

Vicegerency and Nature: Ibn ‘Arabī on Humanity’s Existential Protection of the World

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Human beings are the vicegerents of God on earth and thus also are the stewards of nature.¹ This paraphrases one of the main themes of the relationship between humanity and the natural environment in the Islamic world, as well as in other religious traditions. Vicegerency implies a specific relationship between God, humanity, and nature, as well as a particular metaphysics, which is what I seek to expound here.

The Islamic intellectual response to the ecological crisis began with the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr. His summary of vicegerency—or of human purpose in relation to God and to the world—constitutes the foundational treatment of vicegerency in the contemporary discourse on Islamic environmentalism, so it is helpful to begin with it here:

Pontifical man is the reflection of the Centre on the periphery and the echo of the Origin in later cycles of time and generations of history. He is the vicegerent of God (*khalīfatallāh*) on earth, to use the Islamic term, responsible to God for his actions, and the custodian and protector of the earth of which he is given dominion on the condition that he remain faithful to himself as the central terrestrial figure created in the form of God, a theomorphic being living in this world but created for eternity.²

¹ This is a revised version of “Vicegerency and Nature” for *Critical Muslim*, which was published in July 2016. I am grateful to Professor James W. Morris for whom I initially wrote this essay in a seminar on Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, and to Muhammad Faruque and Oludamini Ogunnaike for reviewing it. Any errors here are my own.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 161. For Nasr’s perspective on the environmental crisis, see Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 1997); Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Nasr, “The Ecological Problem in the Light of Sufism: The Conquest of Nature and the

Many Muslims who seek to explain the Islamic attitude towards the environment turn to scripture. Although Quranic verses and Prophetic teachings are certainly at the heart of the above definition and of Islamic environmental thought in general, we are in need of recourse to Islamic intellectual literature for a deepened understanding of what exactly constitutes vicegerency in the Islamic tradition, there being a generally growing need for explanation with the growing distance between the present moment and the historical moment of revelation. Therefore, I turn to Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), the renowned expositor of Islamic metaphysics, for a detailed exposition.

Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-‘Arabī was an Islamic metaphysician born in what today is Spain and what in his time was the western part of the Islamic world, Andalusia. For centuries he has maintained a profound influence on Islamic intellectual traditions, and many of the cosmological and metaphysical explanations of reality that the Islamic tradition offers today are formulated through his teachings.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, the creation story is summarized by the *ḥadīth qudsī* of the Hidden Treasure, the version of which that he uses is:

I was a Treasure but was not known. So I loved to be known, and created the creatures and made Myself known to them. Then they came to know Me.³

According to Islamic sapiential traditions, humanity and the rest of creation were created for the fulfilment of the wish of God expressed in

Teachings of Science” *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 1997), pp. 152-63; Nasr, “Can We Live in Harmony With Nature?” *Renovatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College* 3.1 (Forthcoming Spring 2019); Tarik M. Qadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism: The Vision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2013); Munjed M. Murad, “Inner and Outer Nature: An Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” *Journal of Islam and Science* 10.2 (Winter 2012): pp. 117-37; Osman Bakar, “Nature as a Sacred Book: A Core Element of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Philosophical Teachings,” *Sacred Web* 40 (Winter 2017): pp. 75-101.

³ Translation taken from William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 391 n. 14. For a translation of the more popular version of this *ḥadīth qudsī*, see *ibid*, p. 66. I must note that by ‘story’, I do not intend to utilize the fictional connotation often associated with the word, but rather the notion of a narrative.

this one cosmogonic statement. From this perspective, the single purpose of a human being is to know God in a total way, while other creatures each knows God in a partial way. The epistemic faculty that allows a human being this knowledge is unique to humanity, and it is made possible by the human potential to encompass all realities and to be the locus for the manifestation of all of the Divine Names.

In what follows, I find it helpful to also speak of the human potential to reflect God, especially in light of the image of the Hidden Treasure seeing Itself, as if It were looking into a mirror. The mirror is a highly symbolic image in Sufi literature. The 14th century Persian mystic Maḥmūd Shabistarī famously explains its metaphysical significance in his *Rose Garden of Divine Mysteries (Gulshan-i rāz)*.⁴

A full and clear human reflection of all of the Divine Names is a realization of a total knowledge of God, as well as a spiritual realization of the human self. Another famed *ḥadīth qudsī* reflects this twofold realization: “Whosoever knows himself knows his Lord.” This essay seeks to explore the ecological implications of the trifold relationship between God, the world, and the human being in light of this realization and in the perspective of Ibn ‘Arabī.⁵

While many works of Ibn ‘Arabī address the topic at hand, the questions that this essay seeks to answer are treated in remarkable detail in the first chapter of *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)*, namely *The Ringstone of Divine Wisdom in the Word of Adam (Faṣṣ ḥikmah ilāhiyah fī kalimah ādamiyyah)*, which, therefore, is the focus of this essay.⁶

⁴ Mahmud Shabistari, *Garden of Mystery: The Gulshan-i rāz of Mahmud Shabistari*, trans. Robert Abdul Hayy Darr, (Cambridge: Archetype, 2007), vss. 130-64.

⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī does not use the Arabic equivalent of ‘nature’ in the writings of his that concern us here, but rather words more directly rendered by ‘the world’ (*al-‘ālam*) or ‘creation’ (*al-khalq*). I transpose findings on the implications of human vicegerency over creation in general to conclusions that concern the physical natural environment in particular. For the purposes of this essay, it hardly seems like a transposition at all. Thus, I refer to ‘the world’ or ‘creation’ in translations, and often to ‘nature’ in my analyses. Ibn ‘Arabī’s reference to God (*Allāh*) as the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) is also worth keeping in mind.

⁶ It is also worth noting that the above *ḥadīth qudsī* of the Hidden Treasure not only provides us with a creation story and a rich paradigm to answer our questions through, but it also frames and structures this very chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. See James W. Morris, “Divine Calling, Human Response—

Understanding Humanity in Relation to What Is Above It

According to the ontological narrative of the *ḥadīth qudsī* of the Hidden Treasure, the Real wished to see Himself through other than Himself. Thus, He created a comprehensive being that encompasses all truths and that reflects Him. Such a being is like a clear mirror unto God. Ibn ‘Arabī famously starts his first chapter to *The Ringstones of Wisdom*:

The Real willed, glorified be He, in virtue of His Beautiful Names, which are innumerable, to see their identities—if you so wish you can say: to see His Identity—in a comprehensive being that comprises the whole affair insofar as it is characterised by existence and as His Mystery is manifest to Himself through it. For the vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like the vision a thing has of itself in another thing, which will be like a mirror unto it...⁷

In this commentary upon the aforementioned creation story, humanity is the instrument through which God facilitates the vision of Himself in other than Himself. What renders this possible is that humanity is created in the image of God.⁸ Human beings are each a locus for the manifestation of the totality and the synthesis of the Divine Names:

And so all of the Names, which are Divine Forms, are manifested in this makeup of man, and the function of encompassment and synthesis is achieved through his existence.⁹

Scripture and Realization in the Meccan Illuminations, Part 1” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 53 (2013): p. 5 n. 7.

⁷ *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)*, trans. Caner Dagli (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World Series, 2004), p. 3 (modified). All translations of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* are Dagli’s and are modified wherever it seemed appropriate.

⁸ One *ḥadīth* narrates that “God created Adam in His Image.” Adam here can signify the whole of humanity. For more on this *ḥadīth* and its different commentarial dimensions, see Michel Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage: Ibn Arabī, le Livre et la Loi*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), pp. 57-9. See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 275-8.

⁹ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 6 (modified).

Being made in the image of God, every human being can reflect God in a total way, while other creatures each offer only partial reflections. The human makeup allows for the encompassment of all realities and is the locus for the manifestation and synthesis of all Divine Names. To be human, therefore, is to be defined by totality. Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

And so the aforementioned was called Man and Vicegerent. As for his being Man, it refers to the totality of his makeup and his encompassment of all realities.¹⁰

Although the above makes reference to the makeup—and hence also to the potential—of human beings, only the person who is fully realized is a clear and total reflection of God in one single point within the cosmos.¹¹ Ibn ‘Arabī refers to such a being as the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).¹² His references in this chapter to human beings in the generic concern the Perfect Man alone, implicitly offering the Akbarian notion

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 6.

¹¹ Most people would fall under the category of “animal man” (*al-insān al-ḥayawān*) and not under “Perfect Man.” They obey the ego’s animalistic commands and inwardly take on an animal form rather than the form of the Divine. The potentiality of the latter can be actualized only by assuming the traits of the Divine Names (*al-takhalluq bi’l-āsma’ al-ilāhiyya*). See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 275-6. According to Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), a major Persian Islamic philosopher who synthesizes Akbarian metaphysics and other Islamic traditions, while most people participate in three layers of existence—namely, the physical, the imaginal, and the intellectual—the Perfect Man uniquely participates in a fourth level: the level of the Divine Imperium. See Muhammad U. Faruque, “Heidegger and Mullā Ṣadrā on the Meaning of Metaphysics,” *Philosophy East and West* 67.3 (July 2017): p. 640. It is also worth noting that the category “animal man” as a lesser category than “Perfect Man” implies a cosmic hierarchy, which I explore below.

¹² I use the term ‘Perfect Man’, which is applicable to both men and women, rather than ‘Perfect Human Being’ because the former is the established technical term for *insān al-kāmil* within the field of Islamic studies. See, for example, the titles of the following works: Pierre Lory, “Animal World and Perfect Man: Ibn ‘Arabī and the Metaphysics of Ecology,” *Journal of the Ibn Arabi Society* 59 (2016): pp. 57-69; Hossein Moradi, “The Ethics of the Perfect Man: Maurice Blanchot and Ibn ‘Arabī” *Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies* 8.1 (2015): pp. 61-80; Rašić Dunja, “The Perfect Man in the Literary Opus of John Climacus and Ibn Arabi” *Časopis za Religijske Nauke* 4.1 (2015): pp. 119-45; Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Tree of Being: An Ode to the Perfect Man*, trans. Shaykh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti (Cambridge: Archetype, 2005).

of what it really means to be human. Only such a being reflects God totally and so only such a being fulfils the responsibilities of vicegerency. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s own words: “Vicegerency is only for the Perfect Man.”¹³

Not only is a human being like a mirror before God, but also, as Ibn ‘Arabī explains, the function of humanity in relation to God is similar to that of a pupil to an eye. More specifically, humanity is the means by which God sees Himself in creation, fulfilling the purpose stated in the above creation story.

In relation to the Real man is like the pupil in relation to the eye, through which vision occurs. This is called the faculty of sight. For this reason he was called Man, and through him the Real looks upon His creation and shows mercy upon them.¹⁴

In summary, concerning humanity’s relationship with God, the former is at once the locus for the manifestation of the synthesized totality of God’s Names, His vicegerent, and a means for His Vision in the world. This is the case notwithstanding the ephemeral and mortal nature of every human life. Human beings are at once mortal and immortal, ephemeral and eternal, and created and uncreated. It is the latter aspect of each of these pairs that enables a human being’s synthesised reflection of divinity, while the former constitutes what is necessary for the existentiating of such a reflection outside of God who is Uncreated.¹⁵

Existence must be understood here as an attribute of creation and not of the Uncreated. The Latin *existere* connotes that one is ‘stepping out’ or ‘coming forth’.¹⁶ Creation, so to speak, steps out of God and comes forth into existence. God, as Uncreated, is beyond such a phenomenon. With respect to its createdness, a human being is “a comprehensive being that comprises the whole affair *insofar as it is characterised by*

¹³ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 14 (modified).

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 6 (modified). Dagli explains that not only does ‘human being’ render the Arabic term *insān*, but so does ‘pupil’. *Ibid*, p. 6 n. 14.

¹⁵ In Ibn ‘Arabī’s terminology, human beings are necessarily He/not He (*huwa lā huwa*). William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 37.

¹⁶ E.A. Andrews, William Freund, Charlton T. Lewis, and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 702.

*existence...*¹⁷ With respect to the divine constitution of a human being, it is “a comprehensive being that comprises the whole affair *insofar as... His Mystery is manifest to Himself through it.*”¹⁸

Understanding Humanity in Relation to What Is Below It

Total knowledge of God is unique to the Perfect Man. Not even angels share in this prerogative.¹⁹ Nor is the attainment of this knowledge within the capacity of the rest of creation:

[The world’s] perception of itself does not comprehend the Real. It shall ever be within a veil that shall remain unlifted, even with its knowledge that it is distinguished from its Existentiator by reason of its needfulness... It will never perceive God, and because of this reality, God remains unknown both to the knowledge through taste and that of witnessing, because what comes to be has no place in this.²⁰

With Adam there were Divine Names the angels did not possess, so neither their glorification nor their proclamation of His holiness were like those of Adam.²¹

In this way, it can be said that the rest of creation ranks below a human being. This is the case, however, only when the human being in question is fully realized as the Perfect Man. Indeed, several Quranic verses refer to unrealized human beings as being lower than others in creation:

Or do you suppose that most of them hear or understand? Truly they are but as cattle. Nay, they are further astray from the way. (25:44)²²

¹⁷ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 3 (modified). Italics are mine.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3. Italics are mine.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 7. Moreover, prophets alone can perfectly fulfill the role of vicegerent. See S.H. Nasr, “The Islamic View of the Universe” in Z.I. Ansari & I.I. Nawwab (eds.), *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture: Foundations of Islam* vol. 1 (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2016, p. 206).

²⁰ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 13.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 8 (modified). This clearly echoes Quran 2:30-33.

²² All Quranic translations are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria

...truly We created man in the most beautiful stature, then We cast him to the lowest of the low, save those who believe and perform righteous deeds for theirs shall be a reward unceasing. (95:4-6)

Ibn ‘Arabī affirms that at the point of a total reflection of God the realized human being surpasses in rank all else in creation:

... [God] is in every existent thing of the world in the measure of what the reality of that existent thing requires of Him, though not one of them possesses the totality of the Vicegerent. He surpasses not but through this totality.²³

If creation does not share humanity’s prerogative of potentially knowing the Real, it neither shares its responsibility of serving as the Real’s vicegerent. Protection is what characterizes human responsibility over the world, just as it does the responsibility of a seal over a treasure chest.

He is to the world what the ringstone is to the ring, which is the place of the signet and the mark with which the king sets a seal upon his treasures. For this reason was he named Vicegerent, for through him the Real protects His creation, as the seal protects those treasures.²⁴

A human being is not the only reflection of God—so too is the cosmos; however, while the Perfect Man and the *totality* of the cosmos both reflect God, only the Perfect Man reflects God in one single form within a sea of multiplicity. Other creatures reflect something of God, but not the synthesized totality of God. In other words, while the world

Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

²³ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 14 (modified). Of course, there is also a difference in ranks among human beings, as stated in many Quranic verses, including Quran 6:165, which also mentions vicegerency.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 6. One may be inclined to assume a connection between the *ḥadīth qudsī* of the Hidden Treasure and the treasures that constitute the realities of the world that the vicegerent of God protects.

constitutes the very many loci of manifestations of the very many Names of God, the Perfect Man is the locus of the manifestation of the Name *Allāh*, which is the all-comprehensive Name of God that contains all the other Divine Names in a synthesised way. In light of this totality, Ibn ‘Arabī’s school of metaphysics considers the Perfect Man to be “like the Face of God in His creatures.”²⁵ In an analysis of an explanation by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492), an authoritative expositor of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings, William Chittick writes:

This ‘two-pronged’ self-disclosure of the name Allah is the basis for Jāmī’s exposition of man’s reation to the cosmos. Man the microcosm (*al-‘ālam al-ṣaghīr*) is the mirror of the macrocosm (*al-‘ālam al-kabīr*). But in man the name Allah is manifested in such a way that each one of the individual names that are comprehended by it is equivalent to all the others. In other words, the divine unity is manifested directly in man in the midst of the multiplicity of the world, but the world itself, though also a reflection of the name Allah, is so in a particularised mode and manifests the relative multiplicity inherent in that name.²⁶

The makeup of the Perfect Man implies not only the reflection of the synthesis of God’s Names, but also the reflection of the synthesis of all of creation. The Perfect Man functions as a microcosm and the world as a macrocosm, each reflecting the other in different ways.²⁷ What exists

²⁵ In his overview of Akbarian metaphysics, Titus Burckhardt writes, “L’homme universel n’est pas vraiment distinct de Dieu ; il est comme la Face de Dieu dans les créatures.” Titus Burckhart, Introduction to ‘Abd ak-Karīm al-Jīlī, *De l’Homme universel: Extraits du livre al-Insān al-Kāmil*, trans. Titus Burckhardt, (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1975), p. 8.

²⁶ William C. Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), p. 145.

²⁷ “[According to] Ibn al-‘Arabī, God created the cosmos in His own image, or, to use a better translation of the Arabic term *ṣūra*, in His own ‘form.’ So also, as the Prophet reported, ‘God created Adam upon His own form.’ Hence, the universe is a great man (*insān kabīr*), while man is a ‘small universe’ (*‘ālam ṣaghīr*).” Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 16. See also *ibid*, p. 276; Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, pp. 31-5; Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 218-24.

expanded and dispersed throughout the cosmos is contained in compact synthesis within the human being.²⁸ One implication of this correspondence is that humanity can contemplate the signs of God both within itself and outside of itself. This act, which is an echo of the divine act of self-contemplation in the mirror of creation, is a sign that humanity is a bridge between God and the world—mirroring both.²⁹

Not only are humanity and the world mirrors, but the former is also the polish to the latter. In this way, the relation of humanity to the world is as spirit to form, respectively. Spirit gives life to form, and the presence of the Perfect Man animates the world as does polish animate an unpolished mirror, which would otherwise be too opaque to reflect the animate forms opposite it.³⁰ In this way too, the existence of the world is intimately connected to that of humanity.

The Real had existentiated the entire world as a body made ready, in which there was no spirit, and so it was like an unpolished mirror... The situation required that the mirror of the world be clear, and Adam was the very clearness of this mirror and the spirit of this form.³¹

Some Quranic commentators have understood the term *khalīfah* as rooted in the word *khalafa*, which means ‘to come after’, implying that “human beings come after all creatures and [that] all grades of being are

²⁸ “... And We have counted all things in a clear registry (*imām*).” Quran 36:12. Bracketed transliteration is mine. For an explanation of the Akbarian notion of the Perfect Man in light of this verse, as well as a concise introduction to the Akbarian notion of the Perfect Man altogether, see Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufism*, trans. D. M. Matheson (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1990), pp. 74-8.

²⁹ For more on Sufi contemplation of nature, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Contemplation and Nature in the Perspective of Sufism,” *Islamic Life and Thought* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 2001), pp. 200-6; Nasr, “God is Absolute Reality and All Creation His *Tajallī* (Theophany),” *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 3-11.

³⁰ It is useful here to think of a mirror as it was at the time of Ibn ‘Arabī, which was likely a metallic or stone object, the polishing of which would phenomenologically animate it by facilitating the reflection of animate forms that pass by it or look into it; hence, the analogy of spirit and form, the former of which animates the latter.

³¹ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, pp. 4-5. (modified)

summarised in the human state,” complementing Ibn ‘Arabī’s description of humanity as a ‘seal’ to the world.³² This parallels the role of the Prophet Muhammad as a seal to the prophets, ending the cycle of prophecy and encompassing within him the realities of all other prophets.

One may be tempted to ask, however, “What of the world before the arrival of humanity?” Fortunately, Chittick has already answered this question:

Before the actualisation of the human form the world existed and the planets revolved. So how can you call man the Pole (*qutb*) of the cosmos and the means whereby it is maintained? Jāmī replies that although man did not exist in the sensory world, he did exist in the spiritual world, and the effect of his existence was manifest in the lower world.³³

The time in which the world existed without human presence in the sensory world, but only in the spiritual world, is perhaps the time at which the world was like ‘an unpolished mirror’.

Humanity Defined

The Perfect Man is the unique locus for the manifestation of all of the Names of God, the encompassment of all realities, the pupil to God’s eye in the world, and His vicegerent on earth. The prototype of the Perfect Man is the Prophet himself, by virtue of whom others reach the station of the Perfect Man.³⁴ This realized human being is also a mirror to the world, the spirit to the world’s form (or the clarity of the world as a

³² Caner K. Dagli, commentary on Quran 2:30 in *The Study Quran*, 21. For a Quranic verse on the selectiveness of vicegerency, see Quran 24:55.

³³ Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, p. 151.

³⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī often refers to the reality of the Perfect Man as the Muhammadan Reality. See Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, pp. 31, 35. Moreover, every prophet is also a Perfect Man, which we can assume is an underlying principle of the *Ringstones of Wisdom*. Again, the use of “man” here does not exclude women. It is worth noting that a case has been made for the prophethood of the Virgin Mary in a remarkably uncontroversial work. See Aliah Schleifer, *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008), pp. 73-94.

mirror), and, as we see below, the protector of the world that otherwise would not be.³⁵

The seed for vicegerency is in the particular makeup of a human being. God created human beings in both His form and the world's, allowing the Perfect Man to be a bridge between the world and God. Commenting on a Quranic verse in which God speaks of creating Adam with His two Hands,³⁶ Ibn 'Arabī writes:

This refers to nothing other than His very act of bringing together the two forms: the form of the world and the form of the Real, which are the two Hands of the Real... It was because of this that Adam was Vicegerent... The makeup of his outward form is made up of the realities of the world and its forms, and his inward form is modelled on the Form of God Most High.³⁷

This very makeup of the Perfect Man—in the form of the world and in the form of of the Real—not only makes him the vicegerent of God, but also the steward of the world. Effectively, the world is the Perfect Man's herd. What implies vicegerency necessarily implies stewardship too.

Were he not manifest in the form of He who entrusted him with Vicegerency, within that over which he was made Vicegerent, he would not have been Vicegerent. If he did not contain all that the herd over which he has been made a Vicegerent needed—and by reason of their dependence upon him he would have to possess everything that they needed—he would not be Vicegerent over them.³⁸

³⁵ This is not an exhaustive definition of the Perfect Man in light of God and the world. For example, Ibn 'Arabi also describes the Perfect Man as ringstone to the world as ring, in addition to describing the vicegerent as invisible and the world as visible, within this same chapter. *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, pp. 6, 13.

³⁶ Quran 38:75.

³⁷ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 14. (modified)

³⁸ *Ibid.* Consulting Burckhardt's French translation of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, I found *troupeau* (Eng. "herd") helpful for translating *ra'āyā*. See Muhyi-d-dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *La sagesse des prophètes (Fuṣūṣ al-hikam)*, trans. Titus Burckhardt (Paris: Albin Michel, 1955), p. 33.

Something must be said here about the two poles that define the human state. We can infer from humanity's responsibilities towards God and towards the world, that the Perfect Man is a harmonious meeting between servanthood and lordship.³⁹ The former is a quality of a human being in relation to God, and the latter in relation to other creatures. The two qualities are not necessarily opposed to each other, but rather support each other. Servanthood of God is the condition of lordship over creation. Moreover, righteous lordship over creation is a means of serving God.⁴⁰ This cannot be mistaken for anthropocentrism, but is rather fully theocentric. The Perfect Man is at the center of the universe inasmuch as God is at the center of the Perfect Man.⁴¹ Human beings lose their lordly prerogatives when their actions are motivated by their own desires rather than God's. The Perfect Man is a *total* vicegerent of God, who channels heavenly grace to a cosmic herd, which is essentially God's herd.

It is worth noting that particular Sufi doctrines further problematize the category of 'lord' for human beings, declaring that the servant's lordship is illusory and that all that one can truly have is one's poverty (*faqr*) and servanthood (*'ubūdiyyah*).⁴² What is other than God is illusory, so

³⁹ This perception of human beings as a bridge between God and the world enjoys a parallel in Chinese tradition, namely in the Chinese character *wang*, which means 'king' or 'king-pontiff'. The orthography displays three parallel horizontal lines of various lengths that are connected at the center of each by a vertical line. The *King-Pontiff* bridges "Heaven, Man, and Earth." Rene Guenon, "Wang: The King-Pontiff" in *The Great Triad*, (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), pp. 106-12; Martin Lings, *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2006), p. 41.

⁴⁰ On the nature of the human being as both servant and lord, see Charles Le Gai Eaton, "Man" in *Islamic Spirituality I: Foundations*, ed. S. H. Nasr, vol. 19 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 358-9. For a treatment of the biblical parallel of this concept, see Lee Canipe, "Rethinking Dominion in Genesis 1:27-28," *Journal of Christian Ethics* 17.4 (2010): pp. 21-3. For a brief but profound contemporary explanation of cosmic hierarchy that is, moreover, not unlike Ibn 'Arabi's, see Hans Küry, *Death as Gateway to Eternity: Nature's Hidden Message*, trans. Gillian Harris (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2013), pp. 6-9.

⁴¹ "Just as he turns round about God, so the cosmos turns round about him." Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 30.

⁴² See Claude Addas, "The Paradox of the Duty of Perfection in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi," trans. Cecilia Twinch, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 15 (1994): pp. 37-49.

lordship over it is illusory too. The world, however, is illusory relative to God who is Absolute Being. It is nonetheless real insofar as it receives its reality from God, thereby manifesting Divine Qualities. Therefore, on the earthly plane, and in manifesting regal and lordly Names of God, as well as in participating in a cosmic hierarchy, the realized human being maintains a relative lordship over creation while absolute lordship belongs to God alone.

The Implications of the Human Purpose

Having explored these two relationships—of humanity with what is above it and of humanity with what is below it—we can now examine their implications. The former implies that the realization of a Perfect Man constitutes the total reflection of God, through which He sees Himself in what is other than Himself, fulfilling the purpose of the cosmogonic act of God, the Hidden Treasure.

One significant implication of what humanity and the world are in light of each other, as well as each in light of God, is that humanity safeguards nature, specifically through the presence of the Perfect Man, who is the realized vicegerent of God on earth. The realization of a human being implies the protection of the rest of creation.

He is Man, who comes to be and is beginningless, who is perpetual and endless in his makeup, who is the separative and unitive Word, and who is the subsisting of the world through his existence. He is to the world what the ringstone is to the ring, which is the place of the signet and the mark with which the king sets a seal upon his treasures. For this reason was he named Vicegerent, for through him the Real protects His creation, as the seal protects those treasures. No one would dare open them so long as the king's seal was still upon them, unless by his leave. It is thus that he is entrusted with protecting the world. *And so the world shall always be protected so long as this Perfect Man is found in it.*⁴³

Without the presence of a fully realized human being, which is to say the Perfect Man, the world itself cannot exist:

⁴³ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 6 (modified). Italics are mine.

Do you not see that, when [the Perfect Man] withdraws and is separated from the storehouses of the lower-world, there shall remain none of what God had stored therein, and that what had been there shall depart away...?⁴⁴

Humanity's protection of nature is existential in two ways, namely in the Perfect Man's *existential* protection of the world's *existence*. It is also, so to speak, passive. It does not necessarily entail an active engagement with nature. This protection of the world, moreover, does not take on the form of defense against an enemy. As Maria Dakake observes, nature's ecosystems operate well without human involvement. Rather, the primary enemy that humanity needs to defend the natural world from is itself.⁴⁵ The ecological degradation wrought by human hands goes against the spirit of vicegerency and calls for a response from those for whom the world is a herd. Yes, the Perfect Man *existentially* provides for the herd, but to physically destroy it is to compromise the existence of natural phenomena and to rebel against the purpose of the vicegerent. It is here that we can infer the need for a human stewardship of nature that takes on the form of contemporary environmental action. Bearing in mind that God has ordered the natural world perfectly and that the environmental crisis is a result of human corruption, the Quranic call to "work not corruption upon the earth after it has been set aright" has never been more pertinent.⁴⁶

Being uniquely made in the image of God, only the progeny of Adam can be vicegerent. This prerogative is planted as a seed into each human being's makeup, sprouting into life upon an individual's realization as the Perfect Man, who is the locus for the manifestation of all of God's Names and whose purpose it is to know and reflect God in a total way. Consequential to a human being's knowledge of God is the human

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Maria Dakake, "To Be *Khalīfah*: The Human Vocation in Relation to Nature and Community," *God's Creativity and Human Action: Christian and Muslim Perspectives: A Record of the Fourteenth Building Bridges Seminar*, eds. Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall (Washington, Georgetown University Press: 2017), pp. 107-10.

⁴⁶ Quran 7:56. Dakake, commentary on Quran 7:56 in *The Study Quran*, p. 428. For more commentary on Quranic verses in the light of the environmental crisis, see Reza Shah-Kazemi "From Sacrilege to Sacralisation: Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Perspectives on the Ecological Crisis in the Light of the Holy Qur'an," *Sacred Web* 40 (Winter 2017): pp. 103-11; Dakake, *To Be Khalīfah*, pp. 108-10, p. 116 n. 15.

existential protection of the cosmos. The world cannot exist without a realized human being, whose fulfilment of purpose towards That which is above protects that which is below. The very existence of the Perfect Man is that which safeguards the world.⁴⁷

Now you know the wisdom of the makeup of Adam, by which I mean his manifest form, and you also know the makeup of Adam's spirit, by which I mean his inner form. He is the Real/creation. You also know the makeup of his station, which is the totality by virtue of which he merits Vicegerency.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ In light of this, we can conclude that one Sufi explanation for the contemporary ecological crisis would be the lack of saints or of Perfect Men in a world that is less concerned with the sacred than ever before. Chittick comes to this same conclusion in his summary of Ibn 'Arabī's cosmological and eschatological teachings. See Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p. 34. For more on the Sufi treatment of the ecological crisis, see the aforementioned works of Nasr, who indeed writes that the environmental crisis is rooted in a spiritual crisis.

⁴⁸ *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 15.