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On Human Nature in the Thought of Muhyiddin Ibn' Arabi and the Western Tradition Within the Context of the Film *The Silence of the Lambs*

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On Human Nature in the Thought of Muhyiddin Ibn' Arabi and the Western Tradition Within the Context of the Film The Silence of the Lambs

Abstract

This article will summarize views about 'human nature' proposed by leading philosophers of the Western Canon. These views will later be contrasted with the viewpoint of Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabi on 'human nature'. The question of what it means to know the human rationally and scientifically, and the question of how much this way of knowing can penetrate the double-sided dark-and-light nature of the human as reflected in the serial killer Hannibal Lecter, is a central focus of the article. The article discusses the framework of *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) which views human nature as both created and divine, from the two perspectives of the *zahir* (outward) and the *batin* (inward), as a different form of knowledge than rational and scientific knowledge, in the context of the work of Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabi. In this study, the possibility of understanding 'what' and 'who' the human is, as visible through the character of Lecter, is explored in its philosophical and religious contexts, through being a participant of the film *The Silence of the Lambs* instead of just being its viewer.

Keywords

Human Nature, Hannibal Lecter, Silence of the Lambs, Muslim philosophy, Rationalism, Mysticism

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Author Notes

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Introduction

It is quite difficult to imagine that an intelligent, cultured, well-mannered, successful psychiatrist with an exquisite taste in art could also be a cannibalistic serial killer who eats his victims. Such a character is beyond the limits of our experience. We believe that it is not really possible to encounter such a character in our daily life, although these characters do in fact exist. Through films, we watch such people in safety, with no risk of danger as we are seduced into thinking about them. Hannibal Lecter, who is introduced to the reader by Thomas Harris in his book *Red Dragon*, seems like a character far removed from daily life. Harris leaves the reader with many contradictions and deliberately ambiguous questions. *Red Dragon* was later adapted for the screen as the film *Manhunter*. However, Lecter has probably become best known through the follow-up novel *The Silence of the Lambs* and the film adaptation with the same name. Harris has further written two other books with the character Lecter, *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising*, which have also been adapted for the screen. It is worth noting that Thomas Harris brings Lecter to the reader and viewer in several works. The character of Lecter, with his seeming potential to offer an extraordinary way of looking at human nature, is central to these works. Due to the limited scope of this article, Lecter will only be examined through his role in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. The context created through this character will be discussed, along with certain questions pertaining to religious studies.

“Do not forget who he is!”

The Silence of the Lambs opens with Clarice Starling, a young student who is striving to prove herself in the FBI academy. Starling is called for an appointment with Jack

Crawford, a respected superior in the FBI. Crawford tells her that they are interviewing convicted serial killers in order to extract a profile for behavioral disorders, which they will use to shed light on previously unsolved cases. Hannibal Lecter, a serial killer who is considered potentially very helpful for creating this profile, is unwilling to cooperate. Crawford thinks that Starling may be able to change Lecter's mind, although he does not openly say this. He asks her to interview him. This interview is necessary because it is suggested that Lecter could help to catch a serial killer nicknamed Buffalo Bill, who remains at large despite previous attempts to catch him.

Lecter is very dangerous because he is a serial killer who eats his victims. This information is given to the viewer at the very beginning of the film. Starling goes to the prison where he is held, a place in which criminal mental patients are kept under extreme security. The extremity of the security measures in this prison are shown to the viewer in various scenes which follow Starling as she walks to her meeting with Lecter. These scenes give the viewer a reading with double meanings.

In the first reading, the viewer feels that (s)he is being protected from something very dangerous. This is necessary in order to express the horrific things that Lecter is capable of doing. The second reading seems to contradict the first; such extreme security measures can also be taken to protect something valuable. Right from the opening scenes, Lecter is portrayed as a character with a double meaning; he is both very dangerous and very valuable. The double-sided nature of his character is expressed in various ways throughout the story. Starling speaks with Lecter's doctor directly before her first encounter with him. The doctor tells Starling (and the viewer) that Lecter is extraordinarily valuable. In his words, "[It is] so rare to capture one alive. From a research point of view, Lecter is our most prized asset." It is worth noting that Lecter is presented as a 'type' and an object for research; the idea that Lecter is a human

being is carefully neglected. What Lecter has previously done are obviously actions that one cannot expect from a human being. However, this maneuver serves precisely to underline the fact that Lecter is human, and his actions are the actions of a human being.

While the viewer gets the feeling that Lecter is extremely dangerous, (s)he also gets the feeling that in some ways, Lecter is superior to all the other characters in the film. For instance, capturing Buffalo Bill depends on the help of Lecter because the theories of the FBI agents are insufficient. The helplessness of the FBI comes not only from the fact that they cannot comprehend the degree of evil of which Bill is capable: it is also strongly implied that Lecter may be more intelligent than the FBI. The viewer is led to feel that Lecter may be the only person capable of solving this puzzle, if he wants to, and yet it is not easy to reach Lecter and receive his help.

The superiority of Lecter over the other characters brings with it a contradiction. Lecter has an exquisite taste in art. He paints, he listens to Bach, he is very intelligent, he has a calm and charismatic personality, he was once a very successful psychiatrist, and he is extremely polite. No single character in the film can compete with him in all these respects. For this reason, Starling and the viewer are warned not to forget who—or ‘what’—Lecter really is. Crawford tells Starling that she has to be very careful when facing Lecter: “Just do your job, but never forget what he is!” After this dialogue, we pass from the scene in the FBI office to the scene in the hospital. Here, Lecter’s doctor explains ‘what’ Lecter is: “Oh, he’s a monster. A pure psychopath.” These words, which are meant to prevent Starling from forgetting what Lecter is, also prepare the viewer to face another contradiction raised by the character of Lecter. Lecter obviously possesses some traits which can make people forget the monstrosity of his actions. The more this monstrosity is hinted at, the more his valuable traits are underlined.

Following her talk with the doctor, Starling walks to meet Lecter. Lecter is kept on a lower level, and Starling has to descend to this place. This descent has several meanings: Starling first passes through various doors and goes down different staircases, thus reaching the space where Lecter is by passing from light spaces into darkness. The sense that this descent is not only physical is given to the viewer through cinematic devices such as slowly decreasing the light and lengthening the descent with several staircases.

The evil which is manifest in Lecter—in other words, the evil which a human being is capable of perpetrating—is conveyed to the viewer with this descent. During the descent, Lecter's doctor talks to Starling about what Lecter is and what sort of relationship Starling should establish with him. The need for this information is made apparent by a photograph which the doctor shows Starling. The photograph displays the violence which Lecter perpetrated on a nurse. The photograph is not shared with the viewer; we see only the horrified face of Starling. The viewer can understand that Starling is apparently 'descending' into the darkness and evil represented by Lecter. In this sense, the descent that one person makes into another person is merged with the descent that this person makes into the dark potential within herself. Both Starling and the viewer are forced to contemplate what it means to be a human being.

The room in which Lecter is kept is in the last ward, and so Starling has to pass in front of the other convicted mental patients in order to reach him. The camera shows us the other wards with their inhabitants. The wards are dark and the convicts scary. The fear evoked by the darkness and convicts increases the tension of meeting Lecter; obviously the last ward should be the darkest and most dangerous. Finally, Starling's descent to Lecter (and the descent of the human into herself) is complete, and Starling faces Lecter.

Contrary to what is expected, Lecter is an extremely normal-looking man compared to the other convicts. He sits in a brightly lit room, in contrast with the other wards. The fact that one of the darkest characters of the film is in a brightly lit room and looks much more normal than the other characters presents a contradictory view of the encounter with evil and with darkness. The character presented is one who does not match our expectation of evil and darkness; it seems that a scene which is supposed to reflect the assumptions of the viewer regarding good and evil has been deliberately switched. In fact, that which changes the viewer's perception of good and evil is not the switching of two opposites, but the fact that these two opposites actually exist together.

The fact that the two poles exist together is evident even in the first moments of the encounter: Starling tells Lecter, "I'm here to learn from you." This maneuver, which Starling uses to establish a rapport with Lecter, is a seemingly necessary expression of humility. However, these words will be actualized in several crucial moments in the story; it seems that Starling has indeed come to learn from Lecter. What, then, can an FBI student who is presented as a good character preparing to lead a life of capturing criminals, expect to learn from a vicious serial killer, and what does she need to learn from him?

Thinking Like a Serial Killer

What Starling expects to learn and will learn, and more importantly, what the viewer will learn from Lecter seem to be fundamental questions in the story. On one level, Lecter will teach Starling the kind of approach she should use in order to capture Buffalo Bill. However, this is certainly not the real issue. Starling's primary aim in her contact with Lecter is to understand the key traits of Lecter and Buffalo Bill. This,

however, is only part of the story, because Lecter does not allow Starling to remain a mere spectator in their relationship. He forces Starling (and the viewer) to look inward, and tells her she needs to learn to think like Bill.

Being able to understand how a person becomes a serial killer and learning to think like one in order to do this are two different tasks which complement each other in the film. The first task raises the question of who the human being is, and what kind of potential (s)he has. The second task requires thought about the methodology needed for this inquiry. In this methodology, the person must direct his / her gaze inward. Thus Starling is urged to look inward, within herself, in order to find the source of the evil which seems apparent in Bill and Lecter. Her ability to learn to think like Bill implies that she holds the same potential for perpetrating evil as Bill.

On the other hand, Lecter points out that Bill is not purely evil. Lecter tells Starling, "Our Billy wasn't born a criminal, Clarice. He was made one through years of systematic abuse." Still, as difficult as it is to imagine Starling as 'evil', it is just as difficult to imagine Bill as 'good'. In the film, this consideration is manifested through Lecter. Lecter is 'good' in the sense that he is an intelligent, sensitive, polite, cultivated man and a successful psychiatrist. He is 'evil' in the sense that he is a serial killer who eats his victims. The potentiality for evil in Starling and the potentiality for good in Bill are hidden, but Lecter displays both good and evil at the same time, with no hidden aspect.

All this complicated and seemingly contradictory information finally urges the viewer to ask a question: What or who is Lecter? And therefore ultimately, what or who is a human being?

The Question of Human Nature in the West

A basic answer to the question of what makes us human is the view that there are some traits which are unique to human beings among all the living beings, and that these traits are inherent to a human's nature. In Western philosophy, these traits are either given by a divine power, or the human defines them him/herself. These two categories can further be elaborated as follows: either the human being is defined by society, or the human being has central importance, with his/her social relationships occupying second place. Answering the question of what makes us human is an extremely difficult task. We can, however, begin with an inquiry into how prominent philosophers have approached this question.

The roots of the question of what a human is can be traced back to Plato, although it can also be claimed that it was Aristotle who defined the Western line of thinking with his definition of the human being as ‘the rational animal’. This section presents a selection of different philosophers' views on human nature.

Plato supports a dualistic view that the human is comprised of a material body and a separate soul. The material body is mortal, but “the human soul is immortal” (Plato, *Republic*: 611). In this regard, the soul is imprisoned in the human body as a metaphysical essence which carries the mind and knowledge. The soul is in constant conflict with the physical body, because the soul comes from a different metaphysical realm which is the realm of Forms; it is placed in the physical body so that the human can be formed (Harris, 2012: 2). The soul has the potential to learn and to turn itself toward good. For Plato, understanding the soul is equivalent to understanding who the human is. A human being is defined according to the abilities he has and according to the functions he performs within society with these abilities. In *The Republic*, Plato claims that people should be separated into different functional classes such as warriors,

guardians, philosophers, leaders and craftsmen. He claims that people are born with the spirit of these functions in themselves, such that a person may have sufficient ability to practice a certain profession but may not have the ability to be a good parent. In such a case, this person is not expected to be a parent; other people with this ability are expected to raise children (Coward, 2008: 9). In summary, for Plato, professions are defined according to the natures of human beings. The human is a rational and social being, and gains the quality of being human through his function in society.

Aristotle, like Plato, defines the human as a social being. He describes the human as a “political animal” in *The Politics* (Aristotle, *The Politics*: 1253a1). For this reason, “In the view of Aristotle, understanding the natural aims of the human is possible through understanding the fundamental principles which direct their ethical and political practices” (Güçlü, Uzun, Uzun, Yolsal, 2002: 105). At the same time, as Aristotle states in *The Politics*, the real difference between a human being and an animal is that a human being has the ability to discern between good and evil, just and unjust (Aristotle, *The Politics*: 1253a7). Society is key in providing the human with this capacity for discernment. It is not possible to define the human without his relationship with society.

For Aristotle, the human is classified as an animal among other living species. Each living species has a *telos*, i.e. an ultimate goal or purpose. The *telos* of the human is to use his intellect in an active manner (Lopston, 2006: 30-31). For this reason, the human “naturally has the desire to know” (Aristoteles, *Metaphysics*: 980a). Because the intellect is the function and *telos* of a human being, it can also be perceived as his nature. The intellect is that which separates the human from the animal, and which gives him the trait of being human. This claim is at the root of the worldview which lies at the center of Western philosophy.

The Continental Rationalists also viewed the mind as superior to all other perceptual experience. René Descartes (1650) is prominent among the Continental Rationalists whose famous statement in *Discourse on the Method*, “cogito ergo sum”, points not only to the source of knowledge but also to Descartes’ method of understanding the human being. Descartes claims that the human cannot define his existence of his material body, but cannot doubt his existence as a thinking being. In this regard, Descartes is dualistic in the same manner as Plato: Descartes perceives the physical body as a machine. However, he perceives the human ability to think through his / her relationship with God. The human cannot think autonomously. It can be deduced that the human exists through thought because God endows him / her with thought at birth (Descartes, 2000: 72-86).

Thomas Hobbes (1679) criticizes the primary status Descartes gives to the mind and the attempt to define the human being through his relationship with God. Hobbes defines the human from a materialistic perspective. In *Leviathan*, he explicates that the universe is necessarily based upon the movements and the vibrations of material objects, and that the human has no exceptional status within this scheme. The essence of the universe is material, and existence can be explained within the framework of this material. In this regard, Hobbes perceives the human as a machine and claims that in this machine, there is no metaphysical element beyond the material, such as a soul or a mind. He reserves no place in his thought for God or for the human being in his relationship with God. He claims that these issues are the concerns of theology, not philosophy. According to Hobbes, the human being viciously pursues personal gain and constantly strives to manipulate every issue for his own benefit through rationalization. (Hobbes, 1995: 23-96).

In Plato, Aristotle and Descartes, the mind is seen as the most important element which defines human nature and distinguishes it from other living beings. The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1804) also assigns central importance to the mind, as proper to the spirit of his era and in line with the philosophers before him. However, the views of Kant differ from those of Plato and Aristotle, who thought that the mind and the ability for rational thought are inherent traits of human nature (Kupperman, 2010: 8).

Kant reserves a place for the idea of the human being as a rational animal put forward by Aristotle before him. According to Kant, human beings carry the potential to become rational animals if they use their capacities in the correct way. However, they are not necessarily rational by birth (Louden, 2011: xxi). Kant tells us that the human can form his own character, and therefore has the potential to perfect himself in accordance with his purposes. The human being is an animal endowed with the power of mind (*animal rationabile*) and therefore can transform himself into a rational animal (*animal rationale*) (Kant, 1996: 237).

At the same time, Kant believes in the existence of God and expresses his faith in the context of Christian theology. He revised the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to create a greater context for faith (Lopston, 2006: 62). In Kant's view, the nature of the human being is defined by God, and his capacity to be rational is given by this definition.

Karl Marx (1883), one of the prominent thinkers of modernism, does not focus on the rationality of human beings, but evaluates the human as a rational being and gives his unique interpretation of this. Marx approaches the question of human nature from a societal perspective, and claims that the human being is a summation of social

relationships¹ (Marx, 1994: 100). Marx explains human nature by employing the term *Gattungswesen*. This term, taken from Hegel and used also by Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, roughly translates as ‘species being’ or ‘species essence’. By defining the human as *Gattungswesen*, Marx refers to a summation of relationships in which humans are in constant interaction with each other. He claims that the human is by nature a ‘social animal’ (Wood, 2004: 17-18). In this regard, what defines the human is not his consciousness; on the contrary, his being social is what defines his consciousness² (Marx, 1994: 211). At the root of this definition lie class relationships and class conflicts which are created by social inequality. The human has become a tool for the capitalist system, when in fact he is supposed to be the purpose of life (Aydın, 2000: 197). Marx claims that society will become classless through the elimination of class inequalities over time. Thus people will attain the freedom which is their birthright and lead a life in accordance with their nature, no longer as a tool for production (Coward, 2008: 17).

The presumption that the mind is capable of knowing everything, which was the legacy of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, reached its climax with modernism as represented by Marx. The desire to know led to the development of several branches of science and specialization. The human was transformed into an object for examination by several specialized branches of science. In modernism, the human ceases to be defined by God and begins to define himself. The idea of the human as being defined by God was necessarily thrown from the realm of philosophy into the realm of theology. Existentialist philosophy, on the other hand, claims that the human

¹ Theses on Feuerbach

² Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*

cannot be reduced to biological, anthropological, metaphysical (or economical, as in the case of Marx) facts. While previous approaches ignored the ways in which human beings perceive and experience life, the existentialists aimed to open up these neglected areas for debate (Pamerleau, 2009: 12).

The existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1980) criticized previous philosophers, including Kant, for their views on the context of human nature. Sartre rejected the claim that each human being is an example of a universal concept of 'human'. According to Sartre, the human does not have a nature, but creates himself. In other words, he produces himself (Sartre, 1966: 27-28). For Sartre, the human is destined to be free. Sartre denies the existence of God just as he denies the claim that human beings are defined by the society or any other entity. He claims that each human being is totally "free to decide what he wants to become or what he wants to do" (Stevenson, 2005: 11-12) because the modern world presents him with several options. Value judgements cannot define who the human being is. Contrary to the claims of other philosophers, there are no universal truths, therefore truth has no ground as it has been assumed and without this ground, what has been chosen bears absolutely no importance (Pamerleau, 2009: 13).

In this section we have attempted to summarize how the question of what the human being is has been approached in the West, as exemplified by prominent philosophers which stand at key points in the history of philosophy. In Western philosophy, the human is knowable in both the scientific and rational sense. In other words, Western philosophy has slowly stripped the human of his inward aspect in order to perceive him through his outward appearance, or through the aspects which affect his outward appearance. In this approach, which prioritizes the function of the human being in society, the fundamental principles which define the human seem to be the

functions of the human in his relationship with society. The character Lecter in the film *The Silence of the Lambs* can be viewed as a representative and product of this rationalistic philosophy. This view is implicit in the film itself. However, before reaching this conclusion, a brief attempt to look at the case from the viewpoint of Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî, who approaches the human being as the intersection of an outward aspect (*zahir*) and inward aspect (*batin*), may provide a different reading for the story.

The Explication of the Human Being in the Qur'an

The Arabic word for the human is '*insan*', which is derives from the word '*ins*'. '*Ins*' indicates the human being as species with female and male members, each of whom are an *insan* (Kutluer, 2000: 320).

In the Qur'an the human is described with his various traits. The human is created from the earth.³ The human is created from water (drop)⁴. Allah has blown a soul to the human from Himself.⁵ The human is assigned as a vicegerent on Earth.⁶ The human has been taught the names which are not even taught to the angels.⁷ The human is created as superior to plenty of the other created beings.⁸ The Prophet Adam (and the whole of humanity in his example) hold the ability to know and to think conceptually,

³ al-Hajj 22/5, al-Mu'minûn 23/12, al-Hijr 15/26- 28- 33, al-An'âm 6/2, as-Sajda 32/7, as-Sâd 38/ 71 – 76, ar-Rahmân 55/14, as-Saffât; 11.

⁴ al-Mu'minûn 23/13 – 14, al-Hajj 22/5, an-Nahl 16/4, al-Anbiya 21/30, al-Furqan 25/ 54, al-Mursalât 77/20

⁵ as-Sajda 32/9, al-Hijr 15/29.

⁶ al-Baqara 2/30, al-An'âm 6/165, an-Naml 27/62, al- Fâtir 35/39.

⁷ al-Baqara 2/31.

⁸ al-Isra 70.

the possibility to choose with free will and to advance on the path of becoming a mature human being (*al-Insan al-Kamil*). The human represents a combination of darkness and light, of ignorance and knowing, of activity and passivity as a result of his soul being blown by Allah from Himself and his being created from the earth. (Coward, 2008: 82). When viewed in all these aspects, the human simultaneously possesses both created and divine traits. Therefore, in Islamic thought, the human cannot be understood as an autonomous being suggested by rational thought; he can only be understood from the perspective of his relationship with Allah. This view has supreme importance for understanding how Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî approaches the question of what makes us human.

Before considering the view of Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî regarding the human, it is important to remember that Ibn'Arabî never presented himself as a philosopher and never named his writings as philosophy. Therefore, the purpose of Ibn' Arabî should not be understood as an attempt to explain the creation and Allah in a rational manner. Ibn'Arabî expresses *Haqiqah* (truth) with unifying comprehension which he sometimes calls *Ma'rifah* (gnosis). In other words, Ibn'Arabî complies with the manner in which *Haqiqah* manifests itself through *Hikma* (wisdom) (Dobie, 2010: 161). Ibn' Arabî states that *Haqiqah* cannot be gained through rational thought, and it is necessary that Allah teaches the human whatever he comprehends. (Arabî, *Fusûsu'l Hikem*: 26). A person cannot gain knowledge autonomously, through rational striving; he can only gain knowledge through the will of Allah. This is one of the clearest differences which distinguishes Ibn'Arabî from the rational tradition of Western thought. In the Western tradition, attempting to understand what the human is implies placing mind and rational thought in central focus. On the other hand in Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî's thought Allah

takes center role. He explains what the human is through his relationship with Allah, toward Him, with Him and through Him.

When approaching the views of Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî on what makes us human, another crucial point should be considered. That which Ibn'Arabî calls human is *al-Insan al-Kamil*, a human who has been created as vicegerent (*khalifa*). Each human being holds the potential to become mature (*kamil*) to a certain degree. However, it cannot be said that every person fulfills this potential. In this regard, this article will deal with the question of human from the view of *al-Insan al-Kamil*.

Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî and the Human in *The Silence of the Lambs*

When Allah told the angels, "I will create a vicegerent on earth", the angels said "Will You place there one who will make mischief and shed blood while we celebrate Your praises and glorify Your holy name?" And He said: "I know what you know not."⁹ Because the angels did not hold the unifying trait of Adam, they could not know the divine names other than those which had been assigned to them. They could not understand that there were names which did not reach them from the knowledge of Allah, and therefore they could not understand the reason for the creation of the vicegerent of Allah (Arabî, *Fusûsu'l Hikem*: 26-27). However, Allah taught Adam all the names and then asked the angels these names. The angels did not know them and said, "You are the Perfect One! Of knowledge we have none other than what You have taught us: In truth it is You Who are perfect in knowledge and wisdom."¹⁰ If the angels had known those names, they would not have said what they previously said about

⁹ al-Baqara 2/30.

¹⁰ al-Baqara 2/31-32.

Adam. What they had to know was themselves, and “if they had known themselves, certainly they would have known (the reason for the creation of Adam); if they had known, they would have been protected (from making that error)” (Arabî, *Fusûsu’l Hikem*: 27).

In the *Fusûsu’l Hikem*, the reason given for the angels falling into error is; “not knowing themselves,” thus “knowing oneself” is held as the prerequisite for the knowledge of *Haqiqah*. If the angels had known their limits, if they had known what they did know and did not know; if they had known themselves, they would have known that there were things that they could not know and they would have been protected from opposing Allah. Therefore they would not have strayed from their true nature which is to praise and glorify Him.

Therefore Allah told the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, and the angels prostrated, except Iblis. Iblis fell prey to his self-importance and resisted.¹¹ Allah said to Iblis, “What prevents you from bowing down to one whom I have created with my two hands? Are you haughty? Or are you one of the high and mighty ones?”¹²

This event related in the Qur’an is important not only for considering the conduct of Iblis, but also for understanding the nature of the human being. Muhyiddin Ibn’Arabî uses the phrase “created with two hands.” He explains this phrase in relation to the vicegerency of Adam. “The divine form belongs rightly to Adam only because he was created with the two hands. Hence all the realities of the cosmos were brought together within him. And the cosmos demands the divine names. Hence the divine names were brought together within him” (Arabî, *Fütûhat-ı Mekkiyye*: 304). In this way, the two

¹¹ al-Baqara 2/34.

¹² as-Sad 38/75.

aspects of Adam, namely the aspect of creation and the aspect of al-Haqq, are unified in him. Although Iblis is a part of this creation, this unification has not been realized in him. Therefore, because Adam exists according to the face of al-Haqq and because he is a unifying creature, he is vicegerent (Arabî, *Fusûsu'l Hikem*: 30).

Although the angels prostrate themselves at the command of Allah, Iblis does not bow down and is expelled from heaven. After their creation, Adam and his spouse are placed in heaven on the condition that they do not violate certain limits. Iblis deceives Adam and Eve and thus causes their descent from heaven to earth.¹³

Previously we have mentioned that in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Starling's meeting with Lecter took place after an initial sequence of descent, and that this descent held several meanings. The concept of descent has various interpretations within different religious contexts. The passing of Adam and Eve from heaven to earth can also be seen as a descent, and in this sense can appear to have negative meanings, since the cause of Adam's passing from heaven to earth was his acting contrary to the command of Allah. In this regard, the religious view which has shaped collective memory also interprets descent as a transition from positive to negative.

Starling has to descend to meet Lecter and the darkness and evil he represents. This descent is intensified with scenes which increase the tension, as we have previously mentioned. In this sense it seems to carry negative connotations. However, Starling also has to make this descent in order to capture a criminal, Buffalo Bill, and through this descent Starling will also be able to begin a process of discovering the human and herself, a process of learning and maturity. Considering all these aspects, it is difficult to say that Starling's descent is wholly negative.

¹³ al-Baqara 2/35-36.

The descent of Adam, Eve and Iblis to earth at the command of Allah is not interpreted as a punishment by Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî. He states that the descent is a punishment only for Iblis. Although Iblis did not commit the sin of *shirk* (claiming himself equal to Allah), he was sent to earth in order to create delusion in the hearts of humans so that they would commit the sin of *shirk*. Adam, on the other hand, was sent to earth to fulfill a promise: that Allah would send a vicegerent to the earth (Arabî, *Fütûhat-ı Mekkiyye*: 211). The story of the first human and his spouse being sent to earth shows not only human weakness but also the destiny of this distinguished creature who will be made vicegerent on earth (Kutluer, 2000: 321).

The concept of descent offers a double-sided dynamic which inspires the basic formula of the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. This dynamic is also present in Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî's explanation of the human. The human being is a creature with the potential to ignore the command of Allah. However, this potential is necessary for his being a vicegerent on earth. In this respect, the human is not without sin; far from being a purely good or purely evil creature, he is a creature who embodies dual opposites such as good/evil, dark/light, right/wrong and positive/negative. This duality becomes apparent in the character of Lecter. Starling is a character with good, positive traits. It is not easy to discern her negative side. Bill appears as absolute evil, and it is very difficult to see his positive traits. Lecter, as we have mentioned, is the embodiment of a collection of positive and negative traits throughout the film. Although he is a cannibalistic serial killer, he is also a psychiatrist, mentor and father, and most importantly Starling's teacher (Lee, 1997: 197). All these roles which Lecter shows Starling should be meaningless if Starling is not to become a serial killer like Lecter. However, in the context of the film, the possibility of meaninglessness is eliminated and the viewer becomes convinced that Lecter really can be a mentor, a father and

teacher, and really can teach Starling and the viewer something about human nature. This ‘something’ seems to be hidden in the description of the human given by Muhyiddin Ibn’Arabî.

As far as we can understand from the descriptions of Muhyiddin Ibn’Arabî, the human not only embodies several conflicting traits, but can also choose to manifest one or the other of these traits. From this perspective, the human is not encouraged to be a “perfect” human as this concept is understood in the West, i.e. a human who is supposed to use his mind in the most superior way and who is supposed to be purely good and purely enlightened with purely positive traits. From Ibn’Arabî’s perspective, the human is encouraged to “know himself” in order to become a mature human (*al-Insan al-Kamil*) who has completely realized all his contradictory traits and who has fully comprehended the reasons for these traits. In this case, the ability to “know oneself” is the most fundamental principle for the definition of the human.

The Silence of the Lambs clearly focuses on the principle of “knowing oneself” and the consequences that can be expected from knowing oneself. Lecter is not aware of himself and Starling makes him face this fact. Through this move, an awareness is awakened in the viewer. Lecter is a representative of all the values idolized by Western rational thought. He is almost the only character in the film endowed with superior positive traits, and from a logical point of view, the fact that he is a cannibalistic serial killer should not make any sense. However, in the film, the viewer becomes convinced that in many ways this certainly makes sense and (s)he understands how the existence of such a character is indeed possible. This conviction intensifies in the scene in which Starling challenges Lecter: “You see a lot, Doctor. But are you strong enough to point that high-powered perception at yourself? What about it? Why don't you look at yourself and write down what you see? Or maybe you're afraid to.” With this challenge,

the viewer is led to feel that although Lecter knows many things, he does not know himself at all. With this dialogue, the fact that Lecter has very intense negative traits is related to the fact that he does not have the ability to know himself. In the film, this exchange is underlined by Lecter's consequent acceptance to help Starling. Starling has the potential to help Lecter know himself. However, this potential is deliberately shown in a very subtle way. It is as if the viewer is more aware of this potential than Lecter is. The claim that "knowing oneself" is a superior form of knowledge has been expressed in various ways since Ancient Greece, when it was made by Socrates. However, in Western thought, "knowing oneself" is generally a concept related to the centrality of the rational mind. On the other hand, "He who knows himself (his *nafs*) knows his Lord," the *hadith qudsi* (saying of the Prophet (saws)) accepted by the Sufis, can be understood only when it is taken beyond the rational and considered in terms of the relationship with Allah. If we remember the consequences of not knowing oneself as it happened in the case of the angels, another *hadith qudsi* revered by the Sufis becomes relevant: "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, therefore I created the universe and the human." This form of knowing is central for Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî as he explains the human being through the absolute relationship between Allah and the human.

For Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî, the human has potentially a very valuable status. However, Ibn'Arabî does not claim that every human being assumes this valuable status. This is apparently the status of the human being whom Allah has endowed with vicegerency, i.e. the status of *Insan al-Kamil* (Arabî, *Fusûsu'l Hikem*: 31). For "He is in relation to Allah as the pupil [*insan al-ayn*], being the instrument of vision, is to the eye. This is why he is called 'insân'. It is by him that Allah beholds His creatures and has mercy on them." (Arabî, *Fusûsu'l Hikem*). The Prophet Muhammed (saws) is the

one who is sent as a blessing to the realms.¹⁴ The fact that Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî accepts the human as a being of possibilities and as an infinite potential is related to the fact that he views *Insan al-Kamil* as the ground for this discussion and to the fact that, above all, he accepts *Haqiqah al-Muhammadiyah*, which was the first creation, as the true human being (Erginli, 2008: 193).

The Prophet (saws) has a being which is distinct from his material life which was limited to sixty-three years. Before there was anything in existence other than Allah, *Haqiqah al-Muhammadiyah* was brought into existence. All the other creatures were created from this *haqiqah* and for this *haqiqah*. The reason, material and purpose of the existence of the Universe is this *haqiqah*. ... Because the soul and the light (*al-noor*) of the Prophet (saws) existed before all human beings, all the prophets and even all the angels, the Prophet (saws) is the spiritual father of all humanity. The Prophet Adam is the material father (*abu'l bashar*) of all human beings while the Prophet Muhammed is the spiritual father (*abu'l arwah*) of all human beings. (Demirci, 1997: 180).

According to this understanding, all the universe, and therefore the human being, is created from the *noor al-muhammadiyah*. Knowing oneself (one's *nafs*) is, in this sense, knowing one's true essence, and the source and reason for one's creation. This information can be open to everyone in certain various degrees, however it is not possible to say that the *noor al-muhammadiyah* is apparent in everyone, because this *haqiqah* is veiled by the *nafs*. *Nafs* in this sense is *barzakh* because the human is both

¹⁴ al-Anbiya 21/107.

material and divine through the qualities given to him by Allah. In other words, as a *barzakh*, the *nafs* unifies qualities such as spirit and material, light and darkness and the derivatives of these dual opposites. In this sense, the *Insan al-Kamil* represents the light aspect of the *nafs* and the *insan al-hayvan* (the animal human) represents its darkness (Erginli, 2008: 181-182).

Because it carries the qualities of the material and the dark, the *nafs* keeps commanding evil, except for those people protected by Allah.¹⁵ The *hadith qudsi* “He who knows himself (his *nafs*) knows his Lord” gains a different meaning when it is viewed from this aspect.

For Muhyiddin Ibn’Arabî, the human is the *Insan al-Kamil* and the vicegerent. However, knowing one's *nafs* means not only knowing oneself but also understanding that the *nafs* is a veil which commands that which is evil and which makes one forget Allah. Therefore, all Sufis, including Muhyiddin Ibn’Arabî, give the highest priority to the taming of the *nafs*. If the *nafs* can be known in all these aspects, and if it can be tamed, the statement “He who knows himself (his *nafs*) knows his Lord” can be understood to mean that the human knows himself as a being which unifies all the truths (the *haqiqah*) within him.

A further crucial difference exists between Western thought and the thought of Muhyiddin Ibn’Arabî. Striving to know oneself does not permit the idea that evil or goodness can come from outside and shape the human, because the human has the trait of possessing all the goodness and the evil that he perceives ‘outside’. In this way, the source of evil or goodness is not searched for outside. On the other hand, since Plato, most of the philosophers who followed the rational tradition have explained the human

¹⁵ Al-Yusuf 12/53.

through his relationship with the society. Lecter's asking Starling to maintain empathy with Buffalo Bill is an example of this line of thinking. Lecter tells Starling that Bill was not born a criminal, but instead became one through years of abuse. In this statement, he implies that it was society which caused Bill to become a criminal. At the same time, Lecter tells her that she has to learn to think like Bill if she wants to catch him, and therefore she has to maintain empathy with him. The apparently impossible task for Starling (and for the viewer) to maintain empathy with a serial killer who removes the skin of women becomes possible with Lecter's statement that "he was not born as a criminal." However, the real point of the film, which is made apparent in this dialogue, is the fact that Starling has to search for Bill inside herself. Starling also has to discover her similarities to Lecter in order to be able to understand him. Lecter frequently tests Starling on how sincere she can be and how much she can face her own dark secrets. He forces her to see the true reason for her pursuit of serial killers, in other words, the true reason for her need to encounter darkness. He maintains his communication to help her only to the degree of her courage to do this. Starling's looking within herself is important in that it shows that the most innocent looking character in the film possesses the darkness of Bill and Lecter. In this way, the viewer's looking into him/herself joins Starling's looking into herself. Moving from a realm of believing that we are good and righteous to the acceptance that we inhabit the opposite qualities becomes possible for the viewer.

Lecter's encouragement that Starling should look into herself also has another meaning. By encouraging Starling, Lecter is able to divert attention from himself, from his responsibility to look into himself. In this case, the evil caused by Lecter can be traced to its relation with his inability to know himself. If the *nafs* is the root of all evil to an unknown degree, it becomes possible to suggest that because Lecter does not

know the nature of his *nafs*, he assumes its qualities to be his own true nature. In this case, the character of Lecter can be seen not merely as a result of the rational worldview as it is presented by the West, but as a result of not knowing oneself. In this way, Lecter becomes a character who presents an important example for understanding what kind of a potential the human being is endowed with and what this potential can lead to if the human does not strive to comprehend his own *haqiqah*; his true nature. Starling, who is the only character in the story who strives to know herself, retains her status of being a ‘good’ character with her ability to comprehend that she holds the potential for darkness created by Bill and Lecter.

Conclusion

The West possesses an extremely rich literature on the question of human nature. A significant part of this literature has been constituted by philosophers, and the approach of religion to the question of human nature occupies a small place in this tradition (Cohen, 1985: 158). Within this tradition, from Ancient Greece through to the modern era which has received the inheritance of Ancient Greece, the human has preferred to explain himself with reference to himself, rather than with reference to God. In this effort, the human mind occupies center stage. The Enlightenment, in particular, glorified the mind and defined the human through his functions rather than through the whole of his qualities and tendencies. In the modern era, it is notable that the human is

named *homo sapiens*¹⁶, *homo economicus*¹⁷, *homo socius*¹⁸ *homo ludens*¹⁹, *homo faber*²⁰; the human is approached as an object for examination or information, instead of being approached as part of a whole truth (*haqiqah*). This case is laid down in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. When referring to Doctor Lecter as an object for examination, a rare species to be captured alive, Crawford warns Starling not to forget ‘what’ (instead of ‘who’) he is. He speaks as if what Lecter is and how he thinks forms a puzzle which has to be examined. Lecter’s response to a questionnaire which is posed to him by Starling in order to extract his profile is significant: “... you think you can dissect me with this blunt little tool?” Lecter's question is a criticism in which he expresses that he is not an object for rational inquiry.

This article has studied the context put forward in various ways by and through Hannibal Lecter, the antagonist of the film *The Silence of the Lambs*; namely, the context of the rational conceptualization of the human being. The views of prominent philosophers who have contributed to this conceptualization have been summarized. Within this framework, the article has explored the question of our ability to build a relationship with a fictional character who seems to be remote from us and the possibility of opening this relationship to a discussion grounded in religion and philosophy.

Films are not reality itself, but they hold the possibilities of reality and present a perspective through which the viewer can sometimes participate in reality. This article

¹⁶ The name given to human species, the intelligent human (Carl Linnaeus).

¹⁷ The economical human (John Stewart Mills).

¹⁸ The social human.

¹⁹ The game-playing human (Johan Huizinga).

²⁰ The tool-making human (Hannah Arendt and Max Scheler).

has argued that Lecter cannot be confined to being a merely fictional character; that his trace can be followed through several historical figures, that he could indeed exist in reality and that he represents a potentiality for evil which is present in every human being. While this representation is viewed in the West as a product of the rational mind, for Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî, it is a representation of the dark side of the *nafs*, which is a *barzakh*.

Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer have reviewed Western history with a critical eye in a similar manner, by considering the violence created by Hitler, because Hitler and the Nazi camps are obviously the result of this historical process. In the beginning of *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*, they point out that the aim of the Enlightenment project as a progressive philosophy was always to eliminate people's fear from people and give them the status of master. Fear is related to the realm beyond the mind; people believe that when everything is knowable, they will be free of fear. In this respect, Western philosophy has assigned primal status to the mind as a way to deem everything knowable. However, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the elevation of the mind did not begin with the Enlightenment project; its traces can be followed back to Ancient Greece. And if the mind can have such destructive effects, then this process may be something beyond the limits of the mind (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2010: 19-67).

As an extension of these claims, Hannibal Lecter can be considered as the result or product of a worldview which depends on the mind. The sophisticated tastes of art and sophisticated expectations of social relationships which are cultivated by the Western mind are epitomized in the character of Lecter. (Lecter's obsessive preoccupation with politeness is exemplified when he causes a prisoner to commit suicide just because he believes that he had been impolite toward Starling.) Lecter

appears to be a sophisticated character who represents all the values which society prizes and expects to live with, while he is also a cannibalistic serial killer. In this regard, Lecter gives us a very clear example with which to view the Western tradition of thought with its roots in Ancient Greece critically, in a similar manner to Adorno and Horkheimer.

When we approach the question from the viewpoint of Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî, however, an alternative view emerges. It is useful to remember once more that Ibn'Arabî differs from the Western tradition in that he states that we cannot know *haqiqah*—and therefore “the human who unifies *haqiqah* in his being”—through a rational way of knowing. This difference moves the central focus to the Creator of the human being, instead of focusing on the human being himself. In this respect, approaching the human merely through his outward appearance means seeing him only partially. Because the human is a microcosm of the universe, he can only begin the process of knowing through knowing himself, and from there he can reach his Creator. This is necessitated by his own nature. In this way, when the human being knows his *nafs* with all its aspects, as a *barzakh* which unifies all contradictions, his potential of being *kamil* (mature) can be realized. For as long as this potential is not realized, the human is driven by the dark and material aspects of his *nafs*.

The aim of this article has not been to contribute to the view that it is the Western tradition, with its exaltation of the rational mind, which created Lecter, as is implied in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. In Western thought, the human being is comprehended by stripping him of his inward aspects and considering him only through his outward qualities. In this article, the approach of Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabî toward the question of what makes us human has been introduced for discussion as a representation

of what it means to approach the human being as a whole, with his inward and outward aspects.

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