

The Soul-Body Relation from the Perspective of the *Wujūdiyyah* Ṣūfī Metaphysics with a Special Focus on Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Metaphysical Framework

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.56389/tafhim.vol17no2.3>

Abstract

This paper draws from the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas to elaborate three aspects pertaining to the nature of the soul-body relation that can be taken as a genuine solution to the problem of their interaction. The methodology employed is philosophical analysis to elaborate such aspects as derived from the tradition of the *Wujūdiyyah* Ṣūfī metaphysicians, that is to say, the discussion on the soul's ontological nature as non-existence (*ʿadam*); the soul as a spiritual “subtlety” (*al-latīfah al-rūhāniyyah*); and man as a new creation (*muhdath* or *khalqan ākhar*). The first two provide the metaphysical and epistemological bases for the positing of man as a new creation consisting of both the spiritual aspect (*insān*) and the bodily aspect (*bashar*). Both supply a holistic understanding of the nature of man which includes not only his spiritual and the metaphysical aspect, but also his ethical and societal aspect. These are contrasted with similar discussions from the Western intellectual tradition such as the Cartesian dualism and the Hegelian conception of the Absolute Spirit.

Keywords

Al-Attas, *Wujūdiyyah*, soul-body relation, nature of man, Ṣūfī, Cartesian dualism, Hegelian Absolute Spirit.

Article history:

Submission date: 1/2/2024

Received in revised form: 6/5/2024

Acceptance date: 5/8/2024

Available online: 20/12/2024

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interest:

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Cite as:

Dayang Nurhazieqa Hamzani, “The Soul-Body Relation from the Perspective of the *Wujūdiyyah* Ṣūfī Metaphysics with a Special Focus on Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Metaphysical Framework,” *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 17, no. 2 (December 2024): 57–84.

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Introduction

The interaction of the soul and the body has been a topic of discussion in philosophy and theology before the modern period. Within the Aristotelian scheme, the relation is described as a unity where the soul is the *entelechy* of the body, that is, the principle that moves the body.¹ Its unity is as that of a wax and an imprint and, to Aristotle, the unity is so great that he cannot conceive of the soul surviving the body after death.² However, contemporary philosophy of mind assumes a mechanistic framework and the solutions tend to be physicalist or materialist in nature.³ In contemporary discourse of the philosophy of mind, then, the discussion of the soul as understood in classical philosophy or as understood in religious tradition such as Islam will be prone to be alienated, due to the dismissal of existence and reality beyond the natural physical world. The exposition of the soul as the *entelechy* of the body, perhaps, is also not adequate to address the spiritual capacities of the soul as understood within the Islamic tradition.

The designation of the soul as the form of the body, using the framework of substance metaphysics may not reflect the ontological understanding that exists in the worldview of Islam, as well as other Eastern traditions. To untangle the puzzle of the interaction between the soul and the body, it is important to consider the nature of the soul and its origin. This article argues that the understanding of the soul and the nature of man within the tradition of Sūfism can provide a proper and adequate metaphysical framework with which the problem of the mind-body can be addressed, and a solution can be attempted.

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1. Aristotle, “De Anima,” in *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), 414a 14–15.
 2. *Ibid.*, 414a19.
 3. Physicalism in the philosophy of mind here is used to mean the metaphysical thesis that the mental is dependent on or derived from physical entities or properties, making the physical as the foundation of everything. See Ansgar Beckermann, Hans Flohr, Jaegwon Kim (eds), *Emergence or Reduction? Essays on the Prospects of Nonreductive Physicalism* (New York: De Gruyter, 1992), 1. Jaegwon Kim states that physicalism believes that every phenomenon, if it were to be explained at all, can be explained in accordance with the laws of physics and all things are made up of matter. See Jaegwon Kim, *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 149–150. There are a number of physicalist theories of the mind, ranging from a strictly physicalist one which eliminates the mental to theories that account for the mental but attribute it as derivative from the brain/body. See Jonathan Westphal, *The Mind-Body Problem* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016), 53–82. According to Kievit et al., “Identity theory is implicitly assumed in most cognitive neuroscientific,” where identity theory is a type of physicalism where the mind is identical to the brain. See Kievit et al, “Mind the Gap: A Psychometric Approach to the Reduction Problem,” *Psychological Inquiry* 22 (2011): 67–87. See also Bagozzi, “Alternative Perspectives in Philosophy of Mind and Their Relationship to Structural Equation Models in Psychology,” *Psychological Inquiry* 22 (2011): 88–99.

The works of a contemporary Malaysian scholar, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas⁴—who discusses the importance of Ṣūfī metaphysics, mainly from the tradition of the School of Transcendent Oneness of Existence (*wahdat al-wujūd*) or better known as the *Wujūdiyyah* Ṣūfī metaphysicians/scholars, when framing a philosophy of science—serve as one such example.

Ontologically, the worldview of Islam as articulated by al-Attas rejects the rigid understanding of essence (the essentialist metaphysical worldview) and proposes an existentialist worldview, which will be elaborated further below. In brief, in addressing the soul-body relation, al-Attas posits a new creation altogether which circumvents the mechanistic framework that underlies contemporary science today. However, without giving a proper discussion to frame this idea of man being a new creation, the solution would still run into problems since the modern mechanistic framework would always require an explanation based on its own terms. The discussion on the nature of man in al-Attas, which includes the elaboration on its dual aspect of being both physical and spiritual, takes place in his commentary of the verses from the Qurʾān, which conveys the central position of Revelation in his philosophical system. Here, al-Attas is using epistemological channels that are accepted and affirmed within the worldview of Islam beyond the ones employed by contemporary philosophers of mind, as well as in Peripatetic philosophy, which allow him to reconfigure our understanding of the soul and the body. This article will go over the elaboration of the human soul from the works of al-Attas which include: (1) the elaboration on the ontological nature of the soul; and (2) the positing of man as a new and special entity out of soul and body. These elaborations of the human soul provide a metaphysical basis for accepting the idea of man as having a dual nature as a genuine attempt at dissolving the aporia that is the soul-body relation.

4. Al-Attas is a Malaysian scholar who has written on topics such as philosophy, education, and the history of the Malay Archipelago. He was the founder as well as the first director of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur. His works on the philosophy of science from the worldview of Islam as well as his exposition on modernity and secularisation serve as a great riposte to the Western intellectual tradition and its myriads of philosophical issues. His biographical information can be obtained from the Introduction to Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud's *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998) and from Muhammad Zainiy Ūthman's Introduction in his Malay translation of al-Attas's monograph on happiness, titled *Ma'na Kebahagiaan dan Pengalamannya dalam Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2014, originally published 2002).

The Worldview of Islam

The worldview of Islam, to al-Attas, is “the Islamic vision of reality and truth, a metaphysical survey of the visible as well as the invisible worlds including the perspective of life as a whole,”⁵ and the inculcation of this worldview involves true knowledge and *ādāb*. True knowledge is defined by al-Attas as the “arrival of meaning in the soul and the soul’s arrival at meaning” and this understanding of knowledge also implies “the recognition of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence.”⁶ The importance of *ādāb* can be gleaned from this understanding of knowledge, which al-Attas reformulates as right action and acknowledgement of the reality and truth of what is recognised.⁷ There are nine fundamental elements to the worldview or the metaphysics of Islam that al-Attas has outlined: the nature of God, revelation, creation, man and the psychology of the human soul, knowledge, religion, freedom, values and virtues, and happiness.⁸ According to al-Attas, these elements are always present and permanently established as a metaphysical grounding on which Muslim theologians, philosophers, and Ṣūfī metaphysicians build their sciences.⁹

When seen in the context of the philosophy of science, the requirements of true knowledge and *ādāb* compel the Muslim thinker or scientist to know the right meaning of the objects to be studied and which epistemological channels and modes of thinking to be employed.¹⁰ These epistemological

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5. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (first impression, Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995; reprinted Johor Bharu: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) Publishing, 2014), 1–2.
 6. *Ibid.*, 16.
 7. *Ibid.*, 16 and 17.
 8. *Ibid.*, 5.
 9. Muhammad Zainiy Uthman, *Al-Attas’ Psychology* (Kuala Lumpur: Himpunan Keilmuan Muslim, 2022), 16.
 10. On the modes of thinking employed in scientific activity and the elevated abstract thinking achieved by the heart (*qalb*), see Alparslan Açıkgeç, “Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’s Place in and Contribution to the History of Islamic Philosophy,” in *Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, His Philosophical System and Conceptions of Humanity, History and Civilization* (Kuala Lumpur: RZS-CASIS and HAKIM, 2022), 73–112; M.Z. Uthman, *Al-Attas’ Psychology* and “Al-Attas on Action, *Thinking Framework*, and the Human Soul,” in *Thinking Framework* (Kuala Lumpur: RZS-CASIS and UTM Publication, 2020), 7–44.

channels include sound senses, true reports based on authority, sound reason, and intuition.¹¹ Intuition as *ilhām* is of a higher rank than knowledge (*ʿilm*) and exists on two levels.¹² The lower level is that which allows for understanding some specific aspects of the world such as the rational and empirical intuition of the scientists.¹³ The higher level of intuition is the spiritual intuition of the saints and prophets which allows for direct insight into reality as a whole.¹⁴ It is this higher level of intuition that is neglected when studying the soul in contemporary science or philosophy but which exists in higher Ṣūfī metaphysics. In the study of the soul, the notion of proper place in the worldview of Islam posits the soul, and by extension, the body, in relation to its Creator and in the order of being and existence. As the metaphysics of Islam is not simply an abstract speculative thought but has its practical aspect as well, so does the question of the soul revolve around the correct ethical precepts and the question of moral right and wrong in order to achieve peace and happiness in this life and the Hereafter. Al-Attas captures all these multifaceted aspects on the question of the soul in many of his works, including his works on education and his commentaries on Ṣūfī manuscripts, although his writings that pertain exclusively to this topic can be found in his monograph *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul*¹⁵ and his book *On Justice and The Nature of Man*.¹⁶ Al-Attas's main points on the question of man or human soul can be summarised in this table below. In this article, only the first two will be elaborated, for the discussion on the soul as spiritual subtlety requires its own elaboration.

11. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 118.

12. M.Z. Uthman, *Al-Attas' Psychology*, 56. See also page 27, footnote 80 where intuition as meant by *ilhām* is considered as a gifted knowledge from God which distinguishes it from the content of general knowledge about worldly things.

13. *Ibid.*, 67. See also Al-Attas's *Prolegomena*, 120–121.

14. *Ibid.*, 68.

15. Al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1990).

16. *Idem*, *On Justice and the Nature of Man* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Banking and Finance Malaysia (IBFIM), 2015).

Table 1 Al-Attas’s explanation on the human soul/nature of man

On the Human Soul/Nature of Man	Explanation	Implication
The soul’s ontological nature as non-existence (<i>‘adam</i>)	The soul’s mode of creation continually being created and destroyed in the process of <i>khalq jadīd</i> . ¹⁷	Leading to the acknowledgement and affirmation of God’s Will and Power over one’s existence, and in turn leading to submission to God’s commands.
Man as a new creation (<i>muhdath, khalqan ākhar</i>)	Man as a third entity constituted out of the soul and the body, not simply a combination of the soul and the body; man’s nature having a dual aspect (<i>nafsān</i>). ¹⁸	Reframing the soul-body relation, with man being defined as a new special entity, enabling the original attributes of soul and body be reimagined, hence elevating the status of man.
Soul as a spiritual “subtlety” (<i>al-latīfah al-rūḥāniyyah</i>)	The term subtlety or <i>latā’if</i> encapsulating the soul’s capacities, metaphysical origin, and spiritual nature. ¹⁹	Expanding the modes of thinking and channels of knowledge; allowing for spiritual truth.

The Soul’s Ontological Nature as Non-Existence (*‘Adam*)

For the *Wijūdiyyah* Ṣūfīs, the origin of the soul and the knowledge or self-awareness that it has can be explained by the doctrine of degrees of existence; that is, the unfolding of existence as manifestation into more concrete manifestation-forms (*mazāhir*) in the lower degrees of existence. The soul then is recognised as something created, i.e., as it takes its manifestation in the spatiotemporal world of empirical things; creation here is also understood as an unfolding of existence and the myriad of things that we see in this world as continually perishing and being recreated anew.

Existence, in the perspective of the *Wijūdiyyah* “is involved in a dynamic and perpetual process of self-unfolding.”²⁰ The world and creatures are described as being in a state of ontological annihilation (*fanā*), and each existence does not endure two moments of time.²¹ This means, at each particular moment, a new world is being created, and this is called *khalq jadīd*. God’s act of creating is from eternity, but this does not make the created things also eternal, since the connection between the eternal power of God to the object being brought to

17. Idem, *Commentary on the Ḥujjat al-Siddīq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, 1986), 272.

18. Idem, *On Justice*, 35.

19. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 148.

20. Idem, *Commentary*, 272.

21. Ibid.

existence is only momentary.²² Everything other than God is in this perpetual state of creation and annihilation due to their nature of being “pure non-existence” (*‘adam mahd*). Since their nature is ultimately non-existence, they require something else that exists in order for them to be brought to existence and since non-existents cannot sustain themselves, they cannot exist continually beyond one moment. God is that Absolute Existence that is responsible for existentiating and sustaining all the other creations. Creation is also not a necessary emanation of God’s existence since it involves God’s creative power (*qudrah*) and will (*irādah*).²³ Things other than God have no existence in themselves, but they have their existence only in relation to the effusion of existence.²⁴ Their appearance of subsistence as having essences is due to our mind attributing a reality to the quiddities of things, which is only real in the mind, that is, mentally posited (*i‘tibārī*).²⁵ The “veil” symbolism is prevalent in Sūfī works,²⁶ and what it means exactly or how the “veil” comes about is due to the process of the unfolding of existence at different degrees and the constant act of bringing something into existence, also known as expansion (*bast*), and returning it into non-existence, known as contraction (*qabd*). Al-Attas explains that when considered from our point of view which is at the level of intellection, the constant renewal and perishing of beings in the world is seen as “the ‘descent’ (*tanazzul*) of the Absolute from the degree of non-determination (*lā ta‘ayyun*) to those of determination (*taqayyud*), particularisation (*takhaṣṣus*), and individuation (*ta‘ayyun*).”²⁷ The “veil” then is this presentation of existence into multiple determined, particularised, and individuated modes of itself, which our soul cognises as separate entities, and this in turn covers or veils us from seeing the Reality of existence for what it is.²⁸ Al-Rānīrī said aptly:

22. Ibid., 259.

23. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 330. Al-Attas states that there are four elements to creation and besides His creative power and will, it also requires God’s command “Be! (*Kun*)” to bring things into existence as well as the infusing of His existence in the forms of things.

24. Ibid., 291. The effusion of existence is also understood as the descent (*tanazzul*) of existence. See *ibid.*, 312.

25. Ibid.

26. See, for example, Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). According to Schimmel, Ibn ‘Arabī, as a proponent of the *wahdat al-wujūd* doctrine in Sūfism, differs from earlier Sūfī mystics whose poetry often puts more emphasis on the personal love between God and the Sūfī. Ibn ‘Arabī’s works instead strive to lift the veil that covers the fact of the “unity” between man and God.

27. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 239.

28. Ibid.

Ketahui oleh mu, hai 'arīf, bahawa sanya Haqq Ta'ālā itu terlalu nyata, tiada menghijabkan Dia sesuatu juapun, hanya terdinging Ia daripada segala makhluk karena sangat nyataNya.

(Know, O knower, that the Truth Most Exalted is too manifest, nothing veils Him, but He is veiled from creation because of His intense manifestation.)²⁹

This is why the Ṣūfīs talk about unveiling or *kashf*, which indicates the event where the Ṣūfī “loses” his or her ego to arrive at the state of trans-empirical awareness, the one called in the Ṣūfī literature as the state of *fanā'*, *fanā' al-fanā'*, and *baqā'*.³⁰ Furthermore, our soul, at every moment of cognising or intellecting the world around it, is also undergoing this self-same process of creation and perishing. Al-Attas says that the soul experiencing this process while being a *khalq jadīd* itself is what produces consciousness.³¹ But if this is so, how does the soul retain its memories of the past, its aspirations of the future, all its knowledge from the moment before everything perishes, if everything is constantly being re-created in the next moment? Would not the contents of the soul's knowledge also perish, and are they also being re-created anew? The *Wujūdīyyah* metaphysics provides an explanation to this question using their understanding of the unfolding of existence. When the *Wujūdīyyah* speaks of creation as the unfolding of existence into lower degrees, or the discussion on the ontological “descent,” what exactly are being manifested, and whence are they coming? It has been said earlier that the nature of those other than God (*mā siwa Allāh*) is pure non-existence. Things are considered pure non-existence only to describe their ontological status in this world when considered in themselves; for they do not have the existence as the mind conceives of them as having.³² But, in another sense, pure non-existence also refers to the ontological possibilities (*mumkināt*) when considered as something that is known (*ma'lumāt*) in the Divine knowledge.³³ The things that are manifest at the level of empirical things are from the unfolding or existentiating of what is called the exterior archetypes (*al-a'yān al-khārijiyyah*) into more concrete forms, producing the multiple things that we have in our world.³⁴ This would technically include everyday conscious experience such as feeling or thinking about something as this experience is produced by our interaction with the world outside us.

29. Al-Rānīrī, *Laṭā'if al-Asrār li-Ahl Allah al-Aṭyār of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī*, trans. Muhammad Zainiy Uthman (Kuala Lumpur: UTM Press, 2011), 226, 506.

30. Al-Attas, *Commentary*, 177.

31. *Ibid.*, 176.

32. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 305 and *Commentary*, 169.

33. *Idem*, *Prolegomena*, 306.

34. *Idem*, *Commentary*, 165, 285.

The exterior archetypes themselves are the products of the self-manifestation of the Absolute Existence, but they are not a direct unfolding from the Absolute Himself; it is only a reflection of the interior archetypes (*al-aṣṣān al-thābitah*) and these are called interior because they remain eternally in the *bātin* aspect of the Absolute, in His Divine consciousness.³⁵ The Sūfis of the *Wujūdiyyah* tradition elaborates this using the allegory of light casting its shadow after being projected at something. If existence is seen as light, the exterior aspects are understood as shadows (*ẓill*), and it is in this sense that the Sūfis speak of the world as being the shadow of God (*ẓill Allah*).³⁶ The exterior archetypes are but a reflection of the interior archetypes (*al-aṣṣān al-thābitah*), which are known in the Sūfī literature by many names, including the Divine Names and Divine Attributes.³⁷ They are known only to Him and are unknowable to anyone other than Him. It is in this way that they are referred to as being in a state of non-existence (*‘adam*).³⁸ Interior archetypes are called *al-aṣṣān al-thābitah* because they are permanent (*thābit*) or fixed, and as such, are also called as permanent archetypes.³⁹ Connecting this with creation as *khalq jadīd*, where everything is ever perishing and being renewed, the permanent archetype also undergoes such a process of existentiating and perishing. However, what differs them from the exterior archetypes is that their natures are at every moment recreated by God as retaining their original form and identity.⁴⁰

This is what makes the permanent archetypes able to serve as the potentialities that impart different natures and attributes, being as they are the Names and Attributes of God, and in this sense, they are also called as *isti’dād aṣliyyah*, or the primordial potentialities.⁴¹ They are what determines the essential properties of the things that are manifested or existentiated in the empirical world, after undergoing further manifestation by the exterior archetypes.⁴² Permanent Archetypes have their original identities continually reconstituted

35. Ibid., 166. “The archetypes, as we have pointed out, never leave their condition of being interior; they remain in the plane of the Unseen (*al-ghayb*) as intelligibles existing eternally *a parte ante* (*qadīm*) in the Divine consciousness.” See also a similar discussion in *Prolegomena*, 250. For a more thorough explanation of *al-aṣṣān al-thābitah*, see Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1979), 81–86.

36. Idem, *Commentary*, 282n329. Al-Attas is here quoting from Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and al-Rānīrī’s *Jawāhir al-‘Ulūm*.

37. Ibid., 162. The Divine Names also have two aspects with one giving impression or making effect in the intelligible and the external worlds, and the other receiving the produced effect. The double aspect of the Divine Names is then said to assume both the parts of the active agent (*fā’il*) and the passive recipient (*qābil*). It is in this way that the Divine Names act as causes which produce effects in our empirical world. See Idem, *Prolegomena*, 256.

38. Ibid.

39. Refer to al-Attas’s discussion on the meaning of *‘ayn* and *thābit* in *Prolegomena*, 242n268.

40. Ibid., 242 and idem, *Commentary*, 272.

41. Idem, *Commentary*, 253.

42. Ibid.

in the dynamic process of the unfolding of existence whereas all others are re-created as similars. It is in this way that the Permanent Archetypes, as Ideas in the Divine consciousness, retain their subsistence or endurance although they do not actually experience continuous existence.⁴³ In this scheme, the soul's subsistence and knowledge of the highest things and self-awareness can be said to endure and subsist because they embody the effects and necessary concomitants of a nature that "subsists." In all these, existence is only one, single being, but just as the refraction of light by a prism resulting in multiple colours, similarly, due to existence continually unfolding through various stages and involving both the interior and the exterior aspects, multiple concrete beings arise, filling the earth with the diversity of creatures.⁴⁴ Returning to the soul as a thing that subsists, consider how in the reflections of philosophers across different periods of time and geographical areas, they realise that it is our soul or the spiritual aspect of man that remains or endures. Whereas our body undergoes changes due to the process of growth and ageing or as a result of injury and sickness, the mind or the soul is always aware of itself and its experiences, except in the cases where our physical illnesses tamper with the faculties of our soul, for example, dementia which is brought about by the ageing of the body, or amnesia caused by circumstances affecting the physical body such as accidents or concussions. In the history of modern Western philosophy, we can see this realisation of a subsisting soul as exemplified in Descartes's *cogito*, and whereas in Descartes this only refers to an individual Ego or mind, subsequent European philosophers abstracted and elevated from this a universal Reason, or Spirit, as can be seen in the Enlightenment thinkers. In fact, the entire philosophy of German Idealism is prefixed upon the endurance of the spirit, reason, or idea as opposed to material things. Hegel, in particular, posits a Spirit (*Geist*) or consciousness (*GewiBheit*) that manifests Itself in history as historically important figures or activities in which humans partake such as religion or science, culminating in an enlightened and peaceful civilisation.⁴⁵

The realisation of these philosophers signifies the higher status of the soul to enforce change and shape civilisations, which it can only do if it is subsisting or endures. But from the perspective of the *Wujūdīyyah*, the soul also undergoes continual perishing and recreation every next moment, just like the body and other creations in the world of sense perception. As has been discussed earlier, what persists and endures in the soul can be attributed to the recreation of the Primordial Potentialities or the Interior/Permanent Archetypes which reside in

43. Ibid., 272.

44. Ibid., 165. The quote is from al-Jāmi's *Lawā'ih*, trans. E.H. Whinfield and Mirza Muhammad Kazvini, Oriental Translation Fund Series (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1928), vol. XVI, 14–18.

45. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. by AV Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

the Divine Consciousness. Although they never go out of their *bāṭin* condition, the forces conforming to their natures (*ahkām*), concomitants (*lawāzīm*), and effects (*āthār*) can be actualised.⁴⁶ In the *Wujūdīyyah* metaphor of light and shadow, the Light of God's Essence can pass through the Interior/Permanent Archetypes, reflected in the shadow that is the Exterior Archetypes and further cast onto this world of sense perception.⁴⁷

How, then, does the *Wujūdīyyah*'s exposition on Existence differ from the aforementioned German Idealists' positing of an Absolute Spirit or Universal Reason? This Spirit or Reason is portrayed by Hegel as manifested in individual human rationality. The Absolute is seen as the main force behind important figures as well as nations of people to affect history. For example, Napoleon is said by Hegel to be a soul of the world or a world-soul seated at that particular time on his horse but is also reaching out over the world to master it.⁴⁸ At a glance, it seems not too far off from the *Wujūdīyyah* idea of an Absolute Existence manifesting Itself in an individualised existence. The Absolute Spirit is also explained by Hegel as an absolute activity. However, it has to be emphasised that Hegel's or other German Idealists' depiction of the Absolute and its manifestation as individual man is not particularly detailed and elaborate. The nature and attributes of this Absolute is also not known beyond it being a more elevated understanding of our own Consciousness or Reason. This is because Hegel's Absolute Spirit's metaphysical origin is not theological but naturalistic or arising from the natural world. Their logic in positing this *Geist* is that since we ourselves have a cognising spirit, this and the events in our history are enough for us from which we can abstract the presence of an Absolute Spirit. This is clear when reading Hegel's discussion on philosophical history. Since thought and reason, says Hegel, are an essential aspect of humanity, and history is a recollection or discussion of humanity, the history of the world is therefore a rational process. However, this hypothesis is not elaborated in more detail and is regarded by Hegel as a conviction and intuition that underlies the study of history; in other words, this is the basic assumption in history.⁴⁹ It may seem as if Hegel is merely saying that the history of humanity is something that can be interpreted rationally, but he does not stop there, as Reason and Idea in History take on an independent spiritual reality or metaphysical concept that is posited as an expression of human subjectivity.⁵⁰ The Absolute, in Hegel's philosophy,

46. Al-Attas, *Commentary*, 270.

47. *Ibid.*, 283. And the things in the empirical realm are the self-revelations (*tajalliyāt*) and self-determinations (*ta'ayyunāt*) of the Absolute Existence at the level of fourth and fifth determinations.

48. Letter from Hegel to Niethammer, 13th October 1806 in *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 113.

49. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 8–9.

50. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 40.

remains an abstract and inexplicable thing and there is no detailed explanation of how exactly this Absolute affect events in the world.⁵¹ How exactly does Napoleon Bonaparte encapsulate the World-Soul? Other than the fact that he is changing the course of European history with his military expeditions and the subversion of the French Revolution, not much is explained regarding the relation between a metaphysical and abstract being and the individualised person of Napoleon. Does Napoleon share the same mind with the Absolute since he is described as a particularised world-Soul? No answer can be conclusive.

On the other hand, the *Wujūdiyyah*'s scheme of ontological descent and the double aspects at each level of determination reject this possibility of the individual man sharing the thoughts of the Divine Mind. Our individual soul, therefore, cannot be said to be of the same ontological nature with the being of God. This is a very important point as there are a number of philosophical systems that portray the Absolute Existence as manifesting Itself as the concrete individual beings in this world, resulting in a pantheistic belief.⁵² The *Wujūdiyyah* metaphysical system, when understood correctly, does not lead to the confusion of the relation between man and God, nor do the levels of determinations affect the possibility of man knowing the divine. This is because the soul is the seat of knowledge and the heart (*qalb*) as the organ for spiritual cognition is present in each soul.⁵³ Furthermore, man's very purpose is to know and serve God.⁵⁴

The incorrigibility of the Absolute Spirit in Hegel is what ultimately drew the criticism and the eventual rejection of Hegelian philosophy by subsequent philosophers of the 19th century,⁵⁵ as can be seen in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, although the idea of an active Existence or Being remains and made its appearance again in the likes of Heidegger and Bergson. However, Western philosophy's foray into this nature of Absolute Existence in the 18th and 19th century was driven by the Enlightenment and Humanist ideals that are marked by a rejection of God as has been understood for millennia within the Christian tradition, as well as the increasing importance of individual liberty.⁵⁶ The German Romantics or Enlightenment thinkers such as Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich Schlegel are noted for their non-Christian understanding of an

51. Taylor has this to say on Hegel's discussion on this Absolute or Spirit (*Geist*) and its relation to man in *Hegel*, 45: "But it must already be clear that it is not easy (and indeed possible at all) to win through to a coherent view of a cosmic spirit on this model, or to maintain clearly in view what it requires."

52. In fact, al-Rānīrī devoted a few books during his time in Aceh to set the manner straight on the relation between God and His creations in light of the incarnationist and pantheistic misunderstanding of Šūfī doctrine. See al-Attas, *Commentary*, 8–9.

53. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 143–144.

54. Ibid., 144.

55. Taylor, *Hegel*, 537–538. Hegel's ideas had a resurgence in the 20th century but his central ontology of the Absolute Spirit is still rejected.

56. For a view on the shift to secular humanism and its ties to Enlightenment thought, see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019).

Absolute Universe or Being. To these poets, their metaphysical idea of the Absolute is more Platonic in conception.⁵⁷ Heidegger is very much influenced by these German Romantics as can be seen from the similarity of their ideas on Being as well as Heidegger's frequent reference to their works.⁵⁸ The Spirit is portrayed as originating not from an otherworldly realm; instead, it is a universalised reason of all man, or something that is just there in nature. The notion of freedom features prominently in the discourse which is very much influenced by this idea of the Spirit, giving it an ethical worldview different from the Catholic one.⁵⁹

Al-Attas has noted the shift in Western metaphysics towards a dynamic view of reality involving process but, to him, this does not mean that Western metaphysics has entered their existentialist phase. In fact, the philosophy of the 19th and 20th century that we have briefly surveyed above which seems to describe an existentialist metaphysics is still thoroughly essentialist in manner.

They have applied such names as 'life' or 'vital impulse', or 'energy', implying movement, the change, the becoming that are productive of events in space-time. That they have chosen these names as descriptive of the reality manifested as process is itself an indication that they consider existence, unlike life, vital impulse, or energy, as a mere concept; and as a mere concept existence is indeed something static, clearly disqualifying it as corresponding with process. In this sense, their formulation of a philosophy of science, in contradiction with their position that the reality underlying phenomena is process, still revolves within the sphere of an essentialistic worldview, a worldview preoccupied with 'thing' having independent and self-subsistent 'essences'...⁶⁰

57. Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 351–355.

58. See for example, Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck, J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). A work of Heidegger that attempts to reframe our thinking on existence beyond the usual discussion on God as in the Christian framework is his *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

59. Freedom is a main feature in Enlightenment and Idealism thought. For freedom in Kant and other *German Idealists*, see Beiser, *German Idealism*, 289–306. For freedom in Hegel, see Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 341–356. It has been argued that Hegel is a Christian philosopher, for his writings betray a Christian leaning since he placed heavy emphasis on Christianity as embodying the Absolute Spirit above other religions. However, we would argue that Hegel is extracting secular ideals from the Christian tradition, or secularising the Christian religion into a humanist philosophy in keeping with the *zeitgeist* in which he finds himself, a world that is slowly putting religion in the backseat. We can see this when he makes religion an inferior mode of understanding the Absolute Idea compared to philosophy, see G.W.F. Hegel, "Concept of Philosophy," *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy* [1820–1827], trans. T.M. Knox and A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

60. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 127–128.

On the other hand, the *Wujūdīyyah*'s affirmation of a single Existence or Reality is not motivated by these anti-theistic or humanistic ideals but is instead squarely rooted in the cornerstone of Islam, which is the belief and submission to God.⁶¹ The end product of this worldview is not a man who realises that he is free to pursue his rational and civilisational potentials without limit, but a man who realises that his existence is merely loaned or borrowed and therefore polishes his soul by way of disciplined intellectual and spiritual endeavours to know and perchance, experience, more of the excellent Light of His Existence. This is also how the concept of the soul in Islam is related to the question of ethics.⁶² According to al-Attas, knowing the self (soul) leads to knowing the positive and negative aspects of one's self, and knowing the latter will move the self to purify his own soul by way of practising good virtues.⁶³ In other words, self-knowledge in Islam is not a solipsism where only the self is seen as existing, but self-knowledge will necessarily lead one to know one's God and one's place in relation to Him and other creations, and this includes submitting also to His Will and Laws.

The question of relation to oneself, God, and others necessitates an ethical worldview. This is in contrast to Descartes's self-knowledge because it leads primarily back to his own reason, where the relation to others as well as its ethical connotations are not elaborated. Despite the intricate nature of the metaphysics of the *Wujūdīyyah*, it is not a mere abstract thought removed from the ethical concerns of this world. Thus, seeing the soul from this perspective is not simply a question of establishing the self metaphysically and ontologically, but also a question of answering to the soul's ethical demand of the right way to live. This explains the importance placed on ethics and happiness in the works of al-Attas.⁶⁴ Although man's self or soul is metaphysical in nature, this does not negate his responsibilities in the physical world; rather, it is because

61. According to Wan Mohd Nor, the existential view expounded by the *Wujūdīyyah* scholars such as al-Rānīrī and al-Attas is not extraneous to the Qur'an, nor is it antithetical to what the Qur'an says. It is instead what is at the core of the religion of Islam. And those who misrepresented the *Wujūdīyyah* doctrine of transcendent unity or oneness of existence drew stern reactions from the true *Wujūdīyyah* scholars as exemplified by al-Rānīrī and his attack on pseudo-Sūfis. From a Saturday Night Lecture on the 27th September 2019, held at UTM Kuala Lumpur. Wan Mohd Nor's book, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas* is also an illuminating read on the worldview of Islam that is derived from the *Wujūdīyyah* philosophy as expounded by al-Attas.

62. Al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Morality* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2013).

63. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 97.

64. Al-Attas elaborates his ethical philosophy which rests on the correct understanding of man in his book *On Justice and the Nature of Man*. Happiness, which is an important discussion within ethics is also discussed at length by al-Attas in his monograph entitled *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993) which is made into the second chapter of his *Prolegomena*. A Malay translation of this monograph was done by M. Z. Uthman as *Ma'na Kebahagaaan dan Pengalamannya dalam Islam*.

his soul is metaphysical in nature that he becomes complete with an ethical worldview. The Absolute in the metaphysics of the *Wujūdīyyah* therefore cannot be equated to the many similar discussions of the Absolute in Western philosophy due to the lack of an articulate explanation of the latter's metaphysical system and an expansive view of the former that not only covers the epistemological grounds for its legitimation, but also the ethical and religious responsibilities that accompany the metaphysical recognition.⁶⁵

Man as a New Entity Out of Soul and Body

The soul is always understood in Islam as being created first, contrary to the position of Aristotelian philosophers as well as Ibn Sīnā.⁶⁶ The real man, according to al-Attas, refers to his articulate soul.⁶⁷ To support this position, the *Wujūdīyyah* refers to an event recounted in the Qur'ān, which is the Day of the Covenant (*yawm alastu*). It occupies a central importance in the metaphysical framework of al-Attas which will be elaborated in this section as it sets the context for the creation of man. Al-Attas explicates his conception of man as a new creation or a new entity, which emerges out of the two entities of the body and the soul. The special status of this new creation separates man from the other animals, whereas the positing of man as a third entity out of the soul and the body allows us to break away from the constraints placed by the fixed nature or quality of the soul and the body. This is how the relation between the soul and the body can be reimagined to sidestep the problem of their interrelation. But first, we will look at the Day of the Covenant and how the soul is said to be prior to the body.

To al-Attas, the covenant (*al-mīthāq*) that man has with God is an essential element and, in fact, a starting point to understand the concept of religion in Islam.⁶⁸ This refers to the event recounted in *Sūrat al-Aḥqāf* (7):172, where God addressed the souls of men and asked them if He is indeed their Lord, and the souls testified in the affirmative. Al-Attas emphasises that these are pre-existent souls before they become known as the human person, that is, as life in this world.⁶⁹ Al-Junayd, who is quoted by al-Attas when discussing the covenant, speaks of this existence of the soul as a “timeless existence,” as mere “concepts which He has conceived” in time where men are “in the state of unity with the

65. Perhaps it can be argued that the philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle also provide a system that links metaphysics and ethics, but the Good or the Unmoved Mover in Aristotle differs from the Absolute in the *Wujūdīyyah* metaphysics. The Good and the Unmoved Mover or First Cause is unknown and uninvolved, and Aristotle's philosophical system makes it impossible for this First Cause to know particulars.

66. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 172.

67. Idem, *On Justice*, 28.

68. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 75.

69. Ibid., 179.

Lord.”⁷⁰ Al-Junayd further says that God spoke to man before he had a formal existence, and while still being in the state of a spiritual existence.⁷¹ When the covenant was made between the souls and God, they were in fact affirming and testifying to God’s Lordship over them as this is the reality and truth that they were made to witness. Al-Attas also emphasises that they knew this by direct experience and vision (*shuhūd*).⁷² The soul that was making the covenant is the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*)—which al-Attas also translates as the “articulate soul” as the more apt English rendering, since the ability to articulate ideas to convey meanings is considered to be the outward manifestation of the cognitive faculty of the soul.⁷³

Al-Attas points out that at this stage, although the Ṣūfīs refer to it as a “union” between the souls of men and God as al-Junayd’s explanation earlier shows, it has to be remembered that the distinction between God and His servants is still there; for, these souls are acknowledging God as their Lord, indicating thus that the God-servant demarcation still exists.⁷⁴ The demarcation between God and creatures then is never completely erased as in a monistic understanding. This safeguards God’s Absoluteness and His own Essence (*dhāt*) which ultimately is only known to Himself; whatever man knows of this stage of union is only by God revealing this via His Aspects and Names; thus it is only revealed in a limited way; limited, because it is not revealed from His own Essence.⁷⁵ Indeed, this revelation of reality and truth to the soul is a remarkable event. Commenting on another verse, *al-Nisā’* (4):58, where God commands man to deliver the trusts (*amānāt*, sing: *amānah*) to those who are worthy of them, al-Attas states that one of the contexts in which the verse can be understood better is with regard to man’s relation to himself, which

...refers to his origin; his Covenant with God his Creator and Lord; his acceptance of responsibility and accountability; his knowledge and his freedom of choice between alternatives of good and evil made known to him by God; his purpose in creation; and his ultimate destiny. All this involves man’s duty and loyalty to God, and his unconditional obedience morally and ethically throughout his life.⁷⁶

70. Ibid. Al-Junayd’s writings are from his *Kūtāb al-Mūthāq* in Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd* (Kuala Lumpur: IBT, 2013, originally published 1976), 160–161.

71. Ibid., 161.

72. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 180.

73. Idem, *On Justice*, 31.

74. Idem, *Prolegomena*., 197. The stage of the covenant also refers to the union before separation, separation meaning the creation of man as soul and body living in this world when man cognises the world in its diverse manifestations, and perceives things no longer as one single existence, but as many entities.

75. Ibid., 198.

76. Idem, *On Justice*, 3.

The covenant, then, signifies man accepting not only his servitude, but also with it, the responsibility to carry out the trust that is placed upon him. Al-Attas also affirms the spirit (*rūh*) as carrier of this *amānah*, or the Trust of Vicegerency.⁷⁷ Thus, we can see Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī, a 13th century Ṣūfī master, in his *Mirṣād al-Ibād* also speaking about the creation of the body as a special occasion since it will need to house the soul which is considered to be the highest of the high, and the carrier of the burden of the Trust.⁷⁸ Al-Rāzī was referring to the tradition of the Prophet, where God is said to knead the clay of Adam with His own Hands, and this manner of creating was different from how things other than man were being created, needing only the command of “*kun*.”⁷⁹ This metaphorical elaboration signifies the sublime status of the soul and, by extension, the human being within Ṣūfī literature.

In explaining the creation of the body, al-Attas made sure to distinguish between the three terms used in describing the creation of man in the Qurʾān (*Sūrat al-Muʾminūn* (23):12–14):⁸⁰

And indeed, We created man (*khalāqnā*) from choicest selection of clay; Then We made from it (*jaʿalnāhu*) sperm and lodged it in a stable dwelling; Then We created the sperm to become a clot, and of the clot We created a lump, and of the lump We created bones and clad the bones with flesh; Then of it We originated (*anṣhaʿnāhu*) another creature. So blessed be God, the Best of the creators.⁸¹

These are “to create” (*khalāqa*), “to make” (*jaʿala*), and “to originate” (*anṣhaʿa*).⁸² *Khalāqa* denotes a process of creating something unique and new, existing for the first time; *jaʿala* denotes something that is drawn out from another latent thing, in the sense of making or producing something from another existent thing; while *anṣhaʿa* is originating something according to the likeness of a former thing, such as the resurrection of the body.⁸³ Al-Attas points out that the term used in the verse to denote the embryo that is produced from the fusion of the male and female gametes is *khalāqa*, which signifies that the creation of embryo, and subsequently the creation of the human foetus, is an entirely new individual organism. This is what al-Attas meant when he states that man is “neither soul

77. Ibid., 32.

78. Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return (Mirṣād al-Ibād al-Mabdāʾ ilā al-Maʿād)*, trans. Hamid Algar (New York: Caravan Books, 1982), 95.

79. Ibid., 97. That the body's creation is depicted in such a positive manner, although its base attributes are still acknowledged, differs from how the body is portrayed in Platonic writings and many Christian works. The body, in these works, are almost always portrayed only as a cage and a lowly thing.

80. Al-Attas's translation. See, al-Attas, *On Justice*, 33.

81. Al-Attas's translation. Ibid.

82. Ibid., 34.

83. Ibid.

nor body, nor is he a composite of the two, but a third entity constituted out of the two.”⁸⁴ Such an understanding of man as a new creation is significant in two ways: firstly, it elevates man as a being as higher and separate from the rest of the animal kingdom, unlike the theories of modern anthropology and evolutionary biology; and secondly, it reframes the question of the relation between the soul and the body.

Al-Attas points out how both “soul” and “body” are understood as having their own distinct states of existence that pre-exist the creation of man. The soul refers to the articulate soul (or rational soul) which received the covenant, while the body refers to the foetus, and the human foetus shares many similarities with the foetus of other mammals.⁸⁵ Indeed, human development from the stage of the embryo is also similar to other animals, and this has been cited widely by the scientific community, beginning with Charles Darwin, as a mark of man having evolved from the same animal ancestors as per the theory of evolution.⁸⁶ However, when the spirit is breathed into the soul, this event elevates the foetus into man and this is what differentiates man from other species of animals.⁸⁷

Al-Attas also refuses to call man as a composition of the soul and body, or a dualism of the soul and body, since a composite does not indicate the merging of the two entities, and in a composition, the soul and the body would retain their original characteristics. Hence, he emphasises the need to consider man as a new creature (*khalqan ākhar*), meaning, it is a “third entity constituted out of the two.”⁸⁸ Considered in this way, the problem of how the soul is said to interact or relate to the physical body loses its currency since the question was phrased with the idea of the two entities retaining all of their natures and attributes in the soul-body union. Man as a new creation merges the essential characters of the soul and the body,⁸⁹ and this formulation does not bind us to

84. Ibid., 35

85. Ibid., 36.

86. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, originally published 1871), vol. I, 14–15. A famous drawing by German biologist, Ernst Haeckel, in his 1874 book, *Anthropogenie*, compares the embryonic development stages between human and other animals including pig, salamander, chicken, and rabbit, which are similar. The image was then shown to be fraudulent as Haeckel drew the human foetus to be much closer to the other animals’ foetuses. However, as the 20th century evolutionary biologist, Ernst Mayr, remarks, the similarity would still be there and is enough to give ample support to evolutionary theory, had Haeckel not retouched the image. See Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is* (London: Phoenix, 2002), 42. In a discussion with M. Z. Uthman at RZS-CASIS on 2nd August 2022, he mentioned how Darwin’s theory of evolution is a remnant of the Aristotelian idea of generation and corruption of matter that produces other beings. Carlo Rovelli demonstrates that the precursor to the theory of evolution can already be seen in Anaximander, in the 6th century BCE, in his work *The First Scientist: Anaximander and His Legacy* (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing, 2011).

87. Al-Attas, *On Justice*, 36.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., 36.

the original intangible character of the soul or the concreteness of the physical body in imagining the relation between the soul and the body. This *khalqan ākhar* is said to have a dual nature at once spiritual and physical.⁹⁰ This is articulated by al-Attas as man having two souls (*nafsān*), although this does not mean a dualism or two independent souls in a human body. Al-Attas only applies the term *nafsān* to man when he lives or exists in this empirical world because it specifically refers to him having both the spiritual aspect, referred to as *insān*, and the bodily aspect, known as *bashar*.⁹¹ After his death, man is identified back by his true designation, *al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*, which is his true and real self.⁹² The dual nature of man as *insān-bashar* is further explained by al-Attas as having different capacities which are also referred to using the term soul or *nafs*. These souls are the “soul of the intellect or reason” (*nafs al-‘aql*), the “soul of discrimination” (*nafs al-tamyīz*), the “vital spirit” or the “soul of the breath” (*nafs al-rūh*), and the “soul of life” (*nafs al-ḥayāh*). The *nafs al-rūh* and *nafs al-ḥayāh* correspond to the philosophical concept of the animal soul (*nafs al-ḥayawāniyyah*), while *nafs al-‘aql* and *nafs al-tamyīz* correspond to the philosophical concept of the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*). The following table summarises this classification by al-Attas:

Table 2 Classification of the dual nature of man in al-Attas

The soul of the intellect/reason (<i>nafs al-‘aql</i>)	The rational or articulate soul (<i>al-nafs al-nāṭiqah</i>)	Pertains to man’s spiritual aspect, the real agent of one’s moral and ethical acts and behaviour. ⁹³	Man as <i>insān</i> (The real or true nature of man)	Man as <i>nafsān</i>
The soul of discrimination (<i>nafs al-tamyīz</i>)				
The vital spirit or soul of the breath (<i>nafs al-rūh</i>)	Animal soul (<i>al-nafs al-ḥayawāniyyah</i>)	Pertains to man’s physical or bodily aspects (biological nature, physical life, shape, bodily origin). ⁹⁴	Man as <i>bashar</i>	
The soul of life (<i>nafs al-ḥayāh</i>)				

90. Ibid., 38.

91. Ibid., 40.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid., 39. See also Idem, *Islām: The Covenants Fulfilled* (Kuala Lumpur: Ta’dib International, 2023), 9.

94. Ibid.

From the table above, the relation between the physical and the spiritual aspect in man is made clearer. The *insāniyyah* aspect in man which corresponds to the real and true nature of man (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*) has the responsibility to guide his physical aspect, since it is the locus of moral and ethical acts. Al-Attas derives this classification from *Sūrat al-Shams* (91): 7–10;

And a soul and Him Who perfected it (7). And inspired it (with conscience of) what is wrong for it and (what is) right for it (8). He is indeed successful who causeth it to grow (9). And he is indeed a failure who stunteth it. (10)⁹⁵

Al-Attas interprets verses 7–8 as referring to the soul in its state of perfection which is the one addressed by God in the Day of the Covenant.⁹⁶ However, verses 9–10 refer to the state of the soul in its life in this world being united with the body. Thus, according to al-Attas, the allusion of the two verses to success in developing the soul and failure in stunting its development refers to the moral responsibility with regard to its conduct and behaviour in this world, further entrenching the concept of man in the idea of moral and ethical framework.⁹⁷ This is also the significance in separating the status of man from other animal species despite their biological similarities. Him having been equipped with the capacity to know and cognise truth, and being given his ethical precepts and religious worldview, man's soul would be safeguarded from the tendency in today's evolutionary biology to answer ethical or religious questions by deriving answers from our similarities with the animal kingdom or from evolutionary forces that purportedly shaped our social interactions.⁹⁸

Al-Attas gives further explanation on the merging between the soul and the body to create a new entity using the analogy of the saturated sponge in his most recent work.⁹⁹ The water and sponge are of different essentials from our point of view. However, they can both assume a single form and identity when the sponge becomes saturated with water, becoming an entity that has both aspects of the sponge and the water. Again, taking his inspiration from the verses from the Qur'ān—in this case *al-Zūmar* (39): 42 and *al-An'ām* (6): 60, where the soul is described as being taken from the body during sleep and being returned to it—al-Attas explains that the soul that is taken from the

95. English translation is from Marmaduke Pickthall.

96. Al-Attas, *Islām: The Covenants Fulfilled*, 37.

97. *Ibid.*, 9.

98. See for example Dennis L. Krebs, "Morality, an Evolutionary Account," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 3 (2008): 149–172; and Jessica C. Flack and Frans B.M. De Waal, "Any Animal Whatever: Darwinian Building Blocks of Morality in Monkeys and Apes," in *Evolutionary Origins of Morality: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Leonard D. Katz (Bowling Green, OH: Imprint Academy, 2000), 1–31.

99. Al-Attas, *Islām: The Covenants Fulfilled*, 6.

body is the *al-nafs al-nātiqah*, leaving behind the *nafs al-rūhī* to keep the body's biological system functioning.¹⁰⁰ Relating the abovementioned to the process of the alternation of night and day, a process which happens every day without fail with the change from night into day and vice versa being seen, yet the exact change being imperceptible, so is the process of the soul merging with the body and of it being taken away something that occurs but its exact moment of which cannot be pinpointed. Al-Attas also relates this to the successive process of renewal of creation (*khalq jadīd*)¹⁰¹ whose moments are likewise imperceptible, making us feel as if we are undergoing a continuous life.¹⁰²

Now, how does al-Attas's explanation of man having a dual nature differ from the Cartesian dualism? Firstly, it needs to be stressed that by simply saying that man is one entity having a dual nature, the interaction or pairing problem of the mind and the body does not get solved. What al-Attas does is not simply stating this claim; rather, his explanation takes place within an elaboration of the metaphysics of Islam where two points have already been made clear in the previous sections: firstly, the ontological nature of the soul as that of non-existence; and, secondly, the understanding of the transcendent oneness of existence. A dualism of the mind-body without spelling out the ontological nature of the mind and the body will still end up in the problem of the interaction between the two. Furthermore, the epistemological basis of al-Attas and the Cartesians differ from one another. Cartesian dualism anchors its finding in the reasoning done by man's rational faculty, whereas al-Attas affirms that our soul has a faculty beyond the logical-rational level, rendering us capable of obtaining true knowledge from intuition (*wijdān*). Hence, the need for an elaboration on the soul's potential and true nature, which expands its epistemological channels and allows it to cognise truth, and which our discussion shall turn to next.

100. Ibid., 7.

101. Ibid.

102. In his inaugural lecture in conjunction with the book launch, al-Attas used an analogy of fan blades appearing as one as they rotate rapidly to describe the imperceptibility of the merging and the process of the renewal of creation which appears as if we are living a continuous life. Lecture attended by this writer in person on the 29th July 2023 at Dewan Merdeka, World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur. The author wishes to thank Prof Zainiy Uthman for his elaboration on the alternation of the night and day in relation to the soul-body unity during a book discussion session on the 26th August 2023 at the residence of Datuk Zaini Ujang in Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

The Soul as a Spiritual “Subtlety” (*al-Latīfah al-Rūhāniyyah*)

True to the Islamic tradition, al-Attas identifies the soul using four terms: soul or self (*nafs*), intellect (*‘aql*), heart (*qalb*), and spirit (*rūh*).¹⁰³ The soul is referred to by these many names due to the different accidental modes and states it manifests itself; the term “accidental” here refers to the soul’s contemplative activity on the accidents of existence.¹⁰⁴ Soul is also defined as a spiritual “subtlety” (*al-latīfah al-rūhāniyyah*),¹⁰⁵ and the term “subtlety” is used to reflect the many modes and states that the soul can be in, as opposed to the term “entity” or “substance.”¹⁰⁶ The term “subtlety” (*al-latīfah*) to denote the soul of man can also be traced to the writings of al-Ghazālī. In his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, al-Ghazālī describes how the eye of the heart (*‘ayn al-qalb*) is also called the rational faculty (*‘aql*), the spirit (*rūh*), and the human soul (*nafs*).¹⁰⁷ Similar discussions can also be found in his *‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb*.¹⁰⁸ The soul is also able to receive the knowledge that God reveals, the recipient of this mode of knowledge known as *ma‘rifah* thus being the self or, more specifically, the *qalb*.¹⁰⁹ In the *taṣawwuf* tradition, the aforesaid takes place due to God’s guidance and grace as well as the person’s own spiritual striving which allows him to reach such proximity to God that He reveals His Secrets to him.¹¹⁰ The self in Islam is therefore someone who has a Lord, to whom he is indebted for the gift of existence.¹¹¹ Due to him having a rational soul, not only is he given the capacity to know his Lord, but also his Lord does not neglect him, instead gives him knowledge about things he did not know before,¹¹² including his own self and his Creator.

This more comprehensive concept of the soul as provided by al-Attas and those within the same *Wujūdīyyah* tradition allows for the expansion of the modes of thinking and channels of knowledge available to the soul beyond

103. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 146. Al-Attas credited al-Ghazālī’s works, the *Ihyā’* and the *Ma‘arīf*, as the reference in the designation of the four modalities of the soul. See also M. Z. Uthman, *Al-Attas’ Psychology*, 32–33.

104. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 148.

105. *Ibid.*, 148.

106. According to Alparslan Açıkgenç, the Western civilisation has not developed a concept to refer to the higher spiritual faculties, but in the Muslim civilisation, they have reached a higher level of abstraction and the highest mode of thinking using these spiritual faculties, which are referred to by Alparslan as *latā’if*. See Açıkgenç, “Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’s Place in and Contribution to the History of Islamic Philosophy,” 87.

107. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. by David Buchanan (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 5.

108. *Idem*, *The Marvels of the Heart*, trans. Walter James Skellie (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 5–12.

109. M.Z. Uthman, *Al-Attas’ Psychology*, 80–81.

110. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 82.

111. Al-Attas’s discussion on indebtedness as one of the primary significations of the term *dīn* can be found in *Prolegomena*, 42–45.

112. *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* (96):5.

the accepted ones in contemporary theories of knowledge. In other words, the worldview of Islam accepts both rationalism and empiricism in the formation of new knowledge, but the source of knowledge goes beyond just our rational capacity and sense perceptions.¹¹³ For example, in Al-Attas's discussion of the soul, imagination (*al-khayālīyyah*) plays an important role in the process of intellection. Imagination, he says, is a cognitive power of the soul,¹¹⁴ belonging to *al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*. This is different from the imaginative faculty (*al-mutakhayyilah*) belonging to *al-nafs al-hayawāniyyah*.¹¹⁵ The imaginative faculty that belongs to this rational soul is a "spiritual or intelligential 'creative' imagination reflective of a real world of images (*ālam al-mithāl*) ontologically existing independently between the world of gross matter and the world of pure ideas."¹¹⁶

This discussion plays a role within the high status of the soul of man in Islam, for the soul is this "spiritual subtlety" that has a special faculty within itself to cognise Reality and Truth as they really are. This is what has been absent in the discussion of the soul in Western philosophy,¹¹⁷ which in turn limits the soul's capacities for obtaining the truth. This faculty of imagination is closely connected to the *qalb* like a mirror that reflects the forms in front of it, allowing the soul to receive the true nature of the Reality, acting as an organ of spiritual cognition. Therefore, the metaphysics of the *Wujūdiyyah* is not obtained via rational thinking alone since it does not have the capacity to grasp the true nature of Reality. Muhammad Zainiy Uthman pointed out that one of al-Attas's significant contributions in the discussion of the soul is the clarification and elaboration of this imaginative faculty as well as its relation to the *qalb* in order to receive illuminative knowledge.¹¹⁸ What this does is safeguarding the validity of the knowledge that comes via revelation (*wahy*) in the case of prophecy, and wisdom (*hikmah*) and intuition (*ilhām*) in the case of sages, saints, and those possessing superior intellect,¹¹⁹ which allow us to know of their vision of Reality and Truth by way of true report (*khbar ṣādiq*). Thus, we come to know the true nature of the soul as non-existence and it being a new entity which has a dual nature, both of which have been discussed above. In other words, the designation of the soul as a spiritual subtlety in our tradition,

113. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 118.

114. *Ibid.*, 168.

115. This imaginative faculty perceives, combines, and separates forms abstracted from the sensible particular objects in order to yield meaning. Humans have a developed form of the imaginative faculty which allows them to apprehend abstract, non-sensual images. See Al-Attas's further discussion on this in *Prolegomena*, 153 and M.Z. Uthman's elaboration in *Al-Attas' Psychology*, 38–39.

116. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 168.

117. Alparslan Açıkgenç, "Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Place in and Contribution," 87.

118. M.Z. Uthman, *Al-Attas' Psychology*, 49–53.

119. *Ibid.*, 56.

and not a substance or an entity, provides the epistemological basis of the two elaborations above, which is the ontological nature of the soul and its relation to the body in the special, newly created entity of man.

Relation Between the Body and the Soul

Al-Attas, as we have said earlier, did not set out his body of works to particularly solve the mind-body problem, but we can derive from them an understanding of the soul in a way that does not complicate or problematise its relation to the body. Such an understanding can be gleaned from his discussions on existence, the sources of knowledge and the soul. These discussions in al-Attas also include the elaboration on the origin or creation of the soul, for it is the soul that is the locus of phenomenal or mental properties—that is, properties that are intangible and non-physical. This is what forms the crux of the mind-body or the soul-body problem since our modern understanding of the mind or consciousness excludes the interaction or relation of the mental and the physical. If we can solve the question of the origin of this spiritual/non-physical aspect of the self, and if we can figure out the constitution or nature of this spiritual/non-physical aspect, we can then unravel the interaction problem. In the contemporary philosophy of mind, two positions prevail: the physicalist position which views the mind as matter; and the functionalist/emergentist position which attributes the mind to matter.¹²⁰ Both positions seemingly solve the pairing problem since there is obviously no difficulty in imagining matter-to-matter relations. However, this solution only takes into consideration the rational and empirical channels of knowledge, thereby restricting the concepts that we can fruitfully use in the science of mind/soul and alienating many other legitimate questions pertaining to the soul-aspect of our existence.

The worldview of Islam acknowledges epistemological channels that are beyond empiricism and/or rationalism, for it also admits of revelation and intuition. Analysed from within this worldview, it gives room in the discussion on the soul-body interaction for the existence of an unquantifiable soul alongside the body. Al-Attas's elaboration on the manifestation of a single existence into multiple modes of existence which form everything that exists explains how the soul and the body come about. Their true reality as modes of existence can now be understood as being two seemingly different, yet self-subsistent entities. As such, they are still connected at another level of manifestation or degree of existence. As a non-existence (*adam mahd*), the soul's existence and, by extension, that of man's, depends entirely and solely on God, who alone has the will and power to cause it to exist as an actual thing. With regard to

120. Jaegwon Kim, *Mind and the Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 2.

the status of man, al-Attas's designation of man as a new and special creation out of the soul and body but not retaining the characteristics of each allows us to reframe the relation of the soul and the body in man. No longer are we beholden to the idea of the soul as having only mental or abstract qualities and the body as having only physical attributes, for these are the characteristics of the soul and the body *before* the creation of man as a new entity. We can thus imagine and establish a new set of characteristics for man, this special creation, where his soul being his very self and the one controlling his faculties, be they intellectual or physical.

Thus, the problem of how the soul and the body relate to each other can be sidestepped for the simple reason that we are no longer talking about the separate entities of "mind," "soul," and "body"; instead, we are now talking about a new entity altogether. The position that this article suggests then is to broaden our understanding of existence and open the ontological and epistemological possibilities for our scientific thinking. Just like in physics, where our encounter with the wave-like properties of light challenges all our understanding of the nature of reality, or in the biological sciences when the naturalists' encounter with the finches in the Galápagos Islands reframed their understanding of the diversity of animal species, so should the encounter of the higher Sūfī metaphysicians with the true vision of reality refurbish our ideas about our being and existence. This is in fact the emphasis that al-Attas makes in outlining a philosophy of science attendant on the worldview of Islam, in addition to his upholding the scientific value of the metaphysical experience of the Sūfīs, in which their experience of Reality is not only verifiable and but has also been verified again and again by those in the same spiritual journey, much like the physicists' and the naturalists' own investigations. This is what is meant by Rānīrī when he says, "And he verified their truth with true verification" (*fa ḥaqqāqa ḥaqqahum ḥaqqā al-tahqīq*).¹²¹ An interesting point to be made here is that even with regard to the experimentation method of the scientists, verification is intimately involved on the part of the person performing the experiments, that is to say, the method of experimentation that is touted by many as the hallmark of science is fundamentally about verification.¹²²

Conclusion

The soul-body problem has been demonstrated to be a problem that is specific to the essentialist worldview which looks at each thing as a self-subsisting, independent entity, along with the mechanistic framework within which

121. Al-Attas, *Commentary*, 128.

122. The author would like to thank Prof. M. Zainiy Uthman for his elaboration on this during my personal consultation with him on 1st November 2022 at RZS-CASIS, UTM Kuala Lumpur.

modern science is operating which complicates the relation or interaction of the mind and the body. The alternative solution provided by al-Attas, instead of being trapped in the same worldview and framework, posits an entirely different worldview and metaphysical system where the soul and the body are seen as particular modes of existence, and their demarcations then should not be seen as final and rigid. In such a conception, man is regarded as a new and special entity which has both characteristics of the soul and the body, with the former being the very self of man, ruling over the latter. Such conception is not conjecture or supposition based on observable empirical facts alone but is based on the intuition of existence of the Sūfī metaphysicians. Indeed, this new understanding of the self or soul does not have to contradict or overrule current practices in biology, medicine, or psychology, since the philosophy of science attendant on the worldview of Islam also affirms empirical observations. The contradiction occurs only when empirical observations alone are made the standard by which all other solutions are assessed.

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