

In Search of Reality: The “Near Ones”:  
*The Concept of Reality in Sufi Works of Islam*

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# I. Introduction

## 1. Sufism

The term “sufi” is familiar, as a cultural label, to the educated west today. Used in a vernacular sense, the words *sufi* and *sufism*, have associations, which in practice refer to a broad assortment of individuals, faiths, and philosophies that have in common a mysticism and spirituality that stem from the Islamic tradition. But what concepts are being recognized in the association? To the non-specialist western reader, ‘sufi’ may evoke associations with dances of ecstasy (cf. the whirling dervishes), or to love poetry of Rumi, one of the most often translated sufi poets. Those that go further may be aware that the etymology of the label, *suf*, comes from the Arabic word for ‘wool’, hence a ‘sufi’ is, quite literally, a “wearer of wool”, denoting the coarse cloth worn by early Muslim mystics. Popular conception mostly stops here. But there is much more of interest.

In a well-documented study,<sup>1</sup> Idries Shah shows that ‘sufism’ has exerted tremendous influence on Western intellectual development, but that this goes largely unrecognized by all but a few academic specialists. For instance, “Al-Ghazzali [or ‘Algazel’ in the Anglicized usage] was once believed in the West to be a Catholic theologian of the Middle Ages, St. Charalambos of the Greeks has been revealed as none other than the dervish master Haji Bektash Wali, who founded the Bektashi [order of Sufis], [and] the fifteenth-century ‘Christian’ saint Therapion is the dervish poet-Turabi.” Shah presents the results of fascinating research tracing the rise of medieval love poetry to the Sufis of Andalusia (Muslim Spain), and the presence of Sufi couplets, their sources generally unacknowledged, in the work of eminent European writers, Shakespeare included. Anglicization has still further obscured the ability to trace the intercultural exchange of ideas. For example, “Not everyone recognizes ‘Doctor Maximus’ (‘The Greatest Teacher’) as El-Sheikh el-Akbar (Ibn al-Arabi); or ‘Basil Valentine’ (‘The Triumphant King’) as El-Malik el-Fatih, the alchemist.”<sup>2</sup>

How can it be that not only the identities, but also the faiths of these Muslim mystics have been erased? How much of Sufi thought entered the Christian West only to go unrecognized? If the thoughts of the Sufis were present in the West from such an early point in history, what can explain the absence of a Sufic flavour in Western philosophy? Shah observes that accompanying the obscuring of identity and faith was a more general trend of selective adaption. Thus, much of what was borrowed was only adapted to the prevailing Catholic Christian conceptions, an effect that in many cases removed the Sufic essence.

My focus in this paper is on the fundamental concepts, assumptions and methods of sufi thought and practice that identify key points of departure between Sufic and western conceptions of reality and the attendant search for understanding. It is these points of departure that become the source of divergence between sufic and western behaviours, and cultural aspirations, both in an intellectual and academic context, and in personal search.

## 2. Names, Language and Translation

Sufis themselves have used different names in self-reference[13]. Of these, “Near Ones”, has a particular appeal for its implied nearness to a hidden truth or reality. In this paper, I shall use ‘sufi’ and ‘Near One’ interchangeably, reserving ‘Near One’ for those sufi masters whose work is used in this study (their names appear in the footnotes and bibliography) and using ‘sufi’ when a more general property applies. Capitalization signifies connection with the Real or the Divine. For example, a Friend often means a Friend of the Divine, or a Friend of God (this is itself a common epithet for Sufis). This is the sense in which I capitalize the “Near Ones.”

The writings of the “Near Ones” represent some of the most eloquent mystical compositions in their native languages, compared to “a vast garden in which are cultivated many flowers of different scents and colors, each sweet and beautiful, each reflecting one aspect of the garden of paradise, and each with its own particular form. [A]lthough the inner reality of Sufism is everywhere the same, containing and reflecting the very heart of the Islamic message, its modes of expression have taken into consideration the artistic possibilities of the peoples whom they have addressed and the genius of the languages they have employed.”<sup>3</sup>

How best to capture the spirit of the sufi conception of Reality? For a non-specialist audience, translation into English cannot be avoided, but is unfortunately a first, and often serious filter. To limit further filters, I avoid the use of secondary sources<sup>4</sup>, and present the translated words of the Near Ones in their original passages, un-indented, as their meaning is an integral part of the paper. In this way it is hoped that greater flavor of their thoughts comes

1 Shah, [13:pps 24, 42, note #49]

2 Shah, [13, p.42, #49]

3 Nasr, Preface to [10]

4 The beautiful attracts, the mysterious allures, the hard to understand draws scores of explainers. Secondary sources analysing the teachings and writings of the Near Ones are found in every translation’s introduction and many books besides.

through and provides the reader with enough original verses to sample the fare for themselves and see which aspects of it may suit their taste.

A note on gender: it is unfortunate for modern discourse that the old literature exclusively references males: "he, him, a man, mankind". As the Sufi search for understanding of Reality is non-gendered, I have altered all quotations, unremarked, replacing gendered references with gender neutral ones: "person, humankind, one, they, them". If any would dispute the non-gendered intension of the Sufi search, they need only refer to the Hadith of the Prophet: "The acquisition of knowledge is a duty incumbent upon every Muslim, *male and female...*" (see Section 4 below).

### 3. Sufism: an esoteric discourse embedded within the cultural context of Islam

Who is a Sufi? One who does not ask who a Sufi is.<sup>5</sup> With answers like this being frequently given, one soon stops seeking for neatly packaged answers. This is the first context: one must not expect the ideas of the Near Ones to be submitted to formulas.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Near Ones claim that human language is impotent when it comes to accurately conveying the Real. Thus, any attempt at speaking of or capturing It in writing is necessarily a first approximation to the Truth. The purpose of any speaking is to evoke a spark in the listener, leading him to conduct his own investigations, and pursue his own verifications by seeking his own Experience.

At a general level, Sufism is associated with ideas about mysticism and spirituality. But *whose* mysticism? Which *ideas*? Though the Near Ones consider the origin of man's mystical aspirations to be as old as mankind itself and thus to include many wise men pre-dating the Prophet Muhammad and Islam,<sup>7</sup> a particular flavour of mysticism blossomed in the wake of Islam which took as its inspiration the many mystical verses of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad.<sup>8</sup> The Near Ones conception of the Real is intimately connected with their conception of the Divine. But the esoteric (mystical) Islamic conception of the Divine is quite different from that of exoteric (non-mystical) Christianity.<sup>9</sup> It must be constantly kept in mind that Sufism in general and the teachings of the Near Ones in particular are situated within the cultural context of from Islam. This means that many of their analogies are uniquely Muslim in character (sultans, fakirs, dervishes, *ulama* religious scholars), in objects (*halwa* / sweetmeats, date palms, camels, *Jinn*<sup>10</sup>), and in reference to symbols that would have been familiar to their Muslim audience. Where required, we will try to provide some of that background, and refer the reader to the Bibliography for further material.

We may now turn to the Sufic conceptions of Reality, starting first with the contextual framework. "Deep in the sea are riches beyond compare. But if you seek safety, it is on the shore." - Saadi (c.1200 c.e.).<sup>11</sup> Let us plunge in!

## II. The Concept of Search in Sufi Works of Islam

### 4. The Centrality of Knowledge: The Foundation for the Sufi Quest

"Knowledge," says Rumi, "is more important than all else." A person without knowledge walks blindly. They can travel nowhere by themselves, for they do not know the road. They need first to be set onto the correct road and then guided by signs. Without these, they "do not know whether they are following the road or have strayed from it."<sup>12</sup>

By comparison, one who "knows the road... has no need of signs and waymarks." Similarly, in the understanding of Reality, it is again personal experience that is the most exalted form of understanding. "Whoever attains to vision has no more need for hearsay."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the first stage of the seeker is to gird himself for his search by becoming always a seeker of knowledge. The centrality of knowledge to the seeker of Reality is illustrated by the following collection of Hadith (Sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad, from whom every Sufi takes inspiration:

"The acquisition of knowledge is a duty incumbent upon every Muslim, male and female. It enableth its possessor to distinguish right from wrong; it lighteth the way to Heaven; it is our friend in the desert, our

<sup>5</sup> Popular wisdom. Cf. Brehner, 2022, <https://en.qantara.de/node/48053>.

<sup>6</sup> For the reader who still wishes such questions answered definitively, Shah attempts this well [13, p.286].

<sup>7</sup> [2:p6; 8; 12; 13; 16] -- numbers separated by semicolons represent book numbers. Page numbers are preceded by :.

<sup>8</sup> [1; 2] survey in detail selections from these early sources of Islamic mysticism.

<sup>9</sup> see the brief and well-exposed [6] for a concise explanation.

<sup>10</sup> see [8; 1; 1.5; 2]

<sup>11</sup> excerpts from *The Orchard (Bostan)*, *The Rose Garden (Gulistan)*, [13, p. 82]

<sup>12</sup> [8, p.126]

<sup>13</sup> [8, p.126]

society in solitude, our companion when friendless; it guideth us to happiness; it sustaineth in misery; it is an ornament amongst friends, and an armour against enemies.

With knowledge one rises to the heights of goodness and to a noble position, associates with sovereigns in this world, and attains to the perfection of happiness in the next. So go in quest of knowledge even unto China. One who leaveth home in search of knowledge walks in the path of God. Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. Learn to know thyself. One who knoweth one's own self, knoweth God.

To listen to the words of the learned, and to instil into others the lessons of science, is better than religious exercises. To spend more time in learning is better than spending more time in praying. It is better to teach knowledge one hour in the night than to pray the whole night. An hour's contemplation is better than a year's adoration. One hour's meditation on the work of the Creator is better than seventy years of prayer." With such words it becomes clear that in the mind of the Prophet, at least, knowledge, science, and religion are in absolute harmony. Indeed so exalted is the learned person that "verily, the superiority of a learned person over an ignorant worshipper is like that of the full moon over all the stars," and "the ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr."<sup>14</sup>

## 5. The Limitations of Intellect & Centrality of Direct Experience; Implications for Behavior

The Sufi's focus is on attaining personal knowledge and understanding through direct personal experience. But the ability to share what one learns is constrained by a fundamental paradox. Human language is inadequate to capture the essence of Reality. No matter the language, the Sufis believe that there can be no substitute for the direct experience. A speaker attempting to describe or explain a spiritual (non-material) experience is inviting a listener to attempt to comprehend what is non-material with a net that is material (the brain). As Aga Khan III explains in his Memoirs, "Ibn-Rushd, the great Muslim philosopher, known to Europe as Averroes, established clearly the great distinction between two kinds of apprehensible human experience. On the one hand, our experience of nature as we recognize it through our senses, whence comes our capacity to measure and to count (and with that capacity all that it brought in the way of new events and new explanations); and on the other hand, our immediate and immanent experience of something *more real, less dependent on thought or on the processes of the mind, but directly given to us*, which I believe to be religious experience. Naturally, since our brain is material, and its processes and all the consequences of its processes are material, the moment that we put thought or spiritual experience into words, this material basis of the brain must give a material presentation to even the highest, most transcendent spiritual experience."<sup>15</sup> And Rumi: "The parent of the new-born child makes babbling sounds, though their intellect should encompass the world."<sup>16</sup>

The inability to use human (material) communication in order to transmit the understanding of the Real introduces a critical tension in the outlook of the Near Ones. It is not possible for the Sufi to capture or transmit the Essence of the Real to the non-enlightened, just as the parent communicating to their baby cannot make the baby understand, though both might wish it possible. Speech about the Real is akin then to babble-talk.

Must the Sufi then give up, unable to proceed? Certainly not! There is yet the rational and the psychological preparation that speech can influence. Speech, then, in the Sufi conception, takes on a unique purpose: it is to *develop the listener*, on the one hand to prepare them to for the Real, and on the other to goad, prompt, prod, and inspire them to overcome their inertia and exert themselves to seeking their own direct experience. Just as the parent babbling to their new-born child benefits both parent and child, so too, those who have comprehended the Real may yet benefit seekers even though the speech itself cannot come close to capturing the totality of that experience. The attention point is how to approach this speaking. In the Sufi conception, speaking is to be done sparingly, with focused intention. "If one speaks, it is to make something understood." (Rumi) If one who has attained direct experience speaks of their understanding, they should do it "in order that those who are still disputing may understand."<sup>17</sup> One must not speak overmuch: "Before one who has eyes, your profit lies in silence." All of this is in keeping with the general Sufi sentiment: "little talk, little food, little sleep."<sup>18</sup>

A model for the Sufi is described by Hazrat Ali: "In the past, I had a comrade in faith, and they were prestigious in my view because the world was humble in their eyes, the needs of the stomach did not have sway over them, they did not long for what they did not get; if they got a thing they would not ask for more; most of their time they were silent, if they spoke they silenced the other speakers, they quenched the thirst of questioners, they were weak and feeble but at the time of battle they were like the lion of the forest or the serpent of the valley, they would not put forth an argument unless it was decisive. Even if they could be exceeded in speaking, they could not be excelled in

14 Prophet Muhammad (S.A.S), [7.5]

15 [6, p.2] emphases mine

16 [8, p.126]

17 [8, p.126]

18 Schimmel, Annemarie, The Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 1978, University of North Carolina Press

silence, they were more eager for keeping quiet than speaking. These qualities are incumbent upon you. So, you should acquire them and excel each other in them. Even if you cannot acquire them you should know that acquiring a part is better than giving up the whole."<sup>19</sup>

The question for the Sufi becomes one of assessing the state of the speaker and the state of one being spoken to. Benefit from the interaction is dependent on this assessment. Four quotes illustrate the decision to speak or not to speak. The calamity of knowledge is to waste it on the unworthy. To waste knowledge on those who are unworthy of it is like putting pearls, jewels, and gold on the necks of swine."<sup>20</sup> "Better to speak words to a speaker of knowledge than to remain silent, but silence is better than bad words."<sup>21</sup>

"Hazrat Ali, indicated his heart, and said: 'I have here a sufficiency of knowledge, but I cannot find anyone to whom to entrust it. There are plenty of people, but they too quickly become uncertain or sceptical. How I yearn for the really learned.'"<sup>22</sup> [13, p.188]

## 6. The Search for Reality & the value of Guide in the Sufi Path Toward Understanding

We have seen that an individual's pursuit of knowledge is deemed central to progress along the Way. We have seen also that Reality is to be *experienced* and that its understanding cannot be conveyed through the lips alone. And yet proceeding entirely without a guide who knows is deemed to be foolishness. But then what reassurance is there that one can find one's way to one's own verification of the Real? Will a helpful guide always be able to be found?

The Near Ones refer to the situation of Muhammad (S.A.S.). "O Muhammad! You were unlettered and an orphan. You had no father or mother to take you to school and teach you penmanship and skills. Where then did you learn these many thousands of sciences and knowledge? You have told of everything that has come into the world from the beginning of creation and existence. Step by step, you have described its journey. You have given news of its felicity and wretchedness. You have lectured on the dissolution of the world, its end, and the Eternity that has no end. From whom did you learn all this? Which school did you attend?

Muhammad replies, 'Since I had no one and was an orphan, that Someone of nobodies became my tutor and taught me. *'The All-Merciful taught the Qur'an'*<sup>23</sup>

Read: In the name of thy Lord who created.

Created a human from a clot.

Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous,

Who taught by the pen,

Taught humankind that which they knew not." (Qur'an 96:1-5)

How then to approach the Search? "[It is possible to] study *objectively* the direct and subjective experiences of those who have had the spiritual enlightenment without material intervention."<sup>24</sup>

The "Real is not veiled from you. Rather, it is you who are veiled from seeing It, for, were anything to veil It, then that which veils It would cover It. But if there were a covering to It, then that would be a limitation of Its Being [since] every limitation of anything has power over it." But as the Real is "the Omnipotent, above His servants," He cannot be veiled without causing a contradiction, and thus they conclude that the illusion is in human thinking that something veils the Real whereas in Truth, it is the human itself who is veiled from the Real.<sup>25</sup> The solution? To each it is exhorted: throw off your own veil!

The way to the perception of Reality is open to everyone, yet not everyone is open to the Way, nor is everyone capable of traveling it or enduring its hardships, of appreciating it or comprehending it. The perception of Reality is not perceived except by the elect. But those not ready now may be ready later. This life is not the only one, and the Lord and Truth is ever present for one who seeks Its Light. So in the final analysis, it falls to each person to strive to penetrate the veils themselves.

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19 [3, p. 299]

20 [Prophet Muhammad, 7.5]

21 [Prophet Muhammad, 7.5]

22 According to the Near Ones, the divine guidance of Prophet Muhammad was passed to Hazrat Ali by divine designation at Ghadir-e-Khumm in the Arabian desert.

23 [1.5, Qur'an 55, p. 590]

24 [6, p.2.] emphases mine

25 Ibn 'Ata'illah, [9, 29. #33]

What are the steps involved in this penetration? First is the recognition that "we live, move and have our being in God." The Near Ones claim that "when we realize the meaning of this saying, we are already preparing ourselves for the gift of the power of direct experience" of this Reality.<sup>26</sup> Second is the recognition in the Creation of the portents of God. This is a theme that is repeated many times in the Qur'an, and indeed, each of the Near Ones discusses the "proofs of God". A classic is the analogy of Hassan al-Basri who "explained the [Muslim] doctrine of God and the Universe by analogy with the sun and its reflection in a fountain. There is certainly a reflection (image) of the sun in a space of a few square meters, but what poverty, how little reality, how little true resemblance between this impalpable image and the immense and lurid celestial sphere! [God] is [like] this sun. The Universe, as we know it, with all its magnitude, and time with its power, are nothing else than the reflection of the Absolute in the mirror of the fountain."<sup>27</sup>

"He has created humanity,  
 He has taught them utterance.  
 The sun and the moon are made punctual.  
 The stars and the trees adore.  
 And the sky He has uplifted; and He has set the measure,  
 That you exceed not the measure (but observe the measure strictly), nor fall short thereof.  
 And the earth has He appointed for creatures  
 Wherein are fruits and sheathed palm-trees  
 Husked grain and scented herb.  
 Which is it of the favours of your Lord that you would deny?  
 He created humans of clay like the potter's,  
 And the Jinn did He create of smokeless fire.  
 Which is it of the favours of your Lord that you would deny?  
 Lord of the two Easts and Lord of the two Wests!<sup>28</sup>  
 Which is it of the favours of your Lord that you would deny?  
 He has loosed the two seas. They meet.  
 [Yet] there is a barrier between them. They encroach not [one upon the other].  
 Which is it of the favours of your Lord that you would deny?" (Qur'an 55:1-21)

"To [one] who looks with such eyes upon the world it is not a prison but a garden. A marvellous garden -- the garden of the Lord. I shall invite my heirs to feast their eyes on the miraculous beauty of the earth -- rivers and seas to slake the earth's eternal thirst, hills like the tents of a great encampment, forests like an army with banners; wide open spaces, dawns and sunsets, the indomitable arch of the sky."<sup>29</sup>

The third step is to direct the seeker of the loadstone to the Mine itself. "O you who are thirsty and heedless, come! We are drinking the water of *Khizr* from the stream."<sup>30</sup> What kind of faith is required of a seeker early in their journey? Rumi describes: "If you do not see the water, act like a blind man: Bring a jug to the stream and dip it in, for you have heard that there is water in the stream."<sup>31</sup> Since the blind man cannot see the stream, he must "act in imitation": "Dip the water skin, which is dreaming of water, into the stream, so that you may feel it become heavy. When it becomes heavy, you will have attained guidance: at that moment your heart will be delivered from dry imitation."<sup>32</sup> This is perhaps a different kind of faith than in Christianity. It is not a blind faith nor an absolute faith, but a faith to fuel the search. It does not remove the validity of questioning, nor deny the need for subjective verification.

There is, though, a recurring theme advising of a pitfall in a seeker's search for direct verification and acquisition of knowledge. While knowledge enables one to recognize the tremendous complexity of the existent universe, and be led therefore inevitably to reflect upon the mystery of how it became that way, yet there is danger of becoming pulled into the ever more involving study of the infinitudes of the created universe as though this were of itself to lead to Reality. The Near Ones warn that it does not. "Say: "Behold what is in the heavens and the earth!" (Qur'an 10:101) Thus, with His words "Behold what is in the heavens" He opened up the door of instruction for you. But He did not say, "Behold the heavens," so as not to lead you to the mere existence of bodies."<sup>33</sup> Investigation must not "stop at the forms of things" but rather use its comprehension to pass through the forms straight to the meanings behind them. When used in this fashion, the Near Ones believe that science is of infinite value, for they claim that the

26 Aga Khan III, [6, p.2]

27 Aga Khan IV, [7, p.5], Aga Khan III, [6, p.7]

<sup>28</sup> The two easts are the two points where the sun rises in winter and in summer. The two wests are the two points where the sun sets in winter and in summer. The two seas are the salt water and the fresh (sweet).

29 Aga Khan III, [5, p.63]

30 Rumi [8, p.130]

31 Rumi, [8, p.130]

32 Rumi, [8, p.130]

33 Ibn 'Ata'illah, [9, p.44, #140]

meanings all point to Him, the transcendent Reality, for He is "the Exterior and the Interior" (Qur'an 57:3), "the hidden Source from which all manifestation proceeds."<sup>34</sup>

When science becomes attached solely to material bodies, and ceases to be used as a mirror within which to see the Beauty of the Beloved, then it rapidly loses value to the Sufis, and becomes "a heavy load."<sup>35</sup> Ibn 'Ata'illah: "Travel not from creature to creature, otherwise you will be like a donkey at the mill: roundabout it turns, its goal the same as its departure. Rather go from creatures to Creator."<sup>36</sup> This is a central theme of the Near Ones.

Where does the path end, and will one know when one reaches it? When seekers have once found the Real, they need "nothing but the inward eye and the divine lamp - they have been delivered of signs and roads."<sup>37</sup> "Whoever finds the way to vision in the spiritual retreat will [not need] support from the sciences."<sup>38</sup> Why? The Near Ones believe certainty is with the Real. To have reached Him is to reach Reality, and to reach Reality is to know with certainty. Indeed, "of [true reality] there is no academic proof in the world; for it is hidden, hidden, and hidden."<sup>39</sup>

The final step is the recognition of Love as the Force of the Universe. How does Love figure into Reality? The Near Ones see it as the fundamental principle manifesting the physical phenomena of the Universe. "The creatures are set in motion by Love, Love by Eternity-without-beginning; the wind dances because of the spheres, the trees because of the wind. The world is like a mirror displaying Love's perfection. Oh friends! Who has seen a part greater than its whole? With Love, this entire Universe has been created and is alive, each thing seeking union with that object for which desire was placed in its heart. God's wisdom in His destiny and decree has made us lovers of one another. That foreordination has paired all parts of the world and set them in love with their mates. [So] each part of the world desires its mate just like amber and straw. Heaven says to the earth, 'Hark! Thou drawest me like iron to a magnet!' Oh a different kind of fruit shakes every branch; a different cup of wine intoxicates each of us and makes us its fool! Everyone was made for a particular task; desire for it was placed in his heart."<sup>40</sup>

To the Sufi, understanding Reality requires understanding Love. Yet like Reality, "the kernel of Love is a mystery that cannot be divulged" in speech. It must be experienced. Like Reality, "Love has many expositions beyond speech."<sup>41</sup> Rumi describes, "No one has ever walked two or three paces toward the garden of Love without a hundred salaams from the Gardener."<sup>42</sup> In another verse, he writes, "The other world keeps coming into this world. Like cream hidden in the soul of milk, No-place keeps coming into this place. Like intellect concealed in blood and skin, the Traceless keeps entering into traces. And from beyond the intellect, beautiful Love comes dragging its skirts, a cup of wine in its hand. And from behind Love, that indescribable One who can only be called 'That' keeps coming."<sup>43</sup> Through Love, the Sufi seeker travels a swifter path to the Supreme Lover than by all other available paths.<sup>44</sup>

## 7. The place of Rationality, Logic, and Proof in Progressing to Enlightenment

At the heart of the endeavours of the Near Ones is a quest for direct experience of the Truth, of the All-Encompassing Reality that is the Beloved. Personal experience of the Divine, of the Truth, of Reality, becomes the hallmark of true understanding. For the Sufi, their own personal progress is the fruit of their labour and provides them with continual reward. Yet interestingly, though this personal experience is the goal, it is made crystal clear that the first (and indeed continual) journey of the seeker must lie along the avenue of knowledge.

And yet, while increasing one's knowledge and advancing one's understanding are good, Rumi believes that book-learning and rational arguments cannot [by themselves] lead a person to the Fountainhead of the Real. Something else is needed: right guidance, i.e. guidance by one who Knows.

In Rumi's example, the person of merely book learning is blind and walks on wooden legs. A surer and swifter path to attaining an understanding of Reality is the path of questing for direct Experience by turning foremost to the One who Knows: "The blind person walks with a cane, which prevents them from falling headfirst on the ground," he

34 Victor Danner, [9, p.44, fn #1]

35 Rumi [8, p.129] "God said, 'Like an ass carrying books' (Qur'an 62:5) : Knowledge not from Him is a burden."

36 Ibn 'Ata'illah, [9, p.31 #42]

37 [8, p. 126]

38 Rumi, [8, p.126]

39 Rumi, [13, p.106]

40 Rumi, [8, p.197]

41 Rumi, [8, p.195]

42 Rumi, [8, p.197]

43 Rumi, [8, p.197]

44 see also Aga Khan III, [6, p.3-5]

says. The stirring up of a doubt "throws these blind persons down on their heads." Why so unstable? Because their currency is "discursive reasoning, not direct vision."<sup>45</sup> The blind, in order to stay on the right road, must first be placed there by someone with better sight than they have, protected, as it were, "by those of illuminated eyes." Rumi continues: "Were there no people of vision and spiritual kings, all the world's blind would be dead. What is this cane? Rational arguments and demonstration. Who [gives] them the cane? The Seeing Mighty One."<sup>46</sup>

To the western intellect, ranking direct vision above proof by discursive reason may seem an inverted ranking. A distinction may help to explain. To the Sufi, by "vision" is meant Vision, that "direct experience ... which no words can explain but which [to the one experiencing it brings] absolute certainties."<sup>47</sup> The Sufis who have experienced such things are not only absolutely certain of their experiences, but their resulting knowledge, obtained through a completely non-discursive process, is witnessed to by others and attested. What is involved in such experiences? There are many examples of what has been called 'mystic knowledge' or 'mystic certainty'. the Sufi story of the Patched Robe of Prophet Muhammad, [13, p.191], the biography of Ibn 'Arabi, and his encounter with Ibn Rushd (Averroes), [12, p.92]. Though such experiences cannot be conveyed through human communication, one "can study objectively the direct and subjective experiences of those who have had spiritual enlightenment without [requiring] material intervention."<sup>48</sup>

Such experiences are not limited only to Sufis. Nietzsche's life and works are an interesting example of a person with unflinching conviction in his specialism. Setting this aside, what I find interesting, however, is his account of what he experienced in autumn 1888 which he describes in his autobiography *Ecce Homo*:

"Has any one at the end of the nineteenth century any distinct notion of what [should be] understood by the word inspiration? I will describe it. ... It [is] hardly possible to set aside completely the idea that one is the mere incarnation, mouthpiece or medium of an almighty power. The idea of revelation in the sense that something becomes suddenly visible and audible with indescribable certainty and accuracy, which profoundly convulses and upsets one—describes simply the matter of fact. One hears—one does not seek; one takes—one does not ask who gives: a thought suddenly flashes up like lightning, it comes with necessity, unhesitatingly—I have never had any choice in the matter. There is an ecstasy such that the immense strain of it is sometimes relaxed by a flood of tears, along with which one's steps either rush or involuntarily lag, alternately. There is the feeling that one is completely out of hand, with the very distinct consciousness of an endless number of fine thrills and quiverings to the very toes;—there is a depth of happiness in which the painfulest and gloomiest do not operate as antitheses, but as conditioned, as demanded in the sense of necessary shades of colour in such an overflow of light. There is an instinct for ... a wide-embracing rhythm, [which] is almost the measure of the force of [the] inspiration, a sort of counterpart to its pressure and tension. Everything happens quite involuntarily, as if in a tempestuous outburst of freedom, of absoluteness, of power and divinity. The involuntariness of the figures and similes is the most remarkable thing; one loses all perception of what constitutes the figure and what constitutes the simile; everything seems to present itself as the readiest, the most correct, and the simplest means of expression. This is *my* experience of inspiration." – Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 3 (p.101)

Experiencing Reality in this way instils Absolute Certainty in the vision received. This concept is at the heart of the Sufi conception of Reality. Such Experiences of Reality are superior to any gained by discursive processes, since the discursive process is itself only sound in relation to its assumptions, while Absolute Certainty makes no assumptions, but rather "drinks directly from the stream"<sup>49</sup> of Absolute Truth. What is this Truth? It is that Knowledge which the Divine grants to the one blessed with the enlightening experience. Different grades of seekers receive knowledge commensurate with their states and stations. Thus the aim of the Near One is for constantly increasing elevation of his station in relation to the Divine.<sup>50</sup>

To the Near Ones, the path to the Knowledge of Reality is not deterministic, i.e. one must not expect to travel it for a fixed length of time after which one will have made a corresponding proportion of progress. From this perspective, it is in fact inappropriate to speak of 'path to'. The more accurate understanding is that Union with the Real is the desire of the seeker of Union. There is no guaranteed reward and there are no thresholds or formulas. Each seeker's business is with himself and He Who is Sought. Ardent self-improvement therefore becomes the life of the seeker and the reward, if it comes, is by the grace of He who is Sought. A classic Sufi story (Rumi) is a good example of how the suppression of one's ego is necessary to attainment of Union. As with all stories of the Near Ones, this is meant as an allegory, not to be taken literally.

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45 Rumi, [8 p.127]

46 Rumi, [8, p.127]

47 Aga Khan III, [6, p.3]

48 Aga Khan III, [6, p.2]

49 paraphr. Rumi, [8, p.130]

50 cf. The Sufi Story of Ibrahim and the List of the Friends of God, [13, p.238] is one such example of the Sufi concern for rankings. [9; 1] contain more details on the states and stations of the Sufi seeker.



"One went to the door of the Beloved and knocked. A voice asked: 'Who is there?'  
The seeker answered: 'It is I.' The voice said: 'There is no room here for me and thee.' The door was shut.  
After a year of solitude and deprivation the seeker returned to the door of the Beloved and knocked.  
A voice from within asked: 'Who is there?' The seeker said: 'It is Thou.' The door was opened for them."<sup>51</sup>

Spiritual progress according to the Near Ones is different from rational progress along a discursive path. The Near Ones make frequent use of concepts of science and recognize the importance of scientific reason. This should not be surprising, since as has been shown, the pursuit of knowledge is the path for all who seek Nearness. Indeed, most of the Near Ones were also masters of the sciences of their day.<sup>52</sup> However, they used the ideas of systematic study and scientific progress for different ends, and continually exhort the seeker of enlightenment to progress beyond the limits of the study of books, for the creation is infinite, and one must not lose oneself in the creation but rather pass beyond it to the Creator. Consider this short verse by Hafiz:

"Only the bird understands the textbook of the rose  
For not every reader knows the inner meaning of the page.  
O you who would learn the section on love from the book of knowledge --  
I fear that you do not know how to fathom it by research."<sup>53</sup>

Another example, in which a scientific sort of analysis is coupled with mystic insight, is given by Farrid-ud-din 'Attar (the author of the famous *Conference of the Birds*). He writes:

"On a wall within the *tekkia* arches of the meditation-hall of Attar, it is related, were written the words: '*Reserved for the Sage (Hakim) Tamtim.*' Sheikh Attar instructed his senior disciples to observe the behaviour of all newcomers towards this inscription. He predicted [for them] that all who reacted to it in a certain fashion would develop mystical powers correctly and rapidly; and that all who said or did certain other things would leave or have to be sent away. He never asked the disciples which postulant reacted in which way. But they observed, over the years, that it turned out always as he [had initially] predicted. One day he was asked why he left this inscription there. He said, "it is to show those without perceptions that apparently insignificant indications to certain experiences will betray the inner capacities or lack of them to one who knows how to make a test."<sup>54</sup>

Further comparison with the Sufic manner of argumentation and reasoning shows another key difference from the western sensibility, and is rooted in different assumptions about the nature of Reality. Ibn 'Ata'illah writes: "What a difference between one who proceeds *from* God in his argumentation and one who proceeds inferentially *to* Him! He who has Him as his starting point knows the Real (*al-Haqq*) as it is, and proves any matter by reference to the being of its Origin. But inferential argumentation comes from the absence of union with Him. Otherwise, when was it that He became absent that one has to proceed inferentially to Him? Or when was it that He became distant that created things themselves will unite us to Him?"<sup>55</sup>

Rumi provides a colourful view of those who believe that correct argumentation must first take the Divine to be non-existent and then prove His Existence. "Someone said in the presence of Shams al-Din Tabrizi, 'I have established the existence of God through an incontrovertible proof!' The next morning Shams said, 'Last night the angels came and were praying for that person. They said, 'Praise be to God! [This person] has established the existence of our God!' You silly fool! God is established. His existence needs no proof. If you want to do something, then establish yourself in a spiritual station before Him. Otherwise, He is established without proof. There is nothing that does not proclaim His praise, but you understand not their praise. (Qur'an 17:44)"<sup>56</sup>

The Near Ones critique the mentality that pursues rational inquiry to the exclusion of spiritual experience from the realm of such inquiry. Rumi: "That iniquitous person knows hundreds of superfluous matters in the sciences, but they do not know their own spirit.... They know the properties of every substance, but in explaining their own substance they are like an ass."<sup>57</sup> To know the value of every merchandise, but not to know your own value, that is stupidity, says Rumi.

In this, Rumi and the Near Ones stand close to the viewpoint of Socrates, whose work, in fact, they consider consistent with their own. Indeed, it can be argued that Socrates' philosophy has more in common with the

51 Rumi, [13, p.189]

52 Examples are Hazrat Ali, Ibn el-Arabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn-Rushd, (Averroes), Jafar-al-Sadiq, Hassin-e-Sabbah (known to the West through the Crusaders as The Old Man of the Mountain), Nasir-al-din-Tusi (the famous astronomer serving at the court of the invading Mongols as they travelled rapidly through Muslim Central Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.)

53 Hafiz, [13, p.225]

54 Attar, [13, p.74]

55 Ibn 'Ata'illah, [9, p.28, footnote #29]

56 Rumi, [8, p.128]

57 Rumi, [8, p. 128]

tradition of the Near Ones than with the Aristotelian tradition to which Western Rationality traces its lineage. Compare to the Sufi teachings this passage from the *Phaedrus* of Plato: "I have no leisure for such inquiries; shall I tell you why? I must first know myself, as the Delphic inscription says; to be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. And therefore I bid farewell to all [these other questions]; [in these] the common opinion is good enough for me. I want to know not about this, but about myself: am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a diviner and higher destiny?"<sup>58</sup>

While no guaranteed formula is prescribed, this mode of connecting with the Real through personal search has been effective with numerous brilliant men and women who have pursued this objective and found the treasure of their heart's desire. The Sufi philosopher and renowned Muslim scientist Ibn Sina (Avicenna) considered this aspect of Reality and the approach of the Near Ones. Avicenna was one of the most intellectually influential men to the progress of science during his era (980-1037 CE). His scientific methods were logical, deductive, rational, yet he was equally comfortable in the Sufi tradition. His writings indicate that the existence of Absolute Certainty and Union with the Divine is in no way an assault on the value and effectiveness of discursive scientific advancement. Nasr's explanation of Avicenna's conception of prophetic consciousness is illuminating. (Keep in mind that "prophecy" in Islam is considered differently than its counterparts in Christianity; hence the connotations of prophetic consciousness are likely to be different to a Muslim. Avicenna's description makes the usage precise.)

"The prophetic consciousness is the perfection of the human state possessing all of the human faculties in their perfection. The prophet fulfils, more specifically, the three conditions of clarity and lucidity of intelligence, perfection of the imagination, and the power of making external matter serve and obey them [just] as the bodies of people obey commands. If all of these conditions are fulfilled, then the prophet gains the degree of prophetic consciousness, a "sacred intellect," which receives all of [its] knowledge, directly, suddenly and without any previous human instruction, from the Active Intellect and thus comes to know at once all things past, present, and future... The prophet is thereby distinguished from sages... first, because their reception of knowledge from the Divine Intellect is complete and perfect and [the sages'] is partial, and, second, because they bring a law into the world and direct the practical lives of people and societies while the sages... seek after knowledge and inner perfection and have no law-bringing function. [The sages] are therefore subordinated to prophets, although they are themselves the most exalted and worthy of the vast majority of persons who are not endowed with the extremely rare nature which is that of a prophet."<sup>59</sup>

### III. Conclusion

#### 8. The Aim of the Sufis

Within the framework laid out above, we have the context for understanding the Near Ones' conception of reality and therefore aspiration. Since the goal is the Beloved and the aspiration is Union, the necessary knowledge is two: (1) knowledge of oneself and (2) knowledge of the Beloved. Neither is sufficient without the other. Progressing along each requires corresponding progress along the other. Without the blessing of the Divine, there is no progress in the knowledge of oneself. Knowledge of oneself, however, is impossible without knowledge of the creation and one's relation to it, as well as one's development in the discipline of attempting to acquire that knowledge through study. Since knowledge of the Creation is seen as a mirror through which one may comprehend the Qualities of the Almighty, without it, knowledge of the Beloved does not proceed. Hence, the aspiration of the Sufi is concern for and contemplation of both the material and the spiritual, both of which are held together in complete harmony.

From this we can perhaps understand better Rumi's dislike of the way of persons absorbed entirely in contemplation of the material. "You know every auspicious and inauspicious star, but you do not look to see if you yourself are auspicious or dirty-faced." Rumi, [8, p. 128] Thus, to the Near Ones "the spirit of all the sciences is only this, to know who you will be on the Day of Resurrection."<sup>60</sup>

To the Near Ones, Science is that process by which humans learn of the Unattainable and Infinite Completeness of the Single Mind, and attempts to bring their own mind into harmony with the Divine Mind.<sup>61</sup> And thus, we can understand the passage written by Aga Khan III: "Learn to desire the thing that happens and not try to mould the event to your desire. It was silly of the poet Omar [Khayyam] to write:

Ah love, could you and I with Him conspire.  
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire

<sup>58</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, <http://webatomics.com/Classics/Plato/phaedrus.html>

<sup>59</sup> Nasr, [12, p. 42]

<sup>60</sup> Rumi, [8, p.128]

<sup>61</sup> Again, the similarities between the Near Ones and the teachings of the Greek freed-slave Epictetus are remarkably close. cf. *The Discourses*: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/6681/epictetu.htm>

Would we not shatter it to bits, and then  
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire?

"That way lies unhappiness, destruction. It is *not* a sorry scheme of things, and the business, the duty of a human, is to get themselves into harmony with it... I say that you should endeavour to suit your desire to the event and not the event to your desire. If a wall tumbles down and crushes my foot, I must say: 'That is the best thing that could happen to me.' I would counsel my heirs, [therefore,] to seek satisfaction, not in the flux of circumstances, but within themselves; I would have them resolute, self-controlled, independent but not rebellious. Let them seek communion with that Eternal Reality which I call Allah and you call God! For that is the twin problem of existence: to be at once entirely yourself and altogether at one with the Eternal."<sup>62</sup>

## 9. The Sufi concept of Reality

Recalling that neither speech nor writing can capture the Essence of Reality for those that have not experienced it themselves, yet we may say a few things.

To the Sufi, Reality is transcendent, just as the existence and effects of the spiritual are believed to transcend the limited life and effects of the material and physical. Reality is veiled with a perfect veil that hides the *zahir* (outer form, apparent form) from the *batin* (inner meaning, hidden Reality). 'The Hidden World has clouds and rain, of a different kind... made apparent only to the refined, those not deceived by the seeming completeness of the ordinary world.' (Rumi, *Mathnavi*).<sup>63</sup> To the Sufi, Reality is the handiwork of a Masterful Creator. Each of the veils is surpassingly beautiful and alluring<sup>64</sup>, each of the traps spread beautifully and with delights, each of the signs most beautifully hidden among manifest phenomena and scattered among the creation, for He in Whom is Ultimate Reality (*al-Haqq*) is in no hurry to be comprehended, delighting in man's discovery of His Work, and of the testing thereby of his intellect and humility.

Each of us individually must aspire to recognize the illusion and begin the Search, each seeking for their own development a realization of the Real. Anything but the Real can hold no lasting pleasure, such is the distinction between Reality and all else. In the attainment of the former there is peace; in pursuit of the latter, there may be achievement, but this achievement is ultimately ephemeral, passing as it will endlessly through cycles, veil upon veil, for the Creator has no limitations in His creations. Thus seekers moving solely in this direction will ever proceed forward, yet never arrive. The true direction is therefore No Direction, for it is in No Place (or one might equally say Every Place) that the Real is found. "Hardly does the intention of the [seeker] want to stop at what has been revealed to them, then the voices of Reality call out: 'That which you are looking for is still ahead of you!'"<sup>65</sup>

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62 Aga Khan III, [5, p.62]

63 [13, p.43 #66]

64 [13] the story about God's showing the World, then Paradise ... etc.

65 Ibn 'Ata'illah, [9, p.27 #20]

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