Chapter 6

The Human State

We have seen that, for Qūnawī, human beings occupy a uniquely privileged place in the universal scheme of things and have considered some of the metaphysical grounds on which this view is based. Now that our attention has been turned to the human state proper, we will begin by examining his theories concerning the seemingly paradoxical relationship between mankind’s elevated metaphysical stature and its lowly, earthbound nature.

1 The Perfection of the Last

On the subject of the human being’s descent into the corporeal state, our author reminds us that while being “first in terms of his metaphysical degree” man is nonetheless “last in terms of his manifest form”.¹ “With the human state”, we are told, “the circle of existence is sealed and the last is united with the first”.² In his earthly state, therefore, man is “the utmost end of creation and the divine command’s descent”.³ As such, his “elemental genesis” (nash’a ‘unṣurīya) represents the aggregate of all causal relations in all states of existence,⁴ such that, considered in terms of his manifest form, no being has more intermediaries between itself and its principle than he.⁵ But while this makes him outwardly the {lowest of the low}⁶ and the poorest and most dependent of creatures,⁷ it is also deemed, paradoxically, to be the guarantor of his inner excellence.

Like his master before him,⁸ Qūnawī calls this paradox the “perfection of the last”⁹ (kamāl al-ākhirīya) or the “perfection of comprehensiveness” – an

¹ Fukūk, p. 248.
² Fukūk, p. 193.
³ Sharḥ al-aḥādīth, fol. 76b.
⁴ Miftāḥ, p. 28.
⁵ Ijāz, p. 240.
⁶ Qurʾān, XCV, 4–5: {We created man in the best of statures, then made him the lowest of the low.}
⁷ Tarjumah, p. 145; Ijāz, p. 343.
⁸ See Futūḥāt, Ch. 198.
⁹ Ijāz, p. 376.
expression, so we are told, of the fact that the last term of a causal series is the only term apart from the origin that comprises the entire series within itself, albeit as its final product rather than its first cause. "To those degrees that are lattermost", he says, "belongs the perfection of comprehensiveness (kamāl al-ḥīṭati wa-l-istī̄b) as the closing term [of a series] is necessarily the most comprehensive with regard to meaning, form, attributes and overall scope". He writes:

From the point of view of his manifest form, and as far as the chain of succession is concerned, the human being is the existent that has most intermediary causes [between itself and its principle], and is hence the last of them to become manifest. This, however, is so that he embraces the secret of every intermediary and so that he encompasses and seals all that the circle comprises; for he is the last existent to be sustained by the divine succour, even though it is from his metaphysical rank that this succour (madad) arrives at the Sublime Pen, which is the first conveyer of this succour after the True.

This, then, according to Qūnawī, is why man is last in order of manifestation yet first in terms of his metaphysical rank. By spanning all degrees and intermediaries, from the highest to the lowest, he manifests the all-embracing character (jamʿīya) inherent in his rank, which is the "beginning of all existential determinations". "Whoever", he says, "is the last point of the circle such that he is connected with the first ... his rank is the first of all firsts, his manifest form is the last of all manifest forms, and his being extends between his form and his rank, without being constrained within first or last, outward or inward".

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10 Fukūk, p. 193. For Qūnawī, as for his master before him, the excellence of Islam is inherently connected with the perfection of the last, the Prophet being the last of the divine messengers in order of manifestation precisely because his metaphysical essence, or "Muḥammadan reality" (ḥaqīqa muḥammadiya), is identical with the barzakh al-barāzikh itself. Hence, the Prophet's spiritual "taste" (dhawq) comprises the taste of all previous prophets just as his sacred law "encompasses and guards over all previous sacred laws". Moreover, an important scriptural base for this doctrine was found in the well-known hadith in which the seal of prophecy is likened to placing the final brick that completes the overall unity of a wall.

11 Iʿjāz, p. 240.

12 Miftāḥ, p. 92.

13 Tarjumah, p. 146.