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## For the Birds: The Mystery of God's Grace through Attar's The Conference of the Birds

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# For the Birds: The Mystery of God's Grace through Attar's The Conference of the Birds

Senior Project Submitted to the Division of Social Studies

Of Bard College

By

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For the Birds: The Mystery of God's Grace through Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*

On the sixth of February 2021, I met a friend in Tarrytown and we drove into the Bronx so I could pick up a fledgling whiteface cockatiel named Porridge. I have cared for this bird now for just over a year, and he is a steadfast and wise companion. That is to say, he is a fickle and easily irritable perpetual toddler with abandonment issues and I love him dearly. My fascination with birds has long predated my adoption of the wood chewing goblin creature I let sleep on my forehead. No, his introduction to my daily life is a natural evolution of my love for birds. Rather, my avian appreciation stems from the same grandmother that introduced me to the church. My grandmother's house is adorned with no less than three bird feeders, and no less than two birdhouses, and that's not accounting for the others scattered across the property. My family had moved back into my grandmother's house recently and it brought to my attention just how close that crazy bird lady - a name used most affectionately - lives with these creatures, to the point she - if her lungs and lips are willing - even speaks their language.

Now I am far from attempting to make any conclusions about my grandmother and King Solomon, but as it is said in the Quran "Solomon inherited David. He said, 'O people, we have been taught the language of birds, and we have been given from all things. Indeed, this is evident bounty'" (Quran 27:16). It is later in this surah that Solomon, blessed with the tongue of the birds, inspects his host of birds and inquires as to the whereabouts of the hoopoe, threatening to "inflict a severe punishment on him or maybe even slaughter him unless he comes forth with a

convincing reason (for his absence)” (Quran 27:21). There the hoopoe, an orange bird with striking striped wings, and a brilliant crest of feathers invoking the shape of a crown comes bearing news to Solomon of Sheba. The people of the kingdom of Sheba worship the sun, rather than God, the hoopoe describes to Solomon, the text including commentary from Allah directly, (according, at least, to Maududi *Towards Understanding the Quran*), reading: “Satan has made their deeds appear attractive to them and has, thus, debarred them from the Right Path so they do not find true guidance” (Quran 27:24). The mention here of the “Right Path” and, crucially Solomon’s response to the news of Sheba has a significant impact on the fate of the hoopoe to come. King Solomon pens a letter commanding the Queen of Sheba to travel to his court and submit herself as a subject, "In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate" (Quran 27:30), so that he might correct her and her people’s misguided ways. For this letter to be delivered, however, Solomon first commands the hoopoe “Take this letter of mine, deliver it to them, and then draw back from them, and observe what they do” (Quran 27:28), and with this verse the story of the hoopoe within the Quran comes to a close, departing as a messenger from Solomon’s army of men and conference of birds

The story of the hoopoe does not, however, end here. In the twelfth century CE, Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar of Nishapur (whom I will refer to simply as Attar, for ease of writing), penned the *Conference of the Birds*. Poet, theoretician of Sufism, and hagiographer, Attar (a name denoting his profession as an apothecary) lifted the title of his most famous work from the sixteenth verse of the twenty-seventh surah of the Quran, (Persian *Mantiq-ut-Tayr*, for “speech of the birds”) about Solomon’s gift over the language of the birds. The premise is simple: “The birds of the world gathered from near and far. / They said: No nation is without a leader; / why is

it that we don't have one? A body without a head nation is without direction. / Let's seek a sovereign, without delay. / And so they converged to seek a leader / worthy of their nation of birds" (Conference 41). The birds of the world, seeing themselves as a nation without a leader, desire one as it is only natural that a nation should have a leader. This is where the hoopoe as "messenger and guide" (Conference 29), returns to our story, described as wearing a Wayfarer's cape around its shoulders and "the Crown of Truth graced its head" (Conference 41), in a literal sense this appears to refer to the Hoopoe's distinctly striped wings, and prominent crest, but in this context, those wings as a cloak become the markers of a Sufi, and the Crown bestowed by the One on High marks him a sheikh. The messenger of King Solomon amongst the birds is the wisest of all, as "a bird who carries Bismillah on its beak / (for all King Solomon's letters began that way) / is never far from the wellspring of mysteries" (Conference 42). The hoopoe comes forward with a proposition, as the wisest bird among them, the hoopoe knows of a suitable leader, one referred to as "that Beloved", but requires companions for the journey to meet with such a Beloved. "Simorgh is that Beloved's name," the hoopoe proclaims "the leader of all birds, / who is closer to us than our own blood veins; / yet we stay far from that Great One, so very far!" (Conference 44).

That vast distance of the Sufi endeavor the hoopoe refers to is elaborated on in works such as *Tohfa Mursala Sharif*, by Sheikh Abu Saeed Mubarak Makhzoomi, and *Fusus al-Hikam* by Ibn Arabi. It is important to remember that the Sufi conception of God as the Beloved is not as purely an entity or a force, or even as merely the Creator, but rather as the utter totality of all things, an idea which is seeded from the Quran "Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of Allah" (Quran, 2:109). This revelation is also more than the statement I've just made but

includes an unspeakable essence to truly uncover this truth. I can say “God is all things”, and while it may be true, that does not mean I am any further along the Path Sufism calls one to travel. While Sufism is an esoteric practice, I find comfort in the relative simplicity of how Sheik Abu Saeed Mubarak Makhzoomi explains the six-tiered manner in which all Creation was created. The work of Ibn Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, loosely reflects Sheik Abu Saeed Mubarak Makhzoomi’s structure of the Almighty’s unfolding of reality, and why I bother to include Makhzoomi at all.

With Makhzoomi having died twenty-six and forty-six years before the births of Attar and Arabi respectively, his life and work were that of a predecessor. Having lived and died in Iraq, evidence of his direct influence on Attar is scant, if not non-existent, however similar ideas were expressed by Ibn Arabi, born in what is now Spain, whose works went on to influence Rumi, a renowned poet and one of the only to mention Attar as an influence before Attar’s work was widely recognized leads me to hold that while not in total agreement, the work of Makhzoomi reflects a put-to paper-example of wider Sufi thought in this period, and his explanation of how to interpret the cosmos is too comprehensive to neglect. The following is my retelling of Makhzoomi’s cosmology in *Tohfa Mursala Sharif* according to pages 82 and 83 in the English translation of *Shams-ul-Fuqara*, by Sultan ul Ashiqeen Sultan Mohammad Najib ur Rehman:

All things begin in the first realm, *alam al HaHooiyat* in Arabic or the Realm of the Incomparable and Unknowable in English. It is in this realm that the Divine Essence intrinsically exists, but even the word “exists” is inaccurate. More accurately put, this realm is utterly three

realms of Command (*alam al-Amr*), which are realms considered to be parts of inconceivable, without any means to properly interpret, and without logical bounds, meaning there is no human standard to even begin to properly understand the unity of God in this form. However, we may call this form *Hoo*. Remember the term I used to describe Sufi cosmology is “relative simplicity”.

The second realm is the Realm of First Manifestation or *alam al-YaHoot* in Arabic. Here what is referred to as Noor-e-Mohammad (Light of Muhammad, or Muhammadan Light) manifests, in God’s first descent. This realm is also referred to as *alam al-Wahdah*, or Divine Solitude, despite the manifestation of a second being. This is to say, the Noor-e-Mohammad is *not* a second entity, but purely an emanation of the first. Both are one, both are God.

In the third realm or Realm of Divinity, *alam al-LaHoot*, the Noor-e-Mohammad itself manifests as the Divine Soul (*ar-ruh al-qudsi*) from which all human souls originate. Below this realm is the realm of Power, or *alam al-jabarut*, wherein human souls properly manifest from the Divine Soul a tier above. In this state, however, souls are formless.

Crossing over in the fourth realm is an important distinction, as one leaves the upper “non-creation”, and enters the lower three realms of creation (*alam al-khalq*). The fourth realm is known as the Realm of Power, or in Arabic *alam al-jabarut*. The term *jabarut* however does not translate directly to power, but rather something closer to the word “bridge”, denoting its place in the cosmos. Remember here however that the Noor-e-Mohammad is not a separate entity from

God but a union with God, so furthermore the Divine soul is a direct manifestation of the direct manifestation of God, and human souls manifesting from the Divine Soul are no different.

It is the fifth realm, the Angelic Realm, *alam al-malakut*, that human souls pass through and begin to take form. These souls take shape as intangible and symbolic forms. When one is asked to imagine the human soul, this is where we can begin to properly picture the soul. To anyone familiar with Plato this realm is comparable to the Platonic Realm of Forms, a theory that asserted the physical world exists only as a pale reflection of a perfect spiritual world that housed the ideal forms of all things. All things we physically interact with are merely shadows or image imitations of its ideal spiritual and metaphorical form in a higher realm according to this theory, and it is a useful comparison to understand the final two realms of Sufi cosmology for a Western reader.

The sixth and final realm is therefore the Realm of Bodies, or more simply, the Physical World, or *alam an-nasut in Arabic*. This is the material world we find ourselves occupying. This process of descent through the six realms from God to humans is what I believe creates the veil that surrounds the Beloved. So it is when the thirty birds arrive in the Simorgh, that “Although the Almighty’s independence is unending / and its detachment immense, / that Great One’s grace is also immeasurable. / And so, it was that Almighty’s grace that bade / the herald open the door and part / a hundred curtains with each breath” (Conference 328). One hadith, recorded in the work of Ibn Arabi reads: "Allah has 70,000 veils of light and darkness. If they were to be removed, the splendor of His face would consume". The theme of separation is repeated, with several interpretations. According to Sheikh Abu Saeed Mubarak Makhzoomi and the exegesis



of Ibn Arabi, this separation can be seen as fivefold (the number of descents between the realms), and the separation according to Attar is that of seven valleys and a hundred curtains but the point remains the same. We as humans are far from God, and that distance is a longing and painful one. However, it is equally true in both *Tohfa Mursala Sharif* and *Conference of the Birds*, that we are not ultimately separate from God despite our distance. It is the duty of the Sufi to return to God, that is what it means to walk the Path. The spirit inside man looks to be released and return to its source, and the success of a Sufi is *fana*, where the soul is reunited with the Beloved. The Sufi is called to “die before you die”, a line attributed to the Prophet Mohammed in hadith. Such a path is not an easy one and requires the total conquering of one’s *nafs*, to undo such a vast separation, an undertaking that not all people are fit to undertake.

This then raises several important questions. If death brings about the afterlife, then is this what separates those destined for heaven and those destined for hell? There is a bird, of unspecified species that inquires to the Hoopoe on the topic of sacrifice, asking “Hoopoe, pure in judgment as you are, tell me / how to risk it all for the Beloved’s love?” and the Hoopoe begins its answer about detachment from material with “The Path is not for everyone” (Conference 193). Such a statement is fairly self-evident, as not all people are Sufis. However, merely accepting that statement as such neglects the question that arises in turn. What happens to everyone else? Conventionally the believer goes to heaven as their reward and the unbeliever is cast into hell for eternity, but with the startling casual acceptance that “the Path is not for everyone” does this hold true?

## Beyond Heaven and Hell

Within the Valley of Poverty and Annihilation, the hoopoe explains “If, like Jesus, you possess even a single needle, / a hundred thieves will block your way, here existence itself becomes a veil” (Conference 312). The reference to Jesus being held in the fourth heaven is an Islamic tradition that explains how Jesus was stopped in the fourth of the seven levels of heaven as a result of a single needle being found on his body while he was ascending to Heaven. Such a reference suggests Attar’s consistency with such tradition, and confirms his agreement with the idea within the Quran that heaven is separated into seven parts (Quran 41:12, 65:12, and 71:15), this idea is further expanded on in the work of another Sufi, one who influenced Attar.

Similar to, but different from *Tohfa Mursala Sharif’s* six realms of God’s disclosure, The Mi’raj of Bistami features an elaborate depiction of the seven heavens that separate one from God- that is, Abu Yazid al-Bistami, a ninth-century Sufi and an early expositor of *fana*, mentioned earlier about the mission of the Sufi. The hagiography of Bistami is recorded in the work of Attar, as one of the figures included in *Memorial of the Friends of God*, wherein Bistami’s ascension to heaven (reflecting Muhammed’s account from the Quran), begins with: “I gazed upon God with the eye of certainty after that He had advanced me to the degree of independence from all creatures and illumined me with His light, revealing to me the wonders of His secrets and manifesting to me the grandeur of His He-ness” (Attar, Memorial 126). For a deeper look into Bistami’s ascension through the heavens, however, we consult the ninth chapter of *Al-Qasd Ila Allah* (qtd. in Sells 243) which goes into more detail about the seven heavens.

When Bistami first awakes in his dream, in “the lowest heaven, [he] was in the presence of a green bird” and the bird carries him to the stars, among a legion of angels. Here Bistami glorifies God amongst the angels until they realized “this is an Adamite, not a Luminary”, and begin to show him the whole of the dominion of the first heaven. Bistami looks away and proclaims his goal is “other” and opens his eyes to find himself in the second heaven. Here there are trees of light along a river’s shore, each tree filled with angels knelt in prayer. Again he proclaims “my goal is other than what you are showing me”. God sends an angel, and when Bistami reaches to take the angel’s hand, he finds himself in the third heaven. In the third heaven, Bistami witnesses an angel of four faces, who offered him the third heaven, but once more he proclaims “O my dear one! My goal is not what you are showing me”, and he is whisked higher. In the fourth heaven, an angel named Naya’il offers Bistami a throne upon an endless sea. In the fifth heaven, angels so great they stood in the fifth with their heads in the sixth heaven, and in the sixth heaven, angels of longing. All of these angels and heavens he refuses until he reaches the seventh, filled with a hundred thousand legions of angels, who bore standards of pure light. A crier exclaims to Bistami: “O Abu Yazid, stop, stop, you have arrived at the end! I did not turn toward his words. He continued to show me dominion that would wear out the tongue to describe. Through all that, I knew that he was testing me in it” But even in the face of this he refuses. It is then that God turns Bistami into a bird that soars “through the Malakut and roaming through the Jabarut”, the realms of power and angels (Mahkzooimi’s *alam al-malakut*), and the realm of absolute divine determination (Mahkzooimi’s *alam al-jabarut*) respectively, tearing through “veil after veil”. Consider the gap between the third and fourth realms in Mahkzooimi’s unfolding reality is the delineation between non-creation and creation. Here he comes to face God. Here God turns him to face all of creation, the heavens, and the earth - was smaller, from

the perspective of the flight of the secret of my heart in quest for Him, than a mustard seed between sky and earth”. Even to this, Bistami refuses, saying one last time “O my dear one! My goal is other than that which you are showing me”, and to this, God proclaims “To me, to me!”, inviting Bastami to “see the subtleties of my artisanship I-ness. You are my chosen one, my beloved, and the best of my creatures”. To which Bistami feels as if he “were melting like melting lead”, and was ultimately brought into a state that he is unable to describe, closer and closer with God, closer even than the “spirit is to the body”. So then, by this account heaven *does* exist, but it also tells us something more.

The Hoopoe, through the parable “The Almighty speaks through David the Pure”, calls the reader to question the existence and roles of heaven and hell, as God poses the question through the mouth of David: “Fistfuls of dust, were I to take away Heaven and Hell, would you still go on serving me lovingly?” (Conference 237). This question supposes firstly that both heaven and hell exist, as they would need to be given if they are to be taken, by a God who “[does] not want to be served out of fear or hopelessness” but rather “[loved] from the depth of your souls because I am your Creator”. However, it is posed to make one question if they act out of selfish desire or out of a purer servitude to God. Longing for paradise becomes a distraction. The Hoopoe is quite clear with the peacock, who longs to return to the Garden of Eden, saying “The Beloved is a grand ocean in which the Garden of Paradise is but a tiny ball of dew. / If you have the Ocean, you have the drop. / Don’t settle for less, don’t seek anything but the Ocean / (...) If you can contain the whole, why trouble yourself with the parts? (Conference 54-54). Whereas conventionally a Muslim would be taught that in return for living in accordance with the Prophet’s teachings their reward is paradise, Attar, and more broadly, the teachings of

Sufism, warn against acting out of the desire for a reward, as wrong motivation can be just as dangerous as wrong action.

Heaven, in fact, seven of them, await mankind, but they too dwell in the realm of creation. According to Bistami, those heavens exist to glorify God but all fall short of the glory of God. Bistami's ascent through heaven ends in sublimation, the decay of himself and entrance into God's embrace directly, "melting" until he was closer to God than his spirit was to his body. In this manner, heaven to a Sufi is an illusion, and true heaven is oneness with God, intimacy beyond intimacy, making sense of God as "the Beloved". This is a recurring theme of Sufism, present in the Conference of the Birds. If fana is not merely entrance to heaven but unity with the Beloved, and not only can this be attained in death, but in the death before death what becomes of those who fall short of such a feat?

As the Hoopoe explains: "When you are a polluted soul, / the Ocean will not refuse you; / you will merely sink to its floor / and remain yourself" (Conference 307). The ocean is used frequently as an allegory for the imperceivable vastness of God, and though the polluted soul sinks, the implication is that God still accepts such a soul into Himself, and the afterlife is promised to all, and though the polluted soul will continue to persist, it will lack the all-encompassing euphoria of oneness with God. Such pollution is the result of one's *nafs*, or aspects of one's lower self. In the English translation provided by Sholeh Wolpe, she uses the word "ego" to describe the lower self in need of vanquishing, and while the term evokes in my mind the clinical works of Western psycho-analysts like Freud, it is not such that it is too distracting. The term is apt for the sake of the English reader. Both represent the worldly and

self-absorbed aspects of humanity that lead us astray from God and create the illusion of the self. Every woman and man is bound by the nafs, and the trial of removing them is the purification of corruption.

Much of this question is explored in the Valley of Poverty and Annihilation, the final valley of seven in the journey the birds take to reach Simorgh. “When a lute and common kindling / meet in fire, they both burn / for they are made of the same wood. / But their attributes are not the same” (Conference 307). Death comes for all regardless, but what comes of those who die without first dying? Conference of the Birds does provide some clues to form answers to that question, and Attar in a humbling way, through the Hoopoe reminds us that we are all equally dust, and we can undergo the purification by fire necessary to reunite with the Beloved. The usage of fire as the purifying vector of the soul is frequent in Conference of the Birds and the parables within, and of them, the most poignant is the parable of the moths.

The parable of the moths begins much the same way Conference of the Birds begins. Just as the birds of the world gathered to seek out a leader for their nation, “the moths of the world gathered one night, seeking to know the candle” (Conference 310). As the Simurgh is to the birds as the Beloved is to a Sufi, the candle becomes the same for the moths, a distant and alluring flame. The gathered moths elect one by one a moth to dispatch to the far light and return with news. When the first departs, he approaches cautiously, and observes from a distance, noting down what he sees, and what he can glean from such observation. One moth, introduced as a critic contends there is no way such observation would reveal anything, he says “This moth fellow has no idea what a candle is!” (Conference 310). So, they send another moth. Bravely it

approaches the flame and as the flames lick the body of the moth it flees the heat. It returns with news of mysteries, but the critic is not appeased. “What use is this information? Like the other moth how can you really know the candle?” it asks. To this, a third moth volunteers, and unlike the previous two “drunkenly danced toward it” and perched atop the flame, not fleeing from the fire. Burning, the flame takes “the moth from feet to head” (Conference 310), and the critic is at last appeased. “This moth alone knows the candle. Who else can understand it? No one except the moth who becomes one with it” (Conference 311).

The proper nature of the afterlife is union with the vastness of God, without any degrees of separation, though this is not a union that spontaneously occurs upon one’s death, but a lifelong endeavor of purification of the self to the stage that no self remains at all, only a devotion to God.

“Indecisiveness is everyone’s fate (...) Purify yourself in your devotion / and you will arrive at your destination – albeit slowly” (Conference 137), the Hoopoe assures one of its followers, suggesting it is purely a matter of devotion. If indecisiveness is everyone’s fate, then devotion means to make that choice, loyalty, piety, and it means choosing it once more every day. It means also that everyone will fail. The introduction of choice and such concepts into the discussion, however, invites a whole host of new questions on the discussion of free will.

## Free Will

In my research on this matter I came across a simple three-panel comic titled “Freewill or Predestination” by Mohammed Ali Vakil, originally posted on Mar 14, 2009, in which a student asks a passing Imam the question “Which of my actions are by my free will and which are predestined?” to which the Imam (who is faceless, I presume because he is meant to depict the Prophet without depicting the Prophet), answers by instructing him to lift his right leg, and upon doing so, the student is informed this is free will. When the Imam then instructs the student to lift his left leg, the student informs the Imam that he cannot, to which the Imam responds “this is predestination”. The lesson to be taken here is that the answer is not free will *or* predestination, but rather free will *and* predestination, to what degree? Perhaps it is that one has free will over his or her actions, but God has the authority over the outcomes of his or her actions, this relationship, of course, is one allowed by God because if God is all-powerful, His power cannot end at us unless He permits it.

This is where I lament being unable to read Attar’s original Persian, as I am only able to appreciate Attar’s wordplay from a distance through the lens of translation. The figure and name Simorgh is not an original conception, but a pre-existing figure in Persian mythology, akin to a phoenix, and adopted by Attar for the sake of the Conference of the Birds, and not done so arbitrarily. In a journey undertaken “of the one hundred thousand birds / only a handful survived, and from them, / only thirty arrived at the door of the Great Abode” (Conference 324). This number, a mere three-thousandth of a single percentage of those who set out, becomes more significant when the birds look upon Simorgh “And when they looked closer, / they saw the



reflection was their own: / Simorgh... si morgh... / which means: thirty birds (Conference 331). This choice of wordplay by Attar invites inquiry on the nature of predestination within Sufism, the relationship Sufism has to Islam, and the fundamental tension created by the presence of free will in a monotheistic world, especially a world as total as the God's Oneness within Sufism. "The valleys you traversed / were in Me, / the bravery you displayed was Mine" (Conference 332), the Simorgh, whose role in Conference of the Birds is to speak as the Beloved, God states plainly. Whose will then governs how one acts? In a literal sense, Attar only says God is the world, and God is the *bravery* of the birds, not the birds themselves. However, what sense is there to argue that God is all things *except* us? That all things in our lives are outside of our control and our actions are not our own is a very uncomfortable idea to grapple with. For many, myself included, something deep within the human spirit categorically rejects this idea. What then does Attar have to say on behalf of Sufism to the matter of predestination?

To answer this question it is best to start with what exactly makes a man. To such an end the Hoopoe addresses the birds. "When Simorgh unveiled itself," the Hoopoe says, "the sun-like face cast / a hundred thousand shadows on earth. / Then with a single glance, in each shadow / the Great Simorgh birthed birds of diverse shapes. / Ignorant birds, / you are those motley forms in Simorgh's shadows" (Conference 76). Simorgh, standing in place for the Beloved, is a burning light that when unveiled casts great shadows from which the birds take shape, then so too are we shadows of the Beloved, a necessary consequence of the unveiling of the Beloved. "If Simorgh had not unveiled itself, / no shadow would have been cast, / and if Simorgh decides to hide itself, / no shadow will remain" (Conference 76). That we exist is proof enough God created us, that He waits for us. What is a shadow but a reflection of the light that births it? Where the light

intersects with the world, should the light fade so too does the shadow. What shadow is not intrinsically linked with the light that casts it? “Therefore if the shadow becomes visible, / it means something has been unveiled. / If you don’t have the eyes to see Simorgh, / it means your heart’s mirror is not clean”. The distinction of the heart as a mirror is an important one, and a useful one for understanding the struggle humanity has with God. God asks us to use our hearts to see him, to treat them as mirrors to gaze upon Him, as “no one has the capacity to see the Beloved’s face, / that Gracious One has given us a mirror to gaze / at the reflection of the resplendent Face”. Just as one cannot stare into the sun, only safely ponder its reflection, a similar nature enshrouds the act of witnessing God. Our hearts, our tools, however, are unclean, polluted, with nafs. As we are tasked to gaze inwards to look outwards, our vision is clouded by darkness smeared across the surface. “Polish your soul to reflect the Beloved’s grandeur”. Should through devotion and grace, such a mirror be cleaned, then we peered downwards into its surface, like a staring deeply into a pure pool of water to gaze upon the reflection of the sky, such an image inevitably includes the face of the viewer. Though for one to even see oneself, there must be light, and that light that enables self-awareness is the result of God. In our minds, we hold a vision of who we are, but with hearts polluted, we have never truly seen ourselves, the greatest irony being, that to see oneself is to realize that one does not exist at all. “When the door is cracked open, / sunlight pours in. Shadows suddenly vanish. / What remains will be the Sun and you”. In that now-clean pool of water, the heart’s mirror, when you see a face enveloped totally in the light of God, the revelation to come is that this is not your face at all, and then it is subsumed by the light. “What shadow is ever separated from its maker? / Do you see? / The shadow and its maker are one and the same,” the Hoopoe says, and if God is the light, and you are the shadow, what is the object such a light is cast upon to create those shadows? As the light

shifts so too do the shadows move in kind. So then does the shadow move only by the grace of God?

Accepting for the sake of this exploration that free will is, therefore, an allowance from God, then why would we be granted such a thing? Free will explains the unbeliever, but of what good is an unbeliever to God? The Quran reads: “As for those who persist in disbelief, it is the same whether you warn them or not—they will never believe. Allah has sealed their hearts and their hearing, and their sight is covered. They will suffer a tremendous punishment” (Quran 2:6-7). In a predestined world this comes across as arbitrary on the part of God, if we assume that no free will exists, then the only thing separating the believer’s reward and the unbeliever’s punishment is the determination of God at the beginning of time. If such a seal is the pollution on the heart’s mirror that will never come clean, is the seal placed upon the heart of the unbeliever because he is never destined to believe, is it a curse that prevents one who might have believed otherwise? Is the seal placed upon the heart of the unbelievers because they have already turned themselves from the Light of God? Those who have determined they do not need God receiving exactly what they desire? By the grace of God then, what makes a believer if God has made it so that some can simply never find the grace of God? Furthermore, what is the place for forgiveness? Surely the unbeliever has done something unforgivable?

A bird laments to the Hoopoe “I have sinned all my life. / How can a wicked bird such as I / find its way to the Great Beloved?” and it goes on to reason “to be wicked means you have left the Road; / how can such a wretch as I ever regain the Path?”, but the Hoopoe is quick in its response. “You speak from ignorance. Do not despair! / Throw aside your shield and welcome

the wound”. The key parts of the Hoopoe's response revolve around the words “ignorance” and “wound”. The latter brings us to Rumi, the thirteenth-century poet I’ve mentioned before as referencing Attar as an influence, so far as to say that “Attar has roamed through the seven cities of love while we have barely turned down the first street”(Moore & Sheldon, 277). Rumi has said “The wound is the place where the Light enters you”, and expands on the Hoopoe’s call to “welcome the wound”. We are often to shy away from wounds as shameful things, and avoid them as undesirable, but Attar and Rumi alike ask us to reconsider. In the following parable, Attar tells the story of a man "tormented by shame”, one who “repented his many sins and returned to the Path, yet when his flesh regained its vigor, he gave in to lust once more and broke his promises”, placing shame and vigor opposite of one another. At this stage, he “stayed away from the Path for a long time and committed all kinds of wickedness. After a while, the pain of shame took hold of his heart once more and soured his life. He wanted to repent again, for sin had brought him nothing but misery, yet he did not have the courage to do it” (Conference 130). It is easy when life is good and one’s flesh is full of vigor to neglect God and lose sight of the Divine. Much like the door being opened just a crack to allow in the Light, so too must the body be open, and in this manner, that is the wound to which both Attar and Rumi refer. That the man’s life of sin brought him nothing but misery brought him low enough for God to pick him up once more. The vigor of one’s flesh can lead to a swelling of one’s ego, and such a thing blinds.

It is in the immediately following parable that the angel Gabriel hears God, the “Blessed Beauty respond ‘Here Am I’, to a supplicating prayerful voice. The angel thought, *I don’t know who this servant may be, but he must be a pure man, dead to his ego and alive in his soul*”, and in the context of the translation, to be dead to his ego would mean such a man is cleansed of his

*nafs*. To this end, when Gabriel departs from heaven to find this man, searching the “earth and the oceans, the mountains and the fields,” he still fails to find the supplicant. God points him to Rome, instructing Gabriel to a temple of idolaters should he wish to find the man. When Gabriel finds the man prostrate before an idol, in tears and deep in prayer, he hastens back to God, and asks “Self-Sufficient One, unveil this mystery to me. He is praying to an idol, but it is *you* who in your grace answers him”. For Gabriel, this series of events is bewildering, and not without good reason. “Surely Allah does not forgive associating others with Him in worship, but forgives anything else of whoever He wills. Indeed, whoever associates others with Allah has clearly gone far astray” (Quran 4:116), reads the Qur’an. Above all sins, idolatry is beyond forgiveness, yet here God calls out to an idolater who prays not even to Him, but to his idol. If idolatry is *the* unforgivable sin, and the Qur’an - the word of God - makes this clear, then how do we explain this mystery Gabriel pleads be unveiled? How can some be forgiven of idolatry and some left without finding God at all? “This man’s heart is darkened by ignorance”, the Almighty explains to Gabriel. Whereas when one is pulled over to the side of the road by a police officer, ignorance of the law is no excuse, a genuine ignorance is enough to warrant God’s forgiveness of even the unforgivable. “He does not know he has been misled. He has committed this error unknowingly,” God continues, stressing the importance of proper guidance. This idolater, without a proper guide, is allowed forgiveness because he has never had a proper master.

The importance of a good teacher is at the core of the text in *The Conference of the Birds*. After the birds have gathered, their first order of business is the election of a leader, or more accurately, a guide. “We cannot manage this journey on our own. We need a guide to lead us through thick and thin; tell us what to do. Such a voyage demands a great governor, someone

who can keep us from sinking into the bottomless ocean” (Conference 109). A Sufi requires a guide, a student under a master, just as this flock of birds requires the Hoopoe. Experience tempers the risks of delving into the depths of the Almighty, and the master has one hand to show the path, and the other hand to catch you should you begin to fall. “*I do not commit errors,*” God tells Gabriel, “I will now guide him to the Path. My benevolence will lead him to repentance” (Conference 131). Without a guide, God deems it fit at times to step in directly. In the case of the man who is the pure and supplicant servant, only led astray in which direction to prostrate, God’s gentle hand reaches out to offer the right way.

In the case of a man whose renewed worldly vigor draws him from the Path, the Almighty dispatches a voice to the anguishing recidivist sinner. It says: “The Supreme Being of the world says: ‘The first time you repented, I accepted your repentance and forgave you. I did not tax you, even though it was within my power. When you broke your penitence, I did not unleash my anger on you’” (Conference 130). The ignorant and the repentant form an intersection at which one finds God’s mercy at play. Those without guidance are forgiven by the Almighty and are offered a hand to help them onto the Path, and those who know the Path and have fallen from it, are forgiven should they find themselves stepping - even crawling - back on the Path. The throughline it seems is taking God’s hand when it is offered. The message to the sinful man continues: “Once again, you ignorant one, you wish to come back to the Path? Well then, come. I have opened the door for you to make amends. I am waiting” (Conference 130). The Qur’an states it is “those who persist in disbelief” who have seals upon their hearts, and the persistence with which God is denied is the basis upon which such seals are placed.

It is the power, the authority of God to open wide the door between Himself and those who are lost, and sometimes that door comes in the form of a wound. It remains however that it is the place of God to open the door and we to accept His hand should he do just that. I struggle with what seems to be an arbitrary nature to how God chooses who is and isn't deserving of an open door, but as God said to Gabriel "*I do not commit errors,*" and grace comes to those who are capable of repentance and humility on that doorstep. The role that God's grace plays is a mystery beyond other mysteries, and it is not unreasonable to suggest it is the mystery underlying all other divine mysteries.

Such a mystery of grace does not go unnoticed by those birds around the Hoopoe. They look upon the "crown-wearing bird" who is their leader and wonder what has made him so wise. "Any bird who gazed at its countenance / was indeed fortunate" (Conference 112), Attar says of the Hoopoe, "A hundred thousand or more birds" gather in the masses to listen to the hoopoe, and one comes forward to ask the Hoopoe a question about grace. It asks: "O most excellent Hoopoe, / how have you come to learn the Truth / better than us? / You are a seeker just like us; / What sin have our bodies and souls committed / that your share in life is the clear part of the wine / and ours is the dregs?" (Conference 113). A world that possesses inequality leads to questions of injustice, and such injustice leads to a reality that contradicts a just God. Such simple observations of the world might evoke images of a fickle cosmos ruled by a fickle power, but God told Gabriel He does not commit errors, and who is there to speak of being owed God's allegiances, or being owed anything at all for that matter? The Hoopoe answers the birds about what sets them apart, saying "Questioner, it is because Solomon's gaze / fell on me but for a moment" (Conference 113). Remember that the Hoopoe is the servant of King Solomon, the bird

trusted to carry his messages, and the bird amongst the conference whom he calls out as missing and demands to see. As the Hoopoe is to Solomon, the prophets are to God, and as the Hoopoe continues: “in that one glance I found grace”.

“When did anyone gain such grace by mere worship? / Didn’t Satan pray day and night? / Still let damnation rain on the bird / that says worship is for nothing. / Do not give up praying, not for one instant, / yet, when you do pray, don’t put value in it. / Spend your life in prayer so that the great Solomon / may grace you with a glance. / Once you have Solomon’s gracious approval, / you will become more than what I can ever describe” (Conference 113-114).

## **Iblis**

It becomes all but impossible at this point to continue discussing free will without discussing the story of Iblis. Where free will and Islamic Sufi theology intersect will always find Iblis at the crossroads. The figure of Iblis is irretrievably linked with arguments about the will of God, and the origin of Islam’s Deceiver - that is, the devil - is rife with theological debate. By some accounts, Iblis is a jinn, a class of spirits below angels, molded of fire as man is molded of the clay. Alternatively, Iblis is an angel, or I would suppose, a fallen angel. As told in the thirty-fourth verse of the second surah of the Quran, “Then we told the angels to bow before Adam and they did, except for Iblis, who was scornful and acted proud, and became a disbeliever”. The story of Iblis is reiterated in the thirty-eighth surah of the Quran, it reads: “Remember when your Lord said to the angels, I am going to create a person from clay. When I have shaped it and breathed into it of my spirit, fall bowing before it. All the angels fell bowing



together. Except Iblis who acted proud and became a disbeliever. He said, O Iblis, what has prevented you from bowing before what I created with my two hands? Are you too proud or are you too lofty?” (38:71-75). This translation is provided by Michael A. Sells, who notes when he uses the word “bow” in his translation, it is a very precise word in the original text as compared to the English. “The crucial point here”, he explains, “is that the term used is the term for Islamic ritual prayer (salat) and this entails, in the argument that Iblis will give, the notion not only of respect but of formal worship” (Sells 269). While commonly held that Iblis, Satan as he is, fell due to his pride, centuries of interpretation have contemplated and tempered the understanding of his motivation.

Two interpretations of Iblis exist, one as an angel, and one as a jinn, a pre-human creation of God’s hands, spiritual beings separate from angels, he was among the angels in the Garden, and when the angels are addressed, he is included. “When your Lord said to the angels,” reads the Qur’an, and the angels are said to be prostrated *except* for Iblis. There is no reason for Iblis to be anything but an angel at this point, except for an aspect of Arabic grammar that allows minorities as small as one to be addressed as part of the majority should they be amid the majority.

Without any evidence to suggest this reading, that would be irrelevant information. That very evidence, however, does exist. “Anyone who refuses to believe in God, and His angels, and His scriptures, and His messengers, and the Last Day, has indeed strayed far astray” (4:136), the Qur’an reads, including the angels between God Himself and the scripture of the Qur’an, the former and latter being infallible. I would argue this implies certain infallibility to angels if they

are *as a whole* to be believed. The Qur'an further expands on this most explicitly, reading: "Indeed, We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they 'all' declined to bear it, being fearful of it. But humanity assumed it, 'for' they are truly wrongful 'to themselves' and ignorant 'of the consequences'" (33:72). The angels, belonging to the heavens, and humanity being singled out as those only beings to assume free will indicate the angels' lack of will beyond obligate service and praising of God. How then, can Iblis deny God?

The first answer comes from within the Qur'an. "We said to the angels, 'Bow down before Adam,' and they all bowed down, but not Iblis: he was one of the jinn and he disobeyed his Lord's command" (18:50), it reads, indicating that despite standing amongst the angels, Iblis is uniquely of the jinn rather than the angels. The jinn, akin to humanity possess the will to obey or disobey God of their own free will.

While the disobedience of Iblis remains a constant, between Iblis as an angel and Iblis as a jinn. Sufi thought contrasts his disobedience with the radical supposition that Iblis refuses to kneel not because he thinks himself superior in his fire to the clay of Adam, but because Iblis's love for God makes him a truer monotheist than any before or after him, be Iblis an angel or a jinn. Such an argument is posed by the writings of Mansur Al-Hallaj, a Sufi mystic who was not only biographed by Attar but who also appears at the center of one of the parables in Conference of the Birds. Such a parable comes to us only through his death, having been executed for proclaiming that he was God.

It is Hallaj, some three hundred years before Attar's life who is responsible for the *Tawasin*, chapter six of which explores the motivations of Iblis. When questioned in this chapter, Iblis himself provides a curious answer. "He [Iblis] was told [by God]: 'Bow down!' He said, '[to] no other!' He [Iblis] was asked, 'Even if you receive my curse?' He said 'it does not matter, I have no way other-than-you. I am an abject lover'" (Sells 274). There is a beautiful irony to Iblis's devotion, that his devotion to God would prevent him from following a command directly from God. Describing himself as an "abject lover", Iblis proclaims there is no other way than God, nothing with bowing before. Iblis goes on to meet Moses on Mount Sinai according to the *Tawasin*, whereupon Iblis justifies his action, arguing to Moses "That was a test, not a command", that the "proclamation of only one object of worship prevented [him]" (Sells 275). It is in his utter singleness of devotion, that Iblis shows a willingness to bear a curse from God as the due price of his devotion. Such action marks him to Sufis as belonging amongst their order as a more ambivalent figure than one of pure evil. Iblis's commitment to the will of God is such that it overrules even the command of God, and his love for God is such that he fears no curse so long as it comes from God.

Such sentiment is repeated in Attar's work, as in the parable of Iblis Refusing to Bow, Conference of The Birds describes Iblis as bearing the curse as more than a just due price, but as any other person would bear a blessing. "Since I know about that pure treasure, how can I then fear a curse?" The curse is yours, forgiveness is also yours; all of creation belongs to you and destiny is under your command" states Iblis, "the recipient of your mercy is no better than the one who receives your curse, for both come from you" (Conference 256). In this parable, the Almighty commands the angels to kneel so they would not witness the mystery of Adam's

creation. Due to his curiosity, however, Iblis looks on, beholding the mystery. He proclaims he knows about “that pure treasure”, but it is unclear just what he witnessed and what he knows, as that mystery is still a mystery to us. This motivation does not explicitly conflict with Iblis’s depiction in the Quran, for “I am better than him,” Iblis contends, as “You created me from fire and created him from clay” (Quran 7:12). Iblis knows therefore there must be something God has done to make Adam more. This uncertainty eats away at him and watching the creation seals his fate as an exile, cursed to exist in longing separation from God.

In his long exile, Iblis contemplates the ideas of predestination, and his own will, for if he acted independently of God, then he knew he was following his devotion to God most sincerely, that nothing would stir him from his love most pure. If however, Iblis has no independent will in the matter, he is still unconcerned because he is fulfilling the destiny as charted for him by his Beloved, as the one uniquely cursed. The fall, the corruption of his form, would all be in accordance with God’s will, and Iblis recognizes the nature of God’s oneness of will. “I have a will in you, and you have a will in me. Your will in me is prior and my will in you is prior” (Sells 274), Iblis is resolute, saying that regardless, “if I bow before an other-than-you, or do not bow, I must return to my origin, for ‘you have created me from fire.’ Fire returns to fire. To you belongs the determination and the choice”. If returning to his source is the fate of Iblis, then so be it, whether he has a will of his own, his fate is ultimately in the hands of God, and he will be obliterated and returned to the source. Is this not the stated intention of the Sufi?

Iblis knows he was made from fire and knows he is destined to be unmade and returned to the fire regardless of his actions, as “both the determination and the choice” belong to the

Almighty. This insight brings me to reflect on the question of the human endeavor, if in death we are all destined to return to our source pure or not, and should the Beloved at any time hide His face and vanish all shadows He casts, are all our fates in the most basic sense not predestinated? In comparison to the infinitely vast power of the Almighty, especially as conceived by Sufi theology, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible to defend the existence of free will, as we conventionally understand it.

It would be the case then as the created are reflections of the Creator, in the way that man looks inward to the heart's mirror to witness the glory of the Almighty, then among the infinite aspects of God that reflect, God's divine will would by necessity be included. Just as Hallaj boldly claimed himself to be God, and was put to death for this heresy, Iblis claims *his* will is *within* God, which can be read as a heretical utterance from the devil, but I would argue it should not be. Just as Hallaj could become a vessel for God (after the obliteration of the self) to recognize that your will exists *only* in God is not any different from recognizing that only God's will exists within you.

At this stage in the argument, whether Iblis is an angel or a jinn is entirely irrelevant. God's will permeates so deeply in all things. To contend that angels are distinct from mankind and the jinn because angels lack free will is itself an illusion.

If Iblis acted in accordance with the will of God, and his fate was predestined, then evil must also derive itself from God. This would be a radical statement to make were it not for the total monotheistic vision of Sufism, to justify it. The reality of evil's origin is no better or worse

than all good deriving originally from God. It is simply the case that God is all things, and to assert the free will of Iblis, or even our free will risks saying evil is the offspring of Iblis and humanity, creating an adversarial force that would by necessity share influence over humanity. The nature of God does not allow this. Implying that Iblis's choice can contradict the will of God is to limit God's totality. Theological dualism cannot exist for an extended period within the theology of a Sufi, as it would be contradictory to the intrinsic nature of reality as a reflection of God in all His aspects. Defending the power of free will would be tantamount to holding another power equal to God. Such a mistake could be considered an act of idolatry, the very act Iblis refuses to commit no matter the curse placed upon him, no matter the distance and hardship he might have to endure as he becomes the deceiver.

### **Destined to Suffer, Destined to Die?**

Here we return to the Simorgh as it stands before the broken and ugly birds which made it to the presence of His throne. "The valleys you traversed / were in Me, / the bravery you displayed was Mine" (Conference 332) but it was those self-same valleys within which so much suffering, distance from God, and untimely, ugly death occurred:

"Some drowned in the sea; / others simply vanished. / Some succumbed to thirst / on lofty mountaintops, / others to injuries and heat. / Some burned their wings in the sun / or the heat baked their hearts. / Some were devoured by tigers and lions / in a most shocking and foul way. / Some disappeared in the claws / of ravenous greedy beasts. / Some died of thirst in deserts, / or expired from exhaustion and heat. / Some lost their minds longing for a grain of

wheat / or killed themselves from hunger. / Some became weak, fell behind, and vanished. / Some were charmed by marvels and became distracted. / Others yielded to the sirens' songs and stayed behind" (Conference 323-324).

Of one hundred thousand birds, only thirty remain, "without wings or feathers / arrived feeble and sore, / hearts shattered, / souls surrendered, / bodies broken". Those few who do survive and reach the Simorgh are in such a sorry state, utterly brutalized, and they are the successful and the fortunate. That birds who seek the Simorgh, more than ninety-nine percent of them succumb to thirst and hunger and beasts and heat and illness, physically and spiritually. "How can the Almighty allow this?", the disbeliever might ask in an argument. But in response, I would double down. I have attested to the illusion of free will according to the Qur'an as well as Conference of the Birds, among other Sufi works, "How can God allow this?" is the wrong question, rather "How can God will this happen?".

Attar of Nishapur died in 1221, in a massacre carried out by invading Mongols under Ghenghis Khan. It is said that an arrow fired from Nishapur struck down Ghenghis Khan's favored son-in-law, and in response, the city would be drowned in blood. Attar's skull was amongst the pile left behind. Are we to believe this was God's will? By Attar's own account, yes. "Have you ever observed how a restless spider spends its life weaving and scheming?", asks the Hoopoe in the Parable of the Spider. "It busies itself with the shrewd delusions and spins its home in a corner. It wondrously weaves web perchance to ensnare a common fly" (Conference 159). In his life Attar witnessed the fall of the Seljuk Empire from his home in Nishapur, and the

rise of the Khwarazmian Empire, which itself would fall only ten years after his death as a result of the very invasion that led to Attar's death. "That's the world for you", Attar writes, as he explains the reality of the spider: "Then suddenly, there's the real master of the house, standing on tiptoe, stick in hand. In one breath, gone is the spider and its hard-won fly" (Conference 159). As empires rise and fall the life of one man is no different as both are equally insignificant to the Almighty. "I have told you my religion, dear one", Attar writes, "If it brings degradation, what of it?". The ego is the plaque of the soul, and one's nafs are only scoured by humility. Humiliation is the first step in enlightenment, and death is the greatest humbler. "The lover Majnun once said: 'Were all who live on earth to give me praise for an eternity, I would not want it. My beloved Layli's curses are enough praise for me'" (Conference 326). This is all to say, "What the Almighty has wrought is for my own good" (Conference 197), and much like Iblis, the difference between a blessing and a curse is not a matter of concern, when compared to the hand which bestows it. How can God not only allow but will all manner of things to happen to mankind? The answer is in the question: God can because God wills it.

The Beloved veils Himself in order to be discovered. "If the Beloved wants to make love to you, / that Great One artfully plays love's game. / You're nothing and you're good for nothing, / so stay a nonentity and leave it all to that great Master Artist" (Conference 244). Attar warns the reader not to become boastful when the Almighty grants you audience, as "whatever is done, it is the Almighty's work. When my heart bleeds, it's the Beloved who endures the pain". There is only one thing God desires from us, and that is the pain in our hearts, that we bear it and go to Him so that he might take it from us. Love only grows fiercer from distance, and "If the Beloved tests you / by selling you to this twisted existence, / don't turn around and sell the Beloved for



the world (Conference 241), as there is nothing for us in this world, it is a bowl of sand with ever-shifting images, lines in the dust. However, it is only as it is in the Parable of the Moths that the lost can be found. It is only through burning that one can know the flame. Attar speaks directly to the reader, calling the journey along the Path a “battlefield of pain”, and calls upon the reader as one “Whose existence is mingled with nonexistence”, an alchemy, a combining of opposites, which must not be hesitated over. Contradiction is at the heart of the truth. “Set fire to reason” he commands, “And flare into a mad lover”. (Conference 319). “It’s pain you must seek,” Attar reiterates, “Longing and experience. / For your longing, seek no remedy; if you do may your soul fade away” (Conference 348). It is only after the king believes he has hastily slaughtered his beloved out of jealousy in the Parable of the King Who Loved His Minister’s Son (Conference 337) that their love unfolds fully into an unknowable form, watered by the pain of loss and separation, from a seed planted in grief.

That is all to say, Love is not rational, especially for the Sufi, “Shut up and lose yourself; / There is no greater honor / than losing the ego for love” (Conference 197). Even as I write I become trapped in the very behavior warned against, growing concerned for what becomes of those who stumble and are unfit for death before death, and the euphoria of unity with God, out of concern for what rewards distinguish those touched by grace. In a way, I have become like the peacock by my fascination with these questions. Recounting the death of Alexander the Great, Attar writes of what Aristotle said: “King of Certitude, while you lived, you lavished council unceasingly. What you teach today with your death completes all that advice”. There is life, and there is death, and we die. Calling upon the birds, Attar says “Among lovers / only those with wings flee this worldly cage before death comes”, that the condition of these lovers is hard to

recount, / for such souls speak a different tongue”. The only answer then, by Attar’s command, is to “disengage from the mind to learn / the wisdom of spiritual faith / for if you learn in the realm of philosophy, you’ll never know the dominion of the soul”. “Philosophy,” he says, “ensnares you in its *whats* and *whys*, it plunders your intuitive knowledge, even if you are wise”, and that the first remedy to this is to “let go of the philosophizing mind”. Attar laments, “how long will you keep on speaking, Attar, / You are not the man for this colossal task”. He reflects asking, “If I walked the Path, even for a moment, / would I be a poet writing poetry?”.

Attar, asks quite simply: “What use is a life if not as an offering / for love of the Beloved?” (Conference 196), and I have nothing more to say on that matter.

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