

## Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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### Summary

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a contemporary Islamic philosopher with global influence. His oeuvre covers an extended field from the perennial philosophy, which dominates his philosophical worldview, to religion, science, environmental studies, education, and the arts with particular attention to Islamic and comparative studies, as well as criticism of modernism. Grounded in Islamic tradition, Nasr's far-reaching ideas have been acknowledged by the global scholarly community. Nasr is the only Muslim thinker included in the Library of Living Philosophers (LLP). Since its inception in 1939, the LLP has featured some of the greatest of the 20th century's Western philosophers and scientists, namely A. N. Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, J. P. Sartre, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Richard Rorty, and Hilary Putnam. Nasr was also the first Muslim and non-Westerner to deliver the prestigious Gifford lectures whose contributors also include prominent intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt, Noam Chomsky, William James, Iris Murdoch, Charles Taylor, and Rowan Williams.

Nasr's written corpus contains some thirty thousand pages in print, which have generated a great deal of interest, contention, and controversy in the Islamic world and beyond. One should also consider his innumerable media appearances, public lectures, and interviews that often complement and expand upon his written corpus. Nasr is perhaps most famous for being one of the first people to predict, diagnose, and provide a response to the ecological crisis, having spoken out on the topic as early as 1966. He is considered the father of "Islamic environmentalism," which is now gaining momentum in the Muslim world. Nasr also made important contributions to topics such as Islamic science and philosophy, religious pluralism, Islamic art and spirituality, and Sufi-Chinese dialogue.

**Keywords:** order of the sacred, eco-philosophy, Islamic science, Islamic art, spirituality, religion and modernity

**Subjects:** Islamic Studies

### Introduction

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The breadth of Nasr's oeuvre ~~is~~ ranges from Sufi poetry to the philosophy of science including such diverse subjects as metaphysics, Islamic art, eco-philosophy, religion, and spirituality. Grounded in the Islamic tradition, Nasr's far-reaching ideas have been duly acknowledged by the global scholarly community. Nasr is the only Muslim thinker whose name has been included in the Library of Living Philosophers (LLP). Since its inception in 1939, the LLP has featured some of the greatest of the 20th century's Western philosophers and scientists, such as A. N. Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, J. P. Sartre, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Richard Rorty, and Hilary Putnam. Nasr was also the first Muslim and non-Westerner to deliver the prestigious Gifford lectures (later published as *Knowledge and the Sacred*).

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Nasr is well-known for being an expositor of the "perennial philosophy," which articulates a comprehensive metaphysics and a critique of modernity in such domains as philosophy, art, religion, and science. But Nasr is perhaps most famous for being one of the first people to predict, diagnose, and provide a response to the ecological crisis, having spoken out on the topic as early as 1966. He is considered the father of "Islamic environmentalism," which is now gaining momentum in the Muslim world. Nasr also made important contributions to topics such as Islamic science and philosophy, religious pluralism, Islamic art and spirituality, and Sufi-Chinese dialogue. Nasr's major intellectual ideas and their proper contexts will be presented in this article.

## Intellectual Background

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Nasr was born in Tehran in 1933 into a family of scholars and physicians.<sup>1</sup> He received his early education in Tehran, Iran before moving to the United States at the age of twelve. After completing his secondary education at the Peddie School in New Jersey, Nasr went to MIT to study physics, with the intention of becoming a *physicos* in the Greek sense of the term (i.e., the one who understands the nature of physical reality). However, a meeting with Bertrand Russell led him to realize that all he was learning were mathematical structures that model the physical world.<sup>2</sup> Nasr's disillusionment with modern physics led to a profound spiritual crisis. Upon graduating from MIT, Nasr earned a PhD in the history and philosophy of science from Harvard in 1958. During his MIT and Harvard years, Nasr studied with several well-known scholars such as Giorgio de Santillana, Ernst Levy, Werner Jaeger, George Sarton, Bernard Cohen, Hamilton Gibb, and Harry Wolfson.

After completing his studies in America, Nasr returned to Iran where he was to spend the next twenty years teaching and studying Islamic science and philosophy. Nasr's stay in Iran was marked by intense scholarly activities at both administrative and academic levels. He became the vice-chancellor and the president of Tehran University and Aryamehr University, respectively, while simultaneously producing numerous books and articles. Moreover, in the 1970s Nasr founded *The Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy*, which attracted well-known scholars and philosophers from around the globe.

In Iran, Nasr also extensively studied the foundational texts of Islamic philosophy with some of the most famous traditional authorities of the time such as Sayyid Abu al-Hasan Qazwini, Sayyid Muhammad Kazim 'Assar, and Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i. During this time, Nasr also collaborated and associated himself with numerous scholars and philosophers including Henry Corbin, Toshihiko Izutsu, M. M. Sharif, Huston Smith, Mircea Eliade, Elémire Zolla, Michel Foucault, Gilbert Durand, Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, Hassan Hanafi, Ismail al-Faruqi, Abdullah Umar Nasif, Syed Ali Ashraf, and Syed Naquib al-Attas. The Revolution of 1979 marked a

period of transition in Nasr's career as he returned to the United States, first serving on the faculty at Temple University, and finally settling at George Washington University in 1984 as a university professor, a position which he holds to this day.

Nasr has continued his scholarly activities by travelling and lecturing around the world and meeting with influential religious personalities including popes, the Dalai Lama, and fellow philosophers and public intellectuals such as Foucault, Gadamer, and Habermas, to name but a few. He also has had extensive contacts and dialogues with well-known Christian theologians such as Paul Tillich, Hans Küng, and John Hick and Jewish theologians such as Rabbi Schorsch and Zalman Schachter, as well as orientalists such as Josef van Ess, Fritz Meier, and John Waardenburg. Another line of influence that played a major role in Nasr's intellectual formation was the critique of modern European philosophy by traditionalist philosophers such as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon. As Nasr says in his autobiography, such an extensive training and diverse encounters set his

gaze more fully upon the horizon of universal and global truth in the traditional sense of the word, embracing not only the Islamic tradition which was [his] own, but also the Western, both Graeco-Alexandrian and Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Far Eastern and primal, and also including esoteric Judaism associated with the Kabbala, and Zoroastrianism and other Iranian religions.<sup>3</sup>

## Major Ideas

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### The Order of the Sacred

Nasr's philosophy is shaped by the traditionalist worldview, which presents a comprehensive vision of reality encompassing metaphysics, cosmology, epistemology, ethics, and art. Given the wide range of possible meanings of the word *tradition* and its centrality in Nasr's work, it is helpful to begin with Nasr's own definition:

Tradition as used in its technical sense in this work, as in all our other writings, means truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind and, in fact, a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, *avatāras*, the Logos or other transmitting agencies, along with all the ramifications and applications of these principles in different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge along with the means for its attainment.<sup>4</sup>

One can see from the above that for Nasr, "tradition" is not to be equated with custom or past heritage. Rather, it refers to metaphysical principles that are themselves immutable and that have varying degrees of applications in the human order. Moreover, according to Nasr, tradition is inseparable from revelation and religion, from the sacred, from the notion of orthodoxy and authority, from the continuity and regularity of transmission of the truth, from the exoteric and

the esoteric as well as to the spiritual life, science, and the arts.<sup>5</sup> Nasr interlaces this concept of tradition to what he calls *scientia sacra* or sacred science, which lies at the heart of every revelation and which, moreover, defines tradition. He argues that it is possible to have knowledge of Ultimate Reality, which is the substance of this sacred science, through the twin sources of revelation and intellection. In Nasr's view, intellection or intellectual intuition involves the illumination of the heart and the mind of the knower and the presence in him or her of knowledge of an immediate and direct nature, which is tasted and experienced, and which in the Islamic tradition is referred to as *presential knowledge* (*al-‘ilm al-huduri*) (see the section "Knowledge and Ethical Purification").<sup>6</sup>

In Nasr's metaphysics, Ultimate Reality is at once Absolute, Infinite, and the Supreme Good. It is Pure Consciousness which is both transcendent and the source of all cosmic and human consciousness. Drawing upon the metaphysical traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Neoplatonism, and also Islam, Nasr explains the nature of Ultimate Reality in the following way:

The Ultimate Reality is at once Absolute and Infinite since no finite reality can be absolute due to its exclusion of some domain of reality. This reality is also the Supreme Good or the Perfection which is inseparable from the Absolute. Reality, being at once Absolute, Infinite, and Supreme Goodness or Perfection, cannot but give rise to the world or multiplicity which must be realized for otherwise that Reality would exclude certain possibilities and not be infinite. The world flows from the infinitude and goodness of the Real for to speak of goodness is to speak of manifestation, effusion, or creation and to speak of infinity is to speak of all possibilities including that of the negation of the Principle in whose direction the cosmogonic process moves without ever realizing that negation completely, for that total negation would be nothingness pure and simple.<sup>7</sup>

In keeping with the worldview of the perennial philosophy, Nasr asserts that the Absolute lies at the center of every authentic religious tradition, although its formulations and the modality of its manifestations may vary depending on the differing contexts of different human collectivities. Nasr further explains how the world of manifestation reflects the order of the Absolute or the Sacred. For instance, the quality of absoluteness is reflected in how every existent entity is distinguished from everything else and from pure nothingness. Similarly, the infinitude of the Absolute is reflected in both the orders of space and time, the former revealing an indefinite extension while the latter manifesting endless duration. Moreover, the "forms" in nature, the number which is marked by endless multiplicity, and matter which partakes potentially of endless forms and divisions, all reflect divine infinitude in the cosmic order.<sup>8</sup>

In delineating his metaphysics or the order of the sacred, Nasr also draws attention to the concept of "levels of reality," which he sometimes explains in terms of the ontology of the School of Ibn 'Arabi. In its simplest version, the structure of reality is conceived in terms of the absolutely unconditioned being (*wujud la bi-shart maqsami*), its first self-manifestation identified with the negatively conditioned being (*wujud bi-shart la*), and all-expanding existence (*wujud munbasit*), which is the Act of Being encompassing everything in the cosmos.<sup>9</sup> Nasr has also argued that the relation between the various levels of reality cannot be fully understood without taking into

account the notion of “necessity,” along with its contrast “possibility.” Drawing upon Avicenna’s (d. 1037) famous distinction between necessity and possibility, Nasr argues that although necessity is opposed to possibility conceptually, not all meanings of possibility contradict the notion of necessity. Possibility has two meanings, one of which has to do with the matter of something that can exist or not exist while the other relates to the character of something which has the power and capacity to perform an act. In the first meaning of the term, everything other than the Absolute is contingent (e.g., an animal may exist or may not exist). Nasr then relates this meaning of possibility to the Sufi notion of *al-a‘yan al-thabita* or immutable essences, which exist eternally as objects of God’s knowledge. In his view, the meaning of possibility is opposed to necessity when things do exist and become necessary through the existentionation of the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*). However, if possibility is viewed as power or potency (i.e., its second meaning), then it is not opposed to necessity but complements it as far as the Absolute is concerned. God is Absolute Necessity and Infinite Possibility, while at the same time the omnipotence of God is reflected in the divine attribute of *al-qadir*—all of which complements the second meaning of possibility described above.<sup>10</sup> He then criticizes those who affirm divine voluntarism, as they fail to see that whatever happens in this world is not only according to a divine will but also in conformity with a divine nature and possibility. God would negate His nature if He willed something that is not a possibility in the second sense described above.<sup>11</sup>

Like the notion of the Absolute, the concept of the human being is also central to Nasr’s metaphysics. For Nasr, the traditional view of the *anthropos* corresponds to a being who is the pontifex or bridge between heaven and earth. Nasr contrasts this pontifical view of the human being with what he calls the Promethean human being who rebels against heaven and tries to assume the role of the Divinity for himself/herself. For Nasr, the pontifical human being lives in full awareness of her/his divine origin, which contains her/his own perfection and whose primordial purity and wholeness she/he seeks to emulate, recapture, and transmit. Moreover, the pontifical human being, who is also God’s vicegerent on earth (*khalifat Allah*), is responsible for her/his actions, especially insofar as they concern nature.<sup>12</sup>

Within Nasr’s comprehensive order of the sacred, nature forms an integral part of cosmology. Everything in nature is seen as a theophany, a particular manifestation arising from the interplay of divine possibilities. The harmony which pervades the world, linking the life cycles of fishes on the bottom of the tropical oceans to the land creatures roaming the tundra in a remarkable pattern, is a testimony to the order of the sacred.<sup>13</sup> Nasr admits that this “harmony” within nature has not been overlooked in recent ecological studies, but for him, such harmony ultimately derives from the Sufi notion of the perfect human (*al-insan al-kamil*), who is the prototype of both the human being and the cosmos.<sup>14</sup>

Not only does the human being occupy a center stage in being an intermediary between heaven and earth (i.e., nature), but also she/he stands at the point of intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes of existence, where the eternal and the temporal meet. Although she/he is a being located in time and the process of change, she/he is made for the eternal and is able to gain access to the eternal even when she/he is situated in the realm of becoming. That the human state is the meeting place of time and eternity is best proven through her/his consciousness of her/his own death and mortality, which implies that she/he is also given the possibility of envisaging that

which lies beyond the temporal unfolding of being.<sup>15</sup> To flesh out the human being's affinity with the eternal, Nasr points to such natural phenomena as the tranquility of a placid lake and the vibrating rays of the morning sun shining upon the mountain peaks, which produces in us a sense of peace and beauty that according to him "melts the hardness of the human soul and quells the agitations of a being caught in the tumultuous tides of the sea of becoming."<sup>16</sup>

The sacred order encompasses not only God, human beings, and nature or cosmos, but also sacred art which, like the words of scripture and the forms of nature, is ultimately a revelation from that Reality which is the source of both tradition and the cosmos. Nasr sees a deep connection between sacred art and sacred knowledge, since the former is based upon a science of the cosmos whose inward dimension vehicles a knowledge which is of a sacred nature. In Nasr's view, sacred art contains both truth and presence, which can be transmitted even to those aspects of traditional art which are not properly speaking sacred art; that is, arts that are not directly concerned with the liturgical, ritual, and esoteric elements of the tradition in question, but which nevertheless are created according to traditional norms and principles.<sup>17</sup>

One can glean from the foregoing how Nasr's view of the order of the sacred presents an alternative account of reality from the one familiar to most science-educated individuals in the early 21st century. In contrast to notions of progress, scientific advancement, and enlightenment that eventually gave birth to modernity, Nasr has seen a gradual eclipse of the sacred worldview in the last five or six centuries. By thoroughly engaging with medieval and late medieval thought, Nasr points to the debate between the realists and nominalists on the nature of the universal and the subsequent spread of nominalism during the Renaissance as the first fissure which begins to weaken knowledge of the sacred order. Nasr also deals with the proliferation after the synthesis of medieval thought of eclectic thinking during the Renaissance such as Aristotelianism, Platonism, Hellenistic philosophies (Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism), Hermeticism, and various currents of humanism.<sup>18</sup> For instance, he mentions Agrippa von Nettesheim as an important reviver of ancient skepticism, which influenced Montaigne and through him many others. In his critique of Renaissance humanism, Nasr engaged at length with Lorenzo Valla's naturalism and Pico della Mirandola's aggrandizement of human nature, holding them and other Renaissance figures such as Charles de Bouvelles responsible for eroding the traditional view of the human being and her/his relationship with nature and God.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, Nasr's criticism of the modern project extends to the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the European Enlightenment.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth noting here that Nasr's critique of the modern project is directed to its metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings. As such, he is not against the historical reality known as the "modern world" as some have claimed but against modernism as a metaphysical worldview that is dominant in that world.<sup>21</sup> This is evident from Nasr's extensive treatment of Cartesian philosophy in many of his works. For instance, Nasr criticizes Descartes for downplaying the intellect and making the individual thinking subject the arbiter of objective knowledge. In Nasr's telling, Descartes made the individual thinking subject the center of reality and the criterion of all knowledge, turning philosophy into pure rationalism and shifting the main concern of European philosophy from ontology and "being" to a subjectivist epistemology. Thus, the knowing subject was bound to the realm of reason and separated from both the intellect and revelation, neither of



which were henceforth considered as possible sources of objective knowledge.<sup>22</sup> According to Nasr, Cartesian epistemology opened the door to Humean doubt and Kantian agnosticism, both of which further denied the intellect its ability to know the true nature of things.<sup>23</sup>

As shall be seen, Nasr's philosophical critique of the modern project colors his treatment of other topics such as eco-philosophy, Islamic science, and Islam and modernity.

## Eco-philosophy

As one of the very first intellectuals who began to talk about the current ecological crisis in the late 1960s, Nasr wrote two crucial books, namely *Man and Nature*.<sup>24</sup> *The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* and *Religion and the Order of Nature*, along with numerous articles on this subject. Taken together, these works deal with different intellectual traditions such as Greek philosophy, Indian philosophy, medieval philosophy, Sufism, and Islamic philosophy and engage with thinkers including but not limited to Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Schelling, and Hegel in order to put forward a sacred conception of nature imbued with ethical and spiritual values that would also preserve the hierarchy of reality extending all the way to the Absolute. According to Nasr, such a radical reorientation toward nature is only possible when modern science is integrated into a higher form of knowledge, namely metaphysics. Moreover, Nasr has argued that there is a correlation between environmental degradation and the spiritual crisis of modern humanity. As he wrote in *Man and Nature*:

Today, almost everyone living in the urbanized centers of the Western world feels intuitively a lack of something in life. This is due directly to the creation of an artificial environment from which nature has been excluded to the greatest possible extent. Even the religious man in such circumstances has lost the sense of the spiritual significance of nature. The domain of nature has become a 'thing' devoid of meaning, and at the same time the void created by the disappearance of this vital aspect of human existence continues to live within the souls of men and to manifest itself in many ways, sometimes violently and desperately.<sup>25</sup>

For Nasr, the degradation of nature into an "it" is directly related to the mechanistic conceptions of nature, which leave no room for the "spiritual dimension." He traces the mechanization of nature back to the 17th-century scientific revolution, which marginalizes sacred conceptions of nature through the Galilean primary and secondary qualities distinction and the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter.<sup>26</sup> That is, Galileo, Descartes, and other early modern thinkers present a picture of the world, which is hard, cold, colorless, silent, and dead because it is a world of quantity, a world in which mathematical modeling is supposed to reveal mechanical regularity in nature. In other words, only quantifiable entities such as mass, motion, shape, size, and so on reveal the essence of nature, whereas color and smell, alongside the beauty, harmony, and wonder of nature ultimately reside in the realm of human subjectivity.

Nasr argues that the technologies developed from such a mechanistic worldview are directly responsible for the destruction of nature on a vast scale, reaching as far as the higher layers of the atmosphere.<sup>27</sup> This is because such technologies view nature as a means (or a “resource”), and not an end (e.g., seeing forests as potential building material and development sites instead of as loci of the sacred, thereby leading to a deep unsustainable relationship with the natural world). In contrast to the mechanistic view, Nasr has argued that one must revive the spiritual meaning of nature by rejecting the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter that reduces nature to a mere “it” and treats it as an “object” not unlike other material objects. In addition, one must also be critical of the mechanistic worldview of modern science, which seeks to explain nature in terms of blind forces, processes, and motion. However, Nasr does not reject the positive elements within modern science, which he thinks can be meaningfully integrated into the order of the sacred in which the domain of nature possesses a higher meaning.<sup>28</sup> Nasr thus promotes a deep relationship with the natural environment, which is generally found in all traditional religions. His perspective advances a participatory view and a deeper understanding of the human–nature relationship.

Nonetheless, for Nasr the spiritual view of nature requires of us a complete reunderstanding of what nature is and who we are as human beings who act upon nature because it is impossible to discuss nature without discussing the image that we have of ourselves.<sup>29</sup> It requires a very radical transformation in our consciousness, which means one must rediscover the traditional way of looking at the world of nature as sacred presence.

The first step toward transforming our attitude vis-à-vis nature is to realize that we are part and parcel of nature, and that we do not stand “above” nature. This is because there is a profound interconnectedness of all things, as all things emanate from God via the Logos or the Universal Intellect:

A person who has reached the center of his own being sees in every phenomenon of nature, in the crystals, plants, and animals, in the mountains and skies and the seas, realities that are not exhausted by the “merely” physical but that reveal themselves through the physical realities that also reside within the being of man and come from the Logos and ultimately God. Man is thus united with nature in body, soul, and spirit and, in the final end, in God.<sup>30</sup>

Although Nasr talks about a hierarchy in which humans are conceived as intermediaries between God and nature, this does not mean humans can dominate or mistreat nature, since they are accountable to God as His servants. However, through their higher nature, human beings can develop a loving and harmonious relationship with nature, and can rightfully claim their ranks as custodians of God’s creation, which is implied by the concept of “vicegerency” or *khilafa*.<sup>31</sup> Nasr highlights the pivotal role of human beings as intermediaries or pontifex in establishing the harmonious connection between the lower and higher levels of reality. He says:



From both the spiritual and the religious perspective, the physical world is related to God by levels of reality which transcend the physical world itself and which constitute the various stages of the cosmic hierarchy. It is impossible to have harmony in nature, or harmony of man with nature without this vertical harmony with the higher states of being. Once nature is conceived as being purely material, even if we accept that it was created by God conceived as a clockmaker, this cosmic relationship can no longer even be conceived much less be realized. Once we cut nature off from the immediate principles of nature—which are the psychic and spiritual or angelic levels of reality—then nature has already lost its balance as far as our relation to it is concerned.<sup>32</sup>

Nasr further explained that the harmony mentioned above is maintained by human beings through religious rituals. The religious rituals (e.g., the Sun Dance of the Native Americans by virtue of their reenactment on earth) link the earth with the higher levels of reality. In Nasr's view, a rite always links us with the vertical axis of existence, and by virtue of that, links us also with the principles of nature *in divinis*. So, in this perspective, rituals help to create balance and harmony with the natural order.<sup>33</sup>

Nasr's ruminations on nature, the environment, and the ecological crisis are not limited to the human-nature relationship or bringing about an inner transformation focused on reviving a spiritual meaning of nature; they also contain numerous practical advice such as planting trees in large numbers; preventing deforestation and supporting social forestation programs; creating an environmental awareness through mosques and churches; reviving traditional agricultural methods and avoiding harmful fertilizers; emphasizing quality of food rather than its quantity; using traditional building and construction methods that are in harmony with nature; using alternative energy sources, such as solar power, windmills, and turbines; reducing carbon emissions; encourage recycling; and most of all, consuming less.<sup>34</sup>

## Knowledge and Ethical Purification

Even though Nasr is most famous for his writings on nature and the environment and his critique of the metaphysics of modern science, his philosophy presents a multileveled epistemology showing the fundamental interrelationship between the subject's modes of being and knowing. For Nasr, scientific knowledge, although legitimate on its own level, relates to the properties and conditions of things that exist in the world of becoming; hence it cannot deliver the self from the bondage of ignorance and bring about its ultimate freedom. On the contrary, when combined with passion, it can entrap the mind in the web of cosmic illusion, thereby imprisoning it within the limits of a particular level of cognition and existence. Following Sufism and Advaita Vedanta, Nasr thus argues that the knowledge that liberates the self is the root of existence itself, since it is based on the metaphysical distinction between the Absolute and the relative (the phenomenal world) and the knowledge of the relative in the light of the Absolute.<sup>35</sup>

In Nasr's epistemology, the role and function of knowledge is not exhausted by sense perception or by the analytical powers of reason. Rather, knowledge that releases the self requires the actualization of the intellect, which is distinct from reason or *ratio*. Nasr asserts that the seminal

distinction between intellect and reason has been forgotten in modern epistemology, although the Arabic word “*aql*” is used to denote both reason and intellect. But in Islamic thought, the distinction between the two as well as their interrelation and the dependence of reason on the intellect is taken into consideration.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on the epistemology of Islamic philosophy and Sufi metaphysics, Nasr further distinguishes between ‘*aql* and terms such as *dhawq*, *ishraq*, and *mukashafa*, all of which pertain to the direct vision and participation in the knowledge of the truth in contrast to acquired knowledge based on reason. Nasr uses the term *intuition* to refer to this direct mode of knowledge. He also maintains how the distinction between intellect/reason and intuition can be understood through the concepts of *al-‘ilm al-huduri* or “presential knowledge” and *al-‘ilm al-husuli* or “acquired knowledge.”<sup>37</sup> All mental knowledge is “acquired knowledge.” For instance, we can know fire or water through the concept of fire or water abstracted through the senses and made available by the various mental faculties associated with reason. But there is another form of knowledge, namely “presential knowledge” which is direct and immediate. For example, when we attain knowledge of the perfume of a rose through direct experience of the olfactory faculty, we do not first acquire the concept of the perfume of the rose but rather attain a direct knowledge of it. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, can be said of self-knowledge and our knowledge of the spiritual realities.<sup>38</sup> Nasr has emphasized how “intuition” in the sense of “presential knowledge” complements intellect, especially when it comes to its higher mode of operation.<sup>39</sup> According to Nasr, presential knowledge ultimately concerns sacred knowledge and the deliverance of the human self from the bondage of metaphysical ignorance. For such knowledge to deliver, Nasr has argued, it must be realized by the whole person and must involve the entirety of human subjectivity. Nasr’s perspective thus binds together presential knowledge with a spiritual method involving the spiritual exercises, moral conformity containing both social and purificatory virtues, a traditional framework, and the cultivation of a material ambience that reflects the beauty of form.<sup>40</sup>

This viewpoint can be better understood in terms of what came to be known as “philosophy as a way of life,” which Nasr also mentions in relation to the realization of sacred knowledge.<sup>41</sup> For Nasr, “philosophy” has a lived dimension that requires one to undergo a regimen of spiritual exercises in order to reorient the self toward a higher mode of being. The various spiritual exercises such as self-examination, meditation, and invocation have the objective of reorienting the spiritual subject toward a clearer understanding of its true nature in contrast to its infirmities such as sloth, anger, greed, envy, pride, and prejudice.<sup>42</sup> In a word, the realization of sacred knowledge requires purification and training of both body and mind, which eventually transforms the subject so that she/he may come to know her/his true nature, which is none other than the face of the Absolute reflected in the unadulterated mirror of the human self. Lest such a perspective be dubbed incarnationism or divine indwelling of some sort, Nasr adds that the human self qua itself cannot attain union with God, but it can nonetheless have knowledge of the Absolute which transcends the subject-object dichotomy. Nasr writes:

Man qua man cannot have union with God. But man can, through spiritual realization and with the aid of Heaven, participate in the lifting of that veil of separation so that the immanent Divinity within him can say “I” and the illusion of a separate self, which is the echo and reverberation upon the planes of cosmic existence of principlal possibilities contained in the Source, ceases to assert itself as another and independent “I,” without of course the essential reality of the person, whose roots are contained in the Divine Infinitude, ever being annihilated.<sup>43</sup>

Nasr’s epistemology described above finds its application in his philosophy of education. Drawing on the Ikhwan al-Safa’ (an anonymous group of 10th or 11th century CE encyclopedists), Nasr elaborates on the ethical dimension of education, which consists of the stages of *tahdhib* (refinement), *tathir* (purification), *tatmim* (completion), and *takmil* (perfection). Nasr envisages the goal of education to be the perfection and actualization of all the possibilities of the human self, leading finally to that supreme knowledge of the Absolute who is the *telos* of human life. Following the Ikhwan, Nasr suggests that the ultimate goal of education is not to dominate the world of nature and gain mastery of it, even though it does involve mastering various sciences. Rather, the goal of education is self-domination, which enables one to travel beyond the world of becoming into the abode of eternity, and this requires acquisition of both knowledge and virtue.<sup>44</sup>

## Islamic Science

Nasr’s hermeneutics of nature and the reason/intellect relationship is closely linked to one of his most contentious (also, most misunderstood) ideas, namely the thesis that “science” does not take place in a vacuum since it is colored by epistemological assumptions, which means the term does not have a universal applicability in the same way across different civilizations. This is not only because the word *science* as we understand it today rose to prominence in the last few hundred years and followed a specific trajectory in its Western context, especially beginning with the scientific revolution, but also because scientific activities in Islam were conducted under a different set of metaphysical and epistemological assumptions.<sup>45</sup> Nasr formulated the concept of “Islamic science,” arguing that it is grounded in the Qur’anic worldview of *tawhid* or the oneness of Reality into which various perspectives from foreign civilizations (e.g., Greek and Indian) were integrated. Nasr writes:

Islamic science, which . . . includes disciplines concerned with the study of the cosmos, embraces a wide spectrum of intellectual activity, from the study of plants to algebra, carried out over more than a millennium by many races and peoples spread over the middle belt of the earth from Spain and Morocco to eastern Asia . . . The Islamic sciences . . . which includes the religious and many branches of the philosophical sciences, are concerned at once with the world of nature, of the psyche and of mathematics. Because of their symbolic quality, they are also intimately related to metaphysics, gnosis, and art . . . Islamic science came into being from a wedding between the spirit that issued from the Quranic revelation and the existing sciences of various civilizations which Islam inherited and which it transmuted through its spiritual power into a new substance, at once different from and continuous with what had existed before it.<sup>46</sup>

In his view, the fundamental objective of Islamic science is to show the unity, hierarchy, and interrelatedness of all that exists in both the natural world and beyond.<sup>47</sup> It is instructive to note at this point that Nasr does not say that all the different enterprises of science in Islam held the same perspective, since in the pre-Galilean world science and philosophy were hardly separable; hence various conceptions of nature and reality were prevalent that nevertheless did not negate the ultimate oneness of the Absolute. Nasr develops and elaborates on these arguments in many of his books and articles, among which one should mention his *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* and *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study*.

Nasr also draws attention to the metaphysical and epistemological differences between the respective worldviews of modern science and Islamic science. As alluded to earlier, he argues against the mechanistic picture of the cosmos propounded by the founding fathers of modern science who took the cosmos as a self-subsisting machine or a preordained clock.<sup>48</sup> He also counters the primary/secondary qualities distinction developed by Galileo and Locke and the Cartesian bifurcation between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, both of which are foundational to the empiricism of science.<sup>49</sup> He also criticizes the Baconian attitude of controlling and manipulating nature rather than contemplating it as God's handiwork, which, however, does not mean nature can have no utility for human beings. Contrasting the respective worldviews of Islamic and modern science, Nasr has contended that science in the modern West became an instrument of power, control, and wealth. In his view, the utility of science became restricted to the welfare of human beings seen purely as earthly creatures with no spiritual aspirations beyond their animal needs.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, Islamic science enables the human being to gain both knowledge of nature and to act upon it, as one sees in agriculture, medicine, and architecture. But the final goal of Islamic science is to enable the human being to contemplate nature and to remake herself/himself in light of the contemplative knowledge thus acquired. While Islamic science allows the human being to act upon nature, such actions are always regulated because of the belief that ultimate happiness comes not from endless action turned outwardly toward dominating and destroying nature but from acting inwardly upon oneself to tame and discipline one's lower self. Nasr contrasted this attitude with the prevailing approach in modern science in which an

aggressive externalization of human energy is directed at dominating nature, leading ultimately to the ecological crisis.<sup>51</sup> In addition, Nasr rejects the “methodological naturalism” in science that denies any reference to vertical causality, teleology, or transcendence.<sup>52</sup>

Nasr’s innovative ideas about Islamic science did not go unchallenged. Just as they found many supporters in the writings of Alparslan Açıkgenç, Muzaffar Iqbal, Osman Bakar, Bruno Guiderdoni, and others, they also generated many opponents in the works of Abdus Salam, Ziauddin Sardar, Nidhal Guessoum, and Pervez Hoodbhoy. Given the limitation of space, it is not possible to dwell at length on the multifaceted nature of these debates on “science and Islam,” but a few brief remarks may be offered. Nasr’s idea of Islamic science includes critics such as the MIT-trained Pervez Hoodbhoy, for whom “Islamic science” simply does not exist. In contrast, modern science is great and ubiquitous because it “enables a person’s picture to be received instantaneously thousands of miles away, jet aircraft to traverse continents, defective hearts to be remedied mechanically, and new genetic varieties of plants and animals to be created in the laboratory.”<sup>53</sup> Hoodbhoy caricatures Nasr’s contention that a truly Islamic science must derive its cosmological basis from the divine intellect. Hoodbhoy interprets the notion of the divine intellect to mean blind obedience to the authority of scripture. In his view, this would pave the way to fruitless religious interpretations of scientific findings.<sup>54</sup>

More sophisticated treatments of Nasr’s philosophy of science can be found in such authors as Nidhal Guessoum, who apparently accepts many of Nasr’s criticisms of modern science.<sup>55</sup> However, he suggests that Nasr’s ruminations on the relationship between science and Islam are unnecessarily antagonistic. He also found Nasr’s criticism of the theory of evolution unacceptable.<sup>56</sup> At heart, though, Guessoum’s criticism of Nasr pertains to the latter’s metaphysics of science itself. In his view, Nasr’s metaphysics of science leads to a view which sees the world as “continuous” with God because of His never-ending self-disclosure.<sup>57</sup> In addition, Guessoum seems to find no problem embracing “methodological naturalism” in science, while at the same time believing that God interacts with the world through the spirit, and not through physical mechanisms.<sup>58</sup>

To be fair to Nasr, these aforementioned critiques of his philosophy of science directly contradict many of his theses about modern science. In more than one place, Nasr has explicitly mentioned how the modern, empirical science is also found in traditional societies and how it is “legitimate” on its own level.<sup>59</sup> What he has repeatedly asked for is the “integration” of modern science into the order of the sacred. Seen from this angle, both Hoodbhoy’s and Guessoum’s critiques are off target. And as seen in the section “Knowledge and Ethical Purification,” it is incorrect to equate Nasr’s epistemology of the intellect with blind obedience to scriptural authority. Similarly, Nasr’s sacred order underscores both the transcendence and immanence of God, so it would be a simplification of his metaphysics to suggest that he espouses a divine order in which God and the world are continuously leading to pantheistic ideas. Nevertheless, Guessoum and others may have a different metaphysics based on a legitimate interpretation of Islam. But that is precisely what Nasr has been arguing for when he rejects scientism, materialism, reductionism, and the denial of teleology and transcendence in modern science, all of which exceed the strict empirical sphere of science and yet are subscribed to by numerous scientists. Moreover, the critics of Nasr have failed to engage the subtle epistemological assumptions governing the workings of modern

science, which Nasr has pointed out. One may recall here similar critiques of modern science by such philosophers as Husserl and Heidegger.<sup>60</sup> It is worth quoting in this connection the great physicist Erwin Schrödinger, who also pointed to the lack of philosophical reflection among science-educated people:

It is certainly not in general the case that by acquiring a good all-round scientific education you so completely satisfy the innate longing for a religious or philosophical stabilization, in face of the vicissitudes of everyday life, as to feel quite happy without anything more. What does happen often is that science suffices to jeopardize popular religious convictions, but not to replace them by anything else. This produces the grotesque phenomenon of scientifically trained, highly competent minds with an unbelievably childlike—undeveloped or atrophied—philosophical outlook.<sup>61</sup>

In critiquing modern science, Nasr also takes cognizance of the differing perspectives (e.g., the tension between classical physics and quantum mechanics or between quantum mechanics and Einsteinian relativity) that exists within the perimeter of science itself from Bohr, Einstein, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, and Weyl to Bohm, Smith, and Penrose.<sup>62</sup> Overall, the above analysis dispels the misconception that Nasr is against modern science per se, since what he finds illegitimate is the problematic metaphysics of science, and not any particular science (e.g., mathematics).

## Religion and Modernity

Another innovative aspect of Nasr's philosophy concerns conceptualizing religion in the modern world and critiquing various modern trends within religion in light of the principles of perennial philosophy. For Nasr, perennial philosophy implies both "the Sacred as revealed to humanity through revelation and the unfolding and development of that sacred message in the history of the particular human community for which it was destined."<sup>63</sup> It implies both horizontal continuity with the Origin and a vertical connection which relates the life cycle of every tradition to the metahistorical Transcendent Reality. The perennialist school of thought studies the ethics, theology, mysticism, or art of each religion in the light of the absoluteness of its Divine Origin, without negating temporal changes that each manifestation of the Absolute as reflected in a given religious tradition must undergo. This school does not, however, identify the essence of religion only with its historical manifestation. Each religion possesses certain archetypal possibilities that unfold in the historical period and within the human collectivity providentially determined to be the temporal and human containers of the religion in question.<sup>64</sup> But the perennialist or traditional school does not deny the social or psychological aspects of religion, although it refuses to reduce religion to its social, historical, or psychological manifestations.<sup>65</sup> Unsurprisingly, it thus rejects approaches to religion that are based solely on historicism, empiricism, or rationalism. It is also opposed to the sentimental ecumenism that sees all religions as being the same at the price of reducing them to a common denominator or putting aside some of their basic teachings that reveal the differences. On the contrary, the traditionalists respect both the universality and particularity within each tradition. While Truth is one, the paths leading to that



Truth are many. Hence, each religion is a self-contained universe with its unique doctrine of and access to the Absolute.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, Nasr, along with other traditionalists, affirm the “transcendent unity of religions” at the level of the Absolute, which transcends the distinct qualities and characteristics that each religion possesses.<sup>67</sup>

Nasr applies his theory of religion outlined above to the study of Islam in the modern world.<sup>68</sup> According to his typology, there are three broad categories in terms of which one can look at the world of Islam today. There is, first of all, “fundamentalist Islam,” which is based on puritanical and outward interpretations of Islam, associated, for example, with some elements of the Deoband school in India, the Salafiyya in Egypt and Syria, and the Muhammadiyya in Indonesia. Nasr also places various schools of “political Islam” such as the Muslim Brotherhood in this category, while noting their internal variations. In general, fundamentalists argue that Muslims have ceased to follow Islam properly and should return to the practice of their religion in its pure form (i.e., *salaf*) and with full vigor in order to defeat the non-Islamic forces and escape the punishment they were receiving from heaven for their negligence in religious matters.<sup>69</sup> Another category of Islam that has some influence in the Islamic world is the phenomenon of “modernist Islam.” According to Nasr, modernists and reformists argue that the Islamic message has to be changed, modified, adapted, or reformed to suit modern conditions. This brand of Islam is deeply influenced by recent events in European history, such as the French Revolution, or by such ideologies as the Enlightenment.<sup>70</sup> Despite their differences, Nasr contends, the fundamentalists and the modernists are united in their admiration of Western science and technology since it would give them the power to dominate.<sup>71</sup> They are also united, Nasr further argues, in their rejection of what Nasr called “traditional Islam” and its holistic approach to religion through arts, science, philosophy, and metaphysics—all permeated by the order of the sacred.<sup>72</sup> Nasr’s holistic approach to Islam is reflected in his recently edited work *The Study Quran*—a two thousand-page commentary drawn from a wide range of traditional Islamic exegeses, including Sunni and Shia sources, and from legal, theological, and mystical texts.<sup>73</sup> *The Study Quran* seeks to convey the enduring spiritual, artistic, and intellectual significance of Islamic civilization through the Qur'an and offers a thorough scholarly understanding of this holy text. Some of the deeper facets of traditional Islam will now be examined.

## Spirituality, Mysticism, and the Interior Life

In his *Islamic Life and Thought*, Nasr begins by suggesting that to understand life within Islamic civilization, one must first acknowledge the diverse ethnic and cultural worlds into which the Islamic revelation descended, and which Islam transformed and made its own. Islamic civilization gradually integrated the vast heritage of the ancient Mediterranean civilizations, Persia, India, China, Africa, and the Malay world. With this background in place, Nasr then explains how there exists a distinction (but not conflict) between the exterior and the interior life in Islam. The exterior life is centered on the Shariah, which is the reason daily life in traditional parts of the Islamic world usually revolves around its markets and its mosques—the two institutions essential to the hustle and bustle of ordinary life in every city and town. The function of religion, Nasr asserts, is to bestow order upon human life and to establish an “outward” harmony upon whose basis human beings can return inwardly to their spiritual origin by means

of the journey toward the “interior” direction.<sup>74</sup> This journey toward the interior life is then explained in terms of knowledge, love, beauty, and truth. According to Nasr, the interior life, focused as it were on love, beauty, self-cultivation, contemplation, and prayer, is necessarily restricted to the few.

In his masterwork on spirituality and mysticism, namely *The Garden of Truth*, Nasr expounds on the nature of love and beauty in the light of Sufism and explained what one must do in order to enter the garden of truth, which is also the garden of love and beauty. After explaining different forms of love, Nasr speaks of both real and metaphorical love (*‘ishq-i haqiqi* and *‘ishq-i majazi*). Following the Sufis, Nasr said that a metaphorical love is mere attraction to material things or a love that is self-centered and egoistic and hence unable to show the true nature of things. In contrast, a real love is always bound up with truth and beauty. Since everything in the universe manifests divine love and beauty in some way, true love is to be found in everything. But this is usually not seen to be the case, since according to the Sufis, what veils us from true love is our own limited nature or the ego, whose attention is always directed to its own desires and inclinations. For this reason, a true experience of love can uproot the ego from its habitual mode of existence, thereby enabling it to realize the latent, transformative power of love that is boundless, unconditional, and pure.<sup>75</sup> Similar to love, Nasr also elaborates on the role and experience of beauty in the spiritual/interior life. In his view, all quests to see beauty are really a quest to see the divine beauty or the face of God.<sup>76</sup> He stresses how perceptible beauty in material or finite beings can be a window through which divine beauty can be experienced. However, if one’s focus is limited to the outward perception of things, the manifestation of a particular beauty can become a veil instead of a window into the higher, spiritual world.<sup>77</sup> By focusing on love and beauty, the interior life thus leads human beings from the world of outwardness and separation to that of union and interiority, enabling them to ultimately unite with the center of their heart and the rhythm which determines human life itself.<sup>78</sup>

Although not so much emphasized in his writings, Nasr makes clear in some of his lectures, interviews, and conversations that his practical teachings concerning the interior life and self-realization remain in the form of an unpublished doctrine.<sup>79</sup> Nasr explains it further by referring to his own function as a spiritual guide within the orbits of Sufism. Alluding to Plato’s seventh letter, Nasr avers that there is a “necessity of preserving and protecting a teaching which cannot be taught to everyone and which, as mentioned, can be harmful for those who are not qualified to receive it.”<sup>80</sup> Quoting Plato this time, Nasr said that serious things are not to be found in books.<sup>81</sup> But in light of what is already known about Nasr’s spiritual life, one may surmise that he is most likely referring to the concrete steps of attaining apotheosis (in Greek, *homoiosis theoi*; in Arabic, *ta’alluh*) or the highest state of being possible for human beings.<sup>82</sup> In Nasr’s own words:

Knowledge of the Truth is ultimately not only a theoretical understanding of concepts. It is above all a knowledge that is combined with faith and involves all that we are . . . The knowledge that delivers and frees is one that removes the veils of separation that have caused us to forget our real identity. It is a knowledge that removes forgetfulness of that Divine Reality, which is the source of all things as well as residing at the center of our being, the Self of our self. To understand fully the Truth is to “become” that Truth. It is to cease to be what we are and become what we have always been, are, and shall be in the Divine Reality.<sup>83</sup>

## Aesthetics and Islamic Art

Apart from metaphysics, eco-philosophy, and Islamic science, Nasr has also made significant contributions to Islamic aesthetics including both art and architecture. For example, he puts forth the innovative idea that the “space” in Islamic miniature art represents that of the imaginal world (*al-‘alam al-khayal*). He also theorizes how this world is the immediate origin of artistic forms. Moreover, in contrast to the commonly held view in the modern West, he shows how logic, metaphysics, and poetry complement each other in the Islamic tradition rather than suggesting incompatibility.<sup>84</sup> Let us begin with Nasr’s conception of Islamic art:

Islamic art is an art which dissolves the limitations of external form in the indefinite rhythms of form, space or sound, thereby opening the soul to the reception of the presence of the One Who is not only absolute but also infinite. This art, issuing from the inner reality (*al-haqiqah*) of the Qur’an, is an integral aspect of the Islamic revelation and plays a basic role not only in the beautification of everyday life, but also in the remembrance of God and the beauty of the Beloved for which our soul yearns here below, for we carry the imprint of the Divine at the center of our being even in the exile of our earthly existence and the confines of the world of forgetfulness.<sup>85</sup>

In Nasr’s view, there is a profound nexus between Islamic art, spirituality, and sacred knowledge.<sup>86</sup> Islamic art is based upon a science of an inner nature which is concerned not with the outward appearance of things, but with their inner reality. Nasr thus argues that in beholding an edifice like the Shah Mosque in Isfahan with its geometric and arabesque patterns one is reminded of the truths of the intelligible world in the realm of sensible forms. For Nasr, the intellectual character of Islamic art cannot be the fruit of a rationalism but of an intellectual vision of the archetypes of the material world, a vision made possible by the fruits of Islamic spirituality and the grace flowing from the Islamic tradition. Moreover, in contrast to certain forms of modern art, Islamic art does not imitate the outward forms of nature but reflects their inner principles.<sup>87</sup>

As alluded to earlier, Nasr argues that the immediate origin of artistic forms lies in the imaginal world, which is a world situated between the intelligible (i.e., the world of archetypes) and the material world. This is a realm where the archetypes become manifested as forms, but forms which are not wed to matter. In Nasr’s view, forms of art are not simply abstract ideas contained in the mind of the artist, which are then given external forms. Rather, they are imaginal forms

connected with the imaginal realm, which appear in the imagination of the artist before becoming manifested in the external world. The imaginal world is thus the ultimate source of artistic creativity.<sup>88</sup> In addition, Nasr also theorized how the principle of unity in Islam (i.e., *tawhid*) is reflected in architecture and urban design, where it implies the integration of the elements of architecture, the interrelation of the functions and purposes of space, and the pervasive presence of the sacred in all forms of architecture in such a way as to remove the very notion of the secular as a category in opposition to the sacred.<sup>89</sup>

## Sufi-Chinese Dialogue

Nasr's most recent work involves an original translation and commentary on Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (TTC) in light of Sufi metaphysics. Composed in exquisite Persian prose, this work is a first of its kind showcasing a fruitful cross-cultural conversation between Daoism and Sufi metaphysics. To give the reader a sense of how Nasr carried out this dialogue, some selected passages have been translated:

Main Text (TTC): The way of which one can speak as “way” is not the eternal Way (Tao);

The Name that can be named is not the eternal Name.

The Nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth;

While the named is the mother of the Ten Thousand Creatures.

In the state of eternal Non-Being we see the invisible depth of the Tao;

While in the state of Being, we see the determinations of the Tao.<sup>90</sup>

Commentary:

The transcendence of the Tao is emphasized in the very first verse, in that whatever that can be spoken of, cannot deserve to be called the eternal Tao. This is because by using language we condition that reality which is transcendent, infinite, and beyond definitions and descriptions. Thus, whatever name we assign to it cannot be the eternal name of the Tao, since by naming that Absolute Reality, we condition it through human language. So, the higher meaning of the Tao refers to the divine reality which is beyond name and description.<sup>91</sup>

O You who are above all imaginations, analogies, and conjectures,

Above anything people have said, or we have heard or read,

When the gathering is over, and life reaches its end

We still remain as helpless in describing You as it was at the beginning.<sup>92</sup>

In the tradition of the Far East, “non-existence” or non-being (*‘adam*) implies transcending the Act of Being, which is other than the ordinary meaning of non-existence. Non-existence here points to a reality before the manifestation of Being (*wujud*).

We are non-existents in the guise of existence

You are the Absolute Being manifesting our existence.<sup>93</sup>

The infinite reality of the Tao should be sought in that non-existence which is beyond existence (*hasti*). Lao-tzu refers to this as the “invisible world,” which is other than the invisible world that is ordinarily thought to be the opposite of the visible world. The domain of Being pertains to the world of creation in which everything exists as determinations of the boundless reality of the Tao.<sup>94</sup>

Nasr continued his commentary on the *Tao Te Ching*:

Main Text (TTC): The Ten Thousand Things arise around him, but he rejects none of them. He fosters them up; yet he claims no possession. He does great things but he does not boast of his own work. He accomplishes his task but does not stick to his own merit. He simply does not stick to his merit; thus his merit never deserts him.<sup>95</sup>

Commentary:

In so far as one is a sage, wondrous things emanate from him, but these do not cause him to be arrogant and condescending. He considers his actions his responsibility, and although these actions are twined with merits and self-elevation, he is never attached to the fruits of these meritorious actions. Hence, he is the one of whom it can be rightfully said:

I am the slave of the spiritual will of the one who is free from

All that binds one to the attachments of life under the blue heaven.<sup>96</sup>

The very meaning of “spiritual freedom” lies in detachment from everything other than God. It is for that reason that virtue belongs to those who have attained freedom, and it never abandons them. That is, the Tao forever accompanies their soul.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion (after Nasr)

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr's ideas have had a profound bearing on the global stage, which one might expect from such a prolific, original, and wide-ranging writer. While it is easy to imagine Nasr's impact by way of his works, it is probably through training generations of students that he has had the greatest influence around the world. Spanning a teaching career of six decades, Nasr has trained an entire generation of students in Iran including some of the most famous contemporary Iranian philosophers, thinkers, and politicians such as Gholamreza Aavani, Reza Davari, Nasrollah Pourjavadi, and Gholamreza Haddad Adel. In North America, some of the most famous scholars of Sufism and Islam such as William Chittick, James Morris, and Sachiko Murata were trained by Nasr, in addition to numerous other scholars, thinkers, and historians including Mehdi Aminrazavi, Mohammad Faghfoory, Gisella Webb, Joseph Lombard, Caner Dagli, Waleed El-Ansary, Maria Dakake, Mohammed Rustom, Fu'ad Naeem, Lynna Dhanani, Yousef Casewit, and Rizwan Zamir.

Nasr's ideas have had a massive impact on the Malay world (Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia), where some of the leading thinkers of that region (e.g., Osman Bakar, Zailan Moris, Megawati Moris, Muhammad Baqir, Baharuddin Ahmad, and Saleh Yaapar) count among his students. After Iran and North America, Nasr's thought has had the greatest impact in Turkey, Pakistan, and the Malay world.<sup>98</sup> In Turkey, Nasr's famous students are Ibrahim Kalin, Mahmut Erol Kılıç, and Zaynab Kot, while in the subcontinent Nasr's students include Abd al-Haqq, Muhammad Suheyl Umar, Ayesha Leghari, Qaiser Shahzad, L. Peerwani, Hafiz Khan, Tarik Quadir, and Ijaz Akram. To this list should be added a number of African scholars such as Mohsin Ebrahim, Oludamini Ogunnaike, and Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, who have been influenced by Nasr's works and perspective.



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## Notes

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1. This section is largely adapted from Muhammad Faruque, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr: A Contemporary Islamic Philosopher," in *The Pen and the Tablet: Works by and about Seyyed Hossein Nasr through His 85th Birthday*, ed. Muhammad Faruque (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2019), 4..
2. Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (New York: Praeger, 2010), 38–42.
3. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. E. Hahn, R. E. Auxier, and L. W. Stone, Vol. 28 of the Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 27.
4. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 67–68. *Knowledge and the Sacred* is Nasr's magnum opus, which provides an exposition of the nature of the traditional worldview. Drawing on many traditions including Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism, Nasr explored humanity's quest for sacred knowledge and how that quest has been eclipsed in modern times.
5. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 68.
6. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 130.
7. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 134.
8. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 135.
9. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Mulla Sadra and the Doctrine of the Unity of Being," in *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 174–180.
10. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 138–139.
11. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 139.
12. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 160–161.
13. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 193–194.
14. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 193–194.
15. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 221–222.
16. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 222.
17. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 253–254.
18. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Renaissance Humanism," in *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. William Chittick (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 2007); and Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 10–48.
19. Nasr, "Renaissance Humanism," 139–151.
20. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition* (revised and augmented edition of *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*) (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2010), 188–204; and Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 26–45.
21. See Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 153ff. For other critical studies on Nasr's thought, see Farzin Vahdat, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr: An Islamic Romantic?" in *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* (London and

New York: Anthem Press, 2015), 199–232; and Ali Zaidi, “Muslim Reconstructions of Knowledge: The Cases of Nasr and al-Faruqi,” in *Islam, Modernity, and the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 53–80. For Nasr’s own responses to some of these criticisms, see Nasr, *Philosophy of Seyyed*, *passim*.

22. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 34–35.

23. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 35.

24. Lynn White also published a seminal paper at around the same time, tracing the roots of the ecological crisis from the primal world of spirits to the mechanistic world of modern science. However, there are notable differences between his and Nasr’s approach to the issue. In the main, White argues how the “dominion narrative” mentioned in the Bible is responsible for the current ecological crisis. This is because the dominion narrative promotes an anthropocentric view and puts forth a dualistic view of human beings and nature. It also encourages the rule of human beings over nature. Nonetheless, White’s article is important because it does show that religious views are liable to multiple interpretations, and can sometimes be responsible for antiecollogical views. But White ignores the complex history of modern science, which went through a series of transformations in the last four–five hundred years starting with Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, and Newton. He also ignores such important causes of the crisis (from Nasr’s perspective) as quantification and the mechanization of nature, deism, and Descartes’ mind-matter dualism that foreshadowed the contemporary “mechanistic” view of nature. White’s Eurocentric, teleological conception of science and its progress are also at odds with Nasr’s perspective on the issue. See Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

25. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Selangor, MY: OHMSI, 2019), 17.

26. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 51–74; and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 126–162.

27. Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 271. Nasr’s criticism of the mechanistic approach to nature probably inspired other seminal studies in this area, see for example, Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2008); and Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1990).

28. Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 270–290.

29. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Spiritual and Religious Dimension of the Environmental Crisis* (London: Temenos Academy, 1999), 5–30.

30. Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 278.

31. Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 280. The political meaning of *khalifa* (vicegerent) as the person who rules over the Islamic world is well known. But for the Sufis whom Nasr follow in this regard, the word also has a metaphysical meaning, which is expressed through the complex doctrine of the perfect human (*al-insan al-kamil*). In simple terms, the doctrine expresses one’s latent capacity for wholeness and perfection including the capacity for human flourishing. See Muhammad Faruque, “Islam, Nature, and Climate Change,” *Origins CNS* 50, no. 1 (2020): 13–15.

32. Nasr, *Spiritual and Religious Dimension*, 12.

33. Nasr, *Spiritual and Religious Dimension*, 11–20.

34. See Md. Abu Sayem, “Religions and Environmental Sustainability: Focusing on Some Practical Approaches by John B. Cobb Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr,” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 65–80. These practical solutions have been criticized as well. For example, traditional agricultural methods may be expensive and time-consuming, and few want to go back to the model of traditional village life, even though it may be more eco-friendly.

People are used to modern life and the ways of modern technology, and they do not like to consume less. Also, a highly spiritual and less consumptive society is needed for most of Nasr's proposals. Sayem, "Religions and Environmental Sustainability," 75–76. See also, Md. Abu Sayem, *Religion and Ecological Crisis: Christian and Muslim Perspectives from John B. Cobb and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (New York: Routledge, 2023). On Nasr's impact on Islamic environmentalism, see for example, Anna Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); and Richard Foltz, ed., *Environmentalism in the Muslim World* (New York: Nova, 2005); and Tarik Quadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism: The Vision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2013).

35. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 309–328.

36. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship from the Islamic Perspective," *Studies in Comparative Religion* (1979): 65–74. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 93–106, Nasr has also made important contributions to the study of postclassical Islamic philosophy, science, and Sufism by advancing these fields through editing and translating a number of Suhrawardi's and Mulla Sadra's treatises and by conducting pioneering research on figures such as al-Biruni, Ibn 'Arabi, Baba Afdal, Mula Sadra, and Sabzawari, in addition to authoring a number of articles on Islamic medicine, alchemy, and hermeticism. For a criticism of Nasr's interpretation of Islamic philosophy, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Boston: Brill, 2014), xxii. For a recent evaluation of this topic which is closer to Nasr's original position, see Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

37. Nasr, "Intellect and Intuition," 66–67.

38. Nasr, "Intellect and Intuition," 68–70.

39. Nasr, "Intellect and Intuition," 67–69.

40. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, *passim*.

41. On "philosophy as a way of life," see Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, nouvelle (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002); and Nasr, *Philosophy of Seyyed*, 85.

42. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008), 80–100.

43. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 326.

44. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World*, 151–152.

45. See for example, Sydney Ross, "Scientist: The Story of a Word," *Annals of Science* 18, no. 2 (1962): 65–85; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (London: The World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976).

46. Nasr, *Islamic Science*, xiii, 9.

47. Nasr, *Science and Civilization*, 22–25. This can be contrasted with the fragmentation and compartmentalization of the sciences in modern times. For more information, see for example, Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 186–187; John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Peter Galison and David J. Stump, eds., *The Disunity of Science: Boundaries, Contexts and Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

48. Ibrahim Kalin, "The Sacred versus the Secular: Nasr on Science," in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. E. Hahn, R. E. Auxier, and L. W. Stone, Vol. 28 of the Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court, 2001) 447–458.
49. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 41–45.
50. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World*, 198.
51. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Complementarity of the Contemplative and Active Lives in Islam," in *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action*, ed. D. Y. Ibish and P. L. Wilson (Tehran, IR: The Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), 428–429. The idea of "contemplation" as the goal of studying the cosmos is found in the writings of the Greeks as well. See Harrison, *Territories of Science and Religion*, 28–33.
52. Kalin, "Sacred versus the Secular," 450–455.
53. Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality* (London : Zed Books, 1991), 77. This is an outmoded, triumphalist view of science that first of all confuses "science" with the technological successes of science, and secondly, neglects to consider some of the disastrous consequences of scientific technology in such domains as the environment and nuclear weapons.
54. Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science*, 73.
55. Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 110–139.
56. Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question*, 271–324.
57. Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question*, 208.
58. Stefano Bigliardi, *Islam and the Quest for Modern Science: Conversations with Adnan Oktar, Mehdi Golshani, Mohammed Basil Altaie, Zaghoul El-Naggar, Bruno Guiderdoni and Nidhal Guessoum*. (Istanbul, TR: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014), 175, 176.
59. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 329. For a defense of Nasr's position on Islamic science, see Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islam Medeniyetinde Bilgi ve Bilim* (Istanbul, TR: Turkiye Diyanet Vakfi, 2006); Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Text Society, 1998); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Meaning, Scope, and Future of Islamic Sciences: Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal," *Islamic Sciences*, 11, no. 1 (2013): 63–78; and Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam and Science* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).
60. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970); and Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).
61. Erwin Schrödinger, "Nature and the Greeks" and "Science and Humanism" (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 12.
62. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Perennial Ontology and Quantum Mechanics: A Review Essay of the Quantum Enigma by Wolfgang Smith," *Sophia* 3, no. 1 (1997): 135–159.
63. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World*, 3.
64. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Traditionalist Approach to Religion," in *Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. William Chittick (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 2007), 27.
65. Nasr, "Traditionalist Approach to Religion," 22.



66. Nasr, "Traditionalist Approach to Religion," 22. See also, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), chapter 1.
67. Nasr, "Traditionalist Approach to Religion," 26.
68. For a lucid study on Nasr's theory of religion, see Haifaa Jawad, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the Study of Religion in Contemporary Society," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 2 (2005): 49–68.
69. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World*, 9, 23.
70. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World*, 24.
71. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World*, 9–10.
72. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World*, 4–8. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2002); and Joseph Lumbard, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr on Tradition and Modernity," in *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 169–184.
73. Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Editor-in-Chief), Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard (General Editors), and Mohammed Rustom (Assistant Editor) (New York: HarperOne, 2015).
74. Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*, 191–192.
75. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 62–63.
76. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 71.
77. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 72–75.
78. Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*, 197–198. Nasr's philosophy of life, which is reminiscent of the tones of love and intoxication that one notices in the poetry of Ibn al-Farid or Hafez, is also found in his poetry; see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Poems of the Way* (Oakton, VA: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 2007), 19–26.
79. Some sources claim that he has written volumes on these topics that may be published later.
80. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 273. Some scholars doubt the authenticity of this letter, which, however, is irrelevant in the present context.
81. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 317.
82. On "becoming like God" as the *summum bonum* of philosophy, see Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176b, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997); and Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Mabda' wa-l-ma'ād*, ed. Muḥammad Dhabīḥī and Ja'far Shāh Naẓārī (Tehran, IR: Bunyād-i Ḥikmat-i Islāmi-yi Ṣadrā, 2002), 1, 7.
83. Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 57.
84. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 87–97.
85. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islamic Aesthetics," in *A Companion to World Philosophies*, ed. Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 448–459.
86. As he writes:

The artist obviously makes something, that is he acts in one way or another upon matter. But because he follows traditional patterns, norms, regulations and procedures which are themselves derived from and are the fruit of contemplative vision, his action is subsequent to contemplation and follows in its wake. In the case of many a traditional artist who is himself engaged in spiritual practice, the phase of making or acting is based upon the direct fruit of his contemplation as well as the contemplative elements handed down by tradition from previous masters.

<sup>3</sup> See Nasr, “Complementarity of the Contemplative,” 429.

87. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 8.

88. Nasr, “Islamic Aesthetics,” 453.

89. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Principles of Islamic Architecture and Urban Design, and Contemporary Urban Problems,” in *Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition* (revised and augmented edition of *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*), ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2010), 246.

90. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Tao Te Ching: Ṭarīq wa faḍā’il-i ān* (Translation from the Chinese into English by T. Izutsu with the assistance of Nasr and Commentary in Persian by Seyyed Hossein Nasr), (Tehran, IR: Intishārāt-i Iṭṭilā’āt, 2022), 25.

91. Nasr, *Ṭarīq wa faḍā’il-i ān*, 26.

92. Nasr, *Ṭarīq wa faḍā’il-i ān*, 26. Poem quoted from Sa’di’s *Gulistan*.

93. Poem quoted from Rumi’s *Mathnawi*.

94. Nasr, *Ṭarīq wa faḍā’il-i ān*, 27.

95. Nasr, *Ṭarīq wa faḍā’il-i ān*, 29–30.

96. Poem quoted from Hafez’s *Divan*.

97. Nasr, *Ṭarīq wa faḍā’il-i ān*, 32.

98. For some relevant works which engage Nasr’s thoughts in these regions, see Mohammad Sabri, *Keberagamaan yang Saling Menyapa: Perspektif Filsafat Perennial* (Yogyakarta, IN: Ittaqa Press, 1999); Aan Rukmana, *Sayyed Hossein Nasr Penjaga Taman Spiritual Islam* (Jakarta, IN: Dian Rakyat, 2013); Muhammad S. Umar, “From the Niche of Prophecy”: Nasr’s Position on Islamic Philosophy within the Islamic Tradition (Lahore, PK: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2000); İlhan Kutluer, Mahmut E. Kılıç, Adnan Aslan, and Seyyid Hüseyin Nasr’da Gelenek, *Tasavvuf ve Dinî Çoğulculuk* (Istanbul, TR: Medeniyet Araştırmaları Merkezi, 2003); and Manūchihr Dīnparast, *Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Dilbākhṭa-yi Ma’nawīyyat* (Tehran, IR: Intishārāt-i Kawīr, 2005).

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