

Actionless Action

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It has indeed been a blessing to sit with the great Kenan Rifai's commentary upon book one of Mevlana's *Mesnevi*.² Spending time with this book naturally led me to Kenan Rifai's explanation of a famous tale in the *Mesnevi* centered around 'Ali b. Abi Talib. The tale is retold from Islamic tradition and is cast in Mevlana's unique terms and worldview.

The long and short of the story is as follows: in the heat of a one-on-one encounter with an enemy of Islam, 'Ali gained the upper hand and thrust his opponent to the ground. Just as he was about to finish him off with one blow from his sword, the enemy spat at 'Ali's face. When this happened, 'Ali immediately dropped his sword and walked away. This perplexed his enemy, and led him to ask 'Ali in earnest why he had not killed him at that very moment. 'Ali then speaks, telling the enemy that he only fights for the sake of God. But, when the man insulted him by spitting at him, the possibility that it would become a personal affair had presented itself to him. So he walked away from the situation. 'Ali then explains that he never acts out of self-interest, but only for, in, and through God.

In Kenan Rifai's explanation of this account, it is clear that he understands the exact meaning of this story by way of learning and *dhawq* or

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2 Kenan Rifai, *Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevlana Rumi*, trans. Victoria Holbrook (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011).

“tasting.” As the ancient doctrine tells us, only the like can know the like. And there is no doubt that Kenan Rifai and Mevlana were kindred souls. Two passages from Kenan Rifai’s commentary on this tale from the *Mesnevi* shall suffice as evidence. In both instances, he explains ‘Ali’s words in the first person:

In reality, I am not I. I am one of those who has attained the degree of annihilation of his soul in the path of God. For me there is no other being, including myself, other than God. The power and invincibility of my sword is not due to my skill. Is it not my sword, it is God’s sword, and that is why I use God’s sword only for those purposes God wishes.³

I bear no resentment toward anyone nor have I any hidden self-interest. I am free of that malady special to mankind. This means that you are speaking with a free spirit. You are hearing his testimony. As you know, the testimony of people who are not free, or prisoners or slaves, especially if they are slaves to their own souls, is not worth two grains of barley.⁴

The implications of these noble words are very clear. Only when we act without self-interest and egoism are our actions worthy in the site of God. In other words, real action in the world is commensurate to the degree to which we relinquish our own self-contrivance (*tadbir*) and allow God to do His work. We thus “act” by giving up the illusory sense of self that gives us a false notion of “our” agency in “our” actions. To phrase it differently: we truly only “act” when God is the actor. This then explains the title of my article, “Actionless Action,” which incidentally also refers to a famous Taoist doctrine, namely that of *wu wei* or “acting without acting.” The Qur’anic basis for this position, which Mevlana also cites in the story in question, is al-Anfal, 8/17, where God tells the Prophet that he did not throw the dust at the Quraysh at the battle of Badr when “he” threw it, but that it was God who threw it.

At this point, I would like to shift focus and take the teachings being discussed here in a seemingly different, though intimately related, direction. One of the things that stands out in Mevlana’s re-telling of this story and Kenan Rifai’s commentary upon it is their emphasis on the degree of detachment from any ulterior motive and worldly gain that characterizes the soul of the person who subsists in God (*al-baqi bi’llah*). This then leads to a deep respect for the other, even at one of

3 Kenan Rifai, *Listen*, 496.

4 *Ibid.*, 497-498.

the most intense moments of human experience, namely war.⁵ Pondering about this idea led me to inquire into an additional “other” which we as human beings face every day of our lives, and which we constantly harm on account of precisely our own selfish desires and ego-centered aims and aspirations. The “other” I have in mind here is the *environment*. What follows, therefore, is an exposition of the environmental crisis based on the same perspective through which Mevlana and Kenan Rifai have explained the meaning of ‘Ali’s actions, or, shall I say, his “actionless actions.”

An important point to keep in mind is that one of the words in Arabic for “environment” is *mubhit*, namely that which “surrounds” or “encompasses” something.⁶ Interestingly, in the Quran God Himself figures as the “surrounder” or “encompasser.”⁷ Thus, God is our “environment” because He surrounds us.⁸ Such a standpoint lends full support to the idea that nature is “sacred.” That is, the environment is nothing other than where God is to be found, but in His manifold modes of manifestation and not as He is in Himself.

Let us also call our attention to a key Qur’anic theme, namely the custodianship given to human beings over nature (*taskhir*). It is figured in such passages as al-Hajj, 22/65, *Hast thou not considered that God has made whatsoever is on the earth subservient unto you?* and Luqman, 31/20, *Have you not considered that God has made whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth subservient unto you and has poured His blessings upon you, both outwardly and inwardly?*⁹ But human beings, who are the custodians of nature, have unfortunately destroyed their natural surroundings, thanks to their own actions.¹⁰ Al-Rum, 30/41

5 This point is inspired by a point made by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the context of his own commentary upon the same story from the *Mesnevi*. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), 87-89.

6 William Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 292.

7 See the astute remark in Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 292.

8 Ibid.

9 Translations from the Qur’an are taken from Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

10 I understand the environmental crisis as a fundamentally spiritual problem. In doing so I follow Nasr’s ground-breaking book, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International, 1997). See also his *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), chapters 8-9 and *Religion and the Order of Nature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

alludes to this very phenomenon: *Corruption has appeared on land and sea because of that which men's hands have earned, so that He may let them taste some of that which they have done, that haply they might return.*¹¹ Yet this verse also implies a sense of hope as it seems to indicate that if people are given a small window into the kinds of catastrophes against nature that they themselves have initiated, it is possible that they will take heed and change their ways.

One of the surest ways people can begin to rectify their distance from and obscure relationship to nature is by first coming to understand themselves. This will only happen when they awaken from their state of being blind, and subsequently read the signs on the horizons and deep within. I am, of course, alluding here to a well-known Qur'anic verse which sets up the basic picture of the human-nature relationship: *We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth.*¹² Thus, the more we come to know of ourselves, the more we come to know the book of nature, namely the cosmos. And the more we come to know the book of nature, the more we come to know ourselves.

At the same time, if we remain ignorant of our true state, if we consume nature by devouring it, our souls will remain distant from God. In Islamic metaphysical teachings, the closer we are to our transcendent source, the more characterized we are by luminosity, subtlety, and "spirituality." On the other hand, the further we are from our transcendent source, the more we are characterized by darkness, density, and "materiality."¹³

That is to say, the more realized we become in the signs that lead us back to God, the more intense is our awareness in accordance with our ascent in the levels of being, which is graded by nature, proceeding from most intense and undifferentiated to least intense and most differentiated. The further we fall away from God's signs, the less aware we become on the scale of being. Put differently, the more dense we become, the more "heavy" our nature, and the less likely we are to participate in higher grades of awareness.

11 Consider the question also asked by when God announces to them that He will create man: *"Wilt Thou place therein one who will work corruption therein, and shed blood...?"* (al-Baqara, 2/30).

12 Fussilat, 41/53. See also al-Dhariyat, 51/20-21: *Upon the earth are signs for those possessing certainty, and within your souls. Do you not then behold?*

13 William Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 141.

It has already been stated that humans are the custodians of nature. But why was this trust placed upon their shoulders? The answer is alluded to in al-Baqara, 2/30, where God tells the angels that He will place a vicegerent (*khalifa*) on the earth.¹⁴ A vicegerent is technically someone who stands in place of another, carrying out the function that the latter has assigned to him. Thus, on earth, human beings are God's representatives, meaning they are to carry out the charge and duty of God's will. Yet if the treatment of nature today is any measure of our success in being God's vicegerents on earth, then we are certainly doing a very poor job. This is why any talk in Islamic thought of people as God's vicegerents really refers to their being the *potential* vicegerents of God on earth.¹⁵

How, then, does one realize this vicegerency? It has everything to do with the assumption of divine qualities. This statement is in accordance with the famous Prophetic injunction to "Take on the character traits of God" (*takhallaqu bi-akhlaq Allah*). Every virtue that a human being can take on is only a possibility because that virtue already belongs to God in its full actuality and goodness. Thus, human beings can, to the measure allowed by the human condition, only be merciful in imitation of the All-Merciful (*al-rahman*), and can only be loving in imitation of the Lover (*al-wadud*). This teaching has some very important implications for the ontological (and hence objective) roots of ethical categories, but the main point to come away with at this juncture is that the Muslims of the past have seen the human project as a totally worthwhile one only insofar as human beings attempt to conform to the divine Norm.

As for "where" these qualities are, the Sufis tell us that they are already contained within the human being, in accordance with a saying of the Prophet to the effect that, "God created Adam in His form." One key insight to be gleaned from this teaching in the context of the human relationship to nature is that whereas in us the divine names are undifferentiated, in the cosmic order, which discloses God qua manifestation, they are also to be found, but in a differentiated manner.¹⁶

Thus, if we are merely content to consume, then this act of squandering our own selves and the natural environment will result in our inability

14 See also al-An'am, 6/165 and Fatir, 35/39.

15 See also Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 298-297 for a statement that is most apt in this context.

16 William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 17.

to actualize the divine qualities potentially contained within ourselves and within nature, resulting in an even greater divide between ourselves and the natural order. Now, it can be asked why human beings have the potential to actually harm nature. Why not, in other words, simply be created in such a way that this harmonious balance would always exist and everyone could then be God's vicegerent on earth? The answer has to do with God's divine qualities that are already configured in human beings. Since one of God's qualities is will, human beings, who derive their positive qualities from God's positive qualities, must have the real freedom to choose things for themselves. This freedom can lead to an ever-increasing view of things in which subject and object are seen as distinct. This can result in a highly reified and overly-scientized vision of things that pushes the world into the realm of pure exigency and human control, thus further-widening the gap between subject and object. Then follows an inconsequentialist view of nature whereby the harm done to the object "out there" is not seen as in any real way affecting the subject "in here." If we take on the divine qualities properly, we will simply be bidding our own nature, and to the extent that this happens, the world of nature, being the same as ourselves, will also be brought into harmony with the divine order.

Those who realize this teaching can see nature with crystal clarity, since the subject and object dichotomy which characterizes the usual human interaction with the natural world is nothing but illusion, characterized as are all things by the veil of forms which surround them. For the self-realized person, the divine qualities to be found within the cosmos are brought about into an undifferentiated form, and this parallels the actualized undifferentiated form of the divine qualities that are already configured in his own soul. We can call this "sympathy" with nature, which denotes the mutual convergence of one with the other to the point that they are no longer on opposing ends of the spectrum, or two parts of a false polarity.

There is a saying of the Prophet to the effect that "The believer is the mirror of the believer." This is normally understood to mean that what a Muslim sees of the good or bad in his brother is also a reflection of what is in himself. Yet, as has been pointed out by Ibn 'Arabi and others, "believer" is also a name of God (*al-mu'min*). Since everything in the cosmos prostrates to God (in accordance with al-Ra'd, 13/15), each thing in the cosmos is in reality a "believer." If the believer is a mirror of God, who is *the* Believer, then the cosmos and all that it contains is a mirror of forms in which God sees Himself.

The Prophet also said that “God is beautiful and He loves beauty.” This explains why the cosmos is beautiful, because it is a mirror of beauty divine. The teaching that God’s Face—which is beautiful of course—is everywhere is to be found in al-Baqara, 2/115: *To God belong the East and the West. Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. God is All-Encompassing, Knowing.*¹⁷ Since God’s Face is everywhere, it is reflected in the mirror of the cosmos, which is nothing but a display for the traces of God’s beauty. Having transcended the forms themselves, God’s true vicegerents can see beyond them, moving with great ease from the symbol to the Symbolized without negating the symbol as such. Rather, they see, *in* the symbol the very Face of the Beloved, which is beyond all space and time. This is, in some sense, what it is like to fall in love. Just as when someone falls in love, the subject-object dichotomy is prone to vanish between the lover and beloved (especially in the act of union), so too is the case when one falls in love with the cosmos, which is the Face of God.

Since such a person who sees through God cannot be described as a separate “I” over and against the cosmic order, this person’s Face can be said to be God’s Face. This station in Sufi texts is referred to by many names, amongst which are union (*jamʿ*) and proximity (*qurb*). Yet *who* is doing the witnessing at this stage? In order to answer this question, let us look at Fussilat, 41/53, a part of which we have already cited: *We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. Does it not suffice that thy Lord is Witness over all things?*¹⁸ With respect to the last part of this verse, what is implied here is that it is God Himself who sees Himself in the myriad forms of creation, as these forms act as loci for His own Self-seeing. God is thus sufficient as a witness since He is the supreme Witness of all things, each of which in turn testifies to His oneness and beauty.¹⁹

The person whose Face is now God’s Face thus beholds God in everything, and the implications of such a person being God’s vicegerent then become clear: such an individual will not harm the environment since it is actually all *witnessed* as sacred to him, reflecting as

17 See also al-Rahman, 55/26-27: *All that is upon it passes away. And there remains the Face of thy Lord, Possessed of Majesty and Bounty* and al-Qasas, 28/88: *There is no god but He! All things perish, save His Face. Judgment belongs to Him, and unto Him will you be returned.*

18 See also Al ‘Imran, 3/18: *God bears witness that there is no god but He.*

19 God is thus His own greatest “proof.” For this point, see Ibrahim Kalin, *Mulla Sadra* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 76.

it does his own face, which is nothing other than the divine Face in whose contemplation he is annihilated. There is thus nothing for him to aspire towards, no gain to receive from nature, and no action to perform, since nature itself is God's gift to him. Nature thereby presents him with all that he loves, as it is the context in which God, his true Beloved, is the sole agent and actor.

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