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Is the *fiṭra* mutable? A reformist conception of human perfection in Shāh Walī Allāh's *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*¹

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Abstract

This article examines the question of whether the created human nature, or *fiṭra*, is portrayed as mutable in Shāh Walī Allāh's (d. 1762) *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*. I argue that Walī Allāh uses the *fiṭra* – or the perfection of four qualities that make for human flourishing – to anchor a unified concept of human perfection that can fit different ages without essentially changing. Walī Allāh accomplishes this by affirming the particularity of divine laws and the efficacy of local customs in realising the eternal demands of the human form. More specifically, he posits that established practices can become second nature to a community, enter the divine system of requital, and thus help a people develop the necessary qualities through highly contingent means, all without violating the Qur'anic and traditional claim that the original nature itself never changes. With recourse to some of his other works and potential influences, I conclude that Walī Allāh's conception of the *fiṭra* accommodates traditional theological assertions regarding the singularity of human perfection, on the one hand, and the possibility of reformed norms, on the other.

Keywords: Shāh; Walī Allāh; *fiṭra*; *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*

I. Introduction

This original nature (*fiṭra*) is that religion (*dīn*) which does not differ according to the differing of eras and all of the prophets agree on it.²

When this rightly-guided practice is clearly established the Highest Council raise prayers for those who conform to it and against those who oppose it. When the customary practices are of this type, they are counted as being part of “the original nature (*fiṭra*) according to which God, may He be Exalted, created human beings”.³

¹ I am indebted to the incisive comments of my reviewers, the feedback of engaged respondents and audiences at the Princeton Islamic Studies Colloquium (2016), the 33rd. Deutscher Orientalistentag (2017), and the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics (2018), as well as comments by Omri Matarasso and Hanna Siurua on earlier drafts of this article. My deepest gratitude goes to Muhammad Q. Zaman, who has patiently listened to and, more importantly, gently pushed back against my take on the question of the mutable *fiṭra* for several years.

² Marcia K. Hermansen (translation), *The Conclusive Argument from God: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi's Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* (Islamabad, 2003), p. 72; Shāh Walī Allāh, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* (Cairo, 1952–53), pp. 52–53. Subsequent references to the *Ḥujja* are to the English translation in Hermansen (*Ḥujja*) and/or to the first volume of the Cairo edition, the latter indicated by “Ar.”

³ *Ḥujja*, p. 144; Ar. p. 104.

Can and does the *fiṭra* upon which God created human beings according to *sūrat al-Rūm* 30 (*fiṭrat Allāhi ʾllatī faṭara ʾl-nāsa ʾalayhā*) change? And if it does, how? Islamic thinkers across centuries and schools of thought have spent very little time addressing this question, since the same verse immediately affirms that “there is no change in the creation of God” (*lā tabdīla li-khalqī ʾllāhi*).⁴ In line with this a famous *ḥadīth* in the collections of Bukhārī (d. 870) and Muslim (d. 875) states that while “all are born on the *fiṭra*” (*mā min mawlūdīn illā yūladu ʿalā ʾl-fiṭrati*), their parents “make them” Jews, Christians, or Magians (*fa-ʾabawāhu yuhawwidānihi wa-yunassirānihi wa-yumajjisānihi*). Although a few have discussed whether it is possible, likely, or even permissible for humans to ‘change’ this created nature, the consensus has been that such change simply does not occur from the side of the creator. In Shāh Walī Allāh’s (d. 1762) important work *Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, the *fiṭra* is a foundational, yet seemingly contradictory concept. It denotes human nature as divinely created and intended, a state in which the four basic qualities of justice, purity, humility, and magnanimity are perfected. Yet at a closer look a tension appears to emerge in this account of the *fiṭra*: On the one hand, the polymathic scholar seems to posit an unchanging human form and vision of perfection existing within a world of images (*ʿālam al-mithāl*) since pre-eternity.⁵ On the other hand, he seems to allow customary practices to be counted as *fiṭra*, in line with his interactive account of prophecy and law tailored to the capacities and character of communities. How does the seeming affirmation of changing human customs as *fiṭrī* fit into the vision of an unchanging form? Do the boundaries of what constitutes the *fiṭra* change in this world? And how is such change possible if the worldly human *fiṭra* is but a reflection of a higher, more perfect form existing in a realm beyond this world? In short, what is Walī Allāh’s position on the possible mutability of the *fiṭra*?

The stakes of this question are evident if we keep in mind the Shāh’s legacy of reform in South Asia and beyond. Referring explicitly to the idea of the *fiṭra* as a concept able to incorporate changing customs, modernists such as Muhammad Iqbal emphasised Walī Allāh’s affirmation of human agency, contingency, and the validity of customary practices. Iqbal argued that for Shāh Walī Allāh, “the law revealed by a prophet takes especial notice of the habits, ways, and peculiarities of the people to whom he is specifically sent”.⁶ Given the specificity of the laws that prophets give to people, Iqbal believed that the laws are contingent and limited: they “are in a sense specific to that people; and since their observance is not an end in itself they cannot be strictly enforced in the case of future generations”.⁷ Although Iqbal’s interest in legal change was a particularly modern concern, this example underlines the importance of the *fiṭra* as a central concept since the early days of the Muslim community.

In fact, the idea that humanity was created in a particular way, or “upon the *fiṭra*”, not only is deeply anchored in scripture⁸ but has been relevant to a variety of Islamic

⁴ Yasien Mohamed, surveying both classical and modern uses of *fiṭra*, points out that classical authors never really touch upon the issue of mutability, as it is “probable that they understood [...] *la tabdīl li khalq ʾillāh* (30:30) in the absolute sense, meaning that there shall be no change in Allah’s creation”; Mohamed, ‘The interpretations of *fiṭrah*’, *Islamic Studies* XXXIV, no. 2 (1995), pp. 129–151, at p. 142. Nevertheless, we can “safely assume that they (with the possible exception of Qurṭubī) accepted it as immutable” (ibid.). Qurṭubī may have been one of the few classical thinkers who argued that the *fiṭra* can be “corrupted or altered” (ibid., p. 137). While the majority of classical writers most likely did not support mutability of the *fiṭra*, Mohamed notes that although most modern thinkers, including Shāh Walī Allāh, did not “address [...] the issue [of mutability] in any way” (ibid., p. 142), a few (such as Asad and the mufti Shafī) did argue in favour of mutability.

⁵ On the history of the *ʿālam al-mithāl* from Ibn Sīnā to Walī Allāh, see F. Rahman, ‘Dream, imagination and *ʿālam al-mithāl*’, *Islamic Studies* III, no. 2 (1964), pp. 167–180.

⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought* (Stanford, CA, 2012), p. 136.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 136–137.

⁸ Most prominently, these scriptural references are Qur’an 30:30 (“So [Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion. This is the natural disposition God instilled in mankind — there is

discourses, from the legal to the theological and the philosophical. As Jon Hoover has noted, the idea of the human *fiṭra* in the early centuries of Islam was invoked in debates over the destiny of human beings, predetermination, and the ability to affect one's lot in the hereafter.⁹ In classical jurisprudence, arguments about the status of young children (whether Muslim or born to non-Muslims) in the context of inheritance or war made use of the idea that by nature all children are born onto the *fiṭra* of Islam and thus are to be regarded as innocent.¹⁰ For Aristotelian philosophers in the tradition of al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), the *fiṭra* played a significant but ultimately unreliable epistemological role as a source of the necessary first principles shared by all.¹¹ Later theologians, such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), argued that it is thanks to the *fiṭra* that humans have an innate, instinctive knowledge of God's existence that makes rational proofs obsolete.¹² While we thus have a certain sense of the breadth of the *fiṭra*'s relevance in several interrelated discourses, the details of individual thinkers' conceptions and uses of the notion of a divinely created human nature remain to be explored.

This article argues that the concept of the *fiṭra* in Shāh Walī Allāh's *Hujja*, as well as in several of his other works, integrates a stable vision of humanity's flourishing with an affirmation of the validity of ever-changing human norms. In short, the reformer argues that the norms and customs that rightfully differ in different ages can instantiate the four qualities that make up the original *fiṭra*.¹³ Although this position "baptises" as God's eternal will what some might perceive as unreliable or innovative guidelines, these norms and customs can be understood as part of the *fiṭra* because they have become "naturalised" or *fiṭrī* in their *function*, which is to form a person and prompt him or her to submit to God's demands, thus eliciting divine responses in accord with the demands of the original *fiṭra*. Drawing on Aristotelian thought to illustrate the mechanics of this argument, I show that there is ample precedent for such a process of formation that does not imply a change in the original vision of flourishing itself. I conclude that although Walī Allāh's claim for the value of particular times and circumstances in the process of human reform balances

no altering God's creation — and this is the right religion, though most people do not realize it" (M.A.S. Abdel Haleem [trans.], *The Qur'an* [New York, 2010], p. 258–59); and variants of the *ḥadīth* report quoted in the beginning of this article, stating that every child is born upon the *fiṭra* and it is merely their parents who turn them to other faiths. These imply, as Jon Hoover has noted, that "Islam is the universal religion at birth" ('*Fiṭra*', *Encyclopedia of Islam*, THREE). There are, however, several other prophetic utterances in other collections that also use the term *fiṭra*; see Genevieve Gobillot, *La fiṭra: la conception originelle; ses interprétations et fonctions chez les penseurs musulmans* (Damascus, 2000), pp. 32–45. See also pp. 7–14 of the same work for a discussion of the linguistic origins of the root *f-ṭ-r*.

⁹ Hoover, 'Fiṭra'. Hoover also refers to Gobillot's monograph *La Fiṭra*.

¹⁰ See Hoover, 'Fiṭra', as well as Camilla Adang, 'Islam as the inborn religion of mankind: The concept of *fiṭrah* in the works of Ibn Ḥazm', *al-Qantara* XXI (2000), pp. 391–410.

¹¹ For more details on this use of *fiṭra*, see Frank Griffel, 'Al-Ghāzālī's use of "original human disposition" (*fiṭra*) and its background in the teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna', *Muslim World* CII (2012), pp. 1–32.

¹² This knowledge still needs actualisation and proper perfecting. For more details on Ibn Taymiyya's views, see Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden, 2007) as well as M. Sait Özervali, 'Divine wisdom, human agency, and the *fiṭra* in Ibn Taymiyya's thought', in *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya*, (ed.) Birgit Krawietz and Georges Tamer (Berlin, 2013), pp. 37–60 and Livnat Holtzman, 'Human choice, divine guidance and the *fiṭra* tradition: The use of *ḥadīth* in theological treatises by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya', in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, (ed.) Yosef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi, 2010), pp. 163–188.

¹³ On the close relationship between the concepts of *fiṭra* and *sharī'a* in Walī Allāh's thought, see Mohamed El-Tahir al-Mesawi, 'Human nature and the universality of the *sharī'ah*: *Fiṭrah* and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in the works of Shāh Walī Allāh and Ibn 'Ashūr', *Al-Shajarah* XIV, no. 2 (2009), pp. 167–205. He also notes that, generally speaking, *fiṭra* in Walī Allāh's view "pertains mainly to the principles and essence of good and evil [...] and not to their details and particular details and applications" (*ibid.*, p. 176).

contingency and necessity, particularity and universality, it does so in a way that allows for legal reform without overturning basic theological assertions.

II. The argument for naturalised customs

It is unwise to delve into a discussion of the *fiṭra* without illuminating the ways in which the concept fits into the general framework of Shāh Walī Allāh's thought. As Marica Hermansen notes at the beginning of the introduction to her translation of the first volume of the *Hujja*, we ought to think of Walī Allāh first and foremost as an integrative thinker. Living through the upheavals of eighteenth-century India, he sought to bring together "the increasingly fragmented and disparate articulations of the Islamic intellectual tradition in his own lifetime".¹⁴ Thus he explicitly combined philosophical and theological thought with mysticism and a focus on scripture. Against this background, the structure of the *Hujja* could be described as a large funnel, which leads from the metaphysical basis of the universe to the importance of *ḥadīth*. The *fiṭra* sits somewhere in the middle of the funnel, connecting divine vision and the creation of humanity. Although the *Hujja* is especially important for its development of a theory of successive civilisations, my discussion of the *fiṭra* seeks to highlight the interconnectedness of human nature, religion, and law within a universe that ultimately moves towards human purpose and benefit.

Hermansen's introduction not only situates the central question of this article but also provides our inquiry with a starting point by offering one way of reading the *Hujja*'s statements on the *fiṭra*: as arguing for the concept's mutability or ability to accept *things not previously envisaged*.¹⁵ Hermansen notes that central to the basic argument of the *Hujja* is a claim the author makes early in the work, namely, that at the level of ideals, an archetypical form of religion (*dīn*) and nature (*fiṭra*) are in harmony with each other. However, the stuff of revelations is not *dīn* itself but rather "actualized manifestations of the ideal form known as '*milal*'", which take into account the "particular material and historical conditions"¹⁶ of the people who receive them. Building on the interplay of *dīn*, *fiṭra*, and revelation, Walī Allāh presents two sources for religious legislation: first, "the universal beneficial purposes for the human species as embodied in its ideal natural constitution", and second, "those systems of laws (*sharī'as*) revealed in response to particular historical circumstances".¹⁷ Crucially, for Hermansen, these sources are "not initially encompassed in the requirements of the human constitution".¹⁸ It is here, however, that I believe we must examine her reading of the Shāh's thought more closely, questioning what it means to claim that there are things "not initially encompassed". I do not dispute Hermansen's claim that for Walī Allāh there are contingent revelations matched to a people in a specific place and time that aim at accomplishing what the original nature can do. Rather, I question whether these contingent ways of improving humanity's lower soul do indeed entail a change to the original nature. I contend that although Walī Allāh affirms the continuous emergence of highly contingent and tailored ways of reforming the animalistic soul (in addition to the most simple or natural ones, which are usually

¹⁴ *Hujja*, p. xv.

¹⁵ It is this sense of "change" that I take issue with: adding something not originally envisaged by God. This is not the same as adding desirable character traits or qualities to one's personality and thus realising the broad demands the *fiṭra* makes for the four qualities.

¹⁶ *Hujja*, p. xxi.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

out of the reach of the masses), this does not mean that he considers the *fiṭra* itself — God’s vision for human perfection in eternity — subject to change.¹⁹

Before turning to the details of Walī Allāh’s conception of the *fiṭra*, it is important to follow Hermansen to the final part of her explication of the interrelation of religion, nature, and law: the idea of the *māzinna*, or signs. In different eras, different sets of signs direct people to the benefit and harm “of the one true *dīn*”.²⁰ Some of these signs might be natural, meaning “in accordance with the nature (*fiṭra*) and purpose of the human race”.²¹ Hence they allow for reward or punishment in the absence of specific religious laws. However, in “the case of the religious laws connected with historical contexts; the religious symbols embodied in their rulings are also derived from particular historical contexts and situations”.²² Most crucially, for Hermansen, these particular rulings arising from historical circumstances can — by the action of the Holy Enclave²³ — become part of the original nature.

These, then, come to have a more general validity at the higher spiritual level and from there come to have an effect on the form of the entire human species which had existed from pre-eternity at the archetypal plane of the World of Images. In this manner a symbol or anticipated source of benefit that is derived from the *sharīʿa* branch of legislation becomes “naturalized” so that being requited on the basis of these rulings has a natural effect, as well as being based on legislative decrees.²⁴

I agree with Hermansen’s basic argument that particular laws can have a more general effect through the actions of the Holy Enclave if the argument is understood to claim not that a novel element (a historical ruling) that was not previously part of the original nature now becomes part of it, but rather that there is a dynamic aspect to religious legislation that is based on the circumstances of a people. Through angelic intervention, these particular laws can be *considered* to have entered the *fiṭra*, or to have been “naturalised” into it, as Hermansen puts it.

However, in an earlier article on Shāh Walī Allāh’s conception of religion in the *Ḥujja*, Hermansen clarifies that this naturalisation does not mean merely that particular norms or customs become efficacious on a higher plane by being understood as part of the *fiṭra*.²⁵ Instead, she argues that customs in fact influence nature. Thus, she writes about the process through which particular laws are incorporated into the original form of humanity:

Such a transformation occurs by negating time, so that these special events may act on the pre-eternal form of the human species altering it so that they become embodied in its ultimate destiny. The effect of obeying the rules generated by these particular circumstances thus becomes naturalised.²⁶

¹⁹ One may note that if Walī Allāh did indeed posit a mutable *fiṭra*, one would expect him to address the question of divine freedom, will, and knowledge, since such a position would impact our understanding of God’s mind. However, none of these issues are addressed in the first part of the *Ḥujja*.

²⁰ *Ḥujja*, p. xxii.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ The members of this Highest Council consist of the most excellent humans and angels, and the very best of them form the Holy Enclave. I discuss the Holy Enclave in greater detail in section iii below.

²⁴ *Ḥujja*, p. xxiii.

²⁵ Marcia Hermansen, ‘Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi’s “Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha”: Tension between the universal and the particular in an eighteenth-century Islamic theory of religious revelation’, *Studia Islamica* LXIII (1986), pp. 143–157.

²⁶ Hermansen, ‘Shāh Walī Allāh’, p. 154.

Instead of arguing that a change in an individual has an effect on that individual's destiny through obedience, or merely stressing that particular laws can become part of the system of reward and punishment that arises naturally from more general norms, Hermansen posits that in Walī Allāh's view there is a way for particular legal rulings to shape the archetypal form of humanity that has existed in the world of images since before time. It is this part of Hermansen's claim that I disagree with – the idea that particular circumstances not only become “naturalised” but negate time and change humans' original form in a way not originally intended by God.²⁷ According to Hermansen,

This type of reasoning is not at all foreign to the tradition of Sufi mysticism, for according to Sufi beliefs, special forces, such as the contracted zeal (*himma*) of saints can act on the archetypal forms or decrees in the World of Images and thus turn back or alter what had been decreed from pre-eternity.²⁸

I am not in a position to disprove this latter claim, but it would have been helpful had Hermansen explicated in more detail how we might envisage such a theory of change in nature and destiny or how it would fit into Walī Allāh's overall theology – in the *Hujja* or beyond. However, I do believe that the seeming tension between an archetypal, stable human form and the efficacy of customs in the *Hujja* can be solved without positing a mutable *fiṭra*, something Walī Allāh appears to deny explicitly in several places.

In what follows, I thus re-examine the *fiṭra*'s potential for change in Walī Allāh's wider corpus. My argument agrees with Hermansen's idea that in his view contingent circumstances can affect human nature by realising its basic demands (which is, as I will highlight, no small claim). But I also argue that this “naturalising” process does not have to mean that the *fiṭra* of Walī Allāh's conceptual framework changes. Rather, I emphasise his insistence that there is indeed an unchanging original human nature that – because it is a broad vision of human flourishing or perfection – allows for the legitimacy of particular historical circumstances and their laws and customs in its realisation. According to Walī Allāh, there is a natural way of life, whose norms naturally elicit reward and punishment (as well as the correlating human feelings). What characterises Walī Allāh's vision is his belief that the operation of this nature as the establishment of four desired qualities (justice, purity, humility, and magnanimity) can and indeed often does take the route of formation through highly contingent laws that incorporate local custom. This is how Walī Allāh conceives of the efficacy of particular historical laws.

Far from wanting to diminish the highly interactive and present-affirming aspects of Walī Allāh's thought, I hope to suggest that this stability of the *fiṭra* is what allows the flexibility of *sharī'a* that he envisions: when he posits the ability of historical norms to elicit divine responses by bringing about the desired qualities, Walī Allāh does not assume a change in form. Flourishing (or the state of the four qualities, or *fiṭra*) has a determined content but can, and usually *has to*, work through means particular to a community, place, and age. Customs can have an effect on the human soul; but the fact that they merely *can be considered* natural demonstrates that their effect is not natural in the same sense that the *fiṭra* is natural. The ideal nature of humanity for Walī Allāh is one, but the means that allow for the attainment of humanity's ideal state take into account the realities of time, place, and capacity.

²⁷ However, Hermansen never explains what it means for events to become “embodied in [humanity's] ultimate destiny”, or how the process of “naturalisation” works.

²⁸ Hermansen, ‘Shāh Walī Allāh’, p. 156.

III. The argument for naturalised customs revisited

The *Hujja*'s central passage on the naturalisation of customs and the seeming affirmation of a mutable *fiṭra* is found in the conclusion of the chapter on conventions (*rusūm*):

When this rightly-guided practice is clearly established the Highest Council raise prayers for those who conform to it and against those who oppose it. When the customary practices are of this type, they are counted as being part of “the original nature (*fiṭra*) according to which God, may He be Exalted, created human beings”.²⁹

An alternative translation of the last part might be “and when the customary practices (*sunan*) are [established] like that, they are considered (*‘uddat*) part of the *fiṭra* ‘upon which he created the people’ [30:30]”. The basic claim that Walī Allāh is making here seems to be that certain practices can be *counted as* or *considered* part of the *fiṭra*, not that they actually *are* so. What is crucial is not only the action of the Holy Enclave in raising a practice (to the level of a *fiṭri* practice) but also — as outlined in the chapter on conventions — the firm establishment of the practice. Thus, we learn that a practice is well established when “the people assent to it age after age, and live and die according to it, and their souls and sciences become engrained in it”.³⁰ However, I will argue, on the basis of Walī Allāh's account of (i) the form and content of the original nature, (ii) the process of reward and punishment, and (iii) the workings of the Holy Enclave, that he is not making a statement about a change in the *fiṭra* itself. Rather he seeks to explain how contingent human customs (*sunan*) can be considered to realise the *fiṭra*. As we will see, by a custom's being “part of” the *fiṭra* he means that it can elicit reward or punishment connected to the demands of the four aforementioned qualities. Both the very general framework that is the *fiṭra* and the fundamental role of particular places and times in defining human reality make it very reasonable to suppose that customs can constitute ways of realising the divine demand for the perfection of human nature. Such customs, in other words, become natural by eliciting divine responses comparable to those elicited by more universal ways of realisation.

i) The form and content of the *fiṭra*

When considering the interplay of custom and human nature in Walī Allāh's thought, it is important to recognise that the *Hujja* contains no discussion of a process of change of or influence on the divinely posited form of human nature and flourishing, or what Walī Allāh calls the *fiṭra*. The Arabic verb in the central passage on customs³¹ is *‘uddat* (are considered); nowhere does he refer to “change” or even “addition” with respect to the *fiṭra*. Instead, he consistently describes human nature as a pure and essential form that is not subject to change and is stable in content. This absent change is distinct from a weaker version of change that is applicable to the human *fiṭra* as it exists in the world. The latter might include a negative falling away (as in the *ḥadīth* recorded in Bukhārī and Muslim that says that parents “change” their children from the original *fiṭra* of Islam to another religion) or the positive addition of self-improvement through the acquisition of qualities and other desirable character traits.

The author describes this process of improvement in chapter 12, “The connection of actions to psychological attitudes”.³² Here we read that actions express underlying states,

²⁹ *Hujja*, p. 144; Ar. p. 104.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143; Ar. p. 104.

³¹ Cf. *Hujja*, p. 144; Ar. p. 104.

³² *Hujja*, pp. 84–86; Ar. pp. 82–85.

so that we know the courageous person by his (or her) courageous acts and the generous person by his (or her) giving:

If a person wants to acquire a character [trait] (*khulq*) that is not in him, there is no way to do so except by being in situations in which it is likely to occur, undertaking actions associated with it, and remembering the attainments of those in the community who are strongest [in this trait].³³

People acquire certain qualities through practice, which is stimulated by situations that ask for certain qualities or what we might call virtues. Situations that allow people to perform and practice these virtues might include going to war or encountering poor people in the market. They can further support the development of the virtues by thinking of others who excel in them. Now, if someone wanted to circumvent this route of practice and instead “summon up for himself the form (*ṣūra*) of courage and generosity, he would be forced to imagine the form of these actions [i.e. courageous or generous ones], unless it should be that the *fiṭra* ‘upon which God created the people’ had changed” (my emphasis).³⁴ Here two points are relevant. First, the *fiṭra* spoken of is that of an individual person, endowed with certain traits which allow that person to perform certain actions but not others (leading to the need to improve). Second, it is clear that the *fiṭra* is assumed to not change. The verse referred to here (*sūrat al-Rūm* 30) goes on to affirm that “there is no altering God’s creation”, and the fact that Walī Allāh does not offer any thoughts on the possibility, reality, or nature of such a change indicates that he did not consider it likely. The development of desirable traits, and thus the perfection of individuals, does not change their *fiṭra*.

Acquiring good traits thus does not mean a change in the abstract form of humanity in this world but rather a realising of its demands, just as a negative turn towards another religion in this world does not change the *fiṭra* but simply leads to a life not in conformity with the human form.³⁵ The idea that God’s original vision for human perfection might be amended through historically contingent human customs is not only in conflict with the basic claim of *sūrat al-Rūm* but also at odds with Walī Allāh’s claims regarding human creation, nature, and perfection in the *Hujja*.

Another revealing facet of Shāh Walī Allāh’s thought on the matter is his emphasis on humanity’s perpetual struggle between its angelic and animalistic natures and thus its constant need of improvement. Whereas angels are wholly good and beasts incapable of goodness, the human being has “two forces”,³⁶ an angelic and an animalistic one. Consequently, the human being is the “only one suited for the imposition of religious obligation and having the capacity for it”, because humanity alone “has the potential of perfection and not the actuality”.³⁷ What humanity hopes for and needs is the means to hold down the animalistic tendencies and develop the angelic ones.³⁸ Beyond this idea of progress, Walī Allāh clearly conveys the sense of a pre-ordained perfection: “God [...] looked

³³ *Hujja*, pp. 84–85 (modified); Ar. p. 62.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Ar. p. 62; cf. p. 84 of Hermansen’s translation.

³⁵ I will return to this question of the relation between nature and habit, or first and second nature, and the question of substantial change below when discussing Aristotelian thought.

³⁶ *Hujja*, p. 58; Ar. p. 42.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57; Ar. p. 41.

³⁸ This division of the soul suggests that a human being shares the properties of the animals through his or her animalistic side but also goes beyond them in rationality and speech (*Hujja*, p. 61; Ar. p. 44). Every species has been assigned a “specific form” by its maker (*ibid.*), and hence we ought to know that “God has designed and regulated every species”, including humanity (*ibid.*, p. 62; Ar. p. 44). Humans come in many shapes and forms but generally are more capable and “nobler” than animals (*ibid.*, p. 63; Ar. p. 45). Humans are able to gain

in pre-eternity at the human species and at man's capacity which he would bequeath to his descendants in the species".³⁹

This statement compels us to note Walī Allāh's conception of the forms of which the *fiṭra* is a part. Thus, we read in the second chapter of the *Hujja* that "a non-elemental world exists in which abstract meanings are represented by quasi-bodily forms corresponding to them in quality. There, things take on their materialisation in some form before they are materialised on earth".⁴⁰ Walī Allāh explains that even things that are often not seen as bodily, such as good and evil, and reason, can be thought of as such and will appear to humans as such on the last day.⁴¹ These forms exist at the level of *malakūt*, the world of images and angels.⁴² We can say that things exist in the world according to their character or form at the higher level; therefore, earthly habits cannot really "inflect" or change the *fiṭra* given the hierarchical ordering of worlds. There may be different ways in which humans throughout the ages have used customs to realise the human form in our world, but in doing so they realise a general form posited at a higher level.

Walī Allāh explicates the content of the original nature in a section on humanity's highest perfection, which is guaranteed by humanity's shared nature. Like "iron is attracted to a magnet",⁴³ human nature strives for this felicity, as "this is the character (*khalq*) upon which God created the people and the *fiṭra* upon which he created them".⁴⁴ It is thus by the *fiṭra* that humans strive for their perfection. Select mystical individuals are able to attain perfection, but most people attain felicity by "reforming the animalistic side".⁴⁵ Reform of the animalistic facet of human nature is based on the habituation of the four qualities (*khiṣal*) of purity, humility before God, magnanimity, and justice, and the "state composed of these [four qualities] is called the original nature (*fiṭra*)".⁴⁶ The *fiṭra*, therefore, is a state defined by these four very generally conceived qualities.

The acquisition of these qualities can take two forms: an intellectual one, in which "a person's knowledge becomes filled with what is suitable for the *fiṭra*", with the result that the original nature — that is, the four qualities — is "established in the soul";⁴⁷ and a practical one, in which humans choose "attitudes, acts, and things which remind the soul of the desired qualities and alert it to them, and which stir it and urge it on".⁴⁸ This second, practical way of achieving the *fiṭra* is where Walī Allāh's belief in the efficacy of customs comes in. For him, the practical approach to establishing the qualities of justice, purity, humility, and magnanimity works "either through a habitual connection between [the soul] and the quality, or due to the soul's being the expected place to find the quality

knowledge about themselves and their destiny in rare cases but for the most part require a leader, without whom "man's preordained perfection would not be effected" (*Hujja*, p. 65; Ar. p. 48).

³⁹ *Hujja*, p. 66; Ar. p. 49.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37; Ar. p. 27.

⁴¹ According to Walī Allāh, God "created the world into species and genera and made certain specific properties particular to each species and genus" (*Hujja*, p. 33; Ar. p. 24).

⁴² In Walī Allāh's conception, the four worlds, from the highest to the lowest, are *lahūt*, the level of divine existence; *jabarūt*, the level of divine command; *malakūt*, the realm of images and angels; and *nasūt*, the level of manifestation and human existence.

⁴³ *Hujja*, p. 150; Ar. p. 107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; Ar. p. 107, my translation.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153; Ar. p. 109.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159; Ar. p. 114.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161; Ar. p. 114.

⁴⁸ *Hujja*, p. 163; Ar. p. 116. We may note that the two options, intellectual and practical, map onto the discussion of the qualities in the *Hujja*'s chapter on psychological states, discussed earlier (see also *ibid.*, p. 284 [Ar. p. 203] on the acquisition of the qualities through practice).

by virtue of innate suitability”.⁴⁹ These pathways can be blocked in three ways, one of them being convention (*rasm*); the others are an overwhelming desire for sustenance and misguided beliefs.⁵⁰

Walī Allāh thus does not regard convention as purely good. As he explains earlier, “these customary practices may also come to include invalid elements and people may come to be deceived in this regard”.⁵¹ However, if they are indeed “true in their basic premise”, they will “lead individuals to their theoretical and practical perfection”.⁵² Walī Allāh’s account of the *rusūm* here and in the section on veils that obstruct the attainment of the four qualities is consistent: if the conventions are good, they move people towards perfection by allowing them to develop and acquire the four qualities needed; if they are not, they block them from such development and thus from “the manifestation of the sound *fiṭra*”.⁵³ The author concludes his explication of custom with the central statement, quoted earlier, regarding the ability of customs to be “considered part of the *fiṭra*”.⁵⁴ Clearly, the efficacy and legitimacy of customs play a great role in this system. More important, however, is the ontological relation of *fiṭra* and *rasm*, or nature and custom. Rather than simply arising among people, customs are the result either of discovery by wise men or inspiration from God to prophets.⁵⁵ They are disseminated and can become established, but what matters most with regard to the question of their naturalisation is their relation to the *fiṭra*.

As seen, the original nature for Shāh Walī Allāh is a state made up of four broad qualities, which raises the question how anything, particularly customs, can be naturalised into it. Walī Allāh appears to highlight the way in which particular customs can move humanity towards its highest perfection and can, as such, elicit reward and punishment from God, as well as create a feeling thereof in a person. He holds customs in high esteem, arguing that were it not for “customary practice [most humans] would almost be like the animals”.⁵⁶ But there is an important difference between the function of customs as a way to reform the animalistic side (and thus to move humans closer to their original state) and customs influencing the pre-eternal nature that is the goal of this reform. Walī Allāh’s argument points to a distinction between the concept of the perfect human *fiṭra* and its attainment (or attempts thereat) in this world.

Another indication that Walī Allāh does not envision custom as able to change or add to the original nature is his continuous endorsement of the Qur’anic and prophetic notion of a stable *fiṭra*.⁵⁷ Thus he emphasises the consistency of God’s creation by quoting the

⁴⁹ *Hujja*, p. 163; Ar. p. 116.

⁵⁰ The title of the chapter (number 34) in which this discussion is found – “The veils preventing the manifestation of the sound original nature (*fiṭra*)” (*Hujja*, p. 165; Ar. p. 117) – is revealing, as it makes clear that each individual strives for the realisation of the four qualities and thus a healthy *fiṭra* that is congruent with the one pre-ordained by God. By implication, an unsound *fiṭra* is one that does not fully exhibit the qualities in accordance with the archetypal form. This point highlights the difference between individual *fiṭra* striving to attain the form and the perfect form itself.

⁵¹ *Hujja*, p. 143; Ar. p. 103. By this he presumably means elements that do not promote the desired qualities but rather lead communities away from their divinely ordained perfection.

⁵² *Hujja*, p. 142; Ar. p. 103.

⁵³ The *fiṭra* of people influenced by such conventions are not perfect, in that they do not correspond to the form that constitutes the goal of human development; however, this shortcoming does not essentially change what the ideal *fiṭra* is.

⁵⁴ *Hujja*, p. 144 Ar. p. 104.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142; Ar. p. 103.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142–143; Ar. p. 103.

⁵⁷ Ghulam Husain Jalbani notes that for Walī Allāh, the “definition of virtue and vices goes by the name of ‘fiṭrat’ which is not subject to any change. The laws of ‘fiṭrat’ deal with the principles and the universals of virtue and vice and not with their consequences and particulars. And this is the standard by which every man or group

following prophetic utterance: “If you hear that some mountain has moved from its place, believe it; but if you hear that a man’s character (*khulq*) has changed, don’t believe it, for he remains true to what was created (*jabala*) upon him.”⁵⁸ And, of course, we see him rely on the Qur’an: “There is never a change in the original nature created by God.”⁵⁹ He reiterates: “This original nature (*fiṭra*) is that religion (*dīn*) which does not differ according to the differing of eras and all of the prophets agree on it.”⁶⁰ The context of these quotations is crucial for the direction of my argument, since the latter passage occurs in the chapter on actions that entail reward or punishment. I now turn to that discussion.

ii) *The process of reward and punishment*

Walī Allāh conceives of four sources of human obligation and requital. The first of these is “the natural requirement of the specific form”,⁶¹ or the *fiṭra*. Because of the way humans are created, “acts whose spirits are submission to God, purity, magnanimity, and justice” (that is, acts that express the four qualities of the *fiṭra*) make the angelic nature “thrive”,⁶² thus moving the human being towards ultimate felicity. The other three sources of reward and punishment are direction through the Highest Council,⁶³ the divine laws decreed for humans, and the injunctions of the prophets.

In Walī Allāh’s view, no change can occur in the first two sources. The *fiṭra* made up of the four desired qualities is impervious to change because God has decreed the perfect human form before time. The second source, direction of the Highest Council, works in a fashion similar to sense perception: together with “the form of humanity represented in *malakūt*”, there are “angelic attendants” who — in accordance with God’s decree — allow humans to perceive the effects of their actions.⁶⁴ Shāh Walī Allāh describes this phenomenon as equally unchangeable: the angels emit “beams of delight and happiness” at every good act and “beams of repugnance and anger” in response to bad acts, and “these beams penetrate the soul of that person causing him joy or gloom”.⁶⁵

For our author, flourishing or the perfection of the human *fiṭra* describes the interaction between the requirements of the form and the actions of the angels as intermediaries between God and humans. Both elicit divine responses and translate them into individual feelings or perceptions.⁶⁶ As Shāh Walī Allāh writes, without the action of the attending angels in *malakūt*, “the human species could not thrive”.⁶⁷ The human form and its attendants operate together, since “God brought them into being together”.⁶⁸

can be tested” (Jalbani, *Teachings of Shāh Waliyullāh of Delhi* [Lahore, 1967], p. 163). Similarly, S. Iqbal quotes Walī Allāh’s assertion that there is no change in the original nature, which compares the likelihood of such change to the likelihood of a mountain’s shifting (*Islamic Rationalism in the Subcontinent* [Lahore, 1984], p. 106).

⁵⁸ *Hujja*, p. 73 (slightly amended); Ar. p. 54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72; Ar. p. 53.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Hujja*, p. 69; Ar. p. 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Hujja*, p. 69; Ar. p. 51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* There is an interaction at this level between the highest and the lower angels: “just as these beams descend to what is below, likewise a coloration ascends to the Holy Enclave from the angels. This prepares for the emanation of an attitude which will be known as mercy, pleasure, anger and cursing” (*ibid.*, p. 70; Ar. p. 51). The level of *malakūt* thus communicates with that of *jabarūt*, as “the preparation of petitionary prayer leads to the response” (*ibid.*).

⁶⁶ Shāh Walī Allāh seems to be unconcerned with the accessibility of these feelings, portraying this kind of angelic perception as unclouded.

⁶⁷ *Hujja*, p. 69; Ar. p. 51.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

The attendants constitute the moral perception system that allows humans to feel the results of their actions, just like the “perceptual faculties placed in [the] brain with which [one] feels whatever [one’s] foot treads on”.⁶⁹ For the Shāh, “the effect of these angels on us is like the effects of perceptions in our bodies”.⁷⁰ As one is able to anticipate the potential physical results of pain, “likewise instinctive inspirations and natural states shower down on humans and the souls of the lower angels from the angels which are the guardians of human beings”.⁷¹

Unlike the first two sources of divine reward and punishment, which are unchangeable, “requit from the third source [that is, the divine law] [...] changes with the variations of the eras”.⁷² Sometimes certain practices make for reward and others prompt punishment; in other times or places, the reverse is true. Although actions that broadly further the four qualities of justice, purity, humility, and magnanimity naturally elicit rewards, this is not necessarily true of more particular divine norms or of human customs. Therefore, the third source anchors the interaction between custom and nature and provides the context for the passage on conventions being “counted as or considered part of the *fiṭra*”. Again, the locus of requital is in *malakūt*, but this time the focus is not on the communication between the Highest Council and *jabarūt* but rather on the interaction between the lower angels and the highest ones, and it thus takes place a level below the second source. The connection between customs, divine laws, and divine responses occurs during an event in *malakūt* known as “the night of power” (*laylat al-qadr*), which takes into account the time and place of a community. Thus, Walī Allāh writes:

When a certain time comes, which in the divine law is called “the blessed night” on which “every wise matter will be decided”, a spiritual energy is generated in *Malakūt* (the angelic plane) which is composed of the determinants of the human species combined with the requirements of this time. (At this time) inspirations filter down from there upon the most intelligent of God’s creatures and on the souls beneath him in intelligence, through his mediation. Thus, the rest of the people are inspired to accept these inspirations, approve of them and to support their protector and forsake their opponent. The lower angels are inspired to do good to the one who obey them and evil to the one who disobeys them. Therefore, there ascends from them a coloration to the Highest Council and the Holy Enclave, and pleasure or rage results there.⁷³

During this event, the particular norms of a place or a time become efficacious. They are calibrated into the system of requital and thus become avenues of the *fiṭra*’s realisation, because they determine the actions for which the angels petition for reward and emit feelings of happiness as well as those for which they do the reverse.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ *Hujja*, p. 69; Ar. p. 51.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70; Ar. p. 51.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Hujja*, p. 72; Ar. p. 53.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 71; Ar. p. 52.

⁷⁴ According to Johannes Baljon, the instantiations created in the blessed night are particular to that time and that revelation and are thus cognizant of a particular people and their circumstances. As he puts it, “legislation sees to it that man’s angelic and bestial potentialities function properly and remain in a state of equilibrium so that bliss will ultimately become his share in the hereafter. With this end in view, divine Providence prepared two kinds of directives: 1. measures designed for situations, actions and ethical qualities which are not conditioned by time. [...] 2. rules adapted to changes of time and place. For that purpose various *sharī‘as* were revealed in the course of history” (Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Dihlawī (1703–1762)* [Leiden, 1986], p. 160). As Baljon further clarifies, a particular *sharī‘a* is developed with “existing local practices and religious observances”

Shāh Walī Allāh's argument is thus that divine laws are particular to peoples, places, and times. When the laws are calibrated during *laylat al-qadr*, good customs are taken into account (a significant claim, as it "baptises" customs into the divine laws).⁷⁵ The point of this process is to mark certain actions as good, subject to the angels' advocacy and feelings of joy, and others as bad, prompting the angels to petition for gloom. As a result, these actions are added to others that attract reward or punishment naturally, and they become incorporated into the system that is naturally connected to the broader four qualities of justice, purity, humility, and magnanimity. Consequently, it makes sense to speak of customs sanctioned on the night of power as "being counted as *fiṭra*", since they are accepted as ways of attaining the *fiṭra* and as such become part of the system of reward and punishment. However, it should be stressed again that Walī Allāh's position here does not imply that the original nature itself changes. Something's "counting as" *fiṭra* means that a practice elicits the natural response of the Enclave on the human form. However, this is the case *after* being calibrated into this system and *made to* have effects that are natural. They are not originally so. And they do not change the *fiṭra* itself.

I thus concur with Hermansen that in being counted as part of the *fiṭra*, these customs acquire the ability to produce the effects that are natural to more basic actions. This extension of effects, however, does not mean the *make-up* of the *fiṭra*, which is being sought as the desired human state, changes. The *fiṭra* is the end goal of the movement towards a human being's flourishing or perfection, which means the realisation of the four desired qualities and control over one's lower, animalistic side. The incorporation of customs into the process through which actions move the human being towards realisation does not mean that the customs travel back in time and change the original nature. Customary practices become "part of the *fiṭra*" in the sense that an individual's adherence to or dismissal of a custom elicits a response in the form of divine mercy or angelic action, just like naturally occurring causes of reward or punishment do. The destination is the same; the custom has simply been accepted as an additional path towards this goal by the angels' agreeing to act as traffic police.

Another passage referring to the first two sources of requital underscores Walī Allāh's view that the content of the *fiṭra* is fixed but that it can be realised through particular practices accepted as avenues towards its perfection. Walī Allāh argues that another way of expressing the *fiṭra*, or the four qualities, is *dīn*, since the latter is "nothing other than the essentials of piety and sin".⁷⁶ In a later discussion of piety and sin we are then informed that at its simplest, piety denotes

every act which a person does as a requirement of his submission to the Highest Council, his being effaced in accepting inspiration from God, and his surrendering himself to the divine purpose. It consists of every act which is rewarded by God in this world or the next [...].⁷⁷

What we see here is a strong sense in which the original nature refers to acts that elicit the response natural to the four qualities. Taken together with the absence of references

in mind *Religion and Thought*, p. 160, and it is thus mindful of what could be described as custom (see also *ibid.*, pp. 171–172).

⁷⁵ If these customs are "true in their basic premise" (*Hujja*, p. 142; *Ar.* p. 103) and aimed at "comprehensive beneficial purposes" (*ibid.*, p. 143; *Ar.* p. 103) rather than any individual interest, they can have an efficacy on the human form through the Enclave.

⁷⁶ *Hujja*, 72; p. *Ar.* 53. This equation of *fiṭra* and *dīn* is widespread, supported in the commentary tradition on both *sūrat al-Rūm* 30 and the *ḥadīth* in Bukhārī and Muslim on the *islām* of all humans.

⁷⁷ *Hujja*, p. 173; *Ar.* pp. 120–121. Conversely, sin "is every act which man does as a result of his obedience to the devil and which results in his surrendering to his purpose, every act which is rewarded by evil in this world and the next [...]" (*ibid.*, p. 173; *Ar.* p. 121).

to change and the affirmation of the stability of the *fiṭra*, this claim demonstrates Walī Allāh's conviction that customs, or established practices, do not in fact change the original nature, since the latter is in essence a concept of the flourishing of the human being.

There are established practices (*sunan*) that God [...] has inspired in the hearts of those who are supported by the angelic light who are dominated by the ethic of the original nature (*fiṭra*) [...]. Thus, they customarily practice them, adopt and teach them and urge to them, so that people emulate them.⁷⁸

Rather than bringing about a change in God's vision of human perfection as ordained in pre-eternity, customs are "naturalised" when they acquire the effect of other *fiṭrī* practices — namely, eliciting divine reward or punishment.

In Shāh Walī Allāh's conception, customs do not amount to an addition to the original nature and do not create any need for a change. Customs differ, but they share principles that lead to human flourishing and can thus become efficacious:

The people of all the religious communities in all regions of the earth agree on them, despite the distances between their lands and the differences in their religions, due to the decree of consistency of the original nature and a requirement of the species. This difference in the forms of these practices does not preclude (this basic congruence) once there is agreement on their principles, neither does the obstruction of a defective group.⁷⁹

Besides highlighting again the consistency of human nature, this passage, through its emphasis on people's agreement, connects the customs discussed here to those discussed earlier as being "counted as" part of the *fiṭra*.⁸⁰ Walī Allāh emphasises that all customs uphold a shared idea of piety because they bring about "the submission of the animalistic force to the angelic one".⁸¹ Thus, such widely shared customs as a belief in God's oneness or fasting are *fiṭrī* because of their ability to promote the four qualities of the original nature or of ultimate flourishing. They have been deemed efficacious for this purpose and consequently form a part of the original nature just as do the most basic acts of justice, purity, humility, and magnanimity.

We can see, then, that customs are one source of requital operating within natural beliefs (*madhhab ṭabī'ī*). These are beliefs "which the human specific form provides, and all segments of the nations agree on it, not due to their following the custom of one nation rather than another, or one religion rather than another".⁸² A natural belief by its very nature thus requites and responds to the *fiṭra*, whereas customs can act that way but are themselves contingent and changeable. Accordingly, in his description of the conditions of *jāhiliyya* Walī Allāh refers to a *ḥaniṭī* (monotheistic) religion whose characteristics express the four qualities of the *fiṭra* and indicate the existence of "a remnant of the rightly guided practice"⁸³ that had been introduced by the *milla* (actualised version of *dīn*) of Abraham. When customs are accepted or naturalised, they become another sanctioned way towards the *fiṭra*.

⁷⁸ *Hujja*, p. 173; Ar. p. 121.

⁷⁹ *Hujja*, p. 173–174; Ar. p. 121.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 142–144.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174; Ar. p. 121.

⁸² *Hujja*, p. 285; Ar. p. 204.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 361; Ar. p. 263.

iii) The workings of the Holy Enclave

A look at Shāh Walī Allāh's description of the Highest Council reinforces the impression that customs share in the original nature by serving as a way of attaining it. Walī Allāh argues that the role of the council is not to change pre-eternal forms.⁸⁴ Instead, the members of the council are “ambassadors and intermediaries between God and His worshippers and they inspire good in the breasts of human beings”.⁸⁵ At the same time they also work in the other direction, “unceasingly pray[ing] for the one who reforms and purifies himself [...] so that their prayer is the cause for the descent of blessings upon them”.⁸⁶ And they also, as mentioned above, create feelings of “grief and remorse in the soul” of a person who commits bad deeds.⁸⁷ The members of this Highest Council consist of the most excellent humans and angels, and the very best of them form the Holy Enclave. It is this Enclave that is responsible for revelation by inspiring prophets.⁸⁸

Another place where one can see the interplay between the general form and the intercession of the Highest Council is Walī Allāh's discussion of the tailoring of religious demands to the recipient. Here we read that certain “structuring forces” determine the command that is matched with each person:

Among these structuring forces are the properties of the elements and their natural constituents, the determinants which God put in every specific form, and included are the states of the World of Images and the existence decreed there, before earthly existence. Also among these structuring forces are the prayers of the Highest Council who concentrate their fullest zeal on those who refine their souls and make efforts to reform people, and (their negative invocations) on the one who opposes this. The structuring forces also include the religious laws ordained for human beings which establish obligation and prohibition, for they are the basis of the rewarding of the obedient and the punishment of the disobedient.⁸⁹

Again, it seems clear that although Walī Allāh conceives of a way in which the earthly plane — through the help of the angels — interacts with the images, what exists in this world is the product of a higher realm.⁹⁰ There is no suggestion that things devised on earth move the angels to change anything.

Walī Allāh provides a final indication of the function of the angels in enabling customs to become a means of actualising a set, beneficial destiny for the entirety of humanity in the *Hujja's* section on human nature, mentioned earlier. There we read:

⁸⁴ The continued emphasis on direction underlines this impression of the unchangeable *fitra* further since God's creation is oriented through his management (*tadbīr*). Thus, anything that occurs in the world happens “in conformity with the system which His Divine wisdom approves, so that it will attain the beneficial purpose (*maṣlaḥa*) which His Divine generosity required” (*Hujja*, p. 34; Ar. p. 25). I discuss this emphasis on direction further below.

⁸⁵ *Hujja*, p. 45; Ar. p. 33.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*; Ar. p. 32.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; Ar. p. 33. The actions of the Enclave in the process of requital are highlighted also in *ibid.*, p. 274 (Ar. p. 196), where we read that there are “angels of God whose utmost concentrated resolve is praying for the one who strives to improve the world, and against the one who tries to corrupt it, and their invocation knocks on the door of divine generosity and is a cause for the descent of requital in some fashion”.

⁸⁸ “Sometimes in the Holy Enclave a consensus is reached to establish a means of saving human beings from the disasters of this life or the next world through the perfection of the purest man of the age and through causing his command to be implemented among the people” (*Hujja*, p. 47; Ar. p. 34).

⁸⁹ *Hujja*, pp. 49–50; Ar. p. 36.

⁹⁰ As mentioned before, on the broader concept of the realm of images, see Rahman's article ‘Dream, imagination, *‘ālam al-mithāl*’, in which Rahman traces the history of the concept of a realm between the spiritual and the physical.

When the time for the creation of the angels came, God knew that the best interest of human individuals would not be fulfilled except through noble souls whose relationship to the species of man would be like the relationship of the intellectual faculty in one of us to his lower soul.⁹¹

Thus, the angels were created “with pure solicitude for human individuals”.⁹² This statement makes clear not only the firm hierarchy of creation, with the humans depending on the angels, and the angels (and the humans, of course) depending on God, but also the fact that humanity’s purpose and well-being are pre-ordained. These points support my argument that Shāh Walī Allāh does not endorse the ability of human custom to affect the *fiṭra* in the sense of changing it.⁹³ Rather, as I have argued, we must read the passage regarding the workings of the *rusūm* as a description of customs’ potential efficacy in the human reaction to good and bad. Therefore, we ought to understand the idea of customs’ being considered part of the original nature as referring to the function of the *fiṭra* rather than to its content, and see the work of the Enclave as a means within the bounds of God’s vision for humanity.⁹⁴ That my interpretation corresponds to the author’s view is indicated by his choice of title for his book: anything with respect to humanity “was only required by His providence towards the species”.⁹⁵ It is God who envisages all things, it is he who directs all that exists in this world.

Nothing asked God to emanate the souls of the Highest Council except the preparedness of the species, and nothing beseeches, asking for this particular divine law at the time of the celestial conjunctions, except the conditions of the species, and “God has the conclusive argument”.⁹⁶

IV. Walī Allāh the reformer

In this section I want to make clear that emphasising a stable but broad conception of human nature as the perfection of four qualities in no way compromises the reforming tendency of Walī Allāh’s thought.⁹⁷ The statement quoted directly above shows that for Walī Allāh, the “preparedness” of humans is crucial for them receiving revelation, and, as seen earlier, customs are the predominant way in which the broad vision of flourishing is achieved.⁹⁸ Both preparedness and the importance of customs already indicate the place

⁹¹ *Hujja*, p. 67; Ar. p. 49.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Walī Allāh’s mention of a concept of maximising benefit at *ibid.*, p. 50 (Ar. p. 37) may be related to this point. He contends that if there is any kind of conflict, even of the kind of “the domain of material creation (*khalq*) over the domain of divine ordering (*tadbīr*)”, humans must assume, in spite of their lack of assured knowledge, that “only the most worthy thing will come into being”.

⁹⁴ This idea of the Holy Enclave’s function is supported by Walī Allāh’s reference to the work of prophecy in the same section, where he writes that Moses was “a means for fulfilling His will” (*Hujja*, p. 68; Ar. p. 49). Since prophecy is a means of requital, this point offers additional support for the idea that the natural senses of good and bad, the work of the angels, divine laws, and prophecy can all be understood as ways of implementing the divine will, that is, of moving humanity towards the actualisation of the state of the four qualities. This is the same goal that good customs, on my reading of Walī Allāh, can promote through their “being considered part of the original nature”.

⁹⁵ *Hujja*, p. 68; Ar. p. 50.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ The opposite appears to be true, since the emphasis on a stable human nature existing beyond time, besides being in accordance with Qur’anic claims, opens up a space for human custom.

⁹⁸ One might, however, claim that conceiving of the universe as fundamentally oriented to a divine purpose diminishes human freedom. Be that as it may, my goal here is to show that although Shāh Walī Allāh does posit

Walī Allāh accords to particularity and flexibility in his vision of law. In this vein Hermansen notes in her introduction to the *Hujja* that the author's idea of religion is interactive, as it "envisages an interaction between the human material and the actualized form (*milla*) of the ideal religion which responds to and shapes it".⁹⁹ Because the actualised form of religion that comes to a people is tailored to the community's specific customs and capabilities, "religion has adapted in its form, beliefs, and spiritual practices to the customs, previously held beliefs and temperaments of the nations to whom it has been revealed".¹⁰⁰ As Shāh Walī Allāh summarises his position, "the divine laws were matched to their peoples [...] according to their capacity".¹⁰¹ Rather than merely stipulating a purpose to which God has continuously called humanity to return through the sending of successive prophets, the particular instantiations are mindful of their circumstances. As a result, a simple conception of history as most authentic at its onset seems to lose power. Instead, each human age has its characteristics in time and space, and God is indeed mindful of them.¹⁰²

The importance of interactions between the divine and human realms in Walī Allāh's view of religion goes hand in hand with his understanding of prophethood. As he writes, "differences among prophetic missions are due to the differences among the communities to which that prophetic mission is revealed".¹⁰³ Rather than merely call to repentance, a prophet "will make reference to what remained among them [i.e. the community] from the previous divine law".¹⁰⁴ The interaction between God, prophet, and community goes so far that our author even speaks of God's having "a connectedness in some sense with time and temporality".¹⁰⁵ Sometimes the time is so ripe for a new revelation — like spring flowers waiting for the rain to come into bloom — that "the least accidental cause is sufficient to knock at the door of divine generosity".¹⁰⁶ In moments of such heightened divine responsiveness, the slightest question can occasion a revelatory response, and it is wise, Shāh Walī Allāh advises his readers, not to be too inquisitive lest multiple, highly specific rules be issued that might become a burden for the community.¹⁰⁷

In my view, given the importance of custom and its role in the attainment of the four qualities in his work, our author emphasises the workings of custom and the divergence of laws not just alongside a sense of purpose, hierarchy, and stability but because of it. Like an experienced pedagogue, God uses different methods to help humanity move along its path to perfection. Although a natural way of developing the *fiṭra* is possible, most individuals and communities are reformed through divine laws that take into account the time, place, and capacity of their subjects. Such a contingency-focused conception of reform does not imply a change in the general make-up of human perfection. Rather, it embodies the opposite idea: particularity in the service of a discernible goal that is larger than any specific circumstances.

God as having the conclusive argument, he does not thereby render time and place irrelevant. Instead, it is because God the teacher, the doctor, the creator knows best that he is able to tailor his pedagogy to capacity, place, and time.

⁹⁹ *Hujja*, p. xxi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 264; Ar. p. 188. The notion of capacity (*istiṭā'a*) is also highlighted at p. 48 (Ar. p. 35) and probably merits more attention than I can give it in this article.

¹⁰² See also S. Iqbal's discussion of Walī Allāh's "evolutionary and natural conception of the *Shariah*" in *Islamic Rationalism in the Subcontinent*, p. 131.

¹⁰³ *Hujja*, p. 268; Ar. p. 191.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*; Ar. p. 192.

¹⁰⁵ *Hujja*, p. 268; Ar. p. 192.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Hujja*, p. 269; Ar. p. 193.

The argument in favour of a non-mutable *fiṭra* does not diminish the legitimacy and efficacy Shāh Walī Allāh attaches to particular customs and hence also does not weaken his commitment to reform and legal change. It is possible to hold both that humanity attains perfection when the four qualities are established in the soul and that one way of attaining such perfection — with the help of the Holy Enclave — is to follow the laws and practices of a particular time and place. That these particular laws, which are formed on the basis of customs, can be as efficacious as more universal acts empowers customs without changing nature. Neither element needs to be “naturalised” into the other; a logical and traditional account of one ideal form of humanity can accommodate a concession to the legitimacy of particularity. Indeed, it might be that Walī Allāh’s ability to uphold both positions is exactly what made him not only a reformer but an acceptable one. The idea that the *fiṭra* itself is mutable would be disruptive to his argument for the authenticity and rightfulness of particular customs, and I see neither a need nor, a real possibility to elicit such an idea from the *Hujja*.

Beyond the *Hujja*

The argument I have put forward here fits well with the evidence from Walī Allāh’s other works, which yield a similar picture: Walī Allāh speaks of a single, unitary *fiṭra* while affirming human-divine interaction and local variations of custom. As in the *Hujja*, Walī Allāh’s endorsement of the possibility of reform and of multiple ways of achieving perfection in these writings does not mean that he accepts change in the ultimate vision of human beings and their flourishing. Instead, as in the *Hujja*, he distinguishes between the earthly attempts of people to perfect their *fiṭar* and the ideal form that exists beyond time and which they hope to attain. Thus, in the *Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* he writes with respect to the relation of the *fiṭra*, prophethood, and human diversity:

Know that prophethood is subordinate to the *fiṭra*. And just as forms of knowledge and perception may enter the depth of man’s heart and soul, and on them is built what he is given to see in visions, so that what he sees are apparitions in accordance with what is stored [in his knowledge and perception] and nothing outside it, likewise, all people and regions have a *fiṭra* they were created upon. All their matters are built upon it. Thus, finding ritual slaughter repulsive and believing in the eternity of the world are the *fiṭra* that the Hindus were created upon; the validity of ritual slaughter and the belief in the createdness of the world are the *fiṭra* that the Arabs and the Persians from among the children of Shem were created upon. When a prophet arrives [among a people], he considers their beliefs and practice. Whatever is in accordance with the cultivation of the self he reinforces and guides them to; whatever is opposed to the cultivation of the self he forbids to them [...]. Prophethood, then, is like the levelling and refining of a thing and its making the best it could be, irrespective of whether that thing is wax or clay. And the *fiṭra* and religion are, at the level of substance, the wax and the clay [...]. The essence of prophethood is refinement of the soul through belief in the veneration of God the Exalted, concentration upon Him, and seeking what will save one from God’s punishment in this world and in the Hereafter, [that is], from a bad requital.¹⁰⁸

While the prophet takes into account the individual realities of a people (or what might be described as their different *fiṭar*), his overall aim is the perfection of the self through whatever means are appropriate to the particular context. In this process, the human

¹⁰⁸ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* (Hyderabad, 1967–70), i, p. 92.

fiṭra, like religion, can be moulded or fitted to differing eras and circumstances. In fact, this passage describes different people as having different *fiṭar* according to which they perceive certain things and understand God and his worship. However, it is telling that the metaphor Walī Allāh uses for the *fiṭra* is wax or clay. Although these materials can be formed and altered, their essential substance does not change. Likewise, the ultimate goal of attaining the four qualities remains the same for Arabs, Persians, and Hindus even as they pursue different, contingent paths to attain this goal. The metaphor affirms both Walī Allāh's belief in the flexibility of the *fiṭra*, which can accommodate different practices and beliefs among people as "natural", or *fiṭrī*, and his conviction that the essence of the *fiṭra*, the flourishing of human beings through the development of the four central qualities, is fixed. Like clay or wax, the *fiṭra* can fit itself to differing circumstances without undergoing fundamental change.

Shāh Walī Allāh's *Altāf al-Quds* further supports my argument that he envisions a diversity of ways in which the broad framework of the *fiṭra* can be attained. In this work, too, he asserts that the four "virtues" of nature are unchangeable and, although quite broad, underpin all forms of human improvement:

God has drawn man's attention towards the cultivation of four cardinal virtues. If you think carefully, you will find that all kinds of goodness are merely an elaboration of these four virtues; conversely, all types of sin are merely an elaboration of their opposite characteristics. These four virtues are precisely the ones which all the prophets have exhorted the people to imbibe. There can be no question of any change or abrogation with regard to these virtues. If there is any difference in what the various Lawgivers say about them, this is only a matter of their outward form, not their real substance.¹⁰⁹

In this work we also learn of the function of the angels, whose primary activity again takes place in the world of ideas. Walī Allāh argues that the angels not only broadly interact with humans but also can intervene on their behalf or "contrive a stratagem to save someone from destruction".¹¹⁰ Instead of suggesting that such intervention could influence or change the human form, he clarifies that it focuses on making people "aware of the real situation by means of dreams or voices".¹¹¹ Further, in a discussion of prophecy, he asserts that religion can "appear in new forms according to the requirements of the circumstances".¹¹² Again, there is no mention of nature (or even customs) changing.

Wālī Allāh's *Lamaḥāt* conveys a similar sense of divine-human interaction and the efficacy of prayer. *Lamaḥa* 42 declares that "sometimes, when the heavenly and earthly causes unite for their appearance, the patterns [that is, angels] are given what they have been pleading for".¹¹³ The angels are surely able to be "a cause for the descent of the grace of God", and there is even a reference to their influence on providence: since "God has two providences according to every particular order", the assembly of angels can steer things in certain directions.¹¹⁴ Additionally, we read that everything is always changing,

¹⁰⁹ G. H. Jalbani (trans.), *Altāf al-Quds* (London, 1982), p. 25 (ch. 4). That the four entities that Jalbani translates as "virtues" are our four qualities is clear, as they are named in the next paragraph as purity, humility, generosity, and justice (ibid.).

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹³ G. H. Jalbani (trans.), *The Lamaḥāt and Sata'at of Shah Waliullah* (London, 1980), p. 49.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 50. The levels of providence are also discussed in *lamaḥa* 27, which denies the possibility of contradiction between heavenly and divine orders; rather, there is always a flow between the two. However, "sometimes one thing happens to be more strongly necessary and the other happens to be its supporter but not

like a phoenix.¹¹⁵ The entire “universe is one body, always changing in its states and everlastingly moving with modal motion”.¹¹⁶ However, at every point God is steering the developments, holding “the balance in His hand”.¹¹⁷ There is thus a universal order of predestination, yet God looks “after every soul and every cause, particularising everything with its required condition”.¹¹⁸ As in his other writings, Walī Allāh thus affirms the changeable nature of the universe without making any mention of a change in or renewal of divine intentions in this “universal administration” of changeability.¹¹⁹

The *Lamaḥāt*’s discussion of the workings of revelation also shows that changeability and stability go together for Walī Allāh. First, he emphasises that “God knew well in eternity that if people are created in such-and-such composition and their administration is given such-and-such celestial shape, mischief will unavoidably spread among them, and they will follow the improper course in many of their affairs”.¹²⁰ No custom is a surprise; instead, every community receives that which helps it achieve its purpose. Second, Walī Allāh holds that God always sends the right person to the right people, since “God knows the Law suitable to the Age”.¹²¹ Similarly, his discussion of God confirms not only the tailoredness of His grace, “which descends according to every condition and time”,¹²² but the fact that His will is always realised on earth, “even if earthly causes are not favourable”.¹²³ All of this is based on the assertion that “God possesses infinite knowledge of every event” and that “if He were to suppress this and expand that, it would be this, and if He were to suppress that and expand this, it would be that, and so on *ad infinitum*”.¹²⁴ In the *Lamaḥāt* Walī Allāh thus confirms the fluidity of the world and the fact that God knows and orders everything that occurs.

His writings demonstrate that Walī Allāh’s thought combines a stable human form, a hierarchical cosmology, and a purposeful divine administration with particular revelations, divine-angelic-human interactions, and the fluidity of the universe. The reason for this balance, as Johannes Baljon argues in his reading of the *Lamaḥāt*, is that forms “are phenomena defined by the limitations of time, place and condition”.¹²⁵ Although time and space may be transient, the space-time continuum in which the forms exist means that “the universe is preserved from chaos”.¹²⁶ This point supports my argument, for had Walī Allāh really envisaged that contemporary practices could cause a change in the *fiṭra* itself, he would have had to explain himself well with respect to the possibility of cosmic chaos.¹²⁷

necessary. At times, one thing happens to be more strongly demanding than the other. At such a time, the Changer inclines the happening towards the stronger one. The truth is that the causes reinforce one another, but He [the Changer] desires to give due regard to the right of every rightful one” (pp. 31–32).

¹¹⁵ *Lamḥa* 17, pp. 13–14.

¹¹⁶ This seems to refer to Mulla Sadrā’s thought (on this connection see S. Iqbal, *Islamic Rationalism in the Subcontinent*, p. 78).

¹¹⁷ *Lamḥa* 28, p. 33.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Lamḥa* 40, p. 47.

¹²¹ *Lamḥa* 59, p. 72.

¹²² *Lamḥa* 48, p. 57.

¹²³ *Lamḥa* 47, p. 56.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

¹²⁵ Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Dihlawī (1703–1762)*, p. 55.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55, n. 65.

¹²⁷ We might note that the notion that there are simultaneously universals and particulars, a stable human form and different ways of implementing general qualities, is found also in Walī Allāh’s *Ṣaṭa’āt*: “Man is ordered to do certain actions and on doing them depends the pleasure of God [...] and he is prohibited from certain actions and on doing them depends His displeasure [...]. God says ‘The word does not change before me.’

Beyond Walī Allāh

A precedent for Walī Allāh's push for a balance of stability and change, particularity and universality, in the attainment of human perfection can be found in the work of Aristotle.¹²⁸ The concept of habit is central to Aristotle's discussion of human nature and the virtues. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* we read that habit plays a role in the attainment of virtues and can, because it is so powerful, become a kind of nature: "For the very reason why habits are hard to change is that they are a sort of second nature."¹²⁹ Similarly in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle writes that "that which has become habitual becomes as it were natural; in fact, habit is something like nature, for the distance between 'often' and 'always' is not great, and nature belongs to the idea of 'always', habit to that of 'often'".¹³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, a Christian reader of Aristotle, also envisions an interrelation between nature and habit in which the latter does not change the former. He argues in his *Summa Theologica* that although nature is a useful analogue for habit (or habitual customs and practices), nature is not habit, nor habit nature.¹³¹ It is true that specific virtues (and vices, for that matter) acquired through habitual practice can become like a second nature, making certain actions feel natural or producing a feeling of improvement in one's nature through the attainment of these virtues. However, the primary nature of humans in a state of perfection (that is, the telos) does not in fact change. Rather than make a hasty comparative argument, what I wish to do here is to highlight the logic of ethical formation common to all three of these thinkers: the perfection of human character is achieved through an ethical formation that occurs in particular times and circumstances. The habits that lead to such a formation come close to nature and might even be described as a second nature in their functioning and their experience by the actor. But despite their functional similarity, the difference between the original nature and the habits remains intact. Nature does not change.

Finally, a brief look at a source more directly related to Walī Allāh's life and thought is helpful in underscoring the possibility of accepting the coexistence of stability and fluidity rather than positing a changeable *fiṭra* on the basis of an affirmation of particularity and contingency. For Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), everything is in flux or substantial motion (*ḥaraka fī 'l-jawhar*).¹³² This includes human beings, who are subject to constant development culminating in the hereafter. As Eiyad al-Kutubi writes, for Mullā Ṣadrā "human beings possess a form that transforms from one mode of being into another through its substantial motion".¹³³ However, "this is not to say that human beings have many forms; rather, they have one form from the beginning to the end that has the capacity

After that on certain occasions and times and with certain persons and people this same summary sciences becomes detailed in this manner, that people should discharge those universal affairs in such-and-such way. The reference to the first is given in the verse: 'He has established the same religion for you as He enjoined on Noah,' while the reference to the second is made in the verse, 'to each among you We have prescribed a Law and an Open way'" (Jalbani, *Lamahat and Sata'at, sa'ā* 15, p. 88).

¹²⁸ For a discussion of Aristotle on habit, see Thornston C. Lockwood, 'Habituation, habit, and character in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*', in *A History of Habit*, (ed.) Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson (Lanham, MD, 2013), pp. 19–36.

¹²⁹ F. J. H. Peters (trans.), *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, 5th ed. (London, 1893), VII, 10, 4.

¹³⁰ Freese (trans.), *Rhetoric* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 1370a5. On the concept of second nature in Aristotle, see Donald R. Kelly, "'Second nature': The idea of custom in European law, society, and culture", in *The Transmission of Culture in Early Modern Europe*, (ed.) Anthony Grafton and Ann Blair (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 131–172.

¹³¹ See, for example, *Summa Theologica*, I.II q. 49 (Benziger Bros., 1947); translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province available at <https://aquinas101.thomisticinstitute.org/st-index> (accessed 9 December 2020).

¹³² For an extensive discussion of this concept, see Fazlur Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany, NY, 1975), pp. 94–100.

¹³³ E. al-Kutubi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Eschatology* (London and New York, 2015), p. 48.

to develop into higher forms”.¹³⁴ The reason for Mullā Ṣadrā’s insistence on both change and stability has to do with the relation between intellectual and substantial form:

Every material substance has a flowing, renewed nature, and it has something that is stable and persistent [...]. The status of the natural forms is like that since they are continuously renewed in respect of their material temporal existence in which they have an existence that is gradually changing and not stable. [At the same time], they are stable and enduring with respect to their intelligible existence and their immaterial Platonic forms that exist in God’s knowledge.¹³⁵

Thus, the substantial, changeable form derives from the intellectual one that exists in God’s mind and is stable. When human beings change and develop, their form provides them with stability.¹³⁶ This is because, as al-Kutubi notes, “when a substance moves and intensifies its mode of existence, it does so within the limit of its intellectual form”.¹³⁷ In other words, there is substantial motion, but it is directed towards a final purpose; and this applies to both particular species and the cosmos as a whole.¹³⁸ At the same time, Mullā Ṣadrā affirms the eternity of the forms in God’s mind. According to Ibrahim Kalin, the basis of this argument is that “in a clearly Platonic fashion, entities retain their essential identities through their eternal forms in God”.¹³⁹ Mullā Ṣadrā thus foreshadows Walī Allāh’s assertion that change, flexibility, and fixed forms coexist. Permanence and universality through the existence of forms at a higher ontological level grounds the idea of substantial change rather than hindering it.¹⁴⁰

This brief excursus into the writings of other influential thinkers on the question of nature and habit shows that there is a precedent for Walī Allāh’s embrace of a balance of particularity and universality, contingency and necessity. A reading of the *Hujja* as affirming both a stable *fiṭra* and the validity of customs for forming that *fiṭra* fits well into a tradition of thought of which Walī Allāh must have been at the very least aware.

Some consequences of my argument and a conclusion

My concern in this article has not been simply to call into question the idea of a mutable *fiṭra* in the *Hujja*. Instead, engaging Walī Allāh’s understanding of the archetypal and worldly *fiṭra* and its relation to law and custom has larger implications. Modernist arguments for legal reform are directly affected by the question of the relation of customs and

¹³⁴ al-Kutubi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Eschatology* (italicized), p. 48.

¹³⁵ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār*, iii, p. 84, quoted and translated in al-Kutubi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Eschatology*, p. 63.

¹³⁶ See also Ibrahim Kalin’s discussion of the relation of permanence and change in *Mulla Sadra* (Oxford, 2014): “The principal of substantial motion turns the world-order into a continuously changing structure based on patterns of essential change and continuity” (p. 113; see also pp. 111–112). Similarly, Rahman speaks of “change-in-unity” (*Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā*, p. 103).

¹³⁷ Al-Kutubi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Eschatology*, p. 63.

¹³⁸ Even here, there is what Kalin calls a “gradation of existence” (*Mulla Sadra*, p. 94) in which man as a contingent being occupies a middle space between higher and lower beings. (On the order and dependency of creation, see also *ibid.*, p. 103).

¹³⁹ p. 116.

¹⁴⁰ Rahman draws attention to the fact that Mullā Ṣadrā’s discussion of existence and essence leaves unclear which of the two is permanent and which changes (*Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā*, pp. 106–107). What seems certain, however, is that for Ṣadrā everything, including all forms, exists in God’s mind at once (*ibid.*, pp. 148–149). In fact, the forms are part of His being, rather than separate entities (*ibid.*, pp. 160, 242–243). Thus, whereas everything outside of God is subject to constant change and movement, “God has an eternal, unalterable will and knowledge” (*ibid.*, p. 181). Beyond God there is the possibility of change, of multiple options and possibilities; this mix, contrasting with a fully determinate picture, allows the development and progress of the material world and thus its eventual redemption (*ibid.*, p. 182).

nature, and so are changing attitudes with respect to the *sharī'a*'s cosmological and ontological position. Further, it seems clear that debates over the relationship between human nature and the human telos as divinely envisaged, as well as over the relationships between stability, change, and progress, are of interest beyond the *Hujja*. So far, I have merely attempted to shed light on one possible strand of thought with which Walī Allāh might have been engaging. In order to appreciate his particular concept of the *fiṭra* and its relations to its predecessors and its successors it would be helpful to understand the kinds of works he read. Additionally, it might be illuminating to examine early commentaries on the *Hujja*. Such a historical inquiry into the curriculum of Walī Allāh's time is possible, but it lies beyond the scope of the present article.

In conclusion, although I agree with Hermansen's view of the role of custom in general in Shāh Walī Allāh's *Hujja*, I contest her argument's most radical implication — namely, that Walī Allāh grants customs the ability to effect changes in humanity's original nature. While multiple avenues remain to be investigated, I wanted to offer an alternative to Hermansen's explanation and raise the possibility of a crucial distinction in Walī Allāh's thought. As I have shown, there is no sense of change in his account of the *fiṭra* but rather a firm emphasis on unity and stability. Walī Allāh does stress that the universe is in motion, prayers are efficacious, and customs are crucial to the development of laws. However, we have also seen that his cosmology is hierarchical. The entire universe moves towards a purpose, and each of its parts towards their own. That purpose is fixed. In the case of humanity, it consists of a return to a flourishing obstructed by humans' animal nature, and it takes place through the cultivation of the four key qualities. General acts promoting the four qualities are efficacious for that purpose, but God also enlists customs and divine laws in this enterprise. Becoming calibrated for divine requital is a way in which practices can be understood to become part of the *fiṭra*: they help their subject develop the qualities needed for flourishing. However, this transformative process does not seem to change the *fiṭra* that is the goal of the process. In this reading of Walī Allāh, neither the possibility of reform nor basic theological doctrine is compromised. With his carefully crafted stance, he does not merely hold humans' general purpose and their particular circumstances together but separate. Rather, the broadness of his account of the qualities that make up the original human nature and the particularity of his account of prophecy work in the service of each others.

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