The Position of Aql

In the Prose and Poetry of Nāṣir Khusraw

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In both his prose and poetry, Nāṣir Khusraw extols the position of the intellect, ʿaql (in Arabic) or khirad (in Persian). In so doing, his method follows neither that of the philosophers nor of the theologians. Although some include him among the philosophers and others among the theologians, he does not regard himself as belonging to either group. He prefers to describe himself as a follower of the ahl al-bayt, the rāsikhūn fiʿl-ʿilm (those well-grounded in knowledge, Qur’ān 3:7) and muṭahharūn (the ones purified by God, Qur’ān 30:30; 56:79). He includes himself among the people of taʿwīl (esoteric interpretation) and taʿyīd (divine help through the Holy Spirit). Alluding to this position, he concludes his Jāmiʿ al-ḥikmatayn thus:

“Every wise person who reads this book, in which we have mentioned the sayings of the sages of philosophy quoting them to answer every question and then rectifying and strengthening them with the taʾwīlī explanation and demonstration from the discoveries (mustanbatāt) and deductions (mustakhrajāt) of the rāsikhūn fiʿl-ʿilm, let him look at them with the inner eye and may he duly reflect upon every point. If he finds a word or a point in a religious allusion or in a taʾwīlī expression that is not well-known among the renowned people of excellence from among the literati, poets and writers, let him not reject it, because the pearls of knowledge of true religion
are strung on the threads of allegories (amthāl) and concealed in the caskets of symbols (rumūz) that nobody can touch except the muṭahharūn, namely those who have seen the concealed secrets of the knowledge of [God’s] mighty book and comprehended the writings of the splendid sharīṭat.”

Here, Nāṣir indicates that certain aspects of the teachings of the ahl al-bayt are known neither to philosophers nor to theologians. They are known only to the family of the Prophet and those who follow this illustrious lineage. In order to assess how Nāṣir arrives at his concept of intellect, his background will be described briefly, his classification of people with respect to the innate intellect vis-à-vis the tanzīl will be examined, and finally the consequences he attributes to a human being’s acceptance or rejection of edification by the perfect intellect are studied.

Nāṣir Khusraw was a member of the Ismaili da‘wa, or ecclesia. The Fatimid Caliph and Imam, al-Mustanṣir bi‘llāh I (d. 487/1094), appointed him as the ħujjat-i Khurāsān, the ‘proof’ of Khurasan, or the šāhīb-i jazīra-yi Mashriq, ‘the lord of the eastern island’. In the da‘wa terminology, a ħujjat or šāhīb-i jazīra is one of twelve dignitaries who oversee the world’s twelve jazā‘ir (islands, sing. jazīra). Even today, centuries after his death, his memory is revered in Badakhshan, Afghanistan, China, Chitral, and the Northern Areas of Pakistan, including Gilgit, Puniyal, Ghizr, Yasin, Ishkoman and Hunza. In these areas he is known as Ḥażrat-i Pīr or Sayyid Shāh Nāṣir-i Khusraw.
His full name was Abū Muḥīn Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāṣir b. Khusraw b. Ḥārith-i Qubādiyānī, Marwazi, Māzandari, Yumgī or Yumgānī. He was born into a family of landowners and officials in 394/1004 in Qubadiyan on the right bank of the Oxus River. There is no dearth of literature about the various aspects of his multi-faceted life. A number of scholars have elucidated the main episodes of his career, such as his education, government service, the visionary experience that led him to change his life and resign from his post, the ensuing seven-year journey from 437/1045 to 444/1052 that was immortalized in his celebrated Safar-nāma, his arrival in Cairo and discussions with the senior Ismaili luminary, al-Muʿayyad fiʾl-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078), his audience with the Imam al-Mustanṣīr biʾllāh I, his appointment as hujjat of Khurasan and return to his native land of Balkh in 444/1052, the beginnings of his daʿwa activities and initial successes, the opposition of his adversaries, his taking refuge in Yumgan and spreading the Ismaili daʿwa there and in the surrounding areas, his works and his death.5

Nāṣir Khusraw’s writings show that he received a sound education in his youth, which afforded him entry into government service. Despite his success in this coveted position, he felt a certain hollowness. His ethical, spiritual and intellectual dissatisfaction with his earlier life rings clear in his Diwān, in which he writes:

Ān kardī az fasād ki gar yādat āyad ān
Rūyat siyāh gardad-u tīra shawad ḵamīr

5
You once wrought such mischief that were you to
call it to mind
Your face would be blackened by dishonour
Your heart darkened by disgrace

Similarly, at the beginning of his *Safar-nāma*, his *Travelogue*,
citing the Prophetic tradition “Speak the truth, though it be
against yourself”, he ruefully admits to his former addiction to
drink.

His internal turmoil precipitated a crisis. One night, at the age
of 43, he had a dream that was to transform his life forever. He
writes:

One night I was approached in a dream by
someone who chided me, “How long will you
drink this brew that destroys human intellect? ’Tis
better to be sober!” I responded, “The sages have
failed to find a better elixir to drive away the
sorrows of the world.” He said, “Never has
drunkenness brought peace of mind. Can one who
leads people to stupor be called a sage? Seek that
which increases intellect and wisdom!” I asked,
“Where can I find such a thing?” He replied,
“Those who seek shall find.” And then, pointing in
the direction of the *qibla*, he fell silent.

Nāṣir rose, the vision still vivid in his mind. He lamented to
himself: “I have woken up from last night’s dream. But now I
must awaken from a dream that has lasted forty years”! He
resolved to forswear his evil ways, knowing that he would never
attain true happiness until he did so. Resigning from government service, on Saturday, 6 Jumādā II 437/19 December 1045\(^{10}\) he set out on his famous journey, returning only seven years later, on Tuesday 26 Jumādā II 444/23 October 1052.\(^{11}\)

The oracle had pointed him in the direction of the qibla, which was also the direction of Cairo, the capital of the Fatimid Caliphate and centre of the Ismaili daʿwa. After his arrival there on Sunday 1 ʿṢafar 439/28 July 1047 he met many Ismaili dāʿīs, including al-Muʿayyad fiʿl-Dīn Shīrāzī, the hujjat of Fars, who was the head of the daʿwa at the time. Nāṣir was duly impressed with al-Muʿayyad, whom he regarded as ridwān, the warden of paradise.

Nāṣir describes Cairo in glowing terms in his Safar-nāma, not only as a splendid metropolis, but even more so as the spiritual city par excellence, the city of knowledge and wisdom of the Imam. He writes:

One day I reached a city to which the heavenly bodies and spheres themselves were subservient. Its plains were embroidered like brocade, its walls made of emerald and its water pure and sweet like the spring of kawthar in paradise. In this city there is no wealth save excellence, no fir trees in its gardens save intellect. It is a city in which the sages wear brocade that is neither spun by women nor woven by men. Upon my arrival my intellect intimated to me, “Go no further! Seek here what you need.” I went to the warden of the city and
told him my tale. He said, “Fear not, for your mine has now transformed into gems.” His discourse, so sweet and pregnant with meaning, convinced me that he was none other than *ridwān*, the warden of paradise. According to the *ta’wil*, paradise is naught but the *da‘wa* of the Prophet’s progeny. I told him of my soul’s grief and frailty, urging him not to look at the strength of my body, or the redness of my cheeks. Never would I touch a medicine without proof and demonstration, said I. He reassured me that he was a physician of that city and encouraged me to describe my illness to him.12

I then posed all the questions that ailed me, causing my intellectual sickness. He said he would give me medicine with proof and demonstration, but first would place a mighty seal on my lips. I consented to this and so he sealed my lips. He presented two witnesses: the external and the internal worlds (*āfāq* and *anfus*) for my nourishment.13 Thus my treatment began gradually. Lo! My illness vanished. He removed the seal from my lips and allowed me to speak. Finally, he took me to the Imam of the time, al-Mustansir bi’llāh, to perform the oath of allegiance (*hay‘a*).14

In the *Dīwān*, evoking imagery of the oath sworn by the Prophet’s companions centuries earlier, Nāṣir describes his own experience:
Dastam ba kaf-i dast-i nabi dâd ba bay'at
Zîr-i shajar-i ʿâlî-yi pur-sâya-yi muthmar\textsuperscript{15}
He placed my hand in that of the Prophet
A pledge made under the lofty tree, shady and fruitful

Nâšir expresses his overwhelming experience in the Imam’s presence in the following verses:

\begin{align*}
\text{Bar jân-i man chū nūr-i imām-i zamān bi-tāft} \\
\text{Laylu’s-sarār būdam-ū shamsu’d- ḍuḥâ shudam} \\
\text{Nām-i buzurg imām-i zamānast zîn qibal} \\
\text{Man az zamin chū zuhra badû bar samâ shudam\textsuperscript{16}}
\end{align*}

When the light of the Imam of the time
shone upon my soul,
Even though I was dark as night,
I became the glorious sun.
The Supreme Name is the Imam of the time;
By which I ascended, Venus-like, from the earth to heaven

Further he says:

\begin{align*}
\text{Shifâ-yi jân nadīdam zi ʾīch dânîsh} \\
\text{Magar az daʾwat-i ʿāl-i payām-bar\textsuperscript{17}}
\end{align*}

I did not witness spiritual healing from any knowledge
Except from the daʿwa of the Prophet’s progeny

Here, it suffices to say that the course of his life changed forever. Henceforth he devoted himself to the service of the
Imam of his time. He expresses his gratitude for the favours of the Imam in the following words:

Har jà ki buwam tâ bi-ziyam man gah-ū  bigâh
Bar shukr-i tū rânam qalam-ū miḥbar-ū daftar\(^{18}\)
Wherever I may be, so long as I live,
time and again
My pen, parchment and inkpot will
bespeak my gratitude to you

Nāṣir rapidly ascended the ladder of the *hudūd-i dīn* until he was appointed the *hujjat* of Khurasan. He left Cairo on Tuesday, 14 Dhu‘l-ḥijja 441/9 May 1050,\(^{19}\) arriving back in Balkh in 444/1052. Here and in the surrounding regions he began to preach the Ismaili *daʿwa*. Both his *Diwān* and Abu’l-Maʿāli’s *Bayān al-adīyān*\(^{20}\) reveal his initial successes. However, this soon drew the attention of adversaries who instigated the mobs against him. They persecuted him and burned his house down. Fleeing Balkh he took refuge in Yumgan, which was then ruled by an Ismaili prince, ‘Alī b. al-Asad.\(^{21}\) From his newfound home he actively and peacefully spread the Ismaili *daʿwa*. As he says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Har sāl yākī kitāb-i daʿwat} \\
\text{Ba-atrāf-i jahān hamī fīristam}^{22} \\
\text{Every year a book of daʿwa I have been} \\
\text{Sending to the corners of the world}
\end{align*}
\]

He lavishes praise on Yumgan for giving him refuge and for being the centre of the *daʿwa*
Garchi zindān-i Sulaymān-i nābī būda ast
Nīst zindān bal bāghist marā Yumgān
Though Yumgan was Solomon's prison
'Tis not so for me – it is a garden
Kān-i ʿilm-u khirad-u hikmat Yumgān ast
Tā man-i mard-i khiradmand ba Yumgānam
So long as a sage like me is here
Yumgan is the mine of knowledge, intellect
and wisdom
In jāst ba Yumgān turā dabistān
Dar Balkh majūsh na dar Bukhārā
Right here in Yumgan is the school [of wisdom]
for you
Seek it not in Balkh or Bukhara

Naṣir wrote most of his works in Yumgan and passed away there after 469/1076.

**Salient Characteristics of the Ismaili daʿwa:**
Naṣir, as mentioned earlier, was a member of the Ismaili daʿwa. Ismāʿiliyya (anglicized as Ismailism), is a branch of Shiʿī Islam, which in turn, is one of the two main branches of Islam, the other being Sunni Islam. Shiʿī Islam, particularly the Ismaili branch, gives paramount importance to the intellect in religion. The entire tanzil, or revealed form of the Qur’an, is based on intellect. This is true of both the univocal verses (āyātun muḥkamāt) and the equivocal verses (āyātun mutashābihāt), the former directly and the latter indirectly. Intellect, however, may be of two types. At one pole is the ʿaql-i muʿayyad, the intellect that is aided by the ṭūh al-qudus or the Holy Spirit, which is the intellect of the Prophets, legatees and
the Imams, whom God has appointed to teach humankind. Those who possess the ‘aql-i mu‘ayyad see everything in the divine light without any distinction between the muhkamāt and mutashābihāt. In their view, everything in the tanzīl is based on the intellect. At the other pole is the ‘aql-i gharīzī27 or innate intellect, which is the intellect of ordinary people and is in the position of learning. Unlike the divinely aided or perfect intellect, the ‘aql-i gharīzī does not possess perfect knowledge. Though it only has rudimentary knowledge, it is capable of receiving knowledge from the former and attaining perfection. The perfect intellect brings down the higher realities for the sake of the innate intellects, expressing these in physical terms to facilitate the understanding of ordinary human beings. This process is called both tanzīl and takthīf, i.e. to bring down higher realities to the level of ordinary language and to clothe these realities in physical allegories or parables. However, it would have been a great injustice on the part of God if the innate intellects were deprived of knowing the higher realities and restricted only to parables and allegories. Far be it from God to be ungenerous! He has provided the means of ta‘wil, which literally means to cause something to return to its origin (radd al-shay‘ ilā awwalīhi). When ordinary people respond to the divine message, the allegorical layers are removed gradually from the realities and the respondents progress step by step in the religious hierarchy (hudūd-i dīn), climbing the ladder of divine cognition from the knowledge of certainty (‘ilm al-yaqīn) to the eye of certainty (‘ayn al-yaqīn) and finally to the truth of certainty (haqq al-yaqīn), ultimately arriving at the level of knowledge of Prophets and Imams and thus attaining perfection. Once they achieve this perfection, they too do not
find any difference between the muḥkamāt and mutashābihāt, because everything in tanzil appears based on the intellect.

The Prophet’s daʿwa (mission) was twofold. The first part of it was the tanzīli daʿwa, which he completed in his own lifetime. The tanzil he brought is unchangeable. However, he appointed his wasī (legatee) or asās (foundation) and his descendants to continue the taʾwil till the day of resurrection. Referring to this twofold daʿwa, the Prophet says: “The best among you is the one who will fight you for the sake of the taʾwil of the Qurʾan as I fought you for the sake of its tanzil.”28 Further, he says: “I am the custodian of the tanzil (ṣāḥib al-tanzil) and ‘Alī is the custodian of the taʾwil (ṣāḥib al-taʾwil).”29 In contrast to the tanzil, which is fixed and unchangeable, the taʾwil is fluid and progresses to ever-deeper levels as the adept ascends the ranks of the spiritual hierarchy. This is because there are numerous esoteric meanings or bāṭīns in every exoteric statement or zāhīr of the text of the Qurʾan. These meanings, known as bāṭīns or taʾwils, are imparted by the Imam of the time to the seekers according to their degree of obedience and receptivity until the time of the qaʾīm, when all the meanings or taʾwils of the Qurʾan will be disclosed.

In this brief discussion of the Ismaili daʿwa, the central point is that, in their entirety, the Qurʾan and the sharīʿa promulgated by the Prophet are based on the intellect. The Qurʾan and the sharīʿa therefore address those possessed of intellect. Those who have not reached the age of majority or who are otherwise not possessed of their senses are exempt from their injunctions. Secondly those who are addressed have an innate intellect, which has rudimentary knowledge of the existence of a
Creator, the necessity of an intermediary between Him and the creatures, the supremacy of humankind among the created beings and the need for a code of conduct. Therefore it is called the first messenger (rasūl awwal). However, to attain complete knowledge and the second perfection, which is the actualization of the innate intellect from its potentia, it needs a teacher whose intellect is actual and perfect. This teacher is called the last messenger (rasūl ākhīr) and is the counterpart or mażhar of the Universal Intellect in this world. His knowledge is therefore not acquired, but rather God given and therefore perfect. As long as the innate intellects exist, by the very nature of their need to be edified through knowledge, the presence of such a teacher in each and every time is incumbent.

These are the fundamental and central teachings found in the works of all eminent dā'īs, including Muḥammad bin Ahmad Nasafi (d. 921), Abū Ya’qūb Ishāq Sījistānī (d. after 970), Abū Ḥātim Rāzī (d. after 933-4), Qādī Nu‘mān (d. 973), Ja‘far bin Mansūr al-Yaman (d. 975 or 990), Ḥamid al-Dīn Ahmad Kirmānī (d. after 1021) and al-Mu‘ayyad fi’l-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 1078). These dā’īs had different approaches and modes of expression according to their contexts. However, there is a consistent central theme that a divinely supported guide with perfect intellect and divinely bestowed knowledge free from any defect must exist for the nourishment and actualization of the innate intellects. Nāṣir was impressed by their exposition of the intellect, accepted it and devoted the rest of his life to propagate it.
Exposition of Intellect by Nāṣir Khusraw:
From the preceding observations, it is obvious that the bi-polar position of the intellect necessitates a dual definition, which Nāṣir provides. He defines the innate or potential intellect as "a simple substance (jawhar-i basīt) whereby people comprehend things."\(^{33}\) Meanwhile, the active or Universal Intellect is defined as "the first originated [thing] which God brought into existence through origination (ibdāʾ). It is a simple and luminous substance, which contains the forms of all things."\(^{34}\)

In his exposition of the intellect, Nāṣir first of all establishes it as the First Existent (hast-i nukhust) on various grounds. In his Khwān al-ikhwān he argues on the basis of the Qur’anic verse (Qur’an 40:67): “It is He who created you from dust, then from a sperm drop, then from a blood clot, then He brings you forth as a child, then lets you reach your age of full strength, then lets you become old – though some of you die before – and then lets you reach the appointed term; and that haply you may find the intellect (la‘allakum ta‘qilūn)”. Nāṣir concentrates on the implications of the last phrase and says: “God, after mentioning all these states, says that you may find/reach the intellect (ki ʿaql râ biyâbîd/ba-ʿaql birasîd).”\(^{35}\) He continues that this is because of the fact that since creation originates with the intellect, inevitably it should return to its origin. He says in his Dīwān:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Khird āghāz-i jahān būd-ū tū anjām-i jahān} \\
Bāz gard, ay sara-anjām, badān nik-āghāz\(^{36}\) \\
\text{Intellect was the beginning of the world} \\
\text{and you its end} \\
\text{O happy end! Return to that good beginning}
\end{align*}
\]
Thus, when God says that “you may find the intellect”, it signifies that the first originated existent was the intellect. Therefore, man, who is the last of the existents, should reach his origin, just as the perfection of a date palm, which originates from a date stone, lies in producing a date stone so that its end may return to its origin. Nāṣir concludes, “He who benefits from the intellect through the mediation of the hudūd-i dīn, the religious hierarchy, returns to it eventually.”

Nāṣir further elaborates this Qur’anic verse with a Prophetic tradition in which he says: “The first thing God created was the intellect (‘aql). God said to it: Come forward! It came forward. Then He said to it: Go back. It went back. Then God said: By My might and glory! I have not created anything more revered by Me than you! Through you I shall reward and through you I shall punish!” He writes that it is because of this divine decree that in the true religion (din-i haqq), whoever uses the intellect and worships God in the light of the intellect (baṣīrat), reaches eternal happiness. Meanwhile, whoever ruins the intellect and acts without knowledge arrives at eternal remorse.

This intellect, so revered and noble in the eyes of God, permeates the entirety of existence: the higher world, the lower world and the world of religion. With regard to the world of religion, which is like a ladder ascending from the lower to the higher world, Nāṣir says that the intellect basically appears at two levels: as the mazhar of the Universal Intellect, which is actual, and as the mazhar of the particular or innate intellect (‘aql-i gharīzī), which is potential. The latter, in its nature, has knowledge of a Creator, worshipping and expressing gratitude to Him for His bounties and the choice of good and avoidance
of evil, but it does not know how to practise them. That is, the innate intellect needs someone to teach it how to practise. Therefore, in the very first discourse of his Wajh-i din, “On the Establishment of Ḥujjat (Proof) of God, the Imam of the Time”, Nāṣir argues that God has to send someone to fulfil the need of the innate intellect for knowledge, just as He provides animals the means of their sustenance by appointing the elements, stars and spheres. Otherwise God would be considered parsimonious, an attribute far from Him. In this sense, the innate intellect acts as the first messenger potentially, but it needs an actual Intellect in order to be actualized. Nāṣir says:

\[
\text{Khirad sū-yi har kas rasūlī nihufta} \\
\text{Ki dar dil nishasta ba-farmān-i Yazdān}^{41} \\
\text{Intellect is a hidden messenger for everyone} \\
\text{Sitting hidden in the heart by God’s command}
\]

In order to fulfil the need to actualize the potential intellect, God chooses one of His servants to be the maz̄har of the Universal Intellect in the material world, and endows him with all the virtues of the Universal Intellect. He gives His special knowledge and ta’yīd to him. He breathes His Spirit into him and illumines him with His light (Qur’an, 33:46). This chosen one is called the Messenger (payghām-bar) in his cycle, the legatee (waṣī) in his age and the Imam of the time (imām-i rūžgār) in every time.\(^{42}\) As long as the world lasts, the human species cannot be without an individual of this rank. Thus, the world is never devoid of this maz̄har of the Universal Intellect. Nāṣir says that were the world devoid of such an actual intellect, the innate intellects would perish. This would be
tantamount to God playing a frivolous game, which is something far from Him.\textsuperscript{43} This actual intellect in the cycle in which Nāṣir lived was the Prophet Muḥammad with ʿAlī as his 
asās and al-Mustanṣir bi'llāh as the Imam of the time.

Classification of the possessors of the innate intellect and how they use it to understand the \textit{tanzil}:
According to Nāṣir the possessors of the innate intellect are divided into four categories:
(1) The first group consists of the literalists who blindly accept the \textit{tanzil} at face value, even when it comes to the Qurʾan’s anthropomorphic descriptions of God. While other Muslims sought to understand these passages by way of \textit{taʾwīl}, or esoteric interpretation, the literalists refused such explanations. The famous Qurʾanic verse on \textit{taʾwīl} (3:7), used by others to justify the practice, was understood by the literalists to condemn it, by a simple difference of opinion on where one of the sentences ends. In the literalist reading, the verse may be rendered as follows:

He it is Who has sent down to you the Book, of which are unequivocal verses, they are the mother of the Book, and others are equivocal. As for those in whose hearts is perversity, they follow that [part of] it which is equivocal, seeking discord and seeking its \textit{taʾwīl}. But no one knows its \textit{taʾwīl} except Allah. And those who are well grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord."
The literalists would end the pivotal sentence after the word Allah, confining the *ta’wil* to Him alone, to the exclusion of even the Prophet himself. However, the verse was read by many others as, “But no one knows its *ta’wil* except Allah and those who are well grounded in knowledge. They say: ‘We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord.’” 44

An example of the literalist approach is the famous statement of Mālik b. Anas concerning *al-Rahmānu ‘ala’l-‘arshi istawā*, “The Beneficent One sat on the throne” (20:5): *Al-istiwā’u mar‘ūmun wa-al-kayfiyyatu majhūlatun wa-al-imānu bihi wājibun wa-al-su’ālu ‘anhu bid‘atun* “That He sits is known, but how (He) sits is unknown. It is incumbent to believe in this but to ask questions about it is [damnable] innovation”.45

Naṣir explicitly censures this kind of blind adherence in his *Diwān*:

*Guftand ki mawdū‘-i sharī‘at na ba‘aql ast*  
*Zirāki ba-shamshīr shud Islam muqarrar*  
*Guftam ki namāz az chi bar atfāl-ū majānin*  
*Wājib nashawad tā nashawad ‘aql mukhayyar*  

They said, “The *shari‘a* does not depend on the intellect  
Because Islam was established by the sword”  
I replied, “Why then is prayer not enjoined upon children and the insane  
Until their intellect becomes capable of choosing?”
(2) The second group is composed of the philosophers (falāsifa) who reject the tanzil because of its allegorical and seemingly contradictory language. These philosophers claim to have attained intellectual sciences by the efforts of their own, unaided intellects. They therefore maintain that in recognizing the signposts of salvation, they can dispense with the Prophets. In their view, the Prophets are needed only to govern worldly matters in order to protect life and property and to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak.\textsuperscript{47}

(3) The third group is composed of mutakallims (theologians) who accept the tanzil, but unlike the literalists seek the ta’wil of the allegorical verses. In the famous verse (3:7) on ta’wil, they do not stop after Allah, but continue the sentence and include the rāsikhūn fi’l-‘ilm, “those who are well grounded in knowledge,” with God in the knowing of the allegorical verses. However, they arrogate to themselves the distinction of being the rāsikhūn fi’l-‘ilm and do not confine this distinction to the Prophets and the Imams from the ahl-i bayt. Unlike the philosophers, they accept the tanzil as the source of ultimate knowledge, but in doing the ta’wil of the mutashābihāt, use their own intellect to derive conclusions.\textsuperscript{48}

(4) The fourth group consists of the people of ta’wil and ta’yid who accept the tanzil, but maintain that tanzil on its own does not provide complete guidance. Rather, complete guidance resides in the ta’wil\textsuperscript{49} of the perfect and actual intellect of the Prophets and the Imams. It can be sought from them, because they alone are the rāsikhūn fi’l-‘ilm mentioned in the Qur’an. Those who uphold this view are the Shi‘a of the Prophet’s Family, particularly the Ismailis. Thus, in the Ismaili da‘wa, there is no fundamental difference between the intellect and the sharī‘a. In fact, the sharī‘a itself is the ta’yid of the Universal
Intellect. As Nāṣir writes: “The Intellect [i.e. the Universal Intellect] is the mu’ayyid (giver of ta’yīd) of all the Messengers (Wa mu’ayyid-i hama rasūlān ‘aql ast).” Thus, contrary to the literalist point of view, Nāṣir Khusraw considers intellect to be the very foundation of the sharī‘a. It is because of this that his predecessor, Abū Ya‘qūb Sijistānī, writes: “The sharī‘a is embodied intellect (al-sharī‘atu ‘aqlun mujassam).” This concept was elaborated by numerous Ismaili dā‘īs.

Abū Ḥātim Rāzī, for example, devoted the seventh chapter of his Aṣlām al-nubuwwa to establish that the Prophets were the real fountainheads of all knowledge. They then bequeathed this knowledge to the sages. According to Rāzī, knowledge and science spring from the first sage (al-ḥakīm al-awwal), Adam, to whom God taught the names directly. All worldly and spiritual knowledge was contained in these names. Through the ages God taught His Prophets everything that people needed to know, both in a worldly and a spiritual sense. He shared His knowledge of the external and internal worlds exclusively with the Prophets. As the Qur’an declares: “He is the knower of the unseen (ghayb), and He does not reveal His unseen to anyone, except to a Messenger whom He chooses” (Qur’an 72:26-27). Rāzī tries to demonstrate that some of those who are considered sages were in fact Prophets. To this end, he gives the example of the Prophet Idris, stating that he is known to the philosophers as Hermes and in the Old Testament as Akhnūkh (Enoch).

Similarly, al-Mu’ayyad fi’l-Dīn Shīrāzī ridicules those who say that the sharī‘a is not in accordance with the intellect. He writes:
Had they examined the matter closely, purifying their thoughts of fanaticism and passion, they would realize that they would fume with rage if someone were to upbraid them, saying, “You said or did such and such, which was not in accord with the intellect”. In fact, they would not have hesitated to confront that person, calling him a liar and making him culpable. So if they detest such accusations about themselves, how can they allow them with regard to their Prophets, who are the chiefs of their religion and the intermediaries between them and their Lord, may He be purified? Don’t they consider the fact that the entire Book of Allah is addressed to the people of intellect (ulu’l-albāb)?

Al-Mu‘ayyad further argues:

There are only two possibilities with regard to these legal practices (al-awḍā‘ al-sharʾiyya): either the Prophet had no intellectual explanation for what he himself brought, which would be a monstrosity, or he had such an explanation, but did not inform people about it. In the former case, were someone to ask him why there were five ṣalāts and not six, he would have to reply that he did not know, which would suffice to discredit him for bringing something of which he himself was ignorant. If he did have an intellectual explanation for these practices, which adorns words and deeds, but did not reveal it, then he did
not duly execute the duty of conveying the message. However, this can be disproved about the Prophet because he did convey the message and said in the congregation: O Allah! Bear witness that I have conveyed the message.\textsuperscript{54}

Thus, to these Ismaili authors, there is nothing in the sharī'as that does not accord with the intellect. The innate intellect is considered God's first messenger (rasūl-i awwal) to humankind, while the human Prophet is His second Messenger who nourishes the first messenger with knowledge.

In their emphasis on the intellect, the Ismailis are partially akin to the philosophers. However, without the upbringing of a divinely appointed teacher (mu'allim) or guide, they consider the innate or partial intellect to be imperfect and incomplete. As Nāṣir writes: “Intellect is the [first] ḥujjat (proof) of God over the people in their creation whereas His second ḥujjat to them is His Messenger, who comes and nurtures the innate intellect. The innate intellect in their creation is in potentia. The Messenger brings it into actuality”.\textsuperscript{55} Nāṣir also says in his Dīwān:

\textit{Miyān-i ālam-i ʿulwiyy-ū suflī  
Bi-istādan na kārī hast āsān  
Ba-fi'l āwurdan az quwwat khirad rā  
Ba-Aḥmad dād farmān Fard-i Rahmān  
Ba-yārī khwāst bar haml-i nubuwwat  
ʿAlī rā sayyid-i sādāt-i dūjhān}\textsuperscript{56}

To stand between the higher and lower worlds is not a trifling matter!
The Unique, Compassionate God commanded Ḥnīmād
To bring the intellect forth from potentiality to actuality.
To bear the burden of Prophethood
The Chief of both the worlds sought the help of ʿAlī

In this respect, the Ismaili dāʿīs differ profoundly from the philosophers. According to the latter, human beings can, on their own, acquire the knowledge of the realities of things as they are, whereas according to the Ismaili dāʿīs, it is impossible to do so without taʿlīm or authorized teaching. Thus, Nāṣir devotes the very first discourse of Wajh-i din to explain the necessity for such a teacher to actualize the potential intellect of human beings by his actual intellect. He argues that just as human beings require physical upbringing and sustenance, without which they cannot survive, similarly they cannot grow and survive intellectually without intellectual upbringing and sustenance. Thus, the need for a divine teacher continues as long as human beings exist. Such teachers, who are the Prophets and Imams, are the main source of knowledge and, in fact, philosophers and others have borrowed from them. Al-Muʿayyad writes:

As far as the belief of the people of truth (al-muḥiqaqīn) is concerned, all sciences, including the intellectual ones (al-ʾaqliyyāt), which they (the philosophers) claim, are gathered together in the sciences of the Prophets, from which they have branched out and ramified.⁵⁷
The preceding account shows that the Ismaili dāʿīs can neither be included in the category of mutakallims, who use their own partial intellects to interpret the Qur’an and the sharī’a without recourse to the rāsikhūn fi’l-ʿilm, nor in the category of those philosophers who claim to dispense with the Prophets. Ismaili works show that almost every Ismaili dāʿī has criticized both the mutakallims and the philosophers for their stances. For instance, prior to Nāṣir, Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. after 411/1021) criticized the views of Muʿtazili and Ashʿarī mutakallims and philosophers in his Tanbih al-hādi wa’l-mustahdī.58

Nāṣir criticises the views of Muʿtazili and Karramī mutakallims in his Jāmīʿ al-ḥikmatayn.59 As for the philosophers, he accords them a higher status and says that there is an iota of wisdom (shammati az hikmat) in the works of the ancients.60 By this he implies, as did Abū Ḥātim Ṭāṭī, that originally they had attained wisdom from the Prophets, which they attributed to themselves and mingled with their own ideas and concepts. Therefore, except for the traces of the Prophetic wisdom that remain in their writings, their other views are incorrect. In Zād al-musāfirin, Nāṣir explains that in the absence of Prophetic guidance, the faulty knowledge of one’s own mind is like a spider’s web in which the seeker becomes entangled.61 Thus, in his Jāmīʿ al-ḥikmatayn, although he explains the problem from the point of view of the philosophers, he disagrees with them in most cases and finally gives the view of the people of taʿwil and taʿyīd. This, he explains, is the knowledge received from the rāsikhūn fi’l-ʿilm, that is, the Prophet as the nāṭiq, Ālī as the asās and their children as the Imams. He further writes: “The
treasure of wisdom is the heart of the inheritors of the Seal of the Prophets”. This he also repeats in his Diwān:

\[
\text{Hikmat az ḥadrat-i farzand-i nabī bāyad just}
\text{Pāk-ū pākīza zi tashbīh-ū zi ta'ṭīl chū sim}^{63}
\]
You must seek wisdom from the presence of the Prophet’s son
Pure and unsullied as silver, free from tashbīh and taʿṭīl.

Such knowledge, according to Nāṣir and other Ismaili dāris, is not the product of the imperfect human intellect, but rather the product of an intellect that is illumined by the Holy Spirit (rūḥ al-quḍus). He writes in the Jāmiʿ al-hikmatayn that knowledge of the true religion is the result of the Holy Spirit (natāʾīj-i rūḥuʿl-quḍus).^{64} This means that the intellect of the Prophets and their successors, the Imams, is supported and illumined by the Holy Spirit, which according to the Qurʾān (42:52), is in the form of light. Nāṣir therefore refers to it as the “luminous intellect (ʿaql-i nūrānī)”.^{65} It is the intellect of one from whose spiritual eyes the veil of negligence has been removed and whose sight has become sharp, as the Qurʾān, addressing the Prophet, says: “You were unaware of this. Thus We have removed from you your veil, so your sight is sharp today.” (50:22).^{66} Once the veil is removed, everything, both in this world and the next, becomes clear to him. It is on the basis of this inner vision (baṣīra), not on hypothetical or conjectural knowledge, that the Prophet and his successor invite people to eternal life. As God says to His Prophet in verse 12:108: “Say: This is my way, I invite unto Allah on the basis of baṣīra (insight), and [also] those who follow me”.^{68} Thus, the insight
and intellect of the Prophet and those who follow him (the Imams), whom God has chosen for the guidance of the people and made intermediaries between Himself and His creatures, are superior to that of other human beings.

According to Nāṣir and other Ismaili dā'īs, such knowledge is not confined to the Prophet and the Imam, but is granted to other people as well. However, this is conditional on iṭā‘a (obedience and submission) or istijāba (responding) to the da‘wa. He explains that when minerals submit to plants they attain the vegetative soul, when vegetative souls submit to animals they attain the animal soul and when the latter submit to human beings they attain a rational soul. Similarly, when human beings submit to the Prophet and his successors and accept their da‘wa, they attain the Holy or Divine Spirit. He quotes the Qur’anic verse (8:24) to substantiate this: “O you who believe! Respond (istajībū) to God and the Messenger when he invites you (da‘ākum) unto that which will give you life (yuhyikum)”. It is this real and higher life that enables one to be born twice and to enter the kingdom of heaven (malakūt al-samā’). Nāṣir, alluding to his second birth and his witnessing the kingdom of heaven, writes:

Gar man darīn sarāy nabīnām darān sarāy
Imrūz jā-yi khwīsh chī bāyad baṣar marā
If in this world I cannot see
What my place in that world is
What use have I of eyes?

Further, he says:
Khirad rā ba-īmān-ū ḥikmat biparwar
Ki farzand-i khud rā chūnīn guft Luqmān
Chū jānat qawī shud ba-īmān-ū ḥikmat
Biyāmūzi āngah zabānhā-yi murghān
Biguyand bā tū hamān mūr-ū murghān
Ki guftand azīn pīshtar bā Sulaymān?!
Nurture the intellect with faith and wisdom
For as the Prophet Luqmān told his son
When your soul is fortified by faith and wisdom
You will learn the languages of the birds
The ants and birds will tell you
What they once told Solomon!

This obedience is in many degrees. Those who respond to this daʿwa initially are called mustajibs. The mustajibs can ascend the ladder of the daʿwa through the ranks of the religious hierarchy or hudūd-i din, up to the Imam or asās or nāṭiq in their respective time. After the time of the nāṭiq, the asās takes his place. Similarly, after the time of the asās, the Imam takes his place and therefore occupies the supreme position in the hierarchy. Further, at the rank of ḥujjat the believer experiences fully the Holy Spirit of the Prophet or the Imam in the form of light within himself. Thus, that light, which is in every human being in potentia, is brought into actuality by absolute submission to him. Nāṣir, as the ḥujjat of Khurasan, describes his own experience in his Diwān as mentioned earlier:

Bar jān-i man chū nūr-i imām-i zamān bi-tāft
Layluʾs-sarār būdam-ū shamsuʾd-ḏuhā shudam
Nām-i buzurg imām-i zamānast zīn qibal
Man az zamān chū zuhra badū bar samā shudam
When the light of the Imam of the time shone upon my soul,
Even though I was dark as night, I became the glorious sun.
The Supreme Name is the Imam of the time;
By which I ascended, Venus-like, from the earth to heaven

Indeed, the Holy Spirit enhances the vision of the respondent, who is enabled to read the books of the afāq and anfus, the physical and spiritual worlds. It elevates the respondent from the level of philosophy to that of observing angels. Nāṣir writes:

Kār-kunān-i Khudāy rā chū bibīnī
Dil nakunī zān sipas ba falsafa marhūn72
When you behold the artisans of God
Never again will you pledge your heart to philosophy.

Perpetual presence of the Perfect Intellect as God’s Proof on the earth:
The necessity of the presence of God’s Proof on the earth has been discussed earlier in the context of the upbringing of the innate intellects. Nāṣir states this very emphatically in his Diwān. In fact his personal quest begins when he becomes aware of this need, therefore it is pertinent to quote it here. He says:

Yak rūz bikhwāndam zi Qur‘ān āyat-i bay’at
Kizid ba-Qur‘ān guft ki bud dast-i man az bar
One day I read in the Qur’an the verse of *bay‘at* (Qur’an, 48:10)
In which God says: “My hand is above (their hands)”. 

Ān qawm kī dar zīr-i shajar *bay‘at* kardand
Chūn Ja‘far-ū Miqādād-ū chū Salmān-ū chū Bū Dharr
Those companions who had done *bay‘at* under the tree,
The likes of Ja‘far, Miqādād, Salmān and Abū Dharr.

Guftam kī kunūn ān shajar-ū dast chigūnast
Ān dast kujā jūyam-ū ān *bay‘at-ū* mahḍar
I asked: ‘Whereof that tree? That hand on which to
pledge?
Where should I seek that hand, that *bay‘at* and that
group?’

Guftand dar ānjā nah shajar mānd-ū nah ān dast
Kān dast parāganda shud ān jām‘ mubattar
They replied: ‘The tree no longer exists, nor that hand,
For that group has now dispersed and that hand
disappeared,

Ānhā hama yārān-i rasūland-ū bihishti
*Makhšūs* badān *bay‘at-ū* az khalq mukhayyar
All of them are the companions of the Prophet in
Paradise,
Singled out by that *bay‘at* and chosen from among the
people’.

*Guftam kī ba-Qur‘ān dar paydast ki Ahmad*
Bashīr-ū nadhīrast-ū sirājast munawwar
I said: ‘It is clear in the Qur’an that Aḥmad is a Bearer of glad tidings, a warner and a luminous lamp’ (Qur’an 33:45-46).

Gar khwāḥad kushtan ba-dahan kāfīr ū rā
Rawshan kunadash ʿIzid bar kāma-yi kāfār

Even if unbelievers intend to extinguish it with their mouths,
God will keep it shining despite their intention (Qur’an, 9:32).

Chūnast ki imrāz namāndast azān qawm
Juz ʿhaqq nabuwad qawl-i jahān-dāwar-i akbar
How is it that today no one is left from that group?
Is the speech of God, the Supreme Ruler of the world, other than the truth?

Mā dāst-i ki gīrīm-ū kujā bayʿat-i Yazdān
Tā hamchū muqaddam bidīhad dād-i muʾakkhkhar
Whose hand should we take and where is God’s bayʿat?
That He may treat the later ones as justly as the earlier?

Mā jurm chi kardin nazādīm badān waqṭ
Maḥrūm chirāʾīm zī paygham-bar-ū muḍṭarr
What sin did we commit that we were not born at that time?
Why are we deprived of the Prophet and distressed?

Thus, Nāṣir emphasizes that since God has guaranteed the continuation, rather the perfection of His light in this world, it cannot be devoid of it as His word is perfect in truth and justice
(cf. Qur’an 6:115). It is with this conviction that he started his search and ultimately he reached his desired goal, the Imam from the family of the holy Prophet. He says:

\[\text{Faryād yāftam zi jafā-ū dāhā-yi dīw} \\
\text{Chūn dar ḥarīm-ū qaṣr-i Imāmūl-warā shudam}^{75} \\
\text{I found refuge from the oppression and cunning of the devil} \\
\text{When I entered the sanctuary and palace of the Imam of humankind} \]

Then he says:

\[\text{Dastam ba kaf-i dast-i nabī dād ba bayʿat} \\
\text{Zir-i shajār-i ‘āli-yi pur-sāya-yi muthmar}^{76} \\
\text{He placed my hand in that of the Prophet} \\
\text{A pledge made under the lofty tree, shady and fruitful} \]

Thus, Nāṣir’s ardent yearning to give bayʿat on a hand that represented God’s hand was fulfilled. According to him, the purpose of creation cannot be achieved without the presence of that hand. Comparing the Imam of the time to the sun and the innate intellect to eyesight, he declares in his Dīwān:

\[\text{Chashm-i sar bī āftāb-i āsmān bī-kār gasht} \\
\text{Chashm-i dīl bī āftāb-i dīn chirā bī-kār nist}?^{77} \\
\text{If the head’s eye becomes useless without heaven’s sun;} \\
\text{Why not the heart’s eye without religion’s sun?} \]
Consequences of the innate intellect’s responding to or rejecting the Perfect Intellect’s upbringing:
The paramount importance of using the intellect, which is a Divine gift to humankind, is clear from the Qur’an: “Verily the vilest of beasts with God are the deaf and the dumb who do not use their intellect.” (Qur’an 8:22) Also: “And they said: ‘Had we but listened or used our intellect, we would not have been among the inmates of the Blaze’.” (Qur’an 67:10) There are numerous such verses that show that those who do not use their innate intellect and its initial teaching as the first messenger or the first proof have to face grave consequences. On the other hand, those who follow its initial teaching and actualise it fully through nurturing true knowledge are praised highly as the “ulu’l-albāb” (the people of intellect) and are granted the abundant good (Qur’an 2:269).

Nāšir alludes to this position of the innate intellect in his prose and poetry. In his Jāmi‘, interpreting the hadith: “Every human being has two devils who lead him astray”, and comparing the two devils to the appetitive and irascible souls, he says that every individual is endowed with the rational soul (nafs-i nāṭiqā) and the appetitive and irascible souls. The rational soul is a potential angel whereas the appetitive and irascible souls are potential devils. If the rational soul is able to subjugate them the individual becomes an actual angel, but if the latter subjugate the former, he becomes an actual devil. This means that every individual who is endowed with the rational soul has the potential to be an actual angel. However negligence in executing the innate intellect’s teaching causes the person to become “the vilest of beasts”. Such are the consequences of accepting or rejecting the perfect intellect’s teaching or
guidance in the form of true knowledge. These are also described in his poetry. For instance in the case of failure:

Har chand rahmat ast khirad bar tū az Khudāy
Bar har ki bad kunad ba-khirad ham khirad balāst\(^79\)
Although intellect is God’s mercy to you
It also becomes a calamity to the one who abuses it

In the case of success, Naṣir extols the intellect so profusely that it is extremely difficult to decide what to quote and what to leave! He says:

Khirad kīmyā'-yi šalāhast-ū ni'mat
Khirad ma'ēdan-i khayr-ū 'adl ast-ū iḥsān\(^80\)
Intellect is the alchemy of well-being and munificence
Intellect is the mine of goodness, justice and favour

Qadr-ū bahā-yi mard na az jism-i farbihast
Bal mardum az nikū sukhan-ū 'aql pur bahāst\(^81\)
Man’s glory and worth is not because of his corpulent body
Rather, man’s glory lies in his intellect and eloquence

'Adl ast-ū rāstī hama āthār-i 'aql-i pāk
'Aql ast āftāb-i dil-ū 'adl azū diyā ast\(^82\)
Justice and rectitude are all traces of the pure intellect
Intellect is the sun of the heart and justice is its light

And finally:

Gar khirad rā bar sar-i hushyār-i khwīsh afsar kunī
Sakht zūd az charkh-i gardān, ay pisar, sar bar kunī³³
If you crown your prudent head with intellect
O son, instantly you shall raise your head above
the revolving sphere of the heavens

To conclude, Nāṣir Khusraw simply and logically expounds his distinct bi-polar concept of the intellect, the actual or perfect intellect and the potential or innate intellect and their respective active and passive roles. He bases the foundation of his argument on examples from the physical world and gradually and systematically proceeds to the spiritual or higher world. This makes it very easy to understand his thought. His works are very effective in conveying the importance of higher and eternal realities and speak to human beings across time and space. They are therefore as relevant today as they were in his time and will no doubt inspire and motivate thinking people in the future. Nāṣir does not consider himself either a mutakallim or a philosopher, if philosophy is understood in the Greek sense. If however, we take it in a broader sense and include other disciplines of thought, as Henry Corbin did in coining the term Prophetic philosophy for ta’wil, ³⁴ then Nāṣir is indeed one of the most outstanding Prophetic philosophers.
1 I would like to thank Professor Shafique N. Virani of Zayed University, UAE for reading the draft of this article and for his invaluable suggestions and corrections.


3 The Muslim concept of the Holy Spirit must not be confused with the Christian idea of the third person of the Trinity. According to Islam it is the Spirit of the Prophets and Imams, which is in the form of light. See Qur’an 42:52.


8 Ibid., p. 2.

9 Ibid., p. 2.

10 Ibid., p. 2.

11 Ibid., p. 174.

12 Diwān (Minuwi edition), pp. 511-12.


15 Ibid., p. 513. Here the rhyme requires “muthmīr” to be “muthmar”.

34
The appellation Ismā‘iliyya came into existence after Imam Ja‘far al-Sādiq, when the Imāmī Shi‘i split into many groups named after his children. Among them the two most important ones are those who followed Ismā‘il al-Mubārak, his older son and came to be known as Ismailis (anglicized form of Ismā‘iliyya) and those who followed Mūsā al-Kāzim, another of his sons, who came to be known as Mūsawiyya. Later on, when the twelfth Imam of this latter group went into occultation, they became known as the Ithnā ‘ashariyya or Twelvers, meaning those who believe in twelve Imams. Ismailis are sometimes called Sab‘iyya or Seveners, that is, those who believe in seven Imams, and are thereby juxtaposed to the Ithnā ‘ashariyya or Twelvers, those who believe in twelve Imams. This is a grave misunderstanding. Ismailis do give importance to a set of seven Imams in the sense that they constitute a minor cycle (dawr ṣaghīr). However, they do not believe that there are only seven Imams. They do not confine the chain of Imams to a particular number. Their present Imam is the 49th in the line of Imam ‘Alī in the cycle of Prophet Muḥammad.


Iʿtīdāl, p. 61; Wajh, p. 269.


Iḥbāt, pp. 50-51.

Iʿtīdāl, p. 49.

Iʿtīdāl, p. 49.

Iʿtīdāl, p. 249.

Iʿtīdāl, p. 89.
37 Khwān, p. 91.
38 Ibid., p. 91.
39 Wajh, p. 61.
40 Ibid., p. 11.
41 Diwān (Minuwi edition), p. 84.
42 Wajh, pp. 11-13.
43 Ibid., pp. 61-62.
48 Jāmi‘, pp. 32-33.
49 Ibid., p. 33.
50 Ibid., p. 116
51 Ithbāt, p. 125.
53 Majālis, I, 2-3.
54 Ibid., I, 3.
55 Khwān, p. 29.
56 Diwān, (Taqawī edition), p. 314. Here the rhyme requires “dū jahān” to be read “dūjāhān”.
57 Majālis, I, 3-4.
60 Ibid., p.18.
61 Zād, p. 151.
62 Jāmi‘, p. 16. Khātām-i waratha in the text should be read waratha-yi khātām.
64 Jāmi‘, p. 16.
66 *Wajh*, p. 139.
67 Zâd, pp. 214-216.
69 Zâd, pp. 472-75.
73 Here the rhyme requires "kâfir" to be "kâfar".
76 *Ibid.*, p. 513. Here the rhyme requires "muthmir" to be "muthmar".
77 *Diwan*, (Taqawí edition), p. 78.
78 *Jami*’, pp. 143-44.