

Cosmic Subjectivity in Ibn ‘Ajība’s Qur’ānic Exegesis

İbn ‘Acîbe’nin Kur’ân Tefsirinde Kozmik Öznellik

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Abstract

In his autobiography the Moroccan Sufi Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība cites an incident in which his saintly grandmother gives a command to a snake and the reptile fulfils the lady’s order. Undoubtedly, the story demonstrates the special powers granted to the saintly woman, but is the snake she interacts with also special? Or do natural entities in general understand and know more than we ordinarily think? Whereas the Qur’ān repeatedly emphasises the “animated quality of nature,” portraying the conscious, knowing and even wise cosmos, the works of exegesis often interpret such verses metaphorically (*majāz*) as eloquent expressions of God’s power and universal submission to it. How to reconcile this widespread figurative understanding with the numerous Sufi accounts of the alive, knowing, and understanding cosmos (similar to the incident mentioned by Ibn ‘Ajība)? To answer this question and more broadly, to reflect upon the understudied issue of cosmic subjectivity in the Sufi works of *tafsīr*, this article looks into Ibn ‘Ajība’s Qur’ānic commentary *al-Baḥr al-Madīd* (*The Immense Ocean*), which masterfully blends exoteric and esoteric approaches to the scripture and which is aimed at general public (rather than the initiates on the Sufi path). Whereas the Sufi master himself clearly perceives everything in creation as an understanding subject, he also succeeds in seamlessly bringing together various interpretations (including purely metaphorical readings), recognising their validity and suitability for different audiences. The highest level, however, is to realise that the

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literal meaning of the Qur’ānic description of the cosmos accurately captures the aspects of reality hidden from senses: the spiritually enlightened actually “see” with the eye of *baṣīra* that the cosmos is alive, conscious, and knowledgeable, and that everything in it is ultimately a vessel manifesting Divine names.

Keywords: Sufism, Ibn ‘Ajlba, *tafsīr*, subjectivity, consciousness, natural world, *majāz*

Özet

Faslı sûfî Ahmed İbn ‘Acîbe otobiyografisinde, büyükannesinin bir yılanı emir verdiği ve sürüngenin de bu mübarek hanımın emrini yerine getirdiği bir olaydan bahseder. Kuşkusuz bu hikâye bu azîz kadına bahşedilen özel güçleri göstermektedir, ancak burada özel olan sadece o mudur yoksa iletişim kurduğu yılan da özel bir varlık mıdır? Ya da genel olarak doğal varlıklar normalde düşündüğümüzden daha fazlasını anlayıp bilebilir mi? Kur’ân, defaten, “doğanın canlı niteliğini” vurgulayarak onu bilinçli, bilen ve hatta bilge bir kozmos olarak tasvir ederken, tefsir eserleri, bu tür âyetleri genellikle mecâzî olarak yorumlayarak onları, Allah’ın kudretinin ve âlemin O’na zorunlu teslimiyetinin belagatli ifadeleri olarak görür. O halde bu yaygın sembolik okuma anlayışını, canlı, bilen ve anlayan bir kozmosun (İbn ‘Acîbe’nin bahsettiği olaya benzer şekilde) sufilerin hayatlarındaki sayısız tezâhürüyle nasıl uzlaştırabiliriz? Bu makale, bu soruyu cevaplamak ve daha geniş anlamda, tasavvufî tefsirlerde az çalışılmış bir konu olan kozmik öznellik meselesi üzerine düşünmek amacıyla, İbn ‘Acîbe’nin kutsal kitaba zâhirî ve bâtînî yaklaşımları ustalıkla harmanlayan ve (tasavvuf yolundaki sâliklerden ziyade) halkın geneline yönelik telif ettiği *el-Bahrü’l-Medîd* (Uçsuz Bucaksız Okyanus) adlı Kur’ân tefsirini incelemektedir. Mürşidin kendisi yaratılıştaki her şeyi bilen birer varlık olarak algılarken, aynı zamanda farklı yaklaşımları (tamamen metaforik okumalar da dahil olmak üzere) sorunsuz bir şekilde bir araya getirmeyi, bunların geçerli ve farklı kitleler için farklı uygunluklara sahip olduğunu kabul eder. Bununla birlikte, buradaki en yüksek seviye, Kur’ân’ın âlem tasvirinin sözlük anlamıyla, hakikatin duyulardan gizlenen yönlerini isabetli bir şekilde ele geçirdiğini fark etmektir: Ruhsal olarak aydınlanmış kişi, kozmosun canlı, idrâk sahibi ve bilgili olduğunu ve içindeki her şeyin, nihayetinde İlâhî İsimler’i tezâhür ettiren birer mazhar olduğunu *basîret* gözüyle gerçekten “görür”.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tasavvuf, İbn ‘Acîbe, tefsîr, öznellik, bilinçlilik, doğal dünya, mecâz

Introduction

Another woman had concerns about a snake that came to devour all the worms she fed to her fowls. According to her own account, she asked the snake, in the name of God and *sayyida* Fatima, to cease its misdeeds. Fatima came to her and immediately the snake placed its head by the door. “Is it this one?” asked Fatima. “By God, it is!” replied the woman. Then Fatima grabbed a pestle and, brandishing it in the direction of the snake, told it: “By God, if you return to eat her worms, I will bury your head!” The snake never reappeared again.¹

This anecdote, told by the Moroccan Sufi Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība (d.1224/1809) in his autobiography (*fahrasa*), refers to his grandmother *sayyida* Fāṭima, who was a renowned saint from *ahl al-ighātha* (people of assistance).² Whereas the story can be examined from multiple angles, what is particularly pertinent to the present article is the fact of seamless communication between *sayyida* Fāṭima and the snake: the snake’s ability to understand and fulfil the command exceeds the range of faculties usually attributed to this animal. Undoubtedly, the incident demonstrates the special powers granted to *sayyida* Fāṭima, but is the snake she interacts with also special? Or do snakes in general understand more than we ordinarily think, even though the majority of human beings are incapable of perceiving this reality? As Ibn ‘Ajība himself states later in his autobiography, when a person dedicates themselves to God and His contemplation, the creatures become related and bound to them.³ He narrates several incidents from his own life, in which wild animals and birds accompanied him on his journeys and in moments of solitude: once, when a jackal was following him, Ibn ‘Ajība commanded the animal to stop and it did. But when he tried to give it a piece of bread, the jackal fled,⁴ indicating that what attracted the animal was the inner state of the righteous Sufi, not trivial hunger. Such incidents leave little doubt that the natural world possesses understanding and affinity with humankind, even though this reality lies hidden from the uninitiated. The idea is not new and has been articulated by Sufis throughout the ages, both in the accounts of their lives and in their theoretical writings. The wind being

¹ Jean-Louis Michon, “L’autobiographie du Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ağība (1747-1809) I”, *Arabica* 15, 3 (1968): 264.

² Saints who function as intercessors and who manifest divine mercy through wonders, see Michon, “L’autobiographie du Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ağība”, 263; John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 89.

³ Michon, “L’autobiographie du Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ağība”, 266.

⁴ Jean-Louis Michon, “L’autobiographie du Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ağība (1747-1809) III”, *Arabica* 16, 2 (1969): 138.

instructed to carry Ḥabīb al-‘Ajamī⁵ or the docile gazelle suddenly turning aggressive upon Abū Madyan’s unintentional withholding of money meant for charity⁶ bring into relief both the universality of consciousness and understanding, which apply even to seemingly inanimate things, and the profound wisdom that the natural world manifests in its interaction with saints. When it comes to the theoretical expression of this reality, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in his *Iḥyā ‘Ulūm al-Dīn (The Revival of the Religious Sciences)* argues that “all the atoms of heaven and earth praise God,”⁷ while Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī in his *Masnavī* justifiably wonders “if the fire of Nimrod has no eye, how can it be explained that it takes care to show respect to Abraham?”⁸ Indeed, the Qur’ān repeatedly emphasises the “animated quality of nature,”⁹ depicting the whole cosmos as an active participant in its narrative: *everything in creation glorifies God (tasbīh)* (Q 17/44) and *prostrates to Him (sujūd)* (Q 22/18), *God addresses the heavens, the earth, the mountains* (Q 33/72), and *the fire* (Q 21/69) on different occasions, *He inspires (waḥy) the earth* (Q 99/5) and *the bee* (Q 16/68), *the natural world plays a pivotal role in the stories of the prophets David and Solomon* (Q 27/16-22), to give just a few most striking examples.

However, in spite of such a wealth of seemingly incontrovertible scriptural evidence pointing to the alive, conscious, understanding, and knowledgeable cosmos, intimately related to human beings, when it comes to the works of *tafsīr*, there is a well-established tendency to often resort to metaphorical interpretations (*majāz*) of such verses. Since the default state of human beings is their inability to perceive and comprehend cosmic *tasbīh*, *sujūd*, and communication, in order to fit human understanding these phenomena are interpreted figuratively as eloquent expressions of God’s incontrovertible power and universal submission to it.¹⁰ In addition to acknowledging the linguistic merits of *majāz*,¹¹ various exegetes also advocate metaphorical readings on

⁵ Renard, *Friends of God*, 107.

⁶ Vincent Cornell, *The Way of Abū Madyan: Doctrinal and Poetic Works of Abū Madyan Shu‘ayb ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Anṣārī (c.509/1115-594/1198)* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1996), 6.

⁷ Lynda Clarke, “The Universe Alive: Nature in the *Masnavī* of Jalal al-Din Rumi,” in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard Foltz, Frederick Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹ Abdal Hakim Murad, *Travelling Home: Essays of Islam in Europe* (Cambridge: The Quilliam Press, 2020), 275.

¹⁰ See, for example, al-Zamakhsharī’s *al-Kashshāf*, al-Rāzī’s *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, al-Qurṭubī’s *al-Jāmi‘ li aḥkām al-Qur’ān*.

¹¹ According to one of the foremost literary theorists of the Islamic world, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, imagery exceeds plain truth in eloquence and its ability to move the reader / listener: the subtlety of expression coupled with the depth of meaning produces the most beautiful forms “that influence the heart and the soul” (José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought*, trans. Consuelo López-Morillas (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 51-2). See also

theological and logical grounds. For example, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in his influential *tafsīr Maḥfūṭ al-Ghayb* argues that since in the Ash'arite *kalām* tradition the existence of life is predicated upon the attributes of knowledge (*'ilm*) and power (*qudra*), consciousness and any kind of knowledge are impossible in *jamādāt* (inanimate things) (at least in their “normal” state which can be upended in exceptional circumstances through God’s intervention).¹² Interestingly, even Sufi exegetes are sometimes unwilling to take the Qur’ānic descriptions of universal prostration, glorification, and conscious celebration of the Divine at face value: for example, Abū’l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī understands cosmic *tasbīh* literally only when it comes to living entities, whereas in the case of *jamādāt* he sides with al-Rāzī, preferring a metaphorical reading.¹³ The propensity among many exegetes for either restricting or denying the existence of life, consciousness, understanding, and knowledge in various cosmic entities invites a natural question of how this position can be reconciled with the numerous Sufi accounts of an unmistakably alive and knowing cosmos as well as their theoretical arguments supporting a literal understanding of the Qur’ānic passages under review. How to navigate such seemingly contradictory views on the nature of the cosmos? Can different cosmic entities be simultaneously alive and inanimate, conscious and lacking awareness and understanding?

Ibn ‘Ajība, whom we have already met at the beginning of the Introduction, is a perfect candidate to answer these questions: belonging to the Darqāwī Shādhilī Sufi school, in his Qur’ānic commentary *al-Baḥr al-Madīd (The Immense Ocean)* he masterfully blends the exoteric and esoteric approaches to the scripture, addressing general public (rather than the initiates on the Sufi path), acknowledging the validity of non-Sufi views, and presenting Sufi doctrines in the accessible language. Whereas Sufis are generally known for their skilful integration of the esoteric and the exoteric, Ibn ‘Ajība stands out for his ability to reveal both dimensions in every single verse of the Qur’ān and to offer practical guidance to all believers regardless of their spiritual level.¹⁴ As has already been demonstrated in the stories from Ibn

Nadwa Dawud, “*Muṣṭalahāt al-taṣwīr wa-l-tamthīl wa-l-takhyīl ‘inda-l-Zamakhsharī fī-l-Kashshāf*” (The terms “*taṣwīr*” (depiction), “*tamthīl*” (allegory) and “*takhyīl*” (visualisation, or imaginative representation) in al-Zamakhsharī’s *al-Kashshāf*), *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 10, 2 (2008): 142-175.

¹² Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Maḥfūṭ al-Ghayb*, also known as *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Vols. 1-32) (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 20: 219.

¹³ Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur’an* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 45.

¹⁴ Mohamed Fadel Elsayed, “Le Commentaire du Coran par le Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība (1160-1224/1747-1809): Méthodes et Themes” (PhD diss., University of Strasbourg, 2021), 248.

‘Ajība’s autobiography, the *mufasssir* clearly perceives the natural world as an understanding subject, yet in his exegesis he accommodates various positions (including purely metaphorical readings), recognising that even though on the surface they might appear contradictory, they are best regarded as complementary, enriching our understanding of both the Qur’ān and the world.¹⁵ In what follows we will look in detail into Ibn ‘Ajība’s perception of the cosmos and its subjectivity and how he succeeds in seamlessly bringing together various interpretations, accepting them all while singling out the literal reading as the deepest and most accurate depiction of reality, that is understood, seen, and internalised by the spiritually enlightened. What is worth drawing attention to before proceeding any further is that the literal reading of “cosmic” verses in the Qur’ān should not be equated with the exoteric level of interpretation: since the Qur’ānic portrayal of the alive and knowledgeable cosmos goes against most people’s routine perception of and interaction with the natural world and challenges their conventional way of looking at it, understanding this portrayal literally without trying to make it fit the necessarily limited human experience is actually closer to the esoteric level. To perceive the cosmos as alive is to go beyond the apparent to uncover the hidden.

Subjectivity and Its Criteria

Subjectivity is an ideal tool to study Ibn ‘Ajība’s understanding of the cosmos in the Qur’ān as it can be used as an umbrella term for such crucial aspects as consciousness, aliveness, mental states, agency, and relationality. Even though there is no single universally agreed-upon definition, the traits that constitute a subject can be deduced from such attempts to define subjectivity as “self-consciousness as the basis of all possible knowledge,”¹⁶ or “the idea of some ‘thing’ that is both the owner of certain mental states and the agent of certain activities.”¹⁷ Since Descartes, the approach to subjectivity in the West has been rooted in cognition making up a uniquely human subject, distinct from surrounding objects upon which they exercise their thought processes.¹⁸ As a backlash against this anthropocentric vision, post-modernity has

¹⁵ Which agrees with Bauer’s thesis about the acceptance of and the comfort with quite high levels of ambiguity in pre-modern Islamic worldview, see Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity. An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

¹⁶ Muhammad U. Faruque, *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 51.

¹⁷ Alain de Libera, “When Did the Modern Subject Emerge?,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82, 2 (2008): 181.

¹⁸ James Miller, *China’s Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 27.

witnessed the emergence of a strictly egalitarian outlook, which denies distinctiveness to human subjects, emphasising universal interconnection of all the entities in the cosmos, whose fluid relationality produces subjectivity.¹⁹ While post-humanist versions of subjectivity in their revolt against the Cartesian binary outlook usher in a flattened cosmos, the Sufi view is equally bent on overcoming the subject – object dichotomy, preserving, however, the existence of spiritual degrees and levels in creation. God, the cosmos, and the self represent three corners of a triangle with God on top, being the ultimate Principle and Source of both the cosmos and the self. Since Divine names permeate the created world and reveal themselves in its every nook and cranny at varying degrees, both the cosmos and the self are first and foremost manifestations of God’s names. The process of spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) attunes a Sufi practitioner to the underlying relatedness of everything in the cosmos: when one transcends the confines of the *nafs* (lower self) and attains *fanā*’ (annihilation), they are able to presentially embrace the whole cosmos (macrocosm) in their own being and consciousness (microcosm).²⁰ What William Chittick calls the anthropocosmic vision bespeaks of the complementarity rather than polarity: in line with a truly *tawhīdic* vision, the cosmos and the self are merely two mirrors reflecting the Divine.²¹ The idea of the two mirrors is particularly stimulating in the context of contemplating cosmic subjectivity: if the cosmos reflects the same Reality as human beings²² – namely, Divine names, – should not its nature resemble that of *banī Ādam*?

The concept of subjectivity as such has become prominent in Western thought since the humanist shift during the Enlightenment and does not belong to Ibn ‘Ajība’s *Weltanschauung*, but the features of subjectivity are clearly addressed in his exegesis. Three features of subjectivity have been selected for the purpose of this study, namely, consciousness / life, knowledge / wisdom, and interrelatedness of everything in creation. Subjectivity, especially when applied to the natural world, provides a useful framework to examine an active and

¹⁹ See, Nathan Eric Dickman, “A Zhuangzian Tangle: Corroborating (Orientalism in?) Posthumanist Approaches to Subjectivities and Flourishings”, *Religions* 10 (2019): 3; Jordi Vivaldi, “Xenological Subjectivity: Rosi Braidotti and Object-oriented Ontology”, *Open Philosophy* 4 (2021): 314.

²⁰ Faruque, *Sculpting the Self*, 85. See also Olga Louchakova-Schwartz, “The Self and the World: Vedanta, Sufism, and the Presocratics in a Phenomenological View,” in *Phenomenology/Ontopoesis: Retrieving Geo-cosmic Horizons of Antiquity*, ed. A.-T. Tymieniecka (New York: Springer, 2011): 428-30.

²¹ William C. Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 131.

²² Even though the clarity and comprehensiveness of the reflected image might not be as sharp and precise.

dynamic dimension of the cosmos in the Sufi master's *tafsīr*: not only is it a seat of God's silent (albeit splendid) signs (*ayāt*), but it is also an indispensable vocal participant in the events of this world, knowing and promoting the good and the true and decrying the evil.

Consciousness/Life

As has already been indicated, Ibn 'Ajība in general is very open to enlivening the whole cosmos, while giving space to various positions expressed by scholars regarding the topic. Adopting a balanced viewpoint, Ibn 'Ajība often recognises the validity of multiple interpretations of the verses hinting at cosmic subjectivity. This stance agrees with the general position of the Shādhilī school articulated by Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī, who explains that the commentary on Qur'ānic verses should be regarded as *ta'wīl*: the interpretation which, without departing from the original sense, goes beyond it, revealing multiple possible ways of understanding, none of which is definitive and all of which resonate with different audiences.²³ To illustrate how Ibn 'Ajība applies this approach in his *tafsīr*, one can have a look at his commentary on the verse about *amāna* (trust) offered to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains and their refusal to carry it out (Q 33/72): in the exoteric section the *mufasssīr* explains that *amāna* can refer to the creation of consciousness, life, and reason in those great bodies or to the trust being offered to their inhabitants (angels and jinn). The exegete also includes a metaphorical interpretation, which he attributes to al-Bayḍāwī: had the offer taken place and had those bodies possessed feeling and consciousness, they would have refused to accept the offer out of fear. And the purpose of such a metaphor is to glorify obedience, which in this case is called *amāna* since it requires implementation.²⁴ While Ibn 'Ajība seems to incline towards the literal meaning, he does not plainly reject the figurative one. And in the *ishārī* section of the commentary (the characteristically Sufi exegesis by sign or allusion) Ibn 'Ajība clarifies that, unlike, on the one hand, angels and jinn, overpowered by abstract and spiritual meanings and having no access to the sensible reality, and, on the other hand, animals and *jamādāt*, existing in the domain of senses and clouded from hidden lights and secrets, a human is the only creature in which the opposites come together (subtlety and coarseness, body and spirit, light and darkness, meaning and sense).²⁵ Whereas Ibn 'Ajība's reflections unmistakably emphasise the

²³ Elsayed, "Le Commentaire du Coran par le Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība," 27.

²⁴ Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-majīd* (Cairo: self-published, 1999), 4: 468.

²⁵ Ibid., 4: 469.

specialness of *banī Ādam*, they also shed further light on the exegete's perception of the cosmos. First, in the esoteric realm Ibn 'Ajība takes the literal understanding of the offer of *amāna* to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains for granted, simply stating its occurrence. Second, by grouping *jamādāt* and animals together and by attributing the sensible perception of reality to them, the exegete makes it clear that consciousness exists not only in animals but also in what is ordinarily regarded as inanimate. Overall, in both the exoteric and the esoteric parts of the commentary Ibn 'Ajība favours the non-figurative interpretation of the actual exchange between God and the mighty cosmic entities without, however, rejecting the validity of the metaphorical reading. It appears that to him different interpretations can co-exist, reflecting the richness and polyphony of the Qur'ānic text.

We can discover the same pattern of inclusivity in Ibn 'Ajība's reading of other verses. Commenting on the prostration (*sujūd*) of shadows (Q 16/48-9), he argues that it can be understood both as *haqīqa* (reality) and *majāz*. Daḥḥāk narrates that when the sun reaches its zenith, everything in creation (specifically plants and trees) prostrates in the direction of the *qibla*. This is the reason why the righteous prefer to pray at that specific time to align their worship with the universal choir of worshippers.²⁶ In his explanation of another verse addressing *sujūd* (Q 22/18), Ibn 'Ajība conveys al-Kawāshī's report that the stars, the sun, and the moon prostrate when they set, and do not rise again until they are permitted to do so. Likewise in a hadith narrated in al-Bukhārī's collection, it is clearly stated that the sun does not rise before it prostrates and gets permission.²⁷ This vision of the conscious spiritually-motivated worshipping cosmos is expressed side-by-side with a metaphorical reading of prostration as submission and obedience. Al-Bayḍāwī in his *tafsīr* refers to *sujūd* as submission, either natural (*bi-l-ṭabʿ*) or by choice (*bi-l-ikhtiyār*). A palm tree prostrates if it bends out of the heaviness of its fruits, and a camel prostrates if it lowers its head to allow mounting.²⁸ The fact that all inanimate things are submissive to their Lord and obedient to His commands is compared to the prostration of the legally accountable (*mukallaḥīn*), which represents the highest degree of obedience.²⁹ Interpreting the instances of cosmic prostration, glorification, and other apparently conscious

²⁶ Ibid., 3: 134.

²⁷ Ibid., 3: 522. See al-Bukhārī, "Bad' al-khalq", 10.

²⁸ Ibid., 3: 134 on Q 16/48-9.

²⁹ Ibid., 3: 522 on Q 22/18.

acts as *majāz* aimed at emphasising universal obedience to the Creator does not necessarily mean that the natural world is not conscious: *sujūd* in the sense of submissiveness might not be of the same lofty stature as literal prostration, but it feels like it still requires consciousness.

Regarding the issue of *tasbīh*, Ibn ‘Ajība, following his proclivity for accepting and validating a variety of opinions, in his detailed commentary on Q 17:44 brings forward a number of possible meanings of universal glorification. He starts with clarifying that *tasbīh* denotes exaltation and that the earth and everything on it point to the exalted status of God and the impossibility of Him having a partner or a son. How exactly do various creatures convey this message? Ibn ‘Ajība describes five scenarios:

- 1) They do it through their very existence, namely, by being possible (as opposed to necessary) and created, they bespeak of the Creator, who is Ever-Lasting and whose being is necessary. The whole creation thus glorifies God through *lisān al-ḥāl* (the language of its state), which constitutes *tasbīh al-ḥāl*, or figurative *tasbīh*. Even though Ibn ‘Ajība starts with this opinion advocated by al-Bayḍāwī, he makes it clear that he himself believes that *tasbīh maqālī* (literal glorification using words) is a more likely interpretation.
- 2) According to another figurative reading of the verse, glorification also implies that everything contains in itself a feature pointing to its Creator, and this realisation prompts whoever witnesses and contemplates the world (meaning, human beings) to engage in *tasbīh*. Ibn ‘Ajība conveys this interpretation from Ibn ‘Aṭīyya as one of opinions of *ahl al-‘ilm* (people of knowledge) without commenting on it: after all, does not the verse refer to all-encompassing glorification which inevitably takes different forms due to its sheer scale? Once started, it is bound to produce a ripple effect, bringing in more and more singers of God’s praise in a universal choir. Both the first and the second versions of *tasbīh* do not necessarily require awareness on the part of cosmic entities.
- 3) Another opinion (articulated by another group of *ahl al-‘ilm* in Ibn ‘Aṭīyya’s classification) ascribes glorification to everything that is alive and growing, excluding inanimate things from the choir of worshippers, since they are regarded as dead. Hence, a tree literally glorifies God, but when it is later carved into a table, not only does it lose life, but it also loses the ability to glorify its Creator. According to this interpretation, life and consciousness go hand in hand, with the latter extending to all living things.
- 4) Universal *tasbīh* can actually be real (*tasbīh al-haqīqa*), expressed through words (*maqālī*) by everything in creation. This position is closest to Ibn ‘Ajība’s heart and is also upheld by the third group of *ahl al-‘ilm* according to Ibn ‘Aṭīyya. The words do not have to be the same as those used by human beings (*subḥān Allahu wa-l-hamdu li-l-Lāhi*), because everything glorifies in a way that best suits their state.³⁰ In a rare explicit reference

³⁰ The only exception to this rule seems to be the mountains’ glorification alongside David: their *tasbīh* did not differ from human glorification and was audible to everyone, which was one of the prophet’s miracles (*mu’jiza*),

to Ibn al-‘Arabī,³¹ the Moroccan Sufi cites the Andalusian sheikh’s statement, according to which whoever does not hear the variations of *tasbīh* in the universe, does not hear it at all, but is only conscious of their own state. According to Prophetic sayings, “neither a fish that swims in the sea nor a bird that flies in the air is caught but it results in the lessening of *tasbīh*” and “as long as there is still God’s creation, it will glorify God upon the rising of the sun, with the exception of Satan and the most arrogant of human beings.” Ibn ‘Ajība also cites his teachers’ teacher, sheikh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-‘Ārif al-Fāsī, who believed in the generality of *tasbīh*, given such well-known incidents from the life of the Prophet as the glorification of the pebbles in his hands, the weeping of a tree trunk upon its separation from the Prophet, the love that the mountain Uḥud felt for the believers, and the *tasbīh* of the food heard by the Companions. Sheikh al-Fāsī assumed that limiting glorification to living things is erroneous, since their *tasbīh* is one specific case of a more universal phenomenon: *jamādāt*, deriving their continued existence from God, do not need to be alive to engage in glorification. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ajība finds support for the universality of *tasbīh* in the standard position of *ahl al-sunna*, according to which there is no correlation between a natural constitution (*binya*) of any entity and its ability to accept knowledge and life, therefore, *jamādāt* are perfectly capable (even in theory) to display humility, awe, and glorification. Ibn Ḥajar, relating a Prophetic report about the weeping of the tree trunk, finds in it a confirmation that God can create awareness (*idrāk*) in inanimate things, that is similar in nature to the one possessed by the noblest of animals.

5) The last scenario, found in the *ishārī* section of Ibn ‘Ajība’s commentary, adds a distinctly Sufi flavour and a metaphysical dimension to the theme of universal *tasbīh*: everything that exists in the world stands between sense (*ḥiss*) and meaning (*ma‘nā*), the former related to the material reality and the latter connected to the spiritual abode. Hence, from the perspective of senses, everything glorifies through their states, and from the perspective of meaning, everything glorifies with their tongues, but human preoccupation with the material blinds them to higher realities. Whoever burns the veil of illusion separating them from their Lord, will leave the circle of senses and will understand that all created entities simultaneously glorify through words (in the realm of meaning) and through state (in the realm of senses).³²

In both the exoteric and esoteric sections of Ibn ‘Ajība’s commentary on the universality of *tasbīh*, he gravitates towards its literal understanding, which unveils a deeper and more accurate picture of reality, even if this picture is not immediately accessible to human senses. At the same

see Ibn ‘Ajība *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 4: 476 on Q 43/10. What a majestic scene and a marvellous experience it must have been, looking at the solid and stately mountains and hearing them repeat *subḥān Allahu wa-l-hamdu li-l-Lāhi!*

³¹ Even though Ibn ‘Ajība’s *tafsīr* carries a perceptible Akbarian fragrance, he openly refers to the sheikh (calling him al-Ḥātimī) only nine times (Elsayed, “Le Commentaire du Coran par le Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība”, 111), most likely out of caution to make sure that his commentary remains accessible to and acceptable by the general public, including those who might not yet walk the Sufi path (Omneya Ayad, “Ibn ‘Ajība’s ‘Oceanic Exegesis of the Qur’an’: Methodology and Features”, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 23, 3 (2021): 97; Elsayed, “Le Commentaire du Coran par le Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība”, 114, 337).

³² Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 3: 202-4.

time, the exegete also recognises the validity of metaphorical and in-between³³ readings: is not it befitting God's majesty that He is glorified in a multitude of ways? Ibn 'Ajība masterfully weaves the literal and the figurative together to portray a cosmos manifesting God through its every fibre, with universal consciousness (enabling literal *tasbīh*) being one of the paths through which the One and His attributes are revealed.

Remembering that Ibn 'Ajība, in spite of his openness to exoteric positions, is nevertheless primarily a Sufī, it is appropriate to finish the analysis of his view on the consciousness of the cosmos with the words of Rūzbihān Baqlī that the Moroccan exegete cites in his *tafsīr*: commenting on the imaginary revelation of the Qur'ān to the mountain (Q 59/21), the Persian mystic warns the seekers on the path against the deceiving and rationalising eloquence of theologians, who claim that the mountain cannot possess reason. There are spirits and minds known only to God. Had the mountain not been able to understand the discourse, it would not have been addressed.³⁴ Ibn 'Ajība is in total agreement with Baqlī, certain that inanimate things have consciousness, reason, and knowledge even if the matter is outwardly hidden.³⁵

Knowledge/Wisdom

Attributing knowledge and wisdom to the cosmos is a much more daring step than conceding that it might after all possess consciousness. The Enlightenment thinkers would raise their eyebrows at the very idea of non-human knowledge, but even those authors who promote post-anthropocentric subjectivity do not go as far as to acknowledge that the cosmos is actually characterised by knowledge and wisdom. Their primary goal is to dethrone human beings, not to elevate the natural world. But Ibn 'Ajība is perfectly at ease with the Qur'ānic stories portraying the sage cosmos: he even adds to the scriptural narrative to weave a tapestry of a strikingly enlightened, perspicacious, and morally upright universe, whose knowledge at times even exceeds that of the prophets. In the famous encounter between Solomon and the ant (Q 27/18-9), it is not even the ant's timely warning of the approaching army that bespeaks of its shrewdness: in fact, the wise ant did not even fear for its companions' physical safety. It had much loftier concerns, being worried that its fellow ants would crave what Solomon had been

³³ Literal glorification in the case of living entities and figurative in the case of inanimate things, which corresponds to the third position outlined above.

³⁴ Rūzbihān Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān fī ḥaqā'iq al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2008), 415.

³⁵ Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-majīd* (Maktaba Shāmila, 2019), 2179.

given and would get distracted from their *tasbīh*.³⁶ What is more, Ibn ‘Ajība recounts a conversation between Solomon and the ant that is not found in the Qur’ānic text, which indicates the ant’s knowledge of the matters concealed from the prophet: the animal informs him of the wisdom behind his own and his father’s names and the reason for the wind’s subjugation to him.³⁷

Moving on to another type of creatures, the birds, Ibn ‘Ajība’s exegesis contains striking examples of their knowledge as well. Since all that most of us as human beings hear from them is their melodious chirping, we are unable to appreciate just how sagacious they are. But Solomon was given the understanding of their language (*manṭiq al-ṭayr*) (Q 27/16) and he conveyed to us the content of their speech, which consists of constant reminders of the fleeting nature of this world and the need to do good deeds: everything that is alive will die and everything that is new will turn to rags; woe to the one whose concern is this world; as you sow so shall you reap; whoever is silent is saved; remember God; whoever does not show mercy, will not be treated with mercy, etc.³⁸ A famous story about Solomon and the hoopoe³⁹ explicitly indicates the bird’s vast knowledge, since the hoopoe comprehended what the prophet did not comprehend (Q 27/22). In the knowledge that God granted the hoopoe is a test for Solomon, but more generally for scholars, who must always remember that whatever knowledge they have is a mere gift from God, who can give more of it to any creature, even the lowest and weakest one, since knowledge comes from Him alone.⁴⁰

Not only animals display impressive intelligence in the Qur’ānic narrative about Solomon, but even plants and inanimate things teach the prophet important lessons. Astounding as it may seem, it was a tree in Solomon’s prayer chamber (*miḥrāb*) that informed the prophet of his impending death.⁴¹ And it was the wind subjugated to Solomon that instructed one of the best

³⁶ Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 4: 185.

³⁷ For instance, Solomon was given this name because he is spiritually safe, since his heart does not rely on what he possesses (relying instead on God alone). See, Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 4:185.

³⁸ Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 4:181-2.

³⁹ Who was later selected by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār to lead the birds on their spiritual quest in his *Conference of the Birds*.

⁴⁰ Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 4: 189.

⁴¹ Solomon would isolate himself for extended periods of time in his *miḥrāb*. When the appointed time of his death approached, a new tree would appear in the *miḥrāb* every morning. Solomon would ask those trees about the reasons for their being in his prayer chamber and they would reply. One day a carob tree emerged and, upon the prophet’s question, replied: “I am planted for the destruction of this mosque.” Solomon exclaimed that God would

of *banī* Ādam on the virtue of humility: in his *ishārī* commentary, Ibn ‘Ajība explains that once the wind was carrying Solomon, but as soon as the prophet affectionately looked at his splendid clothes, the wind brought him down, explaining that it (and other cosmic entities) obeyed him only as long as he obeyed God. Upon the slightest trace of Solomon’s attachment to the world, the bond of obedience was broken and it was restored only after the prophet’s repentance.⁴² This story can serve as a perfect illustration of the exegete’s argument in his autobiography cited in the Introduction that whoever dedicates themselves to God finds all the creatures bound to them: when Solomon was indifferent to the world, focusing on his Lord alone, the wind did all his bidding, but once the prophet got distracted, the wind, somehow aware of this inner deviation, ceased being Solomon’s obedient servant.

A clarificatory remark is in order here: since Solomon was the prophet, the spectacular interactions he had with different creatures and the natural world’s knowledge and wisdom demonstrated in those encounters might be the prophet’s miracle (as the vocal *tasbīh* of the mountains echoing David’s praises is an example of Solomon’s father’s *mu’jiza*). Ibn ‘Ajība does not deny the miraculous elements in Solomon’s story, but what is more significant for the Sufi *mufasssīr* is that the openings that the prophet was given reflect his station and the state of his heart. A deeper look into this dimension of Ibn ‘Ajība’s reflections on cosmic subjectivity will be taken in a later section (“The art of seeing”).

What is more, even though the sagacity of the natural world is particularly conspicuous in the story of Solomon, it is not limited to it. For example, according to one of the accounts about the dog in the story of the Seven Sleepers (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*),⁴³ the youths came across a dog who started following them and then, being given the faculty of speech by God, spoke as follows: “Friends of God (*awliyā Allāh*), do not be afraid that I will attack you, indeed, I love the lovers of God, so sleep and I will guard you.”⁴⁴ Whereas Ibn ‘Ajība clearly indicates that the ability to speak was bestowed upon the dog at a particular point by God, he does not see the need to explain how the dog was able to know and discern in the young people their high spiritual status

not destroy the mosque as long as he was alive, so he deduced that his own death was imminent and asked God to make the jinn oblivious to his death so as to reveal their ignorance of the affairs of the unseen (*al-ghayb*). See Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 4:483 on Q 34/14.

⁴² Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 4:186 on Q 27/17-9.

⁴³ A very similar account of the story is attributed by al-Rāzī in his *tafsīr* to the companion Ubayy b. Ka’b (21:102).

⁴⁴ Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 3: 256 on Q 18/18.

and then take a decision to be their guardian. Whereas the dog's ability to use human language is indeed extraordinary, given the accounts from Ibn 'Ajība's own life depicted in his autobiography, the animal's perspicacity in identifying the righteous and its desire to seek their company should not come as a surprise, since it agrees with the general pattern of animal behaviour experienced first-hand by Sufi saints. They bear witness to the fact that the cosmos has in-built knowledge, first, of God, and second, of what is good, using this knowledge to assist the propagation of virtue.

An insight into the ubiquitousness of the knowledge of the Divine can be gleaned from one of the *ishārī* sections of Ibn 'Ajība's exegesis. Commenting on Q 22/18, the Moroccan *mufasssir* cites one of the wisdoms from Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's famous *Kitāb al-Ḥikam*, which confirms that everything knows God: "You have made Yourself known to everything and nothing is ignorant of You," which is the reason why the whole creation glorifies God and prostrates to Him. This reality is concealed from most people behind the veil of materiality and spiritual heedlessness, but those who plunge into the sea of meanings perceive the knowledge of the Creator reverberating through the whole cosmos.⁴⁵

Interrelatedness

As has already been mentioned, universal interconnection and relationality are the features of subjectivity according to post-modern thought: the boundaries between different entities, solid at first glance, crumble upon closer examination, as subjects emerge only through constant fluid interaction. On the one hand, Ibn 'Ajība cannot adhere to the idea of total parity between everything in creation: as has already been discussed, he attributes the uniqueness of human beings to their ability to combine the opposites, the bodily and the spiritual, light and darkness, the subtle and the coarse, meaning and senses, the heavenly and the earthly.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Moroccan sheikh does not deny that everything in creation serves human beings. In the words of God: *O banī Ādam, I created things for your sake, and I created you for My sake, do not let what I created for you distract you from what I created you for.*⁴⁷ On the other hand, Ibn 'Ajība acknowledges the existence of intimate connection (not only physical, but more importantly

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3: 522.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4: 469.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3: 112.

moral and spiritual) between everything in creation, the connection that affects the cosmos in a profound way, bringing forth its ability to empathise, express emotions, and appreciate righteousness. And on a more esoteric level, he upholds the Sufi belief that everything in creation is after all equal in its being a manifestation of the Divine in His manifold aspects.

To start with a more straightforward dimension of relationality, the innate interrelatedness of the world is brought into relief in the exoteric section of the commentary on the verse describing the fate of tyrannical and oppressive communities, which states that neither the heavens nor the earth weep for them (Qn 44/29). First acknowledging the possibility of interpreting the weeping metaphorically (as an expression of contempt in which the whole cosmos holds the evildoers), Ibn ‘Ajība then proceeds to providing evidence to support the literal reading. He cites several Prophetic traditions to explain how the whole cosmos and different entities in creation literally mourn the passing of a righteous soul, whether they have ever come into direct contact with it or not. When a scholar dies, not only their riding animals, but also the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the vermin and the livestock on the earth – the creatures inhabiting different abodes – all weep over the loss of the virtuous and knowledgeable person. According to another hadith, two doors in the heavens are assigned to every servant of God: through one door their provision descends and through another door their deeds ascend; and when they die, these doors miss them and cry over them.⁴⁸ A place where a believer used to pray and worship is also affected and laments their desertion⁴⁹ – in sum, everything in the cosmos, whether animate or inanimate, having an intimate bond with the deceased or no apparent bond at all, is somehow aware of the loss and mourns it.

Another form of relationality affecting the physical aspects of cosmic entities can be observed in the story of Abraham being thrown into the fire (Q 21/69). In the *ishārī* section of his commentary Ibn ‘Ajība clarifies that Abraham was filled with God’s light, therefore the customary laws of nature no longer applied to him. Had the fire remained in its natural state, it would have been extinguished by the light that filled Abraham’s being, therefore, God commanded the fire to change its nature, so that its outward properties were visibly the same, whereas its burning essence was replaced by coolness. In the same vein, on the Day of Judgment

⁴⁸ al-Tirmidhī, 47, 307.

⁴⁹ Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd.*, 5: 287.

the hellfire will reportedly say: “Pass, o believer, for your light has extinguished my flame,”⁵⁰ confirming that the interaction with the righteous has a direct effect on the nature of the fire, transforming its physical properties.⁵¹

When one abandons the coarse physical abode and rises into subtler realms, what they discover, according to a characteristically Sufi outlook, is that the boundaries between different creatures are ultimately ephemeral. There is underlying metaphysical unity in the cosmos, since everything is a mere vessel reflecting God who manifests through whatever object He chooses.⁵² Every creature in the heavens and earth is “a light from the lights of the Most Merciful, and a secret from the secrets of His essence” (in addition to being His slave).⁵³ Beyond the outward multiplicity of appearances lies the unity of essence: everything ultimately is both God’s slave and His light and secret, and it is the possession of these characteristics that constitutes the kernel of every created thing.

Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ajība repeatedly emphasises the paramount importance of Divine attributes of power (*qudra*) and wisdom (*hikma*), explaining that in the Sufi vocabulary, power is regarded as the secrets of the Divine Essence, whereas wisdom depicts the lights of His attributes and their effects in this world. Every created being stands between power and wisdom, in that power makes things apparent and wisdom veils them, linking them to physical reasons (*asbāb*).⁵⁴ Another way of referring to the same duality between the hidden and the manifest, or the inward and the outward is to juxtapose *ma‘ānī* (eternal meanings) and *awānī* (receptacles, or created vessels): the former display the unchanging meanings of the Creator, while the latter both obscure those meanings through bodily and sensible forms and protect them, serving as their containers in this world.⁵⁵ Everything in creation contains both dimensions, but while most people stay within the realm of the sensible, a gnostic (‘*ārīf bi-l-Lāh*) pierces the veils of the receptacles and discerns eternal meanings behind them, being thus liberated from the prison of creation and ascending to the witnessing of the Creator. The cosmos does not exist by itself, but

⁵⁰ Ibid., 3: 477.

⁵¹ In addition to demonstrating its consciousness, understanding, and intelligence, whose existence is taken for granted and not even analysed by the *mufasssīr*.

⁵² Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, 5: 456 on Q 50/30.

⁵³ Ibid., 3: 366 on Q 19/88-95.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1: 303.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3: 112.

exists only to display eternal meanings. Ibn ‘Ajība compares a multitude of creatures immersed in the sea of eternal meanings with the shadows of trees reflected in the sea: as their shadows do not prevent ships from crossing the sea, so the shadows of created beings should not prevent the ships of contemplation from plunging into the seas of eternal meanings.⁵⁶ Therefore, outward vessels, although manifold and diverse, are mere illusory shadows, while reality belongs to the unchanging oneness underlying them, since creation in its innermost core is the place of Divine manifestation (*tajallī*). Whoever understands this, sees the Creator wherever they look, oblivious to the outward forms of created beings.⁵⁷ It can be said that the Qur’ānic verses portraying the natural world are interpreted in the esoteric sections of Ibn ‘Ajība’s commentary as allusions to spiritual illumination, *al-faḥ*, in which all cosmic events are constantly reoriented towards God, eternally unveiling the Divine.⁵⁸ Given that human beings are also vessels of Divine manifestation,⁵⁹ from this perspective, there is not only interrelatedness, but also equality between everything in creation.

The Art of Seeing Cosmic Subjectivity

Having analysed how the three criteria of subjectivity – consciousness, knowledge, and interrelatedness – are applied by Ibn ‘Ajība to the natural world, we have discovered that the Moroccan Sufi *mufasssīr* clearly perceives the cosmos and its entities as subjects, brimming with consciousness, understanding, wisdom, intimately related to human beings, and, at their core, containing Divine light and attributes and manifesting God. Even when Ibn ‘Ajība accepts metaphorical interpretations in his inclusive and polyphonous *tafsīr*, he clearly does not reduce non-human creation to “a setting and a decorum”⁶⁰ for human activity: the cosmos that is obedient and submissive to God, even if even it does not literally prostrate to the Creator or engage in a dialogue, still seems to possess awareness and understanding, providing an example of proper behaviour for human beings. And in his distinctively Sufi passages Ibn ‘Ajība unambiguously describes the whole of creation as a seat of abundant subjectivity. The question

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4: 106-7.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 3: 542.

⁵⁸ Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino, “Commentaire Coranique, Enseignement Initiatique et Renouveau Soufi dans la Darqāwiyya. *Le Baḥr al-Madīd fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Majīd* d’Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība (m. 1223/1809)”, *Studia Islamica* 107 (2012): 230.

⁵⁹ Elsayed, “Le Commentaire du Coran par le Soufi Marocain Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība”, 333. Ibn ‘Ajība states in his *tafsīr* that “there is nothing in creation except the manifestations of the Most-High, the Great”. See Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-Madīd*, 2: 392.

⁶⁰ Tlili, *Animals in the Qur’ān*, ix.

that naturally follows is why a lot (if not most) of human beings are unable to perceive the aliveness, wisdom, and depth of the natural world? Why do human senses, and primarily eyesight, which is their major doorway to the world, fail them?

The paramount importance of seeing in interpreting the world is well-attested, even linguistically: for example, the saying “knowing is seeing” can be found in all Indo-European languages,⁶¹ and in the Islamic tradition, the link between having a visual experience and obtaining conviction is encapsulated in the second stage of certainty, *‘ayn al-yaqīn* (eye of certainty). Hence, it should come as no surprise that in his exegesis Ibn ‘Ajība discusses the mechanics of seeing at some length. He consistently refers to the heart as the main organ processing and interpreting our visual experiences. Whereas on the surface level it is the eyes that see, they merely constitute an entry point and must convey their experience to the heart to properly understand the perceived scenes. Hence, seeing is a two-step process which should not stop with the eyes receiving the visual input. Interestingly, commenting on Q 22/46 about the hearts rather than the eyes being blind, Ibn ‘Ajība argues that human beings have four eyes: two of them are located on the head and called *baṣr* (or physical vision), and two are situated in the heart and called *baṣīra* (denoting intuitive and intellective insight and discernment).⁶² *Baṣr* operates on a sensory level, only seeing created things, which are necessarily temporary, whereas *baṣīra* penetrates into the level of the timeless, discerning the fundamental meanings of things beyond their shadowy forms (*al-awānī* vs. *al-ma‘ānī* discussed in the previous section)⁶³ and, ultimately, sees the Creator in and beyond His creation. The sensory serves as a container for supra-temporal and metaphysical meanings.

Having explained how vision works, Ibn ‘Ajība then elucidates why the eyes of the heart (*baṣīra*) can become impaired. The reasons are exclusively spiritual: to see better, one needs to purify their heart rather than work on fixing the acuity of their eyes. *Baṣīra* gets clouded because of one’s failure to stick to morally upright behaviour, namely, when people disobey God, follow their blameworthy desires (*ahwā’*), exert a lot of efforts for the sake of this lowly world (*dunyā*)

⁶¹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 161.

⁶² Ibn ‘Ajība, *al-baḥr al-madīd*, 3: 541.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 3: 542.

and very few efforts for the sake of God, and are absorbed in heedlessness (*ghafla*).⁶⁴ The accumulation of sins blinds the hearts not only to the all-pervasive traces of God's presence in the world, but also to perceiving the cosmos as alive, attuned to the Divine and engaged in constant worship. In order to be able to perceive the eternal meanings (*al-ma'ānī*) behind the created receptacles (*al-awānī*), one needs a proper understanding of *tawhīd*, or God's absolute oneness, reaching the station of *fanā'*, or complete annihilation of one's self in the witnessing of the all-embracing presence of God.⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, this station is attainable only by the few, but everyone can start walking the path of self-purification and in the process achieve a certain level of spiritual acuity.

The influence of one's inner state on their ability to read and decipher subtler meanings that the cosmos generously pours out is again brought into relief in the *ishārī* section of Ibn 'Ajlaba's commentary on *manṭiq al-ṭayr* (Q 27/16): the sounds of birds, predators, and the movement of celestial objects are all different means of communication that God uses to interact with the prophets and the messengers, the gnostics and the truthful, who understand the intended messages through their states and stations. Whereas Solomon was given a unique gift of comprehending the language of birds and the faculties of other prophets were expanded by *waḥy*, or revelation, most frequently the understanding of *awliyā* and the righteous (as well as the prophets in non-*waḥy* situations) in this subtle communication with the natural world is determined by their states and stations (*maqāmāt*). Even though they do not know the language of other creatures, they have openings in their hearts, inspiring them (*ilhām*) with understanding.⁶⁶ The higher one's spiritual station is, the more profound their perception of the cosmos will inevitably be. Ibn 'Ajlaba cites one of the maxims from Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's *Kitāb al-Ḥikam* several times in the esoteric parts of his *tafsīr*, stating that "you are with the creatures as long as you do not see the Creator, and when you see the Creator, the creatures are with you."⁶⁷ Whoever turns to God completely and obeys Him in everything, the veils between them and the rest of creation are burned and the world becomes transparent and obedient to them.

Conclusion

⁶⁴ Ibid., 3: 541-2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3: 542.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4: 183.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 4: 186, 4: 477, 5: 15.

Ibn ‘Ajība, coming from a *sharīf*⁶⁸ family of renowned Sufi practitioners and devotees of God and being the foremost master of the spiritual path himself, lived a life conducive to the opening of the inner eye and the acquisition of the subtlety of perception. However, his *tafsīr*, written for the general public and not devoted solely (or even primarily) to spiritual adepts, acknowledges the difference of opinions existing in the Islamic scholarly tradition and recognises the validity of various interpretations of the Qur’ānic text, all of which contain a seed of truth and all of which address the needs of different people. Applying this approach to the scriptural depiction of the natural world and the question of its subjectivity, Ibn ‘Ajība usually enumerates various, metaphorical and literal, interpretations. The inclusivity of the exegete’s commentary emphasises, on the one hand, the impressive nature of the cosmos, bespeaking of the Creator and characterised primarily by the unwavering obedience of all natural entities to God (according to most figurative readings) and on the other hand, the ability of the natural world to literally know God, glorify Him, prostrate to Him, experience rightful anger, sorrow, and other emotions, share wise reminders and advice, and support the virtuous. The metaphorical and the literal complement each other. The Sufi *mufasssīr* himself clearly gives preference to the literal perception of everything in creation as a conscious, living, knowledgeable, and wise subject, attuned to *banī* Ādam and containing God’s lights and meanings, but he realises that this way of seeing the cosmos might not be for everyone. And this is what makes Ibn ‘Ajība’s perspective fascinating, giving a lot of food for thought to the 21st century reader who is environmentally conscious and loves the natural world: the exegete contends that most people are unable to perceive the subjectivity of everything in creation (which would naturally increase one’s appreciation of and care for nature) because of their spiritual blindness. In order to attain spiritual acuity, one needs to engage in assiduous work of purifying their heart. The idea is not new, as even the very first book of Islamic environmentalism released back in 1968 already had a telling subheading “the spiritual crisis of modern man.”⁶⁹ But Ibn ‘Ajība makes his argument not out of concern for the ever-deteriorating state of the natural world that we witness today, but through his lifelong study of and contemplation on the Qur’ānic text. And in his commentary he leaves room for people at different stages of their spiritual development to appreciate the message of the scripture and to

⁶⁸ Claiming direct descendancy from the Prophet Muḥammad through his grandson Ḥasan.

⁶⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature. The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1968).

connect to the natural world. If the human self and the cosmos are both mirrors reflecting the Divine and if Sufi commentaries themselves are also “a play of mirrors between the inward (*bāṭin*) of the mystic and the inward (*bāṭin*) of the scripture,”⁷⁰ the accumulative result is an endless dazzling collection of reflections, all of which capture different parts of the whole with varying degrees of accuracy and precision. The reflection seen by those who are completely heedless is all blurred, as they are unable to comprehend or derive any benefits from repeated Qur’ānic descriptions of the cosmos. The reflection of those who are not totally hopeless, but are only spiritually deficient is clearly visible, but it lacks precision and needs polishing. They are the ones who can benefit from metaphorical interpretations: even though those readings reveal only part of the reality, they can be seen as the first step towards spiritual awakening, encouraging the heart to reflect on the splendour of the cosmos and its absolute submissiveness to the will of the Creator. If a person continues their spiritual journey, painstakingly and diligently, the reflection in their mirror will start shining brightly, displaying more and more details of the Reality. The eye of their *baṣīra* might eventually open, allowing them to see the alive and wise cosmos, a servant and a friend of the righteous, and a container of timeless Divine meanings.

Ibn ‘Ajība’s comprehensive approach to cosmic subjectivity, which is not homogenous and accepts levels, can encourage a more thoughtful and contemplative engagement with the natural world on the part of different readers. What has remained outside the scope of this paper is a broader look at different works of Sufi exegesis to identify to what extent Ibn ‘Ajība’s interpretation is representative of the Sufi tradition. Given that this paper emerged as a result of the author’s interest in the perception of the cosmos and its subjectivity in the wider *tafsīr* genre (including various non-Sufi works), it is merely an introduction to the understudied topic of the subjectivity of the natural world in Sufi exegesis as well as an invitation to those who might be interested to pursue this subject. The author also hopes to continue the project by examining a broader spectrum of Sufi works of *tafsīr*, both “moderate” and “esoteric/ecstatic” (to use Gerhard Böwering’s terminology),⁷¹ to be able to draw more definite conclusions about the way

⁷⁰ Annabel Keeler, “Sufi *tafsīr* as a Mirror: al-Qushayrī the *murshid* in his *Laṭāif al-ishārāt*”, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 8, 1 (2006): 1.

⁷¹ Alexander Knysh, “Sufi Commentary. Formative and Later Periods” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur’anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

the cosmos has been understood by the masters of the spiritual path and to benefit from their reflections in the 21st century, in which we are so often disconnected from the rest of creation.

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