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Ibn ʿArabī on the Circle of Trusteeship and the Divine Name *al-Wakīl*

Atif Khalil
University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, AB, Canada
atif.khalil@uleth.ca

Abstract

With special reference to chapters 119 and 558 of the *Meccan Revelations*, the article draws out Ibn ʿArabī's (d. 638/1240) understanding of the divine Name *al-Wakīl* ("The Trustee") and the nature of trusteeship (*wakāla*). In the process, it demonstrates how for our mystic trusteeship forms a circle that begins with the human being entrusting his affairs to God, and returns to its point of origin with God entrusting him to be His vicegerent (*khalīfa*). Trusteeship, which finds its archetypical perfection in the divine *Wakīl*, descends through various degrees of perfection, to all levels and strata of human society. The capacity to embody and manifest the Name *al-Wakīl* is, for Ibn ʿArabī, itself made possible by the theomorphic nature of the human being, a child of the primordial Adam fashioned in the image of God.

Keywords

Ibn ʿArabī – virtue ethics – trust – reliance – divine names – *tawakkul* – *wakāla* – *wakīl*

1 Introduction

At the heart of Ibn ʿArabī's theological anthropology, that is to say, his understanding of the nature of the human being, and the relationship of this nature to God, there stands the idea that he is made in the divine image. As the hadith runs, "Verily God created Adam in His form," *ʿalā ṣūratihi*.[1] However, as a

1 The tradition is found in Bukhārī and Muslim. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane*, 8 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1936–1969), "kh-l-q." While the pronoun in the

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consequence of the Fall and the concomitant eclipse of his nature, which is that of a theomorphic being, he could not help but forget his true self. In this light, the aim of life, of our short sojourn through this terrestrial world of exile, is to remember who we are, so that we may once again become who we always were – if not here, then at least after death. Hence the emphasis in Sufism on the practice of *dhikr*, literally "remembrance," an exercise in spiritual anamnesis that sets in motion a transformation of consciousness, so that we may begin to see the world as it truly is, and no less importantly, our own place in it.[2] Hence also the emphasis in Sufism on ethical transformation, on *tabdīl al-akhlāq*, since in order to return to our original, primordial self, we must realize our latent splendorous nature, which is that of *imago dei*.[3]

Now, since the divine nature in Islam is characterized by certain attributes, described in the Qurʾan as the "Beautiful Names" of God, *al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā* (Q 7:180, 20:8, 17:110, 59:24), it follows that the self's ethical metamorphosis entails realizing these very divine qualities through a process of *takhalluq*.[4]

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tradition, "Verily God created Adam *ʿalā ṣūratihi*," is read by some to mean, "in his form," which is to say that Adam was created as a fully-fashioned adult (an interpretation that safeguards divine otherness), grammatically speaking, it may also be read, "in *His* form," with the pronoun returning to God. For Ibn ʿArabī, both interpretations are valid since they conform to the rules of Arabic, and these rules, for him, should be the only criterion to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate interpretations. This means that for our mystic God created a fully-fashioned Adam in His own image. For an excellent discussion of this hadith, see Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book and the Law*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), 37–39. On the primordial Adam as a mirror of God, see the opening chapter on him in Ibn ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū al-ʿAlā ʿAfīfī (1946; Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1980), 48–58. Cf. "Adam," in the *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, eds. M. Iqbal et al. (Sherwood Park, Alberta: Center for Islamic Sciences, 2013) 1:99–118, particularly 102–3.

2 On the theory and practice of *dhikr* in Sufism, see Jamal Elias, "Sufi Dhikr Between Meditation and Prayer," in *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Cultural Histories*, ed. Halvor Eifring (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 189–200; and Joseph E. Lumbard, "The Function of *dhikrullāh* in Sufi Psychology," in *Knowledge is Light*, ed. Zailan Moris (Chicago: ABC Press, 1999), 251–74. See also the useful surveys in Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. N. Pearson (New York: Omega, 1994), 73–76, 103–4; and Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 167–78. The most comprehensive treatment of this subject to date remains Mir Valiuddin's *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism* (London: East-West Publications, 1980), published a few years after the author's death.

3 On Sufi ethics, see Cyrus Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2017), 153–302 (part two). On *tabdīl al-akhlāq*, see Atif Khalil, "Sufism and Qurʾānic Ethics," in the *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. L. Ridgeon (New York: Routledge, 2020), 159–71.

4 Literally, a process of "assuming" the divine Names. The term is retraced to the hadith, "assume [or 'take on'] (*takhallaqū*) the attributes of God."

But this realization must unfold in a mode commensurate or suitable to that of the human being, since he or she is not a one-to-one replica of God, but a mirror image of Him, whose right side becomes our left side, and whose left side becomes our right side. If the axis on which we meet is the pole of divine immanence, the edges on which we part are the extremes of divine transcendence.[5] To put it less opaquely, while there are certain attributes which the classical Sufi authorities of Islam would agree the human being should strive to emulate, such as divine patience, thankfulness, love, forgiveness, compassion, and benevolence, there are others the internalization of which would amount to vices, such as divine lordship, independence, and grandeur. And there are still others over which the classical authorities might even disagree. "Should these Names," they might ask, "only belong to God, or may they also be assumed by the human being, as virtues?"[6]

Generally speaking, Ibn ʿArabī takes the immanence or *tashbīh* of God present in man to as far an extent as possible, finding an entry point for divine Names where others would not. But even for him, these Names are never emulated in *exactly* the same manner in which they belong to God, because there remains a gulf of divine transcendence, otherness or *tanzīh* that forever separates the two orders of being, the divine and the human. In other words, just as the world as a macrocosm occupies a place somewhere in between He and not-He, so too does the human being, as microcosm, occupy a similar position, with one face turned to the fullness of God, and the other towards sheer non-existence. What this means is that for the mystic the divine Names must be cultivated, as already noted, in a fashion which suits our creaturely, ontologically impoverished constitution, but a constitution in which God is nonetheless also mysteriously present, at least *in potentia*.[7]

5 While this precise analogy does not, to my knowledge, appear in the works of Ibn ʿArabī, it captures the relation between God and the human being with respect to both divine transcendence and immanence.

6 The question is not merely an abstract, theoretical one. Within an Islamic context, determining which Names to embody, and how one may go about doing so, is made easier by factoring in the character and personality of the Prophet, who serves as the religion's ethical archetype. As Nasr writes, "the names of the Prophet flow from those of God and are a ladder that leads to Him." "Sunnah and Ḥadīth," in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. S.H. Nasr (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987), 99.

7 On the dialectical relationship between divine transcendence and immanence that, for Ibn ʿArabī, marks our experience and knowledge of God, see William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 33–143 (chapters two and three on theology and ontology), especially 68–76, 113–15. See also Henry Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monothéisme* (Paris: L'Herne, 1981).

2 The Trustee (*Wakīl*) in Arabic and the Qur'an

One of the most well-known and frequently invoked names of God in Islam is *al-Wakīl*, which literally means the "Trustee," "Agent," "Guardian," "Protector," or "Overseer." According to al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), the *Wakīl* is "one to whom the affairs are entrusted (*huwa al-mawkūl ilayhi al-umūr*)."[8] And in the words of Aḥmad Samʿānī (d. 534/1140), another Sufi writer from the same period, "*Wakīl* means sufficient, it means guardian, and it means guarantor. Some have said that the meaning of *wakīl* is the person to whom you turn over all your work. The Arabs say, 'I entrusted the affair to so-and-so, so he is my trustee.'"[9] Thus, *wakīl* may refer to an advocate, defender, or lawyer, in so far as one may assign to them power of attorney. In Islamic law, it may also refer, among other things, to one's protective guardian, or the person entrusted with one's wealth.[10]

In the Qur'an, the word appears 24 times, often (but not only) as a divine Name. We encounter it in such verses as "He is over everything a Trustee" (6:102, 39:62), or "Sufficient is God as a Trustee" (4:81, 4:132, 4:171, 33:3, 33:47). The Qur'an also instructs the human being to "Take Him as your Trustee" (73:9). And then there is the verse invoked in times of hardship, and which Abraham is said to have recited when thrown into the fire: "God suffices us, and He is an excellent Trustee" (3:173; cf. 9:59, 9:129, 39:38).[11]

8 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2008), 176–77. See also the translation by David Burrell and Nazir Daher of this text, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1995). For a recent treatment of this work, see Yousef Casewit, "Al-Ghazālī's Virtue Ethical Theory of the Divine Names: The Theological Underpinnings of the Doctrine of *Takhalluq* in *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā*," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4 (2020): 155–200.

9 He adds that the meaning of *wakīl* (which is of the *faʿīl* pattern) is *mawkūl ilayh* (of the *mafʿūl* pattern), and means "trusted." Aḥmad Samʿānī, *Repose of the Spirits*, trans. William Chittick (Albany: State University of New York, 2019), 352 (with slight modifications in italics). The *wakīl* is sometimes defined as a *kafīl*, a "guarantor" (cf. Q 16:91), although according to al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108), author of the famous lexicon of the Qur'an, the former is broader in scope and meaning. *Mufradāt alfāẓ al-qur'ān*, ed. Najīb al-Mājidī (Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 2006), "w-k-l." The *wakīl* is also *kāfī*, "one who protects" or is "sufficient" (see Q 39:36). Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī discusses the meaning of the divine name *al-Wakīl* in his commentary on Q 3:173. *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), 9:82; cf. Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), "w-k-l," "k-f-l," "k-f-y."

10 On the concept in Islamic law, see "Wakāla," *EI²*.

11 On the significance of this verse in the hadith literature, see Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-qur'ān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Arnā'ūṭ (Riyad, Saudi Arabia: Maktaba Dār al-Salām, 1998), 1:571–72 (Q 3:173); cf. Aḥmad Zarrūq, *Sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. S.Y. Ahmad (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2013), 117n3 (under "*Wakīl*").

3 The Semantic and Conceptual Field of Trusteeship (*Wakāla*)

For Muslim authorities, the idea behind divine trusteeship or *wakāla*, of taking God as a Trustee, is to turn over the affairs of one's life to Him, and let Him manage them. To be clear, it does not imply one not strive to put them in order. Rather, it means that one should do the best one can and then leave the rest to God, trusting in His oversight.[12] This relationship with the divine *Wakīl* is defined as one of *tawakkul*, "trust" or "reliance,"[13] and brings with it a certain measure of freedom from anxiety and restlessness when things do not go as planned, or as one hoped for. To the extent that one hands over the affairs to God, one becomes an "entrustor" or *muwakkil*. The act of "handing over," "commissioning," and "entrusting matters" to Him is, in turn, that of *tawkīl*. And the ensuing state of having trust in Him once the affairs are handed over renders one a *mutawakkil*, that is to say, one who trusts in and relies on God. All of these terms form a semantic cluster around the verbal root w-k-l, which means

12 In his commentary on the verse, "When you have resolved, place your trust in God" (3:159), al-Rāzī notes two important features about *tawakkul*. First, it is a state where there "should not be for the servant reliance (*iʿtimād*) on anything other than God" (a standard definition found in classical Sufi texts). And second, one should work within the realm of the outward, secondary causes (*asbāb*), through which God maintains the world, but not depend on them, since that should be "on the Real alone." *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 9:55. While some Muslim renunciants, as is well-known, went to extremes in ignoring the *asbāb* (al-Rāzī chastises them as "ignoramuses"), Ibn ʿArabī, appreciative of the impulse behind it, nevertheless finds such an attitude wanting, since it reflects an inability to discern the divine presence *in* these very causes. *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiya*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Sulṭān al-Manṣūb (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿlā li-l-Thaqāfa, 2017), 5:274–76 ("On Abandoning *Tawakkul*").

13 On *tawakkul* in the *Meccan Revelations*, see Atif Khalil, "Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Sufis on the Virtue of *Tawakkul* (Trust in God)," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society* 71.1 (2022): 87–105. For a general survey of the concept, see Leonard Lewisohn, "The Way of *Tawakkul*: The Ideal of 'Trust in God' in Classical Persian Sufism," *Islamic Culture* LXXIII.2 (1999): 27–62, as well as his *EI²* entry ("Tawakkul"). For a short treatment of the idea in early tradition, see Harith bin Ramli, "Reliance on God in the History of Early Islamic spirituality," *Religions/Adyan*, 13.1 (2015): 31–40. Al-Ghazālī's chapter on *tawakkul* and *tawḥīd* from the *Iḥyāʾ* (Book 35) was translated by David Burrell as *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence* (Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2001). See also Helmut Ritter, *Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār*, trans. John O'Kane with the editorial assistance of Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 217–26 (Ch. 13, "Trust in God's Providence"); and Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 117–20. The most thorough study remains Benedikt Reinert's *Die Lehre vom tawakkul in der klassischen Sufik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968).

to "entrust," "assign," or "commission," and form an essential part of the lexicon Ibn ʿArabī's employs to describe the multifaceted relationship of trusteeship.[14]

4 Divine and Human Trusteeship in al-Ghazālī

In order to better grasp the difference between divine and human trusteeship, it is helpful to turn first to al-Ghazālī, who in his characteristically analytic fashion, singles out three factors in his book on the divine Names, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, that distinguish the name *wakīl* when predicated of God and the human being. He explains, to be precise, the respects in which the name can, and cannot, be attributed to both.

Al-Ghazālī declares that there is (a) first of all the *wakīl* to whom only some affairs (*baʿḍ al-umūr*) can be handed over. So, for example, one entrusts to their physician matters involving their health, but not legal issues. One entrusts to their teachers their education, but not health. One entrusts to their accountant their tax returns and responsibility over their finances, but not their garden. But then there is another kind of *wakīl* or trustee, argues al-Ghazālī, to whom all of one's affairs can be handed over, because such a being has the power and knowledge to oversee them all. Such a trustee, moreover, can only be God. (b) Second, there is the trustee to whom matters are turned over through delegation, authorization, and entrustment, even though it is not essential to his nature to have matters given to him. Such a person in fact becomes empowered through the entrusting, with his power being entirely contingent on the commissioning act of another. So, for example, one is not bound to visit a particular physician when sick, since one may visit any number of them. One is not bound to go to a particular accountant for their taxes, one could go to anyone. This kind of trustee is not by an essential nature meant to be one's *wakīl*. But then there is a trustee to whom matters are handed over since it lies in His essence to serve as one's *wakīl* and that of others, and for hearts to incline towards, rely and depend on Him. Such a one, in addition, is not empowered through the delegation, being by nature an object of human trusteeship, and independent of the need for such commissioning. This second type of trustee, once again, can only be God. (c) Finally, there is the trustee

14 To be precise, it is the second form of this root (*wakkala*) around which the key cluster forms. According to the *Lexicon* of Edward W. Lane and Stanley Lane-Poole, *wakkalahu bi shay'in* means, "*He appointed him*, or *entrusted him, as his commissioned agent, factor, or deputy, with the management, or disposal of a thing*." See "w-k-l." The extreme brevity of the entry is due to this final section having been completed by Lane-Poole after Edward W. Lane's death.

who carries out what is entrusted to him deficiently, prone as he is by nature to fault and failure. To return to our examples above, one's physician may misdiagnose a sickness, or be incapable of healing an illness. One's gardener may fail to sufficiently water the flowers one summer due to a dry season. One's accountant may make an error in their taxes. However, there is another trustee who carries out his *wakāla* to perfection, without dint or blemish, and this trustee, for al-Ghazālī, once again, can only be God. In each of these cases, as we have seen, the first trustee symbolizes the human being placed in a position of trusteeship. The second represents God as an omniscient, omnipotent, perfect *Wakīl*.[15]

5 Ibn ʿArabī on Trusteeship

With these preliminary observations, we are in a better position to turn to the *Meccan Revelations*, to explore how Ibn ʿArabī understands trusteeship. We shall do this by beginning with chapter 118 ("On the Station of *Tawakkul*") where he outlines his conception of *wakāla* within the context of a discussion around the virtue of reliance on God, after which we shall move to chapter 558 ("The Presence of *Wakāla*") to further clarify his ideas.[16]

Near the opening of the chapter, our mystic states that there are two general views about *wakāla*, and by extension *tawakkul*. He notes that these conceptions are not necessarily his own. Nevertheless, he agrees with them in most respects, but not all. Before, however, we move to his own points of divergence – to the extent we can make these out – let us first understand the logic of each of the two positions. Describing the first view, and the theological reasoning behind it, he writes,

> He who observes that the things (*ashyāʾ*) – excluding the human being – were created for the human being, will find that there is in everything for him that which serves his interests (*maṣlaḥa*). It [the thing] seeks it [the *maṣlaḥa*] by its very essence. And since he remains ignorant of wherein lie his interests – interests conducive to his felicity – he fears wrongfully exercising authority over those matters. It has been reported that God

15 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Maqṣad*, 176–77; cf. *The Ninety-Nine Names*, 126.

16 These two chapters along with chapter 119, "On Abandoning Trust in God (*fī tark al-tawakkul*)" – not of direct relevance to our present inquiry – present us with his most sustained treatment of trusteeship. Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:269–75 (chapters 118–119), 11:450–51 (chapter 558).

> inspired Moses, "O Son of Adam, I created the things for you, and I created you for Me." [Reflecting on this] he says [to himself], "If He created the things for my sake, and He did not create except that in which my ultimate interests lie, and I am ignorant of the interests through which I may obtain felicity, let me then entrust the affairs to Him, for He is more knowledgeable of where my interests lie."[17]

This first perspective is rooted in the idea that God created the world for the human being, and the human being for Himself. Now since the human being cannot grasp how to completely oversee and manage his own affairs in a manner conducive to his ultimate well-being and welfare – in a way that would lead most securely to his salvation, and beyond that, intimacy with God – he entrusts his affairs to God. After all, "He created them" and "has a greater right to oversee their management."[18] The person of knowledge and faith (*al-muʾmin al-ʿālim*)[19] therefore takes God as his *Wakīl*, "and turns over the affairs to Him, handing over the reins into His hands."[20] And he does this, as noted, because of his own ignorance of how best to govern what lies under his control. He relinquishes *wakāla* and assigns it to God. Elsewhere, Ibn ʿArabī specifies, voicing his own agreement, that we are no more than "ignorant knowers (*al-ʿulamāʾ al-jāhilūn*)," because we can only see a sliver of the trajectory we are on and virtually nothing of what lies beyond it, outside of our immediate, terrestrial, egocentric field of vision.[21] In effect, we are blind, and this blindness should

17 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:269–70.

18 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:270.

19 For Ibn ʿArabī *tawakkul* is a virtue rooted not in reason but faith (*īmān*). He writes, "it is a quality of the faithful (*muʾminūn*). What then is your view of the knowers (*ʿulamāʾ*) from among the faithful? And since trust in God does not belong to the knower except by virtue of his being a person of faith – as God has so bound them together, and He did not do so say in vain – if it were a quality of the knowers, necessitated by rational knowledge, He would not have bound it to faith. Trust in God is not shared with a person who lacks faith, regardless of which law he follows. The servant of God accepts it through a quality of faith, not rational knowledge." *Futūḥāt* 5:269. This close relation is itself found in the Qurʾan, in which we read, "In God let the people of faith have trust" (Q 3:122, 3:160, 5:11, 9:51, 14:11, 39:38, 64:13). *Īmān* in fact is tied to *tawakkul* is no less than eleven verses. Hence the observation of Nora S. Eggen, that there is in the Qurʾan "a most intimate relationship between faith and Trust in God." "Conceptions of Trust in the Qurʾan," *Journal of Quranic Studies* 13.2 (2011): 56–85 at 59. This close relation was recognized in the early Sufi literature. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, for example, declares in his *Book of Flashes*, "*Tawakkul* is a noble station. God most High has commanded *tawakkul* and He has tied it to *imān*." *Kitāb al-lumaʿ*, ed. Kāmil Muṣṭafā al-Hindāwī (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2001), 49.

20 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:270.

21 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 11:450.

lead us to let God lead us, by allowing Him to arrange our life-conditions with little intervention, except where it involves engagement in "the affairs of religion." Moreover, this handing over of the reins should be easy because in everything that God has created, He has created that which leads to our well-being. In this light, it is best to restrain from meddling in the perfection of a cosmic harmony in which we are embedded, for purely personal, *nafsānī*, worldly reasons. The logic of this view is easy to appreciate when we consider the imperfections of human *wakāla* to which al-Ghazālī drew attention.

As for the second perspective, according to it God did not create the things for us, but for Himself, for His own exaltation. Ibn ʿArabī writes, "He created them so that every genus from the possible things (*kullu jins min al-mumkināt*) would glorify Him in a manner befitting it, through prayer and praise," for "He says, 'There is nothing except that it glorifies His praise' (Q 17:44). It is all for Him – most High – as His dominion (*mulk*)."[22] Ibn ʿArabī then explains that, according to this view, God placed us in charge, investing us with *wakāla*, making us His *wakīl*s, since we are unique in having been made in the divine image. This human deputyship, moreover, is intimately bound to our status as God's vicegerents on earth, as His *khalīfa*s – *khilāfa* (vicegerency) being, form this point of view, a near synonym of *wakāla*. As for the things, while they praise Him, they cannot know Him, since on the principle that like-knows-like, only the human being, fashioned as a theomorphic image, has the capacity to have knowledge of his Fashioner. "He let down the veils between Himself and their perception of Him," Ibn ʿArabī states of the things. "He perceives them while they do not perceive Him, since they do not have gnosis of Him" – gnosis being the privy of the human being alone as *imago dei*.[23]

But the *wakāla* of God's vicegerents, from this point of view, is nevertheless constrained, not absolute, since it is bound to the revealed law, with absolute trusteeship (*wakāla muṭlaqa*) belonging to God alone. Nevertheless, the human being has been endowed with a certain measure of dominion over the world, and as long as the boundaries set down by revelation are respected, he fulfils the obligations imposed on him by divine deputyship. But "as for him who transgresses the limits set down by God" – Ibn ʿArabī quotes from Q 65:1 – "he wrongs his own soul." While human history is, in many respects, a record of these very wrongs, followed by divine retribution or forgiveness, or

22 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:270.
23 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:270.

a combination of both, beginning with the trial and exile of Adam and Eve, our capacity for injustice and sinful rebellion does not negate or nullify our *wakāla*.[24]

It is clear from what has been explained, that of the two perspectives, the first places the accent squarely on the trusteeship of God, while the second emphasizes the human being's function as a *wakīl*. Regarding the first view, particularly with respect to the *wakāla* of God, our mystic draws attention to the extent to which this theme permeates the Qur'an.[25] And indeed, when we scrutinize Muslim scripture, we find that *wakāla* is almost always invariably retraced to God. In Q 17:2, for example, the Israelites are instructed to "Take not other than Me as your Trustee." And the Prophet is informed, on numerous occasions, "You are not a trustee over them."[26] But the Qur'an does not explicitly negate the idea of human *wakāla* either, and it establishes the notion of human *khilāfa* explicitly. In other words, the second perspective is not opposed to the Qur'an, and finds, in fact, much of its rationale within the theological anthropology of revelation, evidenced by the development of the idea in the exegetical history of the faith.

Where then does Ibn ʿArabī situate himself with respect to the two conceptions? His own position lies, as he states, in a combination of both, "for we bring together the two points of view (*fa najmaʿu bayn al-naẓarayn*)."[27] But this should not come as a surprise considering the persuasiveness and even rhetorical force with which he presents both perspectives.[28] With that said, it should be clarified that his own outlook does not entail an unqualified acceptance of both views either. On the particular question of the teleological function of the things or *ashyāʾ*, he highlights his own disagreement:

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24 In fact, for Ibn ʿArabī, Adam's sin exalted his status, bringing him closer to completion and wholeness, since sin expands one's experience of the possibilities latent in being. See Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 79. In chapter 119 (*fī tark al-tawakkul*), Ibn ʿArabī draws attention to this feature of Adam when he states, "he has the most encompassing configuration […] He has the eminence of comprehensiveness (*faḍlīyyat al-jamʿ*). For this reason, he was made the teacher of the angels and God made them prostrate to him." In other words, he had both the light of the heavens and the clay of the earth. *Futūḥāt*, 5:275.

25 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:271.

26 Q 6:107, 39:41, 42:6, 42:6. Cf. 10:108, 17:53.

27 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:271.

28 Ibn ʿArabī has an uncanny ability to appreciate arguments from the vantage points of those who make them, even if he finds them ultimately wanting or incomplete on their own. On the philosophical ramifications of such an approach to knowledge, see Peter Coates, *Ibn ʿArabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously* (Oxford: Anqa Press, 2002).

> He created the things for Himself, not for us. "And He gave everything its nature" [Q 20:50]. In our nature (*khalqinā*) there is an impoverishment towards what is beneficial for us, wherever it may lie, both with respect to this world and the next. We do not know the way towards that wherein lies our benefit, because He did not create the things for us. So, we make Him our Trustee, to subject to us from the things that wherein He knows our benefit to lie.[29]

What this means is that as part of His *wakāla* God makes subservient to us not so much the things themselves, but only those aspects of them wherein our interests dwell. Recall that according to the first view, in everything God created there lies that which benefits us, and leads to our ultimate felicity. This is because, according to this view, God created the world for us. But since for Ibn ʿArabī God created the things for Himself (echoing the proponents of the second perspective), the things do not in their very essences contain that which is beneficial for us. The *wakāla* of God therefore pertains very specifically to guiding us to those matters wherein our own interests are, *and those alone*. It involves Him subjecting to us not everything, but only those matters conducive to our felicity. As for the advocates of the second perspective, while for Ibn ʿArabī they correctly recognize the teleology of things, they fail to appreciate how they relate to our own interests, that is to say, to divine *wakāla*. Grasping the precise distinction between the things in-and-of-themselves, and those matters that benefit us (the *maṣāliḥ*) within the things, entails, for the mystic, treading "a narrow isthmus (*barzakh daqīq*), which, due its subtlety, not everyone discerns."[30]

6 The Circle of Trusteeship: The *Muwakkil*, *Wakīl* and *Wakīl of the Wakīl*

Unfortunately, Ibn ʿArabī does not explain in greater detail how precisely he brings together the two conceptions, each of which retraces, as we have seen, *wakāla* either to God or the human being. However, if we turn to chapter 558 on "The Presence of Trusteeship (*ḥaḍrat al-wakāla*)," we can form a slightly clearer picture of how they overlap. It is here that Ibn ʿArabī explores the relationship between the *wakīl* on the one hand, and the *muwakkil*, the one who commissions him, on the other. The former, he states, is bound to exercise

29 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:271.
30 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 5:271.

authority only over those matters over which the latter gives him jurisdiction, however wide or narrow in scope they may be. Thus "the *wakīl* does not exercise authority except in that over which he has been given permission."[31] But while this confers upon the *muwakkil* a certain measure of power over the *wakīl*, since the former defines the limits over which the latter has authority, it also gives the *wakīl* power over the *muwakkil*, since he has license to execute what the *muwakkil* may not desire, due to his own ignorance of how best to manage the affairs. And this is why Ibn ʿArabī states that "to the *wakīl* belongs the decisive argument (*al-ḥujja al-bāligha* [cf. Q:149]) … if you say to the *wakīl*, why did you do such a thing? He will unveil for you the matter so that you will see that it was you who made him do what you disapproved of him doing. It is inevitable that you will disapprove. But he will excuse you, and you will excuse him."[32] In other words, since the *wakīl* is only carrying out the task for which he was entrusted, he is blameless. And since the *muwakkil* is unaware of how to obtain on his own what he entrusted the *wakīl* to help him obtain, it is only natural that he may object to the steps taken by him (necessary in themselves) to reach the end for which he was tasked, particularly if those steps become a source of pain for the *muwakkil* – a possibility acutely recognized by the *wakīl*, whose only hope is that the *muwakkil* exercise patience and *tawakkul*.[33] Besides, he now has no choice in the matter, since he commissioned the *wakīl* to begin with. "It is incumbent on the *muwakkil* to obey the *wakīl*," writes Ibn ʿArabī, "for in doing so, he is not obeying anyone except himself."[34]

The nature of this dynamic, when transposed onto the divine-human plane, allows us to grasp some of the subtleties that govern the human being's relationship with God as *Wakīl*. For one thing, the human being has a measure of agency, in that it is he who commissions, as *muwakkil*, God as his Trustee.

31 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 11:450.

32 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 11:450.

33 The two virtues go hand in hand, since the *mutawakkil* must often exercise *ṣabr* ("self-restraint" or *ḥabs al-nafs*, the very definition of patience in the classical texts) in undergoing or carrying out what he is tasked with by the *wakīl*. In the Qurʾan, both qualities are directly paired in at least three verses (14:12, 16:42, 29:59). A story in the literature illustrates the wisdom behind patient trust and reliance: A Sufi once passed by a man crucified by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714), the sight of which deeply grieved him, and led him to call out to God, "Your forbearance with oppressors is a cause of great anguish for the oppressed." That night he had a dream where the Resurrection had come to pass. On finding the crucified man in the highest station of Paradise (*aʿlā ʿilliyyīn*), he heard a divine call: "My forbearance with oppressors leads the oppressed into the highest stations of Paradise." ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Sharnūbī, *Sharḥ tāʾiyyat al-sulūk ilā malik al-mulūk* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 2011), 36–37 (section on *tawakkul*).

34 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 11:451.

Ibn ʿArabī stresses this aspect of human power over God. In addition, the way that our mystic outlines the rules of this relationship implies that the human being may request divine trusteeship over certain, specified matters, but not all of them. One may want, for example, God's *wakāla* over one's livelihood, health, or spiritual direction, but not personal relationships, since one might be quite happy with where they stand, fearful that God's wise direction may disrupt them for the greater end. That is to say, the *nafs* or lower-soul, intent on holding onto whatever pleasure or happiness it has in the moment, may not want the intervention of divine *wakāla* over matters that, from its own vantage point, seem to be just fine.[35] Naturally, the ideal for the *muwakkil* is to entrust *all* of his affairs to God, particularly if he is serious about his posthumous states. And this is after all what the Qur'an summons him to as a person of faith. But the nature of this relationship, at least in the manner Ibn ʿArabī outlines it, suggests that the human *muwakkil* has some degree of control in how far he lets God's *wakāla* penetrate his life. Theologically speaking, the idea is not so outlandish. A simple illustration of it lies in a specific prayer that a devotee may make, which God grants because He is after all *Mujīb*, the Answerer of petitions, but which He might not have granted were He also invoked as *Wakīl*, aware of the harm that would ensue by the conferral of the request. In this respect the response, were He to be called upon by both Names, might be compassionate, silent refusal.[36]

35 On the stratagems of the lower soul in early Sufi moral psychology, see Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 123–59; and Sara Sviri, *Perspectives on Early Islamic Mysticism: The World of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and his Contemporaries* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 47–50, 169–77, 179–83. For a contemporary analysis of the nature of the "tyrannical self" by a transpersonal psychologist who also happens to be a shaikh of the Halveti-Jerrahi Order, see Robert Frager, *Heart, Self, and Soul: The Sufi Psychology of Growth, Balance and Harmony* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1999), 52–66. For a recent treatment of the subject in al-Ghazālī, see Joel Richmond, "Al-Ghazālī's Moral Psychology: From Self-Control to Self-Surrender" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2021).

36 A story is told in the Sufi sources of the saintly ascetic Maʿrūf al-Karkhī (d. *c.*200/815) highlighting this idea. Once while seated with his disciples, he was approached by a destitute man who complained of a handbag full of a large sum of money that had been stolen. In desperation, he begged the shaikh (who was known for the answering of his petitions) to pray for the return of his stolen goods. He remained silent. The man then pressed his request. "What should I say to God?" Maʿrūf retorted, "that You give him what You deprived Your prophets and pure ones?" An onlooker felt pity for the victim, and requested the spiritual master to pray for him nevertheless. Maʿrūf then called out, "O God! Give him what is good for him!" The open-ended and general nature of his *duʿā* was intended to protect the man from repercussions which a specific prayer directed at the restoration of such a large sum of money might have. Qushayrī, *Risāla*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. Sharīf (Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2002), 461. It was this same

There are two other aspects of divine *wakāla* highlighted by Ibn ʿArabī worth noting before we proceed any further. The first of these he brings attention to near the opening of the chapter when he writes, "He is the Forbearing One (*al-Ḥalīm*) who does not act in haste. He delays but does not forget, whereas we act in haste, and He knows we act in haste."[37] Divine *wakāla*, in this light, implies that even though the *muwakkil* may entrust his affairs to God, that He will execute tasks only at the proper time and place. The *muwakkil*'s shortsightedness, however, may lead him to think the affairs are being neglected, when in truth the appropriate conditions have not yet materialized – conditions that may include the *muwakkil*'s own preparedness to receive or accept the final outcome. In most cases, the beauty and perfection of the divine orchestration will only become apparent after death, when the veils are lifted. Additionally, Ibn ʿArabī also declares that the intervention of God's trusteeship may be elicited not by only by speech (*lafẓ*), in the form of vocalized prayer, but also through one's state (*ḥāl*) of need or yearning, without articulation.[38] Indeed, as the famous Sufi aphorism runs, "the state is more eloquent than the tongue."[39] One may therefore draw God's Trusteeship into one's life simply through desperation and need, with the soul reaching out in helplessness while the tongue remains silent. In either case, once divine *wakāla* is summoned, God now has the argument on His side, to do what is required for the *muwakkil* – despite his protests – to bring about an end he himself desires.

Thus far, we have seen one side of the relationship, where God is *Wakīl*. The circle of *wakāla* begins to return to its point of origin in the *muwakkil* with Ibn ʿArabī's assertion that as part of God's trusteeship over the human being, He sends His own *wakīl*s into the world – the prophets and messengers – each one of whom acts as a "trustee of the Trustee (*wakīl al-wakīl*)" to guide humans to felicity, the telos of divine *wakāla*.[40] To quote Ibn ʿArabī:

> He entrusted the messengers to convey to the *muwakkil*s that it lies in your ultimate interests (*maṣāliḥ*), as we see them (*al-maṣāliḥ allatī ra'aynālakum*), to do such-and-such, and to stay away from such-and-such. For therein lies your felicity and escape from perdition. He who from

awareness that led Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) to declare, "Many a prayer, if heard, would involve destruction, and it is divine wisdom not to answer it." Cited in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 159.

37 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 11:450.

38 Ibn ʿArabī, *Fuṭūḥāt*, 11:451.

39 *lisān al-ḥāl afṣaḥ min lisān al-maqāl*. Cf. Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Maḥjub*, trans. R. Nicholson (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1992 [1911 reprint]), 356.

40 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 11:451.

> among the *muwakkil*s carries out the instructions of the trustee of the Trustee, attains felicity and final deliverance … [for He says] "O ye who believe, respond to God and the Messenger when He calls you to that which gives you life" [Q 8:24].[41]

There are a few points that should be clarified from this passage, and in doing so, we may now bring our treatment of *wakāla* in Ibn ʿArabī to a close.

First, the mystic reiterates the idea that the human being is a *muwakkil*, an entrustor who commissions God through *tawkīl* to be his Trustee, so that God can manage his affairs in order to bring about, in the end, his ultimate felicity (*saʿāda*). The circle of *wakāla* originates from the desire or *pathos* of the human being for wise divine intervention.

Second, as a consequence of the Trusteeship given to God by the human being, God entrusts the prophets to act as His own *wakīl*s so that they can direct human beings to their happiness and salvation. Note, the prophets are *not* the trustees of human beings, but of God and God alone. They answer to Him and no other. This is after all why in the Qur'an the Prophet of Islam is told on more than one occasion, "You are not a trustee over them" (6:107; 39:41; 42:6; cf. 6:66, 10:108, 17:54). In other words, God commissions the prophets through *tawkīl*, as the divine *Muwakkil*, to carry out a task in much the same way that He is Himself commissioned, as *Wakīl* (= *Muwakkal*), by human *muwakkil*s. And as provocative as it may sound, just as the prophets are held accountable by God, God is also held accountable by humans – accountability forming an essential component of the entrustor-trustee, *muwakkil-wakīl* dynamic.[42]

Third, while Ibn ʿArabī does not explicitly say so, we may assume, by the logic of his own reasoning, that God's investiture of the human being with *wakāla* does not end with the prophets. To the extent that the people of knowledge, the *ʿulamāʾ*, are the inheritors of the prophets (as the well-known hadith states), they are "trustees of the trustees of the Trustee," since they assume their duties upon their deaths. Who else is to carry out the responsibilities entrusted by God to the transmitters of revelation, once they depart from this world, other than those who (according to tradition) follow most closely in their footsteps? And we must not forget that for Ibn ʿArabī, these *ʿulamāʾ* are not those who take their knowledge from books – the "scholars of the tracings" or "exoteric

41 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 11:451.

42 Naturally, the perfection of divine trusteeship will nevertheless absolve God of any blame or criticism once the veils are lifted after death, and the *muwakkil* sees the wisdom of every measure taken by God for his benefit. In theory, however, it is important to remember that the *wakīl* must always answer to the *muwakkil*, just as the *muwakkil* must subordinate himself to the *wakīl*'s *wakāla*.

scholars" (*al-ʿulamāʾ al-rusūm*)[43] – but the Friends of God, gnostics, men and women of sanctity, the knowledge of whom originates in inspiration (*ilhām*), divine bestowal (*wahb*), and second-order revelation (not *waḥy* proper).[44]

Fourth, extending the logic of Ibn ʿArabī's reasoning further, to the extent that every human being has a responsibility to act as a steward over the earth, as God's *khalīfa*, he is also a "trustee of the trustees of the Trustee," or better yet, simply a "trustee of the Trustee." After all, he is invested by God through the prophets with vicegerency. Thus, every human being who believes in the sacred power and function of trusteeship on the basis of revelation – the only source for this knowledge of self-nature – is simultaneously a *muwakkil* who entrusts God with the management of his affairs, and a *wakīl* in so far as he is entrusted by God to be a benevolent caretaker of the earth, to govern what lies under his power in accordance with the good, as outlined by prophecy. Hence a teacher is a trustee over his students, a mother a trustee over her children, a physician a trustee over her patients, and a ruler a trustee over his subjects. And yet, at the same time, each of them seeks divine help through His *wakāla*, to manage their affairs, not only in their respective vocations, but over all they have been entrusted by God. In this light, trusteeship, which finds its supreme archetype in the divine Trustee, percolates through all levels and strata of human society, extending its reach from kings to paupers, to all of God's servants.

Recall that in chapter 118, after outlining the two perspectives on *wakāla*, Ibn ʿArabī argues that he "brings together both views." By doing so, he combines an approach that places the accent on passivity, where one hands the reigns to God, with one that places the accent on an activity where one exercises power and self-will as a divinely ordained vicegerent. Our mystic thereby transforms the ideal state of *wakāla* into that of a subtle balance, where one carefully navigates through the terrain of this world without slipping either into stoic indifference and inaction (exemplified by the famous story of the drowning Sufi who refuses help) or a restless, agitated desire for control and authority, an egocentric desire to become the master of one's destiny (the fate

43 On their limitations in the eyes of Ibn ʿArabī, see Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 247–49; Chodkiewicz, *Ocean without Shore*, 21.

44 See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 247–49. The critique of the "exoteric" scholars is found in the earliest works of Sufism. To quote from Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's (d. 996) *Nourishment of Hearts*, "Abū Yazīd and others used to say, 'Verily the *ʿālim* is not the one who memorizes from the book of God, and if he forgets what he memorized, becomes ignorant. Verily the *ʿālim* is the one who takes his knowledge from his Lord, may He be glorified and exalted, any time he wishes, without memorization or study (*dars*). By my life! Verily such a one does not forget his knowledge. He constantly remembers (*huwa dhākir abadan*) and has no need for a book. He is a lordly knower (*ʿālim rabbānī*).'" *Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Saʿīd Nasīb Makārim (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1995), 1:287.

of most humans).[45] By combining both, Ibn ʿArabī creates a circle of trusteeship that begins with the human *muwakkil* and returns to him as *khalīfa-wakīl*.

7 Conclusion

We began by noting how for Ibn ʿArabī the assumption of the divine Names (*takhalluq*) must be undertaken in a manner that corresponds to the impoverished creaturely constitution of the human being. While his theomorphic nature makes the assumption possible, his particular mode of *takhalluq* rests entirely on where he is placed by God in life, on his unique subjectivity. That is to say, for our mystic God invests each and every human being with a *wakāla* that on the one hand reflects His own, by virtue of the fact that He is the Trustee *par excellence* (*al-Wakīl* and not just a *wakīl*), but that also differs from His, since not only is each person deficient and imperfect (as al-Ghazālī highlighted), but also because he is entrusted with a unique set of responsibilities over which he is granted trusteeship by God, and whose *wakāla* must therefore differ by necessity from that of others. This is all the more obvious since in our world, marked as it is by multiplicity and change, the divine Names can only be embodied in a very specific mode by each and every individual, never appearing in the same form in more than one locus at a given time. As the maxim states, "there is no repetition in existence (*lā takrār fi-l wujūd*)" – a theme central to Ibn ʿArabī's conception of being.[46]

Finally, there remains the question of *tawakkul*, "trust" or "reliance." Since this quality remains essential to the relation between the human *muwakkil* and the divine *wakīl*, once the relationship is established through the commissioning act of *tawkīl*, the question may be asked, does God likewise enter into a state of *tawakkul* with the human *wakīl* whom He entrusts through His own *tawkīl*? Certainly, an Islamic approach that contrasts the perfection of God with the imperfection of the human being would leave little to no room

45 "The story of the dervish who fell into the Tigris is well known. Seeing that he could not swim, a man on the bank cried out to him, 'Shall I tell someone to bring you ashore?' The dervish said, 'No.' 'Then do you wish to be drowned?' 'No.' 'What, then, do you wish?' The dervish replied, 'That which God wishes. What have I to do with wishing?'" Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 180. See n12 above.

46 Also, *lā takrār fi-l tajallī*, "there is no repetition in [divine] self-disclosure." On Ibn ʿArabī's understanding of this phrase which he retraces to Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, see Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 103–5. Cf. Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 200–207 ("The Recurrence of Creation").

for such a possibility, even if one were, for argument's sake, to accept the equation of human vicegerency with trusteeship. And indeed, Ibn ʿArabī does not himself seem to speak of divine *tawakkul* either, at least not in the three chapters where he addresses the subject of trusteeship directly. *Tawakkul*, after all, reflects a state of dependency, a quality suitable to the human being but not God. However, if we move from a dualistic lord-servant theology to a metaphysics of Unity, or the "unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), in which nothing exists but God alone, then we may begin to open ourselves to the possibility of divine *tawakkul* or God-as-*Mutawakkil*. In this framework, not only would this quality be "experienced" by God through the servant in whom He manifests Himself as *muwakkil*, in His relationship with Himself as divine *Wakīl*, but also as the divine *Muwakkil* who entrusts *wakāla* to Himself through the locus of the servant as human *wakīl*. Here, one might argue, He has trust in and reliance upon Himself to carry out the function of a vicegerent – ontologically non-existent in himself – whom He created in His own image. These are speculative considerations, but considerations that nonetheless seem to follow the underlying methods of reasoning that characterize the thinking of our mystic.[47]

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