

## DEATH AND THE WORLD OF IMAGINATION: IBN AL-‘ARABĪ’S ESCHATOLOGY

Teachings about eschatology or the “return” (*al-ma‘ād*) to God make up the third of the three principles of Sunni Islam, after Divine Unity (*al-tawhīd*) and prophecy (*al-nubuwwa*). Those Sufis who discuss eschatology cover a wide variety of topics, two of the most important being the “voluntary return” (*al-rujū‘ al-ikhtiyārī*) and the “compulsory return” (*al-rujū‘ al-iḍṭirārī*)<sup>1</sup>; the first deals with the path of attaining spiritual perfection in this life, the second with the nature of physical death and bodily resurrection.<sup>2</sup> The great Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) discusses both topics voluminously and sets the stage for all subsequent treatments by Sufis, philosophers, and theologians down to recent times. In the present article an attempt will be made to outline a few of his teachings on the compulsory return and suggest how they fit into his overall world view.

### *Revelation and Reason*

Sufi teachings are often looked upon as a departure from “orthodox” Islam, but in most cases this view rests upon a misuse of the term “orthodoxy” and an ignorance of the exact content of the teachings in question. More careful examination tends to support the thesis of Stephen Katz and others as to “The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mystical Experience”<sup>3</sup>; the specifically Sufi explanations of Islamic teachings are not made to subvert the dogma but to support it and to open the way to faith for those individuals who find the unidimensional explanations offered by the theologians and jurists intellectually or spiritually stultifying. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s exposition of Islamic eschatology fits into this category. Far from rejecting such articles of faith as the two angels who question the soul in the grave, the blast on Seraphiel’s trumpet that awakens the dead, the Balance set up to weigh human deeds at the Resurrection, and the division of human beings into the inhabitants of paradise and hell, Ibn al-‘Arabī maintains that anyone who attempts to turn these doctrines into metaphors or allegories

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya* (Beirut Dār Ṣādir, n d), III, 223

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of Islamic teachings on eschatology, see William Chittick, “Eschatology,” in *Islamic Spirituality Foundations*, ed. S. H. Nasr [vol. 19 of *World Spirituality An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*] (New York Crossroad, 1987), pp. 378–409, for the teaching of a well-known Sufi, see Chittick, “Rūmī’s View of Death,” *Alserat*, XIII, 2 (1987), 30–51. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines provide a good deal of the data and principles with which the later philosophers constructed their systematic treatments of eschatology, cf. Mullā Sadrā, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, tr. J. W. Morris (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1981). For an excellent summary of Islamic eschatological dogma with, however, no attempt to explain how it has traditionally been interpreted, see Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany State University of New York Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> See Katz’s chapter by this name in his *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1983), cf. Annemarie Schimmel’s chapter in the same volume.

through “rational hermeneutics” (*al-ta’wīl al-‘aqlī*)<sup>4</sup> only proves that his intelligence is corrupt and his faith imperfect. There is no reason, says Ibn al-‘Arabī, why the Qur’anic verses and ḥadīth that are often interpreted or explained away in order to make them fit into a rational system of thought cannot be understood literally—that is, as long as one understands the Qur’anic metaphysics and cosmology and the ontological referents of the passages in question.

The problem of how to understand the revealed data is often discussed in terms of the theological concepts of “Similarity” (*tashbih*) and “Incomparability” (*tanziḥ*). The general tenor of Islamic thought as developed by the theologians and philosophers has been to negate any Similarity between God and the creatures and to affirm God’s Incomparability. Hence, when the Qur’ān and ḥadīth speak of God’s hand, face, eye, foot, speech, and laughter, these terms need to be interpreted in such a way that God’s Incomparability is not affected; one could say that the traditional data is thoroughly “demythologized.” It is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s contention that such hermeneutical efforts are based upon ignorance of the nature of reality and disrespect for the revealed character of the Qur’ān and the ḥadīth.

The religion has brought statements that contradict rational evidence, since it ascribes to God such attributes of temporal things as coming, descent, sitting down, joy, laughter, hand, and foot. . . . At the same time the Qur’ān says, “Nothing is like Him” (S. 42:11), though these attributes have been affirmed. But if they were impossible, as is concluded by reason (*al-‘aql*), God would not have attributed them to Himself; the true revelation would be false. (II 319.26)<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Henry Corbin and others would make *ta’wīl* a cornerstone of Sufism, and this is true provided one understands that there is more than one kind of *ta’wīl* and that the kind a modern interpreter—whether Muslim or non-Muslim—is tempted to make is precisely the kind that Ibn al-‘Arabī and other Sufis stigmatize. As soon as a text is approached with the attitude that it can be interpreted to suit our own purposes, the result will be a *ta’wīl* of the rationalistic, individualistic, and ego-centric kind that the Sufis considered unacceptable. Speaking explicitly about *ta’wīl*, Rūmī tells us, “Interpret yourself, not the traditions, curse your own brain, not the rosegarden” (*Mathnawī*, I, 3744). An appropriate interpretation of the Qur’ān will be the result of years of devotion to the text—in the sense of both reverence and service (cf. Rūmī’s famous comparison of the Qur’ān to a bride, Arberry, *Discourses of Rūmī* [London: John Murray, 1961], pp. 236–37; William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983], p. 273). The Sufis felt that one had to approach the Qur’ān with the realization that one’s own mind is forgetful and corrupt and needs to be awakened by the Holy Word. Ibn al-‘Arabī likes to quote the Qur’anic verse, “Fear God, and God will teach you” (S. 2:282). The key to understanding is total absorption into the Divine Word, which reforms the Divine Image upon which man was originally created. In short, true *ta’wīl*—“to take [a text] back to the Origin”—presupposes spiritual transformation, so that the intellect within man, the impersonal light bestowed by God, grasps the meaning appropriate to the specific application by discerning how God intended the text to be applied (“God will teach you”).

<sup>5</sup> Roman numerals refer to the volume number of the edition of the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* mentioned in note 1, and these are followed by page and line numbers, when volume I is mentioned, the second set of numerals refers to O Yahya’s critical edition, Cairo, 1972 on.

Ibn al-ʿArabī's eschatological teachings represent one side of a many-sided endeavor to prove the literal accuracy of the revealed data; this is the wider context within which the following doctrines need to be situated.

### *The Ontology of Imagination*

Henry Corbin and others have demonstrated the importance of imagination for Sufism and Islamic philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī insists that it is impossible to gain a true understanding of the Islamic revelation without perceiving the role of imagination within the cosmos. "He who does not know (*yaʿrif*) the ontological status (*martaba*) of imagination (*al-khayāl*) has no knowledge whatsoever" (II 312.2). Long before Ibn al-ʿArabī imagination had been employed in interpreting Islamic eschatological teachings; Avicenna had suggested its relevance and al-Ghazālī had made extensive use of the explanatory possibilities it provides.<sup>7</sup> But Ibn al-ʿArabī is the great exponent of the concept as the indispensable means for understanding the true nature of after-death experience.

The term imagination refers to an ontological and epistemological reality that plays a fundamental role in both the macrocosm and the microcosm, though the individual faculty of the mind that goes by this name participates in its nature only imperfectly. Perhaps the most striking feature of imagination is its ambiguous character; as Ibn al-ʿArabī says, "It is neither existent nor nonexistent, neither known nor unknown, neither affirmed nor denied" (I 304.23; 4, 408.11). The common example of an imaginal (not "imaginary") reality is the image that a person perceives in a mirror: "He knows for certain that in one respect he has perceived his own form, but he also knows for certain that in another respect he has not perceived it" (I 304.24; 4, 408.12).

Ontologically, imagination is situated between the spiritual and the corporeal, possessing characteristics of both sides. Hence it is often referred to as an "isthmus" (*barzakh*), which is defined as "something that separates two other things."<sup>8</sup> A standard example in the sensory realm is the line that divides shadow from sunlight; though we see the line, it exists as such only in virtue of the two realities it separates. In the same way, imagination separates the spiritual or unseen world from the corporeal or visible world; all of its specific characteristics derive from its intermediate situation. In the macrocosm the imaginal world stands between the spirits (*al-arwāḥ*), which are disengaged or disembodied (*mujarrad*), luminous, simple (noncompound), and one, and the

---

<sup>6</sup> See Corbin's seminal study, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ʿArabī* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); cf. his *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> See William Chittick, "Eschatology"; Fazlur Rahman, "Dream, Imagination, and ʿĀlam al-mithāl," in *The Dream and Human Societies*, ed. G.E. von Grunebaum and R. Caillois (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 409–19.

<sup>8</sup> *Amr fāṣil bayn amrayn*, I 304.16 (4, 407.6). Cf. S. al-Ḥakīm, *al-Muʿjam al-ṣūfī* (Beirut: Dandala, 1981), pp. 191–96.

corporeal bodies (*al-ajsām*), which are tenebrous, compound, and multiple. In the microcosm imagination corresponds to the animate soul (*al-nafs al-ḥayawānī*), which acts as an intermediary between the body and the disengaged spirit, which was breathed into the human reality by God (S. 15:29; 38:72).<sup>9</sup>

The characteristic activity of imagination is to embody (*tajsīd*) that which is disembodied and to spiritualize (*tarawḥun*) or sublimate (*talṭīf*) that which is corporeal. Its intermediate status means that everything that leaves the unseen world for the visible world, or the visible world for the unseen, must first be imaginalized. Thus, for example, the angels appear to human beings in imaginal form, and revelation is first imaginalized before it takes the sensory form of a scripture. Likewise the visions of spiritual things experienced by the saints take place in the imaginal world; relatively few of them are able to leave imagination behind and enter into the realm of disengaged spirits and purely intelligible meanings (*al-māʿānī al-māʿqūla*).

The vast majority of people experience the reality of imagination most directly in dreams. For, says Ibn al-ʿArabī, “God placed dreams in the animate world so that all men might witness the World of Imagination and know that there exists another world, similar to the sensory world” (III 198.23).<sup>10</sup> In dreams “Meanings are transferred from their state of disengagement from material substrata (*mawādd*) into the clothing of material substrata” (II 379.24).

The traditional basis for establishing a connection between dreams and disengaged meanings lies in Qurʾanic references to Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams (S. 12:144, 100) and the many aḥādīth which demonstrate that the Prophet used to exercise this power. Ibn al-ʿArabī is particularly fond of referring to a ḥadīth found in al-Bukhārī:

“In a dream I was given a cup of milk, so I drank it until I saw that even my fingertips were quenched. Then I gave the rest to ‘Umar.”

The Prophet was asked, “How do you interpret it, oh Messenger of God?”

He replied, “Knowledge.”

Here, says Ibn al-ʿArabī, a disengaged meaning has assumed an appropriate form and become embodied within the world of imagination.<sup>11</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī also likes to refer to the Prophet’s saying, “I [dreamed that I] saw my Lord in the form of a youth.” For, Ibn al-ʿArabī says, “The dreamer sees meanings in the form of sensory objects, since the reality of imagination is to embody that which is not properly a body” (II 379.3).

If on the one hand Ibn al-ʿArabī employs the term imagination to refer to the isthmus between the spiritual and corporeal worlds, on the other he uses it to

---

<sup>9</sup> On the ontological status of imagination in the context of both the macrocosm and the microcosm as discussed by Ibn al-ʿArabī’s immediate followers, see William Chittick, “The Five Divine Presences From al-Qūnawī to al-Qayṣarī,” *MW*, LXXII (1982), 107–28

<sup>10</sup> Cf. II 378.24

<sup>11</sup> II 311.14

describe the whole of created reality, which is an isthmus between Being and nonexistence. In a well-known poem in the *Fuṣūṣ* he writes,

Engendered existence (*al-kawn*) is nothing but imagination, though in reality it is Truth (*ḥaqq*).

Whoever understands this has grasped the mysteries of the Path.<sup>12</sup>

The term “engendered existence” is synonymous with the “cosmos” (*al-‘ālam*), which is defined as “everything other than God” (*mā siwā Allāh*). The first line of the poem (which paraphrases the *shahāda*: “There is no god but God”) affirms that everything other than God is unreal or “imaginal”; but, to the extent that things do possess some reality—otherwise we could not speak of them—they derive from God. So imagination is the self-manifestation of the Real. The whole mystery of existence lies in the fact that the cosmos is both real and unreal at the same time; the spiritual traveler’s task is to discern between these two dimensions and pass by way of the relatively real side of the cosmos to the absolutely Real.

The reality of imagination is transmutation (*tabaddul*) in every state and manifestation (*zuhūr*) in every form. There is no true being which does not accept transmutation except God; so there is nothing that possesses Real Being (*al-wujūd al-muḥaqqaq*) except God. As for that which is other than God, that is imaginal existence. So when God manifests Himself within this imaginal existence, He only appears in keeping with its reality, not in His Essence (*dhāt*), which possesses true Being. . . .<sup>13</sup> This is what is meant by God’s words, “Everything is perishing except His Face” (S. 28:88), i.e., except His Essence, since no state in the cosmos continues to endure,

---

<sup>12</sup> *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. A. ‘Afifi (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1946), p. 146; cf. *Ibn al-‘Arabī: The Bezels of Wisdom*, tr. R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> The “reality” (*ḥaqīqa*) of imaginal existence refers to its delimited nature, or its inability to manifest Nondelimited Being as such. “Anything other than God” is delimited by its own reality or quiddity (*māhiyya*), i.e., that which defines it as “other.” God alone has no “reality” if by that we mean delimitation and definition; hence God’s “Reality” is Being as such, pure Nondelimitation (*al-lā tā‘ayyun*). In this sense *ḥaqīqa* is synonymous with ‘*ayn*’ or “entity.” Each individual thing or entity is a delimitation or restriction of Being, a darkening of the Absolute Light; the infinite possibilities of delimitation possessed by Nondelimitation are known as the “immutable” or “fixed” entities (*al-‘yān al-thābita*); they are fixed for all eternity since they express the very nature of God’s Reality, or since they are the eternal objects (*al-mā‘lūmāt*) of the Divine Knowledge. So an entity in this sense is a thing, delimited by definition, whether we conceive of it within God’s Knowledge—and therefore “nonexistent” (*mā‘dūm*) with relation to the cosmos—or “existent” (*mawjūd*) at a level appropriate to its own nature. Nevertheless its existence belongs only to God, who alone *is*; the thing is but a restriction imposed upon Nondelimited Being by Its own radiation; or by the fact that Being’s infinity allows It to assume every form while It remains eternally transcendent in Itself. The term “entity” can also refer to the “Reality” of God, but then it is equivalent to Nondelimited Being or the Essence (*al-dhāt*). Cf. William Chittick, “Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī on the Oneness of Being,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXI (1981), 171–84; cf. Chittick and P.L. Wilson, *Fakhrūddin ‘Iraqi: Divine Flashes* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 3–17.

whether it be engendered or divine. . . . Hence, everything but God's Essence undergoes transformation (*istihāla*), rapid or slow; everything but God's Essence is intervening imagination and vanishing shadow. Therefore no engendered existent in this world, in the next, and in whatsoever is between them, neither spirit, nor soul, nor anything other than God's Essence, remains in a single state; on the contrary, it is transmuted from one form to another constantly and forever: imagination is nothing but this. (II 313.12)<sup>14</sup>

When defined as "everything other than God" imagination is also called by other names, well-known to those familiar with Ibn al-ʿArabī's teachings. Perhaps the most famous is the "Breath of the All-Merciful" (*nafas al-rahmān*), the exhalation of God within which all created beings take shape, just as words take shape within human breath. This in turn is identified with the Cloud (*al-ʿamā*) within which was God—according to the Prophet—"before" He created the creatures.<sup>15</sup>

The cosmos in the state of its existence is nothing but the forms that are received by the Cloud and that become manifest within it. So if you look at the reality of the cosmos, you will see it as a vanishing accident. . . . , while the fixed substance is the Cloud, which is none other than the Breath of the All-Merciful. All the forms that become manifest in the cosmos are accidents within the cosmos and may vanish; they are the possible existents (*al-mumkināt*) and are related to the Cloud as forms are related to a mirror [within which they appear]. (III 443.8)<sup>16</sup>

Imagination employed as a synonym for the Cloud or for the Breath of the All-Merciful is described as being "nondelimited" (*muṭlaq*), since, as the infinite Self-manifestation of God, it can act as a receptacle for any form whatsoever. In contrast the particular ontological realm within the cosmos which is also known as "imagination" and which acts as an isthmus between the spiritual world and the corporeal bodies is described as "discontiguous" (*munfaṣil*); it in turn is contrasted with "contiguous (*muttaṣil*) imagination," that is, the microcosmic imagination of "animal man" (*al-insān al-ḥayawānī*), the individual who has not attained to the spiritual degrees of the saints and the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).<sup>17</sup> Imagination is discontiguous if it is independent of the subject that

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* "The cosmos is fantasy, it has no real existence, this is the meaning of 'imagination' you have been made to imagine that it is something superadded to God, subsisting in itself. But this in fact is not the case. Since the situation is as we have described it, you should know that you are imagination and everything that you perceive—saying, 'This is not I'—is imagination. So all of existence is imagination within imagination, while True Being belongs to God alone," pp 103–104. Cf. Austin's rendering, *Ibn al-ʿArabī*, pp 124–25, and T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1983), p 7.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. William Chittick, "The Words of the All-Merciful," *Parabola*, VIII, 3 (1983), 18–25.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, pp 184–90.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. II 310ff.

perceives it, “contiguous” if it depends upon the individual mind. Hence,

The contiguous kind disappears with the disappearance of the imaginer, while the discontinuous kind is an essential ontological level, forever receptive toward meanings and spirits, which it embodies through its intrinsic nature. (II 311.19)<sup>18</sup>

To the extent that it is perceived by man, discontinuous imagination comes from “outside” (*min khārij*). “It is an independent and integral ontological level made up of embodied forms that are put on like clothing by meanings and spirits” (II 296.19).

God brings the three worlds—the spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal—into existence within the Breath of the All-Merciful or nondelimited imagination, which, acting as an isthmus between the Light of Being and the darkness of nonexistence, manifests the properties of both sides. The macrocosm in turn reflects these three primordial states—Being, imagination, and nonexistence—in its three ontological levels: the spiritual world manifests the Light of Being, the corporeal world displays the darkness of nonexistence, and the imaginal world embraces the properties of both. Just as discontinuous imagination is an isthmus between the spiritual and corporeal worlds, so nondelimited imagination is the “Supreme Isthmus” (*al-barzakh al-a‘lā*) or the “Isthmus of Isthmuses,” for “It possesses a face turned toward Being and a face turned toward nonexistence” (III 46.31).

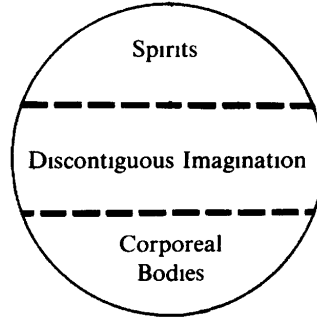
Figure 1 illustrates the above scheme: The circle represents nondelimited imagination, “everything other than God’s Essence.” Nonexistence describes the state of the things (*al-ashyā*,) or entities (*al-a‘yān*) of the cosmos before God brings them into existence. Strictly speaking, however, the entities remain forever nonexistent, since Being belongs to God alone; what appears within the Breath of the All-Merciful is their properties (*ahkām*) or effects (*āthār*), which are neither existent like God nor nonexistent like the entities in themselves. “The Entity of God is described by existence, while the properties of the entities of the cosmos become manifest within this Entity; or, It becomes manifest through them” (III 107.28). That which exists is Being alone; if the delimitations of Being—the entities—possess specific attributes and characteristics, this is precisely because of their nonexistence and their consequent negation of Nondelimited Being.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. III 442.4.

<sup>19</sup> See note 13 and the sources mentioned there; also Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, pp. 160–61.

NONDELIMITED BEING  
(God in Himself, the Essence)



NONEXISTENCE  
(the cosmos in itself)

Figure 1 The Cosmos as Nondelimited Imagination, “The Breath of the All-Merciful”

Concerning the ontological role of both nondelimited and discontiguous imagination, Ibn al-ʿArabī likes to quote the Qurʾanic verse, “God let forth the two seas that meet together, between them an isthmus they do not overpass” (S 55 20) “If it were not for the isthmus,” says Ibn al-ʿArabī, “the two seas would not become distinct” (III 47 26) These “two seas” are Being and nonexistence, or the spiritual world and the corporeal world, depending on how the verse needs to be applied in a given context

As for contiguous imagination, it reflects discontiguous imagination at the level of the microcosm As was pointed out, the clearest access man has to contiguous imagination is through his dreams And since dreams are the imagination of the microcosm, it is not surprising to find Ibn al-ʿArabī calling the cosmos—nondelimited imagination—the dream of God

In reality, in respect of God’s Name the Inward, the forms of the cosmos are related to Him like the forms of a dream to a dreamer The “interpretation” (*taʿbīr*) of His dream is that these forms are His states (*ahwāl*), so they are not other than He, just as the forms of a dream are the states of the dreamer, nothing else—he sees only himself (II 380 4)<sup>20</sup>

Nondelimited imagination is infinitely vast, for it is the cosmos itself, everything “other than God” “It is the vastest of engendered beings, the most perfect of existents” (II 311 3) Even at the delimited level, that is in its

<sup>20</sup> The cosmos as a dream that must be interpreted is an important theme of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Fuṣuṣ*, especially chapter 9 Cf Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* chap 1, Corbin, *Creative Imagination* p 242



discontiguous and contiguous forms, imagination can encompass all things in a certain manner. Pointing to the skeptical views of rational thinkers when presented with a description of imagination's qualities, Ibn al-ʿArabī states that even their ability to "suppose the impossible" (*farḍ al-muḥāl*) for the sake of an argument depends upon imagination. "If the impossible did not receive existence at some level or another, it could not be supposed" (II 312.20).

Nothing is vaster [than imagination], since, in its very reality, it governs all things and non-things. It gives form to sheer nonexistence, to the impossible, to Necessity, and to possibility. It makes existence nonexistent and nonexistence existent. (I 306.6; 4, 417.1).

Having already heard that imagination is characteristically "neither this nor that," we should not now be surprised to be told that imagination is not only infinitely vast, it is also exceedingly narrow.

For imagination is not able to receive anything except as a form, whether it be something pertaining to the sensory or spiritual levels, or a relation, or an attribution, or God's Majesty, or His Essence. Were imagination to attempt to perceive something without a form, its own reality would not allow it to do so. . . . It cannot in any way disengage meanings from material substrata. . . . Hence imagination is the vastest thing that can be known; yet, in spite of this amplitude, which allows it to be exercised over all things, it is unable to receive meanings as they are in themselves, disengaged from material substrata. Hence [and here Ibn al-ʿArabī refers to a series of ḥadīth] it perceives knowledge in the form of milk, honey, wine, or a pearl; it sees Islam as a dome or a pillar; it sees the Qurʾān in the form of butter and honey; it sees a debt in the form of a fetter; it sees God in the form of a human being or a light. Thus it is vast and narrow, while God Himself is only vast. (I 306.13; 4, 418.3)

### *The Isthmus after Death*

The Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth provide graphic descriptions of life after death, the terrors of the Day of Resurrection, the torments of hell, and the joys of Paradise. In general, the Islamic philosophers, while affirming the survival of the soul in some mode or another, allegorized the text of the revelation, while the theologians adamantly insisted on its literal accuracy—although many of them felt it necessary to interpret those verses that suggested "Similarity" between God and the creatures. Al-Ghazālī had already shown that both the philosophers and theologians were correct in their own ways, though neither group was able to grasp the full import of the eschatological data. He suggested that imagination and the world of dreams provided the key to understanding.<sup>21</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī expands on al-Ghazālī's suggestions in voluminous detail.

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Chittick, "Eschatology."

The existence of the "Isthmus" in the eschatological sense, that is, the period between death and resurrection, is clearly established by the Hadīth literature, according to the Qur'ān commentators, it is the object of reference in the verse, "Beyond them is an Isthmus until the day they are raised up" (S 23 100) A connection between the Isthmus and imagination is also well attested in the early sources, especially when they are read with the hindsight of later thinkers The Qur'ān establishes a clear relationship between sleep and death (S 39 42), while the Prophet called sleep "death's brother" It was only a short step from such traditional data to the suggestion that the perceptions that take place during dreams are somehow comparable to those of a dead man Moreover, many of the descriptions of after-death experience provided by the ahādīth are totally explicit in speaking of the "embodiment" of works and of meanings For example, the ahādīth mention that negligent prayers will be rolled up like shabby clothes and thrown in the sinner's face, good deeds will appear as lovely people and evil deeds as ugly old hags, evil works will turn into dogs or pigs<sup>22</sup> By Ibn al-'Arabī's time the imaginal nature of experiences in the Isthmus had long been accepted by many philosophers, theologians, and Sufis, his task was only to explain how this took place within the context of his own metaphysical and cosmological teachings

As a microcosm, a human being contains the three created worlds spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal His spirit derives from the Divine Breath, while his body is made of dust, his soul (*nafs*), which is neither body nor spirit, dwells at the intermediary level of imagination The soul is one like the spirit, yet it is many like the body through its faculties Like imagination its nature is ambiguous and not easily susceptible of definition This is all the more true since several kinds of soul can be distinguished, depending upon the level of moral and spiritual maturity The Qur'ān speaks of the "soul that commands to evil" (S 12 53), the "soul that blames" (S 76 2) itself for its own shortcomings, and "the soul at peace" (S 89 27) with God, the Sufis have normally perceived these as three levels of the soul's development The important point here is that the reality that must be reformed and perfected is referred to as the soul, the "spirit" is disengaged from outward manifestation, since it is the breath of God

In this scheme the function of the body is to provide a locus where the soul can develop and expand as an isthmus between pure corporeality and pure spirituality Without the body, the Divine Spirit could not manifest itself in the form of a particular human individual Ibn al-'Arabī compares the One Spirit of God to the sun, and the individual spirits to sunlight entering the windows of houses He explains that God's wisdom requires these individual lights to continue in existence, so He created for them bodies at every stage of their development, including the Isthmus after death

Since God wants those lights to preserve the distinctness they have

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf al-Ghazali, *The Precious Pearl (al-Durra al-Fakhira)*, tr J I Smith (Missoula Scholar's Press, 1981) pp 30 34, 36 49, 50, 53, 60, 87, Tabrizi *Mishkat al-maṣābiḥ*, tr J Robson (Lahore, M Ashraf, 1963-65) pp 340 448-49 490-91 1176

received, He creates for them Isthmus bodies, within which these spirits remain distinct when they leave their this-worldly bodies in sleep or after death. . . . They never cease to be distinct for all eternity; they never return to their original state of being one entity. (III 188.1).

All the experiences of the grave that are dealt with in such detail in the Ḥadīth take place while the human spirit is connected to the imaginal body in the Isthmus. In a long passage that throws a good deal of light on how he understands such experiences, Ibn al-ʿArabī describes twelve forms that may be seen by the saints when they depart from their corporeal bodies at death; these include works, knowledge, beliefs, station, state, angels, a Divine Name related to God's Acts, a Name of the Attributes, a Name of the Descriptions (*al-nuʿūn*), a Name of Incomparability, and a Name of the Essence. Naturally enough in the context, these forms appear in images that provide a foretaste of Paradise, not of hell. Ibn al-ʿArabī states that each of the twelve categories of form represents an experience of "meanings," for, in the Isthmus, "meanings become embodied and manifested in shapes and sizes, so they take upon forms" (II 295.30). Three examples can suffice to demonstrate the tenor of this passage.

On the subject of works, Ibn al-ʿArabī assumes that his readers are familiar with the ḥadīth, "He who has died has experienced his resurrection" (that is, the "lesser resurrection," *al-qiyaʿmat al-ṣuḡhrā*), since he quotes a number of ḥadīth about the resurrection to illustrate the embodiment of works. He also mentions the Qurʾanic verse, "But as for those who are niggardly with the bounty God has given them. . . , what they were niggardly with will be hung around their necks on the Day of Resurrection" (S. 3:180).

As for knowledge, Ibn al-ʿArabī states that the dead man's knowledge of God may be one of two kinds, rational or "unveiled" (*ʿan kashf*). Then he explains that

The self-revelation of the form of "unveiling" is more complete and more beautiful [than that which derives from rational knowledge], since unveiling and its attainment are the results of godfearingness and righteous works; it is referred to in God's words, "Fear God, and God will teach you" (S. 2:282). The saint's knowledge will become manifested to him at death in a beautiful form or as a light which he wears and enjoys. (II 296.10)

Ibn al-ʿArabī describes the appearance of the "form of a prophet" in interesting detail. Note that he is alluding to his own teaching, which helps structure the *Futūḥāt* and more particularly the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, that the Muslim saints "inherit" their sciences, states, and stations not only from the prophet Muḥammad but also from other prophets. Thus an individual saint will have a spiritual connection to one of the pre-Islamic prophets in addition to his connection to Muḥammad.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī maintains that after his own time, no Muslim saint will inherit directly from the Prophet Muḥammad, since such a state of perfection will no longer be attainable; instead, the saints

Sometimes the prophet from whom the saint has inherited will appear in self-manifestation, for [as the Prophet Muḥammad said], “The men of knowledge are the heirs to the prophets.” Hence at death he will see Jesus, or Moses, or Abraham, or some other prophet. Some of the saints may pronounce the name of that prophet in joy when he comes to them, for the messengers are all among the felicitous. So at death a saint will say “Jesus,” or he will call him “Messiah,” as God Himself has done—this is what usually happens. Those present will hear him speak words of this sort and become suspicious, saying that at death he became a Christian and left Islam. Or the saint will mention Moses or one of the Israelite prophets, and they will say that he became a Jew. But he is one of the greatest possessors of felicity in God’s eyes, for the common people never know this vision, only the Men of God, the possessors of unveilings. (II 296.27)

These few examples illustrate the general principle that man’s situation within the imaginal existence of the Isthmus is determined totally by his life in this world; human life is the process of shaping the soul, which, as was said above, came into existence when God breathed the spirit into the body. The soul, as an isthmus between spirit and body, grows and develops in accordance with the relationship it establishes between these two. No doubt there is a certain natural development that is especially obvious in the early stages, that is, during infancy and childhood. But even here “environment” plays an important role in determining how the soul will grow. Witness the famous prophetic saying, “Every child is born in the primordial [human] nature (*al-fiṭra*), then its parents make it into a Christian, a Jew, or a Zoroastrian.” Islam makes the practice of religion incumbent from the age of puberty, when the intellect (*al-ʿaql*)—the soul’s power of discernment between true and false, real and unreal—begins to manifest itself. From this point on, man assumes responsibility for his own development. To the extent that he follows the “Balance of the Law” (*mīzān al-sharʿ*; III 239.6) that is, the guidelines for moral, spiritual, and intellectual development revealed through the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth—he will develop in harmony with the Divine Form upon which he was originally created (for, in the words of the Prophet, “God created man upon His own Form”).

As the Balance of the Law gradually brings man’s soul into equilibrium (*al-ʿitidāl*) and integrates it into its proper relationship between spirit and body, man develops in an “ascending” direction. In other words, the Divine Spirit that was breathed into the body molds the soul in keeping with its own intrinsic attributes, such as luminosity and knowledge. Without the Balance, man falls away from the vertical axis and sinks down to the “lowest of the low” (S. 95:5)—

---

will inherit directly from other prophets and only indirectly from Muḥammad This is the meaning of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s famous doctrine concerning the “Seal of Sanctity” (*khātam al-walāya*), by which he means the Seal of Muhammadan Sanctity (a station which he apparently claimed for himself, though his writings leave some ambiguity) Sanctity as such will not come to an end until the second coming of Christ, who will be the Seal of Universal Sanctity Cf I, 184–185 (3, 174–177), 244 26 (4, 71 4), 318–319 (5, 68–70), II, 41 10, 49 14, 50 11, III, 400 11, 514 11, IV, 77 20

being totally dominated by bodily attributes such as darkness and ignorance—or he strays into horizontal dispersion. In moral terminology the attributes which tend in a downward direction are known as “predatory” (*sabʿī*), while those which bring about dispersion are known as “bestial” (*bahīmī*).<sup>24</sup> The Qurʾān refers to all three tendencies—ascending, descending, and dispersive—in the Fātiḥa (S. 1:5-7), recited by Muslims during every cycle of the canonical prayer: “Guide us on the straight [=ascending] path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not the path of those against whom Thou art wrathful,<sup>25</sup> nor of those who are astray.” The Straight Path is that of ascent and integration; through it the soul attains to the perfections pertaining to its prototype, the Divine Form. This path leads to felicity, whereas the other paths lead to suffering and torment.

Complete souls are those which profess God’s unity and have faith; the profession of unity (*al-tawḥīd*) and faith (*al-īmān*) prevent them from becoming the locus of pain (*al-alam*) and chastisement (*al-ʿadhāb*). (III 175.21)

In short, life is a process through which a human being shapes his own soul; in death, when the body is discarded, the soul becomes embodied in an imaginal form appropriate to its own attributes; likewise, all its works, character traits, knowledge, and aspirations appear to it in appropriate forms. “In the Isthmus every human being is a pawn to what he has earned, imprisoned in the forms of his works” (I 307.22; 4, 425.4).

The factor that sets the “two weighty creatures” (*al-thaqalān*, human beings and jinn) apart from all others is precisely this development which they undergo during their span of existence in this world. Ibn al-ʿArabī quotes the words of the angels in the Qurʾān: “None of us there is but has a known station” (S. 37:164). Then he points out that all creatures except men and jinn share with the angels in this attribute; moreover, after death, men and jinn will join their ranks.<sup>26</sup>

The angels say, “None of us there is but has a known station.” This is the same with every existent, except the two weighty creatures, even though they also are created within their own station. For within God’s knowledge they possess definite and determined stations which are hidden from them; each person reaches his station with his last breath. So his last breath is his known station, and upon it he dies. Hence the jinn and men were called to

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ibn al-ʿArabī’s discussion of the “sensual” or “concupiscent” soul (*al-naḥs al-shahawāniyya*) and the “irascible” soul (*al-naḥs al-ghaḍabiyya*), III, 237; both of these are contrasted with the “rational soul” (*al-naḥs al-nāṭiqa*), which in essence is identical with the Divine Spirit. Cf. al-Ghazālī’s division of the soul into four powers: rational, sensual, irascible, and satanic (R.J. McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment* [Boston: Twayne, 1980], p. 377).

<sup>25</sup> The connection between Wrath (*ghaḍab*) and the faculty of “irascibility” which goes by the same name (*al-quwwat al-ghaḍabiyya*) is not fortuitous.

<sup>26</sup> On human perfectability in the eschatological context, see Chittick’s “Eschatology” and “Rūmī’s View.”

travel, and so they travel either upwards by answering the call of the Law, or downwards, by answering the call of the Divine Will—but of this they know nothing until after the Will's object is accomplished<sup>27</sup> Every individual human being and jinn ends his travel at the known station which was created for him "Some of them shall be wretched and some felicitous" (S 11 105) Every other creature is created in his station, so he does not descend from it, nor is he commanded to travel to it, since he is already there, this applies to angels, animals, plants, and minerals, all of whom are felicitous with God no wretchedness can reach them (I 258 35, 4, 147 4)

When the soul enters the Isthmus after death, it gains a much clearer vision of its own situation and understands that the body it has discarded was but a veil Speaking of death, the Qur'ān says "We have removed from you your covering, so your sight today is piercing" (S 50 22) In this context Ibn al-'Arabī likes to quote the famous saying of the Prophet "Men are asleep, but when they die they wake up" However, the awakening through death is only the first awakening, at the resurrection, man wakes up once more

Your awakening through death is like someone who dreams that he wakes up In the midst of his dream he says, "I dreamed this and that," and he supposes that he is awake (II 313 6)

The period in the Isthmus prepares man for resurrection, just as the world prepared him for death

In relation to the next world, the period in the Isthmus is like the period that the embryo remains in its mother's womb God makes a person undergo constant development, he keeps on developing until he is born on the Day of Resurrection (III 250 19)

To ask why man dwells in the Isthmus before he is resurrected is like asking why he is born and why he dies The answer is, in short, that this is the destiny of the human soul, or that this is the law of creation God breathed the spirit into the body, and from that point on the soul develops, even before that, at the Covenant of Alastu (cf S 7 172), the spirits of Adam's children acknowledged the sovereignty of their Lord and promised to observe their duties toward Him

---

<sup>27</sup> In other words, they will gain no reward for following the Divine Will, since, as the Prophet said, "Works will be judged by their intentions" They thought they were following some limited goal and had no idea they were being "pulled by the forelock" (cf S 11 56 and *Fuṣūṣ*, chap 10) Only those who follow the commands of God as revealed by religion will ascend toward unity and integration On the difference between the "engendering command" (*al-amr al-takwīnī*) and the "prescriptive command" (*al-amr al-takfīfī*), see Chittick and Wilson, *Fakhriddīn 'Iraqī*, pp 149-50 and 155-58, cf Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī's own Summary of the *Fuṣūṣ*," *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society*, I (1982), 56-58 See also Austin's remarks on the difference between the Divine Wish (prescriptive command) and the Divine Will (engendering command), *Ibn al-'Arabī*, pp 31, 111ff, et passim

When God brought the human spirit into existence, He did so such that it governs a natural, sensory form, whether in this world, in the Isthmus, in the next world, or wherever. The first form in which it was clothed was the form it wore when it acknowledged God's lordship at the Covenant. Then it was gathered (*hashr*) from that form into its this-worldly, corporeal form; it remains imprisoned within it from the fourth month of its mother's pregnancy<sup>28</sup> to the hour of its death. When the person dies, he is gathered into another form from the time of death to the time of the questioning [in the grave by the two angels]. . . . Then he is gathered to another form in the Isthmus; or rather, his form is the Isthmus itself—in this sleep and death are equivalent. Then he is held fast in the Isthmus until the Trumpet sounds at the resurrection. (II 627.27)

During and after the resurrection, the soul undergoes further transformations, until it takes its place in the Garden or the Fire. But even at these stages, it is not attached to a fixed form in the sense that it possessed a corporeal body in this world. To clarify this point we need to look more closely at the ontological situation of the resurrection.

### *The Next World*

The "Isthmus" is called by this name because it is an intermediate stage of existence between this world (*al-dunyā*) and the next world (*al-ākhirā*)<sup>29</sup> and because it is connected to the discontinuous world of imagination, though not synonymous with it in every respect.<sup>30</sup> It is not easy to discern the exact difference between the Isthmus and the next world from Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings. In some passages he makes a clear distinction between the two. For example, he writes that, in contrast to the Isthmus, the next world is "sensory (*maḥsūs*) and non-imaginal (*ghayr khayālī*), for the resurrection is something real (*muḥaqqaq*),

---

<sup>28</sup> The aḥādīth specify that the spirit is breathed into the body at this time; this fact has important social consequences. Cf. B.F. Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> However, the concept of isthmus is rather fluid; as Ibn al-ʿArabī explains, "The resurrection itself is an isthmus; nothing exists except isthmuses, since an isthmus is that which joins two things" (III 156.27). Moreover, Ibn al-ʿArabī does not always speak about the Isthmus after death by contrasting it with this world and the next; for example, he refers to it as "the first way-station (*manzil*) of the next world" (IV 282.13).

<sup>30</sup> The World of Imagination "follows" this world since everything that leaves this world enters into it; in this respect it is identical with the Isthmus after death. But the World of Imagination also "precedes" this world, and in this respect it is distinct from the Isthmus. Cf. Ibn al-ʿArabī's distinction between the "possible unseen" (*al-ghayb al-ilmkānī*) and the "impossible unseen" (*al-ghayb al-muḥāṭī*), III 78.23–30. In other terms, within the Circle of Being (*dāʾirat al-wujūd*) this world marks the termination of the "Arc of Descent" (*qaws al-nuzūl*) and the beginning of the "Arc of Ascent" (*qaws al-ʿaṣṣūd*); the World of Imagination plays a role on both arcs, but the Isthmus pertains only to the Arc of Ascent. Cf. William Chittick, "The Circle of Spiritual Ascent according to al-Qūnawī," in P. Morewedge, ed., *Neoplatonism and Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

existent (*mawjūd*), and sensory (*hissī*), similar to what man experiences in this world" (I 311.20; 4, 447.9). Elsewhere he interprets a Qur'anic verse in a similar vein: The people of Pharoah "will be exposed to the Fire, morning and evening; and on the day when the Hour has come: 'Admit the people of Pharoah into the most terrible chastisement'" (S. 40:45-46). The exposure to the Fire mentioned here refers to the period in the Isthmus, when the people of Pharoah will be tormented at the imaginal level; but in the next world they will be admitted to the sensory fire of hell.<sup>31</sup>

These passages suggest that the basic difference between the Isthmus and the next world lies in the distinction between imaginal and sensory existence; yet imagination is by definition sensory, as was made clear earlier: this is precisely the reason for its "extreme narrowness" in spite of its infinite amplitude. Part of the solution to this problem may lie in a distinction that Ibn al-ʿArabī makes (see below) between the ontological status of the Garden and the Fire, the latter being more "solidified" than the former. Moreover, just as the Isthmus is an awakening in relation to the sleep of this world, so the resurrection is an awakening in relation to the Isthmus. Even if both pertain to imaginal existence, the resurrection is more real; certainly the World of Imagination is broad enough to embrace different levels of reality, as is clear, for instance, in the distinction between its discontinuous and contiguous realms.

In any case, Ibn al-ʿArabī makes clear that the "body" that is resurrected in the next world is not similar to the this-worldly body in every respect:

Although the substances (*al-jawāhir*) are exactly the same—for it is they which are poured forth from the graves and raised up (cf. S. 100:9; 35:9) the composition and constitution differ because of accidents and attributes that are proper to the next abode, but not to this. (I 207.13; 3, 284.4)

One similarity between the next world and the Isthmus is the fact that in both abodes the realities of things shine forth more clearly than they do in this world. As Ibn al-ʿArabī expresses the situation on the Day of Resurrection,

God will come in order to decide and to judge; so He will only come under [the guise of] His Name, "Light." The earth will be made radiant with the light of its Lord, and through that light every "soul will know its works, the former and the latter" (S. 82:5), for it will find them present, unveiled by that light. (II 485.32)

One of the results of the vision of things under the radiance of the eternal light will be that everything is known for what it is; intentions and motivations can no longer be dissimulated. Thus, says Ibn al-ʿArabī, in the next world human beings will be ranked

according to the measure of their states in this world. He who was a perfect slave in this world will be a perfect king in the next world. He who

---

<sup>31</sup> I 299.9 (4, 378.9); 307.17 (4, 424.7).



possessed the attribute of ownership in this world—even if only [in the sense that he considered] his bodily organs his own property—will have his domain in the next world decreased precisely in the measure that it was expanded in this world. . . . So there is none mightier in the next world than he who, in this world, reached the extremity of abasement (*al-dhull*) in relation to God and the Truth; and there is none more abased in the next world than he who reached the extremity of mightiness (*al-izza*) in his own soul in this world, even if he was nothing here but a buffoon. I do not mean by “mightiness in this world” that a person should have been a king; only that the attribute of his soul should be mightiness; and the same goes for abasement. Even if, in his outward situation, he should have been a king or something else, the station or state in which God places His servant in relation to outward things is of no concern. The only thing that can be taken into account is the state of his soul. (I 221.18; 3, 350.14)

Ibn al-ʿArabī holds that a person’s outward situation at the Resurrection and what follows depends totally upon what he has made of himself in this world. Although this remark can also be made concerning the Isthmus, a fundamental difference lies in the fact that—as was pointed out—the Isthmus in relation to the next world is like a dream, just as this world is a dream in relation to the Isthmus. So much does the “outward” (*al-zāhir*) of the next world depend upon the “inward” (*al-bāṭin*) of this world that the ontological situations of the two abodes are in a sense reversed, and this represents one of the primary differences between “sensory” experience in this world and the next.

Any question of a relationship between the outward and the inward—at any ontological level—will have to be taken back to the relationship between the Divine Names “Outward” and “Inward.” As the Inward, God—or Nondelimited Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*)—is the Essence or Ipseity (*huwīyya*), while as the Outward He is the existence within which the possible existents appear, just as colors appear within light. So existence belongs only to God, not to the entities (*al-ʿyān*) or possible existents (*al-mumkināt*) that seem to possess some sort of independent existence. Hence, says Ibn al-ʿArabī,

God is the Outward in respect to the loci of outward manifestation (*al-maẓāhir* = the possible existents), but the Inward in respect to the Ipseity. The loci of outward manifestation are multiple in respect to their own entities,<sup>32</sup> not in respect to that which is Outward within them; so Unity derives from their outwardness, multiplicity from their entities. (II 93.35)

Elsewhere Ibn al-ʿArabī explicitly identifies the Cloud with “the Outward of God referred to in the Qur’anic verse, ‘He is the First and the Last, the Outward

---

<sup>32</sup> That is, the immutable entities, which are the objects of God’s Knowledge but have no existence of their own. See note 13; also William Chittick, “Ibn al-ʿArabī and his School,” in *Islamic Spirituality*, II (vol. 20 of *World Spirituality*), forthcoming, where—in keeping with al-Farghānī’s formulation—the “Manyness of Knowledge” (*kathrat al-ʿilm*) is contrasted with the “Oneness of Being” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). Cf. *al-Muʿjam al-ṣūfī* under *al-zāhir*.

and the Inward' (S. 57:3)" (II 310.13). Hence the "Outward" is identical with nondelimited imagination to the extent that the latter represents God's Self-manifestation, but not in the respect that it appears as "other than God." "God is both the Outward witnessed by the eyes and the Inward witnessed by the intellect . . .; however, the fact that a person witnesses God does not mean that he must be aware that He is the object" (III 484.35).

God's Self-manifestation in imaginal forms is seen clearly at the Resurrection. To illustrate this, Ibn al-ʿArabī often refers to a long ḥadīth found in Muslim. God will reveal Himself to the various groups of people gathered at the resurrection in a variety of forms. In each form "He will say to them, 'I am your Lord,' and they will reply, 'We seek refuge from you in God.'" Finally God will say to them, "Is there a sign between you and your Lord through which you will recognize Him?" They will reply in the affirmative, and God will transmute (*tahawwul*) Himself into the form by which they recognize Him.<sup>33</sup>

God's Outward—the One Being manifested within the multiple entities—undergoes constant transformation not only at the resurrection, but also in this world, where all things are continuously transformed by the "renewal of creation at each instant."<sup>34</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī sees a reference to this constant renewal in the Qurʾanic verse, "Each day God is upon a [different] business (*shaʿn*)" (S. 55:29). God's "day," he says, is the "indivisible instant" (*al-zaman al-fard*).<sup>35</sup>

Since human beings were created "upon the Form of God," they manifest both the Outward and the Inward. What is important to realize is that in Ibn al-ʿArabī's view, the human manifestation of God follows what has been called the "law of inverse analogy"; in other words, there will be a reverse relationship between the two Names, since man is God's mirror image. "The mirror is the Presence [= ontological level] of Possible Existence (*al-imbkān*), the viewer is God, and the form reflected within is you" (III 80.17).<sup>36</sup> Hence man's outward reflects God's Inward, his inward God's Outward.

The Prophet said, "God created man upon His own Form." Man undergoes variegation (*tanawwuf*) in his inward, while he is fixed (*thubūt*) in his outward. No organ is ever added to his outward manifestation, but he does not remain in a single state in his inward, so he possesses both variegation and fixity. But God is described as the "Outward and the

---

<sup>33</sup> I 314 I (4, 461 12), cf I 305 14 (4, 412 10), II 311 25 For the ḥadīth, see Muslim, *al-Sahih*, Kitāb al-Imān, no 302 (Cairo Muhammad ʿAlī Ṣabih, 1334/1916), I 114–117

<sup>34</sup> On the new creation, see Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, pp 205–15, also his "The Concept of Perpetual Creation in Islamic Mysticism and Zen Buddhism," *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, ed S H Nasr (Tehran McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 1977), pp 115–48, cf Chittick and Wilson, *Fakhruddin ʿIraqi*, pp 81–83, 136–37

<sup>35</sup> Concerning the indivisible instant, cf I 292 16 (4, 338 13), II 431 28, III 295 12, see also III 198 32, 224 32, 253 14, 288 16, 470 23

<sup>36</sup> The mirror is one of Ibn al-ʿArabī's favorite examples for explaining relationships, cf the beginning of chap 1 of the *Fuṣūṣ, al-Muʿjam al-ṣūfi*, pp 449–506 See also M Sells, "Ibn ʿArabī's Polished Mirror Perspective Shift and Meaning Event," *Studia Islamica*, forthcoming

Inward"; His Outward undergoes variegation while His Inward is fixed. So God's Inward is the same as man's outward, while God's Outward is the same as man's inward. Hence man is like a mirror: When you look at your own form within a mirror and lift up your right hand, your form lifts up its left hand; your right hand is its left hand, and your left hand its right. Hence, oh creature, your outward is upon the form of His Name the Inward, while your inward is His Name the Outward. (IV 135.33)

The mirror reversal between man and God results from the "completeness" of the corporeal plane of existence. Man's corporeal body displays all God's Attributes in some manner, including those of both Mercy and Wrath. But in the next world, once man has left the corporeal plane of existence, the properties of Mercy and Wrath will become separated to a large degree, as is explained below; in other words, those existents which manifest Mercy will be placed in Paradise, while those which manifest Wrath will go into the Fire. This means that this world and more particularly mankind display both Mercy and Wrath, thus filling a broader ontological spectrum than either of the two abodes in the next world. Hence Ibn al-ʿArabī writes,

Man's most perfect (*akmal*) plane is in this world; as for the next world, every human being of the two groups is divided in half—that is, in his state (*hāl*), not in his knowledge, since each group has knowledge of the opposite state. Hence man [in this world] is faithful and infidel at once; he is felicity and wretchedness, bliss and chastisement, blissful and chastised. For this reason knowledge in this world is more complete (*atamm*), but theophany (*tajallī*) in the next world is more elevated (*ʿlā*). (I 118.10; 2, 221.5)

If man's completeness of state in this world makes him a mirror image of God, in the next world he loses the completeness that corporeality allows, though he gains in knowledge and, if he is one of the felicitous, in proximity (*qurb*). But what is important to understand here is that in the next world he will no longer be God's *mirror* image, since he will no longer exist on the lowest ontological level, where relationships are reversed. His situation in the next world can be compared to rays of light in the midst of the air before they are reflected and reversed. As a result, in the next world man's outward will reflect God's Outward, his inward God's Inward. Hence his inward will be fixed, while his outward will undergo constant transmutation (Figure 2).

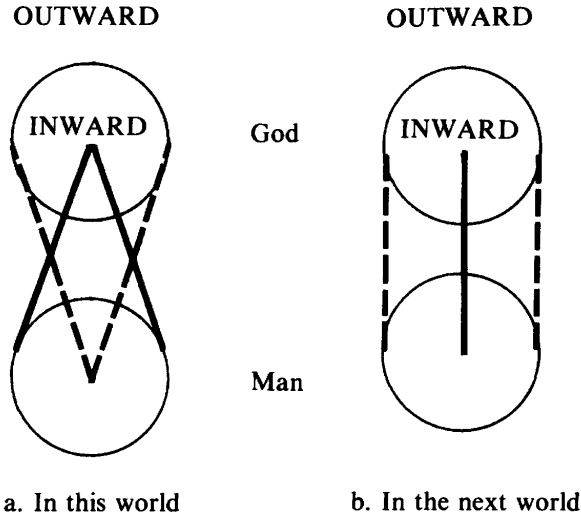


Figure 2. The Relation between God and Man in respect to the Divine Names "Outward" and "Inward"

Know that in this world God never ceases to manifest Himself to the hearts of men; the variegated thoughts in their minds derive from the divine theophany, though only the Men of God are aware of this; moreover, only they know that the variation of outward forms in this world and the next in all existents is nothing other than God's variegation, for He is the Outward, since He is the entity of each thing.<sup>37</sup> In the next world, man's inward will be fixed, for it is identical with his outward form in this world, the hidden transmutation of which is the "new creation" at each moment concerning which men are "in doubt" (S. 50:15). In the next world, man's outward will be like his inward in this world, and the divine theophany will be actualized for him continuously. Hence in the next world his outward will be variegated, just as in this world his inward undergoes variegation in those forms within which the divine theophany takes place, such that his inward becomes totally colored by this theophany. In this world there is a correspondence with God at the level of imagination, but this correspondence will be outward in the next world, just as it was inward in this world. Hence, in the next world, the property of imagination will accompany both man and God. (III 470.16)

<sup>37</sup> This last clause may also be translated, "since He is identical with each thing." However, in light of the fact that ultimately only "the Entity of God is described by existence" (III 107.28; cf. note 13), this passage may be taken as a paraphrase of the passage quoted above in which Ibn al-'Arabi explains the meaning of God's Outwardness (II 93.35). In other contexts Ibn al-'Arabi speaks of man and the cosmos—or the microcosm and macrocosm—as mirror images; we can conclude that the tremendous variety of creatures in the macrocosm reflects the variegation of images in man's inward reality.

In short, the next world “is a domain of rapid excitation (*inf̄f̄ āl*), containing no delay whatsoever, just like the inward plane of this world at the level of thoughts (*al-khawāṭir*)” (III 223.29).

Ibn al-ʿArabī often quotes a Qurʾānic verse in which the people of Paradise are addressed as follows: “Therein you shall have all that your souls desire, all that you call for” (S. 41:31). Likewise he refers to a ḥadīth in which God says to the blessed, “I say to a thing, ‘Be!’, and it is (cf. S. 16:40; 36:82; etc.); now I have given to you that you should say ‘Be!’ and it will be.”<sup>38</sup> In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s view, such traditional data can only be understood in the context of the imaginal nature of paradisaical existence, the fact that the outward plane of the next world corresponds to the mental and imaginal plane in this world. Hence, just as in this world God gives form in our minds to our thoughts and imaginings, so He will do the same thing in the next world. But there we will experience our “thoughts” concretely and “outside” of ourselves at a level of reality far greater than the corporeal level. Ibn al-ʿArabī explains these points as follows:

Know that in this world God brings things into existence for the servant within the Presence of Imagination. Hence, no thought occurs to the servant without God’s giving it existence within imagination, just as He gives existence [within the corporeal world] to those possible existents that He chooses whenever He desires. But within the Presence of Imagination the servant’s will (*mashʿa*) derives from God’s Will, since the servant wills nothing unless God wills it. . . . Some of what the servant wills in this world occurs in sensory existence; but within imagination, his will’s influence is like God’s. Hence God is with the servant within imagination in everything that the servant wills.

In the same way, in the next world man’s will will have an all-embracing property; for his inward in this world becomes his outward in the next world. Therefore everything that he desires comes into existence according to his own will. . . .<sup>39</sup> Hence, God follows the servant’s desire in this world at the level of imagination and also in the next world, just as the servant’s will follows God’s Will. So God’s business (*shaʿn*) is to keep watch over the servant by bringing into existence for him everything he wants in this world at the level of imagination and in the next world; but the servant follows God in theophany: God does not reveal Himself in theophany within a form without the servant’s becoming colored by it; so he undergoes transformation within forms because of God’s transformation, while God undergoes in bestowing existence because of the transformation

---

<sup>38</sup> III 295.16; cf. I 258.22 (4, 144.11), 259.29 (4, 153.1), II 440.35.

<sup>39</sup> As is well-known, Ibn al-ʿArabī teaches that the saints may reach a stage where they can exercise their will—or “spiritual resolve” (*himma*)—in such a manner that whatever they desire enters into physical existence (cf. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, pp. 275–83; Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, pp. 222ff.), but it does not seem to have been pointed out that the saints possess this supranormal power as a kind of anticipation of their paradisaical state.

of the servant's will within the Presence of Imagination in this world, and in all things within the Garden in the next world. (III 509.33)<sup>40</sup>

Man's situation in the Garden depends totally upon his own desires. God's words become his own: "Our only word to a thing, when We wish it, is to say to it 'Be!', and it is" (S. 16:40). In effect, man constructs his own Paradise.<sup>41</sup> In this connection Ibn al-'Arabi often refers to the following ḥadīth: "There is a market in the Garden wherein is no selling or buying, only the forms of men and women. When a person desires a form, he enters into it." In Ibn al-'Arabi's view, this ḥadīth illustrates the fact that the inhabitants of Paradise "continue to be gathered from one form to another, ad infinitum, so that they may know the Divine Amplitude" (II 628.3).<sup>42</sup> The paradisaical state is so subtle (*laṭīf*) that man can exist in one form without this preventing him from existing in other forms as well.

We enter into any of the Market's forms that we desire, even though we retain our own form, and none of our family or acquaintances would fail to recognize us. Yet we know that we have put on a new ontological form, while retaining our old form. (II 183.22)<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> If this scheme sounds like a chicken-and-egg sort of situation, this should not be surprising. In essence it seems to be a simplified version of a circular diagram that Ibn al-'Arabi employs to explain the differences among religions (*al-sharā'ī'*)

- a Religions differ only because of the difference in Divine Relations (that is, Divine Names)
- b Divine Relations differ only because of the difference in states
- c States differ only because of the difference in times
- d Times differ only because of the difference in movements
- e Movements differ only because of the difference in attentivenesses
- f Attentivenesses differ only because of the difference in goals
- g Goals differ only because of the difference in theophanies
- h Theophanies differ only because of the difference in religions (I 265 [4, 185])

This whole discussion hinges upon the nature of "receptivity," i.e., the relationship between the receptacle (the entity) and Nondelimited Being. Cf. note 13, Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 118, 159, et passim.

<sup>41</sup> Man also constructs his own hell. "The People of the Fire conceive no dreadful thought (*khaṭir khawf*) of a chastisement greater than what they are experiencing without that chastisement coming into existence within them and for them, the chastisement is identical with the actualization of the thought" (I 259 30, 4, 453 3). Mullā Ṣadrā teaches that "every human being, whether among the blessed or the damned, has his own complete and independent world" (*Wisdom of the Throne*, p. 165). Here as elsewhere he seems to be indebted to Ibn al-'Arabi, who anticipates this teaching at least implicitly in many passages (cf. III 223 30, where he seems to be referring to it explicitly).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. II 312 26.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. I 149 12 (2, 353 5), III 518 22ff.

Or again:

Man's plane in the next world does not resemble the plane of this world, even though the two planes share in names and in the form of the person (*al-šurat al-shakḥīyya*); in the next world's plane spiritual existence (*al-rūḥāniyya*) dominates over sensory existence (*a-ḥissiyya*). We have tasted this within the abode of this life, in spite of the solidity (*kathāfa*) of its plane: Thus a person's entity can exist in several places [at once]; but the common people perceive this only in dreams. (I 318.27; 5, 67.13)

### *The Garden and the Fire*

Heaven and hell are similar in certain respects, but profoundly different in others. Both pertain to the next world, and both involve a double level of experience: outward and inward, or "bodily" and "spiritual." In insisting on the bodily resurrection, Ibn al-ʿArabī is distancing himself from those philosophers who held that the souls of the blessed survive only on an "intelligible (*ʿaqlī*)" plane. Such thinkers, says Ibn al-ʿArabī, "are ignorant of the fact that there are two planes: one of the bodies and another of the spirits, the latter being intelligible; so they affirmed the intelligible plane, but not the sensory" (I 311.23; 4, 448.7). In brief, "The soul is resurrected in the form of its knowledge and the body in the form of its works" (I 99.20; 2, 123.1)<sup>44</sup>

Ibn al-ʿArabī explains that the Divine Perfection demands these two dimensions—the unseen and the visible—in the next world just as it demands them in this world:

The combination of intellect and sense perception—of the intelligible and the sensory—is more tremendous in power and more complete in the Divine Perfection. Thereby the property of [God's Name] the "Knower of the Unseen and the Visible" (S. 6:73, etc.) continues in every kind of possible existent and the property of the Names the "Outward" and the "Inward" is established in every group. (I 312.4; 4, 451.1)

The profound differences between heaven and hell go back to their archetypes in divinis, i.e., the Attributes of Mercy (*rahma*) and Wrath (*ghaḍab*).<sup>45</sup> These two Attributes provide a key to understanding Ibn al-ʿArabī's cosmology, within the context of which the ontological differences between the Garden and the Fire become clear.

At the risk of oversimplifying Ibn al-ʿArabī's cosmological scheme, we can

---

<sup>44</sup> Cf. I 317.11 (5, 60.6).

<sup>45</sup> As has been mentioned in passing, Ibn al-ʿArabī characteristically refers all of his doctrines back to the Divine Names, since "Every attribute manifested within the cosmos demands a specific relationship, which is referred to by a Name known to us through the Revelation" (III, 441.35). Cf. William Chittick, "Ibn al-ʿArabī's Myth of the Names," in *Islam and Platonism*, ed. P. Morewedge, forthcoming.

conceive of it as follows:<sup>46</sup> Within the Cloud God creates a supreme Spirit, known as the “Universal Intellect” and the “Pen,” and then by means of the first a second Spirit, known as the “Universal Soul” and the “Tablet.” These two mark the boundaries of the world of disengaged spirits; they are, on the spiritual plane, the active and receptive principles of all creation, yang and yin. Next, just as the Universal Intellect threw down a shadow named the Universal Soul, so the Soul throws down its own shadow, which is called Nature and which displays within itself, though it has no actualized existence, four fundamental ontological tendencies, the four “natures” (*al-ṣabāʿ*): heat, cold, wetness, and dryness; these reflect four fundamental Divine Attributes: Life, Knowledge, Will, and Power (the “Four Pillars” of Divinity, *al-arkān al-arbʿa*).<sup>47</sup> Nature in turn acts upon the Dust—Universal Substance—to produce the Universal Body, within which become manifest the four natures in the form of all the creatures of the sensory world, the World of Corporeal Bodies.

The first corporeal creature to become manifest within the Universal Body is the Throne of God.<sup>48</sup> According to the Qurʾān, “The All-Merciful is seated upon the Throne” (S. 20:5), and thus the Throne, which embraces the sensory world, is perceived as a manifestation of pure Mercy. According to the well-known ḥadīth, the following sentence is inscribed upon the Throne itself: “My Mercy precedes My Wrath.” Since the Throne is sheer Mercy, it cannot be mixed with Wrath; so this attribute only appears at the next level of sensory existence, the Footstool, which, according to the Qurʾān “encompasses the heavens and the earth” (S. 2:256). Upon the Footstool God places His two feet, which are identified as the “Foot of the All-Compeller (*qadam al-jabbār*)” (referred to in a ḥadīth) and the “Foot of Firmness” (cf. S. 10:2). According to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s interpretation, the pure Mercy of the Throne “becomes divided at the Footstool into Mercy and Wrath mixed with Mercy” (III 432.14). So “The Foot of the All-Compeller is nothing but God’s Wrath” (III 386.13), which comes into existence at this level and thus encompasses and contains the heavens and the earth. “If it were not for the creatures [of the Visible World], God would not have become wrathful” (III 386.1).<sup>49</sup>

Everything below the Footstool pertains to the domain in which both Mercy and Wrath exercise their influence. Ontologically, the descending levels in which the properties of these two Names are mixed correspond with a progressive solidification of the cosmos. At the level of the seven spheres the four natures produce the four elements—fire, air, water, and earth—in their simple, intelligible form (*al-basīṭ al-mafqūl*.) Then, in conjunction with the earth, the

---

<sup>46</sup> A more balanced description, with diagrams from the *Futuhat*, is given in Chittick, “Ibn al-ʿArabī and his School ”

<sup>47</sup> On the nonactualization of Nature, cf. III 397 5, 430 10, IV 150 9. On the four fundamental Names and their relation to the four natures, cf. I 293 17 (4, 344 10), II 430 14, III 430 25, the latter two passages are based on the fact that Power is equivalent to Word (III 441 19). Ibn al-ʿArabī also provides another scheme: Knowledge (heat), Will (dryness), Power (wetness), Word (cold), II 667 25.

<sup>48</sup> I 148 31 (2, 351 8), II 436 6, III 201 2.

<sup>49</sup> Here *al-khalq* is used in the sense of the sensory creation that is contrasted with the spiritual creation, *al-amr*.



elements come to exist in their compound (*murakkab*) forms, that is, as they appear in the corporeal world. Finally, from the combination of the elements, the “elemental” (*unṣuri*) creatures come into existence: minerals, plants, and animals;<sup>50</sup> hence they are the most “solidified” (*kathīf*) and least “subtle” (*laṭīf*) of all sensory beings, the first of which is the Throne, which is “natural” but not “elemental.”

The distinction between natural and elemental is of fundamental importance and needs to be clarified—though a thorough explanation would require a separate study. Nature has no existence in itself, yet its properties are manifested throughout the sensory world, from the Throne down to the earth. However, certain corporeal bodies are natural without being elemental, as for example the spheres (including the Throne and the footstool), the lower angels, the mental faculties, the particular spirits (*al-arwāḥ al-juzʿiyya*),<sup>51</sup> and the simple elements themselves. By calling certain angels and the mental faculties “corporeal bodies” (*ajsām*), Ibn al-ʿArabī is referring to subtle or “imaginal” bodies, which he often distinguishes from *ajsām* by calling them *ajsād*.<sup>52</sup>

In one passage Ibn al-ʿArabī states that “The Presence of Imagination is Nature” (III 508.26). At first sight it appears that he means that Nature corresponds to the level of discontinuous imagination, since Nature exercises its properties below the Universal Soul, which marks the lowermost limit of the World of Disengaged Spirits. But he may also be referring to nondelimited imagination, since, in clarifying his cosmological scheme, he writes that in truth Nature exercises its properties in everything other than God, beginning with the Cloud. The Nature whose properties appear in “transparent corporeal bodies” (*al-ajsām al-shaffāfa*)—such as the Throne—is like the daughter of this supreme Nature, who is her mother.<sup>53</sup> Most probably these two Natures correspond to the two levels of imagination, nondelimited and discontinuous. Hence, when Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks of corporeal bodies like the Throne that are natural but not elemental, he seems to be saying that they subsist within the world of discontinuous imagination.

However, this may be, Ibn al-ʿArabī makes clear that the various levels of Paradise are “located” between the Throne and the Footstool; they are natural but not elemental. Then the hells are located below the Footstool and extend down to the “lowest of the low”; they are elemental and hence—in contrast to the paradises—similar to this world in substance.

The property of the Fire is near to the property of this world, so it is neither pure chastisement nor pure bliss. That is why God says about hell, “Therein they neither die nor live” (S. 20:73). (I 294.27; 4, 352.4)<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> I 293–94 (4, 344–49)

<sup>51</sup> Universal spirits, such as the Intellect, the Soul, and human spirits, are all disengaged and therefore exist beyond the level of Nature as defined here, from another point of view (see below), they also can be included among “natural” beings. On “natural bodies,” see I 261 5 (4, 161 5), II 335 10

<sup>52</sup> Cf I 133 13 (2, 284 18), 307 8 (4, 423 1), III 186 28, 389 13

<sup>53</sup> III 420 16, cf IV 150 1

<sup>54</sup> Cf II 184 1, 244 33. On the location of heaven and hell, see I 123 9 (2, 241 17), 169 9 (3, 95 14),

The similarity between this world and hell goes back to the fact that Wrath is manifested within both, while it has no access to Paradise. Cosmologically this is expressed by the fact that Paradise lies below the Throne—the locus of God's Mercy—but above the Footstool, upon which is placed the Foot of the All-Compeller. In other words, Mercy and Wrath are mixed at the elemental level, but not at the level of those natural corporeal bodies which dwell *above* the Footstool.<sup>55</sup>

If hell exists, it exists for the same reason that this world of ours mixed with Wrath exists: in order that the properties of the Divine Names may become fully actualized. Ibn al-ʿArabī often explains this point by referring to the “two hands” of God through which man was created (cf. S. 38:75), while “Everything other than man was created either through the Divine Command or by one hand” (I 122.13; 2, 237.16). The Qurʾān speaks of God's right and left hands and the fact that the “companions” of the one dwell in the Garden and those of the other in the Fire (56:7-56). In a ḥadīth, the Prophet explained that God created two “handfuls (*qabḍatān*),” one for the Fire and one for the Garden. “No one can protest this,” says Ibn al-ʿArabī,

since nothing exists there but He. So all things are under the control of His Names: one handful is under the Names of His affliction, the other under the Names of His bounties. (I 37.30; 1, 169.12).<sup>56</sup>

Just as the visible cosmos only came into existence below God's two feet, such that the properties of Mercy and Wrath became mixed, so also its coming into existence necessitated the mixture of the two handfuls.

God brought the cosmos into existence to make manifest the authority of the Names. For, to have “power” without something wherein to exercise it, “generosity” without gifts, a “provider” without provisions, a “helper” without someone helped, and “compassion” without objects would mean that there are realities without effects. Moreover, in this world God made the cosmos a mixture; He kneaded the two handfuls into dough, and then He separated out individuals, placing [elements] from the one handful into the other. . . . Hence the situation became confused, and it is here that the men of knowledge (*al-ʿulamāʾ*) become ranked in degrees to the extent that they can extract the corrupt from the good, and the good from the corrupt. The ultimate end of all this will be deliverance from this mixture and the separation of the two handfuls, each withdrawing to its own world. This is the meaning of the Qurʾānic verse, “That God may separate the corrupt

---

299 20 (4, 380 5), II 440 1, III 442 8 On the fact that the next world is natural rather than elemental, cf I 276 24 (4, 249 1), II 184 1, on the elemental nature of hell, cf III 244 33

<sup>55</sup> It would appear that the natural but non-elemental corporeal bodies that dwell *below* the Footstool, such as the lower angels and the mental faculties, manifest both Mercy and Wrath. A great deal of research needs to be carried out before all the subtleties of Ibn al-ʿArabī's cosmology can be clarified.

<sup>56</sup> Cf I 263 3 (4, 173 4)

from the good, and place the corrupt one upon another, and so heap them all up together, and put them in hell" (S. 8:37). (I 120.15; 2, 229.9)

In eschatological terms, the two handfuls are "the two worlds: the world of felicity and the world of wretchedness" (III 75.14). However, Ibn al-ʿArabī insists that even the people of wretchedness are not cut off from God's Mercy, since pure Wrath cannot exist; the Foot of the All-Compeller, after all, is a mixture of Mercy and Wrath, as was mentioned above. The ḥadīth that mentions the two handfuls places them in the Garden and the Fire, not in bliss and chastisement. "This is because God placed them in the two abodes to populate them. Hence, another ḥadīth states, 'When God created the Garden and the Fire, He said, "To each of you your fill," since He filled them with inhabitants" (III 76.27). But this does not mean that the people of hell will suffer everlasting torment.

### *The Limited Duration of Hell's Chastisement*

Ibn al-ʿArabī's contention that the chastisement of hell will not last forever is hardly new in Islamic thought; even a majority of exoteric theologians were forced to conclude the same thing.<sup>57</sup> If Ibn al-ʿArabī accomplished anything new, it is to integrate this teaching into a systematic metaphysics and cosmology; in any case, hell's limited duration is a recurrent theme in his writings.

Ibn al-ʿArabī does not deny that the "sinners" (*al-mujrimūn*)<sup>58</sup> will remain in the Fire "forever," since the text of the Qurʾān reads "*khālidūn fihā*" (S. 2:25, 39, 81, 217, etc.). But he points out that the pronoun in *fihā* ("in it") is always feminine; in other words, it refers to the feminine "Fire" and never to the masculine "chastisement" (*al-ʿadhāb*). Nothing was revealed in the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth that would indicate that the Fire's chastisement lasts forever, though this is hardly the case with the bliss (*naʿīm*) of the Garden. Moreover "God forgives all sins . . ." (S. 39:53), so nothing can make the chastisement eternal; in addition it can only be an "appropriate recompense" (*jazāʾ wifāq*), so a limited sin could not warrant unlimited punishment.

But again, the primary reason that hell's chastisement must come to an end is that eventually (*bi ʾl-maʿāl*) Mercy will demonstrate its precedence. "Wretchedness derives from the Divine Wrath, while felicity derives from the Divine Good-Pleasure (*al-riqā*), which is an expansion of Mercy without limit; but Wrath will be cut off" (III 382.35). Ibn al-ʿArabī explains the limited nature of Wrath in a

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Smith and Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, p. 95

<sup>58</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī calls the *mujrimūn* "the people of the Fire, those who are its inhabitants" (*ahl al-nār alladhina hum ahluhā*) in order to distinguish them from others who enter the Fire for a time and then are removed from it. He divides the *mujrimūn* into four distinct and well-defined groups: the proud (*al-mutakabbirīn*), the associators (*al-mushrikūn*), the atheists (*al-muʿaṭṭila*), and the hypocrites (*al-munāfiqūn*), and discusses the traditional basis for considering only these four as permanent inhabitants of hell. Cf. chap. 61, "Fī marātib ahl al-nār," I 301–304 (4, 390–405); cf. I 314 27 (4, 467 2)

number of contexts; we have already seen how he does this within his cosmological scheme, where Wrath has no effect above the Footstool. In the context of metaphysics, he points out that Mercy is an Attribute of God's very Essence—hence his followers identify it with Sheer Being—but Wrath is an Attribute necessitated by the existence of the cosmos, while it is nonexistent in God Himself. As he often remarks, God even has Mercy upon Wrath, by bestowing existence upon its properties.<sup>59</sup>

As an intermediate creature—an isthmus—standing between Being and nothingness, or as a creature in whom the two handfuls are mixed, man is a locus within which both Mercy and Wrath manifest themselves. The attributes of Mercy are those which derive from God's Essence and lead back to it, while the attributes of Wrath relate to the specific properties of the elemental cosmos.

God created the hearts of men as loci for truth and falsehood, faith and infidelity, knowledge and ignorance. The ultimate end of falsehood, infidelity, and ignorance is dissolution and disappearance, since they are properties that have no entity in existence. They are a nonexistence that has a manifested property and a known form. . . . In contrast faith, truth, and knowledge are ascribed to something that has existence in its entity, and that is God. Therefore these properties are preserved in this Entity. . . ., which is Being Itself, or God, who is named by these Names and described by these descriptions: He is the Truth, He is the Knowing, He is the Faithful. . . . God is not named by falsehood, for He possesses Being; nor is He called ignorant and infidel—far exalted is He above these names! . . . (These attributes) are accidents possessing no permanence, so their properties will disappear when they disappear. But the entity that received them and became described by them is an existent; it must possess some state by which to be described. Since its wretchedness will have disappeared with the disappearance of its causes, . . . its opposite will remain, and that is called felicity. Hence, he who enters the Fire will only do so in order that his corruption may be negated and his goodness remain. Once his corruption has gone and his goodness subsists, he will be called "felicitous." (III 417.35)

Ibn al-ʿArabī summarizes this argument from a slightly different point of view as follows:

God created the cosmos in its essence only for felicity; wretchedness occurs to whom it occurs as an accident, since Sheer Good untouched by evil is the Being of God, who bestowed existence upon the cosmos; and nothing emanates from Him except that which corresponds to Him, which is good alone. (III 389.21)

So the ontological "evil" that creatures meet derives from their possibility

---

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 177; *Ibn al-ʿArabī*, p. 223; Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 117.

(*al-imbān*)—their ambiguous ontological situation half-way between the Necessity of Sheer Being and the impossibility of sheer nothingness. If evil enters the cosmos, “It only enters it from the direction of the possible existent, not from that of God” (III 389.25). The side pertaining to evil and wretchedness will eventually disappear, since it derives from nonexistence; yet the creatures themselves will never disappear inasmuch as they partake of existence: “The entities of those essences that enter into existence from nonexistence will never cease to exist after their existence” (I 312.34; 4, 455.11). In sum, “The cosmos is the object of Mercy in its very essence; it experiences pain only in what occurs to it accidentally” (III 207.33).<sup>60</sup>

The fact that Mercy prevails in the end might suggest that God’s Wrath ceases to exist, although we know that this would contradict Ibn al-‘Arabī’s express statements concerning the structure of the cosmos: by definition, the Fire is located below the Footstool, which is the domain within which Wrath has some effect. Ibn al-‘Arabī explains this seeming contradiction by stating that after the period of the chastisement in the Fire comes to an end,

no chastisement will remain in the Fire except imaginal chastisement within the Presence of Imagination, in order that the properties of the Names may subsist. For a Name necessitates only the manifestation of the property that its reality demands. It does not determine the ontological level nor the individual [upon whom its property has an effect]; this determination is the property of the Names “All-Knowing” and “Willing.”<sup>61</sup> So when the property of [for example] the Avenger becomes manifest within an imaginal or corporeal body or wherever, its rights are fulfilled by the manifestation of its property and effectivity. Hence the Divine Names continue to exercise effectivity and control for all eternity in both heaven and hell, and their inhabitants never leave the two abodes. (III 119.2)

Though the sinners eventually attain to felicity while remaining in the Fire, one factor continues to demarcate their felicity from that of the inhabitants of the Garden: They will always remain veiled (*mahjūb*) from God, while the felicitous in the Garden will be given vision (*ru’ya*) of Him. The tradition speaks of the eight gates of heaven and the seven gates of hell; but, says Ibn al-‘Arabī, “Hell has an eighth gate that is locked and will never be opened: the gate of being veiled from the vision of God” (I 299.5; 4, 377.14). He explains that after the chastisement of the inhabitants of hell comes to an end, “The veil will remain hanging before them so that they may experience bliss.” For if God were to show Himself to them at this point, after the sins they had committed and their worthiness for punishment, they would be shamed, “and shame is chastise-

<sup>60</sup> Cf. II 486.2; III 328.27, 433.5.

<sup>61</sup> God’s Knowledge of the immutable entities determines when and where they will be given existence; then His Will chooses (*tarkīb*) their existence over their nonexistence. Cf. Chittick, “Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Myth of the Names.”

ment—but chastisement's period has come to an end" (III 119.5).<sup>62</sup> So important is this distinctive characteristic of hell that Ibn al-ʿArabī can say, "The next world possesses two abodes: vision and veil" (II 335.18).

The people of hell will find their bliss in hell itself, for in the last analysis, felicity is that which is agreeable (*mulāʿim*) with a person's constitution (*mizāj*).

After Mercy has embraced them, the people of the Fire will find their joy (*ladhdha*) from being in the Fire, and they will praise God for their not being in the Garden. That is because of what is demanded by their constitution in that state; if they were to enter the Garden, pain would grasp them and they would suffer. So—if you have understood—bliss is nothing but the agreeable, and chastisement is nothing but the disagreeable, whatever it might be. So be wherever you are! If you receive only that which is agreeable with you, you will be in bliss, but if you receive only what is disagreeable with your constitution, you will be in chastisement. The abodes (*al-mawāṭin*) have been made lovable to their inhabitants. For the People of the Fire, those who are its inhabitants, the Fire is their abode; from it they were created, and to it they will be returned. And for the People of the Garden, those who are its inhabitants—from it they were created and to it they will be returned. The joy of the abode is an intrinsic attribute of its inhabitants. (IV 14.34)<sup>63</sup>

The destiny of a given human being depends upon the handful to which he belonged at his origin. In other terms, Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks about the "fixed entities" (*al-ʿyān al-thābita*) within God's knowledge, which in turn depend upon the Names. Each individual human being is a receptacle (*qābil*) for existence; the scope of the receptacle is determined by its preparedness (*istif dād*), and this in turn is determined by the uncreated and eternally fixed entity.<sup>64</sup> "God bestows continuously, and the loci receive in the measure of the realities of their preparednesses" (I 287.11; 4, 308.8). It is in this context that Ibn al-ʿArabī can say that the angels nourish the people of the Garden in the same way that they nourish the people of the Fire. "In the last analysis, the very thing that causes bliss causes pain" (I 301.5; 4, 389.3).

### *Imagination and the Rational Faculty*

To bring this brief summary of Ibn al-ʿArabī's extensive eschatological teachings to a close, let me recall the point where I began: In Ibn al-ʿArabī's view, all the traditional descriptions of the afterlife, no matter how strange they may appear to the rational mind, can be explained by reference to the power of imaginalization possessed by the Divine Reality. The Qurʾān and Ḥadīth are full

<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere (III 435.32) Ibn al-ʿArabī suggests that even the veil may not be absolute

<sup>63</sup> On felicity as the "agreeable," cf II 327 34, 486 4, III 387 23

<sup>64</sup> On the concepts of receptivity and preparedness, cf note 40

of statements about God and the next world that for the most part have either been accepted on faith or interpreted in accordance with the dictates of reason and the laws of logic. But Ibn al-<sup>ḥ</sup>Arabi objects to any interpretation (*ta'wīl*) that strays from the literal meaning, especially by a person claiming faith in Islam; his interpretation demonstrates that "He has faith in his interpretation, not in the revelation" (I 218.26; 3, 336.11).

In our eyes this is one of the most wondrous of things. . . . that a person should follow (*taqlīd*) his own reason (*al-<sup>ḥ</sup>aql*) in the knowledge of his Lord, but not follow his Lord in what He reveals concerning Himself in His Book and upon the tongue of His Prophet. (I 288.27; 4, 316.12)

All rational interpretations of the type Ibn al-<sup>ḥ</sup>Arabi is criticizing ignore the approach which, in his eyes, leads to true knowledge: What appears as impossible to reason in fact occurs exactly as it is described by scripture within the world of imagination. Ibn al-<sup>ḥ</sup>Arabi summarizes his arguments concerning imagination and its importance for any true understanding of the nature of existence as follows:

Imagination is the most perfect of worlds. . . . To it belongs true existence and the ability to control all things. It embodies meanings, and it makes that which does not subsist in itself subsist in itself. It gives form to that which has no form and makes the impossible possible. It exercises free disposal (*taṣarruf*) in all things, however it likes.

Since imagination has this nondelimitation, though it is a creature created by God, what do you think of the Creator who created it and gave it this power? How can you wish to judge that God is delimited (*taqayyud*)? Or to say that God cannot perform the impossible? For all the while you witness in your own self imagination's power over the impossible, though it is one of God's creatures. You do not doubt the meanings that it embodies for you and displays as self-subsistent individuals. In the same way God will bring the works of the children of Adam—even though these works are accidents—as self-subsistent forms to be placed in the Balance, that justice may be carried out. He will bring death—though it is but a relation (*nisba*), even further than an accident from being embodied—in the form of a white ram [to be slaughtered on the Day of Resurrection]<sup>65</sup>. . . . So where is the judgement of reason and its corrupt interpretation (*ta'wīl*) in relation to God!?

A similar thing is found in the bliss of the Gardens, that is, the fruits which are "neither cut off nor forbidden" (S. 56:33). He who has no knowledge interprets this by relating it to the seasons of the year; fruits are no longer produced when their time comes to an end, but then they return in the next year. In contrast, the fruits of the Garden are produced

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibn al-<sup>ḥ</sup>Arabi often quotes this ḥadīth to support the concept of "embodiment." Cf. I 219.22 (3, 341.6), 294.21 (4, 351.6), 305.2 (4, 410.12), 316.18 (4, 477.2); II 309.15; III 118.27.

constantly without being cut off. This is the extent of his knowledge in this question. But in our eyes the fruits are as God says, “neither cut off nor forbidden,” because God will give us provision from them, and this is named “picking” and “eating”; . . . without doubt we will eat of the fruits of the Garden, “its clusters nigh to gather” (S. 69:23), but the fruit will stay in its place upon the tree. Its entity will not disappear, since this is the Abode of Subsistence. . . .

God declared Himself incomparable to the attribute of sleep when He said, “Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep” (S. 2:256). He means that the vision of the isthmuses does not absent Him from gazing upon the world of sense perception nor upon those meanings that are neither attached to material substrata nor actualized in the isthmus. . . . In the next world, the people of paradise will not sleep in the Garden, and nothing of the cosmos will be absent from them. On the contrary, every world will be witnessed by them at its own level, while they are not described by sleep.

It is said, “So and so slept and he dreamt such and such,” meaning that he saw something incorrect or false. For knowledge is not milk, nor is the Qur’ān honey, but this is what he dreamed. But when you reach perfection, you will see knowledge as knowledge in the Presence of Meanings, while at the same time you will see it as milk in the Presence of the Isthmus; the two are identical, not different. So realize what I have taught you, for what I have mentioned will make you happy with an everlasting happiness!. . . .

Once you have realized what I have indicated in this chapter, you will understand everything revealed in the Book and the Sunna concerning the description of God, whether these descriptions are eternal or temporal; you will realize their truth even though they are rejected by reason with its proofs—for reason is incapable of this perception. (II 183.8)

*State of University of New York  
at Stony Brook  
Stony Brook, New York*

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK