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THE METAPHYSICS OF HUMAN GOVERNANCE: IMAM 'ALI, TRUTH AND JUSTICE[1]

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No individual is lost and no nation is refused prosperity and success
if the foundations of their thoughts and actions rest upon piety
and godliness, and upon truth and justice.[2]
'Ali ibn Abi Talib

I. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate, through the writings[3] of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib[4] (referred to herein as "Imam 'Ali" or "the Imam") and the sources he venerated, how his conception of "justice" is informed by certain principles of traditional metaphysics, and to touch upon its relevance to our modern times.

[1] This is a revised version of a study that was submitted and delivered to the International Congress on Imam 'Ali and Justice, Unity and Security, held in Tehran, March 13 through 16, 2001, organized by the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies.

[2] Sermon 21, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Imam 'Ali, translated by Syed Mohammed Askari Jafery, Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, New York, Second American Edition, 1981 (henceforth referred to as *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery). There are variant translations in English of Imam 'Ali's writings as rendered by Sharif ar-Radi. We will also refer to the translation by Sayed Ali Reza, Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, New York, Fifth American Edition, 1986 (henceforth referred to as *Nahjul-Balagha*, Reza).

[3] We have used the term "writings" to designate the compendium of sermons, letters and sayings attributed to Imam 'Ali, collected and preserved by Sharif ar-Radi under the title *Nahjul-Balagha* in 420 A.H. There is evidence that the words of Imam 'Ali were gathered during his own lifetime and preserved in writing within 30 years following his death. Many of the sermons and orations of Imam 'Ali have unfortunately been lost, but it is now generally accepted by scholars that the compendium of Sharif ar-Radi, based on earlier reliable sources, contains the words of Imam 'Ali, and it is in this sense that we refer to these as Imam 'Ali's "writings", though these are not his "writings" *stricto sensu*.

[4] 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (c.600 - 661) was the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, and the Fourth Caliph of Sunni Islam. Shi'ite Muslims venerate 'Ali as their first Imam, the political and spiritual successor of the Prophet. Imam 'Ali is generally venerated by all Muslims as one of the foremost sources of Islamic spirituality.

A preliminary observation will serve to place this discussion in its proper context: at the heart of every traditional religious or metaphysical quest lie two categories of question central to human existence. The first has to do with the discernment of reality. It can be formulated variously as "What is the nature of reality?", "Who am I?", "What is the world?", "How can one know what is real?", "What is truth and what is the criterion for its discernment?" and so on. The second has to do with our relationship to the reality we have discerned. It can be formulated variously as "What is the purpose of life?", "How should we relate to others?", "How should we govern ourselves?" and so on. Answers to both these categories of question must be provided by any traditional religious or metaphysical system that claims to be comprehensive. In other words, the system must address both sets of questions by providing, respectively, two elements of response: a *doctrine of truth* by which reality may be truthfully discerned, and a *method of transformation* by which one may integrate with and conform to the reality that one has truthfully discerned.[5]

It is undoubtedly a claim of Islam, as one of the world's major universal religions, to offer not merely a theological but also a comprehensive metaphysical answer to the central questions of human existence: thus the Qur'an claims to be both a "clear proof"[6] (of reality) and a "manifest light"[7] (guiding all true believers upon the Straight Path[8]). Consistent with all other revealed religious traditions and with

[5] Seyyed Hossein Nasr states: "...every religion possesses two elements which are its basis and its foundation: a doctrine which distinguishes between the Absolute and the relative, between the absolutely Real and the relatively real...and a method of concentrating upon the Real, and attaching oneself to the Absolute and living according to the Will of Heaven, in accordance with the purpose and meaning of human existence" - *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1972, at page 15.

[6] *Al-An'am*, VI:157; *An-Nisa'* IV:174.

[7] *Ash-Shura* XLII:52; *An-Nisa'* IV:174.

[8] The concept of the "Straight Path" or *al-Sirat al-Mustaqeem* (which will be referred to elsewhere in this paper from time to time) derives from the *Surat al-Fatihah*, the opening chapter of the Qur'an, recited by all devout Muslims in their daily prayers. The Qur'anic supplication: *ihdina's-sirat al-mustaqeem* (*Al-Fatihah* I:6) is translated as "Guide us on the Straight Path", which is explained in the next Qur'anic verse as "The Path of those upon whom You have bestowed your grace, not of those who have earned Your wrath nor of those who have gone astray". Allowing for the exception that God's grace is like the wind that "bloweth where it listeth", it can be said that the precondition of being on the Straight Path is that the supplicant must merit God's grace by having a pure heart. Those "who have gone astray" can be understood as those who have not awakened to the perception of their intellects and who thereby fail to discern the real from the illusory; while those "who have earned Your wrath" can be understood as those who, in the face of external guidance from the divine

the universal principles of traditional metaphysics, the central doctrine of Islam is of the unity of reality, and its sacramental method is aimed at the union with that reality. Doctrine and method, unity and union: these relate back to the two sets of questions of human existence as we have defined them. In answering the first of these—the questions about the *discernment of reality*—we are taught that reality is essentially integrated and accordingly that we must refine our perceptions to discern reality as One. This discernment has implications for the second set of questions—which relate to our *relationship with reality*—for, unless we conform to the reality we have discerned, we cannot lead integrated lives. The two sets of questions are therefore metaphysically linked, and we shall have more to say about the nature of this linkage later in this paper.

For the moment, the key point we wish to emphasize is that Imam 'Ali time and again in his writings articulates his twin mission as being that of "truth and justice"—a phrase used repeatedly in his *khutbas* and other writings compiled by Sharif ar-Radi under the title *Nahjul-Balagha*[9]—and, in so doing, he addresses both themes that are required to be addressed by a comprehensive metaphysical or religious tradition, namely, Truth (or the discernment of the nature and structure of reality) and Justice (or the conforming of humanity and all creation to the order of reality). Let us now examine each of these themes in turn.

II. Truth: The Discernment of Reality

Before one poses any questions about the nature of reality, it becomes necessary to consider an epistemological question: "How can reality be known?" Common experience teaches us about the unreliability of the five senses, and a moment's reflection makes it clear that discursive reason cannot yield any answers to questions about the ultimate nature of reality, which is transcendent[10]. How is it possible, then, to discern reality truthfully? The answer provided by traditional meta-

messengers and the inner discernment of their intellects, yet refuse to perfect their submission to God, in other words those who enslave their intellects to the dictates and temptations of their egoic wills.

[9] Refer to note 3 (*supra*) for a brief explanation of the collection titled *Nahjul-Balagha*.

[10] Frithjof Schuon writes: "Reason obtains knowledge like a man walking about and exploring the countryside by successive discoveries, whereas the Intellect contemplates the same countryside from a mountain height" (*Stations of Wisdom*, Frithjof Schuon, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, 1995, at page 65). In a well-known

physics is simple: truth, being of a universal order, is inscribed within our deepest self—that within us which is transcendent and universal, our primordial nature, the core of our very being. Knowledge of reality is therefore equated with self-knowledge or gnosis, and can at one level be understood as the centripetal and radial reconnection of the circumference with the Center through the grace of the primordial intelligence that constitutes our very being. That faculty which is capable of discerning reality in its most subtle nature—bearing in mind that the merely human is not privileged to know the Divine—is not the human faculty of the common senses or of the discursive reason, but the transcendent faculty of the supra-rational Intellect[11], the core of our discerning self, which is sometimes labeled the "Heart".[12]

The Islamic response to the epistemological question is completely in accord with the response of traditional metaphysics: true knowledge resides in the "Heart" or spiritual core of our being. Muslim theosophy starts with the Qur'anic teaching that the divine breath is the

phrase, Meister Eckhart has defined the Intellect as "something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreatable". It is the Intellect alone that is adequate to Truth. Reason alone cannot discover Truth: this is as futile as "a fool who seeks the luminous Sun/ In the desert with a lamp in his hand" (an image from Shabistari's *Gulshan-i raz*).

[11] "Metaphysic is supra-rational, intuitive and immediate knowledge. Moreover, this pure intellectual intuition, without which there is no true metaphysic, must never be likened to the intuition spoken of by certain contemporary philosophers, which, on the contrary, is infra-rational. There is an intellectual intuition and a sensory intuition; one is above reason, but the other is below it; this latter can only grasp the world of change and becoming, namely, nature, or rather an inappreciable part of nature. The domain of intellectual intuition, by contrast, is the domain of eternal and immutable principles, it is the domain of metaphysic. To have a direct grasp of universal principles, the transcendent intellect must itself belong to the universal order; it is thus not an individual faculty, and to consider it as such would be contradictory, since it cannot pertain to the possibilities of the individual to transcend his own limits": René Guénon, *Le Métaphysique Orientale*, p. 11, quoted by Whitall N. Perry in his magisterial anthology, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Perennial Books, Middlesex, Second Edition, 1981, at page 733.

[12] The center of oneself, symbolically the "Heart", is in traditional cosmology also understood to be the metaphysical center of the world, symbolically the "Sun". This radiant Center is, like an eye, the visionary core of one's being, which, in Meister Eckhart's terminology, is simultaneously "the eye by which I see God" and "the eye by which God sees me". The symbolism of the "Heart" is universal: some examples are: "I am seated in the hearts of all", *Bhagavad Gita*, XV:15; "His throne is in heaven who teaches from within the heart", St. Augustine, *In Epist. Joannis ad Parthos*, cited by A.K. Coomaraswamy in 'Recollection, Indian and Platonic', Supplement to the *Journal of American Oriental Society*, No. 3, April-June, 1944, p.1; and the *hadith qudsi* of the Prophet: "My earth and My heaven contain me not, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me", cited in Whitall N. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom, supra*, at p. 822.

very spirit that is infused into our Adamic clay: "Then He fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him of His Spirit."[13] This divine spirit is our *fitra*—our primordial and innate spiritual nature[14] —which pre-existentially affirms and testifies to its Origin in the Qur'anic episode of the Covenant of Alast[15], and is endowed with an innate knowledge of its fiduciary obligations—the *Amanah*[16] or Divine Trust, the duties entrusted to humanity and to each of us individually and which constitute our *raison d'être*. This is the primordial self of whom the Prophet has said: "Every child is born according to *fitra*. Then its parents make it into a Christian, a Jew, or a Magian (Zoroastrian)."[17] It is a self already endowed with the knowledge of its Maker (in other words, of the ultimate integrity of reality—in Islamic terms, *tawhid*) even before its entry into this world. It is the spirit or *ruh*, whose discerning faculty is '*aql* or Intellect, not merely the discursive reason or the senses. This is the center and "Heart" of our consciousness, referred to in the famous *hadith qudsi*: "My earth

[13] *As-Sajdah* XXXII:9.

[14] Note the *hadith*: "God created mankind in His own image": Bukhari, *Isti'dhan* 1; Muslim, *Birr* 115.

[15] The Covenant of Alast refers to a primordial covenant between each human being and God, referred to in the Qur'anic Verse, *Al-A'raf* VII:172—"And (remember) when your Lord took their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam and made them testify as to themselves (saying): 'Am I not your Lord?'—They said: 'Yea, verily, we so testify', lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: 'Verily, we have been unaware of this'." The term "Alast" derives from the key Arabic phrase that appears in the quoted verse: *alastu bi-rabbikum* ('Am I not your Lord?'). By attesting to the essential nature of reality, humanity affirms its pre-existential bond with God, as both supra-temporal Origin and supra-spatial Center. This attestation requires of humanity an existential re-affirmation of its Source and Nature through discernment, remembrance and virtue, the central features of religious life, which constitute, allowing for the grace of God, the means of all salvation.

[16] The Islamic concept of *Amanah* or the Divine Trust derives scripturally from the following Qur'anic Verse, *Al-Ahzab*, XXXIII:72—"We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it. And the human being carried it. Surely he is very ignorant, a great wrongdoer." Humanity, being privileged by the grace of revelation and intellection to know the transcendent and to recognize creation as a manifestation of transcendence, also bears the responsibility of stewardship towards creation. This is an aspect of the principle of *noblesse oblige*. To know God is also to know all things in God, and God in all things, and to treat all God's creatures as sacred. The origin of morality is predicated on the discernment that "all that lives is holy" (*William Blake*), which in turn is premised on the discernment of the sacred as the radiance of the divine. That humanity in general is content to accept the privilege of its creaturely superiority without accepting the responsibility that such superiority confers, explains the Qur'anic comment at the end of the quoted verse.

[17] Bukhari, *Jana'iz* 80; Muslim, *Qadar* 22.

and My heaven contain me not, but the Heart of My faithful servant containeth Me"; and again in those Qur'anic *surahs* that refer to the inscription of faith upon the "hearts" of men[18]. This is the Heart which, while capable of "containing" that in us which is divine, is also capable, in Qur'anic terms, of being "diseased"[19] or "rusted"[20] or "locked"[21]. It is this knowing Heart—the seat of our conscience—that "fallen" man, now in a state of "heedlessness"[22] (*ghafla*), must strive, by divine grace, to awaken. This "awakening" operates as both an illumination and a liquefaction of the heart, simultaneously dispelling the darkness of its ignorance and melting the carapace of its existential hardness[23] with the tender love of the spirit[24]. Truth is an awakening into a state of Presence and the awareness of Presence, into a state of Self-remembering wholeness (or holiness) that is imbued with a sense of the sacred[25], a sacramentally charged all-absorbing and immersed awareness of the Omni-Presence of the Divine Countenance[26], so that

[18] *Al-Mujadilah* LVIII:22 – "...For such, He has written Faith in their hearts..."

[19] *Al-Baqarah* II:10 – "In their hearts is a disease..."

[20] *Al-Mutaffifin* LXXXIII:14 – "...what they were earning has rusted upon their hearts."

[21] *Surat Muhammad* or *Surat Al-Qital* XLVII:24 – "Do they not deeply ponder the Qur'an? Or is it that there are locks upon their hearts?"

[22] *Al-Hajj* XXII:46 – "...Verily, it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts which are in the breasts that grow blind."

[23] Frithjof Schuon writes: "The world is made up of forms, and they are as it were the debris of a celestial music that has become frozen; knowledge or sanctity dissolves our frozen state and liberates the inner melody. Here we must recall the verse in the Qur'an which speaks of the 'stones from which streams spring forth', though there are hearts which are 'harder than stones', a passage reminiscent of the 'living water' of Christ and of the 'well of water springing up into everlasting life' in the hearts of saints" (*Understanding Islam*, Frithjof Schuon, Unwin, London, 1976, at page 41).

[24] Grace operates as a Divine Ray of Love that is operative within the serenity of the contemplative mind and in the vigilance of spiritual ardor. Frithjof Schuon writes in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, translated by P. N. Townsend, Perennial Books, Pates Manor, Bedfont, Middlesex, 1987, at page 158: "Peace is absence of dissipation. Love is absence of hardness. Fallen man is hardness and dissipation... In the peace of the Lord, the waves of this dissipation are calmed and the soul is at rest in its primordial nature, in its center. Through love, the outer shell of the heart is melted like snow and the heart awakens from its death; hard, opaque and cold in the fallen state, it becomes liquid, transparent and aflame in the Divine life."

[25] The term "sacred" denotes the theophanic radiation and resonance of the Absolute in the contingent: "The sacred is the presence of the Center in the periphery, of the Motionless in the moving" (*Understanding Islam*, Frithjof Schuon, *supra,* at page 48).

[26] The notion of the theophanic Countenance of the Divine derives scripturally from the following Qur'anic Verse, *Al-Baqarah*, II:115 – "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God."

its consciousness is illuminated with and moistened by the knowledge of its Maker. This realizational knowledge (gnosis), which the believer had pre-existentially affirmed in the Covenant of Alast, now (that is to say, in this privative existence) becomes incumbent on the devout Muslim as an existential affirmation in the first part of the *shahadah.* The formula for this affirmation is the testament, *la ilaha illa 'llah*—literally, "There is no god if not *the* God", which could, for this purpose, be rendered esoterically as: "Nothing is real if it is not discerned as a manifestation of Absolute integrated reality." In other words—to anticipate our argument—Truth is to be discerned as a theophany. This is a point that we will elaborate upon later.

Having dealt with the epistemological question about the basis of knowledge, one can begin to deal with the substantive question of the nature of reality itself. From the viewpoint of traditional metaphysics, creation progressively exteriorizes that which is principially interior. Reality, while being essentially One, is at the same time a hierarchical descent or objectivization from the subtle and transcendent Essence to gross and immanent Form—an unfolding concretization of the Absolute to the Infinite, from the Center to the periphery. At its most subtle level, Supreme Reality is beyond knowledge, indefinable and ineffably mysterious, and all human approaches to this ultimate knowledge are therefore characterized by paradox and bewilderment: the Absolute cannot in any ultimate sense be apprehended by man, as such, being transcendent and beyond-being. However, because Supreme Reality is Absolute, it is necessarily Infinite, and all possibilities are prefigured within it at an archetypal level that can be said to be relatively-absolute—to admit of which is not in any way to derogate from the essential Self-Sufficiency, Ipseity and Oneness of Supreme Reality. The forms and possibilities of all beings are thus gathered within this qualified level of reality and are projected or manifested out of principial Reality, in a given or defined measure, as creatures within existence. This projection has a reality that is entirely contingent on the Absolute, which is its fount and, more accurately, the Sole Existent. Creaturely or contingent existence is thus a theophany, a radiation of transcendence through which all creation sacrally partakes of and reflects the metaphysical transparency of the Divine.

This metaphysical view of reality is affirmed within Islam. The Qur'anic view accords perfectly with the metaphysical view by distinguishing between transcendent reality (*tanzih*)[27] and immanent

[27] See, for instance, *Ash-Shura* XLII:11 – "Nothing is like Him."

reality (*tashbih*)[28]. God is the Supreme Reality, whose essentially unconditioned quiddity (*dhat*) is distinguished from His qualified attributes (*sifat*) but without in any way derogating from His essential metaphysical Oneness (*tawhid*). As Absolute and unconditioned reality, God is without likeness or peer or privation or cause: this is the Absolute reality of the *Surat Al-Ikhlas*[29]. But as Absolute reality, God is also Infinite, both transcendent and immanent. The Qur'an therefore speaks of the attributes of God, ascribing to Him various names and qualities[30]. It is these names and qualities, prefigured within the archetypal or imaginal realm of the Infinite (the "storehouses" of God's creation[31]), that are projected into existence by divine fiat or Command[32] —but "only in a known measure"[33]. And it is through these names and qualities—which human beings are privileged among all creatures to know[34] —that man can attain the humanly possible knowledge of God: in other words, the created world (the macro-

[28] See, for instance, *Al-Hadid* LVII:4 – "He is with you, wherever you are"; or *Al-Baqarah*, II:115 (*supra*) – "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God."

[29] The *Surat Al-Ikhlas* is Verse CXII of the Qur'an, the Verse of Divine Purity or Metaphysical Oneness. It forms part of the daily prayer of devout Muslims, a reminder of the principle of the integrity of reality (*tawhid*) and of the Absolute uniqueness, self-sufficiency and transcendence of the Deity. The Verse states: "In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Say: He is God, (the reality that is metaphysically) One; God, the Self-Sufficient; He does not begat, nor was He begotten; and there is none that can be compared to Him." As to the notion of Metaphysical Oneness, Imam 'Ali states in Sermon 190 (*Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery): "He is one but His unity is not a mathematical quality..." Metaphysical Oneness is thus "a true whole (which) is logically anterior to, and independent of, its parts", as explained by René Guénon in *The Multiple States of Being*, Larson Publications Inc., New York, 1984 (translation by Joscelyn Godwin from the French book "*Les etats multiple de l'etre*").

[30] These are the *asma wa sifat*, sometimes referred to as the Ninety-Nine Names of God (though there are many more), such as the Compassionate, the Merciful, and so on.

[31] The reference to "storehouses" relates to *Al-Hijr*, XV:21 of the Qur'an -- "There is no thing whose storehouses are not with Us, but We send it down only in a known measure." This is the archetypal realm in which existence is prefigured in the "Mind of God" (if we can be permitted to use this expression, without intending to anthropomorphize the Divine).

[32] *An-Nahl*, XVI:40 – "Verily, Our Word to a thing when We intend it, is only that We say unto it: "Be!", and it is."

[33] See *Al-Hijr*, XV:21, *supra*.

[34] According to Islamic tradition and scripture, humanity is privileged among all creatures by the scope of its knowledge and by an intellect that is adequate to the Absolute. The Qur'anic Verse *Al-Baqarah*, II:31—"And He taught Adam the names of all things..." attests to the symbolic knowledge endowed upon humanity. This presumes the requirement of a "symbolist spirit" of interpretation. One should bear in

cosm) is constituted of "signs" which resonate within the pre-existential memory of man (the microcosm) as the names and attributes of God, which are reflections of the spiritual realities of the Divine (the metacosm). It is by the grace of spiritual literacy that man, not through merely human intelligence but through the blessing of the innate spiritual intellect, can know God. This gnosis (*irfan*) is the drop's knowledge of the Ocean that it contains within itself. Man, as such, cannot know the Divine Essence or Godhead[35], but the transcendent spiritual faculty—the Intellect operating within man—is privileged to know Itself. This is the "knowledge of unveiling" (*kashf*), which operates *externally* as the perception of the revealed reality as a theophany, as a sacred text comprising of "signs"[36] pointing to God—and *internally*,

mind that the "names" of things signify an anagogical understanding of reality because, as the Qur'an states, in *Al-A'raf*, VII:180, for example, "the Most Beautiful Names belong to Allah". Seyyed Hossein Nasr, commenting on *Al-Baqarah*, II:31, notes that man "was given power and dominion over all things by virtue of being God's vicegerant (*khalifah*) on earth. But with this function of *khalifah* was combined the quality of *'abd*, that is, the quality of being in perfect submission to God. Man has the right to dominate over the earth as *khalifah* only on condition that he remains in perfect submission to Him who is the real master of nature" (from the essay, *Who is Man?: The perennial Answer of Islam*, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The essay was delivered by Nasr as a Noranda Lecture at Expo 67 in Montreal on September 4, 1967, later published in the traditionalist journal, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Winter 1968, Volume 2, No. 1, and reprinted in *The Sword of Gnosis*, edited by Jacob Needleman, Penguin Metaphysical Library, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1974, at page 203. The quoted passage appears at page 207).

[35] Thus we see in the Qur'an that even the Holy Prophet, during his exalted *mi'raj* in which he journeyed to the seventh heaven, was proscribed from transgressing the bounds of a lote tree (*Sidrat-ul-Muntuha*), and was thereby veiled from Supreme Reality—see *An-Najm*, LIII:17. This is in keeping with the *hadith*: "God has seventy veils of light and darkness. Were they to be removed, the glories of His Face would burn away everything perceived by the sight of His creatures": al-Ghazali, *Ihya* 1:144. Man, as such, is veiled from the Godhead—though man can know the attributes of God, as these are disclosed by revelation and experience—though even here it is important to emphasize that the Divine Attributes are qualitatively different from their human equivalents, which are their existential approximations. Only God—or that which is transcendent within man—can know God. Thus Schuon has noted that "the individuality as such will always be a veil before the Divine Reality, for the individual as such cannot 'know God'. The Intellect, whether it is envisaged in its 'created' aspect or in its 'uncreated' reality, is not the individual. The individual experiences it in the form of a fulgurating darkness and he grasps only the flashes which illumine and transfigure him." (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, by Frithjof Schuon, *supra*, at page 155).

[36] There are numerous passages in the Qur'an that speak of created things as the "signs" of God. See, for instance, *Surat Yunus*, X:6 and 67 (night and day); *Ash-Shura*, XLII:32 and 33 (ships in the sea); *Al-Jathiyah*, XLV:3 – "Verily, in the heavens and the earth are signs for the believers."

through sacred recollection[37], as self-identification with the spiritual nature of these "signs". This is one of the meanings of the Verse: "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in their selves."[38]

Thus far we have set out a traditionally metaphysical response to the first category of questions central to human existence, namely, the questions dealing with how to discern reality, and we have argued that this metaphysical response is in accord with the Islamic response based on Qur'anic scripture and the *hadith*. As both of these sources were venerated by Imam 'Ali and are referred to deferentially in his writings, it might suffice to argue that Imam 'Ali's response corresponds to the metaphysical and Islamic schema we have outlined earlier. However, a few illustrations of Imam 'Ali's views will serve to better demonstrate this correspondence.

On the issue of the epistemological question of the basis of knowledge, it is well known that the 'Alid tradition is an intellectual tradition, and there are numerous references throughout Imam 'Ali's writings to demonstrate that he advocated an intellectual approach to the discernment of reality. For instance:

> Use your intellect to understand something when you hear about it—the intellect that examines, that is, and not just the intellect that repeats what it hears, for surely there are many who repeat the knowledge that they hear, and there are few who examine it.[39]

Intellectual appreciation occurs through examination and understanding, not through unexamined acceptance, even if the latter involves mental processes. It is significant in the following excerpt that the Imam distinguishes between the mind and intellect. Censuring his recalcitrant followers, he states:

[37] The practice of divine invocation or *dhikr* is a method of "realizing reality", of awakening to the Presence of the Divine Countenance and of being experientially one with the Divine Substance. The connection between the practice of invocation and the notion of "names" is derived from various traditions and Qur'anic passages, for example, *Al-Isra'*, XVII:110—"Say: Invoke God or invoke the Most Gracious, by whatever name you invoke Him (it is the same), for to Him belong the Best Names..."

[38] *Surat Fussilat*, XLI:53. There are three sources of Truth in Islam, all rooted in God: these are the Revelation as Scripture (the Qur'an, in Islam, which is the "criterion" of Truth), as the Objective Creation (the "horizons" or macrocosm), and as the Subjective Self (the microcosm).

[39] From *The Sayings and Wisdom of Imam 'Ali*, The Muhammadi Trust, Zahra Publications, ISBN 0946079919.

> O people! You behave as if you have bodies and minds but no intellects: as if you have extremely divergent views and do not want to gather round and obey an authority.[40]

Implicit here is the notion that intellection is to be distinguished from the ordinary functioning of the mind. The "authority" to be obeyed can thus be understood, not only externally, as the spiritual authority of the Caliph or Imam, but also internally, as the transcendent and critical intellect—the discerning eye of the spirit, which is distinguished from the discursive reasoning capacity of the merely human mind. It is the universality of this intellect that endows it with the criterion of objectivity, hence the capability to resolve "divergent views". Note also that this view of the superiority of the transcendent intellect over the merely rational mind accords with the metaphysical hierarchy of the spirit, mind and body, the ascendancy of the spiritual over the psychic and corporeal, or *spiritus vel intellectus* over the "psycho-physical *res*."[41]

Similarly, Imam 'Ali expressly acknowledges the Heart as the locus of the intellect, the source of innate metaphysical knowledge of reality. For instance, a celebrated prayer that is ascribed to Imam 'Ali, known as the *Dua Kumayl*,[42] contains the assertion that the "heart has been filled with (pure) knowledge" of the Maker. This accords with the Qur'anic descriptions of the Adamic clay being infused with the divine Spirit[43], and of archetypal man being taught the "names" of all things[44]. In the celebrated First Sermon, Imam 'Ali describes the process of creation and of the infusion of the divine Spirit into Adam: "...He infused into it the Divine soul (intellect) and the figure stood up as a man."[45] It is this spiritual Center within humanity,

[40] Sermon 100, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery.

[41] This universal cosmological principle is found in all religious traditions. For example, a clear statement of this principle is to be found in the *Bhagavad Gita*: "It is said that the senses are powerful. But beyond the senses is the mind, beyond mind is intellect, and beyond and greater than intellect is He (the Spirit)" (translated by Shri Purohit Swami, 1994, Shambhala, Boston, Massachusetts, Chapter 3, pages 35 and 36).

[42] According to tradition, the prayer known as *Dua Kumayl* was a supplication attributed by Imam 'Ali to the Prophet Khidr and was taught by the Imam to his disciple, Kumayl ibn Ziyad Nakha'i, by whose name the prayer is now generally known.

[43] *As-Sajdah*, XXXII:9 – "Then He fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him of His Spirit."

[44] See note 30, *supra*.

[45] Sermon 2, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery. See *Nahjul-Balagha*, Reza, Sermon 1: "Allah collected from hard, soft, sweet and sour earth, clay which He dripped in water till it got pure, and kneaded it with moisture till it became gluey. From it He carved an

with its privileged pre-existential faculty of intellectual, intuitive, and profound knowledge (called gnosis or *irfan*), that enables human beings to discern reality to its core and to testify as to its spiritual basis—thereby reaffirming the knowledge attested to in the Covenant of Alast[46]. To know one's essence is to know the substance of all reality, the metaphysical Center and Origin, which are One. Echoing the hermetic maxim of self-knowledge as the path to realization[47], the Imam states:

> Whosoever knows himself well knows his Maker.[48]

And the intrinsic nature of this intelligence is salvific. Because true knowledge is transformative, as we shall later see. Thus Imam 'Ali states:

> God does not entrust
> anyone with intelligence
> without saving him thereby someday.[49]

The *khutbas* contain numerous passages in which Imam 'Ali describes the spiritual basis of reality, that is to say, the nature of God, the supreme and manifest reality discernable by the human Intellect. For instance, in one sermon, we read:

> Praised be God who knows the secrets of things, and the proofs of whose existence shine in various phases of nature. No physical

image with curves, joints, limbs and segments. He solidified it till it dried up for a fixed time and a known duration. Then He blew into it out of His Spirit whereupon it took the pattern of a human being with mind that governs him, intelligence which he makes use of, limbs that serve him, organs that change his position, sagacity that differentiates between truth and untruth, tastes and smells, colours and species. He is a mixture of clays of different colours, cohesive materials, divergent contradictories and differing properties like heat, cold, softness and hardness."

[46] See note 15, *supra*.

[47] Thus, for example, the metaphysician, Frithjof Schuon writes: "to know the intellect is to know its consubstantial content and so the nature of things, and this is why Greek gnosis says, 'Know thyself', the Gospels say 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you', and Islam 'Who knows himself knows his Lord." (*Understanding Islam*, Frithjof Schuon, *supra,* at page 109).

[48] Quoted by Whitall N. Perry in *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, *supra*, at page 863.

[49] *Living and Dying with Grace: Counsels of Hadrat Ali*, translated by Thomas Cleary, Shambhala, 1995, page 103.

> eye has or will ever see Him. But those who have not seen Him physically cannot deny His existence, yet the minds of those who have accepted His existence cannot grasp the real essence of Divine Nature. His place is so high that nothing can be imagined higher. He is so near to us that nothing can be imagined nearer. The Eminence of His position has not placed him further away from His creatures, and His Nearness has not brought them up to His Level. He has not permitted the human mind to grasp the Essence of His Being, yet He has not prevented them from realizing His Presence.[50]

In this eloquent passage, we see that Imam 'Ali describes the reality of God as both transcendent—and therefore places His Essence beyond our mere human faculties[51] —and immanent—and therefore places us intimately within His Presence, for the discerning spiritual Intellect. In this description, we also glean that there are levels in the structure of reality, the highest being "His Level", in other words the transcendent Essence; and also that there are degrees of intimacy or "Nearness". The significance of the polarities (High/Low and Near/Far) and the continuum of gradations implied by these polarities will be discussed later. For the moment, it suffices to note that reality is metaphysically hierarchical, that it has verticality.

In a famous passage from the First Sermon, Imam 'Ali emphasizes the doctrine of *tawhid*—that is, the essential integrity and Unity of reality, notwithstanding its apparent differentiation through multiplicity—when he states:

> The first step of religion is to accept, understand and realize Him as the Lord. The perfection of understanding lies in conviction and confirmation, and the true way of conviction is to sincerely believe that there is no god but He. The correct form of belief in His Unity is to realize that He is so absolutely pure and above nature that nothing can be added to or subtracted from His Being. That is, one should realize that there is no difference between His Person and His attributes, and His attributes should not be differentiated or distinguished from His Person.

[50] Sermon 54, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery. This appears as Sermon 49 in *Nahjul-Balagha*, Reza (*supra*).

[51] Affirming the primacy of the transcendent Intellect, Imam 'Ali has said: "God is not that which can enter under one of the categories of knowledge. God is That which guides reasoning toward Himself" - cited in *Bihar al-anwar* of Majlisi, Tehran, 1305 - 15, vol. II, p. 186.

> Whoever accepts His attributes to be other than His Person actually forsakes the idea of the Unity of God...[52]

Elsewhere, he states:

> Remember that He is Absolute and Infinite, a Being without limitations, attributes or qualities of His creatures.[53]

Through these, and many other, passages in the *Nahjul-Balagha*, Imam 'Ali affirms a view of reality that corresponds to the traditionally metaphysical view found in the Qur'an and *hadith*—of a reality whose substance, notwithstanding any outward differentiation, is spiritual. This spiritual foundation is, as it were, a radiance or effulgence that is discernable by the spiritually critical intellect. It is the ontological conviction that undergirds cognition: the knowledge of the very foundation of being. It is the discernment that all of creation is wondrous, imbued with an intelligence that resonates sacramentally within the spiritually receptive intellect. The Imam invites us to open our eyes to wonder at the design of creation, to be alive to the Sacred Ocean in which we all swim. Thus, for example, there are many passages in the *khutbas* that deal with the intricate architecture of creation and how these creations (whether a bat, an ant, a date palm, a locust or a peacock) are all "signs" pointing to a supreme Architect. For instance, after describing the marvelous design of an ant, Imam 'Ali states, in a passage that is interesting to read in today's post-Nietzschean and neo-Darwinist world:

> It is a pity that man refuses to accept the existence of the Grand Architect of this universe and this Mighty Creator of nature. It is a pity that he either believes his own existence to be an accident, or that he has come into being of his own accord and none has created him...Can there be a building without a builder? Can there be an effect without a cause?[54]

In another wonderfully evocative passage, illustrative of the wondrous qualities of spiritually sensitive observation and vision, he

[52] Sermon 1, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery.

[53] Sermon 191, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery. See Sermon 185 in *Nahjul-Balagha*, Reza (*supra*) - This Sermon describes the nature of God in sublimely apophatic language.

[54] Sermon 190, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery. See Sermon 184 in *Nahjul-Balagha*, Reza (*supra*): "...woe be to him who disbelieves in the Ordainer and denies the Ruler."

arouses in his audience an appreciation of what is meant by the omniscience and omnipresence of God, in these terms:

> He knows where and how the smallest living organisms pass their lives. He knows where ants pass their summers and worms sleep out the winter seasons. He hears the sorrowful cries of speechless animals and footsteps of persons walking quietly and soundlessly. He knows how every bud develops under the covering of green folds and how it blooms into a flower. He is aware of the habitat and the den of every beast in the caves of mountains and in the density of jungles. He knows under which leaf and inside the bark of which tree, mosquitoes live and multiply. He knows from which part of a branch a bud will shoot, and which sperm will pass through its normal and natural course and form (a foetus). He knows which drops of water (from an ocean) will rise (in the form of steam) to form clouds, and which of these clouds gather together and which part of the land they will fertilize. He is aware of the life history of every drop of rain, every particle of sand, how it has started its individual existence, how the wind has blown it from place to place and how one day it will come to an end. He knows all those marks and places that have been destroyed or leveled by floods. He recognizes footprints of insects on sand hills, nests of birds on lofty mountain peaks, and songs of birds singing in the shades of green trees. He knows which shell holds pearls and which does not, what is hidden in the depth of the ocean, what the dark nights try to conceal, what the sun's rays reveal...He fully knows every detail of all this gigantic organization and sees that each part of it works according to the plan set out by Him, His power, His might, and His desire, to organize, govern and influence every part, every phase and every aspect of this mighty creation, and His favors and His benevolences reach them all. And they are not able to thank Him as much as His Kindness and Mercy deserves, and to show as much gratitude as they should.[55]

In these gloriously eloquent passages that draw our attention to the intricate detail of the wondrous design of nature—whether it be the artistic arrangement of a peacock's feathers, or the construction of a bat's wings or a locust's limbs—we are drawn inevitably to one conclusion:

> The Grand Architect of the universe has displayed clear, obvious and tangible signs of Elegance and Grace in every design of creation

[55] Sermon 94 (*Khutba-e-Ashbah*), *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery. See Sermon 90 in *Nahjul-Balagha*, Reza (*supra*).

> and the Greatness and Glory of His Power in every form and system that He gave existence to...

and we are invited by the Imam to:

> ...wonder at its grandeur, admire its greatness, bow before its sublimeness and accept one Sole and Supreme Intellect, One God behind all this.[56]

It is significant that, despite this theophanic view of creation, which emphasizes its essential homogeneity, Imam 'Ali clearly maintains, in keeping with traditional metaphysics, that creation is arranged hierarchically. We have noted earlier that the Imam speaks of the possibility of being "Near" or "Far" from God. Similarly, describing the process of creation, the Imam observes:

> As soon as things came into existence, every one of them was allotted properties and their place in nature...Thus every creature and every object had a place permanently fixed, was assigned a position in nature which none can change.[57]

In this scheme, man is pre-eminent, not because of his material superiority, but because of his spiritual intelligence. Describing the creation of Adam, archetypal man, the Imam states:

> ...then He infused into it the Divine soul (intellect) and the figure stood up as a man. This creation was an intelligent and rational being, using intellect instead of instinct and having complete control of his mental faculties and full command over his limbs. He further had natural sagacity and wisdom, to differentiate between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood and between justice and inequity...
>
> Having created such a being, He ordained the angels to hand over to him the trust committed to their care and to fulfill the promise they had made, which was to accept the superiority of man and to recognize his greatness. He therefore ordered them all to pay

[56] Sermon 168, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery. See Sermon 164 in *Nahjul-Balagha*, Reza (*supra*): "Allah Has provided wonderful creations including the living, the lifeless, the stationary, and the moving. He has established such clear proofs for His delicate creative power and great might that minds bend down to Him in acknowledgment thereof and in submission to Him, and arguments about His oneness strike our ears".

[57] Sermon 1, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery.

> their homage to him and bow down before him. They all obeyed His command except Satan...[58]

The "greatness" of humanity derives from its transcendent intellect, its pre-existential "natural sagacity and wisdom". Implicit in the notion of "greatness" is the concept of hierarchy, inherent in the notion of the ordering of reality, and this concept, premised as it is on the metaphysical principle of verticality[59] is, as we shall see, crucial to the Imam's understanding of justice.

Nature then is depicted as a theophany, arranged hierarchically and radiating the sacred Presence of the Divine, though the Essence of the "Grand Architect" remains transcendent. However, that which is transcendent within humanity, namely, the spirit, can, by the grace of its intellectual vision, the "Eye of the Heart", intuit that which is ontologically evident, that is to say, it can know its own pervasive nature and substance. And by knowing itself, as the Imam has noted, it can know its Maker. In the face of this sacred Presence, man, as such, is reduced to insignificance, and must therefore have an appropriate attitude of humility and wondrous gratitude, while at the same time, by virtue of the intellect's discernment of the pervasive nature of its substance—the sacred Presence in all—, must also have compassion towards all beings. Humility and compassion, detachment and love:

[58] Sermon 2, *Nahjul-Balagha*, Jafery. See *Al-A'raf*, VII: 11 and 12: "And surely, We created you and then gave you human form; then We told the angels 'Prostrate yourselves to Adam', and they prostrated themselves, except Iblis, he refused to be of those who prostrated themselves. God said: 'What prevented you (O Satan) that you did not prostrate yourself when I commanded you?' Iblis said, 'I am better than him (Adam). You created me from fire, and him You created from clay'". Satan's sin is one of metaphysical blindness, the inability to recognize the spiritual foundation of humanity. This opacity of vision is the genesis of pride.

[59] "The principle of verticality, which is a fundamental principle of traditional wisdom, is based on the affirmation of transcendence as an aspect of a comprehensive and integrated reality that is Absolute. According to this understanding, reality has both a transcendent Origin and an immanent Center, which are one, rather than being reduced to the merely horizontal dimension of its existential or quantitative elements. Verticality implies both Heaven and Earth, a worldview in which meaning and purpose are defined principally by both height and depth, and secondarily by breadth—that is, principally by man's relationship to God, who is simultaneously 'above' and 'within' creation, and who therefore governs all creaturely relationships – rather than by breadth alone – that is, solely in terms of the relationship between the subject and the world. It also implies that the horizontal is subordinate to the vertical, that is to say, the relationship between man and the world is premised on the primary relationship between God and man: to restate this in Christian terms, the love of one's neighbor is premised on one's love for God."—from the Editorial, "The Principle of Verticality", by M. Ali Lakhani, in *Sacred Web 14*, Vancouver, Canada, 2004

these qualities are the foundational elements of the piety that, as we shall see later, constitute the basis of Imam 'Ali's view of Justice.

To summarize: Imam 'Ali's view of reality, which is fully consonant with the principles of traditional metaphysics articulated within the Qur'an and *hadith*, point to an essentially unified and integrated view of reality, in which the structure of reality can be differentiated in terms of polarities rooted within its very structure, as the Divine Subject objectivizes Itself, by deploying from the Absolute to the Infinite and from Essence to Form. The whole of the continuum of this deployment is a hierarchically constituted theophany, reflecting the sacred core of our innermost spiritual nature.

Extract from "The Metaphysics Of Human Governance: Imam 'Ali, Truth And Justice"

Features in

The Sacred Foundations of Justice in Islam:
The Teachings of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib
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Edited by M. Ali Lakhani
Introduction by Seyyed Hossein Nasr
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