

Islam and the Density of Man^{1*}

By *Mohammed Rustom*

I would like to begin with an autobiographical account which takes us back to the fall of 2000, when I was a second-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. Like many of my classmates in philosophy, I had a fairly naïve understanding of what I was doing studying this discipline. I would eventually come to learn that there were different kinds of traditions of philosophy, and where one would end up focusing really had to do with a number of factors, not least one's interests, predilections, and ultimate concerns. But, in the fall of 2000, as I sat in a very popular course on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, such things were not entirely clear to me. I signed up for the course, to be honest, because the two authors who were its focus had names that sounded “cool.” The course description promised to give students a sense of the important and enduring themes in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's writings—themes which, in one way or another, helped define a number of pressing problems in several contemporary forms of philosophy. Little did I know that the course would be a catalyst for something else.

One day, through the lens of Nietzsche, the professor was passive-aggressively emphasizing how there is no such thing as truth, how everything is an interpretation largely governed by contexts and received canons of understanding, etc. I recall sitting in that class completely disagreeing with what was being said, but unable to respond. Leaving the class with my head down in shame and terrified by the thought

¹ * This article is based on a lecture delivered at Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions in April 2015. Thanks to Munjed Murad for his invitation and feedback on the materials presented here. Parts of this paper appeared in a section of a previously-published article: “Actionless Action,” in *Door of Mercy: Kenan Rifai and Sufism Today* (Istanbul: Nefes Yayinevi, 2017), 1:122-128.

that “this was it,” I found myself on a bench in one of the more scenic parts of the campus. Suddenly, the sun shone through the clouds, and its rays illuminated the leaves on the ground. The picture was perfect, the moment both in time and outside of time. I was beholding something that I could not understand, but which I understood by virtue of the very act of beholding it. In effect, *that* was the response to the professor which I had been seeking. It occurred to me at that moment that the beauty of nature was both a poetic reality and something that possessed its own razor-sharp logic, with the net effect that it was seen as a crystallization of the mysterious rhythm and flow of life itself.

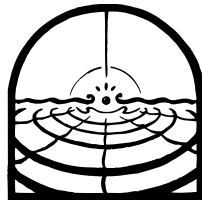
From there onwards, things progressed rather naturally (no pun intended), and before long I came across the works of some of the major authors who belonged to the classical Islamic intellectual tradition. These writers could not but see nature and its beauty as signs which point to ultimate reality itself. What, then, are the principles which inform their thinking on nature? And, how would their vision speak to us today, being as we are people who live in a world that has a very different kind of interaction with nature and for whom nature in turn behaves quite differently?

In an attempt to answer these two questions, I will here present a poem on Islam and nature along with a commentary upon the poem. There are two reasons for this kind of an undertaking. First, these media have always been effective pedagogical forms in Islamic civilization, and for which we have some contemporary examples.² Second, communicating the principles of nature primarily by way of a didactic poem (albeit in the style of *le vers libre*) has the ability to present, by virtue of its very structure, something of the poetic and logical dimensions embedded in nature on the one hand, and the aforementioned Islamic metaphysicians’ understanding of it on the other. The commentary upon the poem will draw on the central sources of Sufism, namely the Quran,³ sayings of the blessed Prophet, and the writings of some of the tradition’s foremost sages.

² For a recent English-language contribution, see Mohammed Rustom, “The End of Islamic Philosophy,” *Sacred Web* 40 (2017): 131-167.

³ Translations from the Quran are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

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