Theoretical Sufism in the Early Period: With an Introduction to the Thought of Abū Bakr al-Wāsiti (d. ca. 320/928) on the Interrelationship between Theoretical and the Practical Sufism

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The treatises and manuals that are the most visible face of early Sufism and the early institutional period tend focus on the basics of the spiritual path and less so on theoretical questions. Kitab al-
luma of Abū Naṣr 'Abd Allāh al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), Kitab al-
ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf of Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-
Kalābādhi (d 380/990 or 385/995), and al-Risāla fi 'ilm al-taṣawwuf of Abū al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (465/1072), for instance, were written in part to define the boundaries of a diverse yet normative Sunni Sufism out of a larger and even more diverse tradition. The quotations of the sayings of the early Sufis in these texts in large part serve the authors'

3. Abu al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karim b. Hawāzin al-Qushayri (465/1072), al-
editorial purpose of defining the practical, legal, and doctrinal boundaries of the path. The sayings of are most often represented in terms of a moral response to the message of God in the Qurʾān and the example of that message in Muḥammad. Despite the presence of a rich tradition of theoretical Sufism in the early period, it is not always obvious in these works that the early Sufi “moral imperative” is grounded in a perspective that William C. Chittick calls the “ontological imperative.” In other words, it is not always obvious that moral actions are understood to be a response to the nature of reality. I would like to explore Chittick’s observation that the stress on practical Sufism encompasses theoretical Sufism but in the context of the early period. In short, I would like to show that while it is heuristically useful to use the terms “practical” and “theoretical” to describe the different emphases of expression of Sufi experience, the Sufi moral and ontological imperatives are inherently interrelated. On one level we can understand theoretical Sufism to be the product of a subtle interaction of an ontology with practical experience on the path. On another level, theoretical discourse should be seen as practical guidance in itself. In particular, I would like to stress the practicality of the theoretical perspective in early Sufism. The moral and the ontological perspectives in early Sufism should not be considered distinct with regard to their aims even if they can often be distinct in their mode of expression. To demonstrate the interrelation of theoretical perspectives with practical guidance on the path, I will be introducing an important theoretical source for Sufism in the early period, the sayings of Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Wāṣiṭī (d. ca. 320/928).  

5. I would like to thank Emil Homerin and Peter S. Groff for their insightful comments and suggestions for this paper. I would also like to thank the members of the Islam and Islamic Mysticism Groups at the American Academy of Religion who engaged me in a lively discussion about Wāṣiṭī’s ideas and helped me clarify my presentation here when I delivered this paper in Fall 2004.
I. Wāsiṭi

Wāsiṭi is the author of one of the earliest known collections of Sufi oral glosses on the Qurʾān – probably preserved in writing by his companions – and numerous provocative sayings. His legacy, however, survives only as quotations found in later Sufi texts. Kalbādhī lists Wāsiṭi in the above mentioned text in a chapter entitled, “A List of the Ṣafis who published the sciences of allusion in books and treatises” but the text and title of the work indicated by Kalbādhī is presently unavailable to us. 6 The greatest concentration of his work is his Qurʾān commentary which survives in the form of quotations in Sulami’s Haqāʾiq al-tafsīr and its appendix Ziyādat baqāʾīq al-tafsīr. 7

Wāsiṭi was an early student of Abu al-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910) and Abu al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907-8) in Baghdād during the latter part of the 3rd/9th century. 8 Baghdād was one of the most important centers of Sufism during the early period. Sarrāj called the early Sufis of Baghdād “the lords of tawhīd (arbāb al-tawḥīd),” meaning that they were the masters of the practice and theoretical doctrine of “declaring God one.” 9 As Alexander Knysh and other scholars have demonstrated, the early period was rich in theoretical expression. 10 Wāsiṭi’s

8. He was not a disciple of Ḥallāj, as suggested by Massignon. Although Wāsiṭi may have had other contacts with Sufi shaykhs before coming to Baghdād, only his close companionship with these two shaykhs in Baghdād is reported in the sources.
10. See chapters 1-5 of Alexander Knysh’s excellent survey of the history of Sufism, Islamic Mysticisms: A Short History (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000). Using the biographical dictionaries alone as his source, Christopher Melchert...
thought represents an important strand of theoretical expression in the early period associated with the Sufis of Baghdad that would ultimately influence theoretical Sufi thought far beyond Iraq. In particular, these Sufis articulated the notion of the creatures' profound ontological dependence on God. The diverse expressions of this position are most notably found in the sober writings and sayings of Junayd, the ecstatic expressions al-Ḥusayn b. Mašūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/921), and in the love mysticism of Nūr and Abū Bakr al-Shibli (d. 334/946).

Wāṣiṭti carried this legacy with him to Marw, in the region of Khurāsān, where he passed on his subtle and rigorous monotheism to his own students. Wāṣiṭti had a large lay community to whom he


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preached and a smaller group of more intimate companions. Little information survives about his life, but it is clear from his sayings and what anecdotes we have that he combined Nūrī’s provocative and public manner of speech with Junayd’s abstruse expressions. In other words, Wāsīṭi is well known for being difficult to understand. When quoted in treatises and manuals his statements often have to be explained.  Sarrāj spends two chapters in Kitāb al-luma discussing his sayings. He complains that Wāsīṭi’s sort of speech only serves as fodder for “the people of contention” who make of it what they will to attack the Sufis even though its meaning is sound. 12 Junayd, himself, wrote Wāsītī a letter urging him to consider the states of his listeners when he speaks. 13 It is perhaps, then, not surprising that he has only one well-known follower, Abu al-Abbās al-Sayyārī (d. 342/953-4) who passed on the bulk of Wāsītī’s sayings and glosses on the Qur’ān to his own companion and nephew, ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Sayyārī (d. 375/985-6). ‘Abd al-Wāḥid is most likely the one who passed them on to Sulami thus preserving Wāsītī’s legacy and establishing the ground of his reputation for the later tradition.

While Wāsītī’s reputation rests on his most provocative and difficult sayings, in the following analysis I will take his most straightforward sayings on the practical matter of “repentance” and demonstrate that his practical guidance is grounded in his ontological perspective. But more than that, I would like to emphasize the practicality of the theoretical in early Sufism.

12. Sarrāj, Kitāb al-luma’, 509. Sarrāj does not specify who are the “people of contention” who used Wāsītī’s language against the Sufis. Certainly later, Wāsītī aroused the ire of the Ḥanbali Ibn al-Jawzī, who includes him among those who possess wrong beliefs. Sarrāj’s attempt to clarify some of Wāsītī’s statements was lost on Ibn al-Jawzī, who quotes Wāsītī directly from Sarrāj in order to condemn him (Abu al-Faraj ’Abd al-Rahmān b. ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzī [d. 597/1200-1], Talḥīs ibhūs [Cairo: Maktaba Usāma al-Islāmiyya, n.d.], 165).

II. Repentance in Wāsiṭī’ Thought

Wāsiṭī advises that one undertake an all-consuming accounting of one’s soul in order to recognize that one repents, not from wrongdoing, but from looking at one’s actions as though one were the possessor of those actions and not God. For Wāsiṭī, one should turn away from oneself and this world toward God to find that God alone acts through the human being. To look at oneself or this world as independent of God is associating others with Him. Hence, for Wāsiṭī, repentance is at heart concerned with declaring God one (tawhīd).

“Tawba” means literally “to turn,” and so to repent is to turn away from one’s wrongdoing because one has turned toward God. “Turning” is at the root of any Sufi discussion of repentance even at the highest levels. On the most basic level, repentance (tawba) is described in the manuals and treatises as remorse for one’s wrongdoing and the commitment not to return to one’s disobedient act. On the highest level, turning toward God in repentance means turning away from oneself and this world toward God.

Wāsiṭī advises that one should pursue repentance beyond the basic requirement that one regret one’s wrongdoing and not do it again. It is not enough to turn away from performing wrong actions, one must turn away from having wrong intentions as well. This is done through a strict accounting (muḥāsabā) of the self. One should unflinchingly examine one’s actions and intentions until one is purified of disobedience outwardly and inwardly. Wāsiṭī most likely learned the practice of self-accounting through Junayd whose own teacher, Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), perfected the practice and came to be named after it.

Self-accounting involves careful daily reckoning of one’s actions and as well as an examination of one’s intentions. In this method, one exposes wrong intentions that lead to wrong action. More importantly, one also exposes wrong intentions that lead to acceptable, or even praiseworthy, actions such as praying in congregation with the intention of displaying one’s piety. The goal of repentance through self-accounting and examination is safeguarding the secret heart (muḥāʿat al-sīr), to be discussed shortly.
Wāsīṭi was asked, “Which of the works is most excellent?”

He replied, “Safeguarding the secret heart. [It is] self-accounting in the outward domain and self-examination in the inward domain. One of them becomes complete through the other, and through the two repentance becomes upright.”

One should not try to seek relief from this painful self-accounting and examination through any familiar comforts that might distract one from it for even a moment. One would be so consumed by repentance that one would not know if it were night or day. Repentance must be an unflinching gaze at one’s shortcomings. Wāsīṭi said, “Repentance is the lack of all familiar comforts. Whoever’s repentance is sincere does not care how his evenings pass or his mornings.”

Wāsīṭi explains the nature of “sincere repentance” mentioned in the verse, O you who have faith, turn to God with a sincere repentance (Q 66:8). Wāsīṭi says that such a repentance results in being purified of disobedience while with others and alone. It should also be read in the context of related sayings as being purified of disobedience outwardly and inwardly. He said, “No trace of disobedient acts will remain with one who is sincerely repentant either in public or in secret.”

Self-accounting of one’s shortcomings should lead one away from looking at one’s mistakes to looking at God. For Wāsīṭi it is an outrage to look at oneself rather than turning one’s attention toward God through the process of repentance. Wāsīṭi commented on the verse, O people, your outrage is only against yourselves (Q 10:23), “The outrage occurs from observing the self and looking at the mistakes it makes.”

Wāsīṭi accused Abū ‘Uthmān al-Ḥirī (d. 298/911) of teaching his companions to commit such an outrage. When Wāsīṭi was passing through Naysābūr on his way to Marw, he met with Ḥirī’s companions. They explained to him that Abū ‘Uthmān commanded them to minutely observe their selves and actions in order to root out any shortcomings. Wāsīṭi accused Abu ‘Uthmān al-Ḥirī of teaching his

15. Qushayrī, Ṭūla, 284; idem., The Risalah: Principles of Sufism, 136. Also see, Sulāmī, Haq‘īq, 202a (Q 24:31).
16. Sulāmī, Haq‘īq, 345b (Q 66:8)
companions dualism because through this practice they focused on their own selves as the source of their actions. Instead, Wāṣiṭī says, turning inward to repent should result in turning away from their own selves toward God who is the ultimate source of those actions. Abū 'Ali al-Daqqāq (d. 412/1021) reports,

> When Wāṣiṭī entered Naysābūr, he asked the companions of Abū 'Uthmān, “What has your shaykh commanded you with?”
>
> They replied, “He has commanded us with adherence to the acts of obedience and looking at how we fall short in them.”
>
> Wāṣiṭī said, “He has commanded you with pure Majanian [dualism]. Why did he not command you to become absent from them by looking at their place of origination and flowing?”

Wāṣiṭī understands God to be the source of all action in respect of His command and power over all things. Wāṣiṭī says that His command “flows,” as quoted in the last saying, through the human being by means of God’s self-manifestation through the secret heart. In Wāṣiṭī’s sayings, the “secret heart” (ṣīr) most often refers to that aspect of the human heart through which the divine is manifest, a meaning that bears on the famous ḥadīth qudāsī expressing the unlimited capacity of the heart to know God, “My heavens and My earth embrace Me not, but the heart of My gentle, meek, and faithful servant does encompass Me.” 19 Safeguarding the secret heart is the goal of repentance and the most excellent of all works, as quoted above, because through repentance one turns one’s attention away from oneself toward the divine manifest through the heart and so realizes that there is no self to obey or disobey God, but instead only God acting through the human being.

### III. The Divine-Human Relationship in Wāṣiṭī’s Thought

For Wāṣiṭī, then, the practical matter of repentance is tied to his understanding of the divine-human relationship and what constitutes the unforgivable sin of associating others with God (shirk). Everything

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18. Qushayri, Rīāla, 204-205; see also, Z. Anṣārī, Sharḥ Risāla, I 187; and Munāwī, al-Kawākib al-durriyya, I 608.
19. Sulami, Ḥaqīq, 142a (Q 15:75), 375b (Q 96:19); Murata, Tao of Islam, 290.
is a matter of perspective, or in the context of our present discussion, “turning.” As we will find, the importance of this notion of perspective for Wāṣīṭi’s thought cannot be overstated. Repentance has a broader significance in that when one turns inward to repent, one finds God manifest through the secret heart, and so one understands the nature of human possession of actions. For Wāṣīṭi, human actions are powerful through God, not through the self. To assume otherwise is to put oneself on par with God who alone has the power to act. Repentance, then, is turning away from all claims of human power to act independently of God and is demanded by tawḥīd. Repentance constitutes a fundamental shift in perspective away from one’s own experience of autonomy to affirming God’s alone.

In the cases that follow, the seemingly contradictory positions that Wāṣīṭi takes should be understood in terms of the same reality perceived from different perspectives, or in Wāṣīṭi’s language different “beholdings.” In a gloss on the verse, Who remember God standing, sitting, and on their sides, Wāṣīṭi explains that one’s experience follows from the particular perspective from which one beholds God (Q 3:191). He uses the word “beholding” (muḥāla) in the sense of one’s view of God, oneself, and the world. Thus, one’s beholding – i.e., in this particular context, one’s remembrance of God through one or more of His names – defines one’s experience of reality. When Wāṣīṭi says that the door of remembrance is shut fast against the one who beholds God Himself, the “One Remembered,” he means that one does not remember God from one delimited human perspective on God or another, but beholds God from God’s own perspective. Hence one cannot remember God, rather God remembers Himself through one. God acts, not the human being.

Wāṣīṭi said, “Everyone who remembers does so in the measure of his heart’s beholding. Whoever beholds the kingdom of His Majesty remembers Him by that. Whoever beholds the kingdom of His Mercy remembers Him by that. Whoever beholds the kingdom of His knowledge remembers Him in accordance with that. Whoever beholds the kingdom of His anger and wrath, has a more awe-inspiring remembrance. And, whoever beholds the One Remembered, the door of remembrance is shut fast against him.” 20

IV. Essence, Attributes, and Acts from the Perspective of Transcendence

Central to Wāsiṭi’s metaphysics is turning his listeners’ attention to the fact of God’s incomparability and His overwhelming command and determination of all things. He takes the conclusion of the first declaration of submission and faith in God, “There is no god but God,” to its logical end. Wāsiṭi takes the position that God alone is truly real and all else, compared to Him, is nothing. His approach should not be interpreted as suggesting a complete and desolate transcendence, for Wāsiṭi’s understanding of the incomparability of God never excludes God’s immanence. But immanence must be first understood through transcendence or it becomes shirk.

Wāsiṭi discusses God in terms of His Essence, attributes and acts. He affirms God’s total incomparability from every vantage point, even from those perspectives that normally demonstrate God’s relationship with creation. Whether one examines the Essence, the attributes, or the acts, everything demonstrates His incomparability. The Essence – God outside His relationship with creation – is evidence of God’s incomparability because it is beyond human comprehension. Although the attributes mentioned in the Qur’an, such as His Mercy, Wrath, Vengeance, and Compassion, are in relationship with creation, they are nevertheless beyond comprehension because language and creaturely understanding are both inadequate to them. With respect to the acts, the created things, God’s total presence blots out any possibility of there being an “other.” So while God’s total presence demonstrates His similarity, it also affirms His total incomparability.

Nothing can express the reality of the Essence of God or even adequately allude to It. Wāsiṭi asks, moreover, how it is possible to consider that God possesses descriptions and attributes, when God is beyond all that. This perspective incapacitates the human understanding of God, and Wāsiṭi says that the only attribute one can engage with is praise. In other words, in the face of total incomparability one can only praise God.

_Call on God or call on the Merciful, whichever name you call on, to Him belong the most beautiful names_ (Q 17:110). Wāsiṭi said, “His names are innumerable. Nothing alludes to His Essence, nor is It described by a true
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attribute except the attribute of laudation. The Real is outside powers of imagining (awhâm) and understandings. So how should He have descriptions and attributes?" 21

Wâsiṭi explains that although people think they come to understand God through attributes and descriptions, in fact these all veil Him. "People have nothing from Him other than a name, a description, or an attribute. People are veiled by His names from His descriptions, and by His descriptions from His attributes, and by His attributes from His Essence." 22

As for the acts, Wâsiṭi says God makes Himself known through creation, yet at the same time it acts as His veil. He makes Himself known because creation points to His "making" (san) and His command, but it remains a veil because the veil is known and not God Himself. Wâsiṭi declares that God is known through creation, but then he follows this statement with a list of negative assertions that express God's incomparability.

He veils Himself from His creatures through His creation, then He makes them know His making through His making (san), and He drives them to His command through His command. It is not possible for the powers of imagining (awhâm) to deal with Him, for intellects to imagine (takhlâluh) Him, for eyesight to picture Him, for hearing to embrace Him, or for wishes to put Him into service. He is that which has no before or no after; nothing falls short of Him and nothing is equal; there is no goal beyond Him and no respite (mahl). He has no period, end, goal, time, or conclusion. No veil covers Him, and no place diminishes Him, no air surrounds Him, no space encompasses Him, no void contains Him. There is nothing like Him, He is the Hearing, The Seeing (Q 42:11). 23

Commenting on the verse, We will show them Our signs on the horizons and in their selves/souls (Q 41:53), Wâsiṭi states that nothing becomes manifest in creation other than God. All of that which points to God's inmanence, points to His transcendence in turn. The verse is one of the Qur'ānic sources for the doctrine of the signs,

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namely that all things both outwardly, on the horizons, and inwardly, in their selves, communicate about the nature of the divine. Hence, for Wāṣīṭī, God makes the signs manifest and is the Manifest (al-zāḥir) through them. Wāṣīṭī reflects Qur’anic usage in using the word “to find” (wajada); a word related by its Arabic root to the important technical term that will signify in theoretical Sufism the identity between “finding” and “being” (wujūd). The following verse suggests that only God is found in the world, everything other than God is a mirage. Those who disbelieve, their works are like a mirage in the desert. The one who is thirsty reckons it is water until when he comes to it and does not find anything, but he finds God with Him (Q 24:39). Wāṣīṭī says that if one examines things thoroughly, one will not find anything other than God manifest in creation.

He is manifest in everything through what He makes manifest of Himself. His making manifest the things is His own manifestation through them. Thus if you examine [things] thoroughly, you will not find anything other than God. 24

Just as God makes His own attributes and signs manifest in each thing, so also He makes His own Self manifest in each self. Hence, in the last analysis, nothing possesses a self for and by itself. In other words, no one has the right to say “myself,” “yourself,” or “itself,” because God’s Self encompasses all of reality. “Wāṣīṭī said, ’He left no self for the creatures after He reported about Himself that He is the First, the Last, the Manifest (al-zāḥir), and the Non-Manifest (al-bāṭin) (Q 57:3).’” 25

V. Attributes and Acts from the Perspective of Immanence

Just as Wāṣīṭī demonstrates that all examples of God’s immanence point to His incomparability, he often shifts his perspective to show that incomparability demonstrates immanence as well. Following from Qur’anic usage, Wāṣīṭī describes God’s manifestation of His attributes through the acts as “the Standing” (al-qā’im) (Q 13:33). 26

25. Sulami, Ḥaqq’iql, 328b.
26. See its use for example in Sarrāj, Kitāb al-luma’, 55.
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The Standing is not one of the traditional ninety-nine names of God; it is more common to use the name of God *al-qayyūm* which might be best translated in this context as "the Self-Standing." I translate Wāsīti’s use of the verb *qāma bi* as "standing through," but it also carries the meanings of undertaking, standing up for, and making something one’s concern. The existence of all things is by means of God standing through them, in other words by His undertaking their creation, upholding and maintaining their existence, taking care of them, and acting through them. 27 The sense that God “stands through” the creatures and not “in” them is brought out where Wāsīti says that God’s attributes “flow” (*jarā*) through the creatures. 28 God stands through the creatures by means of His attributes which flow through them as human character traits and attributes such as compassion, wrath, life, and knowledge.

The following sound *ḥadīth qudsī* is a basic source of Islamic thought concerning the divine-human relationship and is a point of reference for Wāsīti’s understanding of God’s attributes standing or flowing through His creatures.

I love nothing that draws My servant near to Me more than [I love] what I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through superogatory works until I love him. Then when I love him, I am the hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks. 29

Wāsīti emphasizes the care implicit in the meaning of the term *qāma bi* that God shows to His creatures by standing through them when he links it directly with God’s mercy. Wāsīti says in a gloss on the verse *He singles out for His mercy whom He wills* that when God singles a person out for mercy, that person passes away from himself and is aware of God’s standing through him (Q 3:74). Nothing has any existence of its own on any level of reality, outwardly or inwardly,

27. In later theological and philosophical texts it is common to distinguish between God and creation by saying that God is “standing through His Essence” (*qā’im bi-dhatih*) and the creatures are “standing through God” (*qā’im bi’llāh*).
28. See for example Sulami, *Ḥaqa’iq*, 298b (Q 46:35).
but few people perceive this. Most people experience themselves and the rest of creation as "standing" on their own. He singles out for His mercy whom He wills (Q 3:74). "Wāṣiṭī says, 'It is that you should be as you are without you and He should be the Standing. He belongs to you through His Essence and His attribute'.”

Wāṣiṭī discusses passing away (fanā') from one's own attributes or character traits such that one subsists (baqā') through God's attributes and character traits as "bearing" (iḥtima‘l) the attribute or trait. In Wāṣiṭī's sayings, passing away (fanā') is the annihilation of the self in respect to one or more of the attributes. One experiences an attribute or attributes of God standing through one and no longer claims those attributes as one's own. One comes to realize that God has always stood through oneself. For Wāṣiṭī, the term fanā' means a process in which one passes away from the perception of possessing attributes one or more at a time.

Wāṣiṭī uses the term "subsistence" (baqā') to describe both the stage before each passing away when one is living in ignorance of the actual state of things, and the stage after one passes away and realizes God standing through oneself. He sometimes uses "standing through" (qā'īm bi‘) as a synonym for (baqā'). In other words, one either understands oneself to subsist or stand independently through oneself or realizes that one is entirely dependent and subsists or stands through God alone.

Wāṣiṭī says in various contexts that no one can bear a particular attribute, in other words, possess it for themselves through their own power. Then in other sayings he describes those who bear it. The explanation of this seeming contradiction is that no one bears a name oneself, rather the name bears itself through one. This is another way of saying that as one passes away from the illusion of possessing an attribute, one realizes one subsists through the attribute. Or from another perspective, as one stands down from one's claims to possess an attribute or a divine character trait, the attribute or trait stands up through the person on its own.

Wāṣiṭī discusses this matter in terms of one of the most comprehensive names of God, the Real (al-haqq). The name is a near synonym for the all-comprehensive name Allāh and indicates that God encompasses

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all of reality itself. In a gloss on the verse *Some of them look at you; what, will you guide the blind, though they cannot see?* (Q 10:43), Wâsîті says that it is impossible for any human being to bear the Real. He makes all human beings the referents in the verse. Just as people are blind, so they do not have the capacity to bear the Real. To have such a capacity would mean having a capacity equal to the Real Itself.

He does not disclose Himself to them as is worthy of Him, since that would be wrongdoing. They cannot bear the Real, for that would make them disappear. It is impossible that they should have the strength to put up with the Real as is worthy of Him, since that would be equality and conjunction. 31

Hence, Wâsîті states that only the Real can bear the Real. Those who bear the Real bear It because the Real bears Itself through them. They do not bear It themselves. In all cases, God bears His own attributes or character traits through people. Hence people must pass away from their own claims to reality such that they turn to the perspective that it is the Real that subsists or stands through them.

Such people have passed away from lordship and servanthood, which is to say that they have passed away from all claims to possess or to be the lord of their own attributes, and they have passed away from all claims to be servants of the Lord. They have no claims because they have no selves to make claims. From this perspective, nothing of them subsists that could take on any description. Only the Real subsists and stands through Itself.

Among them are those whom the Real attracts and whom He blots out from themselves through Himself; for He says, *God blots out whatever He wills and makes firm* (Q 13:39). Whoever passes away from the Real through the Real so that the Real may stand through the Real has passed away from lordship, not to mention servanthood. 32

The one who has passed away through the Real and witnesses nothing other than the Real standing through him in all his moments has the certainty that nothing other than the Real stands through existence. The person senses or sees nothing other than the Real, and

nothing speaks to him but the Real. Here Wāsiṭī is making reference to the well-known hadith qudsi quoted above, “I am the hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks.” 33

Serve your Lord until certainty comes to you (Q 15:99). “In other words, do not observe other than Him in the moments until certainty comes to you, when you will realize certainty such that you do not sense other than the Real, you do not see other than the Real, and that no one speaks to you other than the Real.” 34

VI. God’s Complete Command

Wāsiṭī sees God’s utter autonomy and control in standing through all things as one of the necessary consequences of tawḥīd. God directly commands all things in every moment, so the things have no independent will. All things act by means of God standing through them. Hence, only God truly acts. By denying human autonomy he affirms God’s oneness: nothing acts other than God. In other words, he is simply restating the first part of the shahada, “there is no god but God.”

If nothing but God becomes manifest in the cosmos, and no self can stand up before His Self, then God has absolute power over all of which is ultimately none other than He. Wāsiṭī refers to “God’s Handful” from a verse declaring that everything will be in God’s hand on the Last Day.

Wāsiṭī said concerning His words, To Him belongs whatever inhabits the night and the day (Q 6:13). “Whoever claims in thought or deed that anything of His kingdom – which is whatever inhabits the night and the day – belongs to him, then he has contended over the Handful and has disdained the [divine] exaltation. Do not the creation and the command belong to Him in an absolute sense (Q 39:67)?” 35

33. Bukhārī, Riqāq, 38.
34. Sulami, Ḥaqāʾiq, 143b.
35. Sulami, Ḥaqāʾiq, 59a.
God's power over all things negates the claims of the creatures to possess anything. All are made manifest by Him and manifest the signs of His attributes and names.

To Him belongs whatever inhabits the night and the day (Q 6:13). [Wāsīṭ] also said concerning this verse, “He does away with kingdoms. Rather, He nullifies them when He ascribes them to Himself, looks after them with His power, and makes them manifest with His will. He made them to be found after He made them lost. He owns them in reality.” 36

Commenting on the verse, You do not will except as God wills (Q 81:29), Wāsīṭ says that God creates human beings such that they are incapable of possessing attributes. Attributes belong to things by virtue of God’s manifestation through them. He bears the attributes through them with His attributes and descriptions. A creature’s will and power to act is only possible through God’s Will and Power. Wāsīṭ asks how it is that one can be proud of one’s obedience when it is entirely dependent on God.

He makes you helpless before your descriptions and attributes, so you do not will except by His will, you do not act except by His power, you do not obey except by His bounty, you do not disobey except by His abandoning. So what subsists for you? Why are you proud of your acts when nothing of your acts belongs to you? 37

In that case, how can one be consumed with repentance if no one acts other than God? Wāsīṭ says that blaming oneself for one’s wrongdoings is shirk because it denies that it is God who determined the mistake. Hence when Wāsīṭ says above that one should be so consumed with repentance such that one does not know what time of day it is, he means that one should be consumed with God, not with blaming the self. One cannot blame oneself because, again, there is no self but God’s Self. Wāsīṭ provocatively puts the blame on God in the following saying in order to turn his listeners’ attention around to the fullest implications of tawḥīd.

37. Sulami, Ḥaḡā’iq, 363a.
Worship God and do not associate anything with Him (Q 4:36). Wasiiti said, "Associating others with God is looking at the shortcomings and slips of his self and blaming it. It is said to him, 'Does the blame adhere to who is in charge of making it stand up or who the slip is decreed for?'"

God is beyond any relationship with the creatures in that He does not act in response to human activity; He only acts according to His will. The cause ('illa) and effect (ma'lih) relationship that exists in this world does not impinge on God. Wasiiti says that nothing a creature does can produce an effect on God, because He creates all causes and effects.

God does not bring the poor one near because of his poverty, nor does He put the wealthy one far away because of his wealth. He has no thought of transitory things such that He should join with them or cut off from them. If you were to give to Him this world and the next, that would not join you to Him. If you were to take hold of all of both of them, He would not cut you off by that. He makes near whomever He makes near without cause, and He cuts off whomever He cuts off without cause. Thus He says, When God does not appoint a light for someone, he has no light (Q 24:40)."

As Wasiiti said above, wishes cannot put Him into service. One cannot assume a cause and effect relationship from one's wrongdoing to one's repentance and, then, to God's forgiveness since God does not act in response to human beings. God determines both the wrong action and the repentance prior to creation which then come into play in a person's existence in the created world. He says, "Choosing is in beginninglessness and wrongdoing and repentance are at the time of being given existence." 40

Wasiiti comments on God's sole activity in a saying using several Qur'anic verses as his proof-texts. The saying concerns the transformation of the self from being lifeless, blind, and ignorant in itself to living, seeing, and knowing through God's attributes. Wasiiti interprets the "wholesome tree" mentioned in the verse, Do you not see how God strikes a similitude? A wholesome word is like a wholesome tree, its

38. Sulami, Haqiq, 42a.
40. Sulami, Minor Quran Commentary, 195:19 (Q 20:122).
root is firmly fixed and its branches reach to heaven. It gives its fruit every season by its Lord's permission (Q 14:24-25), to be the self made wholesome by God. In this saying he reads the “permission” to give fruit mentioned in the verse to be God's command that determines the degree and manner in which His attributes stand through a creature and become manifest as works. Wasiyi typically uses the term “command” (amr) to refer to this complete control over all creatures in every moment. The self possesses no attributes of its own except negative attributes that cannot be ascribed to God, such as lifelessness, blindness, and ignorance. Any positive attributes manifest through the self belong to God and are determined by His command alone.

The self is not given life, sight, and knowledge so that it may come to see and know the world. The purpose of God's standing through human beings is so they can come to know Him. In the context of the present discussion, then, wrongdoings are determined for the same reason. Wrongdoing and repentance should result in knowledge of God. He cites the verse, *On that day faces will be lustrous, gazing on their Lord* (Q 75:22-3) to demonstrate that God gave sight to the self so it might see Him and know that He is the source of its attributes.

This is to say that the self comes to know that it possesses nothing and that only God is real, acts through, and commands all things. Wasiyi says the self is “delighted” with declaring that there is nothing other than Him acting in creation. He ends the saying citing the words of the Qur'an, that God is *the Actor for whatever He desires* (Q 85:16).

*It gives its fruit every season by its Lord's permission* (Q 14:25). Wasiyi said, "The self was dead, then brought to life; it was ignorant, then given knowledge; it was blind then made to see by His words, *On that day faces will be lustrous, gazing on their Lord* (Q 75:22-3). The self was given insight on *tawhid* and it was delighted with declaring God without second, and God is *the Actor for whatever He desires* (85:16)." 41

**VII. Judgment**

Wasiyi's claim that human beings have no agency apart from God brings us to the question of God's judgment of human acts. The

Qur'ān and the Sunna make it clear that there will be a Last Day during which humankind will be judged for their actions in this life. If human beings have no agency apart from God, how can they be judged for their actions? Wāsiti's answer is consistent with his position elsewhere; God's judgment is not in response to human actions. Out of His mercy, God does not accept humankind's “destitute” acts. He says that if human beings were to rely on their own works to determine their final abode, all of humanity would all be lost.

Because human beings have no claim to their works, they will not be able to count on their good deeds in the face of God's judgment. Wāsiti responds to a question asking if God permits one's works to fill the scales on the day of judgment. He answers that God makes the scales heavy or light according to His will in “beginninglessness.” The terms beginninglessness (azād) and endinglessness (ābad) are used to designate “eternity” but with reference to God's relationship with creation. If God makes the scales light in beginninglessness, it was commanded to be so in eternity. But with respect to creation, the command was prior to God's bringing creation into existence.

It was said to Wāsiti, “Does He permit the scales to be heavy with our works?”

He said, “If He permitted that then everyone with numerous limpid works would be safe. Rather God makes heavy the scales of whomever He wills, and He makes light the scales of whomever He wills. Do you not see that Prophet said, The scale is in the hand of God [He lowers the just scale and He raises it]? He lowers some people and He raises others. He raises them in beginninglessness and He lowers others in beginninglessness prior to the existence of each engendered thing.”

If God determines all actions, it follows that He also determines good and bad deeds, and that He rewards or “takes vengeance” on what He Himself has commanded. But Wāsiti says God's “vengeance” is not reciprocal for human actions. None of God's eternal acts can be held to correspond with temporally originated things.

42. Sulами, *Haqīq*, 378b (Q 101:6-7); the hadith is found with a slightly different wording in the Ḥadīth collections (e.g., Bukhārī, Tafsīr, 11; Muslim, Imān, 293, 295; Ibn Māja, Muqaddima, 13; Ibn Ḥanbal, IV, 395, 401, 405; cf., Chirrick, *Sūfī Path of Knowledge*, 173, 401).
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And God is exalted, the possessor of vengeance (Q 3:4). Wāṣīṭī said, "[He is] exalted beyond anyone opposing His desire. Rather, He takes vengeance on what He makes flow to a person, thereby negating that His punishment should be reciprocal for temporally originated actions." 43

Wāṣīṭī says that God, in His mercy, does not judge human beings according to their works. People do not act independently of God, they act inasmuch as God stands through them. Perceived as belonging to the creatures alone, human acts are destitute, no matter how beautiful they may seem to be. In commenting on the verse, Whoever works righteousness, he does it for his own sake; whoever does what is ugly, it is against himself; and your Lord is not unjust to His servants (Q 41:46), Wāṣīṭī says all works, inasmuch as they belong to the creatures, are performed for their own sake and never reach God. If God were to judge humanity on the basis of these works, everyone would be lost. This is true even of the best of humanity, the messengers and the prophets. In Wāṣīṭī’s way of looking at things, God is not unjust to His creatures precisely because He does not accept these destitute works, and instead makes human works beautiful and acceptable by His own bounty alone.

Nothing of His servant’s actions arrive at the Real, for whenever someone does a thing beautifully, it is for his own sake; whenever someone is thankful, it is for his own sake; whenever someone remembers, it is for his own sake. However, out of His bounty, God makes foul deeds beautiful then accepts them. Even if He were to accept those acts which were purely for Him or through which He alone was desired, all creatures would meet him in destitution, including the prophets and the messengers. Whoever observes anything of his own actions, has made manifest his own baseness. 44

In this context, repentance is initiated by the sincere repentant is impossible. Wāṣīṭī is clear that repentance is initiated by God alone. The sincere repentance mentioned at the beginning of this discussion means that one is purified of shirk, which includes the claim to be a sincere repentant. Commenting on the verse, He turned to them, so they might turn in repentance (Q 9:118), Wāṣīṭī says that the only acceptable repentance is one decreed by God prior to one’s wrong-

43. Sulami, Ḥaqā’iq, 22b.
44. Sulami, Ḥaqā’iq, 296a.
doing, let alone one’s intention to repent afterwards. The human role in repentance is removed. “Acceptable repentance is acceptable before the mistake and before the intention of repentance, God says, He turned to them, so they might turn in repentance.” 45

VIII. Human Agency Reexamined

Despite the fact that Wāsiṣṭī states again and again that human beings cannot act independently of God, he does not negate the possibility of human agency. But human agency is dependent on turning one’s perspective to view reality correctly. As we have seen, God is incomparable to creation, yet at the same time, similar to it because He is manifest through it by means of His attributes. This complementary opposition, at the heart of declaring God one in Islamic thought, is reiterated on the level of God’s similarity to the creatures. God’s standing through creatures indicates God’s incomparability because nothing is manifest in creation other than the effects of His attributes. But, likewise, the fact that God acts through creation lends human beings a reality and agency of their own. For Wāsiṣṭī, acts are efficacious when one perceives that God is the source of that agency but powerless inasmuch as one perceives oneself to be its source. Human agency is gained when one gives up one’s claim to it. Repentance is a fundamental part of this process. When people turn toward God and away from themselves and the world, the world becomes “subjected” to them. As intermediaries and secondary causes for the Cause, human actions are significant, powerful, and salvific.

It can be argued that for Wāsiṣṭī the acts are neutral and it is people’s perspective on or beholding of the acts that determines if those acts are destitute or powerful. If they behold the acts as originating in themselves, the acts are destitute. If they behold the acts as originating in God, the acts are powerful. In the following saying, Wāsiṣṭī declares that religious practices are “indecent acts,” then he steps back and clarifies that provocative statement by saying that it is not the works themselves that are indecent but looking at them.

45. Sulami, Ḥaqāʾiq, 96a (Q 9:118).
Who when they commit an indecent act or wrong themselves, remember God (Q 3:135). Wāsīṭī said, “Obedient deeds are indecent acts. No, rather, looking at them in vanity and pride are indecent acts not acts of obedience." 46

In commenting on the verse, Say, My prayer, my ritual sacrifice, my living, my dying – all belongs to God, the Lord of the worlds (Q 6:62), Wāsīṭī says if one makes any claim to possess one’s life or works, those works will be destructive. But if one observes that one’s life and works belong to God, those very same works will be protecting. Relying on works is relying on nothingness, hence they are destructive. But if one relies on God, the works will be protecting as that through which He is manifest in the world. As discussed above, foul deeds become beautiful and accepted by God when one observes they belong to Him.

Say, My prayer, my ritual sacrifice, my living, my dying – all belongs to God, the Lord of the worlds (Q 6:62). Wāsīṭī said, “The explanation of this verse is in His words Whatever is in the heavens and the earth belongs to God (Q 10:55), whenever someone observes them from himself, they destroy him, and whenever someone quits himself of them, they protect him. How is it permissible for him who declares God one to observe an action? 47

In the end, those who give up all claims to human agency find agency through God. Those who seek out this world lose God, and those who seek out God find Him and in finding Him, the world becomes “subjected” to them. Wāsīṭī refers here to the Qur’ānic principle that human beings are the representatives of God (Q 2:30). Inasmuch as people recognize that they are only the representatives through which God acts in the world, the world becomes subjected to them. In other words, when people behold themselves as God’s representatives their actions are meaningful and powerful.

God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth (Q 14:2). Wāsīṭī said, “All of engendered existence belongs to Him. So whoever seeks out engendered existence, the Bestower of existence passes him by. But, whoever seeks out the Real will find Him and engendered existence will be subjected to him.” 48

46. Sulami, Ḥaqa‘iq, 33b.
47. Sulami, Ḥaqa‘iq, 67b.
48. Sulami, Ḥaqa‘iq, 134b.
IX. Conclusion

Hence repentance is only powerful when it is a turning of one’s perspective to see things as they really are from the perspective of tawhid. To safeguard the human heart through repentance by means of self-accounting and examination is to trace the signs of God in the self to their “place of origination and flowing.” In the context of turning one’s perspective toward God, it is impossible to separate the practical or the moral from the ontological imperative. For Wāsiṭi, there is nothing more practical than turning yourself toward the One because tawhid demands it.

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