

10. Pye, *Skillful Means*, chap. 3.
11. Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, p. 86.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 89. "Dharmas" here means "teachings."
15. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
16. *Ibid.*
17. The title is a modern invention. It calls itself *The Hymn of Jude Thomas the Apostle in the Country of the Indians*. The most recent translation into English is that of Bentley Layton in *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 371–375.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 373 (verse 41).
19. Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, p. 58f.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
21. *The Wonderful Dharma Lotus Flower Sutra*, with commentary by Tripitaka Master Hua (San Francisco: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1979), vol. 4, p. 619.
22. A samsaric expectation is one that is concerned with ordinary, deluded, or "worldly" reality. A dharmic expectation is one that is concerned with the teaching of the Buddha and is more sophisticated; yet it is not liberation.
23. Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, p. 101.
24. *Ibid.*
25. The omniscience of the Buddha is a distinctively Mahāyāna teaching and is usually denied by Theravāda.
26. Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, p. 102.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 218f. Words in square brackets are mine.
28. "Beginningless" does not here imply that (absurdly) linear time spreads infinitely backward but that, when samsaric reality is examined, no beginning can be found. It just goes round and round and on and on, causing and conditioning itself, never getting any simpler or reaching anything like a beginning. The investigation of samsara resembles a phase space map of a complex iterative function such as the Mandelbrot set, which is infinitely deep but bounded, full of self-similarities but never exactly repeating itself. (For an absorbing layperson's introduction to such functions, see James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* [Penguin Books, 1987].)
29. The plural here is intentional. Although the *Lotus Sūtra* is presented as the teaching of "the" (historical) Buddha, Śākyamuni, it explicitly says that all the Buddhas of the past have taught and all the Buddhas of the future will teach the same Dharma.
30. Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, p. 58. Words in square brackets are mine.
31. Translated by Edward Conze in *Buddhist Wisdom Books, Containing the Diamond Sūtra and the Heart Sūtra* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958), p. 89.

FOUR

Between the Yes and the No

Ibn al-ʿArabī on Wujūd and the Innate Capacity

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK

Averroes: "How did you find the situation in unveiling and divine effusion? Is it what rational consideration gives to us?"

Ibn al-ʿArabī: "Yes and no. Between the yes and the no spirits fly from their matter and heads from their bodies."¹

SUFISM, SOMETIMES CALLED "Islamic mysticism," has been found wherever there have been Muslims. In general, Sufis differ from ordinary Muslims by stressing inwardness and spirituality rather than activity and Law.² Sufis have tried to intensify and perfect their knowledge of God, and one of the natural results of these efforts has been the direct experience of the object of faith. Descriptions of such experiences are always expressed in terminology that is recognizably Islamic, but those who speak of it unanimously assert that they have witnessed the single and unique Reality that underlies all appearances and all experience.

Sufism has an enormous primary literature, most of it unpublished and little of it translated. Writings that have a distinctively Sufi flavor appear in the eighth-century C.E. and have continued to be written throughout the Islamic world down to modern times. Here I can do no more than look at a few teachings of the most widely influential Sufi author since the thirteenth century, Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), known to the tradition as the "greatest master." It needs to be kept in mind that Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings represent "an ocean without shore," as his foremost student in the West has

put it recently.³ His published corpus includes many thousands of pages at an extremely high level of discourse, and it would be impossible to open any of his books to practically any page without finding statements relevant to the question of mystical awareness and the innate capacity.

Ibn al-'Arabī is primarily a visionary, but he formulated his visions in keeping with practically every form of Islamic learning. One of the first problems we face in investigating his voluminous writings is how to deal with his interpretative biases. It would be tempting to try to leave aside his theorizing and go straight to his expertise. But then we would be forced to interpret his interpretation in terms of our own theoretical categories, and there is no reason to suppose that such an approach would bring us any closer to an understanding of what is at issue.

In what follows, I devote most of the space to bringing out Ibn al-'Arabī's conceptual framework. It is important to stress, however, that Ibn al-'Arabī was not an armchair thinker. What he writes, as he often tells us, is the embodiment of his mystical vision in an imaginal mode. His vision is a vision of Being, or of Reality itself. And this Reality is inherently aware. Consciousness is inseparable from Being. In a very real sense, consciousness is being, and being is consciousness. The centrality of this idea means that Ibn al-'Arabī always focuses not on what we perceive but on what actually is, even if these are two sides of the same coin. Yet he is perfectly aware that presuppositions determine perceptions. This is a major theme of his works: he repeatedly tells us that people relate only to the gods of their own belief. But this is not simply psychological perceptiveness on his part. This idea expresses his vision that the god of belief is itself the merciful self-disclosure of the Real.

Fītra

Like Muslims in general, Ibn al-'Arabī frequently employs the term *fītra*, which I have in the past translated as "primordial nature" or "innate disposition" but which I am happy to translate as "innate capacity." The root meaning of the term is to split, break open, bring forth, create, make. The Koran employs various forms from the root in twenty instances. Most significant is the single verse in which the word *fītra* itself is used along with a verb from the same root: "So turn thy face to the religion as one with primordial faith—God's innate capacity in keeping with which He brought forth [*fatara*] human beings. There is no changing God's creation. This is the right religion, but most people know not" (30:30). Here the Koran tells us that the innate capacity of human beings pertains to their creation and that to adhere to this capacity is to follow God's right religion, understood by Muslims, naturally enough, as Islam. However, the Koran uses the term "Islam" in several meanings, one of which is simply "revealed religion," and the passage suggests that this is what is meant here, given the mention of the term *ḥanīf* or "one with primordial faith." The Koran associates this term with Abraham, whom it considers the closest of the prophets to

Muhammad.⁴ Muslims in general look back to the religion established by Abraham as the most perfect form of Islam before Islam.

Koran commentators usually say that the innate capacity mentioned in this verse is faith in God or—what amounts to the same thing—the recognition of *tawḥīd*, which is the assertion of God's unity defined by the first Shahadah: "There is no god but God." Ibn al-'Arabī identifies the innate capacity with the sum of the attributes of perfection possessed by the human spirit at its creation. He writes, "When God created the human spirit, he created it perfect, fully developed, rational, aware, having faith in God's *tawḥīd*, admitting his lordship. This is the innate capacity according to which God created human beings."⁵

A famous saying of the Prophet employs the term *fītra* in a way that is especially suggestive: "Every child is born with the innate capacity, but then its parents make it into a Christian, a Jew, or a Zoroastrian." Society's imperfections obscure the innate capacity and make it difficult for people to live in accordance with their original nature. In Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, people remain imperfect, undeveloped, irrational, and unaware; they deny *tawḥīd* and associate other lords with God (*shirk*).

In short, already in the Koran and the Hadith, we find the idea that human beings are created with an innate capacity that allows them to understand things as they really are, but this capacity is clouded by the human environment. The function of the prophets is to "remind" (*dhikr*) people of what they already know, while the duty of human beings is simply to "remember" (*dhikr*).⁶ Having remembered, they return to the innate capacity from which they have never really become separate.⁷

If the human spirit knows God and affirms *tawḥīd* at the moment of its creation, this is because this spirit is not completely separate from God. In describing the creation of human beings, the Koran says that God molded Adam's clay with his own two hands, then blew into him of his own spirit. The spirit is God's breath, and Muslim thinkers were well aware of the implications of the metaphor. Breath is different from the breather; yet it is also the same, since a person without breath is a corpse. The divine breath that animates human clay is not identical with God, nor is it completely different.

Human beings are near to God through their spirits, but they are far from him through their bodies made out of clay. The qualities of spirit and body lie at opposite extremes. The spirit is perfect, luminous, alive, rational, aware, intelligent, powerful, desiring, speaking; in short, it possesses all the attributes of God. But the body displays none of these qualities to any perceptible degree. It is merely earth and water, which represent the lowest of created things.⁸

When God blows the spirit into clay, this gives rise to the soul or self (*nafs*), which is an intermediate reality that possesses qualities of both sides. Hence the soul—which is the level of ordinary awareness—lies between light and darkness, perfection and imperfection, intelligence and ignorance, rationality and irrationality, awareness and unawareness, power and weakness. Within the soul, the innate capacity is represented

by the luminous qualities of the spirit that are only dimly present. Actualizing the innate capacity in its fullest measure is seen as the goal of human existence. The soul must be transmuted such that its darkness becomes fully infused with spiritual light. What this actualization entails for human consciousness is suggested in mythic fashion in a Koranic passage about Abraham, the prophet "of primordial faith" who is a model of actualized *fīra*:

We were showing Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, that he might be of those having sure faith. When night outspread over him he saw a star and said, "This is my Lord." But when it set, he said, "I love not the setters."

When he saw the moon rising, he said, "This is my Lord." But when it set he said, "If my Lord does not guide me I shall surely be one of the misguided people."

When he saw the sun rising, he said, "This is my Lord: this is greater!" But when it set he said, "O my people, surely I am quit of what you associate with God. I have turned my face to Him who brought forth [*fatarā*] the heavens and the earth, with primordial faith; I am not one of those who associate others with God." (6:76-80)

Wahdat al-Wujūd

Like most Muslim thinkers and sages, Ibn al-'Arabī grounds his perspective in the only completely certain knowledge available to human beings—that is, *tawhīd* or the assertion of God's oneness. The meaning of *tawhīd* is epitomized by the deceptively simple statement "There is no god but God." Without trying to define what Ibn al-'Arabī understands by the word "God," we can simply say that its closest synonym is the word *al-haqq*, the Real. Hence the Shahadah affirms that there is none real but the Real. In other words, there is nothing truly real but the absolutely real: all relative reality appears in function of a single, absolute reality, known in religious language as God.

The later tradition calls Ibn al-'Arabī the founder of the school of *wahdat al-wujūd*, "Oneness of Being" or "Unity of Existence," and this is a fair judgment so long as we recognize that he himself never employs this particular expression. His understanding of reality as *wujūd* can provide a useful key to some of his teachings on the nature of human consciousness and the ability of human beings to actualize *tawhīd* to the fullest degree and thus to return to their innate capacity.

The word *wujūd* entered the technical vocabulary of the Islamic sciences on the basis of translations of Greek philosophical texts. With this background in view, it can be translated as "being" or "existence." But the literal sense of the Arabic word is "to find," and this meaning is never far from the minds of those Sufi authors who employ it. To speak of finding is to speak of awareness and consciousness; it is to imply that someone finds and something is found. To affirm *wahdat al-wujūd* is to declare not only that existence is one but also that consciousness is one.

Islamic thought is general asserts that *wujūd* cannot be defined, since it is the most inclusive of realities. All definitions and discussion presuppose *wujūd*. For Ibn al-'Arabī, *wujūd* is a name of God inasmuch as he is the utterly unknowable and

inaccessible ground for everything that exists. *Wujūd* in this sense is nondelimited (*muftaq*), while everything other than *wujūd* is delimited, constrained, confined, and constricted. Ibn al-'Arabī refers to the "other" (*ghayr*) by various terms, such as entity, thing, quiddity, and creature. For him and many other Muslim thinkers, *wujūd* remains the absolute, infinite, nondelimited reality of God, while all others remain relative, finite, and delimited.

Since *wujūd* is nondelimited, it is totally different from everything else. What ever exists and can be known or grasped is a delimitation and definition, a constriction of the unlimited, a finite object accessible to a finite subject. In the same way, *wujūd*'s self-consciousness is nondelimited, while every other consciousness is constricted and confined. But one has to be careful in asserting *wujūd*'s nondelimitation. This must not be understood as an assertion that *wujūd* is different and only different from every delimitation. Ibn al-'Arabī is quick to point out that *wujūd*'s nondelimitation demands that it be able to assume every delimitation. If *wujūd* could not become delimited, it would be limited by its inability to become delimited.⁹

When employing the language of Islamic theology, Ibn al-'Arabī makes a parallel point when he says that God is both transcendent and immanent, or, as I prefer to translate the terms, both "incomparable" (*tarzīh*) with all things and "similar" (*tashbīh*) to all things. The creative tension between these two perspectives—declaring God incomparable and seeing him as similar—is a constant theme of his writings.

Ibn al-'Arabī refers to the Real inasmuch as it is nondelimited, incomparable, and eternally unknowable as the Essence (*dhāt*), while he refers to it inasmuch as it assumes all limitations and is similar to all things by such terms as the Real Through which Creation Takes Place, the Cloud, or the Breath of the All-Merciful. In function of the All-Merciful Breath, the Real creates the universe, which is to say that *wujūd* manifests itself within the limitations of the others. *Wujūd*'s assumption of limitations is commonly called "self-disclosure" (*tajallī*). In its incomparability *wujūd* stands beyond every limitation, but in its similarity it discloses itself as every form in the external and internal worlds. Everything that "exists" or "is found" (*muwǧūd*, the past participle of *wujūd*) displays a modality of *wujūd*. Likewise, every finding—every mode of consciousness and awareness—is a mode of *wujūd*'s own self-finding. *Wujūd* is comparable to light, while the things of the cosmos are comparable to the colors that represent the various modes of luminosity.

Wujūd is unknowable in itself; yet it discloses itself through its self-manifestations. Just as light has modalities of self-disclosure that we call colors,¹⁰ so *wujūd* has modalities of self-disclosure that are called "names" or "attributes" or "relationships." The primary attributes of *wujūd* are designated by the primary names of God. These include life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, hearing, sight, generosity, and justice. Wherever anything is found, these qualities are present, though not necessarily manifest. All colors are found in light, and the presence of light is sufficient to indicate that the colors are to be found in some way, but the colors become manifest only through specific conditions.

When a positive quality appears, *tawhīd* alerts us to the fact that the quality must belong to *wujūd*. If life is observed, we know that *wujūd* is alive and that "there is no life but real life," the unadulterated, pure, absolute, and eternal life of the Real. Life that is found among the creatures is ephemeral, while permanent and real life is an exclusive property of the Real. In short, to declare that *wujūd* is one is to declare that reality is one, and to declare that reality is one is to recognize that all real qualities are found in their pure and absolute form only in the Real.¹⁰

Imagination

Ibn al-'Arabī expresses the basic intuition of *tawhīd*—that all real qualities can be nothing but pale reflections of *wujūd*—in many ways. One of the more useful of his expressions is the word "imagination" or "image" (*khayāl, mithāl*), which he applies on several levels extending from individual consciousness to everything other than God.¹¹ In general, he uses the term to refer to anything that has an intermediate and ambiguous status. In the broadest sense, it means that everything in existence hangs between sheer Reality and utter nonbeing. To use Ibn al-'Arabī's expression, everything in the cosmos is both God and not God, or "He / not He."

As a faculty of the soul, imagination brings together sensory things, which have shapes and forms, and consciousness, which has no shape or form. Its nature can easily be grasped by reflecting on dreams, which for most people provide the most direct experience of imagination's nature and power. Dream images are perceived in sensory form; yet they are animated by a formless awareness. Every image brings together the multiplicity of the external world and the unity of the subject; each is an isthmus (*barzakāh*) between the darkness of the bodily world and the luminosity of spirit.

In a slightly more extended sense, Ibn al-'Arabī employs the term "imagination" to refer to the whole domain of the soul, the intermediate level of consciousness between spirit and body that makes up ordinary awareness. For him as for most Muslim sages, the terms "spirit," "soul," and "body" designate qualitative distinctions, not discrete entities. Thus, to speak of the spirit is to speak of a dimension of the human microcosm that is inherently luminous, alive, knowing, aware, and subtle, while to speak of the body is to refer to a dimension that is almost totally lacking in these same qualities. Hence, in itself—without its connection with the spirit—the body is for all intents and purposes dark, dead, ignorant, unconscious, and dense. The term "soul" or "imagination" then refers to the intermediate domain of the microcosm that is neither luminous nor dark, neither alive nor dead, neither subtle nor dense, neither conscious nor unconscious, but always somewhere between the two extremes.

Consciousness cannot escape the ambiguity of the soul. If we ask the question "Has so-and-so achieved consciousness?" the answer depends on the relationship we have in view. On one level, we may simply be asking if the chloroform has worn off. At the opposite extreme, we may be asking if the person has reached buddhahood.

Consciousness, like all divine qualities, represents a continuum. It has degrees of intensity, and the difference between the highest and the lowest created levels of consciousness is practically infinite. At the same time, the Real's consciousness is infinitely more real than the most intense consciousness possessed by the other, since nothing is real but the Real, and nothing is truly conscious but God.

Can human beings experience the consciousness of the Real, which alone can be called pure consciousness? The answer is always yes and no. *Tawhīd* means that "there is no consciousness but God's own consciousness." Inasmuch as human consciousness is nothing but nondelimited *wujūd*'s finding of itself, the answer is yes. But inasmuch as a delimited reality—a human being—is involved in this finding, the answer is no. Every mode of consciousness accessible to anything other than the Essence of the Real is both identical with and different from the Real's own consciousness of Self. Only nondelimited *wujūd* experiences identity without difference. As the theological axiom puts it, "None knows God but God."

Knowledge

Wujūd in itself is the Real inasmuch as it is nondelimited, incomparable, and forever undisclosed, while *wujūd* in its self-disclosure is all the "others," all the things that find and are found. *Wujūd* as such cannot be found except by *wujūd*: "None knows God but God." But nothing other than the self-disclosures of *wujūd* can be found by anyone, since nothing else exists. Every "other" is simply a modality of *wujūd*.

Ibn al-'Arabī employs a large number of terms to refer to different modes of awareness and consciousness, or different kinds of perception of and participation in *wujūd*'s self-disclosure. Most of these terms are rooted in Koranic divine names and represent the identity of *wujūd* with its self-disclosures. Under the most general of names that refer to consciousness—that is, Knowing (*ʿilm*)—a number of other divine names represent specific modalities of knowledge, including Manifest (*zāhir*), Aware (*khābir*), Seeing (*basīr*), Hearing (*samīʿ*), Encompassing (*muhīṭ*), All-embracing (*wāsiʿ*), Witness (*shahīd*), Subtle (*latīf*), Light (*nūr*), Examiner (*raḡīb*), Wise (*hākīm*), Preserver (*ḥāfiẓ*), Guarder (*muhaymin*), and Faithful (*muʾmin*). Each of these names gives news of one mode of *wujūd*'s knowledge of self and others, and each represents a mode of consciousness that is accessible to human beings. Ibn al-'Arabī discusses the divine and the human implications of each in detail. *Tawhīd* demands that in every case, the quality in its real and absolute sense belong only to *wujūd*, while it belongs to the self-disclosures of *wujūd*—such as human beings—in an unreal and relative sense.

Other terms employed by Ibn al-'Arabī stress the human vision of *wujūd* disclosing itself in all things. Among these are gnosis (*maʿrifā*), unveiling (*kasf, mukāshafa*), tasting (*dhawq*), insight (*baṣīra*), and opening (*fāḥ, fuṭūḥ*).¹²

In the present context, it is impossible to provide more than the barest outline of what is implied in the most general of all these terms—that is, knowledge (*ʿilm*). It is

typically seen as the primary attribute of *wujūd*. Though *wujūd* in itself is nondelimited and unrestricted, it is aware of itself and of every possible mode of its own self-disclosure. In other words, "God encompasses all things in knowledge" (Koran 65:12). *Wujūd* is one, and *wujūd* is both knower and known.

On the basis of *wujūd*'s knowledge of itself, it discloses itself according to the demands of its own qualities. The result is an infinitely diverse universe that externalizes the contents of *wujūd*'s knowledge. The creatures—the realities, entities, or things—are identical with the knowledge's objects. Inasmuch as they are found in the universe, they have been given a trace of *wujūd*. Inasmuch as they are ephemeral and unreal, they reflect their own realities, which have no inherent claim to *wujūd*. To return to the analogy of light, red and green are possible modalities of light; wherever they are found, they owe their existence to light, though they have no claim upon light. Without light there is no red and green, but the nonmanifestation of red and green in any given circumstances has no effect on light.

If we look at *wujūd* in terms of its own self-nature, we have to affirm that it is a single reality. But if we look at it in terms of its self-knowledge, then we have to say that it knows every possibility of expression that it entails, which is to say that it knows the cosmos in all its infinite spatial and temporal expanse. Hence, *wujūd* is one with a oneness that embraces potential manyness. In Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, God can be called the One/Many (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*)—that is, He is "one" in terms of his essence, and "many" in terms of his names, which are the general designations for the possible modalities of *wujūd*'s self-disclosure.

Ibn al-'Arabī and his followers distinguish two categories of divine names in accordance with the predominance of oneness or manyness. Names that pertain mainly to oneness are called names of mercy, gentleness, or beauty; these are closely associated with God's similarity (*tashbīh*). Names that pertain mainly to manyness are called names of wrath, severity, or majesty; these are closely associated with God's incomparability (*tanẓīh*). The first category designates creaturely relations with the Real that necessitate nearness, harmony, equilibrium, wholeness, sameness, and knowledge. The second category designates relations that necessitate distance from God, disharmony with the Real, disequilibrium, partiality, difference, and ignorance. These two categories designate the "two hands" with which God molded the clay of Adam.¹³

When *wujūd* discloses itself, it does so in respect of both God's hands—that is, in respect of both unity and diversity, nearness and distance, *tashbīh* and *tanẓīh*. Those things that are more closely connected to *wujūd*'s oneness tend to manifest the qualities of unity, simplicity, harmony, equilibrium, and awareness. Salient examples are spirits, which are noncompound and relatively everlasting. Those things that are more closely connected to the diversity of the objects of *wujūd*'s knowledge display multiplicity, compoundness, disequilibrium, darkness, and unconsciousness. Examples are bodily things. If God's right hand dominates in the makeup of a human being, the qualities pertaining to self-awareness—which is nothing but *wujūd*'s finding of

itself—gain the upper hand. To the extent that God's left hand dominates, the human subject is overcome by dispersion, ignorance, and darkness.

The interrelationship between God's two hands is reflected in that between the macrocosm (the universe as a whole) and the microcosm (the human individual). The universe as a whole, in all its spatial and temporal expanse, displays the infinite diversity of *wujūd*'s possible modes of manifestation. The predominant qualities are difference, lack of integration, dispersion, scatteredness, dimness of light, unconsciousness, ignorance, and passivity. The human microcosm brings together and harmonizes all the diverse qualities of *wujūd* and hence manifests *wujūd*'s oneness and wholeness. To the extent that the microcosm represents a full and conscious self-disclosure of *wujūd*, the qualities that predominate in the human personality are unity, harmony, concentration, luminosity, awareness, knowledge, and activity.

The Unknown Station

Muslim thinkers typically explain the nature of the human microcosm in terms of the biblical saying repeated by the Prophet, "God created Adam in His own form [*ṣūrah*]." This is understood to mean that human beings were brought into existence possessing all of God's attributes, which are nothing but the inherent qualities of *wujūd*. In other words, *wujūd* itself designates the innate capacity of human beings. To be human is to manifest *wujūd* as *wujūd*, while to be anything else is to manifest certain qualities of *wujūd* rather than others. Notice, however, that "manifestation" is the issue here, not identity with *wujūd* in every respect. Although identity is the goal, modes of difference always remain. God's two hands retain their rights even in the experience of oneness.

Wujūd's qualities are disclosed in the nonhuman realm in combinations that allow one or more qualities to dominate over others. But human beings concentrate and unify *wujūd*'s qualities such that, in the ideal situation, every quality stands in perfect balance and equilibrium with every other quality. All things in the universe except human beings stand in fixed and known stations (*maqām ma'ūm*), because each of them is colored by certain of *wujūd*'s attributes rather than others. Hence, nonhuman things can never reach an equilibrium of attributes or colors, a balance in which the colors cancel each other out, leaving only the pure, colorless light of *wujūd* itself.

Human beings come into the world without a fixed station, and hence they undergo constant change and transformation until death. They have the potential to manifest every color of light, every quality of *wujūd*. If they develop in harmony with nondelimited *wujūd*, they reach an unknown station rather than a known station, a station that Ibn al-'Arabī often calls the "station of no station" (*maqām lā maqām*). A person who reaches this station displays every quality of *wujūd* in perfect harmony and balance with every other quality. This is the actualization of the innate capacity of being human, since it is a return to the divine form—or the *wujūd*—from which human beings arose.

If people fail to develop in harmony with uncolored and nondelimited *wujūd*, their divine form unfolds in keeping with certain qualities of *wujūd* rather than others. Hence, they enter into a known station like everything else in the universe. This may be a known luminous station like that of the angels, in which case they dwell in paradise after the resurrection. But there are many other possible known stations, some of them dark, dense, and dispersed, corresponding to various hell worlds.¹⁴

Human beings play a unique role in the cosmos because they alone allow for the full manifestation of the qualities that bring about integration, harmony, and wholeness. This peculiar human characteristic is typically called "all-comprehensiveness" (*jam iywa*). Ontologically, all-comprehensiveness goes back to the fact that God gave human beings an innate capacity that manifests the formless form of *wujūd*, which comprehends all realities. But the term "all-comprehensiveness" is also frequently employed to designate the fruit of meditation, concentration, and remembrance (*dhikr*). It is achieved through gathering together all the dispersed powers of the soul and focusing them on the Real itself, or actualizing *wujūd*'s own awareness of itself.

When discussed in positive terms, human perfection is viewed as the realization of every quality of *wujūd* latent in the divine/human form. Perfect human beings (*al-insān al-kāmil*) are looked upon as God's "vicegerents" (*khalīfa*), since they have brought together all his attributes in a conscious and active manner, and thus they rule the macrocosm in his stead. The innate capacity appears as the possibility to realize the qualities inherent in the divine/human form. Human perfection is viewed as a full affirmation of *tashbīh*, such that all the qualities of *wujūd* are humanly embodied in perfect balance and harmony.

Human perfection is also viewed in negative terms. Difference and *tanzīh* are stressed, rather than similarity and sameness. Since there is nothing real but God, human beings are utterly unreal. Ignorance and deviation result from not recognizing this. From this point of view, human perfection is seen as the stripping away of every claim to *wujūd*'s qualities. Human beings are the utter servants (*ʿabd*) of God, since they have nothing of their own. The path of spiritual growth is pictured as the abandoning of all the dark clouds that conceal the sun of *wujūd*. Only through achieving nothingness can people truly affirm the unique reality of the One (*al-tawhīd*). From this standpoint, the innate capacity is to be empty of created qualities, because created qualities are delimitations, and *wujūd* is nondelimited. Emptiness alone allows for the full self-disclosure of *wujūd*. But to be empty of created qualities is to be full of *wujūd*, which alone is uncreated.

Ibn al-ʿArabī's description of perfect human beings as standing in the station of no station combines the positive and negative perspectives. Since perfect human beings have abandoned all qualities, they stand in no quality. But standing in no quality can only mean standing in *wujūd*, which alone is nondelimited by any quality whatsoever. Hence, the perfect human being is *wujūd*'s full self-disclosure, unhampered by any quality or entity, yet in complete control of every quality and entity.

Annihilation and Subsistence

Ibn al-ʿArabī and other Sufis employ many pairs of terms to bring out the complementary functions of servanthood and vicegerency—that is, the human state of actualizing simultaneous *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, or being fully incomparable with *wujūd* and fully similar to it at one and the same time. One of the most famous of these pairs is *fanā* (annihilation) and *baqā* (subsistence). Western scholars seem to have focused on the term *fanā* because it is reminiscent of terms like nirvana and moksha. But in the texts themselves, *fanā* is always contrasted with *baqā*: "All that dwells on the earth is *annihilated*, and there the two terms is Koran 55:27: "All that dwells on the earth is *annihilated*, and there *subsists* only the face of your Lord, the possessor of majesty and generosity." For Ibn al-ʿArabī and many others, the "earth" is the divine/human form viewed in respect of *tanzīh*, while the "face of your Lord" is the divine/human form in respect of *tashbīh*. God's face is *wujūd*'s self-disclosure within the divine/human form.

When human beings affirm *tanzīh*, they negate reality from themselves. The goal of spiritual practice becomes the elimination of every claim to divine qualities. This is the station of "servanthood." Once all trace of self-affirmation has been erased, what is left is *tashbīh*. God is experienced as disclosing himself within the creature in order to bring it into existence. Creaturely attributes have been annihilated, and divine attributes subsist. This is the station of "vicegerency," or acting as God's representative in the cosmos. But in truth it is God who acts, since the servant has been utterly effaced.

It should not be imagined that this negation of self and affirmation of God remains a mental exercise. Quite the contrary, the experience of this reality preceded its formulation. Muslims who lived their faith to the fullest, having actually undergone the annihilation of their selfhood, were able, like al-Hallaj, to say "I am the Real," because the Real's consciousness of itself became actualized within them. This, at least, is the constant claim of all the masters of Sufism, and Ibn al-ʿArabī is no exception. In a chapter of the *Futūḥāt* devoted to annihilation, Ibn al-ʿArabī points out that the term *fanā* is invariably used in its technical sense along with the pronoun *ʾan* (from). Thus, the Sufis speak of annihilation *from* something. Likewise, the term *baqā* is always employed with the pronoun *bi* (through). Hence one speaks of subsistence *through* something. In all cases, annihilation is lower and subsistence higher. "As for annihilation 'from the higher,' that is not a technical term of the Sufis, even though it is correct linguistically" (II 512.30).

Ibn al-ʿArabī does not provide an exact definition of the term "annihilation" but rather provides examples of what Sufis before him have said about it. They use it to mean "the annihilation of acts of disobedience, . . . the annihilation of the servant's vision of his own acts because God undertakes them, . . . and annihilation from creation" (II 512.27). He says that the Sufis consider *fanā* to have seven levels and explains each in some detail. Already at the third level, seekers are annihilated from the attributes of created things and lose consciousness of their own attributes, since

they perceive only God's attributes. The higher levels pertain to various modes of witnessing the Real.

The term "witnessing" (*shahādah*) provides an important key to what is at issue when annihilation is mentioned. It always calls to mind the divine name Witness (*shahīd*), since "there is no witness but the Witness." In general, witnessing is synonymous with seeing, not only sight with the eyes but also sight with the heart, the inner organ that is the locus of awareness and consciousness. It is often employed as a synonym for "unveiling" (*kashf*), the lifting of the veils between creation and the Real. It demands consciousness of what is witnessed, but it does not demand full self-consciousness, especially if what is witnessed is perceived as light and the self is experienced as darkness.¹⁵

One of Ibn al-'Arabī's students asked him why the mind does not stay the same after annihilation, given that annihilation erases the soul's faculties. Since the faculties play no role, they should not be affected. In the process of answering the question, Ibn al-'Arabī refers to the "witness" (*shāhid*), which he defines elsewhere as "the trace [*athar*] that witnessing leaves in the heart of the witnesser" (*Fuṭūḥāt* II 132.25):

There is no instance of witnessing without a trace in the one who witnesses it. The trace is what is called the "witness." It brings about the increase that accrues to the rational and other faculties. If this witness is not found after the annihilation, then it was not an annihilation in *tanẓīh*. On the contrary, it was a sleep of the heart, since, in our view, annihilation is of two sorts: When we find the witness after it, then it is correct. When we do not find the witness after it, we call it a "sleep of the heart." It is like someone who sleeps and does not dream.¹⁶

Thus, Ibn al-'Arabī recognizes a loss of self-awareness in spiritual experience that has no benefit for those who undergo it, since they remain totally unaffected by it. In another passage, he explains that the annihilation of self occurs because the self is darkness, while the object witnessed is light. When the light shines, the soul disappears.

Shadows cannot be established when there is light. The cosmos is a shadow, and the Real is a light. That is why the cosmos is annihilated from itself when self-disclosure occurs. For the self-disclosure is light, and witnessing the soul is a shadow. Hence the viewer for whom the self-disclosure occurs is annihilated from the witnessing of himself during the vision of God. When God lets down the veil, the shadow appears, and joy is experienced through the witness. (*Fuṭūḥāt* II 466.23)

Ibn al-'Arabī seems to be saying here that during the self-disclosure, there is no consciousness of either self or other. It is only after the person returns to self-awareness that he experiences joy through the trace left in the soul by the witnessing. However, in another work he makes clear that the retention of a certain mode of self-consciousness during annihilation is necessary if human perfection is to be achieved. Hence, the annihilation of self that is experienced is not absolute.

True perfection is found only in the one who witnesses both his Lord and himself. . . . If someone were to witness his Lord while being completely free of witnessing himself—as some people have claimed—he would gain no benefit and be the possessor of imperfection. For then the Real would be the one who witnesses itself through itself, and that is the way things are in any case. So what benefit would accrue to the one who supposes that he was annihilated from himself and witnessed his Lord at the same time?¹⁷

Ibn al-'Arabī never lets us forget that annihilation is a relative term. We are always talking about annihilation *from* some specific mode of lower consciousness and a simultaneous subsistence *through* a specific mode of higher consciousness. There is a giving up of one kind of awareness for a higher kind (which may well be perceived as an emptiness—though nothing is absolutely empty but the Real). Annihilation, in other words, is validated through the subsistence that accompanies it. That which subsists is the Real's self-disclosure, and that which is annihilated is the unreal—the limited self-awareness of the individual. Ibn al-'Arabī explains:

Subsistence is your relationship with the Real. . . . But annihilation is your relationship with the engendered universe, since you say, "I have been annihilated from such and such." Your relationship to the Real is higher. Hence subsistence is a higher relationship, since the two are interrelated states.

None subsists in this path except he who is annihilated, and none is annihilated except he who subsists. The one described by annihilation will always be in the state of subsistence, while the one described by subsistence will always be in the state of annihilation. In the relationship of subsistence is the witnessing of the Real, while in the relationship of annihilation is the witnessing of creation. For you never say, "I was annihilated from such and such," without conceiving of what you were annihilated from. Your very conception of that is your witnessing it, since you cannot avoid making it present to yourself in order to conceive of the property of becoming annihilated from it.

Subsistence is the same. You have to witness the one through whom you subsist, and in this path, subsistence is only through the Real. Hence you have to witness the Real, since you must have made it present in your heart and conceived of it. Then you will say, "I subsist through the Real." This relationship is nobler and higher, because of the highness of the one with whom it is established. Hence the state of subsistence is higher than the state of annihilation, even if the two necessitate each other and are found in a single person at the same time. (*Fuṭūḥāt* II 515. 24)

Human beings are forms of God. In other words, they epitomize the Real in which are found all the qualities of *wujūd*. However, "normal" people live in disequilibrium and dispersion. The divine attributes are actualized only partially and weakly, and certain attributes dominate over others. The dominant attributes most often pertain to qualities of *wujūd* that necessitate distance, differentiation, otherness, and darkness.

When *tanẓīh* is taken into account, the transformation that must take place during spiritual practice involves the affirmation of the exclusive reality of the Real and the negation of every human claim to selfhood. This negation is sometimes called "annihilation." But every annihilation demands a subsistence; *tanẓīh* cannot be viewed

apart from *tashbīh*. Each of Ibn al-'Arabī's seven levels of annihilation calls for an affirmation of *wujūd*'s self-disclosure and the reality of the human mode of consciousness that this self-disclosure brings about.

Becoming Human

The conclusions that we can draw from the brief outline presented in this essay can be summarized as follows: in Ibn al-'Arabī's view, the innate capacity of human beings is established by the fact that they were created in the form of God, which is to say that they alone among all things in the cosmos have the potential to experience the full self-disclosure of *wujūd*. In order to actualize the divine form, however, they have to give up the delimited consciousness that separates them from *wujūd*. Through "servanthood," they must surrender to God's will and return everything to its rightful owner, who is the Real. To be annihilated from the unreal is to subsist through the Real. This "Real" is precisely *wujūd* inasmuch as it discloses itself to the servant. It is the formless divine form in which human beings were created.

The famous ninth-century Sufi Abū Yazīd Basāmī reported that he did not reach God until God said to him, "Leave aside your self and come." Ibn al-'Arabī explains: "God invited him to come from the form of himself to the form of the Real in which God created Adam. The self is only able to assume that form when it departs from attachment to everything other than the Real."¹⁸

When we look at human consciousness in the context of actualizing the divine form, we see that consciousness represents the first and most salient quality of *wujūd*. To "leave aside oneself and come" to God is to eliminate the constraints of ignorance and separation and to experience oneself as a face of God turned toward manifestation and undergoing endless and never-repeating self-disclosures. This station is achieved only by a small minority of human beings, those who attain perfection, but it remains the innate capacity of all human beings. In Ibn al-'Arabī's view, only those who achieve it deserve the name "human" in the full sense. In other people, the dispersive qualities of the macrocosm—represented most graphically by the animal kingdom—retain their ruling property; hence, the self does not fully benefit from the integrating qualities of the undifferentiated divine form.

Having reached pure unity and integration, perfect human beings experience the self-manifestation of nondelimited *wujūd* on the level of delimitation. All qualities of *wujūd* are actualized within such beings exactly as they are found in the Real itself. Hence, no quality can be ascribed to them, since to say that they are *this* would mean that they are *not that*. But they are neither this nor that, or they are both this and that. Not only do they move beyond all created limitations, but they also move beyond domination by either of the two primary qualities of the Real, oneness and manyness, or mercy and wrath, or beauty and majesty, or *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*: "The people of perfection have realized all stations and states and passed beyond these to

the station above both majesty and beauty, so they have no attribute and no description" (*Fuṣūḥāt* II 133.19).

This station of no station represents utter undifferentiation, pure unity, sheer consciousness, total freedom, complete lack of delimitation, and identity with the Real's self-disclosures. The nature of the consciousness thereby experienced can be expressed only through analogies and metaphors. It is utterly inaccessible to ordinary language, which is to say that people are blind to the shining of its light. In fact, of course, the light witnessed by perfect human beings is forever shining in the darkness of the cosmos; it is only human incapacity that prevents people from seeing it.

There is only one light, but every vision of that light other than that light's vision of itself is colored by the visionary, whether or not the visionary is annihilated from himself in the vision. No Muslim authority could think of denying that a single reality underlies all reality, a reality that is the root and source of all experience, all existence, all consciousness. This is the perspective of *tawḥīd* itself: none is truly real but God; none is truly conscious but God.

Notes

1. On the famous meeting between Averroes and Ibn al-'Arabī, see, for example, C. Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī ou La quête du Soufre Rouge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 53ff.; H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 41-42; W. Chittick, *The Sūfī Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. xiii-xiv.
2. On Sufism's role in Islam, see my *Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth-Century Sūfī Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).
3. M. Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage: Ibn 'Arabī, le livre et le loi* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). English version: M. Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn 'Arabī, The Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).
4. The root meaning of the term *ḥanīf* is to incline toward or away from something, while the term itself is understood to mean someone who inclines toward the right way. The Koran uses it in twelve verses, and these determine the way Muslims have understood it. It is taken to signify the faith of Abraham and of those who continued to follow him in the Arab milieu, even after most people had become polytheists. Thus, the Prophet is said to have been *ḥanīf* even before he was made a prophet. See the article "Ḥanīf," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (new ed.; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954-).
5. Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Fuṣūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo: n.p., 1911), II 690.30. Cf. his discussion in II 616.91, quoted by Chittick, *Sūfī Path*, p. 195.
6. On this double significance of the word *dhīkr*, which arguably sums up Islamic teachings better than any other word, see Chittick, "Dhīkr," *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. 4, pp. 341-44.
7. See Ibn al-'Arabī's comparison of the recovery of *fīra* to the appearance of the sun after a cloud passes by (Chittick, *Sūfī Path*, p. 195).
8. This is not to suggest that clay is somehow negative or evil. The point is simply that clay represents an opposite extreme relative to spirit. Muslim thinkers, Ibn al-'Arabī in particular, were well aware of the many virtues of clay, earth, and water. See S. Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 136-41 and passim.

9. On *wujūd* as nondelimited, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 109–12.
 10. Evil is not ascribed to *wujūd* because, generally speaking, it derives from those qualities that pertain specifically to the unreal, and the unreal has no existence as such. Cf. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 290ff.

11. On the world of imagination in its various senses, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, chap. 7.
 12. I provide basic definitions for this second set of terms in *Sufi Path*, chap. 13 and passim. Ibn al-'Arabī also deals in great detail with a large number of "states" (*ahwāl*) and "stations" (*maqāmāt*), which represent various psychological and spiritual modalities in which people experience *wujūd*. Likewise, he discusses the faculties of mind, the nature of thoughts, techniques of meditation and concentration, and so on. His *Fuṣūḥāt* alone represents an enormous repository of Islamic learning on the nature of human beings and their interrelationships with the visible and invisible worlds. Modern scholars have barely scratched the surface of his works.

13. On God's two hands and their relationship with these two groups of names as expounded by Ibn al-'Arabī and his commentators, see Murata, *Tao of Islam*, chap. 3.

14. However, Ibn al-'Arabī maintains that all things reach their own felicity in the end, since all things are possible modalities of *wujūd*, and *wujūd* is fundamentally mercy and bliss. On Ibn al-'Arabī's eschatology, see W. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), chap. 7.

15. For some of Ibn al-'Arabī's basic teachings on witnessing, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 225–28 and passim.

16. Ibn Sawdākin, *Wasā'il al-sā'il*, pp. 44–45; edited in M. Profitlich, *Die Terminologien Ibn 'Arabīs im "Kitāb wasā'il al-sā'il" des Ibn Sawdākin* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1973).

17. Ibn al-'Arabī, *Mawāqī' al-nujūm* (Cairo: Maktaba Muḥammad 'Alī Ṣabīḥ, 1965), p. 27.

18. Ibn Sawdākin, *Wasā'il al-sā'il*, pp. 38–39.

Mysticism, Mediation, and Consciousness *The Innate Capacity in John Ruusbroec*

JAMES ROBERTSON PRICE III

There occurs a meeting and a union which are without intermediary and super natural, and in this is found our highest blessedness.¹

DURING THE PAST fifty years, philosophers of mysticism have been actively intrigued by the meaning and epistemological status of quotations such as this one by John Ruusbroec, the fourteenth-century mystic from Flanders. An intense and fruitful debate has emerged, one marked by three discernible and ongoing philosophic moments. By briefly sketching this debate, I will clarify my own entry into the discussion, as well as my focus on one of its vexed issues: the relationship of mysticism, mediation, and consciousness.

Beginning in the 1940s, "perennial" philosophers such as Aldous Huxley² and Frithjof Schuon³ accepted at face value claims made by Ruusbroec and others regarding an unmediated mystical experience of transcendent reality. Such statements led perennialists to conclude that there is a "common core" to mystical experience, one that transcends the historical and cultural differences of particular religious traditions. Considerable scholarly effort has been devoted to discerning and cataloguing the common features of this experience.

During the late 1970s, the perennialist position was challenged by a group of philosophers who drew on the insights of Kant, linguistic philosophy, and the sociology of knowledge. This group argued that mystical experience can be neither unmediated nor transcultural—for its texture and content are unavoidably shaped by

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Good Friends, enlightenment (bodhi) and intuitive wisdom (prajna) are from the outset possessed by people of this world themselves. It is just because the mind is deluded that people cannot attain awakening to themselves. They must seek a good teacher to show them how to see into their own nature.

—Hui Neng, Platform Sutra ¶ 12