

## **The Importance of the Environment and Its Components within the Sufi Ethical System**

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**Received: 22/01/2025   Accepted: 01/05/2025   Published: 12/07/2025**

### **Abstract**

Islamic Sufism represents an independent intellectual system within Islam. It is distinguished by a moral framework that carries a distinct human dimension. This framework is grounded in lived experience and ethical practice rather than abstract theorization or purely rational speculation. In Sufi thought, moral responsibility extends across multiple domains. It is not limited to the relationship between the servant and the Creator. Rather, it includes the practical outcomes of this relationship as reflected in interactions with the surrounding world. These interactions encompass those who share the same beliefs, those who differ in belief, as well as animals, plants, inanimate objects, and the natural environment as a whole.

The aim of this article is to highlight the social dimension of Sufi ethics in dealing with others and in caring for the environment and its various elements. It also seeks to trace the foundations of these ethics and to clarify their principles and applications within Sufi practice. The study concludes that Sufi thought demonstrates a clear concern for respecting others and for viewing environmental elements through the practical application of Sufi ethics. This approach reflects an inclusive moral vision that embraces all components of lived reality. It links environmental care to core moral virtues and treats it as a permanent ethical conduct, similar to other forms of spiritual discipline followed by the seeker on the path toward the Divine Truth.

**Keywords:** Sufism; Ethics; Environment; Environmental Elements.

### **Introduction**

The environment constitutes the natural setting that contains living beings. It represents a place of shelter and refuge where comfort is found and where the human spirit feels at ease. From it, individuals seek the realization of happiness, and to it they return in order to experience its fulfillment. Islamic law, through its elevated teachings, has taken into consideration the relationship between the individual and both the

environment and society. This consideration applies to all elements, whether human, animal, plant, or inanimate. Islamic teachings aim to regulate this relationship in a manner that ensures harmony and balance. They seek to prevent alienation at the outset and to avoid conflict in the end.

Among the intellectual systems that belong to this religious framework is Islamic Sufi thought. Its writings and texts are rich with references, while the statements of its pioneers and the practices of its masters and disciples reveal clear indications of environmental consideration in all its forms. The environment is viewed as part of creation, which God has brought into existence with wisdom and care. Therefore, it deserves increased attention and ethical engagement from human beings. This engagement is realized through conduct shaped by Sufi ethics, which form the central axis of the Sufi intellectual system.

## **1. Manifestations of Sufi Ethics in Caring for the Environment and Its Elements**

Sufi thought possesses a coherent ethical system whose general foundations are derived from Islamic law. Its detailed applications extend into the paths of spiritual practice and experiential discipline. Through these experiences, Sufi ethics produce distinctive models of conduct. These models emerge from the spiritual stations that the disciple passes through on the journey toward God. As a result, the practitioner acquires moral qualities that distinguish him from others who merely apply the outward teachings of the law. Among the Sufi ethical principles that emphasize care for the environment and its various elements are the following:

### **A. The Impact of the Ethic of Love on Accepting the Other and Living Together**

When love is mentioned in Sufi discourse, it refers to two interconnected meanings: the servant's love for God, and God's love for His servant. In Sufi understanding, the servant's love for God cannot be realized unless it is preceded by God's love for the servant. This is indicated in the Qur'anic verse: "He loves them, and they love Him" (Qur'an 5:54).

As for the servant's love, one of its essential realities in Sufi thought is that it removes from the heart everything other than the Beloved. The perfection of love requires this state, since as long as the heart retains an attachment to anything else, love remains incomplete. True love also entails that the lover forgets his share in relation to the Beloved and forgets his personal needs. What is meant here is that the dominance of love over the heart causes the lover to become absent from his own interests and desires, as all of them are absorbed within the authority of love (Ibn al-Qayyim, 2010, p. 758).

With such love, there remains no attention or consideration for anything other than God, who is described in Sufi terminology as the Other. The lover becomes fully

occupied with the Beloved and finds sufficiency in Him. As a result, creation remains safe from him. Those who agree with him and those who differ from him become equal in his sight. If he maintains relationships with others, he does not seek personal gain or satisfaction of the ego. Rather, he views all people with the same moral outlook.

Through this love, feelings and perceptions are drawn from the attributes of God, exalted and glorified. Consequently, blameworthy traits are replaced with praiseworthy qualities that correspond to the attributes of the Beloved and are pleasing to God. Nearness to God, therefore, is achieved through resemblance in attributes rather than through physical proximity. In this way, the servant's relationship with God improves, and this goodness extends to all created beings. Whoever is overwhelmed by love for God comes to love all of God's creation, because they are His creation. Hence, all religious virtues and noble moral qualities are fruits of love (al-Ghazālī, 2011, pp. 14, 486, 507).

As a result, conflict with opponents diminishes. The servant comes to see followers of other religions as God's creation as well. He does not seek to exclude them intellectually or socially, because his perspective is directed toward their Creator rather than toward their individual identities. For this reason, al-Sha'rānī emphasized an ethical conduct based on compassion and mercy toward those who differ in belief. This conduct is derived from the Prophetic covenants. Its essence is that virtues are original, while vices are accidental, since it is legal rulings that assign such descriptions. When the spiritual traveler witnesses the realities shown to him by his spiritual guide, he begins to address the inner secret present within creation rather than its outward forms. Whoever addresses the divine secret is, in effect, addressing God. When this spiritual station is truly realized, the servant is granted gentleness of speech and openness of countenance that others cannot attain. God thus protects him from harshness of expression and roughness in speech and interaction (al-Sha'rānī, 1993, p. 466). This concerns the servant's love for God.

As for God's love for His servants, which is known as pre-eternal love, Sufis hold a comprehensive view of creation in understanding this form of love. God's love, in their view, is not restricted to a particular group. Rather, it encompasses humanity as a whole. This understanding contributes to renewing the spirit of unity among all people, and especially among followers of divine religions. It is a vision that unites rather than divides, affirms rather than excludes. Ibn 'Arabī expressed this idea in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, stating that God's love for His servants is not characterized by a beginning or an end. It does not accept change or contingency. Rather, God's love for His servants is identical to the very principle of their existence, whether early or late, without limit. This love accompanies them in both non-existence and existence. As God is with them in their existence, He is also with them in their non-existence, since they are known to Him and present within His knowledge. He has never ceased, nor will He ever cease,

to love His creation, just as He has never ceased to know them (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1999, p. 493).

This understanding is further supported by the view of Ṭayyib Ṭizīnī when discussing Ibn ‘Arabī’s efforts to overcome religious conflicts among different sects and faiths. He notes that Ibn ‘Arabī, with his comprehensive intellect and inclusive moral conscience, addresses all people in his famous verse: “Creeds have bound the creatures in beliefs about God, while I have embraced all that they have bound.” (Ṭizīnī, 2011, p. 230).

Ṭayyib Ṭizīnī therefore expressed hope for a broader dissemination of Ibn ‘Arabī’s religious and worldly knowledge. If this were achieved, the sphere of insight and reform would expand and illuminate many intellectual domains. He further notes that Ibn ‘Arabī developed a set of positions, visions, and concepts that can be placed within a three-dimensional framework: freedom of choice, equal and dialogical engagement among all human beings, and enlightenment. Generations of Arab and non-Arab thinkers have been influenced by the intellectual system created by Ibn ‘Arabī (Ṭizīnī, 2011, p. 230).

Islamic Sufism thus demonstrates a flexible and profound understanding of other religions. This is because it emphasizes inner reality more than outward form and seeks to witness the Creator within creation. The Sufi strives to transcend the world of forms and move from multiplicity to unity, from the part to the whole. He abandons the many for the sake of the One, while simultaneously perceiving the One within the many. For him, all things become transparent, including religious forms, which then reveal their single origin. Sufism, or Islamic gnosis, represents the most comprehensive affirmation of the eternity of wisdom at the heart of Islam, as well as at the core of all religions. This exalted doctrine of unity is itself singular, and it is what the Sufi refers to as the “religion of love,” famously articulated by Ibn ‘Arabī in his poetry (Nasr, 1975, p. 171).

This ethic of love and tolerance found its most prominent embodiment in Ibn ‘Arabī’s devoted disciple, Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī. He offered a remarkable example of Sufi compassion toward all religious communities. During the events that took place in Damascus in 1860 between Christians and Druze, the Emir protected Christians, sheltered them in his own home, and secured their lives and property. His actions contributed to reducing violence and preventing the disintegration of the state and social order (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, 2004, pp. 92–94).

## **B. The Verse of the Covenant: The Unity of Origin and the Human Point of Departure**

The Sufis drew inspiration from the Verse of the Covenant mentioned in Sūrat al-A‘rāf, in which God says: “And when your Lord took from the children of Adam, from their

loins, their descendants and made them testify concerning themselves, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes, we testify,’ lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘Indeed, we were unaware of this’” (Qur’ān 7:172). This verse affirms the unity of origin and point of departure for all the children of Adam. God brought them into existence in pre-eternity, within the realm of divine oneness. When He called them, they responded at once. This response was a gift and a grace from Him. He answered on their behalf at the moment of their creation. They were His call, and He made them know Him when they were nothing but a will established before Him. By His will, He moved them, then made them as particles brought forth by His creative command. He entrusted them to the loins of Adam, peace be upon him (al-Junayd, 1988, p. 42).

This covenant points to the true identity of the children of Adam. All are servants of God by virtue of the universal and decreed order. The ethics derived from this covenant show that such morals cannot be constructed by human reason alone. Reason does not found ethics, as it is always in need of them. It seeks them in order to attain completeness and balance. From this same reason, ethics later emerge, whether acquired or inspired. A reason that forgets this covenant is a disconnected reason. Sound reason, by contrast, is a connected reason. It remembers the covenant and perceives a sign of God in all things.

The ethics of this covenant extend to the whole world. They are not limited to the reform of the individual or society. Their aim is the well-being of all creation within the human realm. They elevate human aspiration toward actions and conduct that benefit the self, benefit others within one’s homeland, and benefit the world as a whole. In this vision, every place on earth becomes a homeland, every human a brother, and every being a counterpart in creation. These are universal ethics. They protect people from wronging themselves or others. When this covenant is put into practice, it becomes a foundational element in unifying humanity and guiding it. It refers to a comprehensive moment in human history that actually occurred, unlike later covenants, which assume an imagined state. By reviving the memory of this covenant, the Sufis reconciled reason with revealed law and endowed the human being with ethics of a global character (Tāhā, 2005, pp. 158–159).

This concerns the individual’s relationship with others in the human world. As for the relationship with the surrounding environment, Sufi thought also offers valuable insights. Since the moment humans descended to the earth, they have known no dwelling other than it. It is their place of settlement. Within it, and through it, they have sought the means of well-being. God granted them from it what He willed. He even subjected all created beings to their service, since the human being is God’s vicegerent on earth and a manifestation of His honor bestowed upon many creatures. God says: “And He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth, all from Him” (Qur’ān 45:13).

It is therefore reasonable that human beings preserve their earthly surroundings and environment. They are part of it. It resembles a compassionate mother who has nurtured them since the beginning of human settlement on earth. To harm it, or any part of it such as plants or animals, is a form of grave ingratitude. When the human being senses this connection and becomes aware of being a part within the whole embodied by nature, this awareness awakens within the self the virtue of mercy.

### **C. The Ethic of Mercy in Dealing with Created Beings**

The ethic of mercy is realized only through a strong bond between the servant and the Lord. One who lacks proper conduct with the Creator of the universe will treat creation more harshly and neglect their rights. When contemporary science is guided by an ethical vision of the cosmos, it can restore harmony between humanity and the earth. This begins with rebuilding harmony between the human being and the divine. Human greed toward nature then gives way to a reflective stance grounded in mercy and care. Such a transformation restrains the brutal exploitation of natural resources. Tradition alone can shift the human role from a plunderer of the earth's riches to God's vicegerent on earth, as expressed in Islamic thought (Nasr, 1975, p. 193).

The Sufis hold that inanimate objects and plants possess spirits known only to those endowed with spiritual unveiling. For them, all beings are living and articulate, endowed with life and expression (Ibn al-Qayyim, 2010, p. 225). They cite Qur'anic verses and prophetic reports that affirm the glorification of God by all things. As long as they glorify Him, they are conscious and aware of the One they praise. Through unveiling, God made some of His servants aware that stones remember God and address them, and that they can hear this address. Ibn 'Arabī states that every category of God's creation forms a community. God has predisposed each to a form of worship particular to it, which He inspired within their inner nature. Their messenger arises from among themselves, through divine inspiration embedded in their constitution. This resembles the knowledge animals possess of matters beyond the grasp of even skilled engineers. They know instinctively what benefits them and what harms them in food and habitat. Likewise, what is called inanimate or vegetal has been veiled from our senses in its capacity for expression (Ibn 'Arabī, 1999, p. 225).

From this perspective, Sufism views created beings differently from other approaches. Creatures are distinct communities, and they possess rights similar to those of humans. It therefore becomes a matter of ethical conduct to treat them with specific virtues, foremost among them mercy. Through mercy, their existence is preserved, and the continuity of their kinds is ensured. If people were mindful of these meanings, they would not transgress against nature or seek the destruction of crops and living beings.

'Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā clarified the bond between humans and nature. He noted that nature's mercy toward us precedes our mercy toward it, since it existed before us. Mercy does not pertain only to human beings or even to living creatures alone. It

extends to all things. Just as we show mercy to those of our kind, we should show mercy to the things around us. This mercy resembles that shown to humans in kind and measure. We repel harm from them and bring benefit to them, so as to preserve their being and ensure their continuity. Things do not merely receive mercy from us. They also return it to us (Ṭāhā, 2006, p. 253). He further observed that humans sense bonds with inanimate things and the like, as if these possess a form of spirituality akin to ours. Such bonds are perceived only by those of refined awareness and sound hearts. They are grasped by those attentive to divine meanings in existence, who listen and observe with humility. Such people hasten to aid creation when it is threatened, as seen in cases of environmental pollution, the loss of heritage, and the fragmentation of space (Ṭāhā, 2006, p. 253).

#### **D. Unity (Tawḥīd): Connection with the Creator and Bonds with Creation**

Seyyed Hossein Nasr grounded his intellectual vision in the relationship between religion and nature, in contrast to the devastation brought by modern civilization and its consequences. These consequences have afflicted humans, animals, and nature alike. He argues that throughout history, humans coexisted with nature and used it for their needs without seeking its destruction or the exhaustion of its energies and resources. Nature was seen as a divine creation bestowed upon humanity. It was approached with reverence, and the human being considered himself a part of it. Modern science, however, reduced nature to a lifeless entity separated from humanity. It sought to dominate it fully, extract all its resources, and ultimately destroy it (Nasr, 2015, p. 29).

The Sufi heritage offers one of the strongest forms of protection for the environment against human aggression. It views nature through a pure monotheistic lens. Nature represents an integrated unity whose parts cannot be separated. Its components, whether inanimate or animate, possess spirits connected to their Creator and bearing witness to Him. This perspective guards nature against reckless manipulation driven by narrow utilitarian motives that aim only at satisfying human desire. Nasr notes that modern environmental scientists have recognized that studying the environment as a complex unity requires acknowledging the mutual interconnection of all things. Such study remains incomplete unless it addresses ethical and spiritual truth. One must recognize that inanimate beings are related to living ones, and that all parts of the physical world are interconnected. Beyond this lies the metaphysical principle that links all levels of existence. Every being at a lower level derives its reality from a higher one and cannot be severed from it. This principle must remain present in thought at every step, and it cannot be denied or ignored (Nasr, 1975, p. 193).

#### **E. Compassion toward Animals and Inanimate Beings, and Drawing Moral Lessons from Them**

One striking feature of Sufi literature is its attention to animals, its care for them, and its frequent use of them as moral examples. Sufi authors often point to actions performed by animals that human beings fail to perform. Al-Ghazālī cites a piece of advice attributed to Luqmān the Wise: “My son, do not let the rooster be wiser than you. It calls out at dawn while you are asleep” (al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā al-Walad*, 2nd ed., Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 1435/2014, p. 50). He mentions this in the context of valuing the pre-dawn hours and encouraging night prayer and intimate supplication to God.

Al-Ghazālī also admires the resolve expressed by Majnūn Laylā in verses he composed after seeing a dove awaken before him and endure the night in wakefulness while he remained asleep. He lamented her precedence over him, saying that if he were truly a lover, the doves would not have surpassed him in weeping (al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā al-Walad*, p. 50). Such examples highlight moral vigilance through comparison with animals.

Sufis also likened blameworthy human traits to certain animals known for harmful qualities. Their criticism was not directed at the animals’ physical forms, but at the traits symbolically associated with them. The human being is distinct from animals, yet shares attributes such as anger and desire. The pig, in this symbolic reading, represents unrestrained desire. It is not condemned for its color or form, but for greed, voracity, and excessive lust. The dog represents anger, not by its shape, but by ferocity, aggression, and biting, which arise from rage and lead to injustice and harm. They criticized those who denounce idol worship while, in reality, serving their own passions. Were desire embodied for such a person, he would find himself worshipping a pig. Were obedience to anger, revenge, and oppression embodied, he would find himself worshipping a dog. There is a clear difference between one who worships God, even through mediation, and one who worships mute animals in this symbolic sense (al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 8, Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 1432/2011, pp. 40–41).

Among the refined manners transmitted in Sufi tradition is the avoidance of offensive speech, out of fear of becoming accustomed to it, whether in dealing with humans or animals. This applies even to animals regarded as harmful or repulsive, such as pigs. It is reported that Jesus, peace be upon him, once passed by a pig that approached him. He said to it, “Pass in peace.” When he was asked how he could address a pig in this way, he replied, “I dislike training my tongue in obscenity” (Makkī, 2001, p. 692). This conduct cultivates restraint of the tongue and accustoms it to avoiding harm, even in situations where harshness might seem permissible.

Another manifestation of compassion toward animals is reported of Ibrāhīm al-Khawwāṣ. He used to advise his household to care for cats and similar animals, especially during the daytime in Ramadan. Since people do not eat during the day, they may neglect the animals around them and fail to feed them, thereby harming their welfare. His reminder served as an affirmation of their rights in shared living. He would



also place flour and food crumbs at the entrance of ants' nests, to spare them the dangers of roaming in search of sustenance. Ants might otherwise be harmed by passersby or animals, leading to injury or death, or prolonged suffering from broken limbs. He even advised placing honey at the nest entrance, as an added act of kindness, and warned against placing barriers between animals and their food. One who makes access to sustenance difficult for an animal may find his own path to provision made difficult by God, in accordance with divine justice (al-Shaʿrānī, *al-Minan al-Kubrā*, Damascus: Dār al-Taqwā, 2004, pp. 350–351). Such conduct reflects a high degree of sensitivity and compassion toward animals, often overlooked in an age dominated by selfishness and material preoccupation, where individuals live as if isolated from the rest of creation.

As for inanimate beings such as trees, al-Ghazālī offers a striking ethical position. He considers breaking a tree branch without need to be a sinful act that diminishes one's closeness to God and lowers spiritual rank. He argues that breaking a branch without a valid purpose constitutes ingratitude for God's blessing in creating both the tree and the human hand. The hand was not created for frivolity, but for obedience and useful action. Trees were created with roots, nourished with water, and endowed with growth so that they might reach maturity and benefit God's servants. To break them before they reach that stage, without benefit, contradicts divine wisdom and departs from justice. If there is a legitimate purpose, then it is permitted, since trees and animals were subjected for human needs. Both are transient, and sacrificing what is lesser for what is nobler may be closer to justice than wasting both (al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, vol. 8, p. 315). This detailed reasoning reflects deep respect for the rights of creatures subjected to human use. Play, corruption, waste, and destruction are not aims of humanity's role as God's vicegerent.

Another aspect of compassion toward others in Sufi thought is their sense of solidarity with all creation. They hold that the afflictions that befall creatures result from human wrongdoing. Mercy toward them therefore includes sharing in their suffering. Al-Shaʿrānī states: "We were bound by covenants to share in all the concerns of all the people of the earth, and to see every affliction that befalls them as caused by us, not by them" (al-Shaʿrānī, *al-Baḥr al-Mawrūd fī al-Mawāthīq wa-l-ʿUhūd*, Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 1424/2004, p. 86). This serves as a criterion by which the degree of faith is measured. One who claims faith is expected to share the pain of every sufferer and the trial of every afflicted person. This state is realized through constant moral attentiveness, in which thought remains engaged with others' suffering, finding rest only in sleep or heedlessness.

## **F. Iḥsān as the Alchemy of Enduring Relationships**

The rank of iḥsān occupies a central place in Sufism. It is often said to be Sufism itself. This is because Sufism attends to the third and highest level in the spiritual hierarchy,

namely *iḥsān*. These levels appear in the well-known ḥadīth of Gabriel, in which he asked about Islam, faith, and *iḥsān*. Faith was defined as belief in God, His angels, His books, His meeting, His messengers, and the Last Resurrection. Islam was defined as worshipping God without associating anything with Him, establishing prayer, giving the prescribed alms, and fasting Ramadan. *Iḥsān* was defined as worshipping God as though one sees Him, and if one does not see Him, knowing that He sees him. From this ḥadīth emerged the famous triad: law (*sharīʿa*), path (*ṭarīqa*), and truth (*ḥaqīqa*). Law corresponds to Islam, the path to faith, and truth to *iḥsān*. Thus, *iḥsān* is the summit and final aim of worship, ethics, and conduct. It should be present in every virtue and every stage of the journey toward God.

ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī defined *iḥsān* as a comprehensive term that encompasses all levels of spiritual realization. It is the station in which one fully realizes both lordship and servitude, as implied by the saying, “as though you see Him” (al-Kāshānī, 2000, p. 79). In this sense, *iḥsān* reflects the true nature of the relationship between the servant and God. When a person worships God with the awareness of seeing Him, and maintains this vigilance at all times, he becomes a sincere servant. In doing so, he realizes the true meaning of divine lordship.

ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī explained this meaning by stating that its essence lies in witnessing God and being present with Him in all things. Even if a person is occupied with worldly pursuits and lawful pleasures, he remains present with God and witnesses His manifestations in all things. If he loves food, drink, or any other object, he realizes that his love is, in truth, directed toward the divine reality manifested in that form, not toward the form itself (al-Nābulusī, 1985, p. 279). This means that the servant lives in constant awareness of God in all actions and states. Such awareness leads to excellence in every deed, due to complete vigilance and inner witnessing.

When dealing with people, the person of *iḥsān* treats them with excellence. The revealed law contains many texts that urge kindness toward humans, animals, and all creation. The Sufis drew upon these texts and applied them in daily life. This practice produced a luminous ethic in their dealings. They treated each person according to his or her rank and condition. Before that, they were kind to themselves by avoiding actions that lead to spiritual or worldly ruin. Hence their saying: “The one who practices *iḥsān* is kind to himself by not placing it in peril, kind to creation by not harming them through bad character, and sincere in worship by keeping it free from ostentation” (al-Sulamī, 2001, p. 181).

The beneficence of such a person reaches others, yet he does not harm them. His good is abundant, and his harm is restrained. *Iḥsān* is not limited to giving. It also includes refraining from harm. Preventing harm to others is itself a form of excellence. In this way, one treats creation well through attentiveness to one’s relationship with the Creator. For this reason, the Sufis said: “The signs of the person of *iḥsān* are these: he

does not wrong others; if he is wronged, he does not seek revenge; if he becomes angry, he does not sin. He burdens himself and spares others. People find ease with him, while he bears hardship within himself. His heart trembles at remembrance, and he is patient in affliction” (al-Sulamī, 2001, p. 25).

Through such meanings, social cohesion is strengthened, and society is protected from corruption, discord, and moral decay. These harms often arise from sin. When *iḥsān* takes hold of the heart, it prevents disobedience. God’s remembrance, love, and hope dominate the servant’s inner life. He acts as though he sees God, which restrains him from intending sin, let alone committing it. When a person departs from the circle of *iḥsān*, he loses the companionship of the elect and their serene way of life (Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Dā’ wa-l-Dawā’*, p. 174).

*Iḥsān* also fulfills the principle of justice. It calls for treating people as one wishes to be treated. It affirms equality in conduct. In this context, it is reported that a ruler once approached Abū al-‘Abbās al-Sabtī and asked him to explain the essence of the Sufi path and its guiding secret. Abū al-‘Abbās replied, “It is *iḥsān*.” When asked to clarify, he said, “Whatever you wish God to do for you, do it for His servants” (al-Timbuktī, 2000, p. 71). This statement urges the servant to resemble the divine attribute of beneficence, according to human capacity. Such benefit takes many forms and is not limited to one type. Whatever good a person can offer should not be belittled. It also realizes the meaning of the prophetic saying: “None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself” (Abū Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī, 1999, p. 497).

Another meaning of *iḥsān* is excellence in execution. Excellence is inseparable from *iḥsān*. When the servant feels divine vigilance, he becomes keen on perfecting every act, whether belief, thought, perception, worship, or interaction. His aim is to attain divine pleasure. The servant constantly seeks the satisfaction of his Lord, who calls him to strive toward perfection in action. For this reason, al-Nābulusī stated: “Know that *iḥsān* is higher than faith, because it is the perfection of faith” (al-Nābulusī, p. 278). Achieving such excellence requires effort, full dedication, and sincerity in action. Sa‘īd Ḥawwā explained that *iḥsān* has two aspects: performing what is good or best, and maintaining awareness during action that God sees us, or that we see Him. The person of *iḥsān* chooses the best in all matters, avoids what is ugly, and acts with awareness of divine presence. This state is attained only through self-discipline and constant remembrance of God (Ḥawwā, 1992, p. 241).

*Iḥsān* is also a means of human progress and the preservation of human existence on earth. It supports the cultivation of the world, the realization of human interests, and the protection of the means of survival. For this reason, Abū al-‘Abbās al-Sabtī considered *iḥsān* the foundation of all good in this world and the next. Through it, life finds its balance and spirit. He observed that the heavens give rain, the earth releases its waters, and the mountains contribute their share. The earth then produces its fruits,

yet humans gather and withhold these goods, depriving the needy. He thus censured human miserliness when others are in need, despite the fact that the universe is subjected for the benefit of humanity and others. The absence of *iḥsān* contradicts the order of the cosmos, which is created upon generosity and giving. To oppose this natural order leads to corruption, hardship, and distress in human life.

Beneficence has profound and positive psychological effects on both the benefactor and the recipient. These effects include emotional openness, inner serenity, and purity of intention. They also distance the soul from avarice and miserliness. Such qualities become a cause for continuity in compassion and kindness toward others. The pleasure derived from beneficence, once experienced, functions much like a hormone that spreads and increases within the body as soon as one begins, attempts, or completes an act of kindness. This inner pleasure encourages perseverance and consistency in practicing all forms of beneficence. It is sought for the sense of fulfillment felt during acts of kindness. In turn, this spreads feelings of affection, mutual understanding, fraternity, and empathy. Ibn al-Qayyim states: “The generous benefactor is the most open-hearted of people, the purest in soul, and the most content in heart. The miser who shows no beneficence is the most constricted in heart, the most troubled in life, and the most burdened by anxiety and sorrow” (Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma‘ād fī Hady Khayr al-‘Ibād*, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1990, p. 153).

In Sufi thought, the object of beneficence is not limited to human beings. It extends to animals and even to inanimate entities. Sufis regard it as proper conduct to avoid harming inanimate objects, such as trees, as will be discussed later. As for animals, showing kindness to them is considered an essential moral obligation. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī mentions among the divine favors bestowed upon him that God “brought comfort to my soul by giving a cat or a dog the thigh of a chicken that was in my hand whenever I noticed, through signs, that it anticipated kindness. Often, I would give it the entire chicken if it was hungry” (al-Sha‘rānī, *al-Minan al-Kubrā*, 1st ed., ed. Aḥmad ‘Izzū ‘Ināyah, Damascus: Dār al-Taqwā, 2004, p. 349).

This reflects the serenity of his soul in offering the best portion of meat, which humans naturally prefer, to a domestic animal. It even extends to complete generosity by giving the entire portion of meat, such as a whole chicken. He further considered chasing an animal that had taken a piece of meat to be a form of intimidation and distress that nullifies reward. He argued that the value of the food taken does not equal the harm caused by frightening the animal. He states: “If someone runs after it, I see that frightening and disturbing it nullifies the reward of the chicken, as though we had given it nothing. Indeed, the chicken may not compensate for the harm caused by terrorizing it” (al-Sha‘rānī, *al-Minan al-Kubrā*, p. 349).

He even sought excuses for animals that take food or forbidden items. He attributed this behavior to the stinginess and avarice they observe among humans. A person may

strip a bone of all its meat, skin, and sinew, thereby violating the right of the animal observing him. An animal takes food only after losing hope in human kindness. Al-Shaʿrānī viewed it as ignoble and shameful for a human to withhold generosity from an animal that anticipates benevolence and mercy. This expectation arises from the animal's belief that standing before humans brings provision. Thus, true beneficence lies in fulfilling what the animal hopes for from humans. Animals, in this view, possess an understanding of matters relevant to their existence (al-Shaʿrānī, *al-Minan al-Kubrā*, p. 349).

Beneficence also entails consideration for realizing beauty in the formation and crafting of things, as well as in the completion of actions. Those distinguished by beneficence demonstrate excellence in their thoughts, interactions, and deeds. Their ideas are founded upon truth, encompassed and enriched by beauty. Their actions are likewise grounded in beneficence. Everything they produce reflects beauty—beauty that God has inscribed upon the face of creation—and serves as a sign of the beauty of the creator's soul (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, 1st ed., trans. Dākhil al-Ḥamdānī, Beirut: Markaz al-Ḥaḍārah li-Tanmiat al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 2009, p. 259).

Such beneficence cannot be attained except through divine assistance. It is God who inspires the servant with success in beneficence in action, thought, and perception. It is among the fruits of divine love for the sincere servant and among the outcomes of divine mercy manifested upon devoted believers. Seyyed Hossein Nasr states: "Attaining the rank of beneficence occurs through God's mercy and mercy toward others. Beneficence is love of God and entry into love of creation through this path. It is living in peace and tranquility in harmony with the world through beauty. It is immersion in all the degrees of beauty that lift us beyond our earthly condition and lead us to the Infinite Self" (Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, p. 260).

For this reason, Sufi ethics resemble an interconnected network in which each element reinforces the other. One may find, within the details and subtleties of many moral virtues, references to specific modes of conduct that recur in different contexts. Ethics, in Sufi understanding, form an integrated whole. Each moral quality is connected to the inner state of the seeker himself. It is also connected to others, whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims, agreeable or opposing. Moreover, it encompasses the relationship with the surrounding environment and the world in which we live.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the Sufi ethical system gives considerable attention to the seeker's relationship with his surroundings. The environment is viewed as an integral part of the world in which the seeker lives. It is also understood as a manifestation of created existence that unites the human being with the elements of his environment. In this sense, the human being is one element among others.

The special honor granted to humans, along with their responsibility as stewards on earth, does not justify domination over the environment. Nor does it permit attempts to subdue nature through practices that contradict the principle of beneficence prescribed by ethical guidance. Such conduct represents a deviation from the intended moral path. It also constitutes an unjust use of a legitimate right.

## Explanatory Notes and References

1. Al-Suhrawardī reports narratives describing communication between inanimate objects and animals among a number of prominent Sufi figures. These accounts reveal an actual relationship and connection between the two sides. See: al-Suhrawardī (2013), p. 130.
2. By “the separation of spatial boundaries” is meant the dissolution of geographical space, represented by national borders, and physical space, represented by bodily limits. This dissolution results from Western modernity and its technological advancement through modern communication tools. As a result, neither form of space retains its former sanctity. The more solidarity increases among humans, the more it becomes directed against heritage, nature, and space itself. See: *The Spirit of Modernity*, p. 239.
3. The prophetic tradition is documented in the recognized collections of Hadith. See: Kamāl al-Ḥūt (Riyadh: Dār al-Rushd, 1409 AH), vol. 6, p. 157.

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