A Daring Obedience: Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Futuwwa* on the Right Side of the Law

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Abstract

While Sufi writings have largely depicted *futuwwa* as the selfless virtue of upright young men, there has been, throughout Islam’s intellectual history, an underlying current characterised by brave rebelliousness, a current tied to the virtue’s complex relationship with urban fraternal societies. This paper investigates Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī’s (d. 638/1240) deliberate response to *futuwwa*’s implications of recalcitrance. Making a case for a law-abiding variety of the virtue, Ibn ‘Arabī builds a theoretical frame in which this manly trait, one of consideration and altruism, mimics divine attributes, especially a divine calculating wisdom. In doing so, Ibn ‘Arabī performs a role that Jeff Mitchell describes as the prerogative of noble elites, historically speaking, namely, the social construction of virtue. As is argued here, while Ibn ‘Arabī makes a careful case for a law-abiding *futuwwa*, the lingering resonances of the virtue’s gangster associations indicate that social influence is, to a degree, reciprocal. That is, while Ibn ‘Arabī’s framing of *futuwwa* makes a detailed and metaphysically-substantiated case for law-abidingness, his argument also suggests, however implicitly, that the virtue cannot completely escape its non-elite outlaw framework.

Keywords

Ibn ‘Arabī – virtue ethics – *futuwwa* – chivalry – masculinity – Sufism – aristocracy – gentility – *Sharī‘a* – institutionalisation – outlaw morality

الخلاصة

في حين عرفت الكُتّابات الصوفية مفهوم الفتوة عموماً بوصفه فضيلة نكران الشباب الصالحين للذات، تواجد عبر التاريخ الفكري الإسلامي تيار كامن تميز بالتمرد الشجاع، وهو تيار مرتبط بالعلاقة المعقدة لهذه الفضيلة بالمجتمعات الأخوية الحضريّة. يبحث هذا المقال في الرد المباشر لمحي الدين بن عربي (ت. 1240/638) على آثار الفتوة المتمردة. وفي مسعاها لإنشاء نمط من هذه الفضيلة يكون ملتزماً بأحكام الشريعة، يبني ابن عربي إطاراً نظرياً تشبه فيه هذه الصفة الرجولية—التي تتضمن الاعتبار والإيثار—بالصفات الإلهية، وخاصة الحكمة الإلهية القائمة على الحساب الدقيق والتقدير. وبذلك يؤدي ابن عربي دوراً يصفه جيف ميتشل بأنه امتياز خاص بالنخب النبيلة، من الناحية التاريخية، ألا وهو البناء الاجتماعي للفضيلة. فبينما يدافع ابن عربي عن الفتوة الملتزمة بأحكام الشريعة، تشير أصداء عصابات الفتوة إلى أن التأثير الاجتماعي، إلى حد ما، كان متبادلاً. وبعبارة أخرى، يمثل تأطير ابن عربي للفتوة دفاعاً مفصلاً ومدعوماً كلامياً عن ضرورة الالتزام بأحكام الشريعة، إلا أن حجاجه يشير أيضاً، وإن كان بشكل ضمني، إلى أن الفضيلة لا يمكن أن تنفلت تماماً من إطارها الغير النخبوي الخارج عن القانون.

الكلمات المفتاحية

ابن عربي - أخلاق الفضيلة - الفتوة - الفروسية - الذكورية - الصوفية - الأرستقراطية - الرفق - الشريعة - المؤسسة - الأخلاق خارج أطار القانون

1 Introduction

At first glance, the virtue of *futuwwa* in Islamic ethics seems unambiguous, describing the sum of an exemplary young man's traits. In this legally compliant rendering of *futuwwa*, upright men observe norms of righteousness. Often, then, the *fatā* (or “youngman,” that is, a possessor of *futuwwa*) comes to stand in Sufi manuals for all that is virtuous in a selfless young man and nothing more, in a rather docile way: Honesty, sincerity, bravery, generosity, and jealousy as a fiercely protective attitude, especially regarding the protection of female chastity.¹ Hence the early figure named by later authors as the exemplar

1 Such *futuwwa* is seen in Joseph's protection of Zulaykha's chastity, despite her sexual advances (see Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 3:348). Joseph is referred to as a *fatā* in Q 12:30, and, as we will see, use of this term often matters in discussions of *futuwwa*. It can mean more than merely “a young man,” referring instead to the virtuous *youngman*, that is, a possessor of *futuwwa*. In fact, in this passage, Ibn 'Arabī uses the word *futuwwa* to describe Joseph's actions. Of course, there are times when Ibn 'Arabī uses the term *fatā* as “young man,” without intending its technical sense as a possessor of *futuwwa*. Most significant perhaps is the “young man” (*fatā*) whom he

of reserved, *Sharī'a*-abiding Sufism, Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910), defines *futuwwa* in a number of ways, but always innocuously: “[*Futuwwa*] is to excuse your brothers for their lapses, while never dealing with them in a way for which you would need to apologise” (al-Mazīdī 2006, 42). Yet, in Islamic and sometimes even Sufi literature more broadly, *futuwwa* has a sense of incongruity: A youngman epitomises virtue, yet cannot be constrained by legal niceties; he embodies wisdom, yet often shuns learning; and he personifies freedom, yet is stringently bound by a sense of honour. In a sense, all models of *futuwwa* call attention to traits thought to be best suited for an ideal young man's disposition. Younger, able-bodied men—in the *Sharī'a*-centred models—could be expected to be protectors of others, and hence braver and more generous than their older, feebler counterparts. Young men can also, however, be freer, more daring, and even more rebellious, and this less docile sense of *futuwwa* frequently resurfaces in Sufi literature.

In other words, idealised Sufi descriptions often overlook *futuwwa*'s (“youngmanliness,” often translated as “chivalry”) difficult and sometimes contradictory history of usage in Islamic ethical thought. Originating in the tribal hero, the term came to refer to brotherhoods of young men who abided by a strict standard of moral conduct and yet could sometimes engage in illegal activity, such as illicit hunting or robbery. As the term became significant in Sufi thought, it acquired layers of spiritual significance and an etiological connection to the prophet Abraham. Nevertheless, the figure of the rebellious young man never ceased to affect Sufi notions of *futuwwa*, even when it became a comprehensive virtue corresponding to the perfection of character traits. The great Andalusī Sufi theorist Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī's (d. 638/1240) detailed exposition on *futuwwa* navigates these contradictions, reconciling antinomian implications of this virtue with his larger vision of the law-abiding saint.² It is only within the context of the history of *futuwwa* that Ibn ʿArabī's efforts can

describes in the first chapter of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, with whom he exchanges secrets at the Ka'ba. This young man is a manifestation of spirit, whose youth and hence beautiful and luminous outward form reflect his inner spiritual perfection: Indeed, at one point the young man “disclosed to me [Ibn ʿArabī] the reality of his beauty” and teaches him by means of this self-disclosure (Ibn ʿArabī 1968, 1:48). Yet, as we will see, *fatā* and *futuwwa* in their technical sense most often apply (1) to those youngmen whose realisation ranks lower than the knower (*ʿarif*), or (2) to prophets and saints in their capacity as exemplars to those youngmen less achieved in terms of insight. When Ibn ʿArabī does want to make a prophet or saint an exemplar of *futuwwa*, he indicates that that is the case, as in the examples mentioned in this paper, by using not just the word *fatā* but also the word *futuwwa*. In this first chapter of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, however, he uses *fatā* in its lexical sense (“young man”) and not technical sense (*youngman*, possessor of *futuwwa*). See Ibn ʿArabī 1968, 1:47–51.

2 Henceforth, Ibn ʿArabī.

be seen as participating in a larger effort to include such fraternities within the legitimating domain of *Shari'a*-abiding Sufi orders. This has implications not only for our understanding of Ibn 'Arabī's place in Islamic intellectual history, but also for our understanding of the development of the virtues within their respective cultural frameworks, beyond Islamicate contexts. Urban elites often redefine norms of conduct, borrowing from narratives of authority, creating thereby a civilisation's fixed virtues, as Jeff Mitchell has argued (Mitchell 2019). We see here, however, how contradictions inhere within elite or intellectual appropriations of popular heroic movements. The pull of *futuwwa*'s popular origins becomes apparent in the manner whereby Ibn 'Arabī describes a rebellious “youngman” who remains within the confines of *Shari'a* normativity. Considering *futuwwa* within its historical context helps us see Ibn 'Arabī's theory of the boundaries of the “youngman” as an act of negotiation that considers the author's social circumstances, as well as metaphysical and ethical dimensions of the virtue.

2 *Futuwwa* Within/Without the Boundaries of Law

At times, the popularity of *futuwwa* in premodern Islamicate societies seems to have stemmed from an appreciation for an outlaw morality. Robert Irwin has taken an interest in the discrepancies between idealised notions of *futuwwa*, before the 8th/14th century, and modern Egyptian ones, as appear in the film *al-Futuwwa* (1957), written by Naguib Mahfouz (d. 2006). In this film, as in its larger modern Cairene context, *futuwwa* refers to mobsters whose specialty is racketeering (Irwin 2004, 162). Irwin traces elements of *futuwwa* as the *futuwwa*-gangsterism of twentieth-century Cairo to its earlier, premodern iterations. In the early 7th/13th century, *futuwwa* was associated in some writings with brutish and illicit behaviour in hunting lodges. As an example, some speculated that hunting, as occurring in the free and often unmonitored wilderness, included homosexual activity. There was also the use of the forbidden crossbow and the attendance of non-Muslims in such places (Irwin 2004, 166). A distinctive archer's belt, at one point associated with *futuwwa*, carried a sense of preferring marksmanship to morality and associating with those of ill repute (Irwin 2004, 166). On the other hand, these fraternities were also associated with a set of ideals that were inherited from multiple contexts, both the Arabian *muruwwa* tradition, as well as pre-Islamic Persian warrior codes. One can certainly see the key “old Arab” and pre-Islamic values of generosity, courage, loyalty, veracity, and patience in Islamic instantiations of *futuwwa*, especially *Shari'a*-compliant and Sufi elaborations on this virtue. Indeed,

Toshihiko Izutsu has shown pre-Islamic Arabian resonances for these later Islamic virtues, as they appear in the Qurʾān (Izutsu 2002, 74–104). Still, according to Mohsen Zakeri, it was Persian warrior ideals that prevailed socially during the 2nd/8th-century Abbasid era and gave rise to *futuwwa* brotherhoods. The blossoming of the *Shuʿūbīyya* intellectual movement came with a revival of certain Sāsānian conventions, particularly those that appealed to Persian nobility, the martial class known as “free men” or *āzādān* (Zakeri 1995, 294).³ Zakeri makes a compelling argument that initiatic elements of later *futuwwa* brotherhoods, such as the initiatory pants (*sarāwīl*) and the girdle (*shadd*) have their origins in pre-Islamic Sāsānian and Zoroastrian warrior-initiation rites (Zakeri 1995, 308–9).⁴ The ritual act of drinking salt water, as practiced within Muslim *futuwwa* circles, closely resembles the pre-Islamic Persian ceremony of drinking wine from a common cup in the name of a respected hero (Zakeri 1995, 310–11). Zakeri traces the anti-establishment ethos of *futuwwa* movements to urban groups resisting normative Islamic practice, gathering in taverns and monasteries to indulge in wine-drinking and sympathetic to a perceived Persian heritage (Zakeri 1995, 311).

Regardless of the validity of Zakeri’s convincing body of evidence, the subversive role that *futuwwa* adherents often played, as well as a more *Sharīʿa*-abiding counterpart, has been well-documented in the historical literature (Ridgeon 2010, 21–22). Indeed, during the 2nd/8th century, still the Umayyad period, a variety of youngmen were known to gather to imbibe wine, feast, and celebrate with erotic poetry and song, so much so that the governor of Iraq, Khālīd b. ʿAbdallāh al-Qaṣrī (r. ca. 105–120/723–738), had to ban such gatherings (Maḥjūb 1999, 564–5). Perhaps most threatening of all to social order, the *fityān* had established their own moral code, which, by the time of Abbasid rule, was known to have a liberal view of wine-drinking, music, illicit hunting, sodomy, and pederasty (Maḥjūb 1999, 565–8). Other outlaw groups, gangs who identified as “scoundrels” (*shuṭṭār*) or as “bandits” (*ʿayyārān*) and engaged in highway robbery, such as the brigands who murdered the great philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī in 339/950, adopted *futuwwa* as an alternative moral code that guided their illegal yet still principled way of life (Maḥjūb 1999, 568–9; Salinger 1950, 490). While independent, these groups could sometimes be persuaded to support the rich and powerful, as happened with the *aḥdāth* (“young men”) in Syria (Cahen 1958, 245–6; Vryonis 1965, 47). They were at times enough of a

3 Vryonis attempts to trace the origins of the *aḥdāth* in Syria to pre-Islamic Byzantine circus games, an argument rejected by Taeschner and Cahen (Vryonis 1965, esp. 48 n14).

4 For more on the distinctive clothes, especially trousers (*sarāwīl*), of *futuwwa* see Ridgeon 2010, 77–80, as well as Maḥjūb 1999, 552–3.

recognisable group that in the sectarian violence of 361/972 in Baghdad, the *futuwwa*-adhering *ʿayyārān* were said to have temporarily wrested control of the capital from Shīʿīs and Sunnīs alike (Maḥjūb 1999, 570–1). The combination of outlawry and commitment to a distinctive and potentially subversive moral code rendered these *futuwwa*-bound gangster groups—*ʿayyārūn*, *fityān*, and *aḥdāth*—a dangerous social force.

In the 7th/13th century, political authorities and the saintly men affiliated with them took interest in controlling *futuwwa* brotherhoods by bringing them into the fold of state-sanctioned religiosity. At a time of distinct development for these *futuwwa* fraternities, in 604/1207, the Abbasid caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh (r. 575–622/1180–1225) named himself the head of all *futuwwa* lodges in the lands over which he had authority, in effect acknowledging not only the political and even military potential that these brotherhoods had, both in their Iranian-Iraqi and Syrian manifestations, but their disruptive potential as well (Ohlander 2008, 26).⁵ That *futuwwa* organisations at that time came to represent a more popular, less rigorous alternative to the Sufi order becomes clear in Erik Ohlander's study of Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), who in many ways took aim at taming the *futuwwa* brotherhoods in the service of the aforementioned caliph, al-Nāṣir (Ohlander 2008, 272). A great codifier of Sufi communal life, ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī strove to institutionalise bands of youngmen in Anatolia, especially in Konya, who identified with *futuwwa* in some way (Ohlander 2008, 286–291). He did this both in his writings and in his establishment of *futuwwa*-lodges or *futuwwa-khānas*. *Futuwwa* brotherhoods were, for al-Suhrawardī, laxer alternatives to the Sufi *ṭarīqa*. Similarly, the *futuwwa-khāna*, the youngmen's place of gathering, was laxer in its standards than the Sufi *ribāṭ*, laxer in terms of the supererogatory, but still stringently *Sharīʿa*-abiding (Ohlander 2008, 289–90). Contemporaneous with one another, Ibn ʿArabī and al-Suhrawardī might or might not have met in Baghdad in 608/1212 or in Malatya in 618/1221 (Ohlander 2008, 125–7). Regardless, as evidenced by Ibn ʿArabī's writings, they held a common displeasure with the antinomian implications of *futuwwa* brotherhoods. Indeed, concern for the *fityān* and their non-compliance with *Sharīʿa* had become a concern across a broader section of Muslim intellectuals that included Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and others (Huda 2003, 28–30; Ridgeon 2011, 36–7). In terms of the history of Sufism, that Ibn ʿArabī tempers the antinomian drive of *futuwwa*

5 This is subtly different from Taeschner's view that the caliph's interest in *futuwwa* brotherhoods was largely about imposing his own will (Taeschner 1932 and 1938). Rather, as Huda has argued, the caliph's relationship with these organisations was a matter of strategic alliance (Huda 2003, 34).

corresponds to an institutionalisation process that we know occurred during his lifetime.

This indicates that the social layers of *futuwwa* are quite historically complex. We might think of *futuwwa* as having various public expressions: Gevorgyan modifies Henry Corbin's thesis that military *futuwwa* became spiritual *futuwwa*, in that, in the 15th century, there was a major emergence of craftsmen's *futuwwa* as well (Gevorgyan 2013, 3). For this reason, because of its varying pre-Islamic Arabian, martial Persian, outlaw, craftsman, and spiritual associations, *futuwwa* often appears differently based on the corresponding genre of writing: Sufi treatises, while often acknowledging *futuwwa*'s rebellious implications, nevertheless more often highlight the term as a virtue comprising honesty, bravery, and humility, among other virtues befitting youngmen. Folk narratives describe Robin Hood-like heroes, such that righteous warriors and robbers (the aforementioned *'ayyārūn*, or, in Persian, *'ayyārān*) distributed their spoils among the poor. It is in historical chronicles where we see the *fityān* as hoodlums who threatened shakedowns against merchants and others, that is, what we would call "street gangs." Lastly there is the *futuwwa* of *futuwwat-nāmas*, manuals on proper behaviour in the brotherhoods' ceremonies, as well as an elaboration of norms more broadly. These were often in Persian. On account of plural modes of *futuwwa* in the 7th/13th century, soldiers, craftsmen, and spiritual aspirants each had their own variety of *futuwwa* and, respectively, their own *futuwwat-nāmas* (Gevorgyan 2013, 5). The relationship between this plurality and the earlier, gangster-esque versions of *futuwwa* seems clear when viewed at a distance. What began as locally-organised gangs of men, with their own ideals and modes of dress, became controlled and codified by authorities and their agents among the elites, especially Sufi masters with ties to sultans and caliphs. Of course, another dimension of exclusion, privilege, and institutionalisation, what might be called gendered elitism, inheres in *futuwwa* and the conflation of masculinity with virtue. The focus of this paper prevents me from delving into the marginalisation of premodern women as it relates to the historical development of *futuwwa*. Nevertheless, scholarship in gender in Islamic studies, especially the recent work of Zahra Ayubi, has shown that *futuwwa* in all its iterations, whether *Sharī'a*-centred or not, has assumed male normativity and functioned to support it (Ayubi 2019, 43–44; Cornell 2007; Shaikh 2012).⁶ While the argument has been made that premodern ethical commentaries, especially Sufi ones such as that of Khwāja 'Abdallāh al-Anṣārī of Herat (d. 481/1089), can be read in non-gendered ways, Ayubi argues convincingly that this usually relies on a "circular" argument

6 See also Rkia Cornell's introduction in al-Sulamī 1999.

whereby manhood corresponds to justice, and justice corresponds to manhood (Ayubi 2019, 94–5). In this, *futuwwa* and *muruwwa* resemble Greek and Roman conceptions of masculinity as virtue (Zargar 2017, 220–221). As we will see, cross-cultural parallels—regarding historical transformations of virtues of manliness, like *futuwwa*—allow for some degree of theorising about the affinity between a privileged elite and the social construction of norms.

3 Ibn ‘Arabī and the Institutionalisation of *Futuwwa*

My interest in exploring Ibn ‘Arabī’s theoretical exposition on *futuwwa* stems from two significant strands of his thought, namely Sufi theories of virtue, as well as the lived realities that shaped Islamic institutions. Concerning the first, Ibn ‘Arabī remains arguably the most significant theorist of intellectual Sufism, and his pronouncements on *futuwwa* matter in reconstructing a Sufi Islamic virtue ethics. For Ibn ‘Arabī, *futuwwa* is so comprehensive that it is synonymous with the entirety of “noble character traits” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:232). Indeed, a later commentator of his works, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. ca. 736/1335), would argue that “a person without [*futuwwa*] cannot possibly” achieve the most advanced spiritual rank of friendship with God, or *walāya* (Murata 1992, 268). With *futuwwa*, a stage of ethical development that builds on manliness, or *muruwwa*, all virtues “become manifest within the soul and all ugly qualities disappear” (Ibid). That al-Kāshānī makes this argument in a Persian treatise written to men associated with a *futuwwa* fraternal order (as is clear from the title, *Tuḥfat al-Ikhwān fī Khaṣā’iṣ al-Fityān* (“Gift of the Brethren concerning the Characteristics of Adherents to *Futuwwa*”)) tells us that he continued in his writings the project of placing *futuwwa* orders in a role subordinate but also complementary to Sufi orders, a project that we will observe in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, which came roughly a century before al-Kāshānī’s treatise. This brings me to that second aforementioned concern, the institutionalisation of *futuwwa*.

In order to appreciate Ibn ‘Arabī’s interest in institutionalising *futuwwa*, one cannot forget that, despite his putative renegade status among some (as described in Knysh 1999, 272–7), Ibn ‘Arabī came from a prominent Andalusī family. His father had served in the court of Ibn Mardānīsh,⁷ as well as—following him—the courts of Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf⁸ and Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb⁹ (Addas

7 Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Sa’d b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Judhāmī or al-Tujībī (r. 542–567/1147–1172).

8 Abū Ya‘qūb b. Yūsuf b. ‘Abd al-Mu’min al-Naṣr (r. 558–580/1163–1184).

9 Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb b. Yūsuf b. ‘Abd al-Mu’min al-Manṣūr (r. 580–595/1184–99).

1993, 18 n32). The story of Ibn ‘Arabī’s maternal uncle as a repentant “king of Tlemcen” appears in his own *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Addas 1993, 22–3). More significant here, what also appears in this text is Ibn ‘Arabī’s letter, dated 609/1212, to ‘Izz al-Dīn Kaykā’ūs I, the Seljuq (Saljūq) sultan of Anatolia,¹⁰ in which the Sufi master advises the ruler to observe *Sharī’a* limits “scrupulously” regarding the region’s Christian inhabitants (Addas 1993, 235; Lipton 2018, 55, 209n2). Evidence provided by Gregory Lipton indicates Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective on the *Sharī’a* as God’s final set of commands, revealed to Muhammad, applicable to all of humanity, and to be guarded jealously (Lipton 2018, 70–77). Ibn ‘Arabī’s relationship with governing elites actualises the advice he gives to others to “honour the just ruler” and corresponds to his more general view that God’s law becomes realised through Muslim rulers as protectors of that law.¹¹ The shaykh’s friendship with Kaykā’ūs is especially telling in light of developments concerning *futuwwa* at that time. Kaykā’ūs requested initiation into the *futuwwa* order of the caliph, al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, which was granted. Kaykā’ūs held responsibility for initiating those under his jurisdiction into the caliph’s *futuwwa* order, a responsibility that Kaykā’ūs delegated to Majd al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, father to Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1273–4).¹² Ṣadr al-Dīn would, of course, become Ibn ‘Arabī’s top pupil, spiritual successor, and stepson (Addas 1993, 226).¹³ Indeed, Ṣadr al-Dīn took over his father’s responsibility to initiate others into the caliph’s *futuwwa* order, upon his father’s death (Ibid). This all underscores Ibn ‘Arabī’s connections to ruling elites, from Kaykā’ūs I and Majd al-Dīn al-Qūnawī to Caliph al-Nāṣir, who took a working interest in institutionalising *futuwwa* brotherhoods.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s role in taming what had once been a much more loosely defined and even at times libertine movement allows us to investigate an idea, as argued by Jeff Mitchell, that social elites shape and model the morality of non-elites. Mitchell takes interest in virtue as a standard of taste established by noble elites throughout history, especially in Greek, Roman, and Chinese civilisations. That Aristotle’s virtue ethics, for example, concerns free men is well-known (Striker 2006, 127). Mitchell responds to such elitism with a

10 Kaykā’ūs b. Kaykhusraw (r. 608–618/1211–1220).

11 See Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 4:502.

12 Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī’s father, Majd al-Dīn, or Ishāq b. Yūsuf al-Rūmī (d. ca. 611–618/1214–1220), indeed seemed to have a close relationship with Kaykā’ūs, as well as his father Kaykhusraw. The caliph al-Nāṣir even praised Majd al-Dīn to his client Kaykā’ūs as the “support of God’s knowers” (Addas 1993, 225; Todd 2014, 14).

13 Before his passing, and before Ibn ‘Arabī would marry his widow, Majd al-Dīn had a relationship with Ibn ‘Arabī, meeting in 600/1204 and traveling to Malatya together in 602/1205–6 (Addas 1993, 226–8; Chittick 2012, 77).

consideration of the necessity of a specialised moral elite to the creation and perpetuation of traditional virtue systems. For Aristotle, city life, wherein economically self-sufficient families cooperate in the pursuit of the good life, are most conducive to virtue, as is embodied by the “gentleman,” or *kalokagathos* (Mitchell 2019, 77).¹⁴ As with many other terms related to noble character traits, *kalokagathos* shifted from a knightly aristocratic context to a more abstracted form that did not necessarily draw on its martial connotations. This transformation resembles the history of the word *virtue* itself, since the Latin word *virtus* from which “virtue” is derived initially indicated the wartime valour of men but came to signify moral excellence more generally (McDonnell 2006, 112–3). A similar shift occurs for the Greek word *arete* as “moral excellence,” as well as the Arabic *futuwwa*, as discussed here, both of which emerge in military contexts initially but then become abstracted as urban, civilian virtues (Zargar 2017, 220–4; McDonnell 2006, 110). In all cases, it is the elites who define moral excellence. Thus, Cicero would liken *honestum*—the “special virtue of the true gentleman” in Rome—to an aesthetic sensibility that noble elites felt entitled to share with the untrained masses (Mitchell 2019, 99). “Propriety” or *decorum* too served to measure and balance the gentleman’s actions as an exemplar within Roman society (Mitchell 2019, 100). The elitism of virtue ethics has received attention elsewhere (e.g., Driver 2001, 53–4). Mitchell’s response, however, is a reassessment of the real contributions of moral elitism to traditional civilisations. Mitchell’s intervention lies largely in thinking about modernity as a “post-genteel era,” a setting so egalitarian that any semblance of the cultural relativity of virtue vanishes within a larger liberal, democratic frame (Mitchell 2019, 271, 276). When virtue has no genealogy, when there is no designated subset of society specialising in “good taste,” the ever-changing and technocratic values of capitalistic life take the place of moral excellence defined by tradition, Mitchell argues (Mitchell 2019, 238–9, 263).

Mitchell shows a complete lack of interest in or perhaps awareness of Islamic civilisations and their moral elites, notwithstanding the fact that *futuwwa* can offer an expanded view of the relationship between gentility, the masses, and morality. Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabī’s response to *futuwwa* betrays a much more subtle, layered, and multivalent dynamic that exists between elites and non-elites regarding the virtue of *futuwwa*. Ibn ‘Arabī’s careful theorising shows a push toward *Sharī’a* normativity and Sufi hegemony in the face of the pull of popular heroic antinomianism. It is this push and pull that seems to create a tension within Sufi discussions of *futuwwa*. In *futuwwa*, one finds

14 The Qur’ān also seems to emphasise city life as morally preferable to that of Bedouins (*al-a’rāb*), in numerous verses, such as 9:97.

honesty and self-discipline, two qualities in opposition to the lifestyle of the sinner. Yet, according to these sources, one also finds freedom—freedom from constraints and from the esteem of others—in opposition to the lifestyle of the law-abiding ascetic.¹⁵ In this sense, *futuwwa* often functions as one of a constellation of terms in Sufism centred on love, sincerity, and renouncing certain social norms. For those like Ibn ‘Arabī, who see *futuwwa* within the context of *Sharī‘a*, this contradiction becomes a purely theoretical emphasis on nonconformity, but nonconformity must be present in some form, since the richness and appeal of the virtue indeed depends on the courage to stand in opposition to the approbation of others. In other words, since the figure of the antihero became associated with the virtue of *futuwwa*, tensions between obedience and sincerity presented interpreters with a dilemma. On one hand, *futuwwa* seems at times to demand disobedience (or at least the appearance of disobedience) in order to reject public acclaim, thereby remaining sincere. On the other hand, obedience to God is a foundational premise of the path to Him, a principle sacrosanct to Sufi masters both early and late. Thus, even when *futuwwa* became institutionalised as urban brotherhoods and guilds with Sufi affiliations, it never definitively cut its ties to the outlaw, even if only in theory (Ridgeon 2010, 61). As one example, even the prophet Abraham, named as the patriarch of *futuwwa* (Ohlander 2008, 284–5), can appear as a nonconformist. Lines of poetry by the 13th-century Sufi writer Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Gharnāṭī (d. 686/1287–8) highlight Abraham’s refusal to ask for anyone’s help when catapulted into a fire:

From these waystations God’s friend Abraham reached a rank
that rescued him from the waves of the fire’s heat when he was thrown in;
when Gabriel said from the horizon of the empyrean to him,
“Perchance you have a need, now that this fire’s begun to blaze?”
He replied while in that moment of his, “What’s it to you—no, I don’t!”
Gabriel said, “Ask!” He said, “It’s enough for me that He knows my pain.”

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15 While *zuhd* (renunciation) is certainly a praiseworthy trait, there is a vast collection of statements among Sufi authors as to the drawbacks of immoderate or prolonged renunciation. Ibn ‘Arabī reviews the ethical shortcomings of the ascetic (*zāhid*), when compared to the more complete knower (*‘arif*), which includes an excessive restraint and a failure to love that which God loves (see Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 1:584). To give another example, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) complains about the “ignorant ascetic” (*zāhid jāhil*) who questions his host about the permissibility of that which is served, more concerned with the purity of what he eats than the feelings of his brethren (see al-Ghazālī 1957, 2:119–120).

Abraham's unyielding refusal to supplicate means that his belief and his *futuwwa* have become impermeable sources of strength. It is also, however, a bold exception to the norm of seeking divine aid, when in peril. Of course, it is a tamed rebelliousness, as Abraham is obstinate because of his friendship with God, upon whom he trusts.

4 Ibn 'Arabī's *Sharī'a*-centric Framing of *Futuwwa*

Such tensions between sincerity and obedience surrounding *futuwwa* clearly occupied the thought of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī. These seeming contradictions become a topic of analysis in the forty-second chapter of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* ("The Meccan Openings"), titled "On Knowing *Futuwwa*." The problem, for Ibn 'Arabī, appears in a narrative about Abraham, to whom the idolaters in the passage concerned refer as a "youngman," or *fatā* (Q 21:60). Yet Abraham seems to lie when asked about the idols that he has destroyed, allocating blame to the largest or "greatest" of those idols:

They said, "Have you done this to our gods, o Abraham?" He replied, "No. This one, the greatest of them, did it. Ask them, if they can speak."

Q 21:63

Of course, they cannot speak, thereby proving Abraham's point that they lack agency and will, and, moreover, that a larger deity will always subdue lesser deities, leaving only monotheism as a rational form of devotion. Even if one does so to make a larger theological point, however, lying can often be a grave matter in the schools of Islamic law. Famously, the Prophet Muḥammad is reported to have responded to a claim that he was jesting with his companions by declaring, "I say nothing but the truth," an indication that even a minor lie uttered playfully is impermissible (al-Tirmidhī 1937–1962, 4:357).¹⁶ Ibn 'Arabī's solution to the seeming infraction here is that Abraham has not in fact lied: The "greatest of them" is God, who is the only real actor, such that Abraham's smashing of the idols is indeed God's action (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:243). The idolaters, by their own admission in Q 39:3, worship idols only to draw nearer to God. Therefore it is no lie to say that the deity greater than those idols, God, a deity whom they ultimately recognise, committed the act—via Abraham's strike. Ibn 'Arabī's interest in reframing Abraham's actions stem from his view of *futuwwa*, which must always involve—he tells us—obedience. Such obedience is

¹⁶ This is the *ḥadīth* numbered 1990 in Chapter 57, on "jesting" or *mā jā' fī al-mizāh*.

neither blind nor idealistic, but rather aimed at facilitating the highest degree of monotheism possible in the youngman's social context: He represents God's rule on earth, and—as a politician would—measures his pronouncements to create as much consensus as possible. In this regard, Ibn 'Arabī comments on Abraham's care in terms of presenting God (*Allāh*) as more powerful and more able than the deities worshipped by the idolaters, instead of denying the validity or existence of those deities altogether:

Among the manifestations of Abraham's *futuwwa* is that he sacrificed himself for the right of the uniqueness of his Creator, not for the right of his Creator [to be worshipped without partners]. Since a partner does not negate the existence of the Creator, Abraham focused his attention entirely on the idolaters' denial of God's uniqueness [in that all power goes back to God].

IBN 'ARABĪ 1968, 1:243

As someone “possessing the axial position (*al-quṭbiyya*) in *futuwwa*,” Abraham maintains the divine order, in a pragmatic or even diplomatic sense: On account of his perfection of *futuwwa*, Abraham corrects the idolaters only to the degree necessary, focusing on God's unique power and domination, leaving aside the issue of God's prerogative to be the only deity worshipped (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:243). He directs his attention toward bringing the idolaters to recognise the God that supersedes their gods, instead of negating everything they worship completely, risking thereby their absolute disbelief. In this, Abraham—in Ibn 'Arabī's description—becomes the embodiment of his advice to those possessing *futuwwa* to “interact with people in the most excellent way despite their misdeeds,” in a manner similar to God's providing sustenance to disbelievers (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:243).

Indeed, Abraham's role vis-à-vis God is as a deputy, or representative, a role that Ibn 'Arabī also assigns to Moses within the context of *futuwwa*. Ibn 'Arabī comments that the “youngman (*fatā*) of Moses,” namely, Yūsha' ibn Nūn, or Joshua, was referred to using the equivalent of the Arabic *fatā* in Hebrew (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:243). Joshua accompanies Moses in his quest to find the immortal al-Khiḍr (Q 18:60–2). He was in the service of Moses, Ibn 'Arabī, comments, while Moses himself was the “lawgiver of that nation,” serving as God's “chamberlain” (*ḥājib al-bāb*). In describing God as a sultan or caliph, and Moses as the courtly official controlling access to God, Ibn 'Arabī means to underscore the *Sharī'a*-centrism of the Qur'ānic *futuwwa* exemplars: After all, the youngman here, Joshua, was completely subservient to the living representative of God's law in that era, Moses (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:243). Youngmen living under

rulers and judges representing the Prophet Muḥammad's *Sharī'a* should take heed, for, just as Moses was the protector of God's gate in revealing and upholding the *sharī'a* of his age, so too Muhammad upholds the final *Sharī'a* established for all humanity (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:243). In a grander sense, Ibn 'Arabī's vision for the manner in which prophets, saints, and those who follow them function socially underlies these passages on the relationship between *futuwwa* and representatives of God's law. "*Sharī'a*" comes to represent the relationship between God and human society, one premised on caretaking. Prophets, saints, and those youngmen who follow them serve God and society humbly, which renders them fit for rule by divine proxy. That is, while obedience and subservience might seem to lessen the rank of the youngman, indeed the opposite is true. In accordance with the prophetic saying that "the servant of a band of people is its master," choosing to be meek raises one's status with God and makes one a worthy attendant to others by means of God's authority (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:244).

Lest there remain any doubt that Ibn 'Arabī advocates obedience to God's law as the epitome of *futuwwa*, one can refer to a clear assertion to that effect in Chapter 146 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*:

The reality of *futuwwa* is for a person to prefer the legislated knowledge that God places on the tongues of the messengers over the lower desires of his own soul and over the proofs of his intellect, remaining free from the rule of his own thought or opinions when it opposes the knowledge of the appointed lawgiver of his [age]. That is a *fatā* (youngman). When faced with legislated knowledge, he is like a corpse in the hands of the body-washer.

IBN 'ARABĪ 1968, 2:233

To yield oneself wholly to the law becomes a manly act of bravery, rendering the *fityān* or youngmen "sultans in the forms of slaves" (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:242–3). In this, that is, in being "rulers over the natures of their souls and their habits," the youngmen share character traits with Sufism's "People of Blame," the *Malāmātiyya* (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:242).¹⁷ It is noteworthy that Ibn 'Arabī ties the youngmen to the *Malāmātiyya* in underlining their legal complaisance. The "People of Blame" were, from the fifth/eleventh to at least the

17 "No one else among this party [the Sufis] has this ability except the *Malāmātiyya*" (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 1:242). For some elements of the historical relationship between the *Malāmātiyya* and *futuwwa*, as well as some context overall for why later Sufi writers needed to write such apologetics, see Sviri 1999, especially 602–604.

sixth/twelfth centuries, often conflated with libertines who renounced the limits of law in order to provoke the contempt of the pious masses, creating in response apologetic writings by Sufis, as well as some confusion (Karamustafa 2007, 162). This passage clarifies the distinction between antinomians, on one hand, and the law-abiding *Malāmatiyya* and *fityān* on the other. It also contrasts vividly with a well-known and previous definition of the “youngman” (here *jawānmard*, a Persian equivalent of the Arabic *fatā*). It is reported that Abū al-Ḥasan Kharāqānī (d. 425/1034) defined the “youngman” as “the person who pitches a tent at the side of hell on Judgment Day and takes the hand of the person that the Real has sent to hell” (Ridgeon 2010, 47). For Kharāqānī, as for Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), as we will see, the *fatā*’s bold sense of selflessness extends to God’s decrees as well. The *fatā*, it seems, is generous and intrepid enough to challenge the divine judge Himself. Not so for Ibn ‘Arabī. Ibn ‘Arabī frames obedience to God’s law as a matter of *futuwwa*, in that the servant prefers his master’s wishes to his own; his is a *Shar‘a*-compliant interpretation of selflessness. Such obedience also extends to the domain of politics, in that the true *fatā* will always obey the ruler of his day. Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabī mentions as a case of *futuwwa*, in his *al-Kawkab al-Durri fī Manāqib Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī* (“The Brilliant Star concerning the Virtues of Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī”), Dhū al-Nūn Abū al-Fayḍ Thawbān b. Ibrāhīm al-Miṣrī’s (d. 246/861) careful correction of the caliph al-Mutawakkil,¹⁸ showing deference and obliging the caliph with religious advice while remaining uncompromising in the injunctions of the *sunna*. There is, in such examples, no direct engagement with misinterpretations of *futuwwa*. Yet the emphasis on obedience indicates that Ibn ‘Arabī ostensibly seeks to temper connotations of the *fatā* as an outlaw.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s outlook toward the virtue of *futuwwa* can also be observed in his disappointment upon first witnessing the Sufis of Egypt in 598/1200. Instead of sincere spiritual aspirants, he says that he met men “with no feelings of shame before the All-Merciful,” who dressed themselves in “the gowns worn by *fityāns* [youngmen], while neglecting all question of obligatory and supererogatory acts” (Addas 1992, 909). “They would not be fit,” he adds, “even to clean latrines” (Ibid). While the gowns of the *fityān*, that is, clothes indicating those who possess *futuwwa*, should bind spiritual aspirants to divine law, making them more concerned with what God has commanded and suggested, the group presented to Ibn ‘Arabī seems to see no connection between the uniform of the *fatā* and obedience to God’s law, perhaps even nodding to libertine dimensions of *futuwwa*. What becomes even clearer in Ibn ‘Arabī’s poetic reflection on *futuwwa* is that his descriptions of the law-abiding *fatā*, while presented as

18 Abū al-Faḍl Ja‘far al-Mutawakkil ‘alā Allāh (r. 232–247/847–861).

statements of fact, are indeed arguments within contentions about *futuwwa*'s proper boundaries:

All youngmen (*fityān*) speak the truth, without growing tired of it;
theirs is the first step in every virtue and good trait.
Their states have different shares for whichever person sits with them.
They are always between showing reverence and showing mercy,
or, if a coequal comes along, they prefer him altruistically, through their
goodwill (*birr*).

No regret follows such action for the youngmen.

Secretly they have knowledge about every religious ritual,
though it won't show—not even as much as a black ant,
like the offspring of Qasī, and the one before him,¹⁹
and those among them whom only God knows best.

In this way, they drive their camels to win the race, on every track of life,
and yet they have no retort for the fool, not even “stay away!”

The Exalted has singled out the station of [*futuwwa*] as “the Right Side,”
and yet [*futuwwa*] has no opposite that can be called “the Left.”

“Each of my Lord's hands is right and generous,”²⁰

and the most generous of a people is the one who honours them.

When the saint bestows upon his folk [a robe of honour], you see
their clothing—among other clothes—as his sign.

IBN 'ARABĪ 1968, 1:241

19 This is a reference to Abū al-Qāsim Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Qasī (d. 546/1151), Andalusī author of *Kitāb Khal' al-Na'layn wa-Iqtibās al-Nūr min Mawḍi' al-Qadamayn* (“Removing the Sandals and Taking Light from the Place of Both Feet”), a Sufi leader of an insurrectionist movement against the Almoravids. This reference is telling, for it reveals Ibn 'Arabī's assessment of Ibn Qasī as a virtuous “youngman” (*fatā*), of lower spiritually-informed ranking than a friend of God (*walī*). The reference supports Claude Addas's analysis of Ibn 'Arabī's disparaging evaluation of Ibn Qasī's *Khal' al-Na'layn* and, hence, Ibn Qasī's scholarly abilities (Addas 1992, 926; Addas 1993, 55–7). The “one before him” almost definitely refers to Abū al-Abbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-'Arīf (d. 536/1141). Ibn al-'Arīf was renowned in Valencia for his “practice of renunciation and Sufi chivalry (*futuwwa*)” (Casewit 2017, 62). More significant here, Ibn Qasī claimed to have met the elder master in Almeria (Casewit 2017, 64).

20 Here Ibn 'Arabī quotes a famous *ḥadīth* in which Adam, whom Ibn 'Arabī here interprets as the primordial exemplar of *futuwwa*, discovers the greetings of peace that all humans are to use after him and chooses the right hand of God, rendering the right side to be eternally preferred over the left, despite the fact that “both of my Lord's hands are right and blessed.” In a version narrated by Abū 'Isā Muḥammad b. 'Isā al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), instead of “generous” (*karīma*), as narrated by Ibn 'Arabī, God's right hands are described as “blessed” (*mubāraka*). See *ḥadīth* number 3368, in Chapter 48, on “Qur'ānic commentary,” *kitāb tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (al-Tirmidhī 1937–1962, 5:453).

Here the *fatā* is no outlaw. Rather, he is both honest and sensitive—always speaking the truth. Yet he is not indiscriminately honest. After all, he varies his words and actions to suit his company. For his superiors, those older or more accomplished, he shows reverence, while showing mercy—and not disdain—toward his inferiors. Those equal to him he treats as superiors. Moreover, while honest, he is extremely guarded about his achievements in religious learning, so much so that few will know his erudition. His honesty does not prohibit him from omission when it comes to factors that might bring him praise. Most strikingly perhaps, Ibn ‘Arabī’s *fatā* receives great admiration—on account of his public acts of generosity and kindness—despite his attempts to conceal knowledge.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s verses contrast starkly with a statement made by al-Ḥallāj, who describes *futuwwa* as realised fully only by himself, Pharaoh, and Satan, three infamously condemned figures (Ridgeon 2010, 28–9). Indeed, scorned by others for his unyielding love and his unyielding honesty, al-Ḥallāj’s *fatā* is described as an idealistic rebel in his *al-Ṭawāsīn*:

I was exchanging views with Satan and Pharaoh about *futuwwa*. Satan (*Iblīs*) said, “Had I prostrated [before Adam], then I would have lost all claims to *futuwwa*.” Pharaoh said, “Had I believed in his messenger [Moses], then I would have lost all claims to *futuwwa*.” And I [al-Ḥallāj] said, “Had I rescinded my claim and my proclamation [that I am the Real], then I would have lost all claims to *futuwwa*.”

AL-ḤALLĀJ 2007, 54–55

These three condemned figures rebelled not for the sake of disobedience, but rather for the sake of an idealised monotheism. Satan, despite God’s direct command, refuses to prostrate before Adam, whom he describes almost as a false idol, that is, as “one whom You have created from clay” (Q 17:61). Pharaoh has succumbed to the ultimate truth that only God has reality, that the human self is but an illusion, and so has proclaimed that “I am your Lord Most High” (Q 79:24). He will not back down when faced with a more normative variety of monotheism, one that demands a distinction between servant and Lord. Lastly, of course, there is al-Ḥallāj’s proclamation, “I am the Real,” by which the saint has confirmed both his realisation of *tawḥīd* and his status as a reviled lover of God, one that precipitates his execution. Each of these figures stands in the face of the representative of Law in his day (God, Moses, and the Abbasid jurists respectively). Yet each does so out of a sincere, earnest, and fearless love of God, not fearing the “blame of any blamer,” as described in the Qur’ān (Q 5:54). This sense of *futuwwa* (or its Persian equivalent *jawānmardī*),

including ties to Satan, become echoed in the thought of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 520/1126) and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131), as Mohammed Rustom discusses (Rustom 2020).

5 Ibn ‘Arabī’s Theory of *Futuwwa*

This discussion thus far would seem to indicate that Ibn ‘Arabī’s reading of *futuwwa* supports straightforward obedience to divine law as articulated in justified Islamic legal opinions. Yet his perspective involves, in fact, a much more complex and theologically-grounded theory of the virtue. Ibn ‘Arabī grounds his discussion of *futuwwa* in his view of God as the source of being and all ethical perfection by including it in the range of divine attributes: *futuwwa*, in an absolute sense is what Ibn ‘Arabī calls “a divine quality in meaning” (*naʿt ilāhī min ṭarīq al-maʿnā*) even though no such divine attribute has been revealed in outward lexical form (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:231). God has *futuwwa*, because, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, He “brought the cosmos into existence, without having any need for its existence” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:232). God’s creation is the ultimate act of *īthār*, that is, altruism, in the sense of preferring others to oneself. As Ibn ‘Arabī tells us, God’s bringing “the cosmos into existence for the cosmos’ own sake, as an act of preferring the other (*īthār*) over His singularity in terms of being” is “the very essence of *futuwwa*” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:232). Moreover, God gives without expecting thanks, yet another attribute of the *fatā*. By announcing in the Qurʾān that “everything partakes in glorification by praising Him” (Q 17:44), God lets humans know that gratitude occurs naturally and continuously. Even when not praising Him consciously, we humans praise Him nevertheless by our very existence (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:232). Thereby, God forbids us from sensing even the “scent” of expecting gratitude. It is because of such decisions, Ibn ‘Arabī argues, that in an absolute sense, only God can be a “youngman.” While God’s knowledge can encompass all beings and their place of prioritisation, “it is not in the human’s capacity to encompass the cosmos with his or her noble character traits” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 1:241). As a comprehensive virtue, then, *futuwwa* exists perfectly only in God. Every limited and human act of *futuwwa* follows God’s model, such that Ibn ‘Arabī announces: “*Futuwwa* is, in reality, making manifest bounties (*al-ālā*) and acts of kindness (*al-minan*) while veiling one’s favor (*al-minna*) and any expectation of gratitude (*al-imtinān*)” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:232). God freely gives existence and knowledge of Himself to us (see Q 2:264), and asks that humans give just as freely, without expecting recognition. Abraham displayed such *futuwwa* when he preferred His lord’s *tawḥīd* (a recognition of oneness) to his own life, when

threatened by fire (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:233). In the Sufi tradition more broadly, Abraham’s *futuwwa*-laden heart can also become a direction of orientation for other altruistic youngmen, specifically the Holy Substitutes (*abdāl*), designated saints assigned to guard over the earth (Chiabotti 2019, 91).

One problem for humans attempting to “take on this character trait” (*al-takhalluq*) of God arises from the limitations of human knowledge. To give selflessly that which benefits another requires knowledge of the other. Complete knowledge of the other occurs only when one has brought that other into existence. Therefore, instead of giving in an absolute way, humans give by making choices; giving also necessitates taking away. For this reason, the human *fatā* will constantly endure blame for praiseworthy actions—facing rejection or belittlement for selfless decisions. As Ibn ‘Arabī explains, moral choices almost always involve priorities. In pleasing one person, one must displease another; in favouring one course of action, one shows disfavour toward another. Hence when a young Sufi disciple delays bringing out a dinner spread for guests as his master has commanded, his reasoning verifies his *futuwwa*: Ants crawling on that spread would have been displaced, so the disciple was forced to wait (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:235). By favouring the ants, the disciple has inconvenienced his hungry guests. His decision—as it turns out—was correct, since ants in their entirety are replete with obedience and proximity to God, while humans obey God varyingly. Still, had the servant left the spread for the ants, sought advice from his shaykh about what was happening, bringing something else for the guests, preferring them as has been ordained by divine law, that would have been a more precise application of *futuwwa* (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:235). Abraham too had to make choices that would displease some for the sake of pleasing others, in his case, pleasing God. Abraham heaped praise on God by disparaging the graven representations worshipped by idolaters. It was, as Ibn ‘Arabī has declared, an act of selflessness, but one that involved a choice that triggered the ire of those he wished to guide. Abraham displayed *futuwwa* in the realm of human actions, as was described earlier, but the greater realisation of *futuwwa* remained with God, who had allowed the idolaters to worship Him through their idols. The idolaters are, after all, monotheists, even if their monotheism is misdirected. Abraham is a more cognisant monotheist. Ultimately, however, the absolute monotheist is God himself.

Because the good pervades everything, the moral agent’s task is more a matter of having proper preferences than making a distinction between good and evil. Ibn ‘Arabī’s grounding in the wise injunctions of the creator prevent me from classifying his view as ethical subjectivism. Nevertheless, he is clear that moral determinations resemble aesthetic ones insofar as that which is deemed “vile” (*sū*), like that which is “comely” (*husn*), corresponds to an accordance

within one's physical constitution.²¹ Famously, he provides the example of the dung beetle, attracted to vile odours because of its very constitution.²² He contrasts this with the Prophet Muḥammad's aversion to the odour of garlic. The Prophet's aversion results from his constitution, but one must bear in mind that the Prophet's very constitution is most suited to the remembrance and service of God. Garlic distracts from the prayer, so that the Prophet's natural distastes harmonise with the will of God, who wants His servants to remember Him in prayer free from the diversions of such smells (Zargar 2011, 50–52). Poor taste can lead to very serious consequences as well. One chooses morally according to the constitution, so that a natural love of the vile, obscene, and displeasing to God can lead to a residence in Hell. Yet, Ibn 'Arabī states, in complete consistency with his theory, those inclined to the vile will delight in Hell's scorpions and snakes, on account of the suitability of such things to their constitutions (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 2:648). In terms of *futuwwa*, Ibn 'Arabī presents the *fatā* as one whose inclinations and even constitution have not yet been perfected to the same degree as the knower of God (*'ārif*). For this reason, the *fatā* will need to tailor his preferences to accord with those preferences he knows please God. The *fatā* should, for example, according to Ibn 'Arabī, follow the example of Abū Madyan Shu'ayb b. al-Ḥusayn al-Anṣārī (d. 589/1193 or 594/1198), preferring "foods most beloved of God with respect to having a suitable constitution for worship, instead of the dictates of the lower soul and the pursuit of desire" (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 2:233).

Just as Ibn 'Arabī will sometimes indicate the subjective value of the good, he will, conversely, sometimes indicate the divine wisdom in that which seems haphazard or arbitrary. He tells us that there is a mystery in the words first (*al-awwal*) and last (*al-ākhir*), which are also names of God—a mystery that takes shape in the order of succession for the first four caliphs of Islam. Abū Bakr (d. 19/634), 'Umar (d. 23/644), 'Uthmān (d. 35/656), and 'Alī (d. 40/661) were—according to Ibn 'Arabī—each suited for the caliphate, but God decreed the order in which they ruled based on the lifespans that He had predetermined (Chittick 1998, 204; Ibn al-'Arabī 1968, 4:298). Knowing, for example, that Abū Bakr would pass away first, God deferred the caliphates of the other three. He then determined that 'Umar's caliphate be second, because, again, his life would end earlier than that of 'Uthmān and 'Alī, and so on. While we perceive

21 "In reality, there is nothing but the comely through relation and the vile through relation, for everything from God is comely, whether that thing be vile or bring about happiness. The affair is relative." Translation (modified here) taken from Chittick 1997, 218. See also Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 4:104–6.

22 Ibn 'Arabī 2002 [1946], 221–22.

the day and year of one's death to depend on unplanned circumstances, one sees that there is a concealed ordering to the timing of each event, without which—according to Ibn 'Arabī—the political history of Islam would have been in disarray. Such is also the case with language, and it is here that this relates to *futuwwa*. In Chapter 90 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn 'Arabī offers an interpretation of the *nūn al-wiqāya*, the “n” sound that separates, for example, the first person singular accusative pronoun *ī* from the verb in a word such as *akrimnī*, or “honour me.” True to the meaning of *wiqāya*, this letter maintains a barrier between the pronoun and the word it follows, “protecting” that word. In this manner, Ibn 'Arabī says, the *nūn al-wiqāya* “possesses *futuwwa*, and its genesis is altruism (*ithār*)” (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 2:173). He continues:

Other than it, we have *no defender* [Q 13:34 and 40:21] in [functional] pronunciation;

It has a portion of existence from the quality of its creator
in terms of positioning, for He is the everlasting, the remaining”.

IBN 'ARABĪ 1968, 2:173

That is, this letter is fixed and firm, having no benefit for itself, serving no function for itself, only existing to allow for other elements of the word to be pronounced. Language, as a paradigm of the order of creation, reflects divine names, “the everlasting, the remaining.” As described by the renowned grammarian Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Hishām (d. 761/1360), the *nūn al-wiqāya* is merely a consonantal barrier of necessity, aiding pronunciation for the most part, and often dropping when unneeded (Ibn Hishām 2005, 1:648–650). One might attribute to this letter the accidental duress of human tongues, the natural limits of enunciation. Yet nothing in creation lacks divine wisdom, and thus what seems accidentally necessary, for Ibn 'Arabī, reflects instead a divinely-determined order subject to deciphering. The knower of God can appreciate seeming haphazardness, whether of history or grammar, as reflective of divine wisdom. The *fatā*, on the other hand, must learn this secondarily, by imitating the ways of God's knowers, as well as the revealed standard of normativity based on divine ordering and wisdom, namely, the prophetic *Sharī'a*. As someone lacking the ability to interpret seeming haphazardness, unlike the achieved knower, the *fatā* is thus almost completely reliant on *Sharī'a* norms and saintly precedence.

Finally, although it might be rather clear by this point, it must be mentioned that *futuwwa*, when described as a station (*maqām*) by Ibn 'Arabī, is desirable but not a permanent ethical stopping place. Indiscriminate selflessness is certainly good, but at a higher stage—as one progresses through the

station of *futuwwa*—there is the care for one's self. Such negation of virtues—in the science of Sufi ethical stations—is not unusual at all (Chittick 1989, 282). Progressing through such stations, for Ibn 'Arabī and for countless other Sufi writers, usually involves first an affirmation of that station, followed by its abandonment, much as an appreciation of God's oneness (*tawhīd*) involves affirming and negating His attributes.²³ Abandoning *futuwwa* means abandoning an indiscriminate sort of selflessness—a selflessness initiated by an inner predisposition to prefer others. To make the point that self-preference inheres in the order that God has created, in Chapter 147 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn 'Arabī compares attempted manslaughter to suicide. In the case of an attempted manslaughter, it has been said in a hadith: “Whosoever attempts manslaughter, and his victim does not die, let his affair rest with God, who—if He wishes—will forgive him, or—if He wishes—will punish him” (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 2:234). On the other hand, in the case of suicide, God has declared, again in a hadith: “My servant advanced his soul to Me hastily; I have forbidden Paradise to him” (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 2:234). In the first case, when it comes to someone else's life, God has left the perpetrator's afterlife subject to His divine wish. But in the case of suicide, when it comes to one's own life, God has made no such allowance. Thus, it would seem that—to God—one's own soul has preference over the souls of others and is “greater in sanctity” (Ibn 'Arabī 1968, 2:234). Nevertheless, despite the inherent preference for one's own self, God has sometimes decreed preference for others, along with the means and occasions for doing so. Ibn 'Arabī explains it poetically:

Abandoning *futuwwa* means preferring our Creator
 That is *futuwwa*, if you have verified its meaning;
 Negating (*naḥy*) it is exactly like affirming (*ithbāt*) it, so when
 you have killed it, that death becomes its life.
 Nothing snuffs it [from existence] except annihilation (*al-fanā'*) so be
 worthy of that, and the Real will be its refuge.

IBN 'ARABĪ 1968, 2:234

At this more accomplished station of *futuwwa*, which is the abandonment of the station of *futuwwa*, one does not find oneself caught between contradictories,

23 Ibn 'Arabī, like many other Sufi writers, describes the achievement of a station or *maqām* (a phase of ethical and psychological development) along with the eventual abandonment of that station (*tark al-maqām*). Because the stations represent human, and not divine, perfection, each must be negated and hence “passed” for the soul to find liberation in divine attributes. An example of a station followed by the abandonment of that station can be seen regarding “fear” in Chittick 1998, 161–163.

the contradictories of that which God wants and that which the soul wants. Rather, the possessor of *futuwwa* chooses the “more virtuous” of two actions by striving to know God’s preference, in every instance, opposing even the *selfless* drives of his or her own soul. Abandoning a preliminary sort of *futuwwa* means embracing a *futuwwa* in which a person, aware of the value of his or her own soul, a soul that “is God’s and not mine,” prefers himself or herself when God has decreed such preference (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:235). Ibn ‘Arabī here does not mean to lessen the value of altruism, but rather to caution that realised knowers of God will not be hastily or indiscriminately altruistic, as a more novice youngman might be, but will, instead, sometimes act out of self-preservation, in recognition of God’s wish.

6 Conclusion

The sort of *futuwwa* that Ibn ‘Arabī locates in grammar, narratives, and scripture requires the moral agent to stand selflessly for God’s law, preferring God’s wisdom to the approbation of others. While Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings on *futuwwa* resemble that of ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī and others who aimed to institutionalise *futuwwa* in Sufi terms, Ibn ‘Arabī does not redefine the *fatā* as a person distinct from the “antihero.” Rather, he redefines the antihero, so that the antihero’s rebelliousness and daring is aimed not at revealed norms, but rather at one’s selfishness, selflessness, longings, and even reason. The youngman, you will recall, prefers “the legislated knowledge that God places on the tongues of the messengers over the lower desires of his own soul and over the proofs of his intellect.” His freedom is one “from the rule of his own thought or opinions when it opposes the knowledge of the appointed lawgiver of his [age],” as liberated from the constraints of self-rule as a “corpse” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1968, 2:233). The antihero dares to obey—even when people, including himself, do not understand the justification for that obedience. The *fatā* is thus taken to task not for his humility, but for his bold and courageous willingness to act on commands not easily understood. Moreover, the reason for his obedience is his awareness that good is a relative matter; since all existence, all creation is good, no choice is evil. Rather, some choices are better than others, and the best choices are those made and decreed by the all-knowing Real. What he seems to do out of sheer obedience he does, instead, out of a realisation that that God’s preferences should be preferred. The only universal principle is that someone or something else must be preferred over the self. After all, this is the very sort of preference that inheres in existence, for it is the sort of preference that brought

God to engender creation. While Ibn ‘Arabī’s *fatā* concerns himself with divine law, the master himself hints at an ethical framework in which one must acknowledge the relativity of good or appropriate actions; no human action is perfect, nor perfectly determined, but rather merely closer to (or further from) a divine determination.

Mitchell’s concern with the Greek aristocrat, Roman statesman, Chinese *junzi*, and English gentleman, that is, with iterations of the cultured man as moral paragon, can apply to the *fatā*. Mitchell’s driving thesis is one that laments the demise of specialists in good taste, a moral elite, whereby modern, technocratic, managerial classes, with no distinctive standard of taste or moral code replaced the gentility that once shaped governance and normativity, one “grounded not in doctrines but in practices,” one that recognises itself as distinct to a circumscribed cultural context (Mitchell 2019, 264). The case he makes for top-down moral structures, wherein genteel society specialises in moral excellence, can certainly add the institutionalisation of *futuwwa* to its list. After all, Arabic-writing Muslims in the age of Ibn ‘Arabī flaunted their own variant of the cultured nobleman, one well-read and guided in his excellence, hygiene, manners, and transactions by a body of literature, as well as by the *Sharī‘a*. Ibn ‘Arabī’s references to his noble Arab heritage, his family’s bloodline tracing back to the legendary epitome of Arab hospitality, Ḥātim al-Ṭā‘ī (d. 578), as well as his refined poetic tastes, point precisely to such a self-perception (Addas 1993, 17 n25). This same variant of the virtuous gentleman, within an Islamic context, is on full display in Aḥmad b. Faḍlān’s (fl. 309/921) encounter with the Rūsīyya on his mission to the Volga, wherein *Sharī‘a* practices of burial and hygiene separate him from the ostensibly unrefined, unkempt, and unwashed tribesmen he describes (Ibn Faḍlān 2014, 241–253; Cooperson 2010). Despite all this, the mere act of apologetics on display in Ibn ‘Arabī’s discussion of *futuwwa* indicates that Sufi authors, belonging to an educated elite, took moral trends among the less-educated masses seriously. Not only does Ibn ‘Arabī take care in framing the conduct and outlook of the ideal *fatā*, he also wants to take possession of antiheroic and antinomian conceptions of that *fatā*. As we saw, he is careful to frame Abraham’s acts of rebellion as acts of obedience. The *fatā* must be daring, even if it means, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s case, being daring enough to capitulate to monotheism or the norms of *Sharī‘a*, including those norms not understood. His *futuwwa*, then, as a response to an outlaw expression of *futuwwa*, in a sense retains vestiges of it. His acknowledgement that God’s being and will *supersedes* all norms—which are mere determinations of that divine will—underscores two things. First, it underscores Ibn ‘Arabī’s own position as a person of divinely informed taste. As a

“knower,” his preference should have a range of influence, in his view, that the average person’s, or the *fatā*’s, does not. Second, however, it nods to the most basic claim of outlaw performances of *futuwwa*, namely, that law and reality are distinct, even if related. It admits the outlaw’s implicit claim, through the outlaw’s actions, that there exists some other truth that transcends the norms that others see as fixed, conclusive, and all-encompassing.

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