

# Self-Construction - Part 1

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## Abstract

This article examines the concept of self-construction as discussed in Islamic ethics. Building on what differentiates the human from the animal, and the immaterial nature of the soul, it embarks upon the question of the nature and, indeed, existence of the soul. This ties in with the purpose of the human being – proximity to God – which is the main impetus behind self-construction. The relationship between self-construction and *wilayah* in the general sense is also discussed. The second part of the article is dedicated to ways in which one might embark upon the journey of self-construction, obstacles to self-construction, and the philosophical process thereof.

**Keywords:** *Islamic ethics, Islamic spirituality, Islamic philosophy, Perfect Man (insan kamil), the soul*

## Introduction

God has created human beings with two dimensions: body and soul (or spirit).<sup>12</sup> The soul is a precious endowment from a higher world,<sup>13</sup> the care for which leads to one's transcendence, and the waste of which leads to one's fall.<sup>14</sup> God commanded believers to take care of this precious substance.<sup>15</sup> Since humans have such a precious dimension, they can construct themselves as they want in proportion to the dispositions and capacities given to them by God. In fact, humans are the only entities trusted by the law of creation to portray their own nature; thus, they can give whatever form they wish to themselves, as opposed to their bodily organs which are to some extent already informed in the womb. Contrary to the psychological states of non-human animals, which are already shaped prior to their birth, human psychological states—referred to as characters or morals—are by and

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<sup>12</sup> See Qur'an 15:29 ('And when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My soul...').

<sup>13</sup> Muslim philosophers maintain that the soul existed in another world prior to the human creation, and is bestowed upon humans after their creation. Suhrawardi says: 'When a humour is generated in this world, which is finer and more moderate than the humour of vegetables and non-rational animals, and is disposed to receive the rational soul from the spiritual world, a soul is emanated from heavenly souls and will join it [i.e. the humour] with a celestial character. The soul existed potentially prior to the body to which it is connected, and exists actually with the body.' See *Majmu'ah Musannafat-i Shaykh-i Ishraq*, vol. 3, p. 421. In his characterization of this substance, Ibn Sina says: 'Descended to you from a higher place a bird [i.e. soul] with honour and transcendence.' See 'Qasidah 'Ayniyah Ibn Sina', in *al-Qasidah al-Muzdawajah fi al-Mantiq*, 1405 AH, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> 'Ali (a) said: 'The soul is a precious substance. He who takes care of it promotes it, and he who wastes it demotes it.' See al-Tamimi, p. 231.

<sup>15</sup> Qur'an 5:105 (O you who have faith! Take care of your own souls. He who strays cannot hurt you if you are guided. To Allah will be the return of you all, whereat He will inform you concerning what you used to do.)

large constructed or shaped after birth by people's own hands and based on the approach they adopt in their this-worldly life. Thus, every entity, even animals, is what it is already created as, whereas humans are whatever they want to be.

Having said that, such a choice cannot be achieved unless one knows oneself. Thus, self-construction depends on a background of self-knowledge. As long as a person does not know his intrinsic potentials that would lead him to ultimate perfection, he cannot guide them in particular ways. To the contrary, he will keep losing part of his potential because of his negligence of his precious treasure, and one day he will come to notice all of a sudden that he has lost a huge wealth that he ignored and wasted. Thus, the cultivation of one's soul, which constitutes one's reality, owes to knowledge of this unique substance, and without knowledge of the potentials inherent therein, one cannot set oneself to foster his soul.

In this essay, we seek to take a brief look at the notion of self-construction and self-refinement (*tabdhib al-nafs*), and after providing a definition of the notion and noting its importance, we will tackle the following issues, which will be rendered within 9 sections:

1. Here we provide a definition of self-construction, and note its importance because of its place in the Qur'an and hadith as well as ethical and mystical schools.
2. Since the notion of human being is central to the issue of self-construction, we devote this section to the reality and dimensions of human beings. We will tackle issues such as rational and transmitted evidence for the existence of the soul, and then we go on to introduce the main dimension of the human being, which is his soul or spirit.

We will end this section with an enumeration of some properties of the main dimension of human beings.

3. Since self-construction has a purpose or end, just like any other volitional action, in this section we discuss the purpose of self-construction, which is proximity to God. We go on to characterize the nature and features of such proximity. We also discuss factors of, and obstacles to, achieving proximity to God. Since spiritual proximity has close ties with the issue of guardianship or alliance with God (*wilayah*), in another part of this section, we discuss the nature of *wilayah* and its relation with proximity to God.
4. A person who seeks to construct himself should first and foremost come up with a rather precise conception of the condition in which he lives, so that one could begin to construct oneself, drawing on an understanding of his weaknesses and imperfections in such a condition. Thus, in this section we consider the present condition of humans, which is that of ignorance and negligence from which we all suffer, and then we discuss factors of negligence from the viewpoint of reason and transmitted tradition. To embark upon self-construction, one needs to be wakeful and be no longer ignorant. Part of this essay is devoted to this notion of wakefulness (*yaqzab*).
5. After one's wakefulness from the dire condition in which one is trapped, it is time to start a serious, calculated, and persistent journey to fulfil the purpose of creation. In this section, we provide a picture of how one should move from the undesired status quo to a non-existent desired condition, where the first step is wakefulness. We briefly argue that such a transition comes from one's volitional

actions. With faith in God and doing righteous actions, one can move from his present undesired condition.

6. The change of this condition owes to the principle of the possibility of the trainability and moral changeability of the soul. Thus, in this section, we consider the controversial issue of the trainability of the soul, providing arguments in favour of its trainability. We also introduce some methods of training the soul, including renunciation of this world, asceticism, and servitudinal love of God.
7. In order for the soul to be trained, there need to be special capacities within the human being. In this section, we consider such capacities and potentialities.
8. Since extant capacities do not suffice in the way of self-construction, and it is also required to obviate obstacles and barriers on this way, in this section we discuss some obstacles to self-construction, including self-love, habituation to nature, and habits.
9. The last section of this essay is concerned with how the soul comes to adopt moral virtues and vices. That is to say, this section is devoted to the philosophical process of self-construction.

### **1. Definition of self-construction and its importance**

In Qur'anic sources, hadith, and the work of Muslim mystics and ethicists, self-construction is usually referred to as *tahdhib* (refinement) and *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the self). Although these concepts are not synonymous, we can nevertheless look for components of self-construction within them.

*Tabdhib* literally means ‘refinement’, ‘correction’, and ‘purification’, and a *mubadhdhab* person is one who is free of moral flaws and enjoys good attributes (al-Farahidi 1410 AH: vol. 4, p. 40; Ibn Manzur n.d.: vol. 1, p. 782). *Tazkiyah* means the purification of one’s soul from blameworthy moral characteristics grounded in desire for food, words, anger, jealousy, and the like (al-Turayhi 1375 HS: vol. 1, p. 203). *Tazkiyah* literally means purification; that is, the cleansing of vices and impurities. *Tazkiyah* can include the purification of corrupt beliefs such as polytheism and disbelief, vicious habits such as arrogance and stinginess, as well as vicious or shameful deeds such as killing the innocent, adultery, and wine-drinking (Tabataba’i 1417 AH: vol. 1, p. 333). The common core of the two concepts above can be said to consist of the cleansing of moral flaws which obstruct the flourishing of one’s spiritual dispositions.

In mysticism, self-refinement is a station of the spiritual journey which consists of the transformation of one’s blameworthy morals into praiseworthy ones, or a separation of the commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammarah*, or the part of the self that commands wrongdoing) from Satan (Ansari 1417 AH: p. 71). ‘Self-construction’ here means to cleanse one’s soul of moral flaws and decorate it with good moral characters. Therefore, if as put in these mystical terms, the soul’s blameworthy moral characteristics are transformed into praiseworthy moral characteristics, then the goal of self-construction in question here will be attained. In other words, self-refinement or self-construction is intended to inform and properly direct one’s faculties and internal motives so as to achieve the desired perfection, because, with self-construction and proper exploitation of the powers God has bestowed upon us, our perfection-seeking innate nature (*fitrah*) can achieve the perfection intended for our creation.

The importance of self-construction is obvious, however. For the end of self-construction is for human potential to flourish, to achieve happiness and perfection, and finally to succeed in achieving proximity to God. Every rational person who believes in his internal powers finds himself disposed to growth and perfection, and sees human salvation and happiness as depending on his right beliefs as well as good deeds and habits. He will judge that the only thing to which one should devote his whole life is to try to achieve salvation, that is, the attempt at self-construction. No person would consciously favour the animal stage over the human stage, and when one engulfs oneself in misguidance and misery, it is merely due to his negligence and being affected by personal desires. Otherwise, a person who believes in his own power to find perfection and sees oneself as a creature with particular characteristics and potentials will always try to actualize his potentials and will do his best to elevate himself to the peak of perfection he deserves.

## **2. The nature of the human and its dimensions**

In a standard categorization, things in the world are divided into three main categories: inanimate things, plants, and animals. What distinguishes humans from other animals is the intellect or reason given to them by God. Growth and reproduction in plants, consciousness and cognition in animals, and intellection in humans are all caused by a crucial factor: life,<sup>16</sup> which originates from the soul (or spirit).

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<sup>16</sup> In Arabic, *hayat*, comes from *hayy* (living); see *Lisan al-'Arab*, vol. 14, p. 211. Some people have pointed out that the word *hayat* is used in the Qur'an to mean a variety of things, including the force grounding the growth of plants and animals, the sensing power, intellectual power, eternal afterlife, and God's particular life; see *Mufradat Alfaz al-Qur'an*, pp. 268-269. However, it is

The soul as an origin of life inheres in plants, non-human animals, and humans, and has different degrees of intensity. The stronger the soul is, the stronger life the thing will enjoy. On this picture of living things, humans are composites of bodies and souls (or spirits). The human body and soul are deemed two distinct, yet interacting, dimensions. However, which of these two dimensions is fundamental? That is, can a human exist without one of these two dimensions?

Before we embark on an introduction of the fundamental dimension of the human being, we need to prove the existence of the soul (or spirit), which is the origin of life in humans. Muslim philosophers have presented a number of arguments for the existence of souls, some of which will be pointed out below.

*The first argument.* Some physical objects have features such as nutrition, growth, reproduction, sensation, volitional movement, conception of universals, and inference of facts, none of which arises from their physical dimension. Otherwise, they would exist in every physical object. Thus, we can conclude that there is a principle within physical objects other than their physical dimension that originates such activities (Ibn Sina, 1404: vol. 2, p. 5). Now we can formulate the argument concerning humans as follows:

- (1) Humans have particular features such as the conception of universals and inference,

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difficult to define the nature of life, and so far no one has been able to provide a comprehensive definition thereof. Some people who sought to offer a definition have pointed indeed to some external features of life, rather than pinpointing its reality. Thus, what is mentioned does not go beyond an explication of terms; see *al-Shifa' (al-Tabi'iyat)*, vol. 2, 'al-Nafs', p. 5.



- (2) If such features were originated in the physical dimension of humans, then every other physical object could possess these features qua physical objects,
- (3) No physical object has these features qua physical objects.

Therefore, these features do not originate from the physical dimension of humans. If these features do not arise from the physical dimension of humans, then it seems that humans need to have non-physical dimensions from which these features arise. This non-physical dimension can be referred to as a 'soul.'

*The second argument.* In the first *tanbih* (reminder) of the third *namat* (chapter) of his *al-Isharat wa at-Tanbihat*, Ibn Sina tries to hint at the existence of the human soul and its distinction from the body by noting certain self-evident facts. In fact, in this *namat*, he does not present an argument to prove the existence of the human soul. Instead, he tries to suggest a way in which one can intuit one's own soul. If one can note one's own soul, then it will show that there is a soul one can take note of. Thus, Ibn Sina calls the section a *tanbih* (reminder), because in his view, one already knows that the soul exists, but since one is oblivious to the fact, he needs a reminder that provides knowledge of one's knowledge, rather than knowledge of something unknown.

Here is how Ibn Sina reminds us of the existence of the human soul: suppose that your whole body is healthy and perfect, your eyes are closed, your fingers are wide open, your arms and legs are outstretched, in an environment with the same temperature as that of your body, in a peaceful noiseless environment, where you do not hang from somewhere, you do not lean on anything, you do not stand on anything, and you are created all at once. At this moment, the only thing which you are conscious of is the pure reality of your self; you

are unconscious of anything else. Since the external senses are disconnected from outside and the inside, and since one is created at once and there is no preceding memory to preoccupy the mind, what one perceives at this moment is the existence of the soul via intuitive knowledge by presence (Ibn Sina 1375 HS: p. 80).

As we can see, a scenario is imagined here in which one has no sensory perception of the external world, whereas he finds that he enjoys a certain consciousness of his own identity. It might be said that such self-consciousness, which is referred to as one's knowledge of one's soul by presence, is generated by the soul.

*The third argument.* The human always refers to himself as 'I' and 'self.' What she refers to as 'I' is an entity other than her body and other physical things that might change, perish, and be divided. Sometimes one is ignorant of one's body parts or the whole body, but one is never ignorant of his or her self. Such self-consciousness or self-awareness expresses the reality of one's soul, to which one refers as 'I.' 'Self-consciousness' is a feature that cannot be shown to exist in matter and material features. If an entity is self-conscious and can objectify itself by thinking of itself, it will turn out that it is fundamentally different and distinct from material bodies. Thus, with respect to humans, we conclude that an immaterial force or soul accompanies their material body, which can think of itself (al-Tusi 1389: p. 21).

The above arguments might seem sufficiently convincing for many people. They might wonder what the Qur'anic view of the soul is, and thus, in what follows we provide a sketch of the Qur'anic view of the matter. Qur'anic verses explicitly or implicitly imply that, in addition to body, there is another non-physical dimension to the human being (to which Muslim scholars refer as 'soul'). The Qur'an says about how

wrongdoers die: ‘And if you could but see when the wrongdoers are in the overwhelming pangs of death while the angels extend their hands, [saying], “Discharge your souls!”’ (6:93)

The verse suggests that at the time of death, a certain phenomenon takes place: the discharge or exit of souls so that their records of actions are reckoned on the day of reward and punishment. In other words, there is a soul that is separated from the body at the time of death, or is taken by God, so to speak.

Moreover, in verses concerning the creation of Adam, the Qur’an says:

And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, ‘I will create a human being out of clay from an altered black mud. And when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My soul, then fall down to him in prostration.’ (15:93)

This verse hints that the creation of Adam’s soul or spirit was as something separate from his body. God first created the human body in the best possible way, and then blew His soul in it.

In any case, there are many Qur’anic verses implying the existence of the human spirit (or soul) that leave no doubt over the matter.

But which of the two dimensions, the soul or the body, are fundamental to human beings?

### **2.1. The fundamental dimension of humans**

The Qur’an briefly introduces humans as entities with two dimensions: body and soul. It assigns two stages of the human existence: the stage of body which possesses material features, just like any other material

object, and the stage of spirit at which the body comes to have life. From a Qur'anic viewpoint, once the spirit is given to the human body, the human value will no longer be comparable to anything else—it will become the most superior entity in this world. When the Qur'an describes the stages of the bodily creation of humans, it refers to the bestowal of a spirit upon the human body as a 'new creation' with which the human creation is accomplished: 'then We developed him into another creation. So blessed is Allah, the best of creators' (23:14). It is in virtue of this new creation that angels prostrated to the human at the command of God: 'And when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My soul, then fall down to him in prostration' (15:29).<sup>17</sup>

Two ideas can be gleaned from these two verses: first, the human has a spirit (or soul) over and above the body, and the nature of the spirit (or the soul) is different from the body; and second, humans are dignified and characterized as the most honoured creatures in virtue of their spirits; otherwise, the human body does not deserve to be prostrated to by angels on its own.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the fact that angels prostrate to the human is grounded in his possession of a dimension which is free of matter and material qualities. The immateriality and the survival of the

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<sup>17</sup>In his *al-Mizan*, 'Allamah Tabataba'i interprets the spirit in this verse as the human soul versus the human body; see Tabataba'i 1374 HS: vol. 12, p. 154.

<sup>18</sup>When the Qur'an says that God has blown His spirit into the human, it does not mean that God has donated part of His spirit to the human. It means, instead, that the human spirit is highly honoured, and thus God has attributed it to Himself and said: 'When I blow into it from My spirit, prostrate to him.' The attribution of the human spirit to God is an expression of the superiority of the human soul, just as someone says about someone he loves: 'She is my soul.'

soul is an accepted principle of the Islamic ethical system.<sup>19</sup> On this principle, the human has an immaterial soul over and above the body, which can survive the death of the body; that is, the human is not exhausted by the material body. Instead, he has a nature that survives for eternity. Having accepted this principle, the human life comes to have an infinite dimension. Thus, humans should not restrict the consequences of their deeds to the narrow domain of the material life. They should take into account the effects of their deeds on their eternal happiness and misery as well.

## **2.2. Features of the fundamental dimension of humans**

From a philosophical viewpoint, al-Fakhr al-Razi takes properties of the human soul to consist of foresight, entertaining universal meanings, knowledge and discovery of the unknown and attainment of new information, remembrance and analysis of the past, theoretical reasoning, and practical reasoning (al-Fakhr al-Razi 1411 AH: vol. 2, p. 412). Furthermore, two other basic components of the structure of the fundamental human dimension should also be taken into account: free will or volition, and the power to do things. These features distinguish humans from other animals and give him a privileged position in the world. Non-human animals can never invent or plan their futures. They cannot entertain universal meanings and are unable to discover the unknown or attain knowledge. They cannot analyse past events of their own or others' lives, learn lessons from the past, and accordingly devise

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<sup>19</sup> Many arguments have been presented for the immateriality of the soul, including the following: When I contemplate myself I find that I as a perceiving subject am a simple indivisible entity that cannot be divided into two halves. However, the main feature of physical or material objects is their divisibility, which cannot be found in our spirit or soul. Therefore, the soul is immaterial; otherwise it would have the most basic material quality; that is, divisibility. See Mutahhari 1387 HS: vol. 6, p. 119.

a proper plan for their lives. Reason, both theoretical and practical, is the only thing endowed to humans and angels.

### **3. Divine proximity, the ultimate goal of self-construction**

Obviously, the human life is superior to that of other animals because of the aforementioned properties. Thus, he deserves a superior place and the goal of his creation is different from that of other creatures. Now we should see God's goal of the human creation. We need to discuss the philosophy of the human creation, and the place he can have and attain in the world.

If we are to specify the ideal human condition, the best alternative will be to achieve human perfection. If the ultimate human end is to achieve perfection, then it seems that humans are provided with, or at least can obtain, required means and motives to achieve this end. For it is obvious that, without sufficient motivation, humans cannot take a step towards their end. Such motivation is articulated by Muslim scholars as follows: 'The human innately seeks perfection.' The pursuit of perfection (and happiness) is an innate and intrinsic human tendency. In one sense, all human endeavours are aimed at the satisfaction of this tendency; that is, terminating the flaws and achieving the perfection. There is, nevertheless, no consensus over whether the pursuit of happiness and perfection is an authentic and independent tendency or an ancillary tendency arising from another tendency such as self-love, although the former view is predominant.

In different philosophical and religious views, different accounts of perfection have been offered. Materialist and non-materialist views, particularly religious views, provide different accounts of perfection.

In any case, there is no doubt that all living things, particularly humans, have great potentials that are actualized when conditions are right, and thus they come to possess things they used to lack, or they achieve perfection, so to speak. The human free will and consciousness enable humans to actualize their potentials in different ways from those in which other organic entities actualize their potentials. By 'perfection' here we mean an existential attribute that represents a real possession in an entity in comparison to another entity, and if a perfect entity has consciousness, it will take pleasure in achieving its perfection.

The main issue, however, is what true perfection is, and the actualization of which potential constitutes human perfection. No doubt, with respect to human desires and potentials, the actualization of material and animal desires should not count as a human perfection, because these desires are shared by humans and animals, and the flourishing and satisfaction of these potentials amount to human perfection only in his animal dimension. The humanness of a human is actualized only when human potentials concerning insights and tendencies<sup>20</sup> are aimed at his true perfection.

But what is the desired condition and the true perfection to which humans ought to direct their potentials and which they should try to achieve?

In response to this question, it should be noted that goals pursued by the human in the course of his life are not of the same degree or significance. Some of these goals are preliminary, instrumental, and preparatory for higher goals, and some others count as ultimate and fundamental goals, and yet others are intermediary between

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<sup>20</sup> That is, theoretical and practical reasons.

preliminary and ultimate goals. By ‘ultimate human goal and perfection’, we mean the point beyond which no higher perfection is conceivable for human beings; that is, the last step of the human progress at which all his endeavours are aimed. The Qur’an refers to this ultimate point as *fawz* (attainment), *falah* (success), and *sa‘adah* (happiness), saying: ‘He will [then] amend for you your deeds and forgive you your sins. And whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger has certainly attained a great attainment’ (31:71), ‘Those are upon [right] guidance from their Lord, and it is those who are the successful’ (2:5), and ‘And as for those who were [destined to be] prosperous, they will be in Paradise’ (11:10).

The highest instance of human perfection, from an Islamic point of view, is divine proximity. Since perfection is valuable and the ultimate perfection – that is, divine proximity – is the most valuable human perfection, everything that helps humans to arrive at divine proximity will be valuable. We pointed out that the true human happiness is proximity to the Exalted God, which can be achieved via worship and humbleness before God. The Qur’an takes the ultimate human perfection to consist of proximity to God, for which all physical and spiritual human perfections are preparatory, and in virtue of which humans are humans. Acquisition of perfection can help the human enjoy infinite pleasures. The highest, the purest, the widest, and the most enduring pleasure can be achieved through divine proximity. In other words, the divine proximity and the highest type of pleasure can be said to be concomitant.

### **3.1. The nature and features of divine proximity**



The meaning of proximity or closeness<sup>21</sup> is obvious when it applies to material objects. When we say that an object, A, is close to another object, B, it means that there is not much spatial distance between the two. Despite the fact that spatial closeness suggests a relativity of some sort, it is more or less obvious what it means in its ordinary uses. In one sense, spatial closeness is a relation between two objects, where this is a symmetrical and non-transitive relation: it is symmetrical because when an object, A, is close to an object, B, then B is also close to A, and it is non-transitive because when A is close to B, and B is close to C, it does not entail that A is close to C. This common use of closeness when applied to spatial entities should be contrasted to its less common use when applied to temporal entities. When we talk about temporal closeness of two events, it means that there is little temporal distance between the two.

However, the meaning of closeness or proximity is not as obvious when applied to non-material objects. Notwithstanding this, it should not be thought that such a use is not correct, because it is very common in ordinary language, and people communicate with each other in this way. For example, it is common to say, 'I have close friendship with him.' Such use of closeness cannot be spatial or temporal. In this usage, the word 'closeness' expresses one's intimacy to and affection for someone. The meaning of closeness or proximity we have in mind here is of this latter type. That is to say, when we talk about proximity to God, we do not have spatial and temporal proximity in mind, because God is not a material being which exists in space and is limited to time, and it is not as though people with a certain distance to a spatial or temporal point are close to God. On the other hand, as discussed before, the dimension of humans that has the potential to obtain

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<sup>21</sup> Here we use 'closeness' and 'proximity' as interchangeable.

divine proximity is not the human material self. Therefore, the main idea behind the spiritual meaning of proximity is the proximity of two immaterial beings to one another.

In this section, we seek to provide a philosophical analysis of the notion of spiritual proximity and proximate people, and then in the next section, we will be concerned with Qur'anic verses and hadith regarding divine proximity. As a preliminary, we introduce two major differences between spiritual proximity and spatiotemporal proximity. The first difference, as pointed out above, is that in spiritual proximity, two immaterial beings have a particular relationship with one another. That is to say, the relation of proximity holds between two immaterial beings, whereas in spatiotemporal proximity, the two parties of the relation are material beings. The second difference is that, in spiritual proximity, the relation between the two immaterial beings is not necessarily symmetrical. Instead, it can be imagined that A is close to B, while B is not close to A. It should be noted that proximity is not the only spiritual relation that is non-symmetrical. Another non-symmetrical spiritual relation is love. It is possible for person A to love person B, while B does not love A. According to Qur'anic verses and hadith, God is close to all His servants, but it is not the case that all His servants are close to Him. That is to say, whereas God is close to all people, some people are at a distance from God. Therefore, the relation of spiritual proximity is not necessarily symmetrical.

It is extremely difficult to offer a precise, comprehensive, and exclusive definition of the notion of spiritual proximity. Thus, we begin with instances of people who are close to God (an extensional definition); that is, people of the highest degrees of divine proximity, so as to obtain a better understanding of the notion of spiritual proximity.

A person is close to God when he obtains perfect knowledge of, and thus a full-fledged love for, God, with the exertion of his own decisive will.

A number of points about this definition are in order:

(a) This extensional definition of spiritual proximity suggests that any person who fully knows and thus loves God in accordance to his own will counts as close to God. Of course, this definition does not explicate the concept of spiritual love, but at least it extensionally specifies who counts as close to God. Given this definition, it is obvious that there is a difference between the concept of will, knowledge, and love, on the one hand, and spiritual proximity, on the other. However, we can draw on these three concepts to specify instances of people who might count as close to God, just as we can specify instances of people in love in terms of certain characteristics, without being able to offer a definition of the concept of love.

(b) One might object that for a person to obtain divine proximity, he should, in addition to the above three properties, have numerous other praiseworthy moral characteristics, such as justice, piety, good temper, and humbleness. If this is the case, then the three characteristics of will, knowledge, and love will not suffice for an extensional definition of proximity to God. In other words, there might be a person who has all these three characteristics, but who is still not close to God because he lacks other moral characteristics such as humbleness.

In response, we can say that by will, knowledge, and love, which are taken by this definition to be coextensive with the perfect and ultimate nature of divine proximity, we mean a perfect and full-fledged type of these characteristics that entails the other virtues as well. In fact, higher degrees of these three characteristics are obtained when one develops

pure servitude, knowledge of monotheism by presence, and higher moral honours, and is free of moral vices. It is inconceivable for a person to have the highest degree of these fundamental characteristics, and yet lack some of the praiseworthy moral attributes, such as humbleness.

(c) These three characteristics are singled out because, firstly, the human will has a crucial role in his perfection, such that from an Islamic viewpoint, the human should prefer the good over the bad by his own will. Therefore, it is not possible for a human to attain divine proximity without having preferred it with his own will and without having endeavoured and struggled for it. Secondly, knowledge is the most central concept in this definition. In this case, knowledge is not a matter of theory or acquisition; rather it is a matter of inspiration and presence whose core is monotheism. Such knowledge is like a sun that rises in the human heart, leaving no veil between him and God. He finds the manifestation of divine names and attributes in his existence, as well as other signs of being, feeling their reality with his own heart. Once one develops 'knowledge by presence' of divine perfection and beauty via his own existence as well as other beings, one develops love for it as well, and the more perfect one's knowledge is, the stronger one's love will be. In what follows we will talk more about the existential states of people who are close to God.

It is difficult to offer a conceptual definition of spiritual proximity, because it is solely discoverable by knowledge by presence, rather than acquired knowledge, and those who attain such proximity are unable to describe it because of its transcendence, just like a mathematician who cannot describe the pleasure of understanding an abstruse mathematical problem to a layperson. Thus, it is natural for the nature of a spiritual proximity to be vague and mysterious to those who have

not attained such degrees of proximity. However, we try to outline certain points concerning the nature of spiritual proximity according to Qur'anic verses and hadith so as to grasp a picture of this concept.

### 3.2. Spiritual proximity in Qur'anic verses and hadith

God's closeness to his servants means his sovereignty over them (Tabataba'i 1417: vol. 19, p. 121). Since all creatures, including humans, are possessed by God, God encompasses them, and as put by the Qur'an, God is close to them.<sup>22</sup> However, the proximity referred to as spiritual proximity is the human proximity to God. Humans can acquire spiritual closeness in practices they perform with the intention of proximity. Such proximity is a matter of degrees, just as existence is graded. In fact, every creature that takes a step in the way of its predestined perfection and arrives at a stage of its perfection travels a path to divine proximity. To the extent that a person exemplifies divine attributes, he ascends to divine proximity,<sup>23</sup> until he arrives at the stage of those who are closest to God.<sup>24</sup> It is not possible to arrive at this stage except by exemplifying all divine attributes. The prophet of Islam, Muhammad (peace be upon him and his family), was a person who perfectly manifested all divine attributes. Not only is he at the stage of

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<sup>22</sup> Qur'an 2:186 ('And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me - indeed I am near').

<sup>23</sup> According to Raghīb in his *al-Mufradat*, a person's closeness to God is indeed his exemplification of attributes that can be rightly attributed to God as well, although their attribution to humans is not of the same degree as that of their attribution of God. These attributes include wisdom, omniscience, mercy, and needlessness. A person can develop these attributes to the extent of human capacity by avoiding ignorance, anger, and physical needs; see al-Raghīb 1378 HS: pp. 664-665.

<sup>24</sup> Like a drop of water joining the sea. Shabistari describes divine proximity as a drop joining the sea and reunion with the true end and exemplification of divine attributes; see Sajjadi 1373 HS, vol. 3, p. 1476.

proximity to God, but he is the closest person to God. In general, the perfect man<sup>25</sup> (and the rightful successor of God on the earth) is proximate to God.

### **Factors of and obstacles to spiritual love in the Qur'anic view**

From a Qur'anic view, the main factor helping one to attain divine proximity is faith. If we consider Qur'anic verses regarding important factors of divine proximity and emulation of God, it will be obvious that the main factor is true faith pointed out in verse 4 of Surah al-Anfal. Thus, other factors mentioned in other verses are indeed instances of faith, including piety (3:15, 5:27), charity (2:254), patience (2:153, 103:3, et al.), trust in God (8:61, et al.), sacrifice (59:9), alertness to resurrection (73:17 and 19), prayer (8:3-4), jihad (5:35), and so on. These cases can indeed be summarized as faith and righteous actions with

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<sup>25</sup> *Al-insan al-kamil*: This is a mystical term referring to a person who perfectly manifests divine attributes. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive definition of the Perfect Man because different views have been propounded about it throughout history. Notwithstanding this, given the views in the work of mystics, it might be said that a Perfect Man is a person who exemplifies divine morals, is the cause of the creation and survival of the world, instantiates the comprehensive name of Allah, is the intermediary between God and people, is an uncontested representative of God whose knowledge of religion, the mystical path, and the truth is apodictic, and who has good speech, good deeds, and good morals. In both his interior and exterior, he is the guide of people, is aware of their psychological diseases, and can heal them. He is created by God, but is like God. The divine attributes and morals he exemplifies are on behalf of God. He arrived at this stage because he became essentially identical to God.

which one obtains a good life<sup>26</sup> and attains proximity to God.<sup>27</sup> As to obstacles to divine proximity, we can point out all improper beliefs in the cognitive domain, blameworthy desires in the domain of tendency, and wrong deeds in the domain of behaviours (both external and internal), which are all prohibited by the Qur'an. Thus, the Qur'an says that to turn one's back to God's signs is an obstacle to obtaining divine proximity and higher spiritual positions and divine perfections (7:175-176). Other obstacles to divine proximity include obeying Satan (7:175-176) or following one's personal desires (7:176), transgression (83:12 and 15), love of this world (7:176), polytheism (39:3), and sins (83:14-15).

All these cases clearly show that if a person succeeds in acquiring proper knowledge, proper tendencies, and praiseworthy deeds in the three domains of insight, tendency, and behaviour, then he is moving on the right path towards spiritual proximity. As pointed out earlier, to stay on this path requires certain conditions in these three domains; the lack of fulfilment of one can prevent the person from arriving at spiritual proximity. There have been people who stepped on this right path for a while but failed to stay on it throughout their life because of satanic temptations and because of giving in to their personal desires. According to the Qur'an, people are always in jeopardy, and thus they should trust in God; otherwise, they will lose the way towards proximity to perfection, just as Balaam failed to arrive at the position of proximity to God because of satanic temptations, notwithstanding his remarkable spiritual progress (7:175-176) (Mansuri, 1392 HS).

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<sup>26</sup> *Al-hayat al-tayyibah* is an actual life of good-doing believers come to have as a result of their faith and righteous actions.

<sup>27</sup> Qur'an 34:37 ('And it is not your wealth or your children that bring you nearer to Us in position, but it is [by being] one who has believed and done righteousness').

Thus, the Qur'an refers to prophets as people who exemplified divine attributes in light of their proper and firm beliefs and righteous actions, and as a result of their servitude and worship, they arrived at divine proximity.<sup>28</sup> The closest people are the highest rank of people who achieve happiness, as pointed out by the Qur'an: 'And the Foremost Ones are the foremost ones, they are the ones brought near [to Allah]' (56:10-11). Obviously, this position cannot be obtained by anyone except through servitude to the fullest, as the Qur'an says: 'Never would the Messiah disdain to be a servant of Allah, nor would the angels near [to Him]' (4:172). The main and final purpose of worship and religious ritual is to display one's servitude. Servitude is a relation between a servant (that is, a believer) and his master (that is, God). The relation is graded or a matter of degrees, and it can be accounted for in terms of compliance. The more honest, the deeper, and the more perfect one is in his compliance with God, the better one is in servitude. Servitude is not accomplished unless the servant purely complies with God in his actions (both mental and bodily), subjecting his will and action to the will of his master, wanting and doing nothing except in agreement with what his master wants, and this is to enter into alliance (*wilayah*) with God. Such people are allies of God (Tabataba'i 1374 HS: vol. 19, pp. 207-208).

To the extent of one's servitude, that is, compliance with the Master's will, one will be closer to Him. Thus, servitude and proximity to God are two sides of the same coin. Having attained all stages of divine proximity, one arrives at the stage of *wilayah*. Before we tackle the

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<sup>28</sup> In an interpretation of the verse, 'And the forerunners, the forerunners, they are the closest,' the Prophet said that the forerunners are messengers of God and his most cherished creatures; see al-Kulayni 1362 HS, vol. 1, p. 271. Moreover, God refers to Jesus Christ as one of the closest people to Him (4:172).



relation between proximity and *wilayah*, we need to talk about *wilayah* and its types.

*Wilayah* literally means the adjacency of two things such that there is no distance between them. Thus, it means contiguity and proximity between two things, be they spiritual or material. *Wilayah* as proximity is of two types: conventional and genuine.

1. Conventional proximity. The relation of conventional proximity is symmetrical; that is, if a person is close to a wall, then the wall is close to him, and whatever judgement is made regarding one direction applies to the other as well. One party might have an attribute and the other might lack it. Spatial proximity and distance are of this type; that is, they are symmetrical.

2. Genuine proximity, which is also referred to as 'illuminative relation' (*al-idafah al-ishraqiyyah*), depends on the object of relation; that is, the object of relation appears, and then the relation appears, and in light of the relation, the subject of the relation comes to be, as in the sun and its light, which is a one-way relation: the sun emits light, and with the appearance of light, the light comes to exist and holds a relationship to the sun. Another such example is the relationship of knowledge with the soul: the soul creates a form within itself via illumination, and once it creates it, the subject of relation (that is, knowledge) comes to have a relationship to the soul. Thus, in an illuminative relation, what is fundamental is the object of the relation (such as the sun and the soul), and the subject of the relation (such as light and knowledge) is subsidiary to the relation, and comes to exist thanks to the relation.

Alliance with, and proximity to, God is a genuine alliance which is referred to as Divine guardianship as well. On part of God, closeness holds all the time; God is equally close to believers and disbelievers:

‘and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein’ (50:16). However, on part of the humans, proximity might not hold. In order for the human proximity to God to hold, he is required to fulfil certain conditions and remove certain obstacles, to which we will turn in what follows.

#### PROXIMITY AND ALLIANCE

When one achieves alliance with, and proximity to, God as a result of his endeavours, he will come to have a kind of *wilayah* (guardianship) of his own, which is referred to as ‘existential guardianship.’<sup>29</sup> This is a guardianship and manipulation of things in the external world, just as the human soul has guardianship over its internal faculties. Every person has guardianship over his cognitive faculties, such as estimative and imaginative powers, as well as his motive faculties, such as lust and anger. He also has guardianship over his healthy body parts; for example, if one wants to look, his eyes will obey; if he wants to hear, his ears will listen; and if he wants something to be picked up, his hands will obey. Of course, this is the case insofar as these body parts are not dysfunctional (Jawadi Amuli 1380 HS: p. 123).

Such power to manipulate or intervene in the existential world, which is acquired by some people as a result of the servitude and worship of God, is what is known as ‘existential guardianship’. Thus, as a result of servitude one reaches a stage at which one is given by God a power he lacked before that stage. With obedience of God, one can achieve more perfection; that is, more existential perfection, more knowledge and power, more penetrating will, and eternal life. In this case, one can

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<sup>29</sup> As a result of servitude, worship, and perfection, God’s servants—the prophets, Imams, or anyone else—can achieve a stage at which they come to have dominion over the external world, which is known as existential guardianship; see Khatami 1370 HS: p. 227.

surpass the angels and enjoy human perfections. From the standpoint of monotheism, there is no problem if there are intermediaries for the divine grace. In fact, this is made explicit in the Qur'an, as in the story of Jesus.<sup>30</sup> However, the limits of the guardianship of these people cannot be precisely specified. Qur'anic evidence shows that people can achieve a position in which their will dominates the world (Mutahhari 1388 HS: vol. 3, p. 287).

The dominance of the will of a close person who obtains the position of guardianship is portrayed in a hadith known as *qurb al-nawafil* (proximity of the supererogatory), which is cited in different phrases in Shi'a and Sunni sources.<sup>31</sup> In this sacred hadith, God says:

No servant has sought proximity to Me by an action that is more favoured by Me than obligations. By doing supererogatory prayers, the servant becomes so proximate to Me that I love him. When I love him, I become his ear with which he hears and his eyes with which he sees and his tongue with which he talks and his hands with which he strikes. Whenever he calls Me I answer, and whatever he asks Me for, I give him.

According to this hadith, as a result of the servant's obedience of God, he comes to have an internal power with which he can hear voices that cannot be ordinarily heard, and see things that cannot be seen by ordinary eyes. That God becomes his eyes and ears means that, in light of the divine power, his eyes become sharper, his ears become keener, and his power becomes more extensive.

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<sup>30</sup> Jesus was an intermediary for God's grace in healing diseases and the like, as pointed out in verses such as 3:49 and 5:110.

<sup>31</sup> For example, see al-Bukhari, n.d., vol. 7, p. 190; al-Barqi 1371 HS: vol. 1, p. 292, al-Kulayni 1362 HS: vol. 2, p. 352, al-Tabarani, n.d.: vol. 8, p. 222.

To the contrary, those who abandon faith and obey Satan are allies and under the guardianship of Satan, as the Qur'an says: 'Indeed, We have made the devils allies to those who do not believe' (7:27). Such people suffer a great loss: 'And whoever takes Satan as an ally instead of Allah has certainly sustained a clear loss' (4:119). The devil approaches these people and turns them into agents of his vicious plans. 'Ali (peace be upon him) says about those who disobey God and accept the alliance and guardianship of Satan:

They have made Satan the master of their affairs, and he has taken them as partners. He has laid eggs and hatched them in their bosoms. He creeps and crawls in their laps. He sees through their eyes and speaks with their tongues. In this way he has led them to sinfulness and adorned for them foul things like the action of one whom Satan has made partner in his domain and speaks untruth through his tongue.( al-Radi 1414 AH: p. 53)

Such people become Satan's eyes and tongues. The devil does its deeds with their eyes and tongues so as to disseminate his vicious, false, and ugly message to people. Such a vicious liar is tainted by serving as the devil's successor, and all his cognitive dogmas and practical decisions are formed in accordance with the motives of the devil (Jawadi Amuli 1387 HS: vol. 3, p. 133). However, people who obtain the servitude of God cannot be dominated by Satan, as the Qur'an addresses Satan by saying: 'Indeed, My servants – no authority will you have over them' (15:42).

In hadith from the Infallibles (that is, the Prophet and Imams), some factors leading to spiritual proximity and alliance (or guardianship) are pointed out as follows:

1. Faith. As in the Qur'an, hadith also point out faith as the most important factor leading to divine proximity, in light of which other factors can contribute to such proximity. Thus, good faith<sup>32</sup> makes the believer closer to God. 'Ali (peace be upon him) says: 'The closest of all people to God is one whose faith is superior to that of others.' (see al-Tamimi 1366 HS: p. 87)

2. Patience. To achieve divine proximity, one is required to be patient and firm on the path of servitude. Patience culminates in divine proximity. 'Ali (peace be upon him) said: 'He who is patient for the sake of God will be reunited with Him.' (See al-Majlisi, n.d.: vol. 68, p. 95)

3. Pure intentions. No matter how much one performs religious deeds, one will not achieve proximity to God unless one's deeds are done with pure intentions, rather than hypocrisy and pretence. Thus, having pure intentions is emphasized as a factor leading to divine proximity. 'Ali (a) said: 'A servant's pure intention makes him close to the Exalted God.' (See al-Tamimi 1366 HS, p. 93)

4. Humbleness. Arrogance is the root of many sins, such as insulting others, neglecting other people's rights, and the like, each of which can obstruct divine proximity, whereas humbleness towards God and His servants can make the person close to God, as Imam al-Sadiq said: 'God revealed to David the Prophet, "O David! Just as the humble are the closest people to God, the arrogant are the farthest people from God."' (al-Majlisi, n.d.: vol. 72, p. 132) Angels elevate people who are humble towards God to the stage of divine proximity, and obstruct the arrogant from achieving divine proximity: 'In the sky, two angels are appointed for servants (of God); he who acts humbly will be elevated by the two

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<sup>32</sup> That is, faith with strong knowledge and persistent action.

angels, and he who acts arrogantly will be lowered by them.’ (al-Kulayni 1362 HS: vol. 2, p. 122)

5. The night prayer and vigilance. To perform supererogatory acts is of high significance in spiritual journeys. It is the spiritual traveller’s duty to do obligatory acts which lead to divine proximity, in addition to its divine rewards. However, a higher stage of divine proximity or the praised position (*al-maqam al-mahmud*) can be gained by the spiritual traveller through supererogatory acts. This is analogous to certain ordinary situations as well. When someone is employed for a job, then if he fulfils the requirements, he will not be blamed and will be entitled to his wages. However, what leads to further closeness and popularity is to go beyond one’s requirements. The night prayer is a form of worship that goes beyond one’s obligations, illuminates one’s heart with divine light, and takes him to the stage of divine proximity. According to another hadith, divine proximity depends on vigilance: ‘Reunion with the Honoured God is a journey that cannot be travelled except with vigilance.’ (al-Majlisi, *n.d.*: vol. 75, p. 380)

6. Good temper. Good temper is of particular importance as one of the most basic forms of conduct leading to divine proximity. Many moral virtues are manifested in light of good temper. Thus, the closest people to God are the best-tempered: ‘The closest of you to God are the best-tempered of you.’ (al-Kulayni 1362 HS: vol. 8, p. 69) A good-tempered believer is like someone who always says prayers and fasts and becomes close to God. (al-Daylami 1412 AH: vol. 1, p. 123) Good temper leads to the perfection of faith, which is central to divine proximity. Thus, the highest degree of faith is obtained by the best-tempered people. (al-Saduq 1378 HS: vol. 2, p. 38) One manifestation of good temper is to treat one’s family and relatives kindly, which makes one close to the Prophet of Islam, hence to God. (Ibid)

These moral virtues are only a few of the factors that pave the ground for divine proximity.

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