

THE CLASSICAL ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF MAN AS A 'SMALL WORLD'

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Abstract

Makalah ini membincangkan tentang konsep manusia sebagai suatu 'alam kecil' atau microcosm kepada alam semesta. Ia mengetengahkan perbandingan pandangan-pandangan Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', Ibn Miskawayh, al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī dan al-Ghazālī tentang konsep tersebut.

This article deals with the concept of man as a 'small world', that is, man as a microcosm of the world, or, a small version of the universe. We compare here the views of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā',¹ Miskawayh (d. 1030 A.C. / 421 A.H.), Isfahānī² (d. 1050 A.C. /

¹ The Brethren of Purity wrote fifty-one treatises in the 4th/10th centuries known as the *Rasā'il* (*Epistles*) of the Brethren of Purity. The authors are not known, but they were of Shi'i inspiration and were probably based in Basra. The *Epistles* had a wide influence on later Muslim intellectual figures, including Miskawayh, Isfahānī and Ghazzālī.

² Isfahānī is an Islamic ethical philosopher who died around the middle of the eleventh century. He wrote an ethical work called *al-Dhāri'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah* (*The Means to the Noble Qualities of the Law*), which had a great influence on the ethics of Ghazzālī. For some detail on his life and works, see, Yasien Mohamed, 'The Ethical Philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 1996, 6(1) 51-75. For some informa-

442 A.H.) and Ghazzālī (d. 1111 A.C. / 505 A.H.).³

1. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'

Islamic cosmology, as exemplified by the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', is based on a Neoplatonic system of emanation, which is based on four central concepts, those of the One, the Spirit, the Soul and the Material world. In this Neoplatonic system, the human species occupies a position at the top of the terrestrial realm, as it is the culminating point of the cosmos. The more basic aspects of the terrestrial realm precede man: minerals yield to plants, which support animals, until the crowning purpose of this realm, man, is achieved, within whom both the spiritual and the physical dimensions of the cosmos are contained as the 'small world' (*al-'ālam al-ṣaghīr*), expressing in microcosm the entire cosmos. Man was deemed as such because all the dimensions of the cosmos are within him. Furthermore, and in keeping with Neoplatonic thought, when the human soul is liberated from materiality, it is able to return to God, the Creator of both it and the cosmos. This concept of man as microcosm is integral to the cosmology of the Ikhwān.

What is meant by the concept that man is a microcosm of the cosmos? It suggests that man is a microcosmic form of the whole universe. That is, both his spiritual and physical dimensions correspond to the physical and spiritual nature of the universe respectively. So every part of the human body can be compared, and even explained, by the various corresponding parts of the physical

tion on the impact of his cosmological ideas on Ghazzālī, see Yasien Mohamed, Knowledge and Purification of the Soul. An Annotated Translation with Introduction of Isfahānī's *Kitāb al-Dharī'ah ila Makārim Shari'ah* (58-76; 89-92) in *Journal of Islamic Studies*. Oxford. 1998; 9 (1): 1-34.

³ This study is a new version of an article dealing with the same concept, but which had been explained within the context of cosmology. See Y. Mohamed, 'The Cosmology of Ikhwān al-Safā', Miskawayh and al-Isfahānī' in *Islamic Studies* 39:4 (2000), pp. 657-679. Our present article adds the view of Ghazzālī and we limit the discussion and comparison to the concept of man as a 'small world'. So for a better understanding of how this concept fits in with cosmological theories of three of these figures, the reader will do well to refer to our previous article.

universe, and every part of the soul can be compared with every corresponding part of the physical universe which has an affinity to it. Thus, the Ikhwān refer to man as a 'small world' (*al-‘ālam al-ṣaghīr*), which means that he, both his body and soul together, make up a minute form of the large world.

As has been mentioned, man stands midway between the animal and angel in the Neoplatonic scheme of emanation. His angelic or spiritual aspect is mixed up with his animal or physical aspect. The latter element makes man an imperfect creature. But even this imperfect aspect emanates from the One, albeit a lower form of existence. It therefore reflects the One imperfectly. It is by virtue of man's spiritual aspect that he is able to transcend the lower levels of his microcosmic reality and evolve spiritually towards the One. So when the human soul is liberated from materiality, it is able to return to God. The concept of man as a 'small world' became an integral part of the Ikhwān's cosmological doctrine. In describing how various parts of man correspond to various parts of the universe, the Ikhwān demonstrated the connectedness between man and nature. They asserted that the universe is too large for man to study, and that man need only look to himself, and he will find all the elements of the universe within him, that is, in his body and soul.⁴ By man coming to realize himself as a small world, he will not only know the world, but also God. The whole universe has been created to serve man's innate urge to return to the Creator, which means that he should develop a positive and respectful attitude to all aspects of the universe. The Ikhwān therefore went to great lengths to describe in precise detail the resemblance between man and various parts of the universe. His body is a prototype of the physical world (including planets, minerals, plants and animals) and his soul is a prototype of the spiritual world (including angels, jinns and demons).⁵

⁴ S.H. Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, p. 98.

⁵ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, II, (Cairo: 1928), p. 334f. where man, the small world (*‘ālam ṣaghīr*) has a dual nature of body and soul, the body is analogous to the city and the soul to the king. Cf. Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: 1991), pp. 96-98.

“Know, when the ancient sages looked at this physical world with their eyes, and witnessed its phenomena with their senses, and contemplate upon its conditions with their intellects, and examine the conduct of the (unique) individualities from the general (species) with their insight, and learn from the arts of its particulars by their reflection, they will not find any part of it more complete in frame, or perfect in form, or more analogous to anything else, than man. Since man is altogether a combination of a physical body and a spiritual soul, they found in the constitution of his bodily frame prototypes of all the existents in the physical world ... [of its spheres, planets, elements, minerals, plants and animals]. They also found the prototype of spiritual creation of its angels, jinns, man and devils, and the souls of the rest of animals, and the powers of creation act freely in the world; they are analogous to the human soul and its powers act freely upon the body. When these matters of the picture of man became clear to them, they named him a small world (*‘ālam ṣaghīr*).”⁶

The Ikhwān draw analogies between man’s body and the physical world:

“The frame of his body can be compared to the earth: the bones to mountains, the marrow to minerals, the belly to the sea, the intestines to the rivers, the veins to the streams, the flesh to the earth and the hair to plants, the skin where hair grows is like good land, and where no hair grows is like bad land. Man’s front corresponds to the east, his back to the west, his right side to the south and his left side to the north. His breathing is like the wind, his speech like thunder, his voice like the bolt of lightning, his laughter like daylight, and his weeping like rain, his despair and grief, like the darkness of night, his sleep is like death; the days of his childhood are like the days of spring, the days of his youth are like the days of summer, his middle-age is like the days of autumn, and his old-age

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 456, 14-15, p. 457, 1-13.

is like the days of winter, and the movements and acts are like the movements of the planets and their turning. Birth and man's appearance are like the rising, his death and disappearance are like the descending."⁷

Thus, the Ikhwān refer to the world as the 'big man' (*insān kabīr*), since its parts correspond, at a macrocosmic level, with the parts of the small man (*insān ṣaghīr*). The authors cite many other analogies to illustrate the similarity between man and the world. The interconnections between the universal bodies (simple and complex) and particular bodies in the world are also compared with the government of a city state.⁸

The above quotations give us a sense of the way the Ikhwān saw man as a microcosm of the universe. Such perceptions of man, which are central to their theory of emanation, emphasise man's affinity with and proper relation to the cosmic world. Furthermore, it serves to make man realize his need to liberate himself from matter and become a true microcosm. By so doing, he will realise his true essence, return to God, and complete the chain of being.

Man's true soul will achieve perfection as part of the cosmos, which is gradually unfolding according to a Neoplatonic scheme of creation. Within this scheme, man seeks to return to his ontological point of origin, God. This is man's spiritual ascent towards perfection. His original descent from divine perfection, which involves a certain level of terrestrial imperfection, is the providential fate of all things. This descent to imperfection is irreversible for all creatures, but not for man. Man has been endowed with reason, which enables him to rectify his imperfection, and to aid his soul's ascent to the One. This process does not merely involve a rational apprehension of cosmological realities, but it requires the knowledge and

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 466, 16-21; p. 467, 1-4.

⁸ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, III (Cairo: 1928), p. 215, 22f./ trans. Dieterici, cited in Widengren, 'Macrocosmos-Microcosmos: Speculation in the Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and some Hurufi Texts', *Archivio di Filosofia Padova*, 48 (1980) 297-312, p. 299. According to Widengren, this passage was 'undoubtedly inspired by Stoic popular philosophy' and the social structure is depicted as feudalistic.

practice of the good. Man's rational faculty enables him to transcend matter; including the body, which is inferior to the soul. Reason enables man to transform his soul to a level of ontological superiority.

Thus, the body and soul are aspects of the human microcosm, and refer to the terrestrial and celestial dimensions of the cosmos respectively. The rational aspect of this human anthropology makes it possible to apprehend the meeting point between the Neoplatonic geography of the cosmos and the moral anthropology of the human microcosm. The Ikhwān's theory of cosmic emanation influenced later Arabic writers such as Miskawayh, and their concept of man as a microcosm of the universe became a recurring theme in the writings of Miskawayh, Iṣfahānī and Ghazzālī.

2. Miskawayh

Miskawayh adopted from the Ikhwān their concept of man as a microcosm and their emanationist theory of the universe. Although the two concepts are related, we will deal mainly with their view of man as a microcosm of the universe.

The concept of man as a microcosm is not new in the Ikhwān and Miskawayh; it has its roots in Neoplatonic sources,⁹ but can be traced back to an ancient Indo-Iranian concept.¹⁰ Miskawayh adopted this idea from the Ikhwān, but he was less concerned about giving detailed analogies between the various aspects of man and the various aspects of the cosmos.

⁹ Jachimowicz, 'Islamic Cosmology', in C. Blacker and M. Loewe, eds. *Ancient Cosmologies*. London, 1975, p. 146.

¹⁰ Widengren argues that the doctrine of correspondence between man as a small world and the world as a big man goes back to an ancient Indo-Iranian concept. This correspondence also has an astrological orientation in that every part of the human body is under the protection of one or two zodiac signs; furthermore, the development of the human embryo in every stage is under the protection of a planet. See G. Widengren, 'Macrocosmos-Microcosmos Speculation in the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* and some Hurufi Texts', *Archivio di Filosofia Padova*, p. 305. These speculations are apparently integrated into the Neoplatonic structure of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'.

Man as a microcosm, with all the various aspects of his body and soul, resembles various parts of the cosmos. He has to transcend the lower forms of his nature to progress in his spiritual evolution towards God. In chapters 2 and 3 of the *Fawz al-aşghar*, Miskawayh views man as a microcosm of the world, and states that man has parallels with four elements in the world:

“Man is a small world (*‘ālamun ṣaġhīrun*) and his faculties are inter-connected. He has parallels to all that is in the big world (*‘ālamun kabīrun*): to the four elements in the inhabited and uninhabited worlds; on land, sea and mountain; and to inanimate objects, plants and animals, as though he were an abridgement and composition of all that is in it. Some parallels are apparent and some are hidden and obscure.”¹¹

Note that Miskawayh does not describe specific elements within the human microcosm correspond with the four elements in the cosmos. Miskawayh was more concerned with the essential notion of man as ‘a small world’ that reflects the whole universe. Furthermore, he was concerned with how man’s realization of himself as a small world leads to his ultimate happiness. Miskawayh was attracted to the notion of the human microcosm as a means to explain his ethical theory. Following the Neoplatonic fashion, Miskawayh states that man’s cognitive perfection is explained in terms of contact (*ittiṣāl*) with the intelligible world. When this contact happens, man becomes a microcosm of the world:

“You become a world apart, and you deserve to be called a small world (microcosm), because the forms of all existing entities would have become realized within you, so that you would have become in a sense identical with them. By your actions you will have arranged them in order in the measure of your capacity, and you will thus become, with respect to them, a deputy of thy Lord, the Creator of all things... you will then constitute a complete world... your perfection will have made you ready to receive the divine emanation forever and always you will

¹¹ Miskawayh, *al-Fawz al-aşghar* (Tunis, 1987), p. 118, 8-12.

have come so close to God that no veil should then separate you from Him.... This is the highest rank and extreme happiness. Were it not possible for the individual person to achieve this rank in himself ... he would have been in the same condition as the individuals of the other animals or as the individual plant.... It would have been impossible for him to achieve eternal existence and everlasting bliss by coming close to God."¹²

As a true microcosm, then, man will attain ultimate happiness, but he must first perfect himself morally, and must therefore rise above sensory pleasures. By so doing, he joins the higher spiritual realm (*al-malā' al-a'lā*), and receives the illumination of the divine light. He partakes of divine perfection, becoming godlike. Miskawayh concludes that this happiness accords with the love of God, which only the truly virtuous and happy man can attain.¹³ Man will then transcend his mortal self and live a divine life.¹⁴ This conception of man as a microcosm of the whole universe is most concisely expressed by Miskawayh, who states:

"When man attains perfection, he performs his distinctive activity upon understanding all existents (*'alima l-mawjūdāt kullahā*). Such a man becomes a mirror picture of the world and deserves to be called microcosm (*'ālam ṣaghīr*). The forms of all existents will become present in him, and he will become identical to them. He will then become a vicegerent of God."¹⁵

Man is potentially a microcosm, but by his reason he is able to reach a level where he realises this potential, becoming a true microcosm. This is not merely a process of rationality and apprehension of reality, but it involves a knowledge of the good, and a pu-

¹² Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhḷāq*, ed. C. Zurayk (Beirut, 1966); p. 41, 11-23, p. 42, 1-4, trans. Zurayk, *The Refinement of Character* (Beirut, 1968), p. 37f.

¹³ *Tahdhīb*, pp. 120-122.

¹⁴ Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, p. 152/trans. Fakhry, *Ethical Theories*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Tahdhīb*, p. 41, 4-20.

rification of the soul through the pursuance of good. So when man fully realizes his potential to be a microcosm, he becomes identical with nature, becomes godlike, and attains supreme happiness.

The concept of man as the microcosm of the world is also identical to that of the Ikhwān, but Miskawayh does not follow the style of Ikhwān, which is to provide detailed descriptions of the affinity between man and nature. Like the Ikhwān, Miskawayh propounds a theory of evolution that has four stages: from the mineral, to the plant, to the animal and finally to man. For man to fully realize the microcosm within himself, he has to become identical to the whole of creation, from the minerals to the angels. Without this similarity and connection with nature, man cannot become godlike, nor can he attain supreme happiness. Herein lies the link between man as a microcosm and his spiritual evolution. He has to fully realize his microcosmic state to become harmonious with the rest of the creation; his sense of connectedness with nature will enable him to reach the end of his spiritual evolution and attain complete happiness.

Thus, the Ikhwān and Miskawayh have at least four points in common: the concept of the emanation of creation from God, the concept of spiritual evolution towards God, the concept of man as the microcosm of the universe, and the notion that the soul returns to its Creator and attains happiness with its increasing purification from the impurity of matter and worldly pleasures. It is when the rational part of the soul gains supremacy over the lower parts, that man will come to realise his state as a 'small world', and then both his body and soul will live in harmony with the physical and spiritual parts of the world.

3. Iṣfahānī¹⁶

Iṣfahānī departs from the emanationist view of the world as conceived by the Ikhwān and Miskawayh. God to him is not immanent in the Neoplatonic sense, He is a transcendent God and a per-

¹⁶ On Iṣfahānī's concept of microcosm and its comparison with Miskawayh and the Ikhwān, see Yasien Mohamed, 'Knowledge and Purification of the Soul', An Annotated Translation with Introduction of Iṣfahānī's *Kitāb al-*

sonal God to which man can turn directly for guidance. Although God is transcendent, the creation is not detached from Him, but it is a Divine expression, with all its natural, human and supernatural forms. These forms are differentiated in time and space, and are not part of the process of emanation.

In this section we shall limit our discussion to Isfahani's concept of man as a microcosm. The following passage shows how Isfahani adopted the concept of man as a microcosm and placed it within a different context; that is, he believed that man as a microcosm of the larger world is endowed with an affinity to nature and to the cosmos. An understanding of this affinity leads to an understanding of man, of nature, and ultimately of God.

“The sages said: God fashioned man as a sensible, intelligible structure according to the pattern of this world, and brought him into being in a way that is similar to everything found in the world, to the extent that it is said that he is a *small world*, a microcosm of the larger world, in order to guide him to knowledge both of the world and the soul, and thereby to knowledge of the Creator of both. The epitome of man's knowledge of his Creator is that he should know the world, and know that it is created, and that it has a Creator who is totally other than it - far exalted is God above such a thing.”¹⁷

We refer to this as the cosmological way of knowing God. It is a logical way, the way of reason, based on the observation of nature. The wisdom of creating a microcosm is to know the world: for to know the world is to know God. Knowledge of God can also be achieved through the knowledge of the soul, which leads to knowledge of the world, which in turn leads to a knowledge of God. Knowledge of man as a microcosm is therefore central to the knowledge of God. It is an empiricist theory of arriving at knowl-

Dhari'ah ila Makārim Shari'ah (58-76; 89-92), *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 1998, 9 (1), 1-34.

¹⁷ Isfahānī, *al-Dhari'ah ila Makārim al-Shari'ah* (Cairo: 1987) pp. 76, 9-13; 202. Isfahānī states: ‘God created a small world for every person, both of his body and his soul, and He brought into being in man, an example of every existent in the big world’ (p. 202).

edge of the 'big world', which is the key to knowledge of the unseen, of God. This approach of arriving at knowledge of God is called 'Natural Theology' ¹⁸

Thus the purpose of creating man as a microcosm is confirmed in the *Tafsīl*. Iṣfahānī states, 'The human soul combines the existents of the world ... whoever knows the existents knows his soul'. Furthermore (commenting on Chapter 30, verse 8), he states that 'if men had to reflect upon their souls they would know the realities of the existents of creation, both transitory and permanent'.¹⁹ Therefore, with knowledge of his soul (*rūh*), man will have knowledge of the spiritual world and its permanence (*baqā'uhū*); and with knowledge of his body, man will have knowledge of the physical world and its transience.²⁰ As in the Ikhwān and Miskawayh, there is clearly an affinity between man and nature. As a microcosm, both man's soul and body correspond to the spiritual and bodily aspects of the universe.

Whereas in *al-Dharī'ah*, Iṣfahānī introduces the notion of microcosm in the context of the way to a rational knowledge of God, it is in the *Tafsīl* that he really expands on this concept in a manner resembling the *Rasā'il*. Here he is more descriptive and detailed in comparing the parts of the human microcosm with the parts of the cosmic macrocosm. As a microcosm man is a small model of the big world, and shares similar qualities with it. Both his body and soul can be likened to the larger world. His bodily qualities resemble some plants and minerals and his moral qualities resemble some animals. Unlike the Ikhwān, Iṣfahānī cites many verses from

¹⁸ See A. Baharudin, 'The Significance of Sufi-empirical principles in Natural Theology' in *Islamic Studies* 39 (4) 2000, 613-632, p. 614ff. The author defines Natural Theology and attempts to show that it has a basis in the Qur'ān.

¹⁹ al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Tafsīl al-nash'atayn wa taḥṣīl al-sa'adatayn*, ed. A. Najjar, (Beirut: 1988), pp. 105ff. *Tafsīl*, p. 62; cf. *al-Dharī'ah*, p. 202.

²⁰ *al-Dharī'ah*, 76. 9-10. 'He is a small world, a microcosm of the big world': *al-insānu huwa 'ālamun ṣaghīrun wa mukhtasarun li'l 'ālamī kabīri*. Cf. *Tafsīl*, p. 76, 8-9, where Iṣfahānī also uses the term *mukhtasar*. Miskawayh uses the term *'ālam ṣaghīr*.

the Qur'ān to give the concept an Islamic orientation. For example, he supports the statement that man is a composition of the elements of the world, and that God created him after the existence of these things, by the following verse: 'Who fashioned well everything He created, and originated the creation of man from clay' (Q. 32:7). God has combined within man the simple elements of the world as well as the complex elements, its spiritual aspect and earthly things. Therefore it is said, man is a microcosm (*mukhtaṣar*) of the world.

Man as a microcosm is analogous to a small book, an abridged version of a big book: it has fewer words, but the same meaning. Man is made out of the best of the earth. He is like butter in butter-milk, and oil in sesame seed oil. Everything in the world resembles him. He is like the elements in respect of his heat, cold, moisture and aridness, like minerals in respect of what the body is, like plants in respect of what he eats and looks after, like animals in respect of what he senses, imagines and experiences, like the lion in respect of his annoyance and anger, like Satan in leading others astray, like the angels in his knowledge and worship of God, like the Preserved Tablet whereby God has placed within it the collective wisdom, and like the pen which confirms the collective wisdom in the Tablet, man employs it to confirm with this speech the forms of things in the hearts of people.²¹ Thus, man and the world resemble each other, as it is said, 'Man is a small world, and the world is a big man'. Thus man, the small world, resembles the big world, including, minerals, plants, animals, angels, Satan, and the Preserved Tablet of God. The following passage describes man as a microcosm, a receptacle of all good and bad qualities of the world. Distinctive features of all aspects of creation are to be found within man in varying degrees and in different times. At times man is like a praiseworthy angel, at other times like a blameworthy animal or devil. Thus, 'the potentials united within man make him a vessel for the good qualities of the world: its natural forms, its minerals and its spiritual realities; thus, he is a combination of all of these-minerals, plants, animals, beasts, devils, angels and the Preserved Tablet. Thus, he can manifest within him the distin-

²¹ *Tafṣīl*, p. 76f.

guishable feature of all these'.²² This kind of detailed description of the material, moral and spiritual qualities of man and their mirror image in the form of plants, animals, devils, angels and Preserved Tablet is absent in Miskawayh's *Tahdhīb* and his *Fawz al-aṣghar*. Miskawayh was more concerned with the theory of emanation and man's ascent to the One. Iṣfahānī's description of the microcosm is akin to the Ikhwān. They both use analogies to confirm the intimate affinity between man and the cosmos. Iṣfahānī, however, pays more attention to the similarities between man's moral qualities and the universe. The passage below looks at the moral and theological characteristics that man shares with the plants and animals.

"Thus, there are some people who are as tyrannical as the lion, as scornful as the wolf, as false as the fox, as wicked as the pig, as submissive as the dog, as collective as the ants, as impudent as the fly, as stupid as the donkey, as meek as the faithful bird, as skilful as the wild ass, as proud as the lion, as jealous as the cock, and who coo as softly as the dove. Some people have a beautiful outward and inward appearance like the citron tree.²³ Then there are the opposite ones who, like gall nuts²⁴ and acorns, are ugly in appearance but whose inner demeanour is likened to walnuts and almonds. Then there are [also] those who possess beautiful outward appearances but are ugly on the inside, like the colocynth²⁵ and the oleander.²⁶ The good believer compared with animals and insects, is like the bee that takes the good from the trees but does not pluck the fruit nor break the tree, and does not harm another human

²² *Tafṣīl*, p. 84, 10-11; p. 86, 1-2.

²³ *Utrujj*, see earliest reference to it in *al-Dhari'ah*, p. 60, 4, see translation above and footnote for a clear explanation.

²⁴ Also: 'oak apples'. For a similar passage comparing the moral qualities of man with animals, see *Tafṣīl*, p. 84, 10-11; *Mizān*, p. 902.

²⁵ *al-Dhari'ah*, p. 73, 6, note 4.

²⁶ *al-Dhari'ah*, p. 73, 6, note 4.

being. It benefits man most, sweet its [honey] taste and pleasant its smell. Compared with trees, he is like the citron tree: its blooming fruit and pleasant smell and taste of wood and leaves. The hypocrite and the wicked, compared with animals and insects, are akin to the louse and the termite, and compared with trees, are like weeds with no origin, fresh air, leaves, shade, or flower. Its fruit are spoilt, trees dry; they are like fruit with few leaves, many thorns, and difficult to reach.”²⁷

In a manner resembling the style of the Ikhwān, who compared the universal Soul with the government of the soul, Iṣfahānī compares man with the social and political stratification of a country:

“Philosophers have related many examples of man’s essence and its faculties; they illustrate what can only be perceived by the intellect through a sensory picture that approximates human understanding: They said: As a small world,²⁸ man, as mentioned, is compared to a country—its structure is firm, buildings erect, walls fortified, streets designed, places divided, houses inhabited, paths travelled, rivers flow, and workers employed. Its king has a minister, treasurer, postman, newsman, interpreter, and writer, and both good and bad (people live) in the country. The workers are the seven faculties, namely, attracting, grabbing, digesting, defending, growth, nourishment, and shaping. The king is the intellect residing in the heart; the minister, the rational faculty, in the middle of the brain; the postman, the imaginative faculty in front of the brain; and the newsmen are the five senses; the treasurer, the retentive faculty, behind the brain; the interpreter, the speech faculty of the tongue; the writer, the writing faculty, its tool is the hand; and the good and bad inhabitants of the country are

²⁷ *al-Dhari‘ah*, p. 166, 2-15.

²⁸ *al-Dhari‘ah*, p. 103, for reference to man as a small world. The body is compared to the city and the intellect to the king. See *al-Dhari‘ah*, p. 67 for a similar idea.

the faculties, both of good and bad character. Just as the ruler, when he is purified and governs the rule of God, he becomes the shadow of God on earth; likewise, the intellect when it becomes a ruler, the rest of the faculties have to comply with it."²⁹

Thus, Iṣfahānī adopted the notion of man as microcosm from the Ikhwān because his analogies comparing man with nature resemble those expressed by the Ikhwān. Iṣfahānī, however, departed from Miskawayh and the Ikhwān's explanation of the human microcosm in the context of the cosmological theory of emanation. Iṣfahānī employs the concept within the framework of a theory of creation; a Qur'anic theory of the world being created by a transcendent God. By man coming to realise himself as a small world, he will come to know his Creator. A striking feature of Iṣfahānī's description of the human microcosm is the way its ethical qualities are compared with the various beings within creation, including the animals and plants.

The Ikhwān, Miskawayh and Iṣfahānī share the same view of man as microcosm, but they approach it in different ways. The Ikhwān's theory of the microcosm is viewed within the context of emanationistic cosmology. Detailed and precise aspects of man, his body and soul are compared with the spiritual and material dimensions of the universe. These similes and images of man and the cosmos recur in different forms throughout the *Rasā'il*. Miskawayh adopts the same notion of man as a small world, making it integral to his cosmological world view, but he does not offer any vivid images or similes to illustrate it. Iṣfahānī's microcosm fits into a Qur'anic scheme of creation: the affinity between man and nature is established through the microcosm, and so is man's dependence on the creation. The notion of microcosm is also employed as a rational way of arriving at knowledge of God and increasing man's

²⁹ *Tafṣīl*, p. 92, 1-10, p. 93, 1-9; cf. *al-Dharī'ah*, p. 103, for similar analogies in a slightly different context. The other faculties referred to here are the concupiscent and irascible faculties. The former should obey the latter. The balance of these faculties leads to justice. The hierarchical order of society and the obligations connected with it are compared here with man's faculties.

faith in Him. Unlike Miskawayh, Iṣfahānī provides vivid examples to illustrate man as a microcosm of the universe, making the *Rasā'il* the model for his style.

4. Ghazzālī and Comparison

Ghazzālī shares with Iṣfahānī the notion of man as microcosm of the world, and in the *Mizān* he has an identical description of it as what is in *al-Dhari'ah*. Mention of the microcosm recurs a few times in the *Mizān*, but Ghazzālī does not provide vivid descriptions between man and nature. Ghazzālī states:

“Part of God’s compassion towards his devotees, is that He has combined within the person of man, despite his relatively small size, the wonders of the world which could be described to be almost parallel to his own wonders, to the extent that he is like a small copy (*nuṣṣḥah mukhtaṣarah*) of the form of the world, so that man can reach by contemplating them [the wonders of his individuality], knowledge of God, the most powerful, the illustrious.”³⁰

Like Iṣfahānī, Ghazzālī also adopts the notion of the human microcosm as a point of departure to get to know the world and God. He compares man’s soul with the world, stating that the wonders of man have their parallels in the wonders of the world. Therefore, by reflecting upon the soul one gains knowledge of the world, and hence of its Creator:

“The wonders of the world are composed and created by God. (Since) the parts of the soul correspond with the parts of the world, and these parts of the world are bulging with marvels, the one who examines (these parts) will benefit by having more firm belief and confirmed faith. Thus, God has urged (us) to reflect upon the universe and commanded (us) to contemplate upon the souls, horizons, heavens and the earth.”³¹

³⁰ *Mizān*, p. 200, 14-17.

³¹ *Mizān*, p. 216; cf. Field, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, p. 31; Ghazzālī states that knowledge of the soul leads to a better knowledge of God than knowledge of the body.

Like Iṣfahānī, Ghazzālī also employed the rational argument for God's existence by design. This is the approach adopted by natural theology. It is a divine imperative as suggested by the passage above. God commands man to contemplate his nature in order that he might arrive at knowledge of God. For Ghazzālī, true happiness can only be attained with the knowledge of God, and the key to the knowledge of God is the knowledge of the self. Ghazzālī even calls upon man to contemplate over his physical body, and to realise the perfect manner in which it was created. He provides a detailed description of the wonders of the various parts of the body. The body is part of the human microcosm and the study of it is not only important for doctors but also for those who want to arrive at a knowledge of God. He states: 'Man has been truly termed a 'microcosm', or little world in himself and the structure of his body should be studied not only by those who wish to become doctors, but by those who wish to attain a more intimate knowledge of God'.³²

However, he warns that the study of physical nature is not the only way of knowledge of God. There is a higher level of knowledge of God; this can be attained by meditation and the purification of the soul according to the Sufi method. This is not the rational approach of reason and observation that we alluded to, but it is the approach of intuition and illuminative knowledge. The climax of this knowledge is the love for God.³³ Clearly, then, Ghazzālī employs the notion of human microcosm as a way of coming to know the world, and therefore of God. This is the way of reason and observation, and he exemplifies this approach in his description of the bodily parts. The higher level is by way of intuitive experience where one comes to know the more significant aspect of the duality of the human microcosm, which is the soul. Although Iṣfahānī also recognizes the body and the soul as part of the microcosm, and although he acknowledges the soul as the more

³² Claud Field, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, Lahore, 1991, p. 31

³³ Baharuddin, 'The Significance of Sufi-Empirical principles in the Natural Theology', p. 627ff. The author makes the distinction between knowledge of God by reason and knowledge by intuitive experience.

significant part in arriving at a higher intuitive knowledge of God, he does not, like Ghazzālī, prescribe the Sufi way. It is clear that for both of them, the microcosm had epistemological implications for knowledge of the world of nature, and therefore of the Creator.

In the following passage, Ghazzālī provides a unique comparison between the human organs and the craftsmen of the world.

“Know, the soul of Adam’s children is a microcosm (*mukhtaṣar*) of the world. In it, is a trace of every image in the world; his bones are like mountains, his flesh like dust, his hair like plants, his head like the sky, his senses like planets, and the detail of that is long. Furthermore, his interior (*bāṭinihī*) is like the craftsmen of the world. Thus, the strength of his belly is like the cook, his liver is like the baker, his intestines are like the bleacher (who whitens clothes), and what whitens milk and reddens blood is like the dyer, and the explanation of that is lengthy. This means you should know much all these different things of the world are in your service, without rest, and yet you are heedless of them, not knowing them, and therefore ungrateful to the One who bestowed these bounties upon you.”³⁴

We note from this passage that man as a microcosm is made up of both his body and his soul. The above description pertains to the bodily aspects; how they correspond to not only the world of nature, but also the craftsmen of the world. There is no such comparison in Iṣfahānī.

Significant in the *Mizān* is the manner in which human qualities are associated with the qualities of animals. Ghazzālī identifies human vices with certain animals, including the ox, pig, dog, camel, tiger and fox. Significantly, since man’s nature is akin to both the animal and the angel, the qualities of his soul could be compared to the animals, angels and the rest of creation. Similar kinds of analogies can be noted in *al-Dhari’ah*. Compare these two passages below:

³⁴ Ghazzālī, *Kīmiyā Sa’ādah*, p. 140, 11-12; p. 141, 1-6.

Iṣfahānī	Ghazzālī
<p>But insofar as one only eats and reproduces, man is like a plant. As for the fact that he senses and moves, he is like an animal; and as for his visible form, it is like a picture on a wall. But man's [distinguishing] virtue is [his capacity for] articulation, his superior faculties and their requirements. Thus it is said, "What is man without a tongue, except a disregarded animal or a form like it?" Thus, man is similar to the angel in respect of his faculties of knowledge, articulation and understanding, and is like the animal in respect to his power of nutrition and reproduction. So whoever directs his energies, toward cultivation of thought, knowledge and action is fit to join the highest ranks of angels. He is ranked as angelic and Divine-like, as God says: 'This is no mortal, but he is a noble angel' (Q. 12:31). But whoever directs all his energy and ambition to take care of his appetitive faculty by pursuing bodily pleasures and by eating like cattle, is thereby only fit to join their ranks. Such a person become either gullible as the ox, as greedy as the pig, as submissive as the dog, as spiteful as the camel, as proud as tiger, as evasive as the fox, or he combines [all these qualities] and becomes just like the rebellious Satan.³⁵</p>	<p>Man has been created on level between animal and angel. Altogether, he is composed of faculties and attributes. With regard to his nutrition and reproduction, he is like a plant; his sensory perception and motions are like the animal; his form and stature are like an engraved picture on the wall; the special characteristic for which he was created is the faculty of intellect and the apprehension of realities. So one who employs all his faculties in order to reach therewith knowledge and action is like the angel. Thus, it is apt to call him a Divine angel, as God states: This is no mortal, he is but a noble angel. (Q, 12:31). However, if man aspires towards following bodily pleasures, he will eat like the animal, and will be reduced to the level of the beast, and become: as temperamental as an ox, as greedy as a pig, as submissive as a dog, as rancorous as a camel, as proud as a tiger, as sly as a fox, or he will possess all of these attributes collectively as a shunned Satan.³⁶</p>

The Ghazzālī passage is similar to the Iṣfahānī passage, both in content and style. They compare moral qualities, particularly human vices, with animal qualities. A similar comparison can be found in *Kīmiyā'*, where uncontrolled anger is compared with the dog's behaviour, and uncontrolled desire is compared with the pig's desire.³⁷

³⁵ *al-Dhari'ah*, p. 86, 6-15.

³⁶ *Mizān*, p. 209, 19ff.

³⁷ *Kīmiyā'*, p. 133.

5. Conclusion

The Ikhwān, Miskawayh, Iṣfahānī and Ghazzālī share the same view of man as microcosm, but they approach it in different ways. The Ikhwān's concept is to be viewed within the context of emanationistic cosmology. Detailed and precise aspects of man, his body and soul, are compared with the spiritual and material dimensions of the universe. These similes and imageries of man and the cosmos recur in different forms throughout the *Rasā'il*. Miskawayh adopts the same notion of man as a 'small world', making it integral to his cosmological world view, but he does not offer any vivid imageries and similes of it. Iṣfahānī's microcosm does not fit into an emanationistic perspective, but the affinity between man and nature is established through the concept of a 'small world', which is also employed as a means of arriving at knowledge of God. Unlike Miskawayh, Iṣfahānī provides vivid examples to illustrate man as a microcosm of the universe, making the *Rasā'il* the model for his style. Ghazzālī appropriates from Iṣfahānī the notion of man as microcosm of the world, and provides an identical description of it in one passage. However, Ghazzālī compares human vices with animals, and human organs with the craftsmen of the world. Comparisons between man and nature are more common in the Ikhwān and Iṣfahānī. Ghazzālī and Iṣfahānī have both employed the concept as a key to the rational knowledge of God. Iṣfahānī's analogies compare man with every aspect of the cosmos, including minerals and insects. These analogies are not used merely for stylistic embellishment, but it is an attempt to show the affinity between man and nature and the various elements that make up human nature.

Implicit in this concept of man as a 'small world' is a respectful attitude to the universe in early Islamic thought. Since the universe reflects something of the divine, the contemplation of it will lead to a knowledge of God. Because of the intimate connection between man and the cosmos, man is able to observe in the universe a reflection of himself as a small world, and a reflection of the big world within himself. Moreover, he is able to apprehend the deeper, spiritual meaning of nature only because he can apprehend the inner, spiritual depths of his own being.