The Embodiment of Gratitude (\textit{Shukr}) in Sufi Ethics

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Introduction

It has been argued that in the tradition of Western ethics there have been two general approaches to gratitude. There is first of all a view found mostly among modern moral philosophers which treats the given virtue as a set of feelings and attitudes. The grateful person is obliged first and foremost to sincerely acknowledge the benefaction before anything else, to convey a sense of their debt. The second view, more common in the medieval and ancient world, though not absent among modern thinkers, tends to see gratitude as comprising a number responsibilities towards the benefactor which she must carry out, with the accent placed not so much on emotions as much as on actual reciprocation, at least as far as interpersonal relations are concerned. For proponents of this second view, gratitude is sometimes treated as a species or ethical subset of justice.\footnote{A. D. M. Walker, “Gratefulness and Gratitude,” \textit{Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society}, New Series 81 (1980-1981), pp. 39-55, see in particular p. 39. For a general treatment of gratitude in moral philosophy, see Terrance McConnell, \textit{Gratitude}, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993. On some recent developments in psychology on the study of gratitude as a human emotion, see Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (eds.), \textit{The Psychology of Gratitude}, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004. While the focus in the volume is on the psychology of gratitude, some of the contributors also explore the subject from anthropological, biological and even theological vantage points. Unfortunately, Harpham’s essay on “Gratitude in the History of Ideas” (19-36) entirely skips the Islamic tradition. See also the more popular work by Robert Emmons, a leading figure in the field of gratitude studies, \textit{Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude can make you Happier}, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007.} In the Islamic tradition, particularly as understood by its Sufi authorities, gratitude to God involves both approaches and more. It includes sentiments and attitudes as well as specific forms of activity. While certain thinkers might place an emphasis on one over the other, there is nevertheless a general agreement that in order for gratitude to be total and complete, it must be embodied at the three levels of the heart, tongue, and body, in much the same way that classical authors often speak of faith or \textit{imān}.
The purpose of this article is to examine these levels by drawing on the works of a range of thinkers known for their contributions to the development of taṣawwuf, from such luminaries as Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 899) and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. between 905 and 910) in the formative period to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240) and Ibn Ḥabbād (d. 1309) later on. To date, the nature and role of gratitude in Islam has been the subject of a number of short studies which have been rather limited in their scope. By focusing on the theme of the embodiment of gratitude in the classical Sufi tradition, it is hoped that the present article will advance our knowledge of a virtue within Islamic piety which lies at the heart of Muslim scripture—a fact attested to by Toshihiko Izutsu’s conclusion, on the basis of his extensive study of the Qurʾān, that “Islam as a religion is . . . an exhortation

2 The writers whose works will be examined below have been chosen because their writings address in some form or another the aforementioned levels of gratitude. The selection, far from arbitrary, is guided by an attempt to present a well-rounded and relatively comprehensive treatment of the different forms of shukr. Naturally, as we shall see, some writers go into greater detail than others in exploring one particular type of gratitude.

3 Mahmoud Ayoub’s “Thanksgiving and Praise in the Qurʾān and Muslim Piety,” Islamochristiana 15 (1989), pp. 1-10, is a rather general piece meant for a lay audience with a focuses on prayer. Simon van den Bergh’s “Ghazālī on ‘Gratitude Towards God’ and its Greek Sources,” Studia Islamica no. 7 (1957), pp. 77-98, while useful, is marred by his attempt to retrace Ghazālī’s views almost entirely to Greek sources, particularly Stoicism, overlooking the Qurʾānic and hadith-based foundations of the medieval thinker’s analysis. More recently, Ghazālī’s Book of Patience and Gratitude of the Iḥyāʾ has been translated by the pastor and missionary, H.T. Littlejohn, Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 2011. While I have worked directly with the Arabic for this article, I have made liberal use of his superb translation, which I have compared closely with the original. Alma Giese’s concise entry on shukr (“As a religious and mystical concept”) in EI² relies heavily on Ghazālī. See also Kevin Rienhart’s entry which follows, as well as his treatment in Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought, Albany, SUNY, 1995, pp. 107-123. We also have Roberto Totolli’s “The Thanksgiving Prostration (‘sujūd al-shukr’) in Muslim Traditions,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 61, no. 2 (1998), pp. 309-333. The well-researched article is terse, limited in its focus, and part of Totolli’s broader research on prostration in Islam, and therefore of not much use to an inquiry into the meaning and significance of shukr in Islam. There is also Geneviève Gobillot’s piece which compares patience and gratitude in Tirmidhī, “Patience (Ṣabr) et retribution des merits. Gratitude (Shukr) et aptitude au Bonheur selon al-Ḥakim al-Tirmidhī (M. 318/930),” Studia Islamica 79 (1994), pp. 51-78. Perhaps the best single contribution on the subject is Ida Zilio-Grandi’s “The Gratitude of Man and the Gratitude of God: Notes on Šukr in Traditional Islamic Thought,” Islamochristiana 38 (2012), pp. 45-62. The article reflects the author’s excellent grasp of the source material but should have been better edited by the journal as her primary language is not English. See also my recent article, “On Cultivating Gratitude in Sufi Ethics,” Journal of Sufi Studies 4, no. 1-2 (2016), pp. 1-26.