The notion of human perfection and the concept of “the perfect man” (al-insān al-kāmil) play a central role in both the Ismāʿīlī tradition and in the thought of Ibn al-ʿArabī. This theme, which is closely linked to the broader subject of walāya and awliyā’, has its roots in the pre-Islamic heritage, including the Zoroastrian, Manichean and Gnostic traditions. In Islam, the term al-insān al-kāmil is most frequently associated with the teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabī. However, this and similar terms appear already in the Epistles of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’. Thus, contrary to a prevalent opinion among modern scholars, it seems that Ibn al-ʿArabī was not the first mystic to coin the term al-insān al-kāmil, nor was he the first one to develop the various ideas pertaining to it. Rather, it appears that the Ismāʿīlī authors, and above all Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, should be credited with systematically developing the concept of the perfect man in its mystical-philosophical context.

Discussions dedicated to the subject of human perfection are quite common in Ismāʿīlī literature. In al-Kirmānī’s philosophical oeuvre, for instance, human perfection (tamām, kamāl) occupies a central place. According to al-Kirmānī, perfection—more precisely, “the second perfection” (al-kamāl al-thānī), to be distinguished from “the first perfection” (al-kamāl al-thānī).
(al-kamāl al-awwal) which pertains to man’s corporeal-physical existence—implies the realization of the intellectual-spiritual potential inherent in the human soul. From this perspective, man is required to actualize the full potential of his rational/speaking soul (al-nafs al-nāṭiqa), by performing ethical-religious deeds (‘amal) and by acquiring Divine, religious-philosophical knowledge (‘ilm). Yet this goal can only be achieved through the spiritual guidance of God’s friends—the prophets, their legatees and the imāms—who embody in their very beings the ideal figure of the perfect man. These ideas of al-Kirmānī were later espoused by al-Ḥāmidī and other Ismā’īli-Ṭayyibī authors. Notwithstanding the influence of al-Fārābī’s philosophy on al-Kirmānī, the principal elements in the latter’s perception of human perfection are already found in the Epistles of the Ikhwān.5

To be sure, the terms tamām and kamāl and the distinction between the “first” and the “second perfection” are also found in various Arabic philosophical works, dating from the 9th century onwards to the time of Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Naturally, these themes are rooted in Greek and Hellenistic philosophy as well as in the thought of Late Antiquity. The notion that the achievement of human perfection is only possible when man fully realizes his innate potential by means of both practical-ethical deeds and philosophical knowledge is shared by different Muslim philosophers, such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā (Avicenna), Ibn Bājja (Avempace) and Ibn Rushd.6 Hence, the Ismā’īli discussions of human perfection cannot be detached from the general philosophical discourse in the medieval world of Islam. The Ismā’īli treatment of human perfection is, however, distinct from other Islamic approaches to this subject in two interrelated ways. First, the context in which the Ismā’īli authors deal with human perfection is walāya: the awliyāʾ—the prophets, their legatees and the imāms—are perceived as the only human beings who truly embody the figure of the perfect man. Moreover, it is only through them that the believers are able to actualize their own personal potential. Contrary to the philosophical

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