



# We are Not Our Brain

## How Poets and Philosophers Saw the Immaterial Life of the Self

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We do not belong to this material world that science constructs for us. We are not in it, we are outside. We are only spectators. The reason why we believe that we are in it, that we belong to the picture, is that our bodies are in the picture. Our bodies belong to it.

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WE LIVE IN an era in which the brain has come to signify the central component of human identity. It's common to hear people blurt out statements like "our brains are wired to do XYZ," or "the brain creates new ideas," or "explain X to my brain" (instead of saying "explain X to me!") to talk about their feelings, desires, experiences, and understanding. For a dyed-in-the-wool materialist who either believes there is no mind or soul or completely identifies the mind with the brain, it makes sense to replace the words "I" or "mind" with "brain." While materialism arguably is not the dominant viewpoint in our culture, this nod to the brain [puzzlingly](#) persists when we should really be referring to the entire person/self of which the brain is a part. We unwittingly take the brain to be the center of our self, which has implications for the contours of human subjectivity, the source of our meaning, wonder, love, and beauty. Do such materialistic habits of describing ourselves render holistic conceptions of the human self involving body, soul, and spirit completely void?

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*Reciting Poetry in a Garden*, tile panel; Isfahan, Safavid Iran; seventeenth century; Met Museum

We arrived at this stage of seeing ourselves as children of science and modernity after a series of seismic shifts, which began with dislodging the earth from its privileged position at the center of the universe through the Copernican Revolution in the sixteenth century. After the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and a concomitant rise in empiricism and experimental science, the Darwinian theory of evolution came on the scene, banishing human beings from center stage in the living world.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence of these major transformations, we became more and more comfortable explaining human subjectivity in terms of the theories of modern science, as if they alone can untangle who we really are. And with neuroscience added to the mix, recent theories reduced the soul/self to the mind, which itself is defined by the myriad neurochemical activities in the brain. More recently, an explosion of books in neuroscience have attempted to explain most of our scientific, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic concerns, among others, by way of the brain, a phenomenon described as “neuroexistentialism.”<sup>2</sup> It is a new form of existentialism driven by advances in neuroscience that challenge the existence of an immaterial soul or self. All of this has culminated in “the brain” increasingly replacing “I” or “the self” in casual speech and the rise of the brain as the explanatory foundation in scientific discourse about consciousness.

Neuroscience certainly stakes a claim to remarkable contributions in our understanding of the brain, and nonmodern philosophers and scientists have also noted the multifaceted relationship between the brain and the mind (one can clearly see this in the works of Galen or Ibn Sīnā, for example). As I have extensively discussed in a recent book, neurobiological theories propounded by Francis Crick, Christof Koch, Antonio Damasio, Gerald Edelman, and others do help us understand the neural relationship to human consciousness.<sup>3</sup> But that is different from modern scientists asserting that the self or consciousness gradually emerges from intricate brain processes. Others go to the extreme of embracing either “eliminativism” (in which self or consciousness are seen as fictional entities created by the brain) or the identity thesis (our identity is our brain).<sup>4</sup>

But in an age in which human beings are defined simply as biological machines, leading to what playwright Richard Foreman calls the “pancake self” (“spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button,” while losing touch with our rich inner complexity and cultural heritage), holistic conceptions of the self found in the Islamic tradition (and other global cultures) can serve as an antidote to the flattening of human identity.<sup>5</sup> Such holistic perspectives provide an important corrective to the scientific interpretation of the human self as the product of neurochemical activities of the brain, and allow us to rediscover our inner depths, creativity, and expressive self-articulation.

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In Islamic holistic thinking, there is no room for the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, since the soul (*nafs*) is understood in relation to both the physical (body) and the spiritual (spirit). That is, the soul presents an ambiguous nature by representing the qualities of both the spirit (such as awareness, luminosity, love, beauty, and





Manuscript of 'Ayn-al-Quzāt Hamadānī's *Tamhīdāt* by Abu'l-Makarim ibn 'Alī al-Murshīdī, ca. 1461

meaning) and the body (such as darkness, density, disharmony, and disequilibrium). Cosmologically, the soul can be called a *barzakh* (lit. a barrier), as it is a meeting place between the spiritual and the material worlds. Because of its ambiguous nature, the soul or self in the Islamic context represents an unlimited possibility for growth and expansion, whether in ascending, descending, or sideways manners.<sup>6</sup> It further signifies a never-ending process of self-discovery and self-finding.

In light of that, we can see why there must be a vast hierarchy of souls, ranging from the most humane to the downright beastly. Nevertheless, the ordinary self (also called *nafs*) comprises human intelligence, behavioral inclinations, tendencies, drives, instincts, and impulses.<sup>7</sup> It also represents human vulnerability to temptations and irrational thinking. In contrast, the real self is often understood in terms of the Qur'anic term *fiṭrah*, which broadly means one's pristine, unadulterated nature, and connotes one's innate, God-given personality, which conforms to *tawḥīd*, or the oneness of God. In Islamic teachings, everyone is born with, and always retains **in principle**, an imprint of the *fiṭrah*, even if they gradually lose sight of it **due** to their immersion in the day-to-day businesses of the world.

Moreover, the Qur'an states that human nature is made according to the *fiṭrah* determined by God (30:30), which is further corroborated by a hadith that says that God created human beings in His image (*ṣūrah*).<sup>8</sup> The ethical and ontological implications of such a view are significant, as Islamic metaphysics describes God as the absolutely unconditioned being (*al-wujūd al-lā bi-sharṭ al-maḡsamī*), beyond any thought, imagination, and conceptual categories.<sup>9</sup> Human nature, then, defies having any fixed essence, since God cannot be defined through a specific image or form. Put another way, human nature in its primordial purity and original constitution (i.e., *fiṭrah*) is in a state

of nondetermination, as it is made in the form of the formless because God ultimately transcends any form.<sup>10</sup> Now, human flourishing involves a process of transformation from human-nature-as-it-is (i.e., the ordinary, given self) to human-nature-as-it-ought-to-be (i.e., the real self) if one pursues ethical living. Such flourishing implies the effort on our part to recover our *fiṭrah* or actualize our potential to attain likeness to the divine form. It also means the possibilities of being a self are limitless, which explains the variation, and the hierarchy, when it comes to being a self/individual in the world. People carve their selfhood into a particular shape based on their preferences, intentionality, education, social environment, gender, race, and other factors. It also explains why major ethicists in the Islamic tradition such as Miskawayh (d. 1030), Aḥud al-Dīn al-Ījī (d. 1355), Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī (d. 1502), and Ṭaṣköprüzade (d. 1561) consider human character to be malleable. For instance, Miskawayh sees human beings as having different innate potentials and inclinations that are not static and hence can be reformed through appropriate moral actions. These thinkers did not regard the character of the self as solidified into some unchangeable nature.<sup>11</sup>

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Today, when our lives are increasingly organized around AI-powered technologies, people define themselves and their aspirations in machine-like terms, thereby degrading their own intelligence. We hear talk of how our brain “works like a computer,” even though computers are human inventions. In this way, human intelligence and dignity get reduced to computational functions, erasing an entire spectrum of the self that includes reason, intuition, understanding, wisdom, moral conscience, and aesthetic and poetic judgment.

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To explore the multifaceted nature of the self, one is asked to reflect on one’s inner self and turn one’s gaze inward. The call to take an “inward turn” begins with several verses in the Qur’an that have inspired Muslim authors to elaborate on the inner world of the self. For instance, 41:53 states that God’s manifestations can be found both in the cosmos and the inner realm of the self: “We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves [fī anfusihim] until it will be manifest unto them that it is the Truth.” Similarly, 30:8 asks pointedly: “Do they not reflect concerning their own selves?”<sup>12</sup> Drawing on these verses, Muslim thinkers such as Ayn al-Quṣṭāṭ Hamadānī (d. 1131) and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) ask us to look inward. For Ayn al-Quṣṭāṭ, the path to God can only be found within one’s heart—the locus of divine consciousness at the center of one’s being.<sup>13</sup>

Do you know what I am saying? I am saying that the seeker must not search for God in the Garden, this world, or in the next world—he should not seek in whatever he knows and sees. The very path of the seeker is inside of him. He must take the path in himself: and within yourselves—do you not see? (Q 51:21) All existents are the heart-traveling seeker: there

is no path to God better than the path of the heart. “The heart is the house of God” also has this meaning.<sup>14</sup>

ʿAyn al-Qūzāt makes clear that the path to God lies neither on earth nor in the heavens, and neither in paradise nor on the divine throne. Rather, the path can be found in the inner recesses of one’s own self. One should realize that “all existents are the heart-traveling seeker.” Similarly, while not downplaying the virtues of performing the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), Rūmī urges the reader to find God within one’s heart, referring to “the Beloved” as one’s “neighbor”:

O you who’re going on pilgrimage—  
where are you, where, oh where?  
Here, here is the Beloved!  
Oh come now, come, oh come!  
Your Beloved, He is your wall-to-wall neighbor,  
You, erring in the desert—  
what are you seeking?<sup>15</sup>

But finding God within one’s heart is not easy, since God manifests His love, beauty, and power in countless, diverse, and indistinct ways. Regarding the difficulty of self-understanding, the Indian Sufi poet Khwāja Mīr Dard (d. 1785) says: “I wish that the truth should be discovered by me so that my heart may find consolation, for I do absolutely not understand the depth of my own reality—who I am and why have I been born and why do I live and whence, and where.”<sup>16</sup> In other places, Mīr Dard appears even more frustrated and bewildered as he seeks to resolve the dilemmas of personal identity:

[I could never find] the answer to the question “Who am I? and how and where shall I die and how and why did I live till now?” And I see the gnosis and interior knowledge of all the human beings beneath this greatest amazement of mine—for they have woven the warp and woof of imagination for themselves; and I find the peace and quietude of the individualities of my race beneath this highest bewilderment of mine.<sup>17</sup>

Mīr Dard describes the inner anguish arising from his inability to find his true self:

Though a world sings the fame of me, the lost one, and people look at me according to their thoughts, but... the door of self-knowledge does absolutely not yet open, and it was not yet found who I am and for what all this longing of mine is. And still stranger is, that in spite of not knowing myself I always remain in the torture of my self.<sup>18</sup>

These ruminations draw a distinction between the outer and inner self (or the ordinary and the real self), and they also connect the quest for selfhood to the grand themes of existence—namely love, beauty, and meaning.

Similar to Rūmī and Mīr Dard, the Egyptian mystical poet Ibn al-Fārīd (d. 1235) provides, in his *Tā’iyyah* (Poem of the way), an extraordinarily detailed commentary on the self’s inner depths in terms of first-person subjectivity. The poem begins by alluding to the “eye of the heart” (the organ of spiritual perception), which becomes a conduit through which the self experiences the intoxicating fever of ecstatic love. This

fever, however, is caused by a human beloved whose beauty intoxicates the poet's soul. For Ibn al-Fāriḍ, the lover and the beloved are one in the mystery of mystical union. That is, it is the divine Self—self-loving and self-beloved—which is the underlying subject and object of every form of love hidden behind the veils of manifestation. Seen from this angle, all tales of love are simultaneously both divine and human, contained and being manifested within an undivided consciousness denoted by the pronoun “I”:

I sought her from myself (*wa aṭlubuhā minnī*),  
 Though she was all the while beside me; I  
 Marveled how she was hid from me by me.  
 And I ceased not from a state of turmoil  
 With her within me; for my senses were  
 Intoxicated, and the wine they drank  
 Her beauties; still I travelled on and on.<sup>19</sup>  
 I sought myself from myself, that I might guide myself...  
 By lifting up the veil (*al-ḥijāb*), for I myself  
 Found in myself my only means to come  
 Unto myself.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, the great mystical philosopher Ibn ʿArabī's (d. 1240) expressive self-articulations reach new heights in his *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (The translator of desires):

O moringa of the flood-bed  
 at the Tigris's banks  
  
 The cry of a dove on a swaying bough  
 saddens my heart  
  
 Her song's like the song  
 of the assembly's queen  
  
 At the sound of her oud, you'll  
 forget the music of al-Rashīd  
  
 And when she sings, the chants  
 of Anjash fade  
  
 In Khadimāt, Salmā's direction,  
 and in Sindād, I swear,  
  
 I'm love-stricken  
 in Ajyādi  
  
 No, she dwells within  
 my liver's black bile  
  
 In a rush of saffron and musk  
 beauty falls bewildered<sup>21</sup>

The musical motif used above praises one who embodies the characteristics of a *jāriyah*-diva, a woman who captivates the court and mesmerizes her audience, causing them to





Sufi saint Mullah Shah Badakhshī, Mughal dynasty, ca. 1639

forget the magnificent courts of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. The poet confesses to being “love-stricken” by a woman in Ajyād, near Mecca, then emphatically corrects himself, asserting instead that she actually resides within his liver’s black bile. Although “black bile” is a medical term in Greco-Islamic medicine, the use of blackness here signifies the profound interior of something—a mysterious space of intimacy at the core of the heart where the beloved can be sought. In his *Meccan Openings* (*Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*), Ibn ʿArabī cites two unattributed verses that articulate the lover-mystic’s outward gaze as he laments that the beloved seems distant, yet the object of love remains mysteriously hidden within. The poem concludes by stating that when the beloved emerges, beauty itself wanders in bewilderment. This mirrors a common theme in the *Tarjumān* in which the masters of love find themselves entangled and confounded by the very love they rule.<sup>22</sup> Describing the immanence of love in the depth of the self, Ibn ʿArabī further says:

How strange that I yearn for them and longing  
ask about them while they’re with me  
My eyes weep for them but they’re there  
in their blackness. I sigh and they line my ribs<sup>23</sup>

Again, the lover looks without, but the beloved lies within his consciousness. Moreover, as Ibn ʿArabī explains, he and other mystical poets use various imageries, metaphors, and symbols to talk about love, ~~as a way~~ to point the soul away from the outward appearance to the inward reality of love, while acknowledging that the Beloved due to His infinitude can never be fully possessed.<sup>24</sup>

These mystical authors vividly and lyrically articulate the immaterial life of the self, which can only be gleaned by turning inward and objectifying one’s inner experiences. This couplet from the *Dīvān* of the great Persian poet Shams al-Dīn Hafez (d. 1390) expresses the duality of an inner and outer life, both immaterial:

I do not know who is there within my exhausted soul,  
For while I am silent, it makes all sorts of commotion.<sup>25</sup>

Here we see a dual identity, in which the “I” itself is split into two different “I”s, the inner self being silent while the outer self makes commotion. In any event, the referent of the “I” in this verse is clearly the self, even though we do not know the nature of this self. Nonetheless, such a verse asks the question, “Who or what is the ‘I’?” the answer to which determines the nature of the self.

Mystical poems of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Rumi, Hafez, and countless others are replete with such expressions of a reflexive and inward stance toward the self. But perhaps the supreme example of the dialectical nature of the self (i.e., two selves within a single “I”) can be gleaned from this poem of Hafez:

For years my heart sought the goblet of Jamshīd (jām-i jam) from me,  
That which it already possessed (ānchih az khūd dāsht) it sought from strangers.  
The pearl [i.e., the true self] which is outside the shell of time and space,  
It [i.e., the everyday self] searched its true reality from those who were lost on  
the seashore.

Last night, I took my problem to the Magian Pīr (pīr-i mugān),<sup>26</sup>  
Who could solve problems by his powerful [spiritual] insight.  
I saw him joyful and happy with a goblet of wine in his hand.  
And while he looked at the mirror in hundred different ways,  
I asked, “O sage, When was this cup world-viewing goblet given to you?”  
He said, “On that day, when He created the azure dome [of heaven].”  
He said, “That friend (i.e. Ḥallāj) who honored the top of the gallows,”  
His fault was that he laid bare the secrets [of the true self].  
If the Holy Spirit bestows his grace again,  
“Others can also do what the Messiah did.”  
I said to him, “What is the chain-like tress of idols for?”  
He replied, “Hafez complains of his frenzied heart (dil-i shaydā).<sup>27</sup>

The poem coherently links the metacosm (God), the macrocosm (the cosmos), and the microcosm (the human self) through the symbolism of the “goblet of wine” ~~(the macrocosm)~~. The goblet corresponds to the “heart” of the spiritual seeker (the microcosm), which again, after self-realization, corresponds to the divine throne in the metacosm.<sup>28</sup> In other words, when one looks into a cup full of liquid, one sees one’s own face, just as when one sees the face of one’s true self or the divine when peering into one’s own heart, if it is full of divine wine (i.e., divine love). The “goblet of Jamshīd” is a mythical cup into which the legendary Persian king Jamshīd could look and see any place in the world. It symbolizes the realized, true self, into which one can look and find everything in the cosmos.<sup>29</sup> According to Abū al-Ḥasan Lāhūrī’s massive commentary on the *Divān*, the goblet of Jamshīd cannot be discovered through the effort of the ordinary self, whose sole essence is analytical thinking or reason.<sup>30</sup> Thus one needs the help of a spiritual guide who can unlock the mystery of the true self by showing one the path of love.

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The discovery of one's true self—the inner, realized self—benefits not just the individual but also the community in which one lives. Our communities have become more fragmented, and sociologists now refer to a “post society” in which individuals are increasingly feeling lonely, depressed, and isolated.<sup>31</sup> Beginning with al-Fārābī (d. 950) and continuing with numerous ethicists throughout classical and postclassical periods, Islamic philosophers approached the question of selfhood and human flourishing as both an individual and a communal pursuit (i.e., it is not simply a question of the inner self at the expense of one's social and communal identity).

Following Aristotle, they defined the human being as a political animal. Al-Fārābī links the concept of human perfection with how people live in societies and how these societies serve a specific purpose beyond meeting our basic needs such as food, shelter, and protection.<sup>32</sup> In his view, societies have the natural goal of guiding their members toward true felicity and flourishing. Al-Fārābī draws a distinction between the virtuous city (*al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*) and the ignorant city (*al-madīnah al-jāhiliyyah*), the former being one where people genuinely cooperate with each other to attain human flourishing.<sup>33</sup> Later thinkers such as al-Ījī write that individuals need to cooperate with one another in order to survive and create civic life, while his commentator Ṭaşköprüzade adds that since human beings have different skills and different levels of wealth, all community members can benefit from a process of mutual interdependence.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Mullā Şadrā (d. 1640) talks about a just society (*al-jāmi'ah al-ʿādilah*) in which each member is subject to the interests of the whole, thereby collectively promoting human flourishing.<sup>35</sup> These ethical concepts align with the famous Qur'anic maxim of “commanding the right and forbidding the wrong” (*al-amr bi al-ma'rūf wa al-nahy ʿan al-munkar*), so the individual pursuit of felicity and flourishing, and the cultivation of virtues such as friendship and chivalry, are inseparable from its communal aspects.<sup>36</sup>

This aspect of personal growth begins with understanding selfhood as both received and achieved. We can describe the self (the received aspect) in terms of scientific and social facts, but also articulate it in terms of aspirational ideals that are yet to be realized (the achieved aspect). An aspirational self is something we work toward and become. For many people, their sense of self gives meaning to their life, since it inspires them to exercise the agency to become better. That is to say, a sense of self cultivates a specific narrative of what they can and should become, which is a new, transformed subjectivity.

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The holistic conception articulated by Muslim poets, philosophers, and theologians challenges the reductive and materialistic understanding of the self in modern science; some scientists acknowledge the limitations of empiricism regarding selfhood or consciousness. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Erwin Schrödinger elegantly explains the limitations of a materialistic explanation of subjectivity:


This is the reason why I believe it to be true that I actually do cut out my mind when I construct the real world around me. And I am not aware of this cutting out. And then I am very astonished that the scientific picture of the real world around me is very deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to

us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity. Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in these domains, but the answers are very often so silly that we are not inclined to take them seriously. So, in brief, we do not belong to this material world that science constructs for us. We are not in it, we are outside. We are only spectators. The reason why we believe that we are in it, that we belong to the picture, is that our bodies are in the picture. Our bodies belong to it.<sup>37</sup>

But other scientists, such as Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow (the two coauthored a book arguing that one can explain the origin of the universe without invoking God), do not want to admit this “cutting out of the self,” and hence think of the self as simply a “biological machine” operated by the brain.<sup>38</sup> Most people tend to follow the scientific definitions of human identity because they place their trust in the authority of modern science, partly because it has produced technological devices and software that are pervasive, useful, and reliable and enable us to connect with each other instantaneously across the world, to perform complicated surgeries, and to exceed the computational powers and speed of our brains.



But such a triumphalist view confuses “science” with its technological successes, while neglecting some of the disastrous consequences of scientific technology in such domains as the environment and nuclear weapons. In fact, one observes a growing dissatisfaction among an increasing number of intellectuals concerning scientific totalitarianism.<sup>39</sup> One such example is the philosopher and poet Jan Zwicky, who states flatly that “Western civilization is over,” and while she is not interested in the proximate causes of this cultural demise, she nonetheless outlines them: automation, the global shift to digital technologies, addiction to online life, the decline of literacy, the evisceration of humanistic studies, growing economic inequality, and overpopulation conjoined with accelerating rates of diet-induced human disease. Zwicky sees the root cause of many of the West’s problems stemming from a “way of thinking”—namely, *scientific thinking*—that originated nearly six hundred years ago. She acknowledges that it fostered the growth of capitalism, the military-industrial complex, and Big Technology, but finds it intensely anthropocentric and thinks it has led those who embrace it to regard the nonhuman world as nothing more than a bank of resources to serve modern subjects. While it analyzes, mechanizes, digitizes, and systematizes, it rejects empathy and compassion as “distorting influences” and insists on cold objectivity.<sup>40</sup>

If we understand that modern science misses much by its focus on the brain (or the body) to the exclusion of mind, heart, and spirit, we might be inspired to explore the self more holistically, see the benefits of overcoming individualism, and grasp the interconnectedness of God, the individual, and community. We would also understand that the self has no fixed definition, because the state of *fiṭrah* is a state of nondetermination, as it comes from a source that is infinite. Being a self is an ongoing journey, not a fixed destination. Ibn ʿArabī explains it beautifully through the notion of the “station of no station” (*maqām lā maqām*); the goal of the human journey is to contemplate and reflect the divine, whose essence is infinite and inexhaustible (hence, human perfection has no end). At a more approachable level, we would do well to try to overcome egoism, nepotism,

ethnocentrism, and chauvinistic nationalism, which are antithetical to the divine spirit. In their stead, we can try to expand the field of our awareness and cultivate a sense of cosmic consciousness, integrating family, community, nation, world, cosmos, and spirit. 



## Endnotes

- 1 Nathaniel Comfort, “How Science Has Shifted Our Sense of Identity,” *Nature* 574, no. 7777 (2019): 167–70.
- 2 Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan, eds., *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–22.
- 3 See Muhammad Faruque, *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 143–68. See also Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Christof Koch, *Consciousness: Confessions of a Romantic Reductionist* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012); Francis Crick and Christof Koch, “Towards a Neurobiological Theory of Consciousness,” *Seminars in the Neurosciences* 2 (1990): 263–75; Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (London: William Heinemann, 1999); Gerald Edelman, “Naturalizing Consciousness: A Theoretical Framework,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* 100 (2003): 5520–24; Gerald Edelman et al., “Biology of Consciousness,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 2, no. 4 (2011): 1–7.
- 4 For instance, Steven Pinker says that “the mind is what the brain does; specifically, the brain processes information, and thinking is a kind of computation” (*How the Mind Works* [New York: Norton, 2009], 324–27).
- 5 Richard Foreman, “The Pancake People, or, ‘The Gods Are Pounding My Head,’” *Edge The Third Culture*, accessed December 20, 2023, [https://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/foreman05/foreman05\\_index.html](https://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/foreman05/foreman05_index.html).
- 6 See also William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 17.
- 7 For a full-scale study of the self in Islamic thought, see Muhammad Faruque, “The Self,” *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Alexander Wain (Scotland: University of St. Andrews, forthcoming).
- 8 Bukhārī, k. isti’dhān, vol. 8, bk. 74, hadith 246, sunnah.com, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6227>. This should not, however, be understood in the anthropomorphic sense, since the Qur’an states, “And none is like unto Him” (112:4)—that is,  God’s transcendence.
- 9 Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī, ~~introduction to~~ Maṭla‘ khuṣūṣ al-kalīm fī ma‘ānī Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam (Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam), ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī (Qom: Būstān-i Kitāb, 2008).
- 10 This interpretation is based on Sufi metaphysics as developed within the School of Ibn ‘Arabī, which became influential in postclassical Islam. Unlike other schools of thought in Islam, this school affirms both the transcendence (incomparability) and immanence (similarity) of God. It talks about God’s manifestation (tajallī) throughout creation, while asserting how the human state has the potential to reflect all the divine names and attributes. This, however, does not compromise the absoluteness of the divine essence (al-dhāt al-ilāhī). Note that other schools of theology interpret this hadith and related Qur’anic verses differently.
- 11 See Cyrus Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 86–91.
- 12 Muhammad Pickthall, trans., *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an* (Chicago: Kazi, 1996). All the translations of the Qur’an are from Pickthall, with my modifications.
- 13 The heart can also signify the center of one’s emotions.
- 14 ~~‘Ayn al-Quḍāt~~  Hamadānī, *Tamhīdāt* 23, § 35; translated in Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of ‘Ayn-al-Qudāt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023), 130.



- 15 Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams, ya, Divān-i Kabīr*, ed. Badīʿ al-Zamān Furuzānfar (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 2000), 2:648.
- 16 Khwāja Mīr Dard, ‘*Ilm al-kitāb*, 636, cited in Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 99.
- 17 Mīr Dard, *Nāla-yi Dard*, 63, cited in Schimmel, 97.
- 18 Mīr Dard, *Shamʿ-i maḥfil*, 120, cited in Schimmel, 98.
- 19 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, 511–513; modified translation in Arthur J. Arberry, *The Poem of the Way: Translated into English Verse from the Arabic of Ibn al-Fāriḍ* (London: E. Walker, 1952), 54, lines 1630–35.
- 20 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, 514–15, in Arberry, *Poem of the Way*, 54, lines 1640–45.
- 21 Ibn ʿArabī, *The Translator of Desires*, trans. Michael Sells (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 243.
- 22 Ibn ʿArabī, 278–79.
- 23 Ibn ʿArabī, 279.
- 24 Ibn ʿArabī, 2, 286.
- 25 Hafez, *The Divan of Hafez: A Bilingual Text*, trans. Reza Saberi (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), #26 (translation modified).
- 26 Magīan Pīr symbolizes the person of the spiritual master.
- 27 Hafez, *Divan of Hafez*, #136, translation modified.
- 28 See Abū al-Ḥasan Lāhūrī, *Sharḥ-i ʿirfānī-yi ghazal-hā-yi Ḥāfez*, ed. Bahāʾ al-Dīn Khorashāmī et al. (Tehran: Nashr-i Qaṭrah, 1995), 2:1276ff. Needless to say, this is not the only interpretation of this [ghazel](#).
- 29 See, e.g., Michael C. Hillmann, *Unity in the Ghazals of Hafez* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1976), 43–45.
- 30 The “ordinary self” is symbolized in the poem as *bīgāne* (stranger/the other) and *gum shudegān-i lab-i daryā* (lost on the seashore), respectively. See Lāhūrī, *Sharḥ-i ʿirfān*, 2:1276–78.
- 31 See Carlo Bordoni, *Post Society* (New York: Polity, 2022).
- 32 Al-Fārābī, *The Attainment of Happiness*, in *Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. M. Mahdi (Glencoe: Free Press, 1962).
- 33 Al-Fārābī, *Perfect State*, in *al-Fārābī, On the Perfect State (Mabādiʾ ārāʾ ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍilah)*, trans. R. Walzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), v, 15, 3:231.
- 34 Feryal Salem, “The Ethics of ʿAḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī and Some Notes on Its Commentaries,” in *Mysticism and Ethics in Islam*, eds. Atif Khalil, Bilal Orfali, and Mohammed Rustom (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2022), 249–74.
- 35 S. K. Toussi, *The Political Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* (London: Routledge, 2020).
- 36 For a comprehensive treatment of this maxim in various trends of Islamic thought, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 37 Erwin Schrödinger, “Nature and the Greeks” and “Science and Humanism” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 95.
- 38 Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Random House, 2010).
- 39 See, for instance, Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World* (London: Perspectiva, 2021); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 2020); Wolfgang Smith, *Science & Myth: With a Response to Stephen Hawking’s The Grand Design* (New York: Angelico Press 2012); and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam, Science, Muslims, and Technology* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 2008).
- 40 Jan Zwicky, *Once upon a Time in the West: Essays on the Politics of Thought and Imagination* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023), viii.