

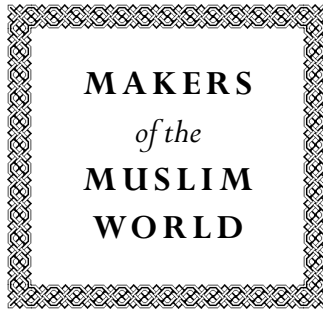
Ibn 'Arabi

Heir to the Prophets

William C. Chittick



ONE WORLD



Ibn ‘Arabi

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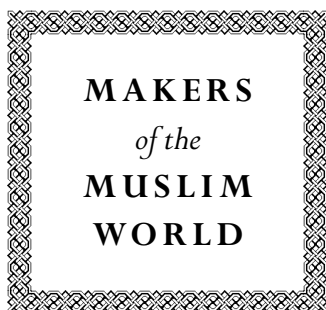
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Ibn 'Arabi

Heir to the Prophets

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK



ONEWORLD
OXFORD

IBN 'ARABI

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INTRODUCTION

Born in Spain in 1165, Ibn ‘Arabi is at once the most influential and the most controversial Muslim thinker to appear over the past nine hundred years. The Sufi tradition looks back upon him as “the greatest master” (*ash-shaykh al-akbar*), by which is meant that he was the foremost expositor of its teachings. Modern scholarship is rightly skeptical about grandiose titles, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this specific title is not out of line. On the quantitative side, Ibn ‘Arabi’s massive *al-Futuh al-makkiyya* (“The Meccan Openings”) provides more text than most prolific authors wrote in a lifetime. Manuscripts of several hundred other works are scattered in libraries, and scores of books and treatises have been published.

But “greatness” is not to be judged by bigness, so we clearly need to look at the contents of all those pages. Probably no one has ever read everything Ibn ‘Arabi wrote, and few specialists would even claim to have read the whole *Futuh*. Even so, “reading” is one thing, “understanding” something else. Ibn ‘Arabi has always been considered one of the most difficult of authors. This is due to many factors, not least extraordinary erudition, consistently high level of discourse, constantly shifting perspectives, and diversity of styles. Thorough analysis and explication of a single page of the *Futuh* demands many pages of Arabic text, and the task becomes much more challenging when it is a question of translation into a Western language.

One might suspect that Ibn 'Arabi's works are difficult because he wrote unnecessarily complicated rehashes of earlier works. In fact, we are dealing with an approach to Islamic learning that is remarkably original, so much so that he has no real predecessor. Certainly, there were important authors during the previous century who also expressed Sufi teachings with theoretical sophistication, but compared even to the greatest of these, such as Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi represents a radical break.

Ghazali speaks for much of the early Sufi tradition when he tells us that "unveiling" – that is, the unmediated knowledge that God bestows on his special friends – should not be set down in books (though he does not always follow his own advice). Ibn 'Arabi sweeps this prohibition aside and spreads out the fruit of unveiling for all to see. It should not be imagined, however, that in setting down his "unveilings, witnessings, and tastings" Ibn 'Arabi is simply providing tantalizing glimpses of the spiritual realm in the manner of a mystic visionary.

One might get the impression that Ibn 'Arabi was primarily a "mystic" by reading Stephen Hirtenstein's excellent introduction to his exterior and interior life, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabi*. Hirtenstein translates a good percentage of the autobiographical passages from Ibn 'Arabi's studied works, and many of these speak of visions and unveilings. In fact, however, the vast majority of his writings are argued out with a rational precision that puts him into the mainstream of Islamic scholarship.

After his death in 1240, Ibn 'Arabi's teachings quickly spread throughout the Islamic world, and they kept on spreading wherever Islam went, from Black Africa and the Balkans to Indonesia and China. The reason for this spread was certainly not that the masters of the various forms of rational discourse that shaped the Muslim elite were overawed by his mystical credentials. Quite the contrary, they were convinced by the

soundness of his arguments and the breadth of his learning. They paid attention to him because he offered powerful proofs, drawn from the whole repertoire of Islamic knowledge, to demonstrate the correctness of his views. Many of these scholars adopted his basic perspectives and a good deal of his terminology, and many also criticized some of his teachings or made sweeping condemnations. But no reputable scholar could simply ignore him.

Ibn 'Arabi's doctrines and perspectives did not have the limited, elite audience that one might expect. They also seeped down into the nooks and crannies of Islamic culture. This happened in many ways, not least through the widespread reach of the Sufi orders, which played important roles in shaping society all over the Islamic world. Several of the orders claimed him as one of their intellectual and spiritual forebears.

Ibn 'Arabi's popularity among the Sufis should not be understood to mean that he was widely read by them. In fact, the vast majority were not scholars and did not have the requisite training to study his writings. Generally, however, those with an intellectual calling, who often ended up as guides and teachers, spoke a language that was largely fashioned by him and his immediate followers.

Ibn 'Arabi's influence also spread through the enormously popular poetry of languages like Persian, Turkish, and Urdu. Many of the great poets were trained in Sufi learning and employed concepts and perspectives drawn from his school of thought.

Partly because of his pervasive influence and widespread name recognition, Ibn 'Arabi came to be targeted by reformers and modernists from the second half of the nineteenth century. He specifically and Sufism generally were chosen as convenient emblems for every shortcoming of traditional Islamic society. More recently, interest in his writings has made a remarkable comeback throughout the Islamic world, especially among

young people disillusioned with the various forms of modern ideology, “fundamentalism” being the latest of these.

Many of the early Orientalists dismissed Ibn 'Arabi as incoherent. Later work, especially the groundbreaking studies of Henry Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu, gave him academic respectability. Whatever scholars may think of the contents of his writings, no one can deny that he represents a watershed in Islamic history and a major determining force in the course of later Islamic civilization.

Those who still believe in the civilizing mission of the West and the supremacy of scientific rationality over all other forms of knowledge may think that Ibn 'Arabi's pervasive influence on premodern Islamic culture is sufficient proof against him. Others may find him a refreshing voice, offering perspectives that throw light on the human situation in any time and any place.

IBN 'ARABI'S LIFE

For those unfamiliar with Ibn 'Arabi's biography, let me provide a thumbnail sketch: Arabic texts commonly call him Ibn al-'Arabi (with the definite article). He often signs his works Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn al-'Arabi at-Ta'i al-Hatimi. He came to be called Muhyi ad-Din, “The Revivifier of the Religion.” He was born in 1165 in Murcia in Andalusia (Spain). His father 'Ali was apparently employed by Muhammad ibn Sa'id ibn Mardanish, the ruler of the city. In 1172 Murcia was conquered by the Almohad dynasty, and 'Ali took his family to Seville, where again he was taken into government service. Ibn 'Arabi was raised in the environs of the court, and recent research shows that he underwent military training. He was employed as a secretary by the governor of Seville and married a girl named Maryam from an influential family.

Ibn ‘Arabi received no unusual religious education as a child, and he tells us that he spent much of his time with his friends in pastimes and gaiety. In his early teens, however, he was overcome by a spiritual call that quickly led to a vision of God. He tells us that everything he subsequently said and wrote was “the differentiation of the universal reality comprised by that look” (F. II 548.14). In this early period he had a number of visions of Jesus, whom he calls his first guide on the path to God.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s father told his friend, the philosopher and judge Averroes, about the change in his son. According to Ibn ‘Arabi’s account, Averroes requested a meeting. The exchange that took place, which has been recounted in several studies of Ibn ‘Arabi, particularly that of Corbin, highlights the wide gulf that Ibn ‘Arabi perceived between the formal knowledge of rational thinkers and the unveiling of those whom he calls the “gnostics” (*‘arifun*), those who have true insight into the nature of things.

Once Ibn ‘Arabi underwent his initial conversion to Sufism, he dedicated his life to the spiritual path. An ambiguous passage in the *Futuhat* has been interpreted to mean that he did not enter formal Sufi training until he was nineteen, but the life-altering vision and the meeting with Averroes had certainly taken place several years’ earlier, “before his beard had sprouted.” Eventually he studied with many Sufi shaykhs (two of his accounts of these have been translated by Ralph Austin in *Sufis of Andalusia*). He also studied with numerous masters of other Islamic sciences. In one document, he mentions the names of seventy teachers in fields like Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), Qur’an recitation, Qur’an commentary, and jurisprudence.

He left Spain for the first time when he was thirty, traveling to Tunis. In 1200, a vision instructed him to go to the East. In 1202 he performed the hajj and met, among others, Majd ad-Din Ishaq, a scholar from Malatya. He accompanied Majd ad-Din back to Anatolia. On the way, he stayed for a time in Mosul, where he was invested with an initiatory cloak by

Ibn al-Jami', who himself had received it from Khadir (Khizr), the undying spiritual guide who makes his first appearance in Islamic sources in the Quranic account of his mysterious meeting with Moses (Q. 18: 65–82). Ibn 'Arabi recounts a number of his own meetings with Khadir, and Henry Corbin has highlighted these in his foundational study. There is no basis, however, for Corbin's suggestion that Khadir was Ibn 'Arabi's primary guide on the spiritual path.

For some years Ibn 'Arabi traveled from city to city in the regions of Turkey, Syria, and Egypt, and he again visited Mecca and Medina. In 1211–12 he was in Baghdad, perhaps accompanied by Majd ad-Din Ishaq, who had been sent there by Sultan Kay Ka'us I (1210–19) of Konya on a mission to the caliphal court. Ibn 'Arabi was on good terms with this sultan and wrote him a letter of practical advice. He was also a companion of the ruler of Aleppo, al-Malik az-Zahir (1186–1218), a son of Saladin. Later on he was a teacher of the Ayyubid ruler of Damascus, Muzaffar ad-Din (d. 1238). His hobnobbing with royalty demonstrates two things: first, his own upbringing, since he would have been trained in all the right ways of speaking and acting demanded by high society; and second, the important role that scholars played as advisers, consultants, and even teachers to kings. His relations with royalty should also be sufficient evidence that his "mysticism" was no barrier to involvement in the social and political institutions of the time.

According to some accounts, after Majd ad-Din's death, Ibn 'Arabi married his widow and raised his son, Sadr ad-Din Qunawi (d. 1274). Qunawi became Ibn 'Arabi's leading disciple, training many well-known scholars and leaving behind a number of important books. In 1223 Ibn 'Arabi settled down permanently in Damascus, where he taught and wrote. A circle of disciples, including Qunawi, served him until his death in 1240. His major project during these years was the *Futuhat*, of which we have two recensions. But he was a prolific author, and

Osman Yahia, in his comprehensive study of 850 works attributed to him, estimates that 700 are authentic and over 400 extant. Many of these works are short treatises, but many more are full-sized books. He is said to have begun a Qur'an commentary whose unfinished version was longer than the *Futuhāt*, but no manuscripts are known to have survived. The most famous of his books are these three:

Fusus al-hikam ("The Ringstones of the Wisdoms"). Over the centuries Ibn 'Arabi's students held this book in highest esteem and wrote well over one hundred commentaries on it. Basing himself largely on Quranic verses and hadiths, he shows how each of twenty-seven prophets from Adam down to Muhammad disclosed in his own person and prophetic career the wisdom implied by one of the divine attributes.

Al-Futuhāt al-makkiyya. This is a vast compendium of metaphysics, theology, cosmology, spiritual anthropology, psychology, and jurisprudence. Topics include the inner meanings of the Islamic rituals, the stations of travelers on the journey to God and in God, the nature of cosmic hierarchy, the spiritual and ontological meaning of the letters of the Arabic alphabet, the sciences embraced by each of the ninety-nine names of God, and the significance of the differing messages of various prophets.

Tarjuman al-ashwaq ("The Interpreter of Yearnings"). This short collection of love poetry, the first of Ibn 'Arabi's works to be translated into English, was inspired by his meeting during his first pilgrimage to Mecca with Nizam, the beautiful and gifted daughter of a great scholar from Isfahan. He also wrote a long commentary on the poems to prove to one of his critics that they deal with spiritual truths and not profane love.

* * *

Novin Doostdar of Oneworld invited me to write a book on Ibn 'Arabi's life and works in the summer of 2000. Faced with

the fine studies of Claude Addas – her long *Quest for the Red Sulphur* and the shorter *Voyage of No Return* – and Stephen Hirtenstein's *Unlimited Mercifler*, I could not think of a fresh approach to his life, so I decided to stick to his teachings. I can console myself with the thought that this approach is more in keeping with the traditional way of dealing with him.

Biography as we know it is a modern invention, and the fact that we think it important to know the details of people's personal lives tells us more about ourselves than about them. Nothing like a thorough account of Ibn 'Arabi's life was available before the twentieth century. In the premodern Islamic world, it was enough to know that he was a great scholar, or a great saint, or a great heretic. Those who wanted to learn about him were not attracted by his life but by his ideas.

I first thought of writing a comprehensive introduction to Ibn 'Arabi's worldview in the early eighties. When I finally gave up the attempt to keep the project down to reasonable size, I published *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (1989), with the promise of a second, completing volume. When I finished the second volume, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (1998), I was forced to promise a third, which is currently in progress. If I ever finish the third, I will no doubt need to promise a fourth. I mention this to forestall the idea that I am trying here to offer an adequate introduction to Ibn 'Arabi's teachings. The chapters are rather a series of forays into his way of looking at things.¹

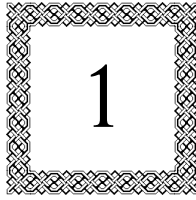
1. The chapters were written originally as talks or articles for non-specialists, though in their present form they have been thoroughly revised. They appeared in the following sources: 1. *Horizons Maghrébines* 30 (1995); 2. *Sufi* 9 (1991); 3. *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 17 (1995); 4. *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, edited by James S. Cutsinger (2002); 5. *Sophia* 8 (2002); 6. *Islamic Studies* 39 (2000); 7. *The Passions of the Soul in the Metamorphosis of Becoming*, edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (2003); 8. *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 24 (2002); 9. *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, edited by Stephen Katz (2000).

My goal is simply to introduce his thought to readers who have not been exposed to it, or to provide a refresher course for those who have.

The first two chapters deal with the relation between Ibn 'Arabi's teachings and his self-perception as Seal of the Muhammadan Saints and lover of God. Chapters three and four address the relationship between God and human beings in terms of love and remembrance. Five and six discuss the nature of knowledge, its role in human becoming, and the importance of correctly apprehending the phenomenal world. Seven and eight offer a few glimpses into the world of imagination, specifically its relation to the soul and death. The ninth and final chapter looks at the central role of divine mercy in the afterlife.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT:

- Q. The Qur'an
- F. Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*. 4 volumes, Cairo, 1911.
- FH. Ibn 'Arabi, *Fusus al-hikam*. Edited by A. Afifi. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabi, 1946.
- D. Ibn 'Arabi, *Diwan*. Bombay: Mirza Mohamed Shirazi, n.d.
- Dh. Ibn 'Arabi, *Dhakha'ir al-a'laq*. Edited by M. 'Abd ar-Rahman al-Kurdi. Cairo, 1968.
- R. Ibn 'Arabi, *Risalat ash-Shaykh ila'l-imam ar-Razi*, in *Rasa'il Ibn 'Arabi*. Hyderabad-Deccan: The Dairatu'l-Ma'arifil-Osmania, 1948.



THE MUHAMMADAN INHERITANCE

Ibn ‘Arabi’s followers often called him “the Seal of Muhammadan Sanctity” or, a bit more literally, “the Seal of Muhammadan Friendship.” It seems rather clear that he laid claim to such a rank, at least in some of his poetry. But what exactly would the expression have meant to him and to the tradition that he represents?

The expression is derived from a title that the Qur’an gives to Muhammad, “the Seal of the Prophets.” This is typically understood to mean two things: first, that Muhammad was the last of the 124,000 prophets sent by God to the human race; and second, that the Qur’an, the revelation received by Muhammad, brings together and synthesizes all the knowledge given by God to all previous prophets.

“Friendship” derives from the Quranic term “friend” (*wali*). This Arabic word has a range of meanings, any or all of which may be meant when it is used: friend, someone close, someone given authority, benefactor, protector. The Qur’an makes it one of God’s names, and it also speaks of God’s friends and the friends of Satan. The friends of God are those whom he has brought near to himself, those whom he protects, and those to whom, on the basis of their special closeness, he has given a certain authority and rulership, if only over their own egocentric tendencies.

By the time of Ibn 'Arabi, "friend" was a standard epithet for those Muslims of the past who had come close to embodying the model of human perfection established by Muhammad. Western scholars have commonly translated *wali* as "saint," but this word should be used with caution, since it has specifically Christian connotations that do not necessarily apply in the Islamic context.

The idea of friendship with God is a major theme in Ibn 'Arabi's writings. In brief, he follows the mainstream of the Islamic tradition by asserting that God chooses as his friends those who embody the best qualities of the human race. God's friends are first and foremost the prophets. His revelations to the prophets then make it possible for others to become his friends as well. Each prophet is a source of guidance and a model of human goodness and perfection.

Those who achieve the status of friendship with God by following a prophet may then be given an "inheritance" from that prophet. The inheritance has three basic dimensions: works, or proper and appropriate activities; states, or inner experiences that manifest noble character traits; and stations of knowledge, or firm rootedness in the true understanding of reality in its diverse modalities.

INHERITANCE

Ibn 'Arabi considered the goal of religion to be the achievement of human perfection in the three modalities of works, states, and knowledge. He commonly calls those who achieve the goal "Perfect Man" (*al-insan al-kamil*), one of his best known technical terms. The word *insan* has no gender connotation, so in this context the English word "man" must be understood in the same way. The main scriptural source for the notion of human perfection mentions both men (*rijal*) and women (*nisa'*): Muhammad said,

“Among men, many have reached perfection, and among women, Mary and Asiyah [the wife of Pharaoh].”

The primary examples of those who achieved perfection are the prophets, beginning with Adam. They can be defined as those perfect human beings whom God created as paradigms for the human race.

In many ways the most important and fundamental dimension of perfection is knowledge, which entails discernment and putting things in their proper places. Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “As a man moves closer to perfection, God gives him discernment among affairs and brings him to realization through the realities” (F. II 525.2).

“Realization” is the full actualization of human status, and “the realities” are things as they truly are, that is, as they are known by God. To be given realization through the realities means to understand the realities for what they are and to respond to them in the appropriate manner. Realization, in other words, demands both knowledge and works. A good deal will be said about this dual sense of the word in coming chapters.

Approaching perfection by following a prophetic paradigm brings along with it knowledge of a certain configuration of realities. The realities are infinite, so God alone can know them in their simultaneity. Nonetheless, human beings may come to know the principles of all realities. In many passages, Ibn ‘Arabi connects the modes of knowing the realities with the names of God that are so frequently mentioned in the Qur’an. The prophets have special insight into the manner in which specific divine names manifest their traces and display their properties in the universe.

Each prophet has left an inheritance. A purported hadith often cited by Ibn ‘Arabi says, “The ulama” – that is, the scholars, those who have knowledge of God and the prophetic teachings – “are the heirs to the prophets.” In his view, every age

must have at least 124,000 friends of God, one heir for each prophet (F. III 208.14). The prophetic inheritances delineate the possible modes of authentic experience and correct knowledge of God, the universe, and the human soul. In other words, to attain true knowledge, one must know and act in accordance with a paradigm of human perfection embodied in a prophet. No one comes to know things as they are without these divinely appointed intermediaries.

The question of how people can gain a prophetic inheritance is central to Ibn 'Arabi's writings. The simplest answer is that, to the extent human initiative plays a role, people must follow a prophet's guidance. However, the guidance of most prophets has not come down to us. The only way to receive an inheritance from those prophets is to take it through the intermediary of Muhammad, whose message comprises everything given to all previous prophets. In the last analysis, however, it is God himself who chooses to bestow an inheritance on any given individual.

OPENING

Ibn 'Arabi tells us that effort can take seekers only as far as the door. Having reached the door, they can knock as often as they like. It is God who will decide when and if he will open the door. Only at the opening of the door can complete inheritance occur. This explains the sense of the word "opening" in the title of Ibn 'Arabi's *al-Futuhāt al-makkiyya*, "The Meccan Openings."

The title announces that the knowledge and understanding contained in the book were not gained by study or discursive reasoning. They were simply given to the author when God opened the door to him. The whole *Futuhāt*, in other words, represents a massive series of unveilings and witnessings, or "mystical visions" if you prefer.

It is important to keep in mind that Ibn 'Arabi does not confuse unveiling, witnessing, and opening with "revelation," which applies properly to prophetic knowledge. It is precisely the special nature of revelation that makes it necessary for God's friends to follow the prophets. As Ibn 'Arabi often tells us, the basic distinction between a prophet and a friend is that the friend is a "follower" (*tabi'*) and the prophet is the one "followed" (*matbu'*).

If one wants to achieve opening, the way to do so is to engage in the practices set down by one's prophet and to follow the instructions of a shaykh or spiritual master, who, in the ideal case, will be a full heir to that prophet. Among the practices that a shaykh will prescribe are retreat (*khalwa*), which is seclusion from others in order to devote oneself fully to meditation and prayer, and remembrance (*dhikr*), which is the constant invocation of a Qur'anic divine name or formula.

When the aspiring traveler clings to retreat and the remembrance of God's name, when he empties his heart of reflective thoughts, and when he sits in poverty at the door of his Lord with nothing, then God will bestow upon him and give him something of knowledge of Him, the divine mysteries, and the lordly sciences. (F. I 31.4)

Notice that it is the "heart" (*qalb*) that needs to be emptied of thought. In the usage of the Qur'an and Islamic sources in general, the heart designates not the emotive and affective side of human nature, but the center of consciousness, awareness, and intelligence. The heart is the human faculty that can embrace God in the fullness of his manifestation. In Ibn 'Arabi's terms, the heart alone can know God and the realities in a synthetic manner embracing both rational understanding and supra-rational unveiling.

THE MUHAMMADAN SEAL

When God opened the door for him, Ibn 'Arabi found that he had inherited all the sciences of Muhammad. Among these sciences was the knowledge that no one after him – except Jesus at the end of time – would be Muhammad's plenary inheritor. It was this unveiling that allowed him to see himself as the Seal of Muhammadan Friendship, that is, the last person to actualize the specific mode of friendship that results from embodying the fullness of the paradigm established by Muhammad.

By no means does Ibn 'Arabi's claim to be the Muhammadan Seal imply that he was the last friend of God. Rather, it means that no one after him, with the exception of Jesus, would inherit the totality of prophetic works, states, and knowledge – a totality that had been realized only by Muhammad among all the prophets.

One should not be surprised that Ibn 'Arabi privileges Muhammad here. This is the Islamic tradition, after all, and every tradition privileges its own founder. For those who prefer a more universal language, we can say that for Muslims, Muhammad is the full embodiment of the Logos, which is the Divine Word that gives rise to all creation and all revelation. Ibn 'Arabi calls this Logos by several names, including “the Muhammadan Reality.”

Ibn 'Arabi maintains that there are friends of God in every age and that they will continue to inherit from Muhammad, but they will no longer have access to the entirety of Muhammad's works, states, and sciences. The modalities of the inheritance will be defined by their connection to specific prophets embraced by Muhammad's all-comprehensive prophethood. After the Muhammadan Seal, “No friend will be found ‘upon the heart of Muhammad’” (F. II 49.26).

Ibn 'Arabi's claim to be the Seal of the Muhammadan Friends has appeared pretentious and even outrageous to many people

over the centuries. Hostile and critical scholars have dismissed it out of hand. The fact remains, however, that no author writing after him has come close to matching the profundity, freshness, and detail of his interpretation of the sources of the Islamic tradition. Whether or not one would like to call him the Seal of the Muhammadan Friends, it is difficult to deny him the title “Greatest Master.”

If the Muhammadan friends of God inherit all the sciences of Muhammad, this means that they have been opened up to all the knowledge and understanding given to all the prophets. This is the knowledge that was given scriptural form in the Qur’an. Thus the Seal of the Muhammadan Friends will somehow embody the whole Quranic message. This is why Ibn ‘Arabi can write concerning the Seal, “There is no one who has more knowledge of God ... He and the Qur’an are siblings” (F. III 329.27).

READING THE QUR’AN

Ibn ‘Arabi presents all of his writings as explications of the Qur’an, which the tradition considers to be God’s Speech or Word, his linguistic self-expression. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s view, the Qur’an presents all prophetic knowledge in a synthetic manner while addressing the two primary modes of human understanding, “reason” (*‘aql*) and “imagination” (*khayal*). If people want to understand the Qur’an in its totality, they need to employ both of these faculties.

Each Quranic verse yields up an appropriate meaning according to the mode in which the interpreter understands it. Ibn ‘Arabi often brings this home by discussing certain verses as expressions of a rational truth, and then offering other interpretations of the same verse on the basis of an imaginal understanding (or what we might call a “symbolic truth”).

Such dual interpretations do not mean that Ibn 'Arabi thinks each Quranic verse has only two meanings – one rational and the other imaginal. In his view, each word of the Qur'an – not to mention its verses and chapters – has an indefinite number of meanings, all of which are intended by God. Proper recitation of the Qur'an opens up the reader to new meanings at every reading. "When meaning repeats itself for someone who is reciting the Qur'an, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance" (F. IV 367.3).

UNDERSTANDING GOD

One of the major themes of Ibn 'Arabi's writings is the time-honored principle of the Judeo-Christian tradition that God created man in his own image. Muhammad's version of this saying reads, "God created Adam in His own form."

I translate the Arabic word *sura* as "form" rather than "image" to retain its technical meaning. It is used in Islamic philosophy in the Aristotelian sense, in contradistinction to matter (the doctrine of hylomorphism, "matter-form-ism"). In Sufism, the same word is used to designate the appearance of things, in contrast to their "meaning" (*ma'na*), which is their invisible reality, the spiritual substance that gives rise to their appearance in the outer world. Ibn 'Arabi uses the word in both senses, though usually in the latter.

As for the word "image," it can serve well as a second translation for the word *khayal*, which we have already met as "imagination." *Khayal* denotes not only our subjective power of imagining things, but also the objective reality of images in the world, such as reflections in a mirror.

In one respect, God is infinitely beyond understanding, and the only proper response to him is silence. In another respect, he discloses himself to his human forms, and he does so in two

basic ways: first, he discloses his undisclosability, and thereby we come to know that we cannot know him. This is the route of negative theology, and Ibn 'Arabi frequently takes it. Second, God discloses himself to human beings through scripture, the universe, and their own souls. To the degree that he does so, people can and do come to know him.

Ibn 'Arabi calls the modality of awareness that discerns God's undisclosability "reason," and he calls the modality of understanding that grasps his self-disclosure "imagination." "Unveiling" is then fully actualized and realized imagination, which recognizes the divine reality in its images. Rational thought pushes God far away, but imaginal thought brings him close. Reason discerns God as absent, but unveiling sees him present.

When reason grasps God's inaccessibility, it "asserts his incomparability" (*tanzih*). When imagination finds him present, it "asserts his similarity" (*tashbih*). Long before Ibn 'Arabi, asserting God's incomparability (or transcendence) had been normative for most versions of Islamic theology, and asserting his similarity (or immanence) was often found in Sufi expressions of Islamic teachings, especially poetry. Ibn 'Arabi's contribution was to stress the need to maintain a proper balance between the two ways of understanding God.

People are able to maintain the balance between incomparability and similarity by seeing with "both eyes," that is, both reason and imagination. If we do not see God, the world, and ourselves with the full vision of both eyes, we will not be able to see things as they are. The locus of such a vision is the heart, whose beating symbolizes the constant shift from one eye to the other, made necessary by the divine unity, which precludes a simultaneously dual vision.

To be human, then, is to be a divine form. To be a divine form is to be a divine self-expression within which every name of God – every real quality found in the cosmos, every attribute of

the absolutely Real (*al-haqq*) – can become manifest and known. The human form is both different from God (incomparable) and identical with him (similar). Correct understanding of the situation demands seeing with both eyes.

The Muhammadan inheritors and the great friends of God differ from ordinary human beings in the clarity of their vision and the appropriateness of their activity. They have realized the form in which they were created, so they grasp the realities in proper proportion and respond to every situation as God himself would respond, were he to take upon human form.

KNOWING SELF

All expressions of knowledge go back to our own understanding and experience. Seeing with both eyes, or what might be called “gnosis” (*ma'rifa*), is no exception. The human self or soul (*nafs*) is “an ocean without shore,” to use the expression that Michel Chodkiewicz has chosen as the title of his outstanding study of Ibn 'Arabi's hermeneutics. To the extent that we do come to know ourselves correctly as the divine form, we also come to know the infinite God in both his incomparability and his similarity.

It is axiomatic for Ibn 'Arabi (and for most of Islamic theology as well), that God never repeats himself in his creative activity, because he is absolutely One. At each moment the One discloses itself to each individual in the universe, and each disclosure of the One is one and unique. Every creature undergoes constant change and flux as the moments of self-disclosure follow one upon another. We are no different from any other creature in this respect, so we are endlessly changing and forever new. Each moment of self-knowledge represents a new perception of God's manifestation in the soul and the world.

For Ibn 'Arabi, the achievement of self-understanding means to live in a constantly overflowing fountain of divine

self-expression, a neverending outpouring of knowledge and awareness. At each instant God's knower experiences a renewed divine self-disclosure and comes to a fresh understanding of what it means to be created in God's form.

God is infinite, but his form is limited, because it appears in the realm of disclosure and manifestation. Each moment of self-disclosure specifies the form and makes it uniquely itself. The Real itself cannot fit into form, so the divine forms can only appear as successive self-disclosures, extending ad infinitum. This explains among other things why people in paradise will never be sated or bored: they experience constant renewal and refreshment. So also, the gnostic, who sees with both eyes, witnesses each moment as a totally new creation, fresh and exhilarating.

In discussing the nature of self-knowledge, Ibn 'Arabi frequently cites the famous maxim attributed to the Prophet, "He who knows himself (or, "his soul") knows his Lord." The saying can perhaps more accurately be translated, "He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord." The saying does not employ the usual word for knowledge, *'ilm*, which often carries the connotation of learning or erudition without true understanding. Rather, it uses the verbal form of the noun *ma'rifa*, which is often translated as "gnosis." This word implies direct experience of the thing and recognition of its true nature and actual situation. The "gnostics" are those who achieve this sort of knowledge – direct, unmediated knowledge of self and God. Thus "gnosis," if this is the right translation, means simultaneous self-recognition and God-recognition.

In his frequent explanations of the meaning of this maxim, Ibn 'Arabi sometimes takes one or the other of the two basic routes of understanding God – asserting his incomparability or declaring his similarity. The more we use our rational insight to analyze the knowing self, the better we come to recognize that we are not God and we cannot hope to know him. But the

more we are given the gift of imaginal vision, the better we recognize ourselves and the world as forms of the divine self-disclosure.

Ibn 'Arabi refers to the perception of self and world achieved by the gnostics – those who recognize things for what they are – as the direct vision of “He/not He,” or “God/not God.” With one eye they see that God is incomparable, transcendent, and infinitely beyond their perception and understanding. With the other eye they see that all things display God’s similarity, immanence, and sameness. Each thing in the universe, not least the human self, is simultaneously God and not God. Each breath, each beat of the heart, offers a new instance of God’s absence and presence.

Although knowledge of God’s Essence is inaccessible to any but God himself, knowledge of God as he discloses himself to the soul is the ready cash of everyone. There is in fact no other knowledge. All of us know God in ourselves and the world, but most of us do not recognize what we know. “There are none but knowers of God, but some of the knowers know that they know God, and some do not know that they know God. The latter know what they witness and examine, but they do not know that it is the Real” (F. III 510.32).

GOD’S WIDE EARTH

At the highest stage of self-knowledge, the gnostics recognize their own nature as the infinite and neverending self-disclosures of God. In their constant vision of the forms of self-disclosure, they live along with Ibn 'Arabi in “God’s wide earth.” In the Qur’an, God says, “O My servants, ... truly My earth is wide, so worship Me” (29: 56). To be God’s “servant” (*‘abd*) is to recognize one’s created status vis-à-vis the Creator, and to “worship” him is to act appropriately to one’s status.

Appropriate “worship” or “service,” *ibada*, is precisely proper “servanthood,” *‘ubudiyya*, a word derived from the same root.

According to Ibn ‘Arabi, when one achieves true servanthood of God, as he did in the year 1195, one worships God in God’s own “wide earth, ... which has permanent subsistence – it is not the earth that accepts change ... The servant remains a servant forever, so he remains in this earth forever. It is a supraformal, intelligible earth, not a sensory earth” (F. III 224.10).

From the vantage point of God’s wide earth, the faith of those who know God is the reverse of the faith of the common people. The faithful, in the Quranic formula, are those who have “faith in the Unseen.” The Unseen is typically identified as God, the angels, and the Last Day. The gnostics also have faith in the Unseen, but for them the Unseen is the universe. “They witness nothing but God in the realm of being. They do not know what the world is, because they do not witness it as a world ... They have faith in it, but they do not see it, just as the people have faith in God, but they do not see Him” (F. IV 74.16).

THE INHERITOR

One might say that Ibn ‘Arabi’s project in the *Futuhat* is to map out the works, states, and knowledge that he received as a denizen of the Wide Earth of God and as an heir to Muhammad and the other prophets. The stress that he places on the necessity of following in Muhammad’s footsteps to gain this knowledge and to achieve perfection cannot be overestimated. He tells us, for example, that the highest vision of God that anyone can hope to attain is found in the vision of the form of Muhammad, the perfect human embodiment of the total divine self-disclosure.

The most excellent, balanced, and correct of mirrors is Muhammad's mirror, so God's self-disclosure within it is more perfect than any other self-disclosure that there may be.

You should struggle to gaze on the Self-disclosing Real in the mirror of Muhammad so that he may be imprinted in your mirror. Then you will see the Real in a Muhammadan form with a Muhammadan vision. You will not see Him in your own form. (F. IV 433.10)

The Quranic prototype for traversing the path to God is the Prophet's *mi'raj* or "ladder," also called his "night journey" (*isra'*). According to the traditional accounts, Gabriel came to Muhammad one night and took him to Jerusalem. From there they ascended together to the Lote Tree of the Far Boundary, the outermost limit of paradise. Then Muhammad ascended alone to the presence of God.

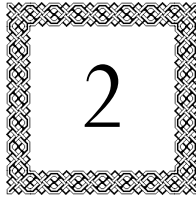
According to a well-known saying of the Prophet, "The daily prayer is the 'ladder' of the believer." In keeping with this saying, many Sufis have taken the accounts of the Night Journey as symbolic depictions of the fruit of spiritual practice. Followers of the Prophet can reap this fruit here and now through prayer and the remembrance of God. Quite a few Sufis, however, recounted how they themselves had traveled in the Prophet's footsteps all the way up the ladder to God. Ibn 'Arabi was one of these, and he provides several accounts of his journey.

In one of his accounts, Ibn 'Arabi describes his meetings with the prophets and angels who inhabit each of the heavens. When he finally attained to the divine presence, God sent down upon him a single verse of the Qur'an, one that highlights his role of speaking for all prophetic wisdom: "Say: 'We have faith in God, and in what has been sent down upon us, and sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus, and the prophets, of their Lord. We do not distinguish among them, and to Him we submit'" (3: 84).

Ibn 'Arabi tells us that when he was given this verse, God made it the key to every knowledge. He came to understand that he was a "Muhammadan," that is "one of the inheritors of Muhammad's all-comprehensiveness." In other words, he recognized that in his own being he embraced all the knowledge revealed to all the prophets. He saw that he had been given the knowledge and understanding of all the names that had been taught to Adam (Q. 2:31). Or rather, he recognized that, as a form of God, he contained all knowledge in himself.

In this night journey I gained the meanings of all the divine names. I saw that they all go back to a single Named Object and a Single Entity. That Named Object was what I was witnessing, and that Entity was my own existence. So, my journey had been only in myself. I provided no indications of any but myself. It was from here that I came to know that I am a sheer servant and that there is nothing whatsoever of lordship within me. (F. III 350.30)

At the highest levels of self-realization, knowledge of self yields the recognition that there is nothing in existence but the self, because nothing can be found in the entire universe but God's self-disclosure. At its most comprehensive and unified, that divine self-disclosure is simply the form in which human beings were created. One who realizes this station recognizes his absolute subservience to the Real and acts as God's servant in all that he does. Achieving this station can only come through "gnosis," that is, through self-recognition. Ibn 'Arabi advises the seeker, "Do not hope to recognize yourself through other than yourself, for there is no other" (F. III 319.23).



THE LOVER OF GOD

Ibn 'Arabi's general approach to the Islamic tradition implies that seekers ascend the ladder to God primarily by means of knowledge and self-recognition, but he does not neglect the motivating power of love (*hubb*). So much does he stress it in fact that Henry Corbin would like to place him in the same category as Persian Sufis like Rumi. It is closer to Ibn 'Arabi's perspective, however, to say that he considered knowledge a more basic quality of the seeker. As he says explicitly, "Knowledge is more eminent than love" (F. II 661.10). God's lovers possess exalted ranks in the hierarchy of saints, but the knowers or "gnostics" rank even higher.

Although Ibn 'Arabi discusses the qualities of knowers much more than he talks about lovers, the *Futuhat* is such a large work that he is able to provide a book-length explanation of what it means to be a lover in Chapter 178. In one long section of this chapter he lists forty-five of the lover's major attributes and then comments on them in a treatise called "God's Loci of Manifestation to the Gnostic Lovers within the Bridal Thrones: Explaining the Attributes of the Lovers in their Love."

It is perhaps needless to say that Ibn 'Arabi did not write about love as a compiler of mystic lore, but rather as a resident in the Wide Earth of God. What he has to say about love bubbles up from his own realization of the realities, his first-hand

recognition of self, his “tasting” (*dhawq*) of the way things are. He is describing his own unveilings and openings, but in the rational and didactic language of the scholarly tradition.

One incident drawn from autobiographical remarks in the *Futuhat* can serve as an illustration of Ibn 'Arabi's personal acquaintance with love. He is in the midst of explaining that love can carry the lover to a station on the path to God where he is deaf to every sound but his Beloved's words, blind to every vision but his Beloved's face, and dumb to every utterance but his Beloved's name. Nothing enters his heart but love. Love's power to transform is such that the lover “can no longer imagine anything but the form of his Beloved” (F. II 325.17).

Next Ibn 'Arabi alludes to a famous hadith that he cites more often than any other in his works. The Prophet quotes the words of God concerning the fruit of the mutual love between God and man:

My servant keeps on seeking nearness to Me through voluntary works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his eyesight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks.

This shows, says Ibn 'Arabi, that “The lover hears Him through Him, the lover sees Him through Him, and the lover speaks to Him through Him.” By way of illustration, he describes his own situation at the hands of love:

The power of my imagination took me to the point where my love embodied my Beloved before my eyes in the outside world, just as Gabriel used to embody himself to the Messenger of God. I could not bear to gaze upon Him, yet He addressed me and I listened to Him and understood what He said. For several days He left me in a state where I could not eat.

Whenever the dining cloth was spread for me, He would stand at its edge, look at me, and say in a tongue I heard with my ears, "Will you eat while gazing upon Me?" I was prevented from eating, but I was not hungry, and He kept my stomach full. I even put on weight and became plump from gazing upon Him. He took the place of food.

My companions and family were amazed at my becoming plump without food, for I remained many days without tasting anything, though I became neither hungry nor thirsty. During all this time, He never left from before my eyes, whether I was standing or sitting, moving or still. (F. II 325.20)

ASSUMING THE TRAITS OF THE NAMES

No points of reference are more recurrent in Ibn 'Arabi's writings than the names and attributes of God, which are mentioned profusely in the Qur'an and provide the basic givens of Islamic theology. A saying of the Prophet tells us that God has ninety-nine of what the Qur'an calls "the most beautiful names," but different lists have been proposed and no general agreement as to their exact identity has been reached. Ibn 'Arabi quotes approvingly the opinion of one authority that only eighty-three of the most beautiful names are known with certainty. But he also points out that the divine names are infinite in number, corresponding to the endless divine self-disclosures that fill the universe, the infinite faces of God that gaze upon the creatures. "Wherever you turn," says the Qur'an, "there is the face of God" (Q. 2: 115).

All creatures become manifest by displaying God's names and attributes. All are "signs" (*ayat*) of God. To use the theological terms that Ibn 'Arabi prefers, things make manifest the "properties" (*ahkam*) and "traces" (*athar*) of the divine names. Or, they "assume as their own the traits of the names," an expression derived from a saying often ascribed to the Prophet.

The cosmos has become manifest as living, hearing, seeing, knowing, desiring, powerful, and speaking ... The cosmos is His work, so it becomes manifest in keeping with His attributes ... It is He/not He, and it is the unknown/ the known. "To God belong the most beautiful names" [Q. 7: 180], and to the cosmos belongs becoming manifest through the names by assuming their traits. (F. II 438.20)

The word translated here as "traits" is *akhlaq*. Its singular, *khuluq*, can be translated as "character." The most important scriptural use of the word is a verse addressed to Muhammad: "Surely you have a magnificent character" (Q. 68: 4), or, as Arberry translates it, "a mighty morality." In English translations of Islamic philosophical texts, *akhlaq* is typically rendered as "ethics." The Muslim philosophers use the term to designate the science that investigates virtue and vice, specifically how to acquire the former and avoid the latter. From the Sufi perspective, the virtues that people must acquire are precisely the divine names and attributes, for it is these that are latent in the human substance, created in the form of God.

Life in this world is a process through which the traces and properties of the divine names come to be actualized. Revelation is necessary if people are to become qualified by the names in proper harmony and equilibrium. To use the moral language, people need divine guidance if they are to actualize the traits of the names as virtues and avoid their deformation as vices.

If people display the traces of divine attributes such as severity and wrath and fail to keep them properly confined through justice, compassion, and generosity, they will be dominated by cruelty and arrogance. Only a perfect harmony of divine attributes can lead to the full blossoming of human nature, the realization of the deformity latent in the soul. Ibn 'Arabi refers to the assumption of the traits of the divine names as the very definition of the spiritual life: "Assuming the character traits of God – that is Sufism" (F. II 267.11).

One of the most important and fundamental of the divine attributes that need to be actualized is love. God is called “the Lover” in both the Qur’an and the Hadith. For Ibn ‘Arabi, the objects of God’s love help delineate the qualities and character traits that human beings must acquire in order to gain perfection. Thus God loves, among others, the repentant and the pure (Q. 2: 222), those who trust in him (Q. 3: 159), the patient (Q. 3: 146), the virtuous (Q. 2: 195), and those who fight in his path in ranks (Q. 61: 4).

Ibn ‘Arabi often quotes a famous hadith to show that God’s love plays an essential role in the origin and structure of the world. Significantly, the saying also highlights the importance of knowledge and recognition: the Prophet reported that God says (in the version cited by Ibn ‘Arabi), “I was a Hidden Treasure but unrecognized. I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures and I made Myself recognized to them, so they recognized Me” (F. II 322.29).

In other words, God’s love brings the universe into existence, thereby opening up a gap between his uncreated Self and the created world. But the love that brings about separation also leads to union. God’s love for creation gives rise to creation’s love for him, and that love does not remain unfulfilled.

THE DIVINE AND HUMAN FORM

Ibn ‘Arabi points out that God created both human beings and the universe in his own form. Both man and cosmos display the traces of the divine attributes and assume as their own the divine character traits. The cosmos, however, discloses the full range of the divine names only when considered as a whole, along with perfect human beings. Without the prophets and the friends of God, the world would be dead, like a body without a

spirit, and it would disintegrate and disappear. "If [Perfect] Man were to leave the cosmos, the cosmos would die" (F. II 468.12).

In contrast to other beings in the universe, humans are complete self-disclosures of the Divine Reality, for they manifest all God's names and attributes and encompass the three basic levels of created existence – corporeal, imaginal (or psychic), and spiritual. Made in God's form, they cannot fully satisfy their quest for fulfillment and completion except in God himself. Only God or another human being is adequate to their love.

Man's love for God and for his own kind absorbs him totally, but no love for anything else in the cosmos can do that. When he loves one of the forms found in the cosmos, he turns to it with the corresponding part of himself, but the rest of him stays sober in its occupation.

As for his total absorption in love for God, this is because he is made in His form, as reported by the Prophet. He coincides with the Divine Presence through his whole essence, and that is why all the divine names become manifest within him. He who does not have the attribute of love will not assume the names as his own character traits. (F. II 325.29)

IMPERFECT LOVE

When Ibn 'Arabi talks about love for God, he means specifically God in respect of his all-comprehensive name, i.e., Allah, to which all other names refer and in the form of which human beings were created. It was God in respect of this name who created man in his own form, not God as Creator or All-merciful. If people love God because he is the Benefactor or the Provider or the All-powerful and not because he is God per se, they run the risk of failing to actualize the full range of divine attributes that determine human nature.

Imperfect love for God can be seen wherever we look. Whatever love's object appears to be, in fact it is love for God, because all phenomena go back to the divine self-disclosures. Typically people love God under the guise of one or more of the divine attributes that he has lent to the creatures. This is a major theme of the great Persian lovers like Rumi, and Ibn 'Arabi expresses it just as clearly: "None but God is loved in the existent things. It is He who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover – and there is nothing in the existent realm that is not a lover" (F. II 326.19).

All things come from God and return to him. The force that brings them into existence is the Hidden Treasure's love to be known. Among all creatures, only human beings, made in God's form, are given the gift of full and integral love in order to realize full and integral knowledge and recognition of the Hidden Treasure. In loving their Lord and thereby actualizing the form in which they were created, they burn away the veils of ignorance and illusion that keep them back from their eternal home. "The sincere lover is he who passes into the attributes of the Beloved, not he who pulls the Beloved down to his own level ... He assumes as his own the traits of His names" (F. II 596.6).

We should not conclude that all lovers are equal in love. Although God is one, his forms are infinitely diverse. Perfect love for God is found only in Perfect Man, and each of the prophets and friends loves God in a unique mode of perfection. In Chapter 208 of the *Futuhat*, Ibn 'Arabi explains something of the typology of lovers in keeping with their varied knowledge of God, for every lover knows God, because it is impossible to love what you do not know.

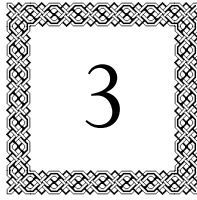
Ibn 'Arabi tells us that some people are simply believers, and their knowledge of God comes by way of hearsay and prophetic reports. But reports invariably conflict, so the believers remain bewildered about God and are not able to

have a clear conception of their Beloved. Among them, some prefer what they understand through their imagination, which recognizes God's similarity and immanence. They conceive of God in a limited form and become attached to it. In their search for God they desire ecstasy, intimacy, and vision.

Some believers know God through their rational faculties. In contrast to those who depend on imagination, they impose no limits on him, but they miss great good. Despite the fact that "He is closer to them than the jugular vein" (Q. 50: 16), they fail to recognize that he is he. Their Beloved is always manifest to them, but they do not have the eyes to see him.

Those who gaze upon God by means of the eye of reason are divided into two sorts. One sort craves to see their Beloved. Here Ibn 'Arabi probably has in mind the Ash'arite theologians, who affirmed that the vision of God in the afterlife was the supreme goal of man. The other sort declare, like the Mu'tazilite theologians, that it is impossible to see the Beloved, though it is possible to know Him. They despair of seeing and, as Ibn 'Arabi puts it, "They remain in the bliss of despair, while the other group remains in the bliss of craving" (F. II 494.6). After all, as the Qur'an tells us, "Each party takes joy in what they have" (23: 53).

All these groups are ranked in degrees according to the level of their understanding. The greatest of the lovers, however, are those who constantly seek to augment their knowledge, in keeping with the Quranic command: "Say: 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge'" (20: 114). They increase their knowledge by never denying God's presence in any phenomenon and by never affirming his presence in anything whatsoever. Seeing with both eyes, they constantly recognize that all is "He/not He." They never let themselves fall into stasis and fixity, but flow with the constant unfolding of the universe. They recognize themselves and all things for what they are.



THE DIVINE ROOTS OF LOVE

Ibn 'Arabi begins his long chapter on love in the *Futuhat* as he begins most of the book's chapters, by citing relevant Quranic verses and prophetic sayings. He points out first that love is a divine attribute, and he lists several of the Quranic verses in which God is the subject of the verb "to love." Fourteen of these mention those whom God loves, and the remaining twenty-three mention those whom God does *not* love.

In every Quranic verse where God's love or lack of it is mentioned, the objects are human beings. In other words, the Qur'an associates love only with man among all creatures. Most other divine attributes mentioned in the Qur'an – such as life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, mercy, and wrath – have no special connection with the human race. It follows that love is a key term if we are to understand what differentiates man from those creatures who are not made in the divine form.

The first prophetic saying that Ibn 'Arabi mentions at the beginning of the chapter is the hadith of the Hidden Treasure, and the second is the hadith according to which, when God loves his servant, he becomes the hearing with which he hears and the eyesight with which he sees.

By citing Qur'an and Hadith at the beginning of the chapter, Ibn 'Arabi wants to establish what he calls "the divine roots" or "the divine principles" of the discussion. On one level, this

means simply that he wants to show that he is basing himself on the revealed texts. On a deeper level, he is saying that the Qur'an expresses the nature of love as it is found in the deepest roots of Ultimate Reality.

WUJUD

Ibn 'Arabi's first topic is always the truly Real, which is God. His second topic is the cosmos, which is defined as "everything other than God." When employing the technical language of philosophy and theology, he typically calls God *wujud*, a word that is usually translated as "being" or "existence."

In Arabic the word *wujud* is applied to God and to everything else as well. God has *wujud*, or rather, God is *wujud*, and everything else has *wujud* in one mode or another. Using a typical way of distinguishing between being and existence in English, we might say that *wujud* means Being when referring to God and existence when referring to anything other than God. But in Ibn 'Arabi's usage of the word, it is often unclear if he means God's *wujud*, the world's *wujud*, or simply *wujud* without specification.

If we translate *wujud* as "existence" or "being," we meet another problem as soon as we look at its literal meaning, which is "finding" or "to be found." True, from early times the word was used in philosophy and theology (and from somewhat later on in Sufism) to mean existence/being. But, the implications of the literal meaning were never forgotten, neither by the more insightful philosophers nor by the Sufis. *Wujud* is not simply the fact of being or existing – the fact that something is there to be found. Rather, *wujud* is also the reality of finding, which is to say that it is awareness, consciousness, understanding, and knowledge.

Throughout the early Sufi tradition, the word *wujud* was used primarily in the more literal sense of awareness and

understanding. As a technical term, it was used to designate “finding God,” that is, coming to direct awareness and consciousness of the Divine Reality. It was practically a synonym of words like “witnessing” and “unveiling,” which also play prominent roles in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings.

For Ibn ‘Arabi, the word *wujud* carries both the Sufi and the philosophical meanings. No matter how “ontological” his discussions may appear to modern readers, he never loses sight of the fact that *wujud* designates not only the incomparable and ineffable Reality of the Real, but also the immanent presence of God in the knower’s awareness. The gnostics look with both eyes, and they perceive *wujud* as both absent, because it is none other than the Divine Essence, and present, because it is none other than God’s self-disclosure as the selfhood of the knower.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s terminology, then, *wujud* means not only being and existence (the “objective” side of reality), but also finding and awareness (the “subjective” side of reality). He highlights the latter sense in expressions like *ahl al-kashf wa’l-wujud*, “the folk of unveiling and finding,” or *ahl ash-shuhud wa’l-wujud*, “the folk of witnessing and finding.” These are precisely the gnostics, those who see with both eyes.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that in English neither “being” nor “existence” has the connotation of awareness and consciousness. Even when we talk about God as “Being,” we know that God has knowledge and awareness because we say so, not because the word itself demands it.

The results of disassociating being and consciousness become obvious when we glance at the history of Western thought, especially in recent times. Scientists, philosophers, and even some theologians look upon life and consciousness as epiphenomena of existence, latecomers on the cosmic scene. We moderns are happy to think that “existence” came before consciousness, or that living things gradually evolved from dead and inanimate matter. For Ibn ‘Arabi and much of Islamic

thinking (not to mention kindred visions in other traditions), no universe is thinkable without the primacy of life and awareness, the presence of consciousness in the underlying stuff of reality.

THE NONEXISTENT BELOVED

In itself, *wujud* is the non-manifest, the Hidden Treasure. However, *wujud* loved to be known, so it created the universe in order to be known. Those who recognize and realize *wujud* are true human beings, Perfect Man. But people cannot know and recognize *wujud* unless *wujud* makes itself known to them, and it does so by revealing itself in three basic modes: the universe, the human self, and scripture.

Scripture is the key that opens the door to the universe and the self. Self-expressive *wujud* employs scripture to stir up human understanding. Without recourse to it, people will not be able to fathom themselves and the cosmos. If they do not come to know and recognize themselves, they will not know God.

When Ibn 'Arabi says that Quranic verses are the divine roots of things, he means to say that these verses manifest the very principles of *wujud*, the very sources of the existence that we find in our experience, the foundations of our consciousness and awareness. The Qur'an gives expression to the realities of *wujud* in the clearest possible manner. Among these realities, one of the most significant for understanding the divinely human form is love.

Love has many similarities with *wujud*, which is simply to say that God is the root of all love, and by experiencing love we experience something of him. Among the most salient similarities is that like *wujud*, love cannot be defined. Ibn 'Arabi calls the understanding of love "a knowledge of tasting" (F. IV 7.2), which is to say that people will know love only when they experience it in themselves, but they will not be able to convey their understanding to others.

Wujud cannot be known in itself, but it can be known inasmuch as it discloses itself. Once *wujud* shows itself, we can summarize what we have learned about it by mentioning its attributes. Thus God, the Real *Wujud*, reveals his own nature in the Qur'an by mentioning his most beautiful names.

In a similar way, love cannot be known in itself, but its attributes and names can be known and described. For Ibn 'Arabi, one of the most important of love's attributes has to do with the nature of its object. Whatever object it is that we love, he says, it is always nonexistent. This seems to fly in the face of common sense, since we like to think that we love a real person or a real object, not a nothingness. "Love's object remains forever nonexistent, but most lovers are unaware of this, unless they should be recognizers of the realities" (F. II 337.17).

The point Ibn 'Arabi wants to make is not difficult to understand. When people fall in love, they experience a desire to achieve nearness or union with the person they love. As long as they have not achieved the object of their desire, the object does not in fact exist for them. People love what they do not already have. They want to achieve something that they have not already achieved, or to be near to someone from whom they are far. "The love of the lover becomes attached only to that of the person which is nonexistent at the moment. He imagines that his love is attached to the person, but this is not so. Love incites him to meet and see his beloved" (F. II 327.7).

Ibn 'Arabi continues this passage by answering an objection. You may say that you loved companionship, or kissing, or intimacy. Then, when you achieved your desire, you found that you still loved it. Therefore, you conclude, love exists along with its object. Ibn 'Arabi replies that in fact the object still does not exist, because now love's object is the permanence of what was achieved, not the achievement itself. Permanence is not an existing thing. "Love attaches itself only to a nonexistent thing ... When love sees the thing, it is transferred to the permanence

of that state whose existence it loves in that existent entity” (F. II 337.18).

THE ENTITIES

All things are rooted in Real *Wujud*, and love is no exception. If it is universally true that the object of love is nonexistent, this must hold true for God’s love as well. In fact, the idea that God loves nonexistent objects is a corollary of *tawhid*, the assertion of God’s unity that is the first principle of Islamic thought and the governing theme of Ibn ‘Arabi’s works.

Tawhid is expressed most succinctly in the formula, “There is no god but God.” God is *wujud*, so “There is no *wujud* but God.” Everything other than God is not *wujud* and can properly be called “nonexistence” (*‘adam*). *Wujud* is the Hidden Treasure, and all things derive their existence from it, for they possess none of their own.

One of Ibn ‘Arabi’s best known technical terms is *‘ayn thabita*, “fixed entity.” The fixed entities are the things of the universe as known by God for all eternity. Given that “God knows everything” (Q. 2: 231) and given that his knowledge, like himself, is eternal and unchanging, he has always known everything and will always know it. The “things” that God knows are precisely the “entities.” They are “located” in the Hidden Treasure: “God’s words, ‘I was a Treasure,’ affirm the fixed entities” (F. II 232.12).

The entities are “fixed” because, despite their nonexistence in themselves, they are eternally known to God. They are “things” even before God brings them into existence. On the basis of his knowledge of them, he creates them and they become manifest as “existent entities” (*a‘yan mawjuda*). However, their existence is not their own, because *wujud* belongs to God. There is only one *wujud*, and that is the *wujud* of

God, or rather, the *wujud* that is identical with God. “The fixed entities,” as Ibn ‘Arabi remarks in an often quoted sentence, “have never smelt a whiff of *wujud*” (FH 76), and they will never smell it, because they are nonexistent by definition.

The things that we perceive and experience in the world are called “existent entities.” This name is deceptive, however, because the “existence” that sustains them does not belong to them. In themselves, they are no different from the nonexistent, fixed entities. Whether we call them “fixed” or “existent,” it is not they that smell the whiff of *wujud*. Rather, Real *Wujud* itself is the hearing through which they hear and the eyesight through which they see.

Wujud and the nonexistent entities – the Real and the not Real – are the two pillars upon which the universe stands. On one side, God alone is *wujud*. On the other side, the entities have no *wujud*. On its own *Wujud* simply is, and on their own, the entities simply are not. But love is an inherent attribute of *Wujud*, and love inherently strives for what is not. It expresses what is unexpressed, makes manifest what is hidden, and creates what has not been created. Love might be described as the innate tendency of *Wujud* to become manifest, or of light to shine. “God is the light of the heavens and earth” (Q. 24:35).

Through love, *Wujud* asserts its own reality by showing itself to everything that may possibly come to exist. The possibilities of existing are specified by entities that do not in themselves exist. If they did exist, there would be two *wujuds*, and that would contradict *tawhid*, “There is no *wujud* but God.” The entities are known to God as concomitants of his own Infinite Reality.

Each entity is a specific mode of not existing, or a specific possibility (*mumkin*), because each represents a mode in which the radiance of *Wujud* can be limited, defined, specified, and determined. When *Wujud* delimits its radiance through the entities, it discloses itself as less than its infinite self. In order for the blinding light of Real *Wujud* to become manifest, it must be

diminished by darkness, which is simply the lack of light, the lack of reality, the lack of existence.

In short, the “existent entities” of the universe are the infinite differentiations and delimitations to which the radiance of Real *Wujud* is susceptible. Each creature is a self-showing or a self-disclosure of *Wujud*, but it does not truly exist, because *Wujud* alone is *Wujud*. It follows that each creature is *Wujud*/not *Wujud*, He/not He, God/not God.

THE GENESIS OF LOVE

Why is love an inherent attribute of *Wujud*? In one passage, Ibn 'Arabi answers this question in terms of two divine names, Beautiful (*jamil*) and Light (*nur*). Light is that which is manifest (*zahir*) in itself and makes other things manifest by bestowing light upon them. *Wujud* is precisely light, for it is manifest in itself and makes other things manifest. In contrast, the fixed entities are nonexistent and non-manifest, which is to say that they have no existence of their own and are known to none but God. When we say that God creates the universe, we mean that he brings the entities into existence, or he makes the non-manifest manifest, or he showers light upon darkness.

In and of themselves the entities remain fixed and immutable in nonexistence. God loves to be known, so he loves the creatures through whom he comes to be known. The objects of his love are by definition nonexistent, and they will always remain nonexistent, because his love for them is eternal. “The created thing ... is nonexistent, so it is the object of God’s love constantly and forever. As long as there is love, one cannot conceive of the existence of the created thing along with it, so the created thing never comes into existence” (F. II 113.29).

If the created thing never gains true existence, then the existence that we perceive can belong only to God, who is Manifest

Wujud and who discloses his names and attributes as the existent entities. Ibn ‘Arabi calls the existent entity a “locus of manifestation” (*mazhar*), for it displays *Wujud* in specific and delimited confines. For our part, we see the confines, the delimited thing, the specific self-disclosure that is this thing and not some other thing. But in fact, *Wujud* alone is truly manifest, because manifestation belongs to light, not darkness; to existence, not nonexistence; to God, not creation.

In explaining why the divine love derives from God’s names, Beautiful and Light, Ibn ‘Arabi says that Light shines upon the nonexistent entities and illuminates their gaze. It gives the uncreated things an eyesight that is none other than the eyesight of God, and then God sees through them and they see through God. Light alone allows things to see and to be seen. “Then God discloses Himself to the entities through the name Beautiful, and they fall in love with Him” (F. II 112.34).

Ibn ‘Arabi is saying that the Hidden Treasure is both beautiful and luminous. The nonexistent things have nothing of their own with which to perceive the divine beauty. In order to give them existence in the world, God must speak to them: “Our only word to a thing when We desire it, is to say to it ‘Be,’ and it comes to be” (Q. 16: 40).

If God speaks to the nonexistent entities, they must be able to hear his words. All perception presupposes manifestation, and light makes itself and others manifest by its very nature. God’s light, shining upon the nonexistent entities, gives them the ability to hear and to see, and they see what is there, which is God. The entities cannot see God without his light, for they have no light of their own. He must become the eyesight with which they see, which is simply to say that things can only come into existence through God’s *wujud*, the only *wujud* there is.

Once the Light of God becomes manifest and the entities come into existence – in a manner of speaking – then the entities see the Beautiful. “God is beautiful,” the Prophet said,

“and He loves beauty.” This sets down a principle that is omnipresent in Muslim discussions of love: every beautiful thing is inherently lovable. Beauty is that which attracts love, just as love is that which is attracted by the beautiful. As Ibn 'Arabi puts it, “The cause of love is beauty, for beauty is loved by its very essence” (F. II 326.24).

When the entities see the Beautiful, they become his lovers. Utterly engrossed in their beloved, they forget self and see nothing but him. What is really happening is that God is loving himself by means of the locus of manifestation that is the existent entity. Having become the entity's eyesight and hearing, God loves what he sees and hears. Just as “There is no god but God,” so also “There is no lover but God” and “There is no beloved but God.” In the last analysis, “The servant is not qualified by this love, since love has no property within him. After all, nothing of the servant loves God but God, who is manifest within him. God alone is the Manifest” (F. II 112.34).

God loves the objects of his knowledge when they are non-existent. As soon as they come into existence, he stops loving them, because love is directed only at nonexistence. Hence he loves the next moment of the thing's existence, which is to say that he loves the permanence of the thing's existence. He never ceases loving the fixed entities for all eternity, because they remain forever nonexistent. At each moment, his love for the existence of the nonexistent things brings about a new creation.

LOVE'S THRONE

In his chapter on the divine names in the *Futuhat*, Ibn 'Arabi writes that the meaning of the name Loving (*al-wadud*) is that God constantly brings the universe into existence for the sake of his creatures. Although we are fixed entities and remain forever nonexistent, the tongue of our own situation begs God to

bestow existence upon us, and he responds by doing so. Looking closely, we see that he is responding to himself, for he is the tongue with which we speak.

One of the two Quranic passages that mention the name “Loving” associates it with the divine Throne: “He is the Forgiving, the Loving, the Lord of the Throne” (85: 14–15). Elsewhere, the Qur’an tells us that it is God as the All-merciful who is sitting on the Throne. The tradition typically understands the Throne to designate the outermost sphere of the heavens, which encompasses the whole cosmos. It follows that God’s mercy embraces everything, as the Qur’an says explicitly (7: 156).

God is generous and bountiful by nature, because *Wujud* is infinitely full and infinitely effusive. He gives to the creatures the best that he has, and that is *Wujud*, his own reality. The creature is by definition a lover, for the entity loves the Beautiful who discloses himself to it through the effusion of light. God’s mercy, then, is directed at his lovers, who are all the creatures of the universe.

He has mercy only on the ardor of the lover, which is a delicate yearning for the encounter with the Beloved. No one encounters the Beloved save with His attribute, and His attribute is *wujud*. Hence He bestows *wujud* upon the lover. Had there been anything more perfect than that with Him, He would not have been stingy with it . . . , for God reported that He is “the Forgiving, the Loving,” which is to say that in His unseen reality He is fixed in love, for He sees us, so He sees His beloved. Hence He delights in His beloved. (F. IV 260.6)

HUMAN LOVE

God loves the nonexistent, fixed entities. They remain nonexistent, but his love brings them into existence forever. From

one standpoint, he has a single object of love, which is the cosmos and everything it contains. From another standpoint, the universe itself is nothing but the manifestation of *Wujud*, so God loves himself, and in loving himself he brings the entities in the Hidden Treasure from nonexistence into existence.

As all-comprehensive forms of *Wujud*, human beings possess the attribute of love, and what they love remains forever non-existent. When God and the universe are considered as two different realities, the object of human love may be God, or someone or something in the universe. But when we understand that the universe is nothing but God's self-disclosure, then we see that the object of love can be nothing but God. The object of love, however, is always nonexistent, so God stays forever nonexistent in relation to his lovers. In other words, in his Essence he remains forever non-manifest, unknowable, and unattainable.

Lovers and seekers strive to find God, but the God who can be loved and sought is the God who can be conceptualized and understood. That is not God in himself, but rather the God of belief (*ilah al-mu'taqad*), the God that we understand, who is none other than God as he shows himself to us. In himself God will never be found. And only the God who will never be found is truly the infinite God who is no different from Real *Wujud*.

FELICITY

If God in himself cannot be sought, what are the seekers seeking? What have the Sufis been singing about in their poetry if not love for God? Ibn 'Arabi replies that they are not seeking God in himself, but God inasmuch as they understand and embrace him, that is, God as he shows himself to them. This God who discloses himself to them, however, is not *Wujud*. It is the radiance and manifestation of *Wujud*, not *Wujud* itself.

In respect of His Essence and His *Wujud*, nothing stands up to the Real. He cannot be desired or sought in His Essence. What the seekers seek and the desirers desire is only recognition of Him, witnessing of Him, or vision of Him. All of these are *from* Him. They are not He Himself. (F. II 663.9)

Given that God himself cannot be sought, the gnostics make no attempt to seek him. What they do seek is their own “felicity” (*sa‘ada*), which is the Quranic term for the permanent happiness achieved in paradise. “God cannot be attained by seeking. The gnostics seek their own felicity, not God” (F. IV 443.1). They seek the joy of participating with full consciousness and awareness in the ongoing renewal of the universe, the endless process whereby God loves the nonexistent entities and brings them into existence. They love God not for his sake, but for their own sake.

Although there are many lovers – or rather, everyone in existence is a lover – no one recognizes the object to which his love is attached. People are veiled by the existent thing within which their beloved is found. They imagine that the existent thing is their beloved, but, in reality, it is their beloved only indirectly. In reality, no one loves a beloved for the sake of the beloved’s self. Rather, he loves the beloved only for the sake of his own self. (F. II 333.21)

POVERTY

Like Rumi and many other Sufi teachers, Ibn ‘Arabi frequently explains love in terms of “need” (*iftiqar*), a word derived from the same root as “poverty” (*faqr*). Poverty in turn is used much more often in Islamic texts than “Sufism” to designate the inner dimension of Islamic teaching and practice.

Poverty or need is an inherent attribute of creatures in face of God, who is the Wealthy, the Independent, the Unneeding

(*al-ghani*). “Poor” and “wealthy” are derived from several Quranic verses, especially 35: 15: “O people, you are the poor toward God, and God, He is the Wealthy, the Praiseworthy.” God possesses all good and all *wujud*. Whatever people possess comes from him, so he deserves the praise for it.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s vocabulary, poverty is equivalent to the philosophical term “possibility” or “contingency” (*imkan*), which refers to the fact that things have no claim on existence and stand in need of Real *Wujud* if they are to come into existence. Wealth or independence refers to God’s “necessity” (*wujub*), the fact that he is and cannot not be.

Sufis sometimes debated as to whether the goal of the Sufi path was to be poor and needy *toward* God or to be wealthy and independent *through* God. For Ibn ‘Arabi, poverty and wealth are two sides of the same coin, but poverty deserves to be stressed, because it is the fundamental situation of every created thing. The entities are inherently poor, so their realities demand that they love and seek what they do not have. The object of their love and seeking is always nonexistent in relation to themselves. “He who is wealthy through God is poor toward Him. But relationship to God through the word ‘poverty’ is more appropriate than relationship to Him through wealth.” (F. II 263.34)

Although people are in fact poor toward the Real *Wujud*, their poverty and need become specified and focused on specific forms. When people recognize the true nature of their poverty, they strive to have no object of need other than God. Nonetheless, the object of seeking can only be nonexistent. Hence to love God means to love that which cannot be delimited, defined, constricted, or understood. It is to desire that which is nonexistent in relation to the limited and defined form that is oneself. The human soul may be an ocean without shore, but it can never be more than a shadow of Infinite *Wujud*.

In their states and beliefs, the Folk of the Path see being [*kawn*] and bliss [*na'im*] as coming only from God, so they are poor toward Him in that and toward no one else. It would not be correct for them to be poor toward Him while they have *wujud*, for then they would already be existent. Rather, they have this poverty toward *wujud* in the state of their nonexistence, and that is why He gives them existence. (F. II 600.35)

The true lover loves God alone, not any specific gift of God. Those who love specific objects are unaware that true love can focus only on what is absolutely nonexistent in relation to the lover. Only *Wujud* is absolutely other than the nonexistent thing, so only it can be the true object of love. This is why Ibn 'Arabi advises his readers, "Attach your poverty to God in an absolute sense, without any specification" (F. II 264.20).

PERFECTION

The hadith of the Hidden Treasure tells us that God loved to be known and recognized. The Qur'an and the tradition make clear that the knowledge God desired to actualize through creation can only be achieved by human beings, who alone are God's forms and vicegerents. Only they were created in God's form, so only they can recognize God by recognizing themselves.

The Qur'an tells us that God taught Adam all the names, and one of the interpretations of this verse is that these were the names of God, that is, the names that designate Real *Wujud*. This special knowledge taught to Adam explains his superiority over all other creatures. The goal of human life is then to actualize the knowledge taught to Adam, and it is this actualization that Ibn 'Arabi calls "perfection."

The underlying theme of Ibn 'Arabi's writings is not, as many would have it, *wahdat al-wujud*, "the Oneness of Being,"

but rather the achievement of human perfection. He never mentions the term *wahdat al-wujud*, but he does refer repeatedly to Perfect Man. His focus on human perfection can be seen clearly in the very structure of his two most famous works, the *Fusus al-hikam* and *al-Futuhāt al-makkiyya*. The first begins with a discussion of Adam, the original Perfect Man, and then describes the various modalities of human perfection in terms of its specific individuations in the prophets. As for the *Futuhāt*, it is a vast compendium of depictions of the various stations of human perfection, viewed from diverse standpoints, though always in the context of the divine names and attributes.

The notion of perfection is closely bound up with the infinity and inaccessibility of *Wujud*. God in himself is “no thing,” which is to say that he is no existing thing, because he is *Wujud* itself, the Divine Reality that stands beyond all existent and nonexistent things. If human beings are to attain to the perfection of the divine form, they cannot be tied down by specific things. At one and the same time they must be all things and no thing, just as God is all things and no thing.

When we love specific people or things, we focus our aspirations and desires on defined and limited objects. By doing so, we turn away from an infinite number of other possible objects. For his part God loves all things. His love embraces everything that can possibly exist and brings the universe into existence moment by moment. Perfect Man is similar to God in that he loves all things and no specific thing, in contrast to ordinary people, who love this thing and that thing, this person and that person.

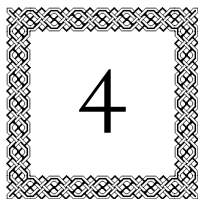
Ibn 'Arabi sometimes calls human perfection “the station of no station” (*maqam la maqam*). Everyone other than Perfect Man stands in a specific station delimited and defined by the objects of his or her love and aspiration. Perfect Man alone stands in no station, because he alone has fully actualized a love that has no

specific object. Rather, the object of his love is the infinite Essence of God, which remains forever inaccessible.

Perfect Man is defined by his lack of definition. He loves the “nothing” that is the source of everything. He has perfected the divine form, for he is indefinable and unrestricted, just like the object of his love. By living in no thing and no station, he is free of all things and all stations. By being poor and needy toward all things, he is poor and needy toward nothing, which is to say that he is poor and needy only toward God and wealthy and independent only through him.

The mark of Perfect Man’s love is his universal poverty, that is, the utter annihilation of his egocentric self and his total focus on God in the infinite wealth of the divine self-disclosure. God’s self-disclosure is the universe in its entirety, in all its spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal dimensions. Through a love for God that is absolute and non-delimited, Perfect Man loves all. Others at best will experience only glimmers of non-specific love.

Ibn ‘Arabi calls the non-specific and non-delimited love that is realized by the gnostics and Perfect Man “divine love,” since, like God’s love for the universe, it does not distinguish among the entities. The mark of this divine love is that the gnostic loves every created thing in every level of being and every world, whether the level be supraformal and spiritual, imaginal and psychic, or corporeal and sensory. For, every level of being “has an eye from His name Light through which it looks upon His name Beautiful, since it is this light that dresses it in the robe of *wujud*” (F. II 113.6).



THE COSMOLOGY OF REMEMBRANCE

The Prophet said, “This world is accursed, and accursed is everything within it, save the remembrance of God.” “This world,” which is where we are now, is contrasted with “the afterworld,” which is where we will be after death. The saying seems to express an other-worldly sentiment that is not especially characteristic of the Islamic tradition. Generally, like Judaism and contrary to much of early Christianity, Islam evaluates this world positively and asks people to bring God into it, not to turn away from it. Is this saying in fact uncharacteristic of Islam? Perhaps more to the point, is it in fact as negative as it first appears? Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings on remembrance (*dhikr*) provide some interesting answers.

REMEMBRANCE

We saw in Chapter 1 that Ibn ‘Arabi speaks of remembrance as knocking at God’s door in the hope that God will open it. In another passage he defines it as “presence [*hudur*] and watchfulness [*muraqaba*] over God’s traces in your heart and in the cosmos” (F. III 502.12). It is to be with God and not absent from him, to recognize him through his signs and marks in the cosmos and the self.

Remembrance is often encouraged in the Qur'an, where it means keeping God in mind and mentioning or invoking his name. It was central to theory and practice from the beginning of the tradition, and Western scholars have paid a good deal of attention to the prominent role that it has played in Sufism. Its similarity to the Jesus prayer in Christianity, *japa yoga* in Hinduism, and *nembutsu* in the Shin Buddhist tradition has often been remarked upon. Some scholars have gone as far as to claim that Sufis borrowed the technique from Christian monks. Given its role in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, however, this seems a gratuitous hypothesis. In any case, Ibn 'Arabi throws a good deal of light on why it should be central not only to Sufism, but also to Islam in general.

The Islamic tradition is founded on knowledge. This is most evident in the first half of the testimony of faith, "There is no god but God," which epitomizes *tawhid* or the assertion of God's unity. Even those familiar with Islamic teachings, however, sometimes forget that *tawhid* has nothing to do with history, because it is simply a statement of the way things are. More sophisticated Muslim thinkers have always maintained that *tawhid* is a universal and atemporal truth. To be human is to have an intuition of this truth, and all the 124,000 prophets came with *tawhid* at the core of their message.

Tawhid expresses the nature of reality, irrespective of the existence of the universe, man, or any other created things. Given that we do have a world and human beings, however, the tradition takes into account a second fact, the human situation. It encapsulates this situation with the words "forgetfulness" (*nisyan*) and "heedlessness" (*ghafla*). Although people have an innate intuition of *tawhid*, they do not necessarily find it ready to mind. It may not be easy for them to bring it from latency to actuality or to voice it in language and put it into practice. They need the help of the prophets.

PROPHECY

With “prophecy,” the second principle of Islamic faith, the perspective shifts from atemporal to temporal, eternal to contingent, and God to history. The first function of the prophets is to “remind” people of their own divinely given reality. This word “remind” translates *dhikr* and several of its derivatives (*dhikra*, *tadhkir*, *tadhkira*). The Qur’an calls the human response to this reminder by the same word *dhikr*. The “reminder” that comes from God calls forth “remembrance” from man.

The use of one word to designate a bidirectional movement – from the divine to the human and from the human to the divine – is consistent with the Qur’an’s unitary perspective and recalls the parallel use of the word love: “He loves them and they love Him” (Q. 5: 54). “So remember Me, I will remember you” (Q. 2: 152).

Whether we speak of remembrance or love, there is in fact only one force, and that is the divine activity that makes manifest the good, the true, and the beautiful. God loves human beings and sends the prophets to remind them that he is the one source of love and the only real goal of love. The doctrine of “one-and-only-ness,” *tawhid*, is the foundation of the message. But the human response to the reminder does not simply entail acknowledging its truth. To remember God is to awaken to the innate understanding of God’s unity and to express this understanding in language and praxis.

If the first function of the prophets is to remind people of the One Reality and its love for them, their second function is to provide instructions that will allow people to live their lives in ways that are pleasing to that Reality and worthy of its love. The Qur’an calls these instructions “guidance” (*huda*). To follow the guidance of the prophets is to remember God in word, deed, and thought; or in works, states, and knowledge. It is this guidance that is fully actualized in the inheritance given to God’s friends.

As the human response to the divine reminder, remembrance can be defined as keeping God in mind at all times and in all activities. Ibn 'Arabi defines it in this sense as "presence with the One Remembered" (F. IV 36.8). If we remain absent from God in word, deed, or thought, in works, states, or knowledge, we have not remembered him as he should be remembered.

The Qur'an and the tradition sum up the practical implications of remembrance with the word *'ibada*, which means worship, service, and being a servant (*'abd*). As mentioned in Chapter 1, at the final stage of his ascent to God, Ibn 'Arabi came to understand that he had been witnessing nothing but the One Entity, i.e., God himself, and that the One Entity was nothing but his own *wujud*, the only *wujud* there is. His journey to God had been in himself. At that point he saw that he had become "a sheer servant," with no trace of "lordliness" whatsoever.

The fact that "servanthood" is the highest human perfection is one of Ibn 'Arabi's constant themes. As Muslims well know, "servant" is Muhammad's first title, mentioned in the rites before "messenger" (*'abduhu wa rasuluhu*). It should come as no surprise that Ibn 'Arabi uses the expression "Perfect Servant" interchangeably with "Perfect Man."

Worship and servanthood are the most important of human tasks. When God says in the Qur'an, "I created jinn and mankind only to worship/serve Me" (Q. 51: 56), the tradition understands this to mean that people must conform to the Divine Reality. They do so by remembrance, which entails their works, states, and knowledge and involves right speech, right activity, and right understanding. The criterion for "rightness" is the degree to which people understand, act, and exist in the presence of God.

Islamic faith has three principles, not just two. After divine unity and prophecy comes *ma'ad*, the "return" to God,

commonly discussed in terms of death and resurrection. Since everyone dies and is brought forth into the presence of God, the afterlife is often called the “compulsory return.” But many theologians, philosophers, and spiritual teachers place far greater stress on the “voluntary return,” that is, choosing freely to undertake the return to God here and now.

To sum up, the general Islamic understanding of the human situation is that correct knowledge of the world and the human soul demands that people freely and actively undertake the journey back to their Creator. They do so by remembering him on every level of their being. To remember him is to make the fact of his unity, his absolute and infinite reality, the axis of thought, speech, and activity. This is precisely “worship” and “servanthood,” which are the appropriate response to *tawhid* and prophecy. Thus the Qur’an speaks of *tawhid* and worship as the two basic dimensions of every authentic tradition: “We never sent a messenger before you without revealing to him, ‘There is no god but I, so worship/serve Me’ ” (Q. 21: 25).

THE BOOK OF THE SOUL

In the process of detailing God’s names and activities, the Qur’an goes to extraordinary lengths to emphasize that it is God’s book, speech, and words. It maintains that all revelation to the prophets is nothing but God’s speech, and that God speaks to the prophets to clarify the nature of things and to explain the appropriate human response. Moreover, it tells us repeatedly that God creates the world by speaking. Just as the Qur’an and other scriptures are collections of God’s “signs” or “verses” (*ayat*), so also the whole universe is a vast collection of God’s signs and verses. In effect, God creates the universe by revealing three books – the universe, the human self, and scripture. In each book he displays his signs and writes out his words.

Once we understand that reality is configured by speech, we see that the human task is to read and understand what has been written and to follow the instructions. The interpretation of the Qur'an is the foundation and fruit of all Islamic sciences, and it has always entailed the simultaneous interpretation of the universe and the soul. Every Muslim, by accepting the Qur'an as God's Speech, has accepted the responsibility of understanding what God is saying. The fruit of this understanding redounds on the soul.

Every soul will answer for its own reading, not only of scripture, but also of the other two books. And, given that the soul's understanding is written out in itself, the soul's own book is the all-important determinant of its destiny. This helps explain why, in recounting the events that will take place on the day of resurrection, the Qur'an says that every human being will be addressed by the words, "Read your book! Your soul suffices you today as a reckoner against you!" (Q. 17: 14).

The crux of knowledge, then, is to understand one's own soul. The voluntary return teaches people how to interpret themselves by discerning the wisdom present in both revelation and the cosmos. The return reaches its fruition on the day of resurrection. What we should want to learn is who we are now and who we will be when we arrive back at the meeting with God. All other knowledge should be subordinate to this knowledge.

THE BREATH OF THE ALL-MERCIFUL

When Ibn 'Arabi discusses God's creation of the universe by speech, he frequently elaborates on the expression "the Breath of the All-merciful," which he borrows from a prophetic saying. According to the Qur'an, it is God as the All-merciful who sits on the Throne, which embraces the whole universe. God is the

King (*al-malik*), as the Qur'an tells us, and every king has a throne and a kingdom. God's kingdom is the cosmos in its entirety. He sits on his Throne as All-merciful because the divine mercy – which is the bestowal of the good, the beautiful, and the true – determines the nature of the universe. According to the Prophet, the inscription on the Throne reads, “My mercy takes precedence over My wrath.”

Another saying tells us that God's Throne is the human heart. It follows that, just as nothing lies beyond the macrocosmic Throne but God, so also nothing is found at the center of the microcosmic Throne but God. Hence the famous divine saying said to have been related by the Prophet: “My heavens and My earth embrace Me not, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me.”

When the All-merciful speaks, he articulates words in his Breath, so his Breath is the underlying stuff of the universe. It is the page upon which God writes out the cosmic book. The nature of the words that appear in the Breath is suggested by the etymology of the words *kalam*, “speech,” and *kalima*, “word.” Both derive from *kalm*, which the Arabic dictionaries define as *jarh*, which means to cut or wound. *Jarh* in turn is explained more generally to mean *ta'thir*, to leave traces and marks. Basing himself on these standard definitions, Ibn 'Arabi says that the divine speech leaves traces in the All-merciful Breath. Each word is a “cut” or an “articulation,” even though the Breath itself remains forever untouched and uncut.

In the eternal now, God speaks one word, and that is the command “Be!” This word gives rise to the beginningless and endless succession of words and worlds that unfold in the spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal realms. The one word “Be” (*kun*) bestows being (*kawn*), so all things are implicitly contained within it. God directs this word toward everything that he wants to bring into existence: “Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it ‘Be!’ so it comes to be” (Q. 16: 40).

The “things” to which God speaks abide in “nonexistence,” which, as we have seen, is the realm of divine omniscience. God knows all things, all entities, for all eternity, but they have no existence of their own. When he says “Be!” to them, they come to be articulated in his Breath. Their being belongs not to them, but to the divine Breath within which they are voiced.

Given that creatures are nothing but words uttered by God, human knowledge of things can be nothing but knowledge of the divine words. As Ibn 'Arabi puts it, “The existence of the realm of being has no root other than the divine attribute of speech, for the realm of being knows nothing of God but His speech, and that is what it hears” (F. II 352.14).

If creatures know nothing but speech, this is because there is nothing else to be known. The speech they know says “Be!” to them, and it never ceases belonging exclusively to God. Speech is God’s true attribute, so the true attribute of creation is silence. When speech is attributed to creation, it is done so only inasmuch as God has bestowed it, just as, when being is attributed to creation, it is done so only inasmuch as God has said “Be!” to it. “When you hear the servant speaking, that is the Real’s bringing to be within him.” (F. III 218.34).

All things are words of God, silent in and of themselves. All are modes of being, nonexistent in themselves. It is *wujud* who speaks through them, hears through them, sees through them, and remembers through them. And it is *wujud* that is spoken, heard, seen, and remembered.

The cosmos has received nothing from the Real but *wujud*, and *wujud* is nothing other than the Real ... So nothing remembers Him but something that has been given *wujud*, for there is nothing else ... The cosmos stays in nonexistence according to its root, though its properties become manifest in the *wujud* of the Real. (F. IV 92.12)

KNOWLEDGE OF THE NAMES

Islamic theology calls creatures “acts” of God. Ibn ‘Arabi explains that these acts are nothing but the traces of God’s names, the *vestigia Dei*. But what about the divine names themselves? What exactly are they? When we speak of names (*ism*) – whether we are talking about God or creatures – we are speaking about “Something that occurs from a trace, or something from which a trace comes to be” (F. II 120.13). So again, a name, like other words, is a trace, a scratch, a cut, or an articulation in the plain fabric of universal, uncut *wujud*.

The ultimate source of all names and all realities is the very Selfhood of God, the Essence. In himself, God knows all things, because things are simply the traces of his knowledge of his Essence, which is Infinite and Absolute *Wujud*. God knows not only his own names, but also the names of all things and all creatures. If he calls himself by many names both in the Qur’an and in other scriptures, it is because the traces of the names are infinitely diverse. As Ibn ‘Arabi puts it, “God made the divine names many only because of the diversity of the traces manifest in the realm of being” (F. IV 36.19).

From one standpoint, the divine names are the traces of the divine attributes and qualities that become manifest in creation. God names himself in terms of the creatures, which are the words that he pronounces. Within the creatures, certain qualities can be discerned, and these can only be the qualities of their Speaker. The Speaker reveals himself through the attributes of creation as Merciful, Alive, Knowing, Powerful, Speaking, and so on down the list of the most beautiful names that he pronounces in the Qur’an.

All names, whether of God or creation, are in the last analysis traces of the Essence, which in itself is traceless and unknown. Nonetheless, man has been given the capacity to know all the names – all the traces displayed by the Essence,

traces that are nothing but the words voiced in the All-merciful Breath. It is this potential omniscience that sets man apart from other creatures. When the Prophet said, "God created Adam in his own form," he certainly had in mind the fact that God had given Adam knowledge of all things: "He taught Adam the names, all of them" (Q. 2: 31).

Ibn 'Arabi points out that names make remembrance possible. This holds true not only for man, but also for God, who knows things through their names, which are nothing but their traces in his own omniscience, traces known as "entities": "Were it not for the names, God would remember nothing, and nothing would remember God. So, God remembers only through the names, and He is remembered and praised only through the names" (F. II 489.26).

ALL-COMPREHENSIVENESS

In sum, the distinguishing feature of man is the potential to know all the names, which are the traces of the divine attributes, or the traces of the divine Essence itself. In the creative act of the eternal now, God voices the names, and they appear as creatures in the All-merciful Breath. The endless array of creatures are specific words of God. Every creature has an understanding of God, but only in respect of the name or names that differentiate it from other named things. Only man was taught all the names, making him somehow equivalent to all of creation.

In the universe as a whole, the names are infinitely differentiated, but in the divine form that is man, the names are brought together as an all-comprehensive epitome. Adam received the all-inclusive knowledge of the names when God taught it to him, and he was able to know all the names precisely because he was made in the form of God, who knows and utters all things.

In effect, among all creatures Adam alone was taught the meaning of the name “God” itself. He came to know and understand this name and all subsidiary names by knowing himself, made in God’s form. This sort of knowledge does not come by means of discursive thought, but directly from the nature of things. Ibn ‘Arabi refers to it as “tasting,” a standard expression for unmediated knowledge:

God taught Adam all the names from his own essence through tasting, for He disclosed Himself to him through a universal self-disclosure. Hence, no name remained in the Divine Presence that did not become manifest to Adam from himself. From his own essence he came to know all the names of his Creator. (F. II 120.24)

ACHIEVING THE STATUS OF ADAM

Quranic theology, rooted in words, names, and remembrance, allows Muslim sages to understand the human role in the cosmos largely in terms of the achievement of true knowledge of God. Those who do so are precisely “Perfect Man.” Historical examples are found in the prophets and some of the saints. Most people, however, remain at the level of what Ibn ‘Arabi sometimes calls “animal man.”

Perfect Man realizes the knowledge of the Hidden Treasure, a knowledge that is God’s goal in creating the universe. Only human beings can recognize God in the fullness of his divinity, because only they were created in the form of his all-comprehensiveness. The importance of this knowledge is already implicit in the Quranic statement, “I created jinn and mankind only to worship/serve Me” (Q. 51:56). As the Prophet’s companion Ibn Abbas explained, “to worship/serve Me” (*ya ‘buduni*) means “to know Me” or “to recognize Me” (*ya ‘rifuni*). Once one recognizes one’s own human status as a

servant and creature of God, one can give servanthood its full due by following prophetic guidance.

Creation has many levels, and the most perfect level is occupied by man. Each kind in the cosmos is a part with regard to man's perfection. Even animal man is a part of Perfect Man ... He created Perfect Man in His form, and through the form He gave him the ability to have all of His names ascribed to him, one by one, or in groups, though all the names together are not ascribed to him in a single word – thereby the Lord is distinguished from the Perfect Servant. Hence there is none of the most beautiful names – and all of God's names are most beautiful – by which the Perfect Servant is not called, just as he calls his Master by them. (F. III 409.16)

THE PERFECT SERVANT

In the diverse creatures of the cosmos other than man – on whatever level they may dwell, from spiritual and angelic to corporeal and sensory – the traces of God's names and attributes are externalized as the specific and unique characteristics of each creature. Everything in the universe knows God in a specific, differentiated, and determined way, defined by the attributes that the thing displays, or by the divine word that it embodies. Each thing gives news of God and displays his signs by occupying its own specific niche in the never-repeated speech of the All-merciful.

In the multileveled reality that is the human self, the traces of God's names and attributes are relatively internalized. They extend from the corporeal to the spiritual realm, and they circle around the heart, the luminous center of the being, the spirit that God blew into Adam at his creation.

Man alone is given the potential to know God in a global, synthetic manner, because he alone was created in the form not

of one or several specific names, but in the form of the all-comprehensive name that designates God as such, in both his absoluteness and his infinity, his Essence and his attributes, his incomparability and his similarity, his transcendence and his immanence. Only the human form denotes the meaning of God's all-comprehensive reality. Man is in effect God's greatest name. "You are the clearest and most magnificent denotation of God, for you have it in you to glorify Him through yourself ... You are His greatest name" (F. II 641.21).

If the fullness of worship and servanthood is to remember God in a manner appropriate to God's total reality, only those made in his form can be servants of God per se. Nonetheless, in a narrower sense, worship simply means serving God's purposes, and in this respect everything worships God, because created and contingent things can do nothing but serve the Necessary *Wujud* from which they arise: "There is nothing in the heavens and the earth that does not come to the All-merciful as a servant" (Q. 19: 93). Each servant – each creature – worships and serves God through its own mode of being. Each has a status determined by the manner in which the All-merciful articulates his Breath.

If human beings alone can achieve the station of being a perfect servant of God, this is because they are the exception to the rule of having a cosmic niche. In their perfected state, they have no specific mode of being, because their awareness and recognition have no boundaries. They alone are global images and forms of the All-knowing and the All-aware. In effect, they have the potential to be the form of the All-merciful Breath itself, the manifestation of all of *Wujud* and all the divine names and attributes. This, in Ibn 'Arabi's view, is the true meaning of the divine vicegerency bestowed upon Adam.

Whoever witnesses without cease what he was created for, in both this world and the next world, is the Perfect Servant, the

intended goal of the cosmos, the deputy of the whole cosmos. Were all the cosmos – the high of it and the low of it – to be heedless of God’s remembrance for a single moment, and were this servant to remember Him, he would stand in for the whole cosmos through that remembrance, and through him the existence of the cosmos would be preserved. (F. III 248.12)

THE HOUSE OF GOD

In sum, the Qur’an depicts God, the universe, and man in terms of words and speech. The three principles of Islamic faith – *tawhid*, prophecy, and the Return – are understood on the basis of his names and naming. The human task is to respond to our existential situation by remembering the names of things – the real and actual names of things inasmuch as they designate the Divine Reality, or inasmuch as they articulate the All-merciful Breath.

This task can only be accomplished through the heart, man’s spiritual and cognitive center. The heart alone can expand to become an unlimited realm of awareness and consciousness. Among all created things, only the heart has the capacity to encompass God. To remember God fully and actually is to find him sitting on his Throne in the microcosm.

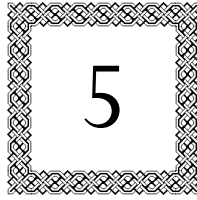
Knowing God demands recognizing all things as self-disclosures of the Real, as signs and traces displaying God’s names and attributes. This is not a theoretical sort of knowledge, but a knowledge of gnosis and tasting. It is a true vision of the divine omnipresence, the fact that “Wherever you turn, there is the face of God” (Q. 2: 115). Such knowledge comes by way of remembrance, which is “presence with the One Remembered.”

Once we achieve presence, then we see that everything in this world is accursed inasmuch as it does not disclose the Real,

and that we ourselves are accursed inasmuch as we fail to recognize things as his self-disclosures. At the same time, however, we see that the world is nothing but God's reminder to us, God's mention of himself. Our response can only be to follow the world's lead – to mention and remember God.

“This world is accursed,” says the hadith, “and accursed is everything within it, save the remembrance of God.” But, *everything* is the remembrance of God, so *nothing* is accursed. The alchemy of remembrance transmutes the accursed into the blessed. The place of remembrance, where God becomes truly present and man becomes truly blessed, is the heart. Only knowledge and recognition can bring the heart to life and make possible the achievement of human status. This is why Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

The greatest sin is what brings about the heart's death. It dies only by not knowing God. This is what is named “ignorance.” For the heart is the house that God has chosen for Himself in this human configuration. Someone like that, however, has misappropriated the house, coming between it and its Owner. He is the one who most wrongs himself, for he has deprived himself of the good that would have come to him from the Owner of the house – had he left the house to Him. This is the deprivation of ignorance. (F. III 179.6)



KNOWLEDGE AND REALIZATION

Ibn ‘Arabi’s basic goal in his writings is to show the way to the life of the heart. He wants to awaken in his readers the intuition of *tawhid* that lies at the root of their being and remind them of the way to achieve the worship and servanthood demanded by their very nature. Knowledge is fundamental to the task, so he constantly discusses it. His purpose, however, is not to provide an exhaustive theory or explanation. Rather, he wants to urge his readers to go beyond rote learning, to achieve understanding on their own, and to realize and verify for themselves the truth that is written out in the signs and verses of scripture, the universe, and the soul.

Ibn ‘Arabi often cites the divine command, “Say: ‘My Lord, increase me in knowledge’” (Q. 20: 114). Although this command is grammatically singular and typically taken as addressed to the Prophet, it also pertains to every human soul. If the Prophet himself, the embodied Logos, the Perfect Man par excellence, was commanded to ask God for greater knowledge and understanding, then all human beings must do the same.

The command to seek knowledge does not mean simply to acquire information and learning from people and books. Certainly, one must follow the guidance of scripture, but the quest to know is intensely personal. The opinions of experts,

scholars, and scientists have no relevance to true awareness. No one can know for you. The life of the heart pertains only to self-awareness, and the locus of self-awareness can only be one's own self.

KNOWLEDGE

Ibn 'Arabi agrees with the standard view that knowledge (*'ilm*) cannot be defined, because it is presupposed by every definition. He insists, nonetheless, that true knowledge attaches to the thing in itself, its "essence" (*dhat*), which in the final analysis is its fixed entity, or its reality as known to God.

Like anything else, knowledge has a divine root. The Qur'an says repeatedly that God knows everything. Real *Wujud* is not only that which truly is, but also that which truly finds and truly knows. To say that God has knowledge means that Real *Wujud* has permanent consciousness of its own reality; it is aware of itself and everything demanded by its absoluteness and infinity. God knows his Essence, his attributes, and his acts; he knows himself and all the entities.

Ibn 'Arabi sometimes speaks of the "four pillars" of Divinity, by which he means the four primary names upon which the cosmos is predicated. He typically lists them as Living, Knowing, Desiring, and Powerful. He points out that each of these names designates the exact same *Wujud*, but they have a logical interrelationship that helps us understand the underlying order of the universe.

God creates the cosmos through power, but he never exercises power without desiring to do so, which is to say that nothing arbitrary or meaningless ever happens in the universe. He cannot desire something without first knowing it, so desire is preceded by omniscience. And knowledge depends upon life.

Another way to understand the divine roots of knowledge is to notice that God is “the One/Many” (*al-wahid al-kathir*). In other words, Real *Wujud* is a single reality that is properly named by many names, though these do not compromise its unity in any way. God is *Wujud* – both Being and Finding – and within his own Singularity he finds the possible entities in all their infinity.

The first person to use the expression *wahdat al-wujud*, “the Oneness of Being,” as a technical term was Sa‘id ad-Din Farghani (d. c. 1300), a student of Ibn ‘Arabi’s primary disciple, Sadr ad-Din Qunawi. He did not claim, however, that the expression refers to Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective. Rather, he employed it in the course of discussing two principles in God that give rise to the universe. These are the oneness of God’s *wujud* and the manyness of the objects of his knowledge. The oneness of *wujud* gives rise to the existence that is shared by the entire cosmos, and the manyness of knowledge gives rise to the multiplicity of things and their constantly changing states. Both the oneness of being and the manyness of knowledge are subordinate to God’s unity.

As a divine attribute, then, knowledge designates Real *Wujud* as the one who is aware of self and others. As a human attribute, it designates human beings in the same way – inasmuch as we are aware and conscious of self and others. Truly to know is to remember the names taught to Adam, and there is nothing higher to which we can aspire. “There is no level more eminent than the level of knowledge” (F. III 448.7).

Given the primary importance that Ibn ‘Arabi accords to human knowing, his constant discussion of it, and the extraordinary extent of his literary corpus, it is beyond the scope of this chapter even to begin a survey of his views. Instead I will try to evoke his explanation of the benefit (*naḥ‘*) of knowledge. I have in mind the well-known saying of the Prophet, “I seek refuge in God from a knowledge that has no benefit.” Seeking

knowledge is, in the Prophet's words, "incumbent on every Muslim." What sort of knowledge must be sought, what sort should be avoided, and what exactly is the benefit to be gained?

BENEFIT

It would be fair to say that Ibn 'Arabi's writings attempt to expose the full range of things knowable to human beings – not exhaustively, of course, but inasmuch as these may be beneficial. "The various sorts of knowledge are not sought for themselves; they are sought only for the sake of that to which they attach" (Dh. 191), that is, for the sake of their objects. Which object or objects, once known, are beneficial for human beings?

Benefit needs to be understood in the broadest sense – that is, in the light of the three principles of faith: *tawhid*, prophecy, and the return to God. From this standpoint, beneficial knowledge can only be that which accords with the Real and profits man at the return. Any knowledge that does not yield benefit in these terms is not Quranic knowledge, so it is not Islamic knowledge, and, one could argue, it is beneath human dignity to seek it. Certainly, there may be need for knowledge on various social and individual levels, but such knowledge should be sought only insofar as it is a necessary preparation for the greater knowledge. "The right-thinking man has no aspiration save toward knowledge of Him" (F. IV 129.6).

In a letter addressed to the famous theologian and Qur'an commentator, Fakhr ad-Din Razi, Ibn 'Arabi suggests something of the benefit of knowledge and differentiates between knowledge that is truly important and imperative, and the various types of knowledge with which people divert themselves from their divine calling. He asserts that genuinely worthwhile knowledge is only the knowledge of God that comes by way of

“bestowal” (*wahb*) and “witnessing” (*mushahada*), which is to say that it cannot be acquired from books or teachers.

Ibn ‘Arabi explains to Razi that a wise and intelligent human being seeks only those sorts of knowledge that will aid him in perfecting his soul and will then accompany him in the stages of becoming after death, what Ibn ‘Arabi calls “the homesteads of the afterworld.” Other sorts of knowledge – such as medicine or mathematics – are useful only in this world, so they will be left behind at death.

Hence, the intelligent person should not partake of any knowledge save that which is touched by imperative need. He should struggle to acquire what is transferred along with him when he is transferred. This is none other than two knowledges specifically – knowledge of God, and knowledge of the homesteads of the afterworld and what is required by its stations, so that he may walk there as he walks in his own home and not deny anything whatsoever. (R. 6–7)

What about knowledge of the Shariah? Is such knowledge imperative? The answer is, “To a degree.” Like most other forms of knowledge, knowledge of the revealed law has no benefit once a person reaches the next world. *Taklif* – God’s “burdening” the soul by prescribing worship for it – is cut off at death. In the afterworld, everyone will worship God with an essential worship, not with the secondary and accidental worship that is characteristic of believers in this world and depends on their knowledge of religious teachings. Hence knowledge of the Shariah is important to the extent that it is useful to guide the individual in his worship and service of God, but it has no use in the next world. One should learn it here only in the degree necessary.

Ibn ‘Arabi tells us that we need knowledge of the revealed law just as we need food, so we should exercise moderation and partake of it only in the measure in which we engage in activity,

which is precisely the realm to which such knowledge applies. Paying too much attention to it will produce illness of the soul, just as eating too much food produces illness of the body. In contrast, knowledge of God and of the homesteads of the after-world has no limit at which one can come to a halt. Only this sort of knowledge “will lead its knower to a preparedness for what is proper to each homestead” (F. I 581.29) and will allow people to answer for themselves on the day of judgment.

THE FORM OF GOD

Ibn 'Arabi supports his views on beneficial knowledge with arguments based on ontology, theology, cosmology, anthropology, and spiritual psychology. The most basic argument can perhaps be called “anthropological,” in that it is grounded in an understanding of what makes human beings human. The axioms here are “God created Adam in His form” and “He taught him the names, all of them” (Q. 2: 31).

It was noted that the Sufis use the word “form” (*sura*) as the opposite of “meaning” (*ma'na*). The form is the external appearance of a thing, its outwardness (*zahir*), or its corporeality. The meaning is the invisible reality of a thing, its inwardness (*batin*), its spiritual essence, or its fixed entity. To say that God created man in his own form implies that man's meaning is designated by God's all-comprehensive name, which denotes both the Essence and all the divine attributes.

When the Qur'an says God taught Adam “all the names,” this means that he taught him all the names of God and creation. These names designate God as the One/Many, the single Essence that comprehends all reality, what Ibn 'Arabi commonly calls “the Divine Presence”: “There is nothing in *wujud* save the Divine Presence, which is His Essence, His attributes, and His acts” (F. II 114.14).

The “meaning” that Adam came to know is God, and Adam’s knowledge is the “form” of that meaning. But Adam’s knowledge is not disassociated from Adam’s being, just as God’s knowledge is nothing other than his *wujud*. The very knowledge infused into Adam by God is the very being that sustains him, the word that articulates him in the divine breath.

The human soul, then, has a beginning, because God gave it existence, but no end, for there can be no end to the knowledge that unfolds from its fixed entity. The beginningless and endless divine Meaning imbues the human soul with a boundless form, and this same Meaning articulates a limitless cosmos in the Breath of the All-merciful.

Correct knowledge of the cosmos is in fact knowledge of God’s outward and inward signs. Ibn ‘Arabi sees this already implicit in the Arabic language, where the words “cosmos” (‘*alam*), “knowledge” (‘*ilm*), and “mark” (‘*alama*) all derive from the same root: “We mention the ‘cosmos’ with this word to give ‘knowledge’ that by it we mean that He has made it a ‘mark’” (F. II 473.33).

Although knowledge of the cosmos must be acquired in the process of knowing oneself and one’s Lord, it can also be the greatest of veils. The more we focus on signs without recognizing what they signify, the deeper and denser becomes the darkness that prevents us from seeing things as they are.

RELIABLE KNOWLEDGE

The universe is the realm of possibility, in contrast with the Necessary *Wujud* of God and the impossibility of sheer non-existence. The Qur’an tells us repeatedly that God is powerful over everything. There can be no end to things when they have an infinite source. It follows that “Knowledge of the possible realm is an all-embracing ocean of knowledge that has

magnificent waves within which ships founder. It is an ocean that has no shore save its two sides" (F. III 275.15), which are Necessity and impossibility, or the Essence of God and absolute nothingness.

Trying to know things in terms of other things is like trying to pinpoint a wave in the ocean. In itself, the shore of Necessity cannot be known, because none knows God but God. Nor can anyone know the shore of absolute nothingness, because there is nothing there to be known. This helps explain Ibn 'Arabi's radical agnosticism concerning knowledge of things without reference to divine instruction. "It is impossible for anything other than God to gain knowledge of the cosmos, of the human being himself, or of the self of anything by itself" (F. III 557.4). True knowledge, in other words, belongs to God alone, and human knowledge can be reliable only inasmuch as it partakes of divine knowledge. As the Qur'an puts it, "They encompass nothing of His knowledge save as He wills" (2: 254).

The knowledge that people are able to acquire by their own efforts situates things in relation to other things or, at best, in relation to God. Only God has direct, unmediated knowledge of himself and things as they are. God can bestow direct knowledge of himself, but even then, none knows God but God. What in fact happens is that God becomes the hearing through which the servant hears, and the intelligence through which he knows.

Given the impossibility of any real knowledge without reference to God, it should come as no surprise that Ibn 'Arabi frequently discusses the inadequacy of reason for achieving true understanding. Every knowledge gained by rational thought or by any other purely human mode of knowing is obscured by created limitations. People can understand only inasmuch as their native ability, circumstances, upbringing, and training allow them to. They know in the measure of their own selves, which is to say that, in the last analysis, they know only

themselves. “The thing knows nothing but itself, and nothing knows anything except from itself” (F. III 282.34).

FOLLOWING AUTHORITY

Ibn ‘Arabi demonstrates the futility of independent human effort to achieve real knowledge in many ways. He points out, for example, that all knowledge comes from outside the knowing self. In acquiring knowledge, we are forced to depend on others and trust in them. We “follow authority” (*taqlid*) in our knowledge. Following authority is much discussed in jurisprudence, where it is contrasted with *ijtihad*, the competence to make independent legal judgments. If a believer has not totally mastered the sources of jurisprudence, then he must take his knowledge of proper activity from someone who has.

In the intellectual sciences such as philosophy, following authority is contrasted not with *ijtihad* but with *tahqiq* or “realization,” which entails knowing things by finding their realities in the transcendent reality of the Universal Intellect (i.e., the divine spirit). Like the philosophers, Ibn ‘Arabi takes the position that the purpose of seeking knowledge is to achieve realization and to know the realities for oneself. This is precisely the sort of knowledge that people do not have, because they follow the authority of teachers, books, public opinion, scientists, experts, their own sense faculties, imagination, and reason, all of which are unreliable. Anyone who has not achieved realization does not know the realities of things. “Since it has been affirmed,” says Ibn ‘Arabi, “that other than God cannot have knowledge of anything without following authority, let us follow God’s authority, especially in knowledge of Him” (F. II 298.3).

The way to follow God’s authority is to tread in the footsteps of the prophets, Muhammad specifically. But it is not enough

simply to accept prophetic instruction and put it into practice. The full and integral prophetic inheritance demands receiving knowledge directly from God by way of “bestowal and witnessing.” The messengers themselves, the paradigms of human perfection, received their knowledge precisely by this route.

“The day God will gather the messengers and say, ‘What response did you receive?’ They will say, ‘We have no knowledge; Thou art the Ever-knowing of the absent things’” [Q. 5: 109]. No one has any knowledge save those whom God has taught. Other than this divine path in teaching, there is nothing but the predominance of conjecture, knowing by chance, or being convinced by fantasy. (F. IV 80.33)

REALIZATION

Ibn 'Arabi maintains that real knowledge alone is truly beneficial, and that such knowledge is true knowledge of Real *Wujud*, received by following God's authority. Every other sort of knowledge must be subservient to it. It is this knowledge that provides the means to know the Hidden Treasure and to achieve God's purpose in creating the universe. Through it people actualize their own selfhoods as forms of God and reach everlasting felicity. They become, in short, Perfect Man.

In order to achieve realization, one must transcend the limitations of all modes of knowing save the one mode that recognizes the relative validity of each mode while not being bound or restricted by any. This is precisely “the station of no station” or “the standpoint of no standpoint.” It is achieved by “the Muhammadans,” those who receive the inheritance of all prophetic wisdom from Muhammad.

Realization, then, is the full actualization of beneficial knowledge. The Arabic word, *tahqiq*, is the second form of the verb

from the root *h-q-q*, from which we have two words of great importance for the Islamic sciences – *haqq* and *haqiqa*. The second, *haqiqa*, means “reality,” and a great deal could be said about what it means in Ibn ‘Arabi’s terms and in the Islamic sciences in general. The English translation suggests some of the directions in which a discussion would take us. All we have to do is pose questions like “What is reality?” or “What is the reality of a thing?” to fall into the most difficult of philosophical issues.

The word *haqq* is perhaps more significant than *haqiqa* for grasping the sense of *tahqiq*. *Haqq* means not only “real,” as I usually translate it, but also true, proper, appropriate, right, and just. As a Quranic divine name, it means the Real, the Truth, the Right. From early times, it was used as a virtual synonym for the name God (Allah). It is typically juxtaposed with *khalq*, “creation.”

It can be said that there are two basic realities, *haqq* and *khalq*, or the Real and creation. The status of the Real is perfectly clear, because “There is no god but God,” which is to say that there is nothing real, true, right, proper, appropriate, and just in the full senses of the words but God. It is the status of created things that raises questions.

In investigating the status of creation, we can gain help by remembering that a second term, *batil*, is also juxtaposed with *haqq*. *Batil* means unreal, false, null, void, absurd. The Qur’an contrasts the two terms in a dozen verses, such as, “The *haqq* has come and the *batil* has vanished” (Q. 17: 41).

Although both *khalq* and *batil*, creation and unreal, are opposites of *haqq*, the two words are hardly synonymous. The unreal is totally other than the Real, the negation of the Real. But creation, though not the same as the Real, is also not completely different, because it is certainly not unreal, false, vain, and null. Its actual status is the first question of Islamic philosophy: “What is it?” This is the question of quiddity or essence, and it can be posed for everything in the cosmos.

THE AMBIGUITY OF CREATION

Creation has a status that is ambiguous, because it hangs between Real and unreal, God and nothingness, right and wrong, proper and improper, appropriate and inappropriate. We are creatures, so we need to understand the status of created things in order to live appropriately in the realm of being. We cannot avoid asking ourselves what we are and whether or not there is anything we can do to improve our status. If we can talk of improvement, we need standards by which to judge better and worse. To have standards, we need to know our purpose in existence, our real goal in life.

These then are the two foundational questions that arise from the human situation: “What [*ma*]?” and “For what [*lima*]?” What exactly are we, and why are we here? What is our actual situation, and what should we be doing to take advantage of it and reap its benefit? The process of asking these questions, answering them, and putting the answers into practice is what “realization” is all about.

One verse in particular plays a crucial role in Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of realization: “Our Lord is He who gave each thing its creation, then guided” (Q. 20: 50). Here we have the beginnings of an answer to the two questions.

What are we? Are we *haqq* or *batil*, real or unreal, appropriate or inappropriate? The basic answer is given by the first clause of the verse, “He gave each thing its creation.” The Real has determined and bestowed creation, and when the Real comes, the unreal vanishes. The Absolute *Wujud* gives existence to creatures and defines and determines their nature.

When we look at God's engendering command (*al-amr at-takwini*) – the fact that He says “Be!” (*kun*) to a thing and gives it being (*kawn*) – then we must conclude that creatures are *haqq*, which is to say that they are real, right, true, and appropriate.

Inasmuch as we can see the Real's activity in creation, we find the *haqq* manifest in *khalq*.

This brings us to the second question: Why are we here? It is answered implicitly by the second clause of the verse, "Then guided." First God creates the things, then he guides them. Our purpose in creation is to follow God's guidance. "I created jinn and mankind only to worship/serve Me" (Q. 51: 56). The prophetic messages lay down the paths of achieving appropriate and worthy worship and servanthood. These paths in turn lead to the station of vicegerency, for which Adam was created.

One cannot achieve the human purpose simply by following the engendering command. In any case, everything follows the engendering command by definition, so there is nothing else we can do. What complicates the human situation is the mysterious gift of freedom, the possibility of saying "Yes" and "No." The human purpose can only be achieved by responding positively to the "prescriptive command" (*al-amr at-taklifi*). With this command, relayed by the prophets, God provides instructions on right, true, and real knowledge and activity.

GIVING THINGS THEIR HAQQ

One of Ibn 'Arabi's several scriptural sources for his discussion of the *haqq* of created things is a well-known hadith that has come in many versions and in most of the standard sources. A typical version reads like this: "Your soul has a *haqq* against you, your Lord has a *haqq* against you, your guest has a *haqq* against you, and your spouse has a *haqq* against you. So, give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*."

"Giving to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*" provides a thumbnail definition of *tahqiq*. Realization is to recognize the reality, truth, rightness, and properness of things, and, on the basis of

this recognition, to give them their *haqq*, that is, what is appropriate for them and rightfully due to them.

From the point of view of the first question, "What are we?," the hadith of the *haqq*s explains that we and everything with which we interrelate have *haqq*s pertaining to us, which is to say that everything without exception has a proper situation, a correct mode of being, an appropriate manner of displaying the Real to us. It does so because "He gave each thing its creation," thereby establishing not only its *khalq*, but also its *haqq*. As the Qur'an puts it, "We created the heavens and the earth and what is between them only through the *haqq*" (15: 85). In this respect the creation of each thing is identical with its *haqq*, because the Absolute *Haqq* has bestowed its creation upon it.

In answer to the second question, "Why are we here?," the hadith of the *haqq*s tells us that we are here to achieve realization, which is to give "to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*." The human purpose is to live such that everything we do, say, and think is right, true, appropriate, worthy, and real. All things have *haqq*s against us, so, in the homesteads of the resurrection (or, if you prefer, in the posthumous realms of karmic repercussion), we will answer for the manner in which we dealt with those *haqq*s. Each *haqq* "against us" represents our responsibility toward God, the person, or the thing. The object has a right and, by that very fact, the subject that engages with it has a responsibility.

Only human beings were taught *all* the names, so they alone are able to recognize and realize the *haqq* of everything in existence. The *haqq* of God's vicegerents demands that they recognize the *haqq* of all things and act accordingly. When they deal with people, objects, and situations, they need to address their *haqq*s, which are identical with the created nature that God has given to each of them. That created nature is not only what is there, but also what is right and worthy. It lays moral and ethical responsibilities on human beings by its very reality.

Given that all things manifest the Absolute *Haqq* and that each thing possesses a relative *haqq*, and given that people will be held responsible for the *haqq*s that pertain to them, they need a scale by which to judge the extent of their responsibility and to learn how to deal with the *haqq*s. They cannot possibly know the *haqq* of things by their own lights or their own rational investigation of the world and the soul, for the relative *haqq* of creation is determined and defined by the Absolute *Haqq*, and the Absolute *Haqq* is unknowable except in the measure in which it chooses to disclose itself. The scale of measurement comes through the prophets, and it is the Qur'an that clarifies the *haqq* for Muslims: "With the *haqq* We have sent it down, and with the *haqq* it has come down" (Q. 17: 105).

One can conclude that for Ibn 'Arabi, God's primary prescriptive command – the command that addresses most directly the question "Why are we here?" – is expressed in the hadith of the *haqq*s by the sentence, "Give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*." This is realization, the goal of human existence.

THE RIGHTS OF GOD AND MAN

The first *haqq* that people must recognize is that of God himself, who is the Absolute *Haqq*, the basis for all *huquq* (plural of *haqq*). Indeed, many jurists and theologians have discussed the necessity of fulfilling what is commonly translated as "the rights of God" (*huquq Allah*). Nowadays in the Islamic languages, the whole discussion of "human rights" goes on employing this same word *huquq*, though it is often forgotten that human rights cannot be disassociated from divine rights and human responsibilities toward God.

The way to realize God as *Haqq* is to begin by perceiving him as the Truth and Reality that has a rightful claim upon all creatures, a claim that supersedes all other claims and that

establishes every claim and every right. The Qur'an is totally explicit about God's rightful claim on people. It criticizes them for paying attention only to what they perceive as their own *haqq*s and neglecting God's *haqq*. It calls this attitude by names such as *kuf*r (unbelief, ingratitude, truth-concealing), *zulm* (wrongdoing), and *fisq* (unrighteousness). In one verse, it lists many of the things that we see as having rightful claims upon us, and then tells us that nothing is due to them if it interferes with what is rightfully due to God:

Say: "If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your wives, your clan, your possessions that you have gained, commerce you fear may slacken, and dwellings you love – if these are more beloved to you than God and His Messenger and struggle in His path, then wait till God brings His command. God does not guide unrighteous people." (Q. 9: 24)

In short, the *haqq* that needs to be verified and realized before all other *haqq*s is that of God. This means, among other things, that one must carry out all human obligations toward God, which are precisely his "rights." The first of these is *tawhid*. As a well-known hadith puts it, "God's *haqq* against the servants ... is that they should worship Him and not associate anything with Him, ... and the servants' *haqq* against God" is that "if they do that, He will bring them into paradise."

THE SOUL'S *HAQQ*

After *tawhid*, human obligations toward God are defined by everything that *tawhid* demands. In the domain of creation, the first thing whose *haqq* is clarified by prophetic guidance is the human self or soul. Notice that the hadith of the *haqq*s begins, "Your soul has a *haqq* against you, your Lord has a *haqq* against you." Then it mentions guest, wife, etc. The order is not

accidental. Although observing “the rights of God” is the first priority, we need to know who we are. “He who recognizes himself will recognize his Lord.” When instructing people how they should supplicate God, the Prophet said, “Begin with yourself!” Only when we recognize our status vis-à-vis our Creator can we observe God’s rights.

On the Shariah level, discerning *haqq*s is relatively straightforward. It demands recognizing that we are addressed by the revealed law, and then observing the law to the best of our abilities. But the Shariah pertains to only a small portion of reality. What about the rest? God says, “I am placing in the earth a vicegerent” (Q. 2: 30). The duties of God’s representatives can not be limited to observing commands and prohibitions, which, for example, do not address the roots of morality and virtue. The Qur’an says, “God burdens a soul only to its capacity” (Q. 2: 286). Made in the form of God and taught all the names, the soul certainly has the capacity to know itself, the cosmos, and its Lord.

The issue of who we are pertains to ontology, cosmology, spiritual psychology, and the anthropology of human perfection. To give our own soul the *haqq* that is due to it, we must know the Meaning of which we are the form. Realization is the station of those who have achieved, by divine grace and solicitude, the full possibilities of human knowledge and existence. The realizers recognize the *haqq* in exactly the manner in which God has established it. By giving everything in the soul and the cosmos its *haqq*, they also give God his *haqq*, and they actualize the fullness of God-given knowledge and God-given reality.

Ibn ‘Arabi sums up his view of realization in a short chapter of the *Futuhat*. He explains that realization “is true knowledge of the *haqq* that is demanded by the essence of each thing.” Then he goes on to say that realization can be achieved only by becoming the object of God’s love, for things can be given their due only when God is one’s hearing, eyesight, and understanding.

One condition for the owner of this station is that the Real should be his hearing, his eyesight, his hand, his leg, and all the faculties that he puts to use. He acts in things only through a *haqq*, in a *haqq*, and for a *haqq*. This description belongs only to a beloved. He is not beloved until he is given nearness ...

God shows the realizer all affairs as established by the divine wisdom. He who has been given this knowledge has been given what is necessary for each of God's creatures ...

What is desired from realization is knowledge of what is rightly demanded by each affair, whether it be nonexistent or existent. The realizer even gives the unreal [*batil*] its *haqq* and does not take it outside its proper place. (F. II 267.17)



TIME, SPACE, AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF ETHICAL NORMS

In his voluminous writings on the cosmos, Ibn 'Arabi employs a great deal of the terminology used by Muslim philosopher-scientists like Avicenna and Averroes. Indeed, it is hardly possible to speak of the world without discussing basic modalities of its appearance, such as time and space, two important philosophical issues. Nowadays these two terms, however, have come to have much greater prominence than they did in premodern times. This is hardly surprising, given the focus of scientific cosmology on physical appearances instead of essences and realities.

When Ibn 'Arabi discusses time and space, he keeps in view their divine roots. There is nothing in the universe that is not a sign of God and his workings. As signs, time and space provide reminders for the human soul in its becoming. In other words, understanding them and perceiving their *haqq* has direct relevance to the task of achieving realization, or assuming as one's own the character traits of God.

THE METHODOLOGY OF REALIZATION

Ibn 'Arabi cannot properly be described by any of the conventional labels given to Muslim scholars, such as Sufi,

philosopher, theologian, jurist, Hadith expert, or Qur'an commentator, even though he was a master of all these fields. If we insist on putting a label on him, it would probably be most accurate simply to call him a "realizer," given that both he and his followers use the term "realization" to specify their own intellectual position. To grasp the role of time and space in his way of looking at things, we can do no better than to reflect once again on *tahqiq* as an approach to knowledge.

As already pointed out, God as *haqq* is the Real or the Reality, the True or the Truth, the Right, the Proper, the Just. When the word *haqq* is applied to creatures, it designates not only their "truth" and "reality," but also their rightful place in creation and the just and proper demands that they make upon human beings. When someone perceives the *haqq* of a thing, he has perceived not only its true and real nature, but also its "rights," or what is properly and rightfully due to it. In other words, such a person understands not only the thing itself, but also his own correct response to it. *Haqq* designates at once the objective reality of a thing and the responsibilities of the subject who encounters it.

Everything has a *haqq*, because each is created by the Absolute *Haqq*, thereby receiving a relative *haqq*. In the verse, "Our Lord is He who gave each thing its creation, then guided" (Q. 20: 50), a thing's "creation" can be understood as its actual reality at any given moment, and its "guidance" as the path it will follow in achieving the fullness of what it is to become. In other words, "creation" refers to the fact that each thing has come forth from Real *Wujud*, and "guidance" to the fact that the Real has provided each with a path back to its Source. Everything except human beings follows its own proper guidance simply by virtue of being a created thing. All obey the engendering command.

Human beings have a peculiar situation, because they alone were created in the form of God. Their creation – their

primordial nature – bestows upon them the potential to actualize the divine character traits as their own and to realize all-comprehensiveness. They are guided not only by their own nature, created in the form of God, but also by prophetic instruction. The latter is needed because, by virtue of their divine form, they possess a certain freedom of activity deriving from God’s trait of “doing what He desires” (Q. 2: 253). At the same time, their distance from their Source – their exposure to the realm of the unreal, the false, and the vain – makes them susceptible to forgetfulness and heedlessness. They cannot be counted upon to make the right choices in every situation.

The intelligence and discernment latent in human all-comprehensiveness can provide the ability to differentiate between *haqq* and *batil*, truth and untruth, right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate. People’s primordial nature forces them to play a role in becoming what they will become, and the guidance of the prophets directs them toward the fullness of the divine form. They cannot actualize their deiformity, however, unless they freely and actively choose the Real and avoid the unreal.

In short, each thing’s creation and guidance situate it in the grand scheme of *tawhid*. Nothing is unrelated to the Absolute *Haqq*. To give things their *haqq*s is first and foremost to understand them in relation to God. Many of the things whose *haqq*s need to be understood are made explicit by the tradition, such as self, God, visitor, and spouse. But this hardly exhausts the list. It is not too difficult to see that discerning the *haqq*s of things is the primary issue in all Islamic sciences qua *Islamic* sciences. It is intimately bound up with the interpretation of revealed scripture.

Scholars who specialized in transmitted learning (*al-‘ulum an-naqliyya*) were primarily interested in interpreting the Qur’an and Hadith with a view toward right activity. Scholars

who specialized in intellectual learning (*al-'ulum al-'aqliyya*) wanted to interpret and understand *all* things, not just scripture. They did not limit themselves to investigating the *haqq*s clarified in the Qur'an. They also tried to understand and act upon the *haqq*s laid bare in the other two books – the universe and the soul.

The jurists and theologians kept mostly to transmitted learning and focused on the explicit teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet. The Muslim philosophers set out to understand the nature of the objective world and the reality of the knowing subject. Realizers like Ibn 'Arabi brought together the study of all three books. Whichever of the three scriptures they interpreted, they dealt with it in terms of the same principles, the same realities, and the same ultimate *Haqq*. They saw that in each case, God makes demands upon us, and our duty as creatures is to act in keeping with those demands.

To verify and realize something, to discern its *haqq* and to act accordingly, is first of all to see how it displays the signs of God. This is not an abstract, theoretical enterprise, but a spiritual discipline. It is a way of training the soul to find God's names and attributes in all things and to realize them in oneself. The goal is to see "the face of God" that is found "wherever you turn" (Q. 2: 115), in every creature and in oneself, and to act accordingly.

If we understand things without taking into account the fact that they disclose the divine face and act as loci for the divine Self-disclosure, then we will have lost sight of their *haqq*s. By doing so, we will have lost sight of our own responsibility toward the things and their Creator. In other words, we will have lost sight of *tawhid* and fallen into *shirk* or "associating others with God," which, in Islamic terms, is the root of all negativity and misfortune.

TIME AND SPACE

The standard Arabic expression that corresponds to English “time and space” is *zaman wa makan*, which I would translate as “time and place,” or “time and location.” The word *makan* does not conjure up the vast empty reaches that are understood from the word “space.” Rather, it implies the fixed and exact locations in which things exist.

When Ibn ‘Arabi discusses *zaman* and *makan*, he typically speaks of them as “relations” (*nisab*). By doing so, he means to contrast them with entities, which are real things (though not necessarily existent things). He is saying that time and place designate interrelationships among things, but they themselves are not things. There is nothing out there that can properly be called “time” or “place.”

Relations per se do not exist, so it is always difficult to say exactly what they are. In other words, time and space are two abstract concepts that do not designate anything in the objective universe. They refer rather to the manner in which human observers see relationships among things. Using the terms tells us as much about our own subjectivity as it does about the world.

From Ibn ‘Arabi’s standpoint, if we want to verify the real, objective world and come up with a valid theory of how things hold together, we need to go beyond appearances and surface relationships. We need to penetrate into verities, principles, essences, and *haqq*s. Time and space are abstract concepts and insubstantial relationships, which helps explain why he – like most other Muslim thinkers – discussed them only with passing interest. It is far more important to discern what exactly is out there, not simply how things appear to us.

To discern what is actually there, we need to address the whole question of what *being there* means. In other words, the intellectual tradition focused not on the realm of external

being, but on the ultimate nature of being itself, and that demanded an understanding of *wujud* and its essential attributes and concomitants.

Wujud is the most real and concrete of all entities, because it underlies every object, every subject, every concept, and every relationship. *Wujud*, in other words, is God. True and unsullied *wujud* belongs to God alone, and everything else “exists” only in a manner of speaking, inasmuch as “He has given it its creation.” As for time and place, they tell us more about nonexistence than existence.

LOCATION

Of the two concepts, place or location is easier to understand. For Ibn 'Arabi, the first question in realization is how a thing or concept is related to the Absolute *Haqq*. How is location related to God? One way to answer this question is to reflect on the Arabic word *makan* itself. The grammatical pattern of the word, called “*maf' al*,” designates a “name of place” (*ism makan*). *Maktab*, for example, has the same pattern and means “place of writing,” though it has come to mean grammar school.

Makan itself is the most general word in the *maf' al* pattern, so much so that it gives its name to the pattern. It is the most general because its root is *kawn*, “being,” a word that applies to all created things, though not to the uncreated. The word *makan* means literally “place of being.” In other words, it designates the specific location within the matrix of the All-merciful Breath in which a thing comes to exist after God has uttered the engendering command “Be!” When this command gives *kawn* to a thing, it has its own specific place different from that of other things. Typically, *makan* is used for things found in the corporeal world, because spiritual beings are not localized, much less God.

The word *kawn* is almost never used for the “being” of God. Rather, *wujud* is used to designate God’s Necessary Being and his finding of self and others. *Kawn* is then the being that is acquired by things when God brings them into existence. The very use of the word *makan* or “place” tells us that something that did not have being has now entered into the realm of being. The cosmos as a whole is called *al-kawn*, “the (realm of) being,” the net result of God’s having said “Be!”

TIME

Makan designates the place and locatedness of something in the visible world, so the concept involves a certain fixity. But things are not in fact fixed, because both their being and their location change. As soon as we mention “change,” time enters the picture. The word *zaman* designates change and movement in the realm of being. It refers to changing relationships in the appearance of the cosmos. The being of the cosmos can never be fixed and stable, because permanence and stability are attributes of the Real, not creation. They belong to *wujud*, not *kawn*. “Time” is a name that we give to the pattern of ongoing changes that occur in the face of the cosmos.

Ibn ‘Arabi points out that both time and place are demanded by the realm of *kawn wa fasad*, “being and corruption,” a philosophical expression that is applied to everything that has a location. Its standard English equivalent is “generation and corruption.” Generation here means coming to be as a result of God’s creative act, and corruption means disappearance. To speak of being is to speak of place, because a thing’s being is localized. To speak of corruption is to speak of change, and changes are described in terms of time.

God is untouched by time, just as he is untouched by place. This is what is meant by words like *qadim* and *sarmadi*, both of

which mean eternal or outside time or beyond time. In contrast to eternal, temporal (*zamani*) refers to the changing relationships of created things.

ETERNITY

How then are eternity and time related? Is the relationship between God and the world a fixed relationship of eternity or a changing relationship of time? These questions are versions of the central issue in *tawhid*: “How are the many related to the One?” Answering such questions has always posed major difficulties for theologians and philosophers. One of the several ways in which Ibn ‘Arabi addresses it is in terms of the word *dahr*, which I would translate as “Aeon.” (In medieval Western philosophy, Aeon can designate an intermediate realm of unchangeable created things, perhaps what Ibn ‘Arabi means by the fixed entities.)

Arabic texts often treat Aeon as a name of God, and Ibn ‘Arabi considers it as such. In some passages he says that Aeon and time are the same thing, but more commonly he differentiates between the two. He tells us that Aeon is God’s name inasmuch as he gives rise to the changing conditions of the universe, the flow of events that we call time. Thus it designates the relationship between eternity and time.

The Qur’an mentions “the Days of God” (Q. 14: 5), and Ibn ‘Arabi takes this as a reference to the prefiguration of temporal differentiation in the Divine Knowledge. It is the Days of God that give birth to the unfolding temporal cycles of our world. He tells us that these Days all belong to the name Aeon, which designates God as the principle of time. Just as God’s attribute of knowledge is the root of all awareness and understanding in the universe, and just as his mercy is the root of all mercy, compassion, and kindness, so also God as Aeon underlies time and becoming.

God has days of differing length that are related to various names. The Qur'an says that the angels and the Spirit rise up to God in a day whose length is fifty thousand of our years, and it relates this fifty-thousand-year day to the divine name *dhu'l-ma'arij*, "the Possessor of the Ladders" (Q. 70: 3–4). The Qur'an also speaks of a one-thousand-year day (Q. 32: 5), and Ibn 'Arabi explains that it is connected to the name *rabb*, "Lord." He also mentions several other divine days of varying length, each related to a specific divine name.

The most all-embracing of the Days of God is the "Day of the Essence," to which Ibn 'Arabi finds a reference in the verse, "Each day He is upon some task" (Q. 55: 29). God's Essence, denoted here by the pronoun He, is Absolute, Real, Unchanging *Wujud*. One might think that the Day of the Essence is the longest of the Divine Days. This is true, but Ibn 'Arabi points out that from our standpoint, it is the shortest. Its length is one instant, which is the present moment. There is no time shorter than the present moment, which is defined precisely as the instant that cannot be divided into parts. But, this shortest of Divine Days lasts forever. We never leave the present moment, because we never leave the Divine Presence.

To come back to the name Aeon, Ibn 'Arabi says that it designates God inasmuch as he is the possessor of Days. Each Day is divided into day and night. "The Aeon," he writes, "is nothing but daytime and night" (F. IV 87.18), because the properties and traces of the Days of God constantly change. During daytime, a divine name's traces become manifest, and at night they stay hidden. Each of God's Days has cycles of manifestation and non-manifestation, or display and concealment. These cycles underlie the changes that occur throughout the universe for all time.

As for the daytime and night of the Day of the Essence, these are the fact that God is forever present and absent, or the fact

that what prevents us from seeing God's face is precisely the face of God before our eyes. As Ibn 'Arabi says in a short invocation that expresses this paradox, "Glory be to Him who veils Himself through His manifestation and manifests Himself through His veil!" (F. III 547.12).

CONSTANT TRANSFORMATION

In several passages, Ibn 'Arabi tells us that the specific characteristic of the divine name Aeon is *tahawwul*, that is, constant change and transformation. Inasmuch as God is Aeon, he brings about the ceaseless transformation and alteration of the universe. Change is so basic to creation that, as Ibn 'Arabi frequently remarks, God's signs never repeat themselves, whether in time or in place. This is the meaning of his maxim, "There is no repetition in Self-disclosure."

At each moment, every sign of God – every creature in its momentary reality – is unique, because it manifests God's own uniqueness. Nothing is ever the same as anything else, and no moment of anything can ever be repeated. Every creature at every moment has a unique *haqq*, and the goal of realization is to perceive and act upon all these instantaneous, never-repeating *haqq*s in every time and in every place, just as God perceives and acts upon these *haqq*s in the Day of the Essence.

If every creature is constantly changing, do creatures have nothing permanent? Do we and other things have no real and fixed identity? Ibn 'Arabi answers this question by having recourse, once again, to the divine names. God is both omniscient and eternal. It follows that God knows all things for all eternity. "Not a leaf falls but He knows it" (Q. 6: 59). All things are permanent in his knowledge. They do in fact have fixed identities, and we can be sure that our persons are eternal in God. However, everything in the realm of being and

corruption undergoes change and disappearance, which is to say that all things experience time.

We can sum up this brief discussion of the *haqq* of time and place in terms of two divine names: Speaker and Aeon. As Speaker, God says “Be!” in the Day of the Essence, so at every instant he recreates the realm of being and location. As Aeon, he manifests his names and attributes through the diversity of his Days, whose days and nights display and conceal his never-ending signs.

ETHICS

It goes without saying that the perspective of *tahqiq* demands a radically different standpoint from the perspectives that infuse modern thinking – whether we are talking about science, philosophy, sociology, ideology, theology, or whatever. The difference in standpoint is so stark that it might be imagined that there is no relationship between *tahqiq* and modern thought. Nonetheless, the attempt to draw parallels may provide insight into the significance of realization for Ibn ‘Arabi and the Islamic tradition.

The first point to remember here is that, according to the standpoint of realization, it is impossible to know things properly and truly if we do not combine the knowledge of their objective reality with the rightful demands that they make upon us as knowing subjects. If we break things out of the context of the divine signs – the divine faces or the divine *haqq*s – then we dissociate them from Real *Wujud*. By doing so, we negate *tawhid*, which is to say that we destroy the interrelationships established by the divine Unity, because we put Reality on one side and things on the other. Things are then simply “objects” without any real connection to their Source. They are *khalq* deprived of *haqq*, creatures wrenched from their context

in the whole of Reality, relativities deprived of their absolute point of reference.

One of the many implications of the perspective of *tahqiq* is found in the domain of ethics. Modern thought in its various forms investigates objects, relationships, and concepts. At the same time, it strips these of their *haqq*s, that is, their characteristic of having real relationships with the Real and of making demands on the subjects who deal with them. Hence the question of right activity is relegated to the beliefs and opinions of the human observer. It is ascribed to the side of the subject and negated from the side of the object.

Typically in the modern view of things, the object out there is thought to be indifferent to the observing subject, with the exception of other human beings (who have, for example, "human rights"). Nowadays, of course, ecologists and others are striving mightily to recognize the rights of non-human creatures, but "hard science" cannot take these efforts seriously. Despite the critiques of numerous philosophers and thinkers, the predominant view among practicing scientists and popular scientism has been and continues to be that "objective knowledge" is value-free.

From the standpoint of *tahqiq*, talk in these terms abuses the words "subject" and "object." If the word "objective" is to have any real significance, then it must designate knowledge that is rooted in the actual reality of things. The "actual reality of things" is incomprehensible without knowledge of the Ultimate Reality, the Unique *Haqq*, the Origin and Return of all things.

In Real *Wujud*, subject and object converge. Ibn 'Arabi would say that the divine root of all subjectivity is the fact that God is Knower, and the divine root of all objectivity is that he is his own object of knowledge. In other words, God is *wujud*, and he finds all things as fixed entities in the midst of his own finding of himself, his own knowledge and consciousness. He is the One/Many, the Knower/Known.

To discern the *haqq* of things is to find their objective realities and to act in accordance with the demands that these realities make upon us. We cannot dissociate object from subject and then claim that the object has no divine rights, that it lays no obligations on the subject who knows it. Anyone who wants to investigate “objective” truth must at the same time investigate “subjective” truth. Not to do so is to ignore the *haqq* of both the object and the subject.

LOST IN THE COSMOS

Modern thought has no access to the *haqq*s of things, so talk of ethics and morality typically goes on in terms of self-interest and social stability. But what is this “self” whose interest we are trying to discern, and what is the *haqq* of society? If we do not know the *haqq* of the human self, we are left with a discussion of self-interest based on a misunderstanding of the self and its becoming. Without knowledge of the *haqq*s of the selves who make up any collectivity, the *haqq* of society cannot be known. Yet, contemporary disciplines, with their ever-increasing specialization, are based upon separating things out from their cosmic and human contexts – not to mention their divine context.

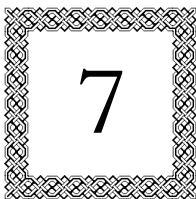
Clearly, modern discussions of human nature and ethics give no thought to the fact that human beings are made in the form of Real *Wujud*, or the fact that their innate, primordial nature embraces a knowledge of all things. Nor do these discussions take into account the sure criterion of the ultimate significance of all human reality and all human becoming, the return to God after death. *Tahqiq* demands that we understand that God gave each thing not only its creation, but also its guidance. Without understanding the final goal of becoming, there is no possible way to understand the significance of the world.

If it is true that ethics cannot be integrated into modern science, this would be sufficient proof for Ibn 'Arabi that science is fundamentally flawed and ultimately *batil* – unreal, vain, null, void. This is not only because it ignores the *haqq*s of things, but also because it cannot possibly not ignore the *haqq*s of things. If it did not ignore them, it would betray its own methodology and cease being worthy of the name “science.”

By definition, scientific research is cut off from anything beyond the realm of “being and corruption,” the realm of time and space, and by definition it leaves out the “subject.” It may be that some of the latest theories in quantum mechanics are stretching the limits of “scientific” reality, but, compared to any traditional cosmology, the quantum universe remains enormously impoverished.

In short, modern science specifically and modern learning in general cannot allow for the objectivity of ethical and moral standards. Today’s critical methodologies can never acknowledge that people – much less animals, plants, and inanimate objects – have *haqq*s that belong to the very stuff of reality.

From Ibn 'Arabi’s standpoint, modern thought is the study of the ocean’s waves and the simultaneous rejection of the reality of the ocean. By self-imposed methodological constraints, scientists and scholars deal only with the surface of reality. They think – or at least they practice their professional disciplines as if they think – that there are waves but no ocean. Studying waves will never provide access to the ocean without shore.



THE IN-BETWEEN

Translators of Greek texts into Arabic rendered *psyche* as *nafs*, the usual English equivalent of which is “self” or “soul.” In Arabic *nafs* functions as the reflexive pronoun, like *self* in English but unlike *psyche* in Greek. As such, it can be applied to anything – the rock itself, God himself. Already in the Qur’an, however, it is used dozens of times with the definite article but without reference to a noun. In these instances, it is understood to designate the human self as a generic term, and translators typically render it as “the soul.”

As a designation for the human self or soul, *nafs* is used in all schools of Islamic learning. The word was given a variety of definitions, but generally it was taken to refer to the totality of constituents that make up a human being, including body and spirit; or, to all the components of any living being that are more than simply the body. Sometimes *nafs* was distinguished from spirit (*ruh*), and sometimes it was not.

In keeping with one common usage, Ibn ‘Arabi often speaks of the *nafs* as the net result of the divine act through which human beings were created. Mythically, this act is depicted as God’s molding the clay of Adam with his two hands and then blowing his spirit into the clay. Once the clay came to life through the divine spirit, Adam “himself” came to be distinguished from the components that gave rise to him. Thus the *nafs* – the self or soul – is what comes into being when God

combines body and spirit. It is neither the spirit, nor the body, nor something completely new. Already in the myth, the domain of the human soul is “in between” – that is, between the divine breath and the earthly clay, or between spirit and body.

RELATIVITY

Ibn 'Arabi considers knowledge of the self the primary means to realization. But knowing oneself is hardly straightforward. We can only recognize who we are in terms of a radical in-betweenness (*bayniyya*), so we are left with uncertainty in every domain. The knowing subject is in between – between spirit and body, light and clay, knowledge and ignorance, awareness and unconsciousness. So also, the soul's knowledge is in between, because it is inseparable from both the known object and the knowing subject. When we think we know something, in fact our knowledge partakes of the indeterminate nature of the soul, so it lies between truth and error, reality and unreality, accuracy and inaccuracy. All knowledge is true in one respect and false in another. All knowledge, one might say, is relative.

If the relativity of knowledge does not lead to relativism in any of its modern forms, this is simply because the Absolute *Haqq* remains lurking beneath the surface and continues to demand that the *haqq* of individual things be recognized. Ibn 'Arabi insists on a certain sort of relativism because he recognizes the actual human situation and acknowledges the limits of human possibility. In his view, nothing of value can be accomplished on the basis of ignorance and self-deception, and these are sure to result when false absolutes are set up. Once we recognize where in fact we stand – a recognition that depends upon knowing who we are – then the path of deliverance from limitations may become clear.

In one passage, Ibn ‘Arabi alludes to the manner in which the recognition of universal cosmic relativity leads to deliverance: “Morning is not hidden from the Possessor of the Two Eyes, for he distinguishes the in-between from the in-between [*al-bayn min al-bayn*]” (F. IV 384.33). “The two eyes,” as noted earlier, designate the two primary modes of human understanding: reason and imagination, or ratiocination and intuitive apprehension, or intellect and unveiling. Seeing with one eye leads to distortion. True understanding can only come when reason and imagination are kept in the delicate balance demanded by the *haqq* of things.

Either eye acting on its own perceives one of the two sides that define the middle. Only those who see with both eyes will recognize that all things are in-between, placed in their specific niches with wisdom and order. True understanding will then dawn from the horizon of darkness, delusion, and deception.

In the domain of theology, seeing with two eyes means that God must be looked upon both as incomparable, transcendent, and absent, and as similar, immanent, and present. In actual fact, God is both absent and present, or neither absent nor present. If we look at him with one eye, or with one eye predominating over the other, we are bound to fall into theological error. The issue is not just theological error, but all the errors that arise from not seeing the self, the world, people, and things for what they really are.

THE WORLDVIEW OF IN-BETWEENNESS

Anyone who wants to know the actual situation of all things must know the Real *Wujud*, which is the principle and root of all reality. Only the Real is an absolute point of reference, which is to say that, in itself, it does not stand in between. It establishes the reality of everything in the universe. To know this Real, one

must know oneself, but the self has no fixity and embodies relativity. It is nothing but a flux, a flurry of relationships, an in-betweenness that can never be tied down to what it is, because it is nothing in particular.

The soul is configured by the web of relationships that shape and mold it. This web embraces not only the social, political, historical, physical, biological, and psychological factors that preoccupy modern scholarship, but also everything that escapes the methods of rational and scientific inquiry – an infinitely vast spectrum of reality.

The self cannot be understood by grasping what it is, because it is nothing specific. We can only grasp where it stands, and “where it stands” is smack in the middle of everything. The soul is the ultimate in-betweenness. It stands between all things, and all things have apparitions and signs within it. By knowing these signs, one can know the things and the self, and by knowing the self, one can know the configuration of reality.

Of course, the soul is not unique in its in-betweenness, because everything else is also situated between the absolute, undifferentiated reality of the Real and utter nothingness. Everything is a word articulated in the All-merciful Breath. What singles out the human soul from other things is the all-comprehensiveness of the qualities and characteristics latent within it.

Potentially, the soul can assume as its own any attribute and quality in existence. Made in the form of God, it has no essence or definition other than to be the point of conjunction for all things, for every realm of the in-between. Other things tend toward one side or the other, but the soul in its full realization can only be understood as the central point of cosmic *wujud*.

Once the soul completes its trajectory in this life, it moves on to the next place of in-betweenness. Islamic texts commonly call the first posthumous realm the *barzakh* or “isthmus,” because it is situated between the ocean of this world and the

ocean of the next world. For Ibn ‘Arabi, however, every place, time, and world, and indeed everything in existence other than the Real, is an isthmus, because nothing can be discretely itself by itself. Discreteness is definition and limitation, and these depend upon the configuration of surrounding realities. No word can stand on its own in the All-merciful Breath, because each is configured both by the letters that spell it out and by the sentence, chapter, and book in which it appears.

Cosmic “location” is not the only factor here, of course, for time plays an equally important role. “There is no repetition in Self-disclosure,” and creation is renewed at each instant. Everything other than God is destroyed and re-created at every moment, because nothing other than God has any *wujud* in and of itself. Nothing other than the Real is permanent, so each thing must be constantly replenished, just as a ray of light gains its continuity from the unbroken emission of its source.

God is the “light of the heavens and the earth” (Q. 24: 35), and all realms of existence are rays of God’s light. Any discrete point or location on a ray vanishes at once, only to be replaced by a new point at the next instant. Nothing in the realm of manifest *wujud* is ever the same for two successive moments. Everything is an in-betweenness configured on a radius emerging from a dimensionless center, a center that is unknown and imperceptible. Nothing is discrete, nothing is fixed, and everything is constantly changing. The fact that we often fail to notice the change says nothing about the evanescence of all things. Unless we grasp this evanescence, we cannot begin to know our own souls.

COSMIC IMAGINATION

Few notions are more central to Ibn ‘Arabi’s conceptual apparatus than *khayal*, imagination or image. The Arabic word denotes not only the power that allows us to picture things in

the mind, but also mental pictures, mirror reflections, and images on a screen. It refers both to the internal faculty and the external reality.

Imagination had long been discussed by Muslim philosophers to highlight the intermediacy of the subjective realm, which is an image of both the knowing self and the known object. This subjective realm came into being when God blew his spirit into Adam's clay. It is none other than the soul, which arises at the meeting point of light and darkness, awareness and unawareness.

Philosophers considered imagination one of several internal faculties or senses. Ibn 'Arabi universalized the concept, showing that it properly designates everything other than God. All things are images of Real *Wujud*, which is Being, Consciousness, and Mercy, and all things are also images of utter nothingness. All things shimmer between being and nonbeing. Each is an isthmus between other things, spatially and temporally.

The realm of being is nothing but image
but in truth it is *haqq*.
Whoever understands this fact
has grasped the secrets of the Path. (FH 159)

To be an image is to be an isthmus between an object that casts the image and the locus in which the image appears. It is to be located in a never-never land between being and non-existence, light and darkness, consciousness and unawareness. Creatures are like images in a mirror, different from both the mirror itself and the object casting the images.

From one point of view, the object that casts the images is Real *Wujud*, and the mirror is nonexistence. But, as Ibn 'Arabi often reminds us, "Nonexistence is not there" (F. IV 410.30), so the analogy of the mirror should not be pushed too far. Once we have dispensed with it, we are left with a picture of reality akin to the non-dualisms of India and East Asia. An infinity of

images fills the universe, and all are nothing but the effulgence of Conscious Light – dispersed, differentiated, and refracted in a cosmos without beginning and end. An infinity of words has become articulated in the All-merciful Breath, and each is nothing but the divine exhalation itself.

As the very stuff of the soul, imagination marks the point where the active vitality of intelligence encounters the signs and sediments perceived by the senses. Invisible realities come down into imagination embodied as notions and dreams, and the objects of sense perception rise up to imagination and become the landscape of the soul. Awareness and unawareness, depth and surface, meaning and words, spirit and clay, inward and outward, non-manifest and manifest – all coalesce and become one.

As two all-comprehensive images of the Real, cosmos and soul reflect each other. The universe is outward, deployed, dispersed, and objectified; the soul inward, concentrated, focused, and subjectified. The soul is aware and conscious, the world unaware and unknowing – relatively speaking, of course, because there can be no absolutes when the stuff of reality is intermediacy and flux. Through its inwardness the soul finds itself and others, and through its outwardness the world deploys what is potentially knowable to the soul.

Given that God taught Adam all the names, everything deployed and dispersed in the universe is already known to primordial human nature. Regaining Adamic perfection means to remember who we are and to recognize what we know. “All the names” means every possibility of being and becoming present in the Real, every word articulated in the All-merciful Breath. The qualities and characteristics of created things are in fact the names of their Creator. Following the path of realization, the soul comes to experience the designations of the names in its own imaginal realm, where being and awareness are one.

THE SOUL

From a certain point of view, the soul is Ibn 'Arabi's only topic. He frequently tells us that we can only know what we are. All human knowledge is simply the articulation of human awareness and consciousness. Everything we know is our self, because awareness and knowledge are situated inside the self, not outside it. What we know is the image of what lies outside, not the thing itself. All outside things are themselves images cast into the mirror of nothingness. Things have no permanence or substantiality, despite the power of the divine imagination to display them as integral parts of an entrancing dream.

Human knowledge, then, is an internal image of an external image. To the extent that knowledge does in fact coincide with the reality of the known thing – that is, with the entity fixed in God's knowledge – the internal image is more real than the external image. The external image, after all, pertains to the physical, inanimate realm of being and corruption, but the internal image pertains to a higher level of existence and reality, a realm that is identical with life, awareness, and consciousness.

Inasmuch as true knowledge of external objects becomes entrenched in the soul, the objects are transmuted into the life of the knowing soul, which finds the objects in its own primordial omniscience, taught to it by God at its creation. The soul of Perfect Man takes the totality of the world as its object. Together, the perfect soul and the cosmos are a single, unitary reality, supported by the Object that casts the images.

Ibn 'Arabi's voluminous writings are all concerned with depicting the diverse modalities of human knowing and awareness, which he looks upon as signs of God in the soul and the world. To depict and clarify the signs, however, he needs to make sense of the infinite diversity of human souls, the subjects that become aware of the signs. No human subject is exactly the

same as any other, for each is an ongoing, never-ending articulation of the infinite in-betweenness called the All-merciful Breath.

Awareness of the shoreless ocean of the soul can have no end. But the only way to be aware of it in a cogent and coherent fashion is to turn away from the multiplicity of the waves and focus on the unarticulated water itself, the ocean of awareness. To grasp the soul's fullness and integration, one must dwell in the root of all souls, the divine spirit that was blown into Adam's clay, the All-merciful Breath that utters every word, the Divine Meaning that gives rise to the Divine Form and is refracted endlessly in human diversity.

THE SOUL'S ROOT

Knowing the soul is to situate it within the grand flux that is the cosmos. To do this, one must know what the cosmos is, which in turn depends upon knowing the principles and roots of reality. These principles Ibn 'Arabi typically explains in terms of the divine names. Equally important for his perspective, however, are the prophets in all their multiplicity.

The divine names represent the roots of things in God himself, which is to say that they signify the basic modalities of Real *Wujud*. By understanding the names, one understands in conceptual and abstract mode how God relates to the world and human understanding. Inasmuch as God is properly and appropriately named by many names, he is the first principle of in-betweenness. As the One/Many he is the root of divine self-expressiveness or the Logos – known in Ibn 'Arabi's terms as the Supreme Isthmus, Non-delimited Imagination, the Reality of Perfect Man, and the Breath of the All-merciful.

The traditional idea that God sent 124,000 prophets from Adam down to Muhammad provides Ibn 'Arabi's second

framework for explicating roots and principles. It functions as a bridge between the unity of the Logos and the diverse possibilities of human becoming. The prophets designate the divine roots of multiplicity as they become humanly embodied. They signify the basic modalities of humanness. By meditating on the prophets and their disparate human qualities and characteristics, we can come to understand in relatively concrete terms how *Wujud* is present to the human soul and how its attributes determine human character traits.

What distinguishes Ibn 'Arabi is not that he makes the divine names and the prophets the basic terms of theological and psychological discourse, for that was done by many other theologians and thinkers. What distinguishes him is rather that he highlights the middle ground and emphasizes its in-betweenness. He is perfectly aware that discourse always pertains to the middle, that language is always ambiguous, and that nothing can be known or expressed without uncertainty and wavering.

Everything other than God is an image, so nothing whatsoever can be known in and of itself. The selfness of each thing is precisely the fact that it is an image of something else. Moreover, God cannot be known in himself, because none knows God but God, and no image of God can ever coincide with God in every respect. This means that, in the last analysis, *nothing* can truly be known. Only the image can be known – not in itself, but as image, as in-between, as a sign in the soul pointing to the divine names. Ibn 'Arabi makes the point in an often-quoted verse:

I have not perceived the reality of anything –
 How can I perceive a thing in which You are? (D. 96)

Ibn 'Arabi's approach ends up in an admission of utter ignorance in face of the Real. This is why he often tells us that the ultimate, final knowledge is the knowledge of unknowingness, or what he likes to call *hayra*, "bewilderment" or "perplexity."

In no way, however, does his approach lead to a suggestion that God is not there or to attempts at defining human life and responsibility in human terms. Rather, God is there, but he cannot be known as he knows himself.

CONTROVERSIES

Ibn ‘Arabi has been perceived with hostility by many Muslim theologians and jurists. What has been said about in-betweenness should suggest why. He threatens all the easy certainties. Theologians love to establish their catechisms and creeds, which offer in seemingly unambiguous language a firm ground on which believers can stand. Ibn ‘Arabi, in contrast, launches a massive assault on straightforward assertions.

Ibn ‘Arabi does not deny the relative validity and usefulness of dogma, and he often reaffirms the standard formulations. He frequently tells us that the only safe road in the ocean of in-betweenness is faith in God as set down in the Qur’an and the Sunnah. But, the moment he begins to meditate on the meanings explicit and implicit in the sources of the tradition, he destabilizes unreflective minds. All the stark black and white distinctions that are the stock-in-trade of dogma – not to mention ideology – are shown to be illusory shadows.

It should be obvious that Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings were not accessible to the vast majority of Muslims. His books demanded far too much background in the Islamic sciences. In any case, he was not attacking the faith of the common people, for which he had great respect. Rather, his targets were the opinions and teachings of the learned, especially the jurists, theologians, and philosophers. Only they had enough training to understand what he was getting at. He subjects their finely tuned explanations of God and the world to withering criticism. He refuses to let anyone claiming knowledge of things

stand on firm ground. He frequently shows the essential contradictoriness of rational discourse, and in doing so he attacks a sacred cow of all Muslim intellectuals.

From the standpoint of the in-betweenness that he highlights, Ibn 'Arabi's grand contribution to Islamic learning was to loosen and unhinge all the fixed points of reference to which people attach themselves in their beliefs and opinions. This alone is enough to explain the hostility that he has stirred up, especially in modern times, when ideological absolutes have played central roles in political discourse throughout the Muslim world. Nonetheless, the fact that he has been venerated by numerous great scholars and by the common people should be enough to tell us that his approach must be rooted in some basic Islamic insight. That insight is simply *tawhid*: "There is no god but God."

The formula of *tawhid* radically undermines everything other than God, including all beliefs and certainties concerning God and the world, not least those established by rational, scientific, and ideological thought. Whatever fixed point of reference one seizes upon must be other than God himself, who is beyond all points of reference. Everything that appears as fixed and stable must be thrown into the fire along with all things ephemeral and passing.

THE GODS OF BELIEF

One of Ibn 'Arabi's bolder explanations of the in-betweenness of all things is found in his analysis of the gods of belief. Given that everything other than Real *Wujud* is an isthmus, an image, an in-between, whatever people worship and serve can only be an image, because they do so on the basis of their own understanding. In actual fact, everyone is an idol-worshiper, because everyone worships a god that he fabricates in his own mind, whether or not he names it "God."

In effect, everyone worships himself, because what we worship is what we conceptualize, grasp, believe, and understand. Whatever object of worship it may be and wherever it draws us, it cannot be outside of our own selves. What is outside the self is unknown and inaccessible, unperceived and unfathomable.

This is not to say that all beliefs are equal, or that faith in the God described by the prophets is useless. It is simply to state the obvious – “There is no god but God.” The god that we know is not the God who alone is, but rather the god that needs to be negated: “None knows God but God.” All knowledge claimed by anything other than God is simply a phantom, floating between darkness and light, hovering in the foggy realms of the in-between.

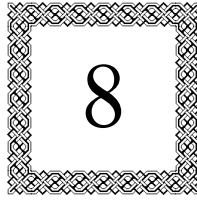
Once it becomes clear that all understanding, including theological and scientific understanding, is simply an understanding of oneself, it becomes even more imperative to know the self that knows. So again, this is Ibn ‘Arabi’s basic project – to describe the parameters of the soul on the basis of the Object of which the soul is the image, or the Meaning of which it is the form.

If everything the soul knows is nothing but itself, this can only be because the self has the potential to know everything other than the Divine Essence, of which each thing and every concept in the universe is simply the image or the self-disclosure. The Real in itself cannot be known, but the Real as it discloses itself in images can be known, and these images include everything that can be known or experienced, and everything that knows or perceives.

The Meaning of which Adam is the form is the Logos, or the totality of God’s self-disclosing Self, or the primal Unity of all the images that make up the universe, or the Supreme Isthmus, or the eternal reality of Perfect Man. Human beings can know all things because all fixed entities – all objects of God’s

knowledge – are already latent in the soul. Coming to know oneself is coming to know the things, which are the individual facets of the all-inclusive divine form.

When one knows the form of God, one recognizes oneself as the form of God's self-disclosure. The knowing subject perceives that it is none other than the known object. Just as the soul can perceive nothing but the divine self-disclosures, so also the very act of perceiving and knowing is God's disclosure of himself to himself. "I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees." The human process of knowing oneself, however, is never-ending, because the soul has no shores in this world or the next.



THE DISCLOSURE OF THE INTERVENING IMAGE

Underlying Ibn ‘Arabi’s enormous literary output is the concern to explicate reality in all its dimensions. Although grounded in the unifying vision offered by the Qur’an, he speaks as a universalist and not a particularist. Far from developing a “system,” as some modern observers have claimed, he offers a vast panorama of legitimate points of view, symbolized by the divine names and the 124,000 prophets. Among the many basic topics that he explains with unprecedented detail and extraordinary insight is the return to God, the third of the three principles of Islamic faith after *tawhid* and prophecy.

The goal of realization is to gain knowledge of the *haqq*s of things and to act appropriately. The soul must undergo a transformation such that it becomes indistinguishable from the infinity that it knows. The quest for omniscience has of course been present in Western thought at least since Aristotle, and it has obvious parallels in Hinduism and Buddhism. What is unusual in Ibn ‘Arabi’s case is that his writings are the clear fruit of having achieved the goal – or so it has seemed to much of the later tradition.

Ibn ‘Arabi calls the fruit of realization “the Muhammadan station” and “the station of no station.” As long as human individuals know themselves as confined and limited, they deserve to be called this or that. True freedom is achieved only by those

who pass beyond every specificity and return to the original purity of the human self, known as *fitra* or primordial nature. As the Taoists would say, the primordial self is an uncarved block, but social and environmental circumstances carve it into specific shapes and destroy its simplicity.

The Prophet said, "Every child is born in keeping with the primordial nature, but then its parents make it into a Christian, a Jew, or a Zoroastrian." Achieving the fullness of human possibility demands recovering the state of non-determination and returning to the freedom of the All-merciful Breath, which underlies every articulation in the universe. Human beings have the potential to understand, emulate, and actualize every name that properly applies to *Wujud*. But to do so, they must reject the fixity and limitation of every station and standpoint.

The cosmos is a continuous and neverending process of divine self-disclosure, a constant bubbling up and boiling over of existence and awareness, a ceaseless flow from unity into multiplicity and consciousness into nescience. What comes to be disclosed is the concealed reality of the absolutely Real, which embraces every possibility of being and knowledge. The disclosure is driven by the Hidden Treasure's love to be known.

Man enters the cosmos at the point where the dispersive and externalizing movement of God's love to be known turns back upon itself. People begin as germinal images of the Real. Their individual configurations replicate microcosmically everything deployed in the indefinite spatial and temporal expanse of the universe. They have the possibility of developing into full-blown manifestations of the Real's simplicity and all-comprehensive unity by loving God fully and achieving identity with every quality latent in the Hidden Treasure.

SELF-AWARENESS

Human subjectivity pertains to the inwardness of the cosmos, and the physical appearance of the world pertains to its outwardness. This is not to deny the inwardness of animals, plants, and other creatures, to which Ibn 'Arabi devotes a good deal of attention. It is simply to say that what characterizes the human state is the potential to be aware of everything, in contrast to the limited horizons of other things. The limited potential for awareness in non-human beings makes them pertain more to the object than to the subject.

The inner limitations and psychic boundaries of animals appear as the diversity of their species. In contrast, human beings are outwardly similar but inwardly diverse. The primordial purity of human nature, created in the form of the Infinite and the Unlimited, allows for vast differences in inner being and awareness. The diversity of life-forms in the outside world provides only the barest hints of the unbounded realm of the soul. Indeed, Ibn 'Arabi tells us that the world of imagination is by far the vastest realm in existence, "because it exercises its ruling property over every thing and non-thing. It gives form to absolute nonexistence, to the impossible, to the Necessary, and to possibility. It makes existence nonexistent and non-existence existent" (F. I 306.6).

Human beings become what they are by actualizing their ontological, spiritual, and psychological potentialities in never-repeating combinations. Their true world is that of awareness and imagination, but its panorama remains hidden from those who make no attempt to reverse the outward flow and focus awareness back on the Source. Loving this and that, they lose sight of the real Beloved and remain transfixed by the mirroring surface.

The cosmos as a whole is simply an image of the Beautiful. The soul's self-awareness derives from the living image of the

cosmos that is its own perception and understanding. Perception of self and others is never anything but consciousness, which is to say that it pertains to the realm of the soul. People cannot recognize the world and themselves for what they are without awareness of their own immersion in the ocean of imagination.

Just as imagination is the realm of disclosure and recognition, so also it is the domain of concealment and deception. It embraces both illumination and obscurity and is peopled by both angels and demons. Its ambiguity and intermediacy explain the imperative for prophetic revelation, which provides the keys to differentiate angel from demon and beauty from glimmer.

In sum, each human self is a unique subject, complemented by the object that is the universe. Both soul and world are images of the absolute Subject/Object, which is Real *Wujud*, true Finding and Being. In itself, human primordial nature is unhampered by any quality or characteristic, but most people freely choose to carve their blocks into specific shapes. Falling in love with transient beauty, they fail to realize that they have the potential to aim for the Beautiful and transcend every limitation of existence and awareness.

DEATH

The Qur'an and the Prophet offer numerous accounts of the world after death. Ibn 'Arabi finds the key to interpreting these accounts in the very stuff of the human self, which has the potential to assume every form. People have no specific form in their primordial nature, but they gradually assume qualities and character traits according to the paths that they follow in the unfolding of their lives.

The paths that people follow may lead in the direction of the fullness and wholeness of the divine form, or they may obscure

its radiance. Some people become attuned to the universality, harmony, and balance of the Real, and others perceive the cosmos and themselves as dissonance, disequilibrium, and dissolution. The soul's situation in the total pattern of things comes to be determined by the objects upon which it fixes its attention. It becomes what it loves.

Death turns the soul inside out. "God created man in an inverted configuration, so he finds the afterworld in his inwardness and this world in his outwardness" (F. IV 420.1). At death, man's inner life becomes the outward configuration of his reality. The self is left to stand on its own without the stabilizing fixity of the outside world. So-called objects disappear as independent things, and the divine self-disclosure comes to the surface. People experience themselves in forms appropriate to their own loves and aspirations. As God says to the soul that has just died, "We have lifted from you your covering, so your sight today is piercing" (Q. 50: 22).

The afterworld is the inversion of this world's configuration, and this world is the inversion of the afterworld's configuration, but man is simply man. Hence you should strive here to make your thoughts praiseworthy according to the Shariah so that your form in the afterworld may be beautiful.
(F. IV 420.3)

LOVE

Given the essential unlimitedness of the human self and the fact that nothing is impossible in the realm of imagination, the modalities of posthumous becoming are beyond reckoning. The only way to ensure a congenial afterlife is to love the Beautiful and recover the primordial purity of God's form. This is precisely the practical goal of realization: assuming God's character traits as one's own.

The homesteads of the afterlife are the stages of an endless succession of awakenings to the self-disclosures of the Real. In this life, the stages of the return to God map out in broad strokes the infinite imaginal realm where divine self-disclosures will be seen for what they are. Every stage on the path to God prefigures one of the homesteads of the next world. Human nature finds the imperative to follow the path in the hunger to know the divine names and to find their substance within the self, a hunger that is commonly known as love.

The Real, Ibn 'Arabi reminds us, is precisely the Real and nothing else. All else is derivative and unreal. Nothing in the universe can subsist except in function of the Sheer Good. "Nothing comes forth from the Sheer Good in which there is no evil – which is the Real's *Wujud* that bestows *wujud* on the cosmos – except what corresponds with it, and that is good specifically." This is why Ibn 'Arabi claims that God, the All-merciful, the Sheer Good, "created the universe only for happiness" (F. III 389.21). When misery occurs, it occurs as a passing accident. Even hell is not exempt from this rule, as will become clear in the next chapter.

In this life, people taste something of the good and mercy of reality in love, which allows them to recognize God's presence in the world and drives them to realize the divine form within themselves. Those who fail to recognize that all love is directed toward God will come to their senses at death: "When the covering is lifted, they will come to understand that they had loved only God, but they had been veiled by the name of the created thing" (F. IV 260.27).

In his chapter on love in the *Futuhāt*, Ibn 'Arabi explains that this world is in fact nothing but a testing ground for love, and death the meeting with the true Beloved. He is commenting on the hadith, "When someone loves to encounter God, God loves to encounter him. And when someone dislikes to encounter God, God dislikes to encounter him."

The encounter that lovers crave is a specific encounter designated by the Real, since He is already witnessed in every state. He designates whatsoever homestead He will, making it the place of a special encounter, because of His craving for us. We reach it only by emerging from the abode that contradicts this encounter, and that is the abode of this world ...

Encountering God through death has a flavor not found in encountering Him in the life of this world. In death we are related to Him as mentioned in His words, "We shall surely attend to you at leisure, O jinn and men!" [Q. 55: 31]. For us, death is that our spirits achieve leisure from governing our bodies. Lovers desire and love to taste this directly. It will occur only at the emergence from this world through death, not in ecstatic states. It happens when they depart from the physical frames with which they have gained familiarity from the time they were born, and through which they have become manifest ... He created death and made it a trial for them so as to put their claims to love Him to the test. (F. II 351.16)



THE HERMENEUTICS OF MERCY

No doubt the predominant interpretative methods of the modern-day academy belong to the category of “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” In contrast, traditional Islamic scholarship is characterized by a hermeneutics of trust, though trust in God alone. One can, however, observe a tension between the interpretative approach of the experts in dogmatic theology and that of the Sufis. The theologians were more likely to trust in God’s wrath and vengeance, and the Sufis preferred to trust in his mercy and forgiveness.

The stance of the theologians, and along with them that of the jurists, has much to do with their chosen role as guardians of religious and social order. They appealed to a God who will punish all those who stray from the straight and narrow. The Sufis called upon a God who loves his creatures and inclines to forgive all sins.

One major reason for the differing standpoints lies in individual religious experience. The theologians made no claim to know God other than by way of rational interpretation of the Qur’an and the tradition. Many of the Sufis claimed to know God’s mercy and compassion first-hand.

Ibn ‘Arabi explains that the rational analysis characteristic of theology detaches God from the soul and abstracts him from creation. Rational minds find it easy to prove God’s

transcendence and incomparability, but they fail to grasp his immanence and similarity. “Those who know God through their rational faculties look upon Him as far removed from themselves through a distance that demands the declaration of incomparability. They put themselves on one side and the Real on the other side, so He calls to them ‘from a far place’ [Q. 41: 44]” (F. III 410.18). In contrast, God called to Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufis from a near place, and they found that God was “closer than the jugular vein” (Q. 50: 16).

INTERPRETING THE QUR’AN

Part of the reason that Ibn ‘Arabi came to be called “the Greatest Master” was that his massive corpus contains consistently erudite and profound expositions of the meanings of the Qur’an that had few precedents, and no serious later challengers. Recent studies, especially the work of Michel Chodkiewicz and Claude Addas, have brought out the intimate connection between his spiritual life and his understanding of the holy book.

For Ibn ‘Arabi, the Qur’an was the vivifying word of God, an infinite ocean that constantly replenished his soul, a living presence that would embody itself to him and appear in visions. The dependence of his writings on the Qur’an is obvious to careful readers, and he frequently reminds us of the fact. As he says in one passage, everything that he writes “derives from the presence and the storehouses of the Qur’an,” because God gave him “the key to understanding it and taking aid from it” (F. III 334.32).

When Ibn ‘Arabi tells us that his writings provide explicit or implicit commentary on the Qur’an and that they represent the fruit of bestowal and witnessing, he is claiming that his interpretations are divinely inspired. He does not in any

way, however, mean to preclude other interpretations. Quite the contrary, from his standpoint, a true understanding of any Quranic passage can never be exclusive. As was noted in Chapter 1, he goes so far as to say that anyone who understands a Quranic verse in the same way twice has not truly understood it.

The Qur'an, after all, is God's Speech, and God's Speech is the self-disclosure of his infinite Essence. God's infinity demands that he never disclose himself twice in the same form. To the degree that we understand the Qur'an, we come to understand God's self-disclosure within ourselves. Given that no self-disclosure is ever repeated, no two understandings, even by the same individual, can be exactly the same.

Diverse interpretations of the Qur'an answer to the diverse modes in which God discloses himself to the book's readers. One could claim, of course, that this is not specific to the Qur'an, since no two readers will understand any book in exactly the same way. Ibn 'Arabi would not argue, but he does point out one grand difference between divine and human books. When the omniscient God reveals a book, he intends every meaning that will be understood from it, but no human author can possibly anticipate, much less intend, all the meanings that his readers will find. "The Qur'an is an ocean without shore, since He to whom it is ascribed intends all the meanings demanded by the speech – in contrast to the speech of created things" (F. II 581.11).

Ibn 'Arabi does not mean to imply that every interpretation is equally valid. He adds a number of conditions to this blanket approval, most notably that the interpretation must be sustainable by the language of the revelation. If the language does indeed support it, "No scholar can declare wrong an interpretation that is supported by the words ... However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation or to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those

who follow his authority” (F. II 119.24). Responsibility for interpretation rests with the interpreter.

GOOD OPINIONS OF GOD

If interpreters of the Qur'an will be held responsible for their own interpretations, they should naturally take care to interpret the book in a way that is appropriate to its author. Ibn 'Arabi likes to quote the divine saying related by the Prophet, “I am with My servant's opinion of Me, so let his opinion of Me be good.” Those who have a good opinion of God will be given good by him, just as those who have an evil opinion will find misfortune: “Those who opine evil opinions of God – against them shall be fortune's evil turn” (Q. 48: 6).

Perhaps the best opinion that one can have of God is represented by the hadith of God's precedent mercy, one of the basic themes of Ibn 'Arabi's writings. When he saw God in all things, he saw mercy, and God's mercy is nothing but his goodness, bounty, kindness, love, and solicitude toward all creation.

God says, “I am with My servant's opinion of Me,” but He does not stop there, because “His mercy takes precedence over His wrath.” Hence He said, in order to instruct us, “So let his opinion of Me be good” – by way of commandment. Those who fail to have a good opinion of God have disobeyed God's commandment and displayed ignorance of what is demanded by the divine generosity ... When people have a bad opinion of the actual situation, what overcomes them is their own bad opinion, nothing else. (F. II 474.26)

It was noted earlier that Ibn 'Arabi's claim to be the Seal of the Muhammadan Friends implies that he would be the last person before Jesus at the end of time to inherit all the works, states, and stations of Muhammad. The Qur'an says that God sent

Muhammad only as a mercy to the creatures, and the fact that practically every chapter of the Qur'an begins by citing God's two primary names of mercy – *ar-rahman* and *ar-rahim*, “the All-merciful” and “the Ever-merciful” – was lost on no one. If Ibn 'Arabi considered himself Muhammad's last plenary inheritor, it is not surprising that he saw his own role as that of spreading mercy: “God created me as a mercy, and He made me an inheritor of the mercy of him to whom He said, ‘We sent thee only as a mercy to the worlds’ [Q. 21: 107]” (F. IV 163.9).

What is especially telling in this passage is Ibn 'Arabi's next sentence, which clarifies his understanding of what the mercy of the Prophet implies: “God did not specify those who have faith to the exclusion of others.” In other words, God sent Muhammad as a mercy to everyone, not just Muslims or religious believers.

This all-inclusiveness of mercy has implications that many theologians – not just Muslim theologians – would find difficult to accept. As Ibn 'Arabi puts it, such people would like to exclude some of God's creatures from his mercy, but their evil opinion of God can only redound upon themselves. “Those who curtail God's mercy curtail it only from themselves. Were it not that the actual situation is otherwise, those who curtail and limit God's mercy would never reach it” (F. III 532.22).

I saw a group of those who dispute concerning the all-embracingness of God's mercy, maintaining that it is confined to a specific faction. They curtailed and constricted what God has made all-embracing. If God were not to have mercy on any of His creatures, He would forbid His mercy to those who say this. But God refuses anything but His mercy's all-inclusiveness. (F. IV 163.5)

Although Ibn 'Arabi's stress on the precedence and predominance of God's mercy has many Quranic roots, his own intimate experience of God was perhaps the deepest motivation. One of his visions is especially telling. He saw the divine

Throne, upon which the All-merciful is sitting, and it was supported by four columns. He found himself standing in the ranks of the angels who held up the most excellent of these columns, which is “the storehouse of mercy,” because God had created him “ever-merciful in an unqualified sense” (F. III 431. 32). One of the other three columns was pure wrath and severity, and the other two were mercy mixed with wrath.

THE RETURN TO THE ALL-MERCIFUL

Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics, theology, cosmology, and spiritual psychology are all rooted in a good opinion of Sheer Good, the All-merciful God whose mercy takes precedence over his wrath. This comes out with special clarity in the issue of hell. The Qur'an declares that hell is a place of divine wrath and punishment. The general Muslim understanding is that hell's chastisement will last forever, though some theologians offer dissenting views. Ibn 'Arabi's own good opinion is categorical, however: although certain types of unbelievers will remain forever in hell, even they will cease to suffer after a period of time, however long this period may take in earthly terms.

A basic argument that Ibn 'Arabi offers to prove that hell's pain comes to an end is simply that God is “the Most Merciful of the merciful” (Q. 12: 64). There are people who could never agree that anyone, even the most evil of men, should suffer forever. God is certainly more merciful than they.

I have found in myself – who am among those whom God has innately disposed toward mercy – that I have mercy toward all God's servants, even if God has decreed in His creating them that the attribute of chastisement will remain forever with them in the cosmos. This is because the ruling property of mercy has taken possession of my heart.

The possessors of this attribute are I and my peers, and we are creatures, possessors of fancy and personal desire. God has said about Himself that He is “the Most Merciful of the merciful,” and we have no doubt that He is more merciful than we are toward His creatures. Yet we have known from ourselves this extravagant mercy. How could chastisement be everlasting for them, when He has this attribute of all-pervading mercy? God is more noble than that! (F. III 25. 19)

God’s “nobility” or “generosity” (*karam*) is a recurrent theme in Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussions of hell. God has commanded his servants to acquire noble character traits (*makarim al-akhlaq*). Would he ask his servants to acquire attributes that he himself lacks? The Qur’an ascribes many of these noble traits to God by calling him Forgiving, Patient, Just, Pardoner, and so on. Such traits demand that he have the best interests of his creatures in view. Hence the “final issue” (*ma’al*) of the creatures will be at mercy.

According to an already cited hadith, God has a *haqq* – a right, a truthful and worthy claim – against his servants, and his servants have a *haqq* against him. God’s right is *tawhid* – that the servants acknowledge his Unity and worship him alone. The servants’ right is that, if they fulfill God’s right, he will take them to paradise.

The Qur’an says that people will not be blamed for claiming their rights, but it also states that it would be better to forgive. “God has set down in the Shariah concerning some of our rights that if we abandon them, that would be best for us, and He placed this among the noble character traits.” In proof, Ibn ‘Arabi cites the verse, “And the recompense of an ugly act is an ugly act the like of it, but whoso pardons and makes things well, his wage falls upon God” (Q. 42: 40).

The next verse gives people permission to claim their rights: “Whosoever helps himself after he has been wronged, against him there is no way” (Q. 42: 41). If it is better for the

servants to pardon people who have sinned against them, then God himself will certainly pardon the sin of not worshipping him: “He will pardon, show forbearance, and make things well. Hence the final issue will be at God’s mercy in the two abodes. Mercy will embrace them wherever they may be” (F. III 478.20).

THE MERCY OF *WUJUD*

To say that God has noble character traits is to say that reality itself is rooted in these traits and demands that they become manifest. The key term here, as usual, is *wujud*. God is the Necessary *Wujud*, which is to say that he is and cannot not be. Everything else is a possible thing, which is to say that it has no inherent claim on *wujud*. The cosmos – everything other than God – owes its existence to God’s bestowal, which is his mercy. The whole realm of possible existence is nothing other than the Breath of the All-merciful.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s most frequently cited proof text for all-pervasive mercy is the verse, “My mercy embraces everything” (Q. 7: 156). It follows that “The cosmos is identical with mercy, nothing else” (F. II 437.24). This verse does not suggest that mercy pertains only to specific realms, or that it is found in paradise but not in hell. “Hence the abode of mercy is the abode of *wujud*” (F. IV 4.32). “The name All-merciful protects us ... *Wujud* accompanies us, so our final issue will be at mercy and its property” (F. II 157.23).

The final issue will be at mercy, for the actual situation inscribes a circle. The end of the circle curves back to its beginning and joins it. The end has the property of the beginning, and that is nothing but *wujud*. “Mercy takes precedence over wrath,” because the beginning was through mercy. Wrath is an accident, and accidents disappear. (F. IV 405.7)

Inasmuch as the cosmos is everything other than God, it is everything other than the All-merciful, the Permanent, the Living, the Powerful, the Knowing, the Generous. It is, in short, everything other than Real *Wujud*. Hence the cosmos has nothing of its own to support its existence. At the same time, we all recognize that helping the underdog is a noble character trait. How could God, who is merciful and bountiful by essence, do anything but help the weak? “And all creatures are weak at root, so mercy includes them” (F. III 255.33).

The Qur’an says, “There is no fault in the blind, there is no fault in the lame, and there is no fault in the sick” (Q. 48: 17). This is normally taken to mean that the Shariah makes allowances for human weakness and handicaps. But the Shariah is God’s law, and, as God’s law, it expresses the nature of *wujud* itself. It follows that a deeper meaning of this verse is that God is gentle and kind to all those who are weak and disabled. But weakness and disability are the attribute of the whole universe, which is other than the Real, the Strong, and the Powerful.

He who is stricken by some blight has no fault, and all the cosmos is stricken by some blight, so it has no fault in the view of him whose insight has been opened by God. This is why we say that the final issue of the cosmos will be at mercy, even if they take up an abode in the Fire and are among its folk. “There is no fault in the blind, there is no fault in the lame, and there is no fault in the sick.” And there is nothing but these ... For all the cosmos is blind, lame, and sick. (F. IV 434.34)

MERCY’S PRECEDENCE

Ibn ‘Arabi finds allusions to mercy’s final triumph throughout the Qur’an. For example, the book tells us that the “felicitous” will remain in paradise forever, as “a gift unbroken” (Q. 11: 108). In the same place it tells us that the “wretched” will

remain forever in the Fire. As Ibn 'Arabi points out, however, God “does not say that the state within which they dwell will not be cut off, as He says concerning the felicitous.” He continues,

What prevents Him from saying that is His words, “My mercy embraces everything” [Q. 7: 156], and His words, “My mercy takes precedence over My wrath” in this configuration. For *wujud* is mercy for all existent things, even if some of them suffer chastisement through others. (F. II 281.26)

To say that mercy takes precedence over wrath is to say that God takes precedence over his creatures, light over darkness, reality over unreality, good over evil. Or, it is to say that, by embracing all things, mercy also embraces wrath, employing it for its own ends.

God says, “My mercy embraces everything” [7: 156], and His wrath is a thing. Hence His mercy embraces His wrath, confines it, and rules over it. Therefore wrath disposes itself only through mercy’s ruling property. Mercy sends out wrath as it will. (F. III 9.23)

The Qur’an tells us that the wrongdoers, even if they were to possess the whole universe, would not be able to ransom themselves from the ugliness of their actions. “There will appear to them from God what they had never reckoned with ... and they will be encompassed by what they mocked at” (Q. 39: 47). Theologians of evil opinion read this as a guarantee that God will implement his threats, but Ibn 'Arabi rejects this out of hand. God, after all, is “Sheer Good, in whom there is no evil” (F. II 478.9). The wrongdoers, having been immersed in evil, reckon to receive the same from God. But, what appears to them is the Real itself.

“There will appear to them from God what they had never reckoned with,” and that is the witnessing of the affair as it is in

itself. God will relieve them through what appears to them from Him, for nothing appears from the Good save good.
(F. II 478.12)

As already suggested, one of the most obvious Quranic assertions of God's good intentions is found in the *basmalah*, the formula of consecration that begins practically every Quranic surah: "In the name of God, the All-merciful, the Ever-merciful." As the all-comprehensive name, "God" embraces all the divine attributes, and these can be divided into two categories – the severe and the gentle, or the majestic and the beautiful, or the merciful and the wrathful. The fact that this name is followed by the two primary names of mercy tells us that the merciful side of God rules over creation and revelation. As Ibn 'Arabi remarks, the *basmalah* does not make manifest any of the names of severity and wrath.

Even if the name God includes severity, it also includes mercy. So the names of severity, dominance, and harshness that the name God comprises are countered measure for measure by the names of mercy, forgiveness, pardon, and forbearance that it contains in itself. There remains for us the surplus ... and that is His words, "the All-merciful, the Ever-merciful." ... Thus His mercy is all-pervasive, and hope is great for everyone ... for He has made mercy three – the non-manifest mercy in the name God, the All-merciful, and the Ever-merciful.
(F. III 9.24)

Ibn 'Arabi compares the *basmalah* to the intention that undergirds every human activity. According to the Shariah, if one is deficient in one's religious practice "through heedlessness or inattention, this has no effect on the correctness of the activity, for the intention makes up for it." In the same way, God's intention, asserted in the *basmalah* at the beginning of each chapter, makes up for "every threat and every attribute that demands the wretchedness mentioned in the chapter ... So the final issue

will be at mercy, because of the *basmalah*. It is a statement of good news” (F. III 147.31).

ESSENTIAL SERVANTHOOD

People win paradise by observing the instructions that God has sent through the prophets, just as they earn hell by ignoring them. The prophets guide people to become proper servants, but the Qur'an also tells us that everything is a servant by nature: “There is nothing in the heavens and the earth that does not come to the All-merciful as a servant” (Q. 19: 93). Nothing can disobey the engendering command that brings it into being, so the first act of every creature is obedience. In other words, the primary created characteristic of everything is to obey the divine command and to serve the All-merciful. This characteristic must exercise its ruling property, sooner or later. Having explained this, Ibn 'Arabi remarks, “The precedence belongs to mercy, so there is no escape from the final issue at mercy for every possible thing for which wretchedness occurs, for the thing is obedient at root” (F. IV 296.10).

There are two basic sorts of worship and servanthood: The “essential” sort follows upon created nature, and the “accidental” sort derives from God's commandments delivered by the prophets. The existence of accidental servanthood depends on a number of factors, not least of which is free choice. In the next world, whether people go to paradise or hell, they will lose their freedom of choice and return to worship through their essences. “This is why the final issue for the wretched will be at mercy, for the essential worship is strong in authority, but the commandment [to worship God in this world] is accidental, and wretchedness is accidental. Every accidental thing disappears” (F. III 402.11).

Although human beings are free when gauged against other creatures, they have no freedom when compared to God. They are his absolute servants like everything else. They are, as Ibn ‘Arabi often remarks, compelled in their free choice. They never leave their essential worship, even if they choose to reject accidental worship. God will forgive them for their accidental disobedience. “Since the excuse of the world is accepted in actual fact – because they are compelled in their free choice – God placed the final issue of everything at mercy” (F. III 433.4).

PRIMORDIAL NATURE

Muslims have typically understood the notion of “primordial nature” (*fitra*) to mean that all people are born with an innate disposition toward *tawhid*. If they fail to acknowledge God’s unity, they will be flying in the face of their own reality. Primordial nature is associated with the Covenant of Alast, when all human beings, before their entrance into this world, stood before God and acknowledged his lordship over them (Q. 7: 172). Ibn ‘Arabi often identifies it with people’s essential worship of God: “Every child is born according to primordial nature,’ and this primordial nature is acknowledging God through servanthood. It is an obedience upon an obedience” (F. IV 296.14).

Even those who end up in hell will reap the fruit of this primordial obedience. They will cease suffering when they come to understand that they, like all things, were created as servants of the All-merciful. At this point they will stop claiming lordship, control, and mastery, and they will acknowledge that they are nothing but creatures and servants. They will recognize that everything real belongs to the Real and will give everything its *haqq*, thus being delivered from ignorance, illusion, and pain.

They will pluck the fruit of their words [at the Covenant of Alast], “Yes, [we bear witness]” [Q. 7: 172]. They will be like those who submit to God after apostasy. The authority of “Yes” will rule over everything and finally give rise to their felicity, after the wretchedness that had touched them in the measure in which they had made claims. The property of “Yes” will never leave them from its own moment ad infinitum – in this world, in the isthmus, and in the afterworld. (F. II 213.8)

Ibn 'Arabi offers one of his bolder assertions of the ruling authority of primordial nature in the context of the constant Quranic criticism of the “associators,” those who worship others along with God. In some verses, the Qur'an quotes excuses that they offer. For example, “We only worship them so that they may bring us nigh in nearness to God” (Q. 39: 3). In answer to this sort of excuse, God tells Muhammad to ask them to name their associates (Q. 13: 33). In Ibn 'Arabi's reading, “Once they named their associates, it became clear that they worshipped none but God, for no worshipper worships any but God in the place to which he ascribes divinity to Him.” Hence, despite associating others with God, such people are standing firm in the *tawhid* that is God's right, “because they acknowledged Him at the Covenant,” and so they remain in their primordial nature. “Through the strength of remaining in their primordial nature they did not in reality worship Him in the forms. Rather, they worshipped the forms because they imagined that within them was the level of bringing about nearness, as if they were intercessors.” This will open them up to God's forgiveness and pardon (F. III 24.34).

SWEET TORMENT

The Qur'an asserts that hell will last forever, and this may appear as strong evidence against universal mercy. Ibn 'Arabi

does not deny its everlastingness, but he does deny the permanence of suffering. His basic argument is simply the precedence of mercy.

How could there be everlasting wretchedness? Far be it from God that His wrath should take precedence over His mercy – for He is the truthful – or that He should make the embrace of His mercy specific after He had called it general! (F. III 466.20)

The Quranic verse that supports Ibn ‘Arabi’s position most explicitly is probably 39: 53, “O My servants who have been immoderate against yourselves, do not despair of God’s mercy! Surely God forgives all sins.” The Qur’an often says that the sins of those who repent and do good deeds will be forgiven, but here it says that the sins of everyone will be forgiven.

He brought forgiveness and mercy for the repentant and those who do good deeds, and He also brought it for those who are “immoderate,” those who do not repent. The latter He forbids to despair, and He confirms the point with His word “all.” Nothing could be greater in divine eloquence concerning the final issue of the servants at mercy. (F. III 353.1)

Many people would counter by citing various Quranic verses that make sinners the objects of wrath and punishment. Ibn ‘Arabi answers that God becomes wrathful only in this world. In the next world, all creatures will follow his command exactly, for they will worship him by their very essences. He will be pleased with them, whether they dwell in paradise or hell, because they can do nothing but obey him through their own primordial natures. Everyone will act in keeping with God’s good pleasure, “for this is required by the homestead, in contrast to the homestead of this world” (F. III 495.23).

In this world, people are addressed by the prophets and told to do certain things and to avoid others. They are able to act “both in what pleases God and what angers Him.” God created

the situation this way “because He made the Fire the abode of those with whom He is angry. Hence, in this world, its folk have no escape from acting in what angers Him.” Once they enter hell, however, it becomes impossible for them to act except according to God’s good pleasure. “That is why the final issue of its folk will be at the ruling property of the mercy that ‘embraces everything’ [Q. 7: 156], even if the Fire is an abode of wretchedness” (F. III 495.24).

The Qur’an says, “God is well-pleased with them, and they are well-pleased with Him” (5: 119, 58: 22, 98: 8). One should not be misled by the fact that the context of this statement makes explicit reference to paradise.

The Real does not make good-pleasure manifest until the folk of the Fire have taken up their domiciles and the folk of the Garden have taken up their domiciles. Then everyone will be pleased with what they have because the Real will make them pleased. No one will desire to leave his domicile, and each will be happy with it. (F. II 244.1)

Ibn ‘Arabi continues this passage by referring to the unpopularity of this sort of good opinion of God. No one, so far as he knows, has explained that God’s good pleasure rules over both paradise and hell. He supposes that some people have been aware of this fact, but they have concealed it, to ward off criticism and to protect others from the harm of rejecting the truth. “I have called attention to it here only because mercy has overcome me at this moment. Those who understand will be felicitous, and those who do not understand will not be wretched because of their lack of understanding, even if they are deprived” (F. II 244.4).

One of God’s Quranic names is “Patient” (*sabur*). God is patient with the disobedience of his servants, and the Qur’an says that he will delay taking them to task for their wrongdoing until the afterworld. He is patient despite the fact that his

curse is upon those who annoy him: “Those who annoy God and His Messenger – God has cursed them in this world and the next” (Q. 33: 57). In explaining the meaning of this verse, Ibn ‘Arabi says that when this world comes to an end, so also will God’s annoyance, and along with it the property of the divine names that answer to this annoyance, such as Avenger and Severe in Punishment. “One of the causes of punishment is annoyance, but annoyance has disappeared, so there is no escape from mercy and the removal of wrath. Inescapably, mercy will include everything, through God’s bounty, God willing” (F. II 206.33).

Ibn ‘Arabi finds a divine allusion to the final issue at mercy in the Quranic word for chastisement, *‘adhab*. The basic sense of this word’s root is to be sweet and agreeable, which clearly has nothing to do with pain and suffering. An apparently unrelated meaning is found in a noun form that means pieces, strips, the extremity of a thing, the end of a whip.

“Chastisement” seems originally to have meant the pain of being whipped. In the Qur’an, it is the generic term for the punishment inflicted upon people in hell. The Qur’an could have used other words to make the same point. Why did God choose this specific word? For Ibn ‘Arabi, the reason can only be that in the end, the chastisement will become “sweet” (*‘adhib*) for those who suffer it. “That which causes pain is named ‘chastisement’ as a good news from God: Inescapably, you will find that everything through which you suffer is sweet when mercy envelops you in the Fire” (F. II 207.1).

CONSTITUTIONAL DIVERSITY

God is Just, and the basic definition of justice is to put things where they belong. The divine justice becomes manifest when God puts people where they belong by their very nature. Once

they arrive at their final abodes, they will find that they are happy because they have come home. It is not the location that determines bliss or chastisement, but the nature of the person who enters the location. The angels of chastisement enjoy hell, and sinners will too. "Bliss is nothing but what is accepted by the constitution and desired by the soul – locations have no effect in that. Wherever agreeableness of nature and attainment of desire are found, that is the person's bliss" (F. III 387.22).

The same line of reasoning helps Ibn 'Arabi explain why the Qur'an refers not only to the "fire" of hell, but also to its "bitter cold" (*zamharir*). Those who go to hell do so because their individual divine forms – their "constitutions" – are out of kilter and therefore inappropriate for the equilibrium of paradise. The person of cold constitution will find the fire's heat pleasant, and the person of hot constitution will find the bitter cold pleasant. What causes pain in one constitution will cause bliss in another constitution.

So, wisdom is not inoperative, for God keeps the bitter cold of Gehenna for those with hot constitutions and the fire for those with cold constitutions. They enjoy themselves in Gehenna. If they were to enter the Garden with the constitutions that they have, they would suffer chastisement, because of the Garden's equilibrium. (F. II 207.3)

Ibn 'Arabi finds another allusion to the pleasures of the Fire in the verse, "Whosoever comes unto his Lord a sinner, for him awaits Gehenna, wherein he shall neither die nor live" (Q. 20: 74). The folk of the Fire will not die therein, "because they find relief through the removal of pain." When it is removed, the chastisement turns sweet. "Nor will they live therein, which is to say that they will not have a bliss like the bliss of the folk of the Gardens, a bliss that would be something in addition to the fact that He has relieved them in the abode of wretchedness" (F. III 245.26).

In several places Ibn 'Arabi insists that the pleasure of hell is precisely the removal of suffering and pain. But this is not something small, given hell's severity.

The enjoyment of the Companions of the Blaze is tremendous, for they witness the abode, while security is one of its properties. There is no surprise if roses are found in rose gardens. The surprise comes when roses grow up in the pit of the Fire. (F. IV 307.34)

SURRENDER

Ibn 'Arabi says that a soul's wretchedness derives from its refusal to submit to God's wisdom and to accept its own nature. People suffer the fire of hell because they do not trust God and insist that the world needs to be changed to accord with their own personal desires.

The wretched have chastisement only from themselves, for they are made to stand in the station of protest. They seek the reasons for God's acts among His servants. "Why did such and such happen?" "If such and such had been, it would have been better and more appropriate." (F. II 447.8)

By protesting against the way things are, people dispute with the Real, who has given everything its creation. They join up with those who "broke off from God and His messenger" (Q. 8: 13). Ibn 'Arabi explains one meaning of this verse by playing on the similar spelling of *shaqq*, which means "breaking off," and *shiqā'*, which is the "wretchedness" of hell. "Their wretchedness is their 'breaking off.' Hell is the abode of 'the wretched' because they enter it in this state." Eventually, however, their state changes and they come to realize that there is no profit in questioning God and refusing to submit to their own nature. "When the period is drawn out for the wretched

and they come to know that dispute has no profit, they say, 'Agreement is better.'" At this point, their situation changes, and their breaking off from God and his Messenger disappears.

Then the chastisement is removed from their inwardness and they achieve ease in their abode. They find an enjoyment known by none but God, for they have chosen what God has chosen for them, and at that point they come to know that their chastisement had been only from themselves. (F. II 447.12)

When the denizens of hell accept their own natures, they realize that they will never leave the Fire. This makes them secure in their places, for they no longer wonder if they will be among those who, according to a hadith, had done no good whatsoever in the world but would be taken out of hell by the Most Merciful.

When they give up the thought of leaving, they become happy, so they enjoy bliss in this measure. This is the first bliss they find ... Thereby they find that the chastisement is sweet, for the pains disappear, even though the chastisement remains. (F. III 463.6)

Among the Quranic verses that criticize those who associate others with God is the following: "Be not among those who associate, those who divide up their religion and become sects, each party rejoicing in what is theirs" (Q. 30: 31–32). Ibn 'Arabi finds good news lurking here, even for sectarians. He is in the process of explaining how the Qur'an encourages its readers to search out the deepest meanings of its verses, which are the "signs that God appointed 'for a people who use intelligence' [Q. 2: 164] and 'for a people who reflect' [Q. 10: 24]." It calls those who understand the signs *ulu'l-albab*, which is usually translated by expressions like "possessors of minds" or "people of understanding." Literally, it means "owners of

the kernels,” and Ibn ‘Arabi contrasts it with “owners of the shell.”

Those who penetrate to the kernels of things enjoy their knowledge, and those who remain with the shells stay happy with their ignorance. Each group has its own idea of happiness, and neither is wrong, because each idea corresponds to the group’s own nature. This is a mercy from God which, however, filters haphazardly into this world, because here not all are happy with what they have. Things will be sorted out in the next world.

The realization of His words “each party rejoicing in what is theirs” [Q. 30: 32] occurs only in the next world, in contrast to this world. It is not known in this world, or rather, it occurs for many people but not for everyone ... The final issue of everyone in the next world, after the expiration of the term of taking to task, will be that they will rejoice in what they have and what they are busy with. (F. III 471.9)

A final passage can serve to summarize Ibn ‘Arabi’s good opinion of God. He points out that the Qur’an never provides straightforward verses concerning hell’s suffering. What it does say along these lines should be understood as threats. But God is the source of all beautiful character traits, and no person of true nobility and generosity would carry out his threats. In one of the more threatening passages, the Qur’an says, “The Clatterer! What is the Clatterer! And what shall teach you what is the Clatterer? The day that men shall be like scattered moths, and the mountains shall be like plucked wool-tufts!” (Q. 101: 1–5). This indeed sounds like a terrible situation, and the rest of the short surah encourages readers to take it as a dire warning of calamities to come. But Ibn ‘Arabi’s good opinion of God allows him to read it as a sign of precedent and all-embracing mercy:

The ultimate end of the affair will be that “with God is the most beautiful place of return” [Q. 3: 14]. God does not explicitly link

any ugliness whatsoever to the place of returning to Him. Things of that sort that have come to us play the role of threats in the first understanding... For His mercy is all-embracing, and His blessing is abundant and all-comprehensive...

This explains why all the world will be mustered on the day of resurrection "like scattered moths" [Q. 101 : 4]. Mercy will be scattered in all the homesteads, so the world will scatter in search of it, for the world has diverse states and various forms. Through the scattering they will seek from God the mercy that will remove from them the forms that lead to wretchedness. This is the cause of their being scattered on that day.
(F. III 390.35)

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