

DESCENT AND MANIFESTATION

Hamid Parsania

A qualitative difference between descent as manifestation (*tajallī*) and descent as displacement (*tajāfī*) separates movement into and within the corporeal world. This difference is nuanced as it is applied to various states of being and domains of existence, and is seen in the perspective of spiritual realities. The perspective of multiplicity allows distinction from absolute unity and God's encompassing omnipresence. This leads into illuminationist relations for nature in its descent, which, in turn, ultimately establishes man as a relative existent.

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Manifestation (*tajallī*) versus Displacement (*tajāfī*)

Both man's journey to the natural world and his consequent migration from it are very different from his worldly travels in the corporeal world. Because our minds are accustomed to the journeys, ascents and descents that take place in the natural world, they tend to consider the descent into and ascent from this natural world in similar terms. Hence, it is prudent to pay special attention to the characteristics of physical ascents and descents prior to explaining their spiritual counterparts so as to be exactly aware of the differences between the two types. A comparison between physical and spiritual ascent and descent can help in preventing the many errors to which the human mind and imagination are prone in this regard. Because of the affinity of the human mind to the natural world

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it constantly attempts to impose the conditions of this world upon the other aspects and dimensions of being. It is the intellect that, upon consideration of the particularities of the different cases at hand, keeps the imagination under control.

The first characteristic that becomes apparent concerning the descent of things into nature is that it is by way of “manifestation” (*tajalli*). Conversely, descents *in* the physical world are characterised by “displacement” (*tajāfi*). For a better understanding of the principle of manifestation, it is important that the concept and conditions surrounding displacement become well known. These pertain to the natural order and therefore are familiar. Only then can the points of divergence between manifestation and displacement be properly studied.

Whenever a body in the physical world descends from one place to another, the first place becomes empty of it. For example when a raindrop descends from a cloud or when a jewel is taken from a treasure vault, the cloud or vault becomes less to exactly the extent of one drop or jewel, respectively. It matters not how large and great the cloud or treasure is; though it may be very large it becomes less by just that one drop or jewel. This emptying of the cloud and vault is the defining characteristic of displacement (*tajāfi*).

In the descent by manifestation (*tajalli*), on the other hand, the descent of a thing does not cause any diminution or deficiency in the origin of descent. For example, in the reflection of a person in a mirror, and despite the real existence of the image of the person in the mirror, nothing is taken from the person himself and he is not any less than he was to begin with. Of course this is just an example and it could easily be said that in the forming of the image of the person rays of light or the like are taken from him and he is to this extent reduced. Despite such a remark, the example and the principle that it represents stand true, as it is clear that the example is not to be taken to its final limits. To be exact, in the final analysis there is actually no difference between the example and what it represents. This is because what are perceived to be the causes for the formation of the reflected image—things such as light, reflective surface, glass, mercury, angle of reflection, etc.—are nothing but supplementary causes and agents that facilitate the appearance and manifestation of the image of the person. The person (i.e. the object being reflected) maintains its integrity irrespective of any such considerations and is not composed of these things which are supposed to form it.

Another and perhaps more graphic example that can be given for de-

scent by *tajallī* consists of the mental forms or concepts that man forms in his imagination. For instance, prior to bringing a picture of, say, a lemon to mind, the person in question must have had knowledge of lemons. If he did not have this knowledge, then he could never picture a lemon simply by hearing its name.

This implies that, prior to mentally picturing the lemon, he did not have a distinct knowledge of it and the knowledge of the lemon resided with the knowledge of all the other things that he knows in a non-distinct form in his repository of knowledge.

This repository, which contains knowledge in a united and non-distinct fashion, is known as cognition (*malakat al-ʿilmī*). The existence of this repository-cum-faculty makes a person who possesses it in a given field, a master of that field—capable of expert opinion and a specialist in his own right. A medical doctor who has a particular speciality, for instance knows his speciality in all states, even when he is asleep or not thinking about anything in particular. It is the “active” nature of his knowledge base that makes it possible for him to immediately bring to mind the particular cure for any ill person that he observes and then to transfer this to others by way of speech or by written text. This imagining and picturing in the mind of a cure is another example of descent by *tajallī* precisely because he forms the idea or picture of the cure by using that which exists in his knowledge base, without thereby reducing anything in that base. Any given fruit or the appropriate cure and medicine for a disease that come to the mind of a person, though not externally existent, partakes in a type of existence that can rightly be called “imaginal” or noetic. The watering of the mouth when imagining a lemon or the writing of a prescription when thinking of a medicine are some of the real effects of imaginal or mental knowledge.

A fruit or a cure, both of which also exist mentally, actually descend from their imaginal origin—that is to say they are manifested from man’s repository of knowledge. This is because the cognition of the doctor or the knowledge base of someone who knows fruits is neither altered nor diminished in the least during and after the picturing and imagining. If this were not the case and some type of change took place in the knowledge base or cognition of the person imagining an object—implying a descent by *tajāfi* of the idea from the repository of knowledge to the mind—then the general and undifferentiated knowledge of a thing would cease to exist after its distinct and particular conception.

The above examples, when rigorous attention to detail and exactness

is not demanded, more than suffice to represent the idea of descent by *tajallī*.

Many Islamic source materials simultaneously give credence to the stability and inexhaustible nature of the Divine Treasures and deny that any emptying or displacement takes place during a descent from them. For instance, in *Duʿā al-iftitāḥ* God is addressed in the following way: “the open-handed Granter of good Whose bounties and treasures are not diminished and Whose abundance of giving increases Him in nothing but goodness and generosity.”¹

In the everyday prayer of the month of Rajab that is read after the daily prayers, the following expression is to be found: “O God! Grant me all the goodness of this world and all the goodness of the next. Keep from me all the evil of this world and the evil of the next. For surely that which You give is never diminished.”²

Now, if Divine bestowal and munificence should cause the Divine treasures to be lessened, or in other words, if the descent of things from the treasures should be by *tajāfī*, then whenever God gives all of the good of this world and of the next to a single individual, two related problems arise: The act would eventually completely exhaust the treasuries of good, and subsequently make it impossible to give anything else of good to others.

If, however, the said descent should be by *tajallī*, then these problems are avoided. In the first place, even after all of the good of the heavens and the earth is given to a person, the Divine Treasures are not reduced in the least. In the second place, there remains the possibility that a second person who joins in the prayer is also given all the good of the two worlds—all out of His grace and munificence.

Tajallī is a term that has been used in the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth. God has said in the Qurʾān ...*So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He levelled it, and Moses fell down swooning...*³ In other places in the Qurʾān, there are similar references to the crumbling and destruction of whole mountains. *Had We sent down this Qurʾān upon a mountain, you surely would see it humbled and rent asunder, out of the fear of God.*⁴ Both this rending asunder of the mountain and its crumbling in the account of Moses are due to a single cause. This is because the Qurʾān is a reality in which God

1. Shaykh ʿAbbās Qummī, *Mafātīḥ al-Jinān*, “Duʿā al-iftitāḥ”.

2. Shaykh ʿAbbās Qummī, *Mafātīḥ al-Jinān*, “Adʿiyat shahr al-Rajab”.

3. *al-Aʿrāf*: 143.

4. *al-Ḥashr*: 21.

has manifested Himself—by an effusion or self-disclosure—and hence the descent of the Qurʾān upon a mountain is tantamount to His manifestation upon it. God’s manifestation—just as in the theophanic episode of Moses—makes the hardest and most durable of earthly phenomena to crumble and fall apart as if it was nothing.

Imām ‘Alī, speaking about God’s *tajallī* in the Qurʾān, has said: “And He manifested Himself to them in His book.”⁵ In *Nahj al-Balāghah* the Imām praises God for His manifesting Himself to His creation by saying, “All praise be to God, the Manifested, for His creation by His creation.”⁶ Hence, it can be concluded that it is not only the idea of *tajallī* but also the word itself, in its various derivative forms, which appears in various Islamic texts and resources to clarify the relationship that man and the other created beings have with God.

The descent of things from the Divine Presence, through the intermediary stages and levels and until their final destination here in the natural order, forms one single continuum. Moreover, just as the verse of *and We do not send it down but in a known measure*⁷ alludes, the integrity of these levels is maintained during the descent. That is to say, the Divine Effusion (*al-fayḍ al-ilāhī*) initiates its descent in the Divine Heaven to the treasures and the invincible world (*jabarūt*), continuing to the isthmus and the world of measures, and from there, manifesting itself finally in nature and the corporeal world. If it were otherwise, and God’s majesty or the reality of the Qurʾān that is with Him were to directly manifest themselves in this lower world, then there would remain no place for the manifestation of the other existents and inhabitants of the natural and imaginal worlds. In such a case, not only the Mount of Ṭūr, but even the place of the first Qurʾānic revelation—the Mount of Nūr—would be rent asunder and all that which is to occur on the Day of Resurrection would become apparent. On this Day, all mountains are to be razed to the ground, for the Qurʾān says *and the mountains will be set moving and become a mirage*.⁸

Continued Presence (*tadāwum al-ḥudūr*)

The second particularity of the descent of things from the invincible realm of the Divine Treasures to the spiritual domain of the isthmus, and then to the corporeal and natural world, is that the object of descent

5. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon 147.

6. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon 108.

7. *al-Ḥijr*: 21.

8. *an-Nabāʾ*: 20.

never leaves the real presence of the origin of descent. This is contrary to physical descents, in which the object must leave the origin for the descent to take place.

A raindrop that falls from a cloud and into an eavestrough is in a place that the cloud is not. The precious jewel that is taken from the vault and now dangles upon the person of a paramour is no longer in the vault. Similarly, the raw material of a production line that becomes a finished product and is put on the market is not to be found in the warehouse.

These are all examples of the second particularity. The latter differs from the first particularity in that, in the first, the emphasis was on the loss and depletion of the source of descent, and in the second, it is the limitation and absence of the origin of descent with respect to the place and destination of descent.

In the descent *to* the natural world as opposed to the descent *in* the natural world, the object of descent remains in the presence (*maḥḍar*) and under the dominion of the origin of descent. A good example of this is the concept that the soul, by recourse to its repository of knowledge, creates in the mind. In this case, even after it has further conceptualised the idea in detail, the initial idea remains known in general and present to the faculty from which it got its inspiration. It is clear in this example that there is no decrease in the faculty or repository of knowledge and there is no displacement of the conceptualised idea and it remains ever-present to the faculty in question. The presence and existence of the object of cognition is intimately linked to the presence and existence of cognition itself and its agent. This is so to the extent that if the soul—the agent of cognition—is even for a moment heedless of the concept and idea present in the mind, then the idea immediately ceases to be. Now, the things that descend from the dominion (*malakūt*) to the kingdom (*mulk*) are in a similar situation. They are “dominated” by the dominion, hence the name. The kingdom and all that is in it is conversely “owned” by and in the control of the dominion and ultimately the *Dominus*.

Even though it is true that, technically, the term dominion (*malakūt*) refers to both the isthmus and the imaginal world, in some cases it also refers to the invincible world of the treasures (*jabarūt*). This is so precisely because of its role of comprehension of, dominion over, and ubiquitous presence with, the natural world and all the other worlds lower than itself.

The Qur’ān holds that all things have a dominion and then goes on to assert that the dominion of all things is in the power and control of

God, the *Dominus*. So immaculate is He in Whose hand is the dominion of all things.⁹

Limiting, Not Limited

The third particularity of the descent of things from the *jabarūt* to the *malakūt*, and from the *malakūt* to the *mulk*, is that the limitations of the descended thing do not necessitate any limitation in the origin of descent. In physical descents, however, the thing that descends always calls forward limitations in its origin and gives evidence of these same limitations.

The raindrop which has fallen from a cloud, despite its minuscule nature and even assuming that the descent was not by displacement, has certain perfections and attributes that the cloud itself lacks. The mountain spring from which water has gushed out for years on end, even though the flow has not noticeably become less, is nonetheless deprived of the perfections and qualities of exactly that amount of water which has flowed from it. The driver who yesterday filled his petrol tank can tell how much petrol he has used by the distance that he has travelled.

In the descent by manifestation, the limitations and qualifications of the origin do not accompany the object of descent. Hence, any given mental image that a person pictures in his mind cannot be said to indicate or qualify the limits of his faculty of knowledge. The proof of this third characteristic and particularity is, in actuality, the first two particularities of the descent by manifestation mentioned above.

The fruit that is envisaged in the mind is, firstly, not descended from the repository of knowledge by way of displacement (*tajāfī*) so as to create some deficiency in the origin or to give evidence to its imperfection. Secondly, it is not absent from the purview and presence of the origin so as to point out a place or state from which the origin of descent is missing or lacking.

The relationship of the *mulk* to the *malakūt* and the *jabarūt* is similar in the sense that phenomena of the natural and physical order do not delimit the higher metaphysical worlds in any way. This also applies to God Himself, as He is above all the worlds. It is the metaphysical realities and the Real Itself that manifests limited beings as well as their limitations through a process of self-disclosure. It is with reference to the origin of descent, then, that the perfections and qualities that the descended thing lacks come to be known.

9. *Yā Sīn*: 83.

In the prayer for the first day of *Rajab*,¹⁰ God is described as the Limiter—the Setter of the limits of all things (*Ḥāddu kulli maḥdūd*), meaning that it is God who reveals and causes all things to descend in particular measures and limits and the decree of all things is in His command. Hence, the measure and limits of any thing can only fully be known by a reference to the Divine Essence while nothing can delimit this Essence nor confine it to any definable realm.

Manifestation of Unity

The fourth characteristic of the descent to nature is a corollary of the previous three. The numerousness of emanations and descents by manifestation provides ample evidence for the greatness and majesty of the origin of descent. When things are sent down by way of manifestation and effusions, the manifold aspects and dimensions of the source and agent of manifestation become better known. In the descents that occur within the physical world, on the other hand, the greater the number of things sent or produced from a source, the more the source is diminished.

All things in the natural order are transitory and perishable. As any thing in the corporeal realm ages, it declines and comes nearer to its non-existence. The Qurʾān says *And he whom We lengthen in age, We reverse him in creation...*¹¹ It is for this reason that the more years that a mine has been in operation, the greater is the fear of it becoming depleted of ore. Similarly, reserves that have been drawn upon for a long time are accurately thought to be nearing their end.

Heavy usage of a physical object is generally considered to be a liability for it. On the contrary, less usage or its “newness” is considered to be an asset. However, if the descent in question is not in the physical world but from the metaphysical to the physical world—that is to say that it is by *tajallī* and not *tajāfī*—then the reverse holds. In this case, the more the origin of descent is “used”, the more apparent becomes its grandeur and sublimity.

The person who is able to study a simple geometric shape and come up with hundreds of axioms and corollaries about it provides evidence for his powers of cognition and intellection. The more he is able to expand this study, the greater the depth and breadth of his knowledge. The situation of the physical and corporeal world is analogous to this. The greater

10. al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, *Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid*, *Shahr Rajab*, “*Awwal Yawm min Rajab*”, 804.

11. *Yā Sīn*: 68.

the spread and scope of this world (*mulk*) and the more multiplicity it espouses, the greater appears the grandeur and depth of the spiritual world (*malakūt*), the invincible world of the Divine Treasures (*jabarūt*), and in fact, the Divinity Itself.

It is for this very reason that on various occasions the Qurʾān has recounted the multiplicity and numerousness of nature, and in some other cases, has explicitly declared man's impotence in being able to count the same. *If you enumerate God's blessings, you will not be able to count them.*¹² Despite this statement from God about the innumerability of His bounties, He has referred to all of them as being signs, proofs, and evidences of Himself and His boundless treasures. *Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, and the ships that sail at sea with profit to men, and the water that God sends down from the sky—with which He revives the earth after its death, and scatters therein every kind of animal and the changing of the winds, and the clouds disposed between the sky and the earth, are surely signs for a people who intellect...*¹³

In his commentary on *Duʿā al-Saḥr*, Imām Sayyid Rūḥullāh al-Mūsawī al-Khumaynī (1902-1989) writes the following with regards to the phrase of prayer, *Allāhumma innī asaʿluka min ʿazamatika...*: “He is great in His essence, great in His attributes, great in His acts. And from the greatness of His act is known the greatness of the name presiding over it, and from its (i.e. the name's) greatness is known the greatness of the Essence while it (i.e. the name) is in its own capacity (and according to its own level and limits) one of the manifestations (and effusions) of it (i.e. the Divine Essence).”¹⁴ Imām Khumaynī holds that the grandeur of God's acts and the greatness of His Names are the signs of the greatness of His Essence, due to the fact that they have emanated and descended by *tajallī* from Him. He continues on to discuss the great nature of the acts of God.

Comprehensive Distinction

The fifth characteristic of the descent to the material world is that the difference and distinction between the descended thing and the origin of descent is what can be called a “comprehensive distinction” (*tamāyuz ihāṭī*) and is one-sided. In a physical descent, however, the distinction is two-sided and the otherness is by separation. Two things can be said to be “distinct” from one another when one of them has an attribute or perfec-

12. *Ibrāhīm*: 34.

13. *al-Baqarah*: 164.

14. Rūḥullāh Khumaynī, *Sharḥ Duʿā al-Saḥr* (Tehran: Muʿasiseh Tanzim wa Nashr Athar Imam Khumaynī, 1374/1995), 33, line 9.

tion that the other lacks. If all of the attributes that apply to one of the things applied to the other, there would be no distinction between the two and in fact they would be one thing. For example, if all of the particularities of a given clock existed in a second clock—viz. mass, height, width, depth, color, form, position—then they would be indistinguishable in all their aspects and would really be one single clock.

Differences and distinctions that exist in physical things are always two-sided and are separative (*ʿazlī*). That is to say, each one of two material things, despite their points of commonality, contains aspects and particularities that the other does not have. This can be likened to two brothers who share common parents but mutually differ in many personal traits and characteristics.

A comprehensive distinction differs from a separative and two-sided distinction in that, in the former, it is only one of the two sides that contains the attributes and perfections that the second is lacking.¹⁵ This second side, then, does not have any characteristic that the first does not have. The set of whole numbers and levels of light are two examples of this type of distinction. In the sequence of whole numbers the numbers nine and ten, say, are distinct one from the other. The distinction lies in the quantity that exists in the number ten, but which the number nine is lacking in. This is because nine does not have anything that ten lacks or needs, whereas ten has everything that nine has plus something extra.

Bright light is different from weak or dim light. But dim light cannot be said to “have” something that accounts for this difference. Now it can be argued that both dim light and the number nine *have* attributes that bright light and the number ten respectively do not have. For it can be said that the number nine is “lower” or “less” and that dim light is “weaker”. But it must be noted that these attributions are reflective of a lack or need in the number nine or dim light, that is they are a result of what they “do not have” and not what they “have”. This lack or weakness is only perceptible when compared to its opposite attribute. So, it is only by looking at the greater number or the stronger light—that exist in the number ten and bright light respectively—that one becomes aware of the lack of these qualities in the number nine and dim light. Hence, the reference point of attributes that result from an absence and negation of existential qualities is never found in the side that lacks them, but rather in the opposing,

15. ʿAbdullah Jawādī Āmulī, *Tahrīr Tamhīd al-Qawāʿid* (Tehran: al-Zahrāʾ, 1372/1993), 122, 332.

“fuller” side.

The above are two examples for the purposes of illustration only and their divergence, upon a strict analytic comparison, from the idea that they represent does not reduce the veracity of the idea in the least.

When the things that descend from the Divine Treasures to the isthmus and imaginal world and then to the natural and physical world are compared to their ideas and realities in the higher worlds, it becomes apparent that the distinctions are not two-sided ones and the differences are not ones resulting from separation. For these things, which have descended by *tajallī*—and even after their descent remain within the scope (*iḥāṭah*) of the origin and subsist in its continuous presence—do not possess anything that the origin lacks. On the other hand, the origin of descent has perfections that they do not. Now, if certain particularities such as ignorance or temporal and spatial limitations—exclusive to the material domain—are attributed to the lower levels, it must be understood that these attributes are not based on the positive and existential aspects of the lower levels. On the contrary, they arise from the aspect of imperfection, weakness, lack and need inherent within these levels. Hence, the fact that the higher levels do not contain these “negative” attributes in no way limits them from having one-sided comprehensive distinctions with the lower ones. Comprehensive distinctions are impossible only when each side contains aspects that are not in the scope of the other side, thus, preventing one from being totally present for the other.

The spiritual realities (*ḥaqāʾiq malakūtī*), from which the material things of the natural world have descended, contain all the perfections of the lower levels. Because these higher realities are not bound by the limits and imperfections of material things, they encompass and comprehend them and are always present with them. God, Who is the origin and source of all manifestations and effusions, is above all levels and states of being and hence comprehends and encompasses all things.

God’s distinction from other existents is also a comprehensive distinction. This is because there is no possible existent which has a perfection that God does not, and which He does not encompass. It is due to this comprehensive distinction between God and all levels and states of being that He is not absent from any of them and is omni-present. The Qur’ān says *It is He who is God in the sky, and God on the earth...*¹⁶ He is present in the heavens and the earth, without being of them or colored by them and

16. *az-Zukhruf*: 84.

without being limited by any of their limitations. The heavens and the earth subsist by His being. The sky is the sky and the earth is the earth by His existence. He gives to all things their limits and definitions but is Himself free of all such things.

Mullā Hādī Sabzawārī (1797-1878) mentions, in his *Manẓūma al-Ḥikmah*, separative distinction and otherness and contrasts it to what he calls “attributive distinction” (*tamāyuz wasfī*)—the latter being identical to the comprehensive distinction that was mentioned above. He takes the term “attributive distinction” to be derived from a saying of Imām ‘Alī, in which the Imām differentiated God from His creation. Mullā Sabzawārī writes, “and one of the sayings of Amīr al-Mu’minīn Sayyid al-Muwaḥḥidīn ‘Alī (upon whom be Peace) is: To unify Him is to make Him distinct from His creation, and distinction is otherness in attributes not otherness by separation.”¹⁷

Absolute Unity

In the descent to nature, the origin cannot be put alongside the things that descend from it and be counted as though it were one of them. In a physical descent, on the other hand, because there is no *tajallī* at play and the descent is by *tajāfī*, the origin of descent can always be counted alongside the descended objects as making up one collection.

Every physical object in the natural world occupies a certain space and position. No two objects can ever exactly be located in the same space. Every physical object is juxtaposed by other objects and can be said to be “horizontal” to them. This rule applies to the origin of physical descents just as it does to the things that derive from it. It is for this reason that things in nature can always be counted alongside one another.

The particular number that is associated with any given item in a set of objects depends upon where the counting was initiated from and, thus, is arbitrary. As such, repeated counts may yield different numbers being associated to the objects in the collection. For example, in a set of three objects, the first one counted is the first of three, the second is the second of three and the third is of course the third of three. But if the order is changed and the second object from the first count is the starting point, all of the numbers change without any particular problem arising.

In the descent to nature, because the origin is comprehensively distinct to the things that descend from it, it encompasses them and is present with them wherever they happen to be. For example, if two things descend

17. Mullā Hādī Sabzawārī, *Sharḥ Manẓūmah*, 83.

by way of *tajallī* from the origin, the encompassing nature of the origin means that the two things are not taken into account when the origin itself is regarded. In other words, when the perspective in question is centered upon the origin, all that has come from it remains in its perpetual presence and light and thus is virtually annihilated and reflects only the origin. But if, on the other hand, attention is paid to the two descended things, a multiplicity (or duplicity in this example) is observed. This, when further deliberated upon, results in the intellectual understanding that reality does not stop at these two things and that there is a third agent at play that could be nothing other than the origin of the two. At this point, if the third “thing” is considered, the “other” two things are no longer seen as being alongside it so as to be counted along with it.

When the perspective of multiplicity is taken into account and becomes the point of reference, descended things become distinguishable and the encompassing unity which surrounds them—not being of their level—does not add anything to the their quantity. Because this unity and origin have been referred to above as the “third” thing, to prevent any misunderstanding it must be said that it is not the third of a group of three but rather the “third” of a set of two.

The third of (a set of) three, as has been mentioned above, is an arbitrary attribute whose referent differs when the order is changed. The third of (a set of) two on the other hand, is a real attribute and remains the same regardless of the differing perspectives applied to the set. The “third of two” is an attribute then that is only given to a thing that encompasses and comprehends other things. The latter are never characterized by such an expression.

The comprehensive distinction of every level with respect to levels lower than it was seen to establish the higher level’s presence in the lower levels. This cannot be taken to mean, however, that realities of the higher level are brought down to the level of the lower so as to be counted as one of the existents of that lower level. It is for this same reason that God, Who encompasses and is infinitely near to all things, can never be said to be on a par with them, nor can He ever be enumerated along with them. The Qur’ān echoes this truth by, on the one hand, emphasizing God’s omni-presence and immanence, while on the other, refuting the idea that God is rank and file with other things and that He subsists alongside the things that have effused from Himself. The Qur’ān labels such ideas as polytheistic and designates their holders as disbelievers.

With regards to God’s immanent presence in all things, the Qur’ān

says *He is with you wherever you may be*.¹⁸ About the blasphemy of counting God to be a thing among others, the Qurʾān has this to say: *Surely they disbelieve who say 'Surely God is the third of the three'...*¹⁹ In the Qurʾānic terminology God is not the third of three but rather the third of two, or the fourth of three, or the sixth of five.²⁰ *Have you not regarded that God knows whatever there is in the heavens and whatever there is in the earth? There is no secret talk among three, but He is their fourth [companion], nor among five but He is their sixth, nor less than that, nor more, but He is with them wherever they may be...*²¹ That is to say, wherever something exists, He also is present.

If God were the third of three, the fourth of four, the fifth of five, and the like, then He would be alongside the things that have come from Him and, hence, present where they are. It is because He is the third of two and the fifth of four that the last part of the verse quoted above applies to Him, and because of this it is said “He is with them wheresoever they may be.”

From the vantage point of the Qurʾān, because the entirety of the universe has come from God by way of *tajallī*, He is the One who is with all existents in all states, yet can never be counted alongside any one of them and is Unique from them. He is a One for which a second cannot even be supposed (for multiplicity to be brought about after the supposition).

Because God is absolute, He has no bounds and delimitations. He comprehends all things and hence can never be put alongside them. His unity is not countable and numerical.

Imām ‘Alī said that “He is One without number”. This is because a thing that has a number to it can be more or less. Now to simply know that something exists says nothing about its quantity. But absolute existence is not like this. By the very nature of its absoluteness it can be said that it is one for which an “other” cannot exist.

The quality of unity cannot be separated from reality and from God’s existence, just as omni-presence, comprehensiveness, encompassment, and immanence cannot be negated from Him. With respect to Him there is no “other” so that this other should be His son or father. And again, for Him no “second” can be postulated so that it could be His like, associate or companion. These truths are only insignificant drops from the oceans

18. *al-Ḥadīd*: 4.

19. *al-Māʾidah*: 73.

20. Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Shawāhid al-Rabūbiyah* (Tehran: Markaz Nashr Danishgahi, 1360/1980).

21. *al-Mujādilah*: 7.

of knowledge that the chapter of *al-Tawhīd* in the Qurʾān contains: *In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Say, He, God is One. God is Absolute (Ṣamad). He begets not, nor is He begotten. And there is none like unto Him.*²²

Ṣamad is a great invincible stone that contains no fissures or cracks whatsoever and is a sanctuary whose confines are impregnable to outsiders. Absolute unity (*waḥdat al-ṣamadi*) is an all-pervading unity that leaves no room for empty spaces. The verses of the chapter of *al-Tawhīd* and the first verses of the chapter of *al-Ḥadīd*²³ in the Qurʾān indicate the presence of an all-inclusive, all-pervading, comprehensive unity in immanence with all things. There is a saying narrated from Imam Sajjād ‘Alī bin al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (659-713) to the effect that God knew that in the latter days there would come a people who would be given to contemplation and rigorous thought, and hence, He revealed the chapter of *al-Tawhīd* and the first verses of the chapter of *al-Ḥadīd*.²⁴

Descension and Emanation

In the descent of things from the Divine Treasures, descension always accompanies emanation (*ṣudūr*)²⁵ and creation. In the descents within the physical world, however, there is no talk of creation and the formation of a new thing—there is only a change in the spatial coordinates and position of the thing undergoing descent. Due to the fact that this physical displacement takes place in a certain time, all material existents necessarily have a temporal nature. The raindrop that falls from the cloud is exactly the same drop of water that it was before it fell from the cloud—its descent only entails its movement and displacement from the sky to the ground. As such, in any physical descension, the descending thing leaves an empty space in the origin after its departure from it and hence the descent takes place by way of *tajāfī*.

The existent which emanates from the boundless Divine Treasures by *tajallī* on the other hand—measured out in certain proportions in the isthmus and appearing finally in the material realm—is fashioned anew at every stage. This means that the physical reality of corporeal objects in relation to their imaginal existence in the isthmus, as well as the imaginal and spiritual form of the same in relation to its being in the Divine Treasures and the *jabarūt*, is new.

22. *al-Ikhlāṣ*: 1-4.

23. *al-Ḥadīd*: 1-6.

24. Kulaynī, *al-Kaḥfī*, Vol. 1, 91, *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, *Bāb al-Nisbah*.

25. Implying origination and generation as well as emanation.

The natural and physical form of a thing is not the same as its imaginal (*malakūṭī*) or its invincible (*jabarūṭī*) form. A descent through these worlds is not just a matter of a change in place and time. Rather, the *jabarūṭī* and *malakūṭī* realities of a thing stay constant and unchanged on their own levels, but here, the form of the thing that has descended by *tajallī*, is new and different—a novelty of creation in its own right. It is for this reason that the Qurʾān, which holds God to be the Revealer and the source of descent of all things to nature, describes God as the Creator (*al-khāliq*) and Originator (*al-fāṭir*) of the heavens and the earth.

Fāṭir is the nominative noun of the Arabic root F-Ṭ-R, meaning the splitting or rending asunder of darkness by light and non-existence by existence. Hence, the *fāṭir* is the subject who first creates something. It is in this meaning that the exegesis of the Qurʾānic verse *All praise be to God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth*²⁶ is that He created the heavens and the earth when before they did not exist. That is to say, His act of creating is not like that of an artisan who takes a material object and by applying his skill, changes its form to yield “another” object. The nature of God’s creation is such that, without a precedent in the *malakūt* or the *mulk*, He makes things to descend from His treasures, and with every descent into a lower level, He manifests them there for the first time.

Regarding the innovative nature of God’s creative act, Imām ‘Alī says “He did not create things from primal materials, nor from eternal archetypes, but rather He created what He created...”²⁷

Illuminationist Relations

The eighth characteristic of the descent to nature is that the object of descent does not have an independent existence of its own. To explain, the thing that has descended is really nothing but a relation and nexus (*rabṭ*) with the origin of descent. Furthermore, any actuality and concrete existence that the thing in question can be said to have is accounted for solely by this relation and its nature. In a physical descent, on the other hand, the thing that undergoes descent by *tajāṣṣī* continues to exist in its own right after the descent—in such a way that at this point the existence or non-existence of the origin of descent is of no consequence whatsoever.

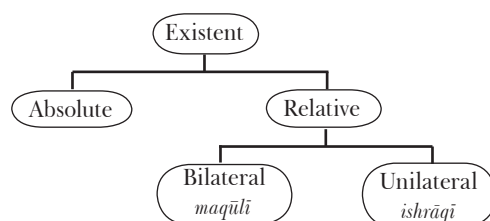
The dependent nature of things that descend by way of *tajallī* can be deduced from the previously mentioned characteristics of this type of descent. This is because this type of descent was seen to be by way of

26. *al-Fāṭir*: 1.

27. *Nahj al-balāghah*, sermon 163.

emanation, innovation and origination.²⁸ All of these meanings involve relations.

In an initial categorization, all existents can be divided into two groups, absolute (*naḥsī*) and relative (*nisbī*). The latter can be further divided into two types, those whose relation is one-way and unilateral (or unipolar or uniaxial to be precise) and those whose relation is a two-way or bilateral. The bilateral relationship is termed, *idāḥah maqūlī*, and the uniaxial one is called, *idāḥah ishrāqī* (illuminative relation).



A non-relative or absolute existent is one whose reality and meaning is for itself and not dependent upon another reality or meaning—as in the case of “man”. A relative existent, on the other hand, is one in whose meaning and conception there is implicit the idea of another reality. The actualisation of this relative existent then, depends upon the actualisation of the other.

The bilateral relation (*idāḥah maqūlī*)—such as fatherhood, tallness, childhood, loving, etc.—is not an absolute attribute or quality, but is, rather, a relative one. The meaning of “tallness” is dependent upon two sides that are called the two terms of the relation. These terms are realities which, when measured and compared against each other, give birth to the idea of “tallness”. For instance, when two men, two trees or two walls, are measured in height and the quantities duly compared, one of the two is given the relative attribute “tall” and the other “short”. Loving also needs two sides. In this relationship, both lover and beloved are required. The lover can be a man or any other sentient being, while the beloved could be God or any of His creatures.

In a bilateral relation, the existence of the relation is dependent upon the pre-existence of its two terms. Hence, it is impossible to postulate the existence of the former if one or both of the terms are absent. For example, it is possible for a man and the thing that he could love to exist

28. The word “origination” in this chapter refers to the “originative act” and “originating”, and it is not to be taken in its meaning of “origin”.
Tr.

without there being a relation of love existing between the two. However, it is not possible for the man to become a lover without there first being in place both himself—the man—and the object of his love.

The uniaxial relation (*iḍāfah ishrāqī*)—such as creation, origination, or emanation—is like the bilateral relation in that two distinct sides can be posited for it. The difference between the two is that the uniaxial relation, for its actualisation, depends on only one of the two sides or terms—the other term not really having an existence or actuality apart and separate from the reality of the relation itself. Hence, the external and concretely existing referent of this second term of the relation is none other than the relation itself.

The descent by *tajallī*, which was seen to be the emanation and origination of existents, is a uniaxial relation (*iḍāfah ishrāqī*). This is because conceptually it has the two sides—the originator and the thing originated or created—to make it a relation in the first place. Now, origination and creation do not occur without the existence of an originator and creator. Moreover, the creator can exist prior to the existence of the created being but the converse does not hold. The created being—emanated by *tajallī*—is actualised in the very process of creation and emanation. Hence, the second term of this relation cannot be prior to the first, or to the relation, and in fact is a part and parcel of the relation itself. This fulfils the conditions of a uniaxial relation.

In descents by *tajāfī*, the thing that descends exists prior to the actual descent. The descent only causes its position to change. Hence, in this case, both the object of descent and the origin of descent have concrete existences independent of the actual act of descent.

The descent of the corporeal world (*mulk*) from the dominion and spiritual world (*malakūt*), and the latter from the Divine Treasures, is also by *tajallī*. By means of this descent, the object of descent acquires its existence, essence and actuality, while God, by His bestowal of being, plays His part as its Originator and Creator. Hence, the *mulk*, not having actualisation of its own *a priori*—as does the Creator—has no concrete reality whatsoever prior to the act of emanation, descent and creation.

The reality of the natural world and the *mulk* is identical to divine emanation and creation, and it is by means of the latter that God manifests Himself in the created order. While a distinction can be made between the Creator and the act of creation—the former being in all respects prior to the latter—the same cannot be said of the created and the act of creation. The created and creation are really one single reality and any distinctions

made between the two are merely mental concepts. In this type of relation, it is only the first term—the Creator or Originator in this case—which has priority over the relation itself; the second term—the created being—is identical to the relation (the relation of creation and origination in the example at hand). To repeat, the second term of the relation is the same as the relation to which it seems an adjunct. The first term of the relation is prior to the relation. Hence, the second term is posterior to the first.

The unity and identity that the uniaxial relation has with the second term of the relation means that, like the relation itself, the second term also lacks an independent existence and is an adjunct of and dependent upon the first term for its reality. Again, the originated and created is not a “thing” from beforehand for the act of origination or creation to be attributed to it—in hindsight as it were. It is the very act itself.

It is due to the identity presiding between the created or originated on one hand, and the act of creation or origination on the other, that the Qur’ān has referred to the reality of man by the terms “origination of God” (*fiṭrat Allah*) or the “creation of God”.²⁹ The Qur’ān says *the origination of God, upon which man has been originated*³⁰ directly implying that the reality of the originated is not different from origination itself. Origination was seen to have a relative and not an absolute meaning in which the idea of bond and nexus with the source and the first term was the defining theme. Thus, it can be concluded that man has a relative reality that only acquires a semblance of actuality, and in fact any meaning whatsoever, due to his relation with his Origin, God.³¹

Terming man the “origination of God” is an outstanding feature of the Islamic perspective. As such, it stands in opposition to the other familiar terms used to describe man. Terms such as “homo sapiens” and “homo faber” are absolute, non-relative terms that define man as an “independent” being in his own right.

Fiṭrah or origination is a special type of creation and man has been

29. The word “creation” in English already has the dual connotations of both the act of creating and the end product or result of it. Here the author is attempting to show a similar linguistic link between *fiṭrah* and *maṣṭūr*, but the argument in this case, based primarily on Qur’ānic exegesis and the philosophical discussions of the preceding pages, goes beyond the realm of language and carries with it metaphysical implications of the first order. Tr.

30. *ar-Rūm*: 30.

31. From the above explanations it can be seen that the usual translation of the word “*fiṭrah*” as “nature” can be problematic.

created upon nothing other than this special origination of God. Just as the creation of God is a uniaxial relation and connotes a relative meaning unrealisable without a bond and connection to the *axis mundi* that is God, man too is a relative being who has no reality whatsoever without this connection and bond with the Absolute.

Some of the verses of the Qurʾān speak eloquently of the bond and nexus that constitutes the substance and reality of man. *O mankind! You are the ones who stand in need of God, and God—He is the All-sufficient, the All-laudable.*³² The word “needy” in this verse comes from the Arabic root F-Q-R. Its singular is *faqīr*, literally signifying a person whose spine has been broken. Such a person can only hold himself up with the support of another. Similarly, man too can only rise and subsist by taking the hand of God and being connected to Him. This connection and bond is man’s very existence and actualisation. If man, in actuality, were not “needy”, then he would have to be an independent existent, as there is no other logical possibility, and this is absurd. That man’s neediness is a positive and existential quality for him can be seen in the prayer of Imām Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī (626-680) in which he refers to it as a “having” rather than a “not having”. He says, “O God! In all that I own and have I am needy (and dependent upon You), so how can I not be needy (and independent of You) in my poverty.”³³

It is not only man whose existence is full of indigence and need. On the basis of what has thus far been covered, all that exists in the *mulk* and whatever subsists in the *malakūt* is deprived and needy and has the bond and tie with God at its crux. This is because God is not the Originator of man alone. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth and all that they contain. All things turn to Him in their needs, as the Qurʾān says *All that is in the heavens and the earth beseeches Him...*³⁴ He in His turn responds to them all, for the above verse continues *...and at every turn He is at work.*

Imām ‘Alī also speaks of the continuous subsistence of all things by God. He says “Everything is submissive to Him, and everything is subsisting by Him (*qāʾim bihi*).”³⁵

Translated from the original Farsi by Shuja Ali Mirza

32. *al-Fāṭir*: 15.

33. Shaykh ‘Abbās Qummī, *Mafātīḥ al-Jinān*, Du‘a al-‘Arafah.

34. *ar-Raḥmān*: 29.

35. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon 109.