufṛ*, as Izutsu also points out, did not always connote the idea of disbelief. In pre-Islamic Arabian society it referred simply to ingratitude towards one’s benefactor.⁴ With the rise of Islam, the Qur’an came to theologize the term to imply the rejection of divine revelations while also retaining some of its distinctly pre-Scriptural sense as part of the semantic shifts it introduced in the language of the Arabs. It is significant in this light that of all the pre-Islamic values which lay at the disposal of the emerging Arabian religion, it was gratitude and ingratitude, *shukr* and *kufṛ*, which were selected to function as the pegs around which the key notions of “faith” and “disbelief” would be erected. This alone renders the virtue peculiarly unique within the Islamic tradition—a fact not lost to classical thinkers.

While there is no denying that gratitude has been extolled as an eminent virtue within much of Western religious and philosophical literature, both in modern and pre-modern times, it does not appear to hold the same privileged position which it does within the ethical landscape of Islamic thought. It is true that the Apostle Paul counseled one “to give thanks in all circumstances,”⁵ and there are numerous verses in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament which call to mind the importance of cultivating gratitude. We are reminded of such passages as “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever,”⁶ or “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving.”⁷ Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that gratitude neither figures in the eight beatitudes of Christ at the Sermon on the Mount, nor within the scheme of the four cardinal and three theological virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance; faith, hope and love).⁸ Likewise, ingratitude was excluded from the list of both the

3 Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen University Press, 2002), 26.

4 Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious*, 26; cf. idem., *God and the Man in the Qurʾān*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2003), 15.

5 1st Thessalonians, 5:18.

6 Psalm, 107:1.

7 Psalm, 50:14.

8 For an excellent study of this scheme found in both classical and medieval literature, see István P. Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages: A Study in Moral Thought from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 270.

quartet of cardinal vices, and the septet of deadly sins.⁹ When gratitude was addressed, at least by a thinker of some note, it was often treated simply as a subspecies of justice, as we find for example in the short section devoted to the virtue—penetrating as it is—in St. Thomas Aquinas’s encyclopedic *Summa Theologiae*.¹⁰ In contemporary ethics, gratitude figures even less prominently in the absence of a need to be thankful to God. This is evidenced, for example, by Fred Berger’s claim that “[g]ratitude is not a subject much discussed in the philosophical literature,”¹¹ or Terrence McConnell’s observation in the introduction to a detailed study of the virtue, that it stands “on the edge” of moral theory.¹² Only recently has gratitude really come to the forefront of intellectual inquiry within the burgeoning field of positive psychology, as a result of some of the startling health benefits which the concerted and active cultivation of the emotion has been found to yield.¹³ Outside of these recent developments, however, it has often remained on the sidelines both in theological and especially secular writings, at least in relation to other virtues.¹⁴

The purpose of this article is add to our knowledge of *shukr* in Islam by focusing specifically on its conceptualization within the Sufi tradition, and even here, with a general focus on the importance attached to its cultivation. In doing so, it is hoped that this paper will contribute to our knowledge of

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- 9 See chapter 4 of Bejczy’s *Cardinal Virtues* for a lengthy treatment of the relation between the virtues and the vices in medieval thought.
- 10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 41 (*Virtues of Justice in the Human Community [Latin texts and English translation]*), ed. T. C. O’Brien (New York: Blackfriars and McGraw Hill, 1971), 83–114 (Questions 106 [Gratitude]–107 [Ingratitude]).
- 11 Fred Berger, “Gratitude,” *Ethics* 85.4 (1975): 298–309, 298.
- 12 Terrance McConnell, *Gratitude* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 12. Cf. Patrick Fitzgerald, “Gratitude and Justice,” *Ethics* 109.1 (1998): 119–53, 119.
- 13 The literature on gratitude in positive psychology is too vast to cite. For a survey of some of the research, see Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (eds.), *The Psychology of Gratitude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Emmons, one of leading figures in the field of gratitude studies, has made the findings of the field more accessible to lay audiences in *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude can make you Happier* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007).
- 14 Robert Solomon, for example, in his foreword to *The Psychology of Gratitude* writes that “[g]ratitude is one of the most neglected of emotions and one of the most underestimated of virtues.” v. There are however notable exceptions. The Stoic philosopher, Seneca (d. 65), for example, explored the virtue in great detail in *On Benefits* (trans. Miriam Griffin and Brad Inwood [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010]). For a summary of his views as well as others on gratitude, see Edward Harpman, “Gratitude in the History of Ideas,” in *Psychology of Gratitude*, 19–36.

gratitude in Islam already advanced by T. Izutsu,¹⁵ Kevin Reinhart,¹⁶ and more recently Ida Zilio-Grandi,¹⁷ as well as others.¹⁸ The paper is divided into five parts. It begins with (I) an overview of the semantics of *shukr* in Arabic lexicography and (II) its use in the Qurʾān, after which (III) it turns to briefly explore definitions of gratitude in Sufism. It then examines (IV) the psychological obstacles which stand in the way of cultivating gratitude, concluding with (v) a brief overview of what are believed to be the consequences or “karmic effects” of internalizing the virtue.¹⁹

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- 15 Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious*, 119–78. The focal point of his extensive analysis here is on *kufr* and its related concepts. On “thankfulness” in particular, see 200–2.
- 16 Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 107–23.
- 17 Ida Zilio-Grandi, “The Gratitude of Man and the Gratitude of God: Notes on *Šukr* in Traditional Islamic Thought,” *Islamochristiana* 38 (2012): 45–62.
- 18 See Simon van den Bergh’s “Ghazālī on ‘Gratitude Towards God’ and its Greek Sources,” *Studia Islamica* no. 7 (1957): 77–98. Unfortunately, the article is marred by van den Bergh’s attempt to retrace Ghazālī’s views almost entirely to Greek philosophy, particularly Stoicism, overlooking the Qurʾanic and *ḥadīth*-based foundations of the medieval thinker’s analysis. More recently, Ghazālī’s *Book of Patience and Gratitude* of the *Iḥyāʾ* has been translated by the pastor and missionary H. T. Littlejohn (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011). While I have worked directly with the Arabic for this article, I have made liberal use of his superb translation, which I have compared closely with the original. Alma Giese’s first half of the *EI*² article on *shukr* (“As a religious and mystical concept”) relies heavily on Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (12 vols. [Leiden: Brill, 1954–2004], 9:496–7); Kevin Reinhart’s succinct second half focuses on *shukr* in law (“As a factor in public life and in the principles of law”) (ibid., 9:497–8). We also have Roberto Totolli’s “The Thanksgiving Prostration (“*sujūd al-shukr*”) in Muslim Traditions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 61.2 (1998): 309–13. The well-researched article is terse, limited in its focus, and part of Totolli’s broader research on prostration in Islam, and therefore of not much use to an inquiry into the meaning and significance of *shukr* in Islam. There is also Geneviève Gobillot’s piece which compares patience and gratitude in Tirmidhī, “Patience (*Ṣabr*) et retribution des merites. Gratitude (*Shukr*) et aptitude au Bonheur selon al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (M. 318/930),” *Studia Islamica* 79 (1994): 51–78. Mahmoud Ayoub’s “Thanksgiving and Praise in the Qurʾān and Muslim Piety” is a rather general article clearly meant for a lay audience with a focus on prayer, *Islamochristiana* 15 (1989): 1–10. See also my forthcoming article, “On the Embodiment of Gratitude in Sufi Ethics,” *Studia Islamica*.
- 19 The authors whose works will be examined below are not randomly chosen. Their particular works examine some of the central themes surrounding gratitude which will be explored in this essay. It should also be noted that I do not wish to minimize the differences between authors holding to different sometimes competing conceptions of Sufism. However, only an extreme reductionism would prevent one from drawing out some of the shared themes in their respective analyses.

I The Semantics of *Shukr*

The Arabic word *shukr* derives from the trilateral root sh-k-r which means to thank, praise, eulogize or commend someone for a benefit or service.²⁰ The more concrete meaning of the root is closely tied to the idea of “revealing” or “unconcealing.” This is why it has been suggested that the root is a transposition, through a shifting of radicals, of k-sh-r,²¹ which refers to an “act of uncovering, or exposing to view,”²² that is to say, of *kashf*. In his chapter on gratitude in the *Nourishment of Hearts*, one of the earliest sustained treatments of the subject in Sufi literature, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996) states that “the meaning of *shukr* in the (Arabic) language is to unveil (*kashf*) and make manifest (*iḥhār*).”²³ Likewise, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 905 or 910) observes that “the root of *shukr* is to display (*aṣl al-shukr al-ḡuhūr*).”²⁴ In relation to the act of gratitude, *shukr* therefore involves revealing and disclosing an act of benefaction by acknowledging and recognizing it, to oneself, the benefactor, and also, if appropriate, before others. Its opposite, as we have already seen, is *kufṛ*, which entails a concealing of that very gesture in a display of ingratitude. The *kāfir* is a “concealer” in much the same way that the *shākīr* is a “revealer.” Aside from the notion of unveiling or revealing, *shukr* also signifies, within the constellation of its more concrete imagery, the idea of “being full.”²⁵ The 8th form of the verb, *ishtakara*, for example, refers to an udder becoming full. And the *shakūr* is a “beast that fattens up with a small amount of fodder, as if to show gratitude [...] Its gratitude entails making obvious its blessing, and revealing its fodder [in the form of its fat].”²⁶ The apparently contrasting imageries of becoming full and unveiling are not mutually exclusive within the context of gratitude,

20 Lane, s.v. “sh-k-r.”

21 *maqlūb ‘an al-kashr*. Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt alfāz al-qur’ān*, ed. Najīb al-Majidī (Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-‘Aṣriyya, 2006). 283. Cf. Tirmidhī, *‘Ilm al-awliyā’*, 157; idem., *al-Furūq wa man’ al-tarāduf*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Juyūshī (Cairo: Maktabat al-‘Imān, 2005), 117; Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:414; Shihāb al-Dīn ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, eds. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. al-Sharīf (Cairo: Maktabat al-‘Imān, 2005), 477.

22 Lane, s.v. “sh-k-r.” Hence the expression *kashara ‘an asnānihi*, which means “*He displayed his teeth, or grinned*.” Lane, s.v. “k-sh-r.”

23 Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:414. Suhrawardī provides a virtually identical definition in the *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, 477.

24 Tirmidhī, *al-Furūq*, 117; cf. idem., *‘Ilm al-awliyā’*, 156.

25 Lane, s.v. “sh-k-r.” See also Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārīj*, 2:253; Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 493.

26 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 7:171. See also Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 333.

since, as in the example just cited, the beast reveals and makes manifest what it has been generously fed through its flesh. The imagery of fullness or becoming full allows one to understand how *shukr* also refers to the abundance of one's praise for the benefactor. In this light, we can also see why *shukr* has as one of its meanings *ziyāda* or an "increase."²⁷

II *Shukr* in the Qur'an

Derivatives of sh-k-r appear in the Qur'an a total of 75 times. In 8 of these instances, God is the subject of *shukr*. When used of God, the word signifies His generous recompense or requital for human piety. In the words of Qushayrī (d.1072), it refers to "His bestowal of a great reward for a small act (of devotion)."²⁸ God is described both by the active participle, *shākir* ("the Grateful"), and the intensive active participle, *shakūr* ("The All-Grateful" or "Oft-Grateful One"), both divine names.²⁹ Of these two, the more commonly used is *shakūr*, a name which highlights belief in the incommensurable generosity of God. Indeed, in two of the four instances where *shakūr* appears, it is preceded by mention of divine *fadl*, His overwhelming grace or favor, (as opposed to His *'adl*, justice).³⁰ Interestingly, the name that is most often coupled with *shakūr* is *ghafūr*, the "All-Forgiving." The coupling takes place in three verses,³¹ the contents of which center around God's bounteous rewards in the afterlife. The pairing emphasizes both a clearing of slate and pardon for past wrongs, as well as a generous recompense for one's goodness. Lost in translation, however, is the subtle, poetic imagery created by this juxtaposing of names, most discernable to those early listeners of Scripture whose ears were attuned to the nuances of classical Arabic. *Ghafūr* comes from a root which, in its more concrete sense, means to

27 Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d. 1077), *Sabwat al-ʿarīfīn wa uns al-mushtāqīn*, eds. Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 164. For more on the little known author of this work, see the fine editorial introduction.

28 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 333. Divine *shukr* also signifies God's satisfaction, good will, and forgiveness. Lane, s.v., "sh-k-r." Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt*, 283–4. While the translations of passages from Qushayrī's *Risāla* are my own, I have often consulted for this article the fine renditions of Rabia Harris (Chicago: Kazi, 2002) and Alexander Knysh (London: Garnet Publishing, 2007).

29 Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-asmāʾ*, 1:128. *Al-Shākir* does not, however, always figure into the classical lists of divine names (unlike *al-Shakūr*). Zilio-Grandi, "The Gratitude of Man and the Gratitude of God," 46.

30 Q 35:30 and 42:22.

31 Q 35:30, 35:34 and 42:23.

“cover,” “hide” or “conceal.” In the words of Iṣfahānī, it refers to “clothing that protects one from filth (*ilbās mā yaṣūnuhu ‘an al-danas*).”³² God’s forgiveness or *maghfira* refers therefore to a covering of sins, or the sinner himself,³³ so as to protect him from His own judgment and chastisement. The act is itself one of mercy and benevolence—the theological equivalent, in some respects, of atonement in Christianity. When the Qur’an brings *shakūr* and *ghafūr* together, there is an inversely symmetrical image created through an interplay of names of God as both concealer and revealer: He hides and conceals the sinner, or his sins, and thereby forgives him, just as He discloses his good deeds and thereby rewards him.³⁴ This pairing is also found in the *ḥadīth* literature.³⁵

Derivatives of *shukr* appear much more frequently in the Qur’an in relation to the human being. A number of verses tie in human *shukr* to divine *faḍl*,

32 Iṣfahānī’s definition is of the verbal noun, *Mufradāt*, 379. Cf. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 10:91; Lane, s.v. “gh-f-r.” Note that from gh-f-r we also get *mighfar*, which refers to mail worn underneath a helmet, underscoring the notion of protection. The Prophet wore such a *mighfar* over his head as he entered Mecca on the day of its conquest. Wensinck, *Concordance*, 4:450.

33 The Arabic lexicographical and Qur’anic exegetical traditions leave open both possibilities. In either case, God’s end is the same, to protect the sinner from His own judgment. Ibn Manẓūr notes that to say “God *ghafara* his sins” is to mean that “He concealed them (*satarahā*).” *Ghafūr* and *ghaffār*, moreover, refer to God as the one who “conceals the sins of His servants.” *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 10:91. Iṣfahānī draws attention to the other possibility in his *Mufradāt*, 379. See also Lane, who cites both views, c.v. “gh-f-r.” God’s concealing (*sitr*) may also involve hiding the sins from others, so as to prevent embarrassment and humiliation. Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-asmā’ wa al-sifāt*, ed. ‘Imād al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḥaydar (Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2002), 1:104–5. Rāzī’s brief commentary on the opening of Q 40:2 (“The Forgiver of sin [*ghāfir al-dhanb*]”) is also useful. *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 27:24–5. It is also worth pointing out, in this context, that the imagery conveyed by the root gh-f-r may be contrasted with that of the two other Arabic roots from which we also get Qur’anic terms for divine forgiveness, namely *‘afwa*, which conveys the idea of effacing and erasing the sin, and *tawba*, which refers to a turning of God towards the sinner in mercy and clemency, either before or after he has himself turned towards God in *tawba* (repentance). For a fuller discussion of the semantics of *tawba* in Arabic and the Qur’an, see the first two chapters of my forthcoming work, *Repentance and the Return to God in Early Sufism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press).

34 Note that even in the one instance where *shakūr* is paired with another divine name (*al-ḥalīm*), it is immediately preceded by mention of divine *maghfira* (Q 64:17). For a brief treatment of the Qur’an’s coupling of divine names at the end of certain verses, and the relation of this coupling to the content of the verse, see Ibn al-Qayyim, *Asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, eds. Yūsuf ‘Alī Badawī and Amīn ‘Abd al-Razzāq (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2003), 296–301.

35 Wensinck, *Concordance*, 3:166.

specifically as a response to it in this world.³⁶ Not only is God's *shukr* an act of *faḍl*, as we just saw, *faḍl* must also elicit human *shukr*. But the Qur'an also reminds its' readers in numerous instances of the human being's propensity towards ingratitude, a theme which occurs so often that it would not be mistaken to identify it, within the ethical worldview of Islamic revelation, as one of the central moral weaknesses of the human being, the theological analogue of the primary human fault of "desire" or *tanha* in Buddhism, and original sin in Christianity. "Most people are not grateful," states the Qur'an on multiple occasions; "little gratitude do you show," and "few of My bondsmen are truly grateful."³⁷ And near the end of the Qur'an we read, "verily the human being is terribly ungrateful towards his Lord."³⁸ The Arabic term used here to describe this extreme form of unthankfulness is the quasi-intensive active participle, *kanūd*, employed only once in the entire text, and defined within the exegetical literature as *kafūr* (from k-f-r),³⁹ an "obstinate ingrate."⁴⁰ As proof of his ingratitude, the Qur'an suggests the human being's discontentment with his lot: "and of this (ingratitude)," we read, "he is a witness."⁴¹

III Definitions of Gratitude in Sufism

Most of the treatments of *shukr* in the Sufi tradition tend to focus, as one finds in the Qur'an, on the human side of gratitude. The definitions usually have as a common thread a number of motifs the most important of which

36 Q 10:60, 16:4, 27: 40, 28:83, 35:12, 45:12, 40:61. And there are numerous other instances in which mention of *shukr* is immediately preceded by examples of God's many bounties, both spiritual and worldly. See for example Q 2:52, 2:172, 2:185, 5:6, 5:89, 8:26, 14:37, 16:78, 16:114, 22:32, 23:78, 25:62; 29:17, 31:14, 32:9, 34:15; 36:35, 36:73, 54:35, 56:70 and 67:23.

37 Q 34:13.

38 Q 100:6.

39 See for example Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, ed. 'Abd al-Laṭīf Ḥasan 'Abd al-Raḥmān, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000), 3:443; Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, tafsir.com; Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 32: 63–4. One of the underlying imageries conveyed by the root k-n-d is that of barren or infertile land. As Rāzī notes, *kanūd* earth refers to land "on which nothing grows." It is as if no matter how much rain or sunlight it receives, it has nothing to return or show. *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 32:64; cf. Lane. s.v., "k-n-d." This may be contrasted with one of the derivatives of sh-k-r, namely *shakīr*, that is to say, the shoots, leaves and herbage which grow around the base of a tree out of its abundance. Lane, s.v., "sh-k-r." Cf. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, 7:172.

40 Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, 812 and 821.

41 Q 100:7.

are recognition of the gift as a gift, an acknowledgment of its origin in God, and finally, the kind of response which the act of divine benefaction should evoke. The definition provided in Qushayrī's *Treatise* is illustrative: "the reality of gratitude in the eyes of the people of realization (*ahl al-tahqīq*) is recognition of the blessing from the Benefactor in a state of humility."⁴² Or as Tirmidhī put it, gratitude is "the joy of the heart over the blessing of your Lord;"⁴³ it is "the servant's vision of His gift, benevolence, generosity, liberality, compassion, love and kindness."⁴⁴ Likewise, Aḥmad Zarrūq (d.1493)⁴⁵ states that gratitude "is the heart's delight with the Benefactor on account of His blessings, until it spreads out and extends into the limbs."⁴⁶

The focal point of these and other definitions is almost always on God as the *mun'im* or *mu'ī*, the Benefactor or Gift-Giver. This is understandable considering the theological nature of the analyses. Gratitude would never be, as it might in more secular treatments of the subject, construed simply as a positive attitude or state with no particular focal point. The distinction that A. Walker a contemporary moral philosopher makes between "gratitude" and "gratefulness,"⁴⁷ with the former being a feeling or gesture one channels in the direction of a particular benefactor and the latter a broader and more encompassing state in which one might be "thankful without being thankful towards anyone"⁴⁸ because no such source of the gift can be identified, is, needless to say, more or less non-existent in any theocentric framework. Walker's distinction, also present in contemporary positive psychology, is naturally premised on a certain philosophical view which does not feel compelled to recognize an ultimate benefactor, a benevolent deity that is a profoundly engaged actor in the human drama of existence and the source of life's gifts. Within an Islamic and by extension Sufi religious context, however, such a being naturally stands at the summit of the triangle of gratitude, made up of a *mun'im* (benefactor/gift-giver), *mun'am* (beneficiary/recipient of the gift), and the *ni'ma* (blessing/benefaction/gift) which brings the two together. In a non-theistic or deistic

42 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 332.

43 Tirmidhī, *Ilm al-awliyā'*, 149.

44 Ibid., 154.

45 For more on Zarrūq, see Scott Kugle, *Rebel Between Spirit and Law: Ahmad Zarruq, Sainthood and Authority in Islam* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

46 Aḥmad Zarrūq, *Sharḥ (al-ḥikam al-Aṭā'iyya)*, eds. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd ibn al-Sharif (Cairo: Dār al-Naṣr, n.d.), 146. He then adds, as part of the lengthier definition, how gratitude requires conformity to the wishes of the divine benefactor.

47 Walker, "Gratefulness and Gratitude," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series 81 (1980–1): 39–55, see in particular 45–7.

48 Walker, "Gratefulness and Gratitude," 46.

framework, on the other hand, the triangle would simply collapse into a line outside of interpersonal (or even inter-sentient) relations.⁴⁹

For Walker, at least, this does not mean that one cannot express one's appreciation when there is no agent behind the gift. This is because gratefulness, for him, is usually accompanied by a desire to make a return, and this is one feature that separates it from merely feeling *glad*: one wishes to favor another because one has received favor oneself. And so a shipwrecked seaman, to use his example, who has been cast ashore by a wave which rescued him from certain death may display his gratefulness by an act of generosity towards his fellow seamen, the local villagers, or someone else.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in the absence of a clear agent of benefaction to which one can direct feelings of gratefulness, in a continuous state, even Walker would have to concede that such a virtue would likely be more fully cultivated within a theocentric framework which allows one to retrace all of one's blessings to a supreme agent. In fact it could be argued that a person overcome by constant feelings of thankfulness would likely find such a worldview more conducive to the expression and channeling of such feelings.⁵¹ A gift-giver who has singled one out for favor is more likely to elicit feelings of thankfulness than a non-existent or nebulous, vaguely identifiable one.

In an Islamic context, needless to say, the theocentric nature of conceptualizations of gratitude is central. It is so fundamental a character of particularly Sufi inquiries into the virtue that we encounter a view of gratitude which goes so far as to entirely invert Walker's notion of seeing the gift but not the gift-giver. In a saying attributed to Shibli (d. 946),⁵² we read that "gratitude is the

49 In a deistic framework God is too far removed from the everyday affairs of humans to draw or warrant gratitude except perhaps in a most indirect way. Yet even within deistic forms of theism, one may perhaps express gratitude to a Supreme Being for the good that emerges out of the harmony and order of the world which He has created. At the same time, the full range of feelings evoked by gratitude would most likely require belief in a personal God to whom one can relate as one does in private supplication and prayer.

50 Walker, "Gratefulness and Gratitude," 49–50.

51 We may consider the case of the prolific English writer Gilbert K. Chesterton (d. 1936). He was so overcome with feelings of gratitude for his life, his experiences of love, and his vision of beauty, that he felt confronted by what was to him a profound riddle: how can one experience such a tremendous degree of gratitude for life without anyone to thank? It was the answer to this question that led to his eventual conversion to Catholicism. Emmons, *Thanks*, 19–21.

52 For recent scholarship on him, see Kenneth Avery, *Shibli: His Life and Thought in the Sufi Tradition* (Albany: SUNY, 2014). Cf. Richard Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1995–6), 1:513–670.

vision of the Benefactor, not the blessing.”⁵³ Or as another authority put it, “gratitude is absence from the blessing through the vision of the Benefactor.”⁵⁴ Definitions of this genre would be clarified and explained by tradition through an appeal to a stratification of gratitude into various levels, at the summit of which stands a state of absorption in God that is so intense and all-consuming that one is no longer conscious of the gift. It is as if the act of benefaction is meant simply to take one to the gift-giver, in whose presence one becomes entirely unconscious of or annihilated from the gift. And so we find in ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī’s (d. 1088) *Stations of the Wayfarers* that he identifies Shibli’s definition with that of the highest of the three levels of gratitude. In his commentary on Anṣārī’s work, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 1330) describes the experience of one who stands at the summit of this station in a passage that calls to mind the Plotinian notion of being alone with the Alone:

[It] entails a complete absorption in witnessing Him in [a state of] solitude (*tafrīd*).⁵⁵ It is a station where there is nothing but the Real alone, where one does not see anything but Him, and in which one witnesses neither blessing nor affliction, because he is, through his witnessing, made entirely oblivious to both himself and another. He does not see anything but the Real alone, for were he to witness another he would not witness the Real alone, and would thereby not be one made solitary (*mufrad*) [through the station in which he stands].⁵⁶

While most of the treatments of gratitude within Sufi literature seem to acknowledge, at least implicitly, that gratitude at its highest levels involves either a witnessing of the Real alone, or the Real within the gift, with the gift

53 *Al-shukr ru'yat al-mun'im lā ru'yat al-ni'ma*. Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 335. Cf. Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 4:129.

54 *Al-shukr huwa ghayba 'an al-ni'ma bi-ru'yat al-mun'im*. Cited in Suhrawardī and attributed to an anonymous authority, *Awārif*, 476.

55 As Chittick notes, *tafrīd* is often used as a quasi-synonym of *tajrīd* or “disengagement,” where one is removed from everything other than God. The state of *tafrīd* is also one of true *tawḥīd*, in that one becomes solitary with the Solitary. *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 156, 244.

56 ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī, *Sharḥ manāzil al-sā'irīn*, ed. Muḥsin Bidārfar (Qum: Intishārāt-i Bīdār, 1971), 216. The same tripartite classification is found in the Andalusian Ibn Juzayy al-Kalbī, who writes that the highest of the three levels of gratitude involves “becoming absent from witnessing the blessing by witnessing the Benefactor.” *Tasfiyat al-qulūb fi al-wuṣūl ilā ḥadrat 'allām al-ghuyūb*, ed. Aḥmad Tawfiq (Casablanca: Dār al-Bayḍā', 1998), 63. He is also better known as the author of the short *tafsīr*, *Al-Tashīl li-'ulūm al-tanzīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam, n.d.).

being His own self-disclosure, the focus of Sufi inquiries into *shukr* tend to be on the moral or spiritual psychology of gratitude. That is to say, what should one be grateful for, how might its obstacles be overcome, and how is the virtue to be cultivated and embodied? In other words, what are the rules that should govern the “grammar of gratitude” in the life of the believer? The emphasis within Sufi treatments is by and large on *mu‘āmalā* or praxis, that is to say, in aiding one to develop this particular quality within herself and embody it so as to draw closer to God. There is, for the most part, little in these treatments that a pious believer who disagrees with or objects to a metaphysical schema that blurs the distinction between God and the human being⁵⁷ can seriously object to.

IV Overcoming Obstacles to Gratitude

As we have seen, a recurring motif within the Qur’an’s discussion of *shukr* is the propensity of the human being to be unthankful. This view is not unique to Islam’s understanding of human nature. Indeed, Immanuel Kant recognized this tendency when he observed that “man is so notorious for it that we are not surprised if someone makes an enemy by showing kindness.”⁵⁸ The Qur’an itself however does not go into extensive detail as to the reasons for this. Why is the human being so prone to this particular moral fault? Kant himself singles out pride, but his discussion of gratitude centers around interpersonal relations of duty, that is to say, responsibilities which moral agents have towards their human benefactors.⁵⁹ The logic of his analysis is not easily transposable

57 Perhaps the best synopsis of the doctrine of the “unity of being” can be found in Toshihiko Izutsu, “An Analysis of Wahdat al-Wujūd: Toward a Metaphilosophy of Oriental Philosophies,” in idem., *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* (Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1994), 66–97. For a more historical overview, see William Chittick, “A History of the Term *Wahdat al-Wujūd*,” in idem., *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, eds. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 71–88.

58 Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Mary G. Gregor (Harper and Row: New York, 1964), 128 [458].

59 Kant’s view is premised on the argument that the one who receives a favor finds himself standing in a position of inferiority before the benefactor. By acknowledging the gift, he argues, the beneficiary cannot but admit to some measure of inequality with the gift-giver, because the latter has initiated an act of kindness which he cannot match, even through his gratitude—the benefactor having “priority of merit; the merit of having been the first in benevolence.” The recipient of a gift is therefore put in a subordinate position

onto an analysis of *shukr* in the Qurʾān, which is concerned first and foremost with the divine-human relationship.

Within the Islamic tradition, the most common explanation that was offered for human ingratitude was heedlessness (*ghafla*) and ignorance (*jahl*). In the view of Ibn ʿAbbād (d. 1390), it is because of the “extent to which heedlessness has overtaken them” that most people do not realize blessings and are therefore ungrateful for them.⁶⁰ Or as ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī put it, “how many an ignorant one is there who receives a blessing but does not count it a blessing.”⁶¹ The logic behind this line of thinking is itself implicit within the Qurʾān when it calls to mind human ingratitude alongside God’s generous outpouring of gifts.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) explains the psychology behind ingratitude by drawing attention to the fact that as humans we are inclined only to be grateful, when we are grateful, for those blessings which we feel ourselves to be singled out, that is to say, blessings that appear unique or specific to us.⁶² Our ingratitude for general blessings (*niʿam Allāh taʿālā al-ʿamma*),⁶³ on the other hand, those blessings which are distributed to everyone and which accompany us in all of our states, is, for Ghazālī at least, the result of extreme ignorance. He provides the example of air, a general blessing since everyone has their share of it, to convey his point. This is the kind of blessing an unreflective person might only reckon a blessing if he were choked and then released, locked in a bathhouse with little more than scorching hot air to breath, and then freed, or if he fell to the bottom of a well surrounded by unbearably cold and moist air, and then, by some miracle of chance, was rescued. Only such extreme circumstances would induce him to appreciate the preciousness of an element he might never have given much thought and be moved to gratitude. The same could be said if he were temporarily deprived of the sense of sight, hearing, smell, or any other general blessing essential to an overall condition of well-being. The tendency only to recognize the value of a blessing when it is lost therefore has its roots, as noted, in heedlessness and ignorance, since grati-

due to the debt of gratitude created by the act of benefaction. And so he writes, “[i]s it not this—namely pride—that causes so much ingratitude?—seeing another above oneself and feeling repugnance at not being able to make oneself fully his equal . . .?” *Doctrine of Virtue*, 127 [457]. For more on Kant’s view, see McConnell, *Gratitude*, 163–72.

60 Ibn ʿAbbād, *Sharḥ al-ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʾiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍā (Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2003), 403. See also Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 4:191; Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:420.

61 Qāshānī, *Sharḥ*, 212.

62 Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 4:191.

63 *Ibid.*, 4:196.

tude tends to be postponed to the moment when it disappears, or when it is lost and restored. In view of these considerations, Ghazālī encourages one to constantly contemplate those gifts which might be taken for granted but without which the quality of life would be diminished, or worse, made unbearable. This includes being thankful even for the intricate and delicate balance of the world, which allows such blessings to come into existence and make their way to human beings for their own enjoyment and use. Since it is through this balance that divine gifts reach us, it too should be an object of gratitude.⁶⁴ Only by actively and consciously reflecting over the most seemingly menial and trivial of life's bounties, therefore, is it possible in Ghazālī's eyes for one to cultivate a genuine state of thankfulness and fulfill the obligations of the virtue.

The idea that humans recognize blessings only when they are deprived of them is a recurring motif in the classical literature on *shukr*. The authors who address this topic seem to concur that it is an underlying reality of the human state, part and parcel of the human proclivity towards *ghafla*. Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh (d. 1309) captures the essence of this condition when he declares in one of his aphorisms, that "he who does not recognize a blessing in its presence, realizes it in its absence." This is why, as Ibn 'Abbād observes in his commentary, the value of water is only recognized by one overcome by intense thirst in a desert, not by the one standing next to a flowing river, or why an insolent, rebellious son only comes to appreciate his father on the day of his death.⁶⁵ It was an awareness of this same tendency that also led Fuḍayl b. 'Iyād (d. 803)⁶⁶ to caution, "remain in a constant state of gratitude for blessings, for rarely does a blessing return to a people after it has been lost."⁶⁷ Or as Sarī al-Saqāṭī (d. 867) put it, "he who does not realize the value of a blessing, is stripped of it from whence he knows not (*sulibahā min ḥaythu lā ya'lam*)."⁶⁸

One of the methods the Sufi authorities suggest by which one can overcome the tendency towards heedlessness is by observing those who are deprived of the very amenities which one may himself take for granted. The basis of this idea is itself found in a number of *ḥadīths*, among them the tradition in which

64 Ghazālī devotes a lengthy section to this subject, much of which would resonate with modern ecological sensitivities. *Iḥyā'*, 4:169–86. While Ghazālī is developing ideas which Makkī's touches on very succinctly in his chapter on gratitude (*Qūt*, 4:222), there are also clear Qur'anic undertones to both of their treatments.

65 Ibn 'Abbād, *Sharḥ*, 404. Cf. Aḥmad Zarrūq, *Sharḥ*, 320.

66 For more on Fuḍayl, particularly his relation to the early Ḥanbalī movement, see Jacqueline Chabbi, "Fuḍayl b. 'Iyād, un précurseur du ḥanbalisme," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 30 (1978): 37–55.

67 Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:421. Cf. Ibn 'Abbād, *Sharḥ*, 404.

68 Ibn 'Abbād, *Sharḥ*, 404.

the Prophet encouraged his disciples to “look at the one who has been given less than you, not at the one who has been given more.”⁶⁹ The intention behind this advice, as is rather obvious, is to make one more aware of one’s blessings by considering the plight of those who are deprived of them. As an illustration of this strategy, Ghazālī mentions the story of a man who used to regularly visit hospitals, state institutions where punishments were meted out, and graveyards. At the hospitals he would observe the condition of the sick, the diseased, and the decrepit. This would cause him to consider his own health and vitality and move him to thank God. At prisons and other such institutions, he would see legal punishments carried out on bandits, murderers and other such criminals. This would lead him to cherish his own security as well as his freedom from the trials which caused others to turn to lives of crime, further intensifying his feelings of gratitude. Finally, at graveyards, standing before the gravesites of the dead, he would reflect over the fact that there is nothing the deceased would want more than to return to life, if even for the span of a day. The sinner, he thought, were he to be given a second chance, would take the opportunity to repent and make amends for all the wrongs he had committed, while the righteous person would use the opportunity to do even more good, having now experienced first-hand the delightful recompense of a life of virtue.⁷⁰ These considerations would cause him to thank God even more.

Along similar lines, Ghazālī relates the story of Rabīʿ b. Khaytham who, despite the completeness of his inner vision, sought a way to further strengthen his knowledge of God and deepen his feelings of gratitude. To this end, he would sleep in a grave which he had dug within the courtyard of his own home. Before falling asleep, he would pray, “My Lord, allow me to return, so that I might do good” (Q 23:99–100). Upon awakening and seeing that his prayer had been answered, he would say to himself, “O Rabīʿ! You have been given what you asked for, so work until you ask [again] to return, but it will not be granted.”⁷¹ While the notion of digging a grave within the vicinity of one’s own home may strike the sensibilities of a modern reader as rather extreme, Ghazālī’s intention is to underscore the importance of consciously and vigorously cultivating *shukr*, so as to make it, through habituation, second-nature. This is particularly because of the ease with which humans fall into a lackadaisical state of mind and become easily incognizant of all that they have been

69 The *ḥadīth* is cited in Ibn ‘Abbād, *Sharḥ*, 404. For a similar tradition, see Makkī, 1:417; Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 4:194.

70 Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 4:196. Cf. Ibn ‘Abbād, *Sharḥ*, 404–5.

71 Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 4:196. Cf. Ibn ‘Abbād, *Sharḥ*, 405.

given. Ghazālī therefore recommends certain exercises of remembrance to counteract the downward pull of forgetfulness.

Our authors also emphasize the need to be grateful for circumstances which could have been much worse. In his *Etiquettes of the Soul*, Muḥāsibī (d. 857) counsels that “you should count every trial which comes your way as a blessing because God has sent greater, more severe trials to others.”⁷² The *shukr* of which he speaks is not necessarily for the trial (*balāʾ*) itself, but for the blessing of it not being greater. The underlying idea is found in the story of the man who once wrote to his friend in complaint upon being sent to prison by the sultan. To his own bewilderment, the friend replied, “be grateful to God!” When the man was later subjected to a beating and wrote to his friend again, bemoaning his own condition, “be grateful to God!” came the reply. Finally, a Zoroastrian with a gastrointestinal ailment (*mabṭūn*) was brought into the prison and had his foot chained to that of the man. Whenever he would be forced to make his way to the toilet in the middle of the night, the man would have to accompany him. He wrote again to his friend lamenting his plight, who responded yet again as he had always before, “be grateful to God!” “How long,” the man wrote back in frustration, “will you continue to say this (to me)? And what trial could be more severe (than the one I am in)?” “If the belt he wears around his waist was tied around your waist,” his friend sagaciously responded, “just as the chain around his foot is tied to your foot, what then would you do?”⁷³

Finally, the most valuable of blessings which our authors never tire of reminding the reader of are religious and spiritual in nature. The Andalusian Ibn Juzayy al-Kalbī divides divine gifts into three categories. “Know O dear friend (*muḥibb*),” he writes in the *Purification of Hearts*, “that the blessings over which gratitude is binding are of three kinds: worldly blessings such as health, wealth and children, religious blessings such as knowledge, piety and good words, and (finally) other-worldly blessings such as receiving tremendous rewards for a small amount of devotional worship performed in a momentary, fleeting lifespan.”⁷⁴ The value attached to the last two of these is found in a story told about Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896). A man once came to him complaining

72 Muḥāsibī, *Ādāb al-nuḥūs*, ed. Majdī Fathī Sayyid (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1991), 79–80. For a brief synopsis of this work, see Gavin Picken’s recent study, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī* (London: Routledge, 2011), 74.

73 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 335. Knysh notes that the belt or girdle in question (*zunnār*) was a sign of the man’s status as a protected non-Muslim minority, 190. The friend’s remark may also be an allusion to having been spared the trial of infidelity.

74 Ibn Juzayy al-Kalbī, *Taṣfiyat al-qulūb*, 62; cf. Ibn ‘Ajība, *Īqāz al-himam fī sharḥ al-ḥikam* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 100.

of a thief who had broken into his home and stolen his goods. “Be grateful to God most High,” he warned, “for if the thief, the Devil, had entered your heart and corrupted your *tawhīd*, what then would you do?”⁷⁵ The moral of the story is self-evident, that as long as one retains the gift of faith, all other losses pale in comparison. Along similar lines, Abū ‘Uthmān al-Ḥirī (d. 910)⁷⁶ observed the difference between the thankfulness of those whose aspirations are noble, lofty, and divine, and those unable to move beyond the most basic concerns of this world. “The gratitude of the common people is for food and clothing,” he once said, “while the gratitude of the elect is for spiritual insights which descend into their hearts.”⁷⁷

V The Consequences of Gratitude

One of the most recurring themes within treatments of *shukr* in the Sufi tradition pertains to what we might describe, for lack of a better term, as the “cosmic effects” of cultivating the virtue in question. It is as if, through a sort of law of cause-and-effect, a kind of divine *sunna* or custom which governs the cosmos, the internalization and embodiment of gratitude is believed to have certain consequences above and beyond simply the transformation of the soul. Among the effects of gratitude, at least from the perspective of the tradition, is that it serves to preserve and safeguard bounties. This is one of the reasons why the spiritual authorities encourage *shukr* as a way of protecting divine gifts from being lost. “Blessings are (like) wild beasts,” said one of the early Muslims, “tie them with the rope of gratitude.”⁷⁸ Likewise, ingratitude is believed to have the opposite effect, by rendering one vulnerable to losing those very blessings. As Sahl al-Tustarī put it, “he who does not realize the value of blessings, is

75 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 336.

76 For a survey of the source material on him, see Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums*, 2:113–241.

77 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 335. It is also worth pointing out here that Kharrāz begins his short section on *shukr* in the *Book of Truthfulness* by calling to mind the gifts of *tawhīd*, faith, and knowledge of Him (*ma‘rifā*), for which God has singled out the reader, before turning to more temporal blessings. *Kitāb al-ṣidq*, 45 (Arabic).

78 Makkī, *Qūt*, 4:421. Zarrūq attributes it to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb while Ibn al-Qayyim relates a similar saying to ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. See Zarrūq, *Sharḥ*, 147; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Uddat*, 127. Ibn al-Qayyim also notes that the early Muslims used to refer to gratitude as the “preserver” (*ḥāfiẓ*) because it was believed to protect and safeguard blessings. *Uddat*, 27. See also his *Madārij*, 2:252.

stripped of them from whence he knows not.”⁷⁹ Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh’s expressed this same notion in one of his aphorisms, when he wrote, “He is who is not grateful for blessings, runs the risk of losing them; (while) he who is grateful for them, ties them down with their own fetters.” Makkī offered this line of reasoning as one of the interpretations of the Qur’anic verse, “Verily God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in their own souls.”⁸⁰ God only takes away blessings, he argued, after the recipients of those very gifts become ungrateful for them. The internal state of *kufṛ al-ni’ma* produces an external effect, namely the vanishing of those very blessings.⁸¹

Yet another though much more serious consequence is that one’s blessings may, through a kind of metamorphosis, metastasize into curses, whereby worldly boons become the cause of loss and duress. Persistent ingratitude coupled with unrestrained, reckless sinfulness may also, for our authors, lead, in more extreme cases, to a proliferation of blessings, but the kind which in fact become the sources of one’s own misfortunes, unless checked by repentance. In such a state, the recipient of these gifts, under the spell of his own self-importance, deludes himself into thinking that they are the result of his own special place in God’s eyes. After all, why would He privilege him with so many favors? All the while, he does not consider that these gains may, due to his own state, become the source of his downfall through a subtle divine deception (*makr*). This particular condition is described as one of *istidrāj*, where the ingrate is led to ruin, through apparent blessings, slowly and gradually, step-by-step, without knowing it. It happens in a manner that is so subtle and elusive that, before he knows it, he stands before his own destruction, even if he only experiences the full brunt of it after death. Zarrūq defines this *istidrāj* as “a tribulation (*miḥna*) which lies concealed in the gift itself, while there remains no fear of trial (*fitna*).”⁸² The basis of this idea is itself found in the Qur’an, when it states, “We shall lead them on, step-by-step (*nastadrijuhum*), from where they know not.”⁸³ For Zarrūq, the fear of *istidrāj* spurs the pious and heedful to continuously turn to God in a state of gratitude by employing their blessings for noble and worthy ends. As Ibn ‘Abbād states, “the fear of being brought low, step-by-step (*istidrāj*), through blessings is from among the qualities of those of faith. And the absence of this fear alongside persistence in offences is

79 Ibn ‘Abbād, *Sharḥ*, 404.

80 Q 13:11.

81 Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:422.

82 Aḥmad Zarrūq, *Sharḥ*, 146.

83 Q 7:82. I have slightly modified Muhammad Asad’s translation here. Cf. Q 68:44.

from among the qualities of the ungrateful ones (*kāfirīn*).⁸⁴ As noted, *istidrāj* is not the result of simply being unmindful of blessings, but a graver and more serious condition of rebellious, sinful ingratitude coupled with a sense of self-importance, the delusion that temporal fortunes are the marks of receiving favor from heaven.

Now just as ingratitude leads to a loss of fortunes, or the proliferation and transmutation of them into sources of ruin, conversely, gratitude is believed to lead to an increase of blessings. This is why Makkī says that “the grateful one is in a state of increase (*al-shākir ‘alā mazīd*),” that is to say, through thankfulness he opens himself to receive even more divine gifts.⁸⁵ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) likewise states that God “has made it (gratitude) a means for drawing more, out of his *faḍl*.”⁸⁶ Or as Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) would state, “[t]o express gratitude is to stalk and ensnare good things. When you hear the sound of gratitude, you will be prepared to give more.”⁸⁷ The Persian master’s words highlight something of the reasoning for why this is the case. When one is genuinely thankful for a gift, the gift-giver is inclined, in the face of a sincere and heartfelt recognition of benefaction, to be even more generous, at least if her means afford it. Since her gift has been acknowledged and graciously received, she cannot but be moved to bestow more favors. God, or so our authors argue, is no different. When humans are grateful, it is believed that He will give them even more of His limitless bounties. But the underlying basis of this view, that gratitude draws even more gifts, is primarily scriptural. In the Qur’an we read, “if you are grateful, I will surely give you more (*la azīdannaikum*)” (Q 14:7). Makkī draws attention to the unique place of gratitude by noting that God does not make as direct a promise in instances which involve His forgiveness (*maghfira*) (Q 5:40), wealth or prosperity (*ighnā*) (Q 9:28), sustenance (*rizq*) (Q 2:212), turning towards the human being (*tawba*) (Q 9:27), or the response to remove an ill (*ijāba*) (Q 6:41). For each of these the divine gift is qualified by “if He wills” or “on whom He wills.” But this is not so with *shukr* since He promises, without qualification, to meet gratitude from the human side with an “increase” from His own side.⁸⁸ Ghazālī also felt compelled to draw atten-

84 Ibn ‘Abbād, *Sharḥ*, 190.

85 Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:412. Cf. Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 337.

86 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij*, 2:252; cf. idem, *‘Uddat*, 127.

87 Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi* (*Signs of the Unseen: The Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi*), trans. W. M. Thackston (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), 188. See also Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi* (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 304.

88 Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:411–12.

tion to this very point regarding *shukr* in the Qur'an in his own treatment of the subject—clearly under the influence of Makkī⁸⁹—as did Ibn al-Qayyim.⁹⁰

The exact nature of the “increase” (*mazīd/zīyāda*) was the subject of some debate within the classical exegetical tradition. Makkī states that ultimately the nature of the blessing rests on how God sees fit, that no constraint can be imposed on Him on this matter. “The increase,” he writes, “lies in the hands of the Benefactor. He determines it as He wills.”⁹¹ It may, for Makkī, involve a heavenly grace that leads to the development of virtuous character traits (*akhlāq*), or the acquisition of particular kinds of knowledge. While it may also be of a worldly nature, the most coveted of increases, as we would expect from a representative of Islam's inner tradition, are spiritual ones. Makkī suggests that the increases may also follow a progression, beginning with an awareness of God as the sole origin of the gift, as one who confers it without the help of a co-partner or intermediary. This may in turn be followed by a more stable state of perpetually witnessing the divine benefactor. As Makkī writes, among the most valuable of gifts is “beauty of certainty and witnessing [His] attributes.”⁹² And the most splendid and cherished of all gifts is the beatific vision, a divine response to the thankful prayers of praise uttered by the newly arrived inhabitants of Paradise. “And by their vision of Me,” a tradition has God declare, “I give them more.”⁹³ For Makkī every act of gratitude, for each and every blessing, no matter how insignificant, attracts through a kind of cosmic magnetism, an increase, just as every act of ingratitude elicits its opposite. The close relation which Makkī draws between *shukr* and *mazīd* in fact permeates his entire discussion of gratitude.

Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240) offers one of the most intriguing explanations regarding the promised increase.⁹⁴ The Andalusian mystic opens his treatment of

89 Ghazālī, *Ihyāʾ*, 4:125. Although Ghazālī drew heavily from Makkī's treatment of gratitude, he was clearly selective in what he decided to include. For the influence of Makkī's *Qūt* on Ghazālī's *Ihyāʾ*, see H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in Ghazzali* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1975), 34–5; Kojiro Nakamura, “Makkī and Ghazālī on Mystical Practices,” *Oriens* 20 (1984), 83–91; Mohamed Sherif, Ghazālī's *Theory of Virtue* (Albany: SUNY, 1975), 105–7; Saeko Yazaki, *Islamic Mysticism and Abū Tālib al-Makkī: The Role of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 2013), 99–100.

90 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Uddat*, 124–5.

91 Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:412.

92 Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:412.

93 *wa bi al-naẓr ilayyā azīdahum*. Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:412.

94 For more on his views on *shukr*, see my “Ibn al-ʿArabī on the Interplay of Divine-Human Gratitude (*Shukr*),” in the collection of essays on Islamic thought edited by Sebastian Günther and Omid Ghaemmaghami (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

gratitude in the *Meccan Revelations*, as Qushayrī also does in the *Treatise*, by quoting the Qur'anic verse (14:7) which serves as the basis for the idea. He states categorically that gratitude “is a quality which necessitates (the conferring of) an increase from the *mashkūr* to the *shākir*,”⁹⁵ that is to say, from the one thanked to the thankful one. After briefly discussing the role which the *ziyāda* should play in the divine-human relationship of gratitude, he returns to the theme at the very end of the chapter. It is here that he argues, in contrast to Makkī, that there is indeed a constraint, that the recompense for gratitude, the *ziyāda*, must be similar in kind to the blessing for which gratitude is shown. In other words, there must be a correlation between the increase that God bestows in return for gratitude, and the gift for which gratitude was shown in the first place. “The verifiers (*muḥaqqiqūn*) take it,” that is to say, the *ziyāda*, “to be of the same genus as that which occasioned gratitude. What is not of the same genus is not (for them) the increase that is necessitated by gratitude. No, such blessings fall within the category of the initial gift, not the category of requital (*bāb al-jazā'*).” He goes on to state that if the return is not of the same kind or genus, then it is simply another divine gift, not the promised increase.⁹⁶ Ibn al-'Arabī acknowledges that the nature of the increase is a matter of debate, but states that the men and women who through their own enlightened states have been able to ascertain matters for themselves know of what we might call the “law of correspondence” which governs the relationship between human gratitude and the increase which follows it. Those who argue otherwise,⁹⁷ on the other hand, do so because of “a lack of understanding of the correspondence (*munāsaba*) between things which the Wise Judge (*al-ḥakīm*)—exalted be He—has chosen.”⁹⁸ In relation specifically to the question of *shukr*, what Ibn al-'Arabī's position naturally implies is that if one wants to receive a particular kind of gift from God, then she should arouse herself to give thanks for whatever portion of the gift she might already possess, be it wealth, health, knowledge or faith.

95 Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Cairo: 1911), 2:202.

96 Ibid., 2:203.

97 While Ibn al-'Arabī does not single out anyone out in particular by name, he may well have had, among others, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī in mind, a figure whom he otherwise esteems for his knowledge of “divine secrets,” but with whose views he occasionally voices disagreement. For more on this relation, see William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY, 1989), 103, 413n17; Yazaki, *Islamic Mysticism and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī*, 106. On Makkī's influence in medieval Spain, see Yousef Casewit's forthcoming Yale dissertation on Ibn Barrajān.

98 Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:281. See also my article (currently in progress), “If you are grateful I will surely give you more: Ibn al-'Arabī and Sufi Exegetes on Q 14:7.”

It is not surprising to find traces of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s argument in the earlier tradition. We have for example the statement of Abū al-Qāsim al-Naṣrābādī (d. 977–8),⁹⁹ a disciple of Shibli and himself a Sufi master, that “he who is grateful for the gift receives more of the gift, while he who is grateful for the Giver receives more of gnosis and love of Him.”¹⁰⁰ The remark not only sheds light on the degrees of gratitude, it also implies the idea of correspondence or *munāsaba* outlined above. Ghazālī does not broach the particular question of the nature of the *mazīd/ziyāda* in any detail in his *Book of Patience and Gratitude* of the *Iḥyā’*, but he does provide an interpretation of the story from the life of the Prophet with which we opened this essay that seems to illustrate the view that Ibn al-‘Arabī would articulate more than a century later. Recall that when the Prophet was asked why he exerted himself so tirelessly in his night vigils, despite having been forgiven his sins, he replied, “shall I not be a grateful slave?” According to Ghazālī, it was as if he said, “shall I not seek more of the (higher) stations?,” to which he then adds by way of commentary, “this is because gratitude is a means of (eliciting) *ziyāda*, just as God says, ‘If you are grateful, I will surely give you more.’”¹⁰¹ Even though the Prophet already stood in a station of proximity, argues Ghazālī, he sought to draw even closer to God, and this he did by expressing thanks for the intimacy he already enjoyed in view of his knowledge of the hidden power of *shukr*. While Ghazālī does not explicitly restrict the *ziyāda* the way Ibn al-‘Arabī does, the example he provides nevertheless appears to illustrate the Andalusian master’s argument, that the nature of one’s gratitude must correspond in some measure to the genus of what is desired.

Conclusion

We began our essay by taking note of the special role gratitude plays in Islamic piety by virtue of the fact that the defining notions of “faith” and “disbelief” revolve around the pivots of *shukr* and *kufr*—that *īmān*, the foundation of all

99 For more on him, see the biographical entries in Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 147–8 (entry # 81), and also Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (1911; repr., Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1992), 159–160. Cf. Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 62–3.

100 *man shakara al-ni‘ma zādahu min al-ni‘ma wa-man shakara al-mun‘im zādahu ma’rifā bihi wa-maḥabbā lahu*. Cited in Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī, *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa al-sawād*, eds. Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 301 [258].

101 *Iḥyā’*, 4:135–6.

praiseworthy character traits or *akhlāq*, is itself an expression of gratitude for the blessing of divine revelation, and that the heart of *kufṛ al-īmān*,¹⁰² the root of all vices, lies in ingratitude. Izutsu, as we saw, took notice of the privileged position *shukr* occupies within the religious psychology of Islam through an extensive internal semantic analysis of Muslim Scripture. “The Qur’ān,” he wrote, “never tires of insisting most emphatically and trying to bring home to man how all the good things which he is enjoying in this earthly life are in reality nothing but God’s gifts. Islam as a religion is, in this respect, an exhortation to gratitude towards God.”¹⁰³ Indeed, from this vantage point, we can see why it is not unreasonable to suggest that gratitude occupies a relatively more important place in Islamic virtue ethics than it does within formulations of virtue-theory typically found in medieval and modern Western writing (positive psychology being a notable exception). This is not to suggest, by any means, the moral superiority of one over the other, but simply to highlight certain differences of accent in the ethical orientations of two often overlapping, even interdependent traditions.

To summarize some of the main themes in this essay, we have seen that the Arabic word for gratitude derives from the trilateral root sh-k-r which, in its more concrete, etymological sense, contains two images: that of “revealing” or “unconcealing” on the one hand, and of “being full” on the other. In relation to gratitude, the former involves disclosing and fully acknowledging an act of benefaction, to oneself, the gift-giver, and even others; in the case of the latter, it entails being “full of praise” for the benefactor. These two notions, rather than being mutually exclusive, convey different aspects of the process of gratitude. We have also seen that *shukr* figures prominently in the Qur’ān both as a divine and human quality. While God is often described by the intensive active participle, *shakūr*, underscoring the perfection of divine gratitude, Muslim scripture also notes the human tendency towards *kufṛ al-ni’ma*, toward an unthankfulness for divine gifts and not fully recognizing or acknowledge the full range of blessings in life. This propensity may be accurately characterized as one of the underlying faults or weaknesses of the human being in Islamic anthropology, a quality that goes hand-in-hand with the tendency towards heedlessness and forgetfulness (*ghafla, nisyān*), and acts as the counterweight to the *fiṭra* or “primordial disposition” that pulls the soul upwards towards God through an intuitive anamnesis.

102 Also *kufṛ fi al-dīn*, “ingratitude for religion.” Iṣfāhānī, *Mufradāt*, 451. Ibn Manẓūr provides a lengthy explanation of the various categories of *kufṛ*. *Lisān al-‘arab*, 12:118–24.

103 Izutsu, *God and Man*, 15.

Our Sufi thinkers—those who probed most deeply into the psychology of *shukr*—were profoundly aware of the human proclivity towards *kufṛ al-niʿma*, and so suggested various ways by which one could cultivate a continuous state of awareness and gratitude for all of life’s gifts, from the temporal and material to the spiritual and other-worldly. These strategies included actively and consciously counting one’s blessings, observing the plight of the less-fortunate, realizing the ease with which gifts disappear, especially when taken for granted, and recognizing that no matter how severe one’s own tribulations may be, they could always be worse, that there are others in more trying circumstances. Our authors all encouraged one to be thankful not only for specific blessings for which one might feel uniquely singled out, but also more pervasive general ones, such as the simple ability to eat, drink, sleep, or breath with ease and without which life itself would become unbearable. And as we also saw, one of the most recurring motifs within Sufi literature on gratitude is what we might be called the “karmic effects” of cultivating the virtue in question, the belief that *shukr al-niʿma* attracts through a kind of cosmic magnetism greater divine benefactions, while its negligence leads to a loss of those very gifts already within one’s possession—whence the need to vigilantly guard blessings by remaining in a constant, unfaltering state of thankfulness.

We also saw that the overwhelming tendency within analyses of gratitude in Sufi literature was on providing concrete measures through which one might more fully internalize the virtue. This is in line with the overriding practical concerns (*vis-à-vis muʿāmala*) of most Sufi authors, who spent far more time delineating the rules that should govern the “grammar of gratitude” in the inner-life of the believer than on the metaphysics of *shukr*.

The relatively narrow focus of this paper, not to mention limitations of space, prevented a fuller analysis of gratitude in Sufi virtue ethics, one which, in order to be more complete, would have had to take into consideration the importance of thanking others, and not just God. As the *ḥadīth* states, “he has not thanked God who has not thanked others.”¹⁰⁴ A more comprehensive overview would also require of us to examine the levels of the embodiment of gratitude (heart, tongue, and body),¹⁰⁵ whether it is proper to be thankful for trials and suffering, the true meaning of divine gratitude, the precise

104 For an excellent analysis of this *ḥadīth*, see Zilio-Grandi, “Gratitude of Man and the Gratitude of God,” 51–3.

105 Ibn ‘Ajība states that only when gratitude is fully embodied at these three levels does it serve to attract more blessings. *Īqāz al-himam*, 100.

relation between thanking and praising God (*ḥamd*), and of course, the relation between gratitude and patience, as well as the extensive ancillary debates over which the two is more eminent and superior. It is hoped that these dimensions of *shukr* will be the subject of more thorough analysis in the future, to add to our already existing knowledge of this most salient of Islamic virtues.