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Original Call Number: BL625 .M8975 1993
Responder Call Number:

Title: Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies
Author: Edited by R.A. Herrera
Publisher:

ISBN/ISSN: 0820420077   **Date (Monograph):** 1993   **Edition:**

Volume/Issue: **Pages:** 361-376   **Date (Serial):**

Article Title: Ethical Standards and the Vision of Oneness: The Case of Ibn al-Arabi
Article Author: William Chittick

DETAILS

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Ethical Standards and the Vision of Oneness: The Case of Ibn al-'Arabî

William C. Chittick

Those spiritual masters whom the Sufi tradition has looked back upon with reverence have considered the Shari'a — the revealed Law — as the foundation of the path to God. But many of these same masters have been criticized by Muslim jurists and theologians for their anti-nomian views. In the case of Ibn al-'Arabî (d. 1240) — the "Greatest Master" — and his followers, these criticisms often take the form of attacking the doctrine of the "Oneness of Being" (wahdat al-wujûd).[1] According to critics, those who uphold this doctrine fail to distinguish between good and evil and claim to stand beyond the revealed Law. A contemporary scholar expresses these criticisms succinctly when he says in regard to Ibn al-'Arabî, "A thoroughly monistic system, no matter how pious and conscientious it may claim to be, can not, by its very nature, take seriously the objective validity of moral standards."[2]

Why then does Ibn al-'Arabî — along with many other Sufis who predate and follow him and to whom a "thoroughly monistic system" might easily be attributed — insist on the necessity of the Shari'a? Why, in fact, is a "mysticism" founded upon the practice of the revealed Law normative for all Islamic history, whatever the deviations which on occasion have occurred? There are no doubt many possible approaches to answering these questions. I look at Ibn al-'Arabî's teachings on ethics and suggest one of these approaches.

Ethics in Ibn al-'Arabî

However we define ethical and moral standards, little of what Ibn al-'Arabî has to say in his enormous corpus of writings is unrelated to them. It is impossible in a short paper even to begin to sort out the principles or details of Ibn al-'Arabî's ethical views. Instead I will only attempt to show what he understands by the single term akhlâq, the word normally used for "ethics" in the philosophical vocabulary, and then suggest the manner in which he finds a grounding for akhlâq in an ontology that can fairly be described by the term "Oneness of

Being." The actualization of *akhlâq* within the context of this ontology will then be seen to depend upon the observance of the Law.

Though Ibn al-'Arabî's analysis of ethics shares many common characteristics with discussions of ethics by Muslim philosophers (who based their writings largely on works translated from Greek), he finds his basic point of reference and the ultimate source for most of his key terminology in the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (the Hadith). In discussing almost anything at all, Ibn al-'Arabî displays a constant concern to go back to the thing's "root" (*asl*) or "reality" (*haqîqa*), which is the divine attribute or name from which it comes forth and which is mentioned in the Koran and the Hadith. He frequently reminds his readers that these attributes or names are not concrete things, but providential designations for the relationships which exist between the Divine Reality and the things of the "cosmos" (*al-'âlam*, which is defined as "everything other than God"). The divine names provide human beings with knowledge of their own connection with the absolute and immutable ground of everything that exists. Without the names—or without the revelation that provides them—people would wander in a sea of uncertainties and relativities.

The Arabic word *akhlâq* or "ethics" is the plural of *khuluq*, which means both "character" and "character trait". It is used twice in the Koran (in the singular) and repeatedly in the Hadith (often in the plural). One Koranic instance was especially suggestive for later commentators. Addressing the Prophet, God says, "Surely you have a *khuluq azîm*" (68:4). English translators have rendered these two words with expressions such as "mighty morality," "sublime nature," "tremendous nature," "sublime morals," "sublime morality," and "tremendous character." Such translations of the term *khuluq* attempt to bring out its moral and ethical connotations on the one hand and its ontological roots on the other, for the word is separated only by pronunciation (not in the way it is written) from the term *khalq*, which means "creation". For Ibn al-'Arabî, the term's ontological side is fundamental. The Prophet's "tremendous character" has to do not only with his inward goodness and the way this was reflected in his dealings with people, but also with the degree to which he had realized the potentialities of his own primordial nature, rooted in the Being of God.

The Origin of Noble Character Traits

In the general Islamic view, made completely explicit by Ibn al-'Arabî, noble character traits (*makârim al-akhlâq*) belong truly to God and only

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metaphorically to human beings. Everything good comes from God, and moral traits such as generosity, justice, patience, forbearance, etc., are no exception. The Koran confirms this point by the names it ascribes to God: Generous, Just, Patient, Pardoner, Clement, Thankful, and so on. Hence, as Ibn al-'Arabî declares,

> God is more worthy of noble attributes than the servant. Or rather, they belong to Him in reality and to the servant only by His grace in bestowing them. (II 617.26)[3]

Ibn al-'Arabî often discusses Koranic verses or hadiths which mention God's noble qualities. He concludes that

> God never praises a noble character trait unless He Himself is more worthy of observing it toward His creatures, and He never blames a base character trait unless the Divine Side is further away from it [than are human beings]. (I 285.8)

These "character traits of God" (*akhlâq Allâh*) are the same as "God's names" (*asmâ' Allâh*), and Ibn al-'Arabî uses the two expressions interchangeably. This follows naturally from the fact that so many of the divine names revealed in the Koran are also the names of noble human traits. Moreover, how can a Muslim answer the question, "What are God's character traits?", if not by listing the "most beautiful names" (*al-asmâ' al-husnâ*) mentioned in the Koran?

Ibn al-'Arabî often employs the terminology of the Peripatetic philosophers like Avicenna in referring to God. Hence God is the Necessary Being (*wâjib al-wujûd*), while everything else that may be said to exist is a possible thing (*mumkin*). In Ibn al-'Arabî's way of thinking, *wujûd* (Being, existence, or the fact of being found)[4] belongs in the final analysis only to God. At best the possible thing can be said to have received *wujûd* on loan. But what is important in the present context is that Ibn al-'Arabî prefers the religious to the philosophical terminology in explaining the nature of God's *wujûd*. The answer to the question, "What are the attributes of *wujûd*?", is given by listing the names of God. Generosity, justice, forbearance, pardon, gratitude and all the other divine character traits are intrinsic to *wujûd*. The human task is not to devise some ethical system or to debate about the meaning of morality, but simply "to be, to exist, to be found." Through the purification of one's *wujûd*, or through allowing the divine Sun to shine through the limitations of the human individuality, a person brings about the manifestation of the noble character traits as a matter of course. They are already present in the nature of *wujûd* itself.

The Divine Form

Few teachings are as fundamental to Sufi anthropology as the idea that God created the human being in His own image or "form" (*ṣûra*). Ibn al-'Arabî pays close attention to the fact that in the prophetic saying, "God created Adam upon His own form," the name Allah is employed, not, for example, Creator or Forgiver or Vengeful. The name Allah is known as the "all-comprehensive name" (*al-ism al-jâmi'*), since it comprises within itself the meaning of all God's names and is referred to by all of them. One says, "Allah is Merciful, Allah is Lord, Allah is Creator," and so on. Hence God created Adam in the form of Allah, the universal name that embraces all names, not in the form of some specific name such as Knowing, Willing, Powerful, Merciful, Vengeful, or Forgiving.[5]

Not only the human being but also the whole cosmos was created in the form of Allah and therefore in the form of all the names. In Ibn al-'Arabî's terms, both the human being and the cosmos are loci of manifestation (*maẓhar, majlâ*) for all the divine names, since within them are found the traces (*âthâr*) and properties (*aḥkâm*) of God's life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, and so on. But in the cosmos these traces and properties are found divided up among the things of the universe in a "differentiated" manner (*tafṣîl*), while in the human being they are found in their entirety in each individual in an "undifferentiated" way (*ijmâl*).

Since human beings, like the universe, display the properties of God's names, every name that is attributed to God can also, in some respect, be attributed to humans. It is this peculiar characteristic that sets them apart from all other individual creatures and makes them capable, for example, of carrying the "Trust" (mentioned in Koran 33:72) and serving as God's "vicegerents" or representatives (*khalîfa*) in the earth. Sufis see a direct Koranic reference to man's being made in God's form in the verse, "God taught Adam the names, all of them" (2:31), a verse that comes immediately after the statement that God had decided to place Adam in the earth as His vicegerent.

> The human being is the locus of manifestation for the divine names and compre-
> hends the realities of the whole cosmos, whether angels, celestial spheres, corpo-
> real bodies, nature, inanimate objects, or animals—all this in addition to the
> knowledge of the divine names that pertains exclusively to him. (I 125.29)
>
> The human being, who is "Adam," consists of the sum total (*majmû'*) of the
> cosmos . . . . God arranged in Adam everything outside of and other than Himself
> . . . . All the divine names are related to him. Nothing of them eludes him.
> Hence Adam appeared in the form of the name "Allah," since it is this name
> which comprises all the divine names. (II 124.1)

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Human Perfection

The divine names are identical with the divine character traits, while human beings were created in the form of God, comprehending all the names. Hence human beings were created with all God's character traits. However, nobility of character is in fact not easy to come by. Many human beings are not even aware that it exists, not to speak of possessing it themselves. When we pay closer attention to what Ibn al-'Arabî means when he says that human beings are made in the divine form, we realize that he draws a clear dividing line between what is potential in human beings and what is actual.

It is well known that one of Ibn al-'Arabî's favorite topics is "perfect man" (*al-insân al-kâmil*), a term which denotes a complex metaphysical, cosmological, and spiritual reality. Without touching upon various cosmological dimensions of this doctrine, we can say that perfect man represents the ideal human situation which all people should strive to achieve. Only those who have attained to perfection may truly be said to be created in God's form, since only they have actualized the potentialities latent in the primordial human nature (*fiṭra*).

Ibn al-'Arabî is fully aware that perfection is a relative affair, and he devotes a great deal of attention to the various kinds, levels, and degrees of perfection. Fully actualized perfection—absolute perfection (*al-kamâl al-muṭlaq*)—is found only in the Divine Being, while human perfection always accepts increase, whether in this world or the next, since the finite can never attain to the infinite. Hence, even in the case of the most perfect of perfect men, there is no question of a static situation.

> The "perfect" is that which does not accept any increase. But we increase in knowledge in this world and in the next, so we are linked to imperfection. Hence our perfection depends upon the existence of imperfection within it. Hence we have a single perfection, but God has two perfections, an absolute perfection, and another perfection concerning which He says, "[And We shall assuredly try you] until We know [which of you struggle and are steadfast]"[6] (Koran 47:31). Our copy (*nuskha* [i.e, of God's perfection]) is from the perfection of "until We know", not from the absolute perfection. (II 543.13)

Most people live at the level of what Ibn al-'Arabî refers to as "animal men" (*al-insân al-ḥayawân*), since they have not gone beyond the elementary possibilities of the human state.

> Within the human being are gathered the potentialities (*quwâ*) of the whole cosmos and of the divine names in their perfection. Hence there is no existent more perfect than perfect man. But if a person does not reach perfection in this

world, he is a rational animal, a part of the [divine] form, nothing more. He does not reach the degree of the human being. On the contrary, his relationship to the human being is the relationship of a corpse to a human being; the corpse is a human being in shape, not in reality, since in fact it lacks all potentialities. So also is the one who has not reached perfection. The human being's perfection is through the vicegerency, so anyone who does not possess the merit of all the divine names is not a vicegerent. (II 441.3)

Only those human beings who have attained to perfection can truly be said to be created in God's form. Within them the divine names — or the all-comprehensive name Allah — display their full range of properties to the extent possible on the ontological level envisaged. Since the names represent all the possibilities of deployment and manifestation possessed by that nondelimited *wujûd* which is God, they display *wujûd* in its full splendor. The specifically human qualities can be explained by this manifestation of all the names. In the microcosm, the combination of all ontological potentialities in a single individual means that human beings can develop in any possible mode of existence, whether this mode be perceived as "good" or "evil."

An example may serve to make this infinite potentiality of human beings clear: God knows all things, as the Koran often reminds us. Made in God's form, the human being has the potentiality to know all things. Naturally there are fundamental differences between the divine knowledge and human knowledge, but to the extent that the human being's knowledge is not hindered by the limitations of contingent existence, it is infinitely expandable. The whole of human history is there to prove this statement. Anything known by any human being at any time and place is, in principle, knowable by every human being, given a healthy mind and various other external conditions. Human beings forget, grow old, and die, but it is a matter of common experience that knowledge accepts only accidental bounds; the basic act of knowing accepts no principial limits. The underlying ethos and goals of modern science clearly express the basic human intuition that everything can be known.

In a given human being, knowledge will be "perfected" to the extent that everything knowable comes to be known; in the context of Islam, what is knowable is fundamentally God, His names, His angels, His scriptures, His prophets, and the various branches and ramifications of this metacosmic and cosmic knowledge. Real knowledge is achieved when God is known and when the things are known with a view toward their roots in God. To the extent such knowledge is actualized, it will, as a matter of course, include knowledge of the nature of the cosmos and its contents, since all these are "signs" (*âyât*)

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of God. Ibn al-'Arabî and other Sufis would consider what passes for knowledge in modern science as a veil over real knowledge, since it has not been integrated into a wider view tying phenomena back to their roots in absolute *wujûd*. It is concerned fundamentally with the peripheral matters of existence, not the essential.

In most people, knowledge is not brought to "perfection." At most one or two possibilities or modes of knowing are developed to some degree. In the majority of cases knowledge remains largely a virtuality, even by contemporary standards. Formal education is not completed, the demands of social status prove more attractive than learning, the need to make a comfortable livelihood overcomes intellectual potential, and so on. But from Ibn al-'Arabî's viewpoint, even those who develop various possibilities of knowing usually do so in a wrong-headed manner. Instead of devoting themselves to the roots of things in God, they become engrossed with the branches; instead of searching out the First Cause, they dissect secondary causes to no ultimate end; instead of seeing inward meanings (*ma'ânî*), they fix their gaze on outward forms (*suwar*). The result is the tremendous proliferation of facts that we see before us; the human potential for unlimited knowledge is being actualized, but in a bewildering variety of peripheral modes.

One could undertake a similar analysis of any of the divine names. God is Desiring, Powerful, Speaking, Hearing, Seeing, Forgiving, Vengeful, Grateful, and so on. In the Sufi view, a perfect human being will have actualized all the divine names to the extent possible and in the appropriate manner, given certain individual limitations having to do with the corporeal body, time, place, environment, and so on—though inwardly, in the spiritual realm, these limitations count for less than they do outwardly. To use a common analogy, the light of the sun—which represents the inward world of the Divine Spirit—is one, but the courtyards of the bodily houses display the light in different shapes.

The actualization of the divine names, it was just said, must take place in the "appropriate" manner. Another analogy can make clear the basic problem, which is intimately connected with ethics: The goal of human life is to actualize pure white light by putting together an indefinite number of colored lights of varying intensities. How do we prevent ourselves from ending up with too much red, too much green, too much blue? What is the measure by which we can gauge the different colors and put them together harmoniously?

When we look at the divine names, we see that many of them are mutually contradictory. God is the Forgiver and the Avenger, the Merciful and the Wrathful, the Life-giver and the Slayer, the Abaser

and the Exalter. Given that human beings must actualize these names, how can the opposite qualities be harmonized in a single personality? According to Ibn al-'Arabî, the divine names reach an equilibrium in the highest stage of human perfection such that perfect man is uncolored and nondelimited by any name whatsoever, like the Divine Essence itself.[7]

> In the case of perfect man, the names hinder one another, and this mutual hindrance leads to their leaving no trace in him who has this attribute. Hence he remains purified of all traces just like the Absolute Essence, which is not delimited by names and attributes. (II 615.23)

Much of Ibn al-'Arabî's writing has to do with the manner in which human beings can become full and harmonious loci of manifestation for all the divine names and thereby possess in the appropriate manner all the divine character traits. In every case his advice is fundamentally the same: In order to attain the full perfection of their character traits, human beings must return to the right balance among the qualities as found in the divine names, and this balance is set down in the Koran and the Hadith. In other words, the Shari'a or revealed Law provides the necessary practical guidelines for establishing equilibrium among the divine names and character traits. Having established this equilibrium, human beings will have actualized the form in which they were created.

The process of actualizing the divine form is described in many ways, but in the present context, I wish to discuss a single term, since, among all the terms that could be mentioned, it demonstrates most clearly the connection between the divine names and human character traits. The term is *takhalluq*, the fifth verbal noun from the root *kh.l.q.*, from which we have *akhlâq*, "character traits." *Takhalluq* means "to assume (i.e., the character traits of)". The most famous usage of the word in Sufi texts is the command, often attributed to the Prophet, "Assume the character traits of God!" (*takhallaqû bi akhlâq Allâh*). Ibn al-'Arabî quotes the following hadith: "God has three hundred character traits. He who assumes one of them as his own will enter paradise."

In Ibn al-'Arabî's vocabulary "assuming the traits of the divine names" (*al-takhalluq bi'l-asmâ' al-ilâhiyya*) and "assuming the divine character traits" (*al-takhalluq bi'l-akhlâq al-ilâhiyya*) are synonymous terms. Moreover, he sometimes gives to the word *takhalluq* a meaning that goes outside the ethical sphere altogether, though it points to the ontological root of character traits. For example: "To God belong the Most Beautiful Names, and to the cosmos belongs manifestation through them by assuming their traits" (II 438.23). This is reminis-

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cent of his oft-repeated axiom, "There is nothing in existence but God,"[8] and of its expanded form, "There is nothing in existence but God, His names, and His acts" (III 68.12).

> There is no existent who is named by all the divine names except the human being. Moreover, he has been charged to assume them as character traits. (II 603.4)
>
> 　The servant sincere in his love for his Lord assumes the traits of His names. Hence he assumes the trait of independence (*ghinâ*) from other than God, might ('*izz*) through God, bestowal ('*atâ*') with the hand of God, preserving (*ḥifẓ*) with the eye of God. The men of knowledge (*al-'ulamâ*') know about assuming the traits of God's names and have written many books about it. Since they loved God, they qualified themselves with His attributes to the degree appropriate for them. (II 596.14)

The Root of Base Character Traits

Up until this point, there is nothing unusual about Ibn al-'Arabî's description of character traits as being rooted in the divine names. Much of what he says is implied if not stated explicitly in earlier texts. But so far we have not really begun investigating the second part of our topic, which is the relationship of character traits to the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujûd* or "Oneness of Being."[9] For present purposes, we can say that the Oneness of Being implies that every existing thing, by the very fact of its existence, manifests absolute and nondelimited *wujûd*, i.e., God. In other terms, everything in the universe is a locus of manifestation for the divine names. There is only one *wujûd*, and to speak of many "*wujûds*" is merely a manner of speaking, one that is justified by our normal if imperfect perception of the nature of the cosmos. But ultimately, everything that may be called *wujûd* in whatever form it appears is in fact the nondelimited *wujûd* of God. That which delineates the specific properties of those things described as possessing *wujûd* is the mode under which the *wujûd* of the Real manifests Itself because of the laws of Its own nature—laws which revelation summarizes in terms of the divine names.

Such a description of the cosmos necessarily sees everything as stemming ultimately from God, even the "evil" that is found within it. Of course there are all sorts of ways to avoid attributing evil directly to God, and Ibn al-'Arabî employs most of them. For example, he devotes a tremendous amount of space to discussing "nonexistence" ('*adam*) and the manner in which it "dilutes" as it were the intensity of *wujûd*, so that whatever defect is found in existence must be attributed to the side of nonexistence, not to nondelimited *wujûd*.

When it comes to the question of human activity, the situation is extremely complex. For one thing, every act does in fact manifest an

ontological quality, or else it could not occur. There is something positive and affirmative about activity. Are not the very creatures known as God's "acts" (*af'âl*) in Islamic theology? How then do we deal with human character traits? Ibn al-'Arabî does not shy away from the demands of his own logic. Though on one level he can say, as he does in the passage quoted above and many others, that character traits which are blameworthy (*madhmûm*) for human beings are even more blameworthy for God, on deeper analysis he has to admit that even the most blameworthy traits arise out of the nature of existence itself, which is nothing but the self-manifestation of the divine *wujûd*.

> All character traits are divine attributes. Hence all of them are noble, and all are found in the human being's fundamental makeup . . . . God is the Necessary *wujûd* through Himself, while the human being has *wujûd* through his Lord. Hence he acquires *wujûd* from Him, so he acquires character traits from Him. (II 241.28)

In other words Ibn al-'Arabî affirms that base character traits as well as noble character traits have their roots in *wujûd* and that, in fact, what we call base character traits are really noble. But in no sense does this lead him to some sort of antinomian position. Nowhere does he suggest, for example, that since everything comes from God, it makes no difference how we act. Quite the contrary, the very fact that all character traits come from God leads Ibn al-'Arabî to affirm even more strongly that there is no possible way of leading a correct life outside the guidance of the prophets, who also come from God and who show how to make all our character traits praiseworthy.

Ibn al-'Arabî's basic argument concerning prophetic guidance goes back to his position on the nature of existent things. All things in the cosmos are but the properties and traces of the divine names, which themselves are but designations for the relationships that exist between nondelimited *wujûd* and the things. This means that in the last analysis there is nothing in existence but various modalities of *wujûd*, or various relationships and attributions. There is no plurality of existent things, but one of relationships. Anything in the cosmos that we want to analyze is a relationship between other things. There are no fixed entities, only the flux of changing attributions. Character traits are no different from anything else. Hence, if the attributions change, character traits can be transformed from base to noble.

Ibn al-'Arabî commonly makes these points in connection with the prophetic saying, "I was sent to complete the noble character traits." Character traits were incomplete, he says, because many of the noble character traits had been left out of the lists set down by the earlier

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prophets. What Muhammad did was to "complete" them by adding all the base character traits to the noble character traits. This took place because his revealed Law transforms the blameworthy traits into praiseworthy ones. It does this by changing the manner in which the so-called base character traits are employed (*maṣraf*).

> Rational proofs, unveiling, and gnosis all show us that there is nothing in the cosmos except the character traits of God. Hence there are no base character traits. Therefore the Messenger of God . . . gave news that he had been sent to complete the noble character traits, since they are the character traits of God. Hence he joined what had been called "base character traits" to the noble character traits, and as a result, all became noble. He who understands what is meant by the revealed Law sees that the Prophet did not leave a single base character trait in the cosmos. (II 363.25)
>
> The attributes found in the human being's fundamental makeup do not change, since they are intrinsic to this world's plane and his specific constitution. These include cowardice, avarice, envy, greed, talebearing, arrogance, harshness, seeking subjugation, and the like. Since no one can set out to change them, God explained various uses for them toward which they can be turned through injunctions of the divine Law. If the soul turns the properties of these attributes toward these uses, it will be felicitous [in the next world] and attain to high degrees. Hence the soul should be cowardly toward committing forbidden things because of the loss it can expect. It should have avarice toward its religion. It should envy him who spends his property [in the way of religion] and him who seeks knowledge. It should be greedy toward good and try to spread it among the people. It should tell the tale of good just as the garden tells the tale of the sweet-smelling flowers within it. It should be arrogant in God toward him who is arrogant toward God's command. It should be harsh in its words and activities in the places where it knows God approves of that. It should seek the subjugation of him who is hostile toward God and resists Him. Such a soul does not leave its own attributes, but it turns them toward uses for which its Lord, His angels, and His messengers have praised it. Hence the revealed Law has brought only that which aids nature . . . . So people perish only when they are controlled by egocentric desires. (II 687.12)[10]

Servanthood

In the previous section blameworthy character traits were looked upon from the human side, without any attempt to attribute them directly to specific divine names. Another way to approach the same problem is to analyze specific divine names whose attribution to human beings will cause obvious difficulties. While Ibn al-'Arabî says that perfect man assumes the character traits of all the divine names, he acknowledges that in practice assuming the traits of certain names would conflict with our normal ideas about noble character traits, e.g., names such as the Arrogant, the Inaccessible, the Majestic, the Slayer, the Conqueror, the Avenger, the Terrible in Punishment. How can a

person assume these traits without turning into a monster? The simple answer is that he has to do so in proper measure, or in equilibrium with other names, and that the scale by which the names can be weighed in proper measure is the revealed Law.

Ibn al-'Arabî states the problem in relation to God's attribute of arrogance or greatness (*kibriyâ'*) as follows:

> Everything in the cosmos has a divine root, but if the servant should become qualified by a divine root, this is not necessarily praiseworthy. For example, without doubt arrogance has a divine root. But if the servant becomes qualified by it, makes himself a branch of it, and employs it internally, everyone agrees that this is blameworthy in every respect. (III 36.25)

Ibn al-'Arabî explains in a variety of ways how it is possible to assume the character traits of the divine names without falling into disequilibrium and deviation. Here a brief allusion to one of the most basic of his teachings will have to suffice: The spiritual station in which a human being attains to perfect equilibrium in relation to the divine attributes and is able to manifest them in the correct proportions is known as servanthood (*'ubûdiyya*). This is fundamentally an ontological situation, arising out of the "possibility" (*imkân*) of the created things, i.e., the fact that creatures have received their existence and attributes on loan from God. Ibn al-'Arabî equates the philosophical term "possibility" with the Koranic expression "poverty" (*faqr*). By their very essences all existent things are poor toward and in need of God, while God has no need for anything in existence. "O people! You are the poor toward God, and God, He is the Independent, the Praiseworthy" (Koran 35:15). The basic human task is to come to a full understanding and realization of the radical poverty of all things, especially themselves; acting in accordance with this understanding will then be called servanthood, and there is no higher station to which a person can aspire, since this is the station where all things dwell in their proper place and all ignorance and illusion are effaced.

In one passage Ibn al-'Arabî discusses the Trust given to the human being by God, identifying it with the divine form and the resulting all-comprehensiveness of the human reality. Then he explains that like any trust, this Trust is a burden, and the only way to gain release from the burden is to give the burden back to God by surrendering to the dictates of servanthood.

> Do you not see that when someone deposits property with a person, he finds that it weighs him down? Guarding and preserving it are a burden for him. If its owner says to him, "I give this to you and it no longer belongs to me," the carry-

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In the same way God's attributes are a Trust with the servant. The servant never ceases being aware that they are a trust with him. He is weighed down by watching over them: How should he employ them? Where should he put them to use? He fears lest he use them in the way their true owner might use them. When this weighs him down, he returns them to their owner and remains happy and burden-free in servanthood, which is his own characteristic, or rather, his reality, since anything in addition to that may disappear from him. (II 631.4)

In Ibn al-'Arabî's view, the perfect human being must combine the poverty of servanthood with the full display of the divine attributes demanded by his being created in God's form. This is achieved only by the messengers, the prophets, and the greatest "friends of God" (*awliyâ' Allâh*). It is the goal of human existence, yet it is rarely actualized. Even for those who have set out on the path to achieve it, it poses many dangers. The divine deception (*al-makr al-ilâhî*), about which the Koran often warns, will sometimes manifest itself to those attempting to attain to perfection. The only escape is to cling to the station of servanthood. In one passage Ibn al-'Arabî describes the various difficult ascents (*'aqaba*) which the spiritual traveler must pass over in achieving this station.

If God does not favor this servant through protection and guarding and does not fix his feet in this difficult ascent by keeping his vision fixed upon his servanthood while he manifests the form of God . . . , then his feet will slip and what he possesses of God's form will come between him and his vision of his servanthood . . . . This derives from the divine deception. He who wants protection from the divine deception must cling to his servanthood and its concomitants in every state. (III 147.6)

The first concomitant of "servanthood" is that the human being must "serve" the Divine Reality. In the Koran God says, "I created jinn and mankind only to serve [or "to worship"] Me" (51:56). This service or worship has an ontological dimension (called "essential worship") whereby all things serve God through their mode of existence, and a second, moral and religious dimension (called "accidental worship") whereby human beings employ their free will and choose whether or not to follow the Law. Hence observance of the Law makes possible the perfection of servanthood and the eschatological fruit of this perfection, which is known as "felicity" (*sa'âda*). Neglecting the Law throws the human being into error, deviation, and ultimate "wretchedness" (*shaqâwa*).

Perfect man manifests the divine form while being firmly fixed in servanthood. Through affirming his radical ontological deprivation, or his absolute nothingness in face of the Necessary Being, he fixes

himself in the distance from his Lord that his possibility and contingency demand. He submits himself absolutely to the requirements of the Necessary Being, as set down in revelation, which represents God's guidance for mankind in this plane of existence. Yet, paradoxically, through his knowledge of his true situation and his maintenance of absolute distance, perfect man is brought into God's proximity. Ibn al-'Arabî points to the happy combination of distance and proximity, of servanthood and manifesting the names of God, by quoting two apparently contradictory sayings from the famous Sufi Abû Yazîd Bistâmî:

> Servanthood is not a state of proximity. That which brings the servant near to his Lord is his knowledge that he is His servant, not the servanthood itself. Servanthood demands distance from the Master, but the servant's knowledge of servanthood requires nearness to Him. When Abû Yazîd became bewildered about proximity and did not know how he should gain nearness to his Lord, God said to him in his inmost consciousness, "O Abû Yazîd! Come near to Me through that which I do not possess: lowliness and poverty." Hence God negated from Himself these two attributes, lowliness and poverty. That which He negates from Himself is an attribute of distance from Him. So when those attributes which demand distance arise in someone, they determine his situation, and they demand distance.
>
> At another time Abû Yazîd said to his Lord, "Through what should I gain proximity to Thee?" God said to him, "Leave aside your self and come!" Once he abandons himself, he will have abandoned the property of servanthood, since servanthood is identical with distance from Masterhood and the servant is far from the Master.
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> Hence in lowliness and poverty Abû Yazîd sought proximity through servanthood, while in abandoning self he sought proximity through assuming the character traits of God. (II 561.14)

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Notes

1 This doctrine is often said to have been formulated for the first time by Ibn al-'Arabî. However, the term itself is not found in his works, though it is present in the works of some of his followers, and many Sufis before Ibn al-'Arabî expressed the same idea. Cf. Chittick, "Rumi and *Wahdat al-wujûd*," in A. Banani and G. Sabagh (eds.), *The Heritage of Rumi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

2 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 146.

3 References throughout are to *al-Futûhât al-makkiyya* (Cairo: 1911), volume, page, and line number.

4 One of the difficulties we face in discussing Ibn al-'Arabî's views is how to translate *wujûd*. Either "Being" or "existence" presents us with problems, not the least of them the fact that Western thought does not agree on what we are talking about by the use of such terms. For present purposes, we can say that *wujûd* refers to the fact that something is "found" (the literal sense of the term) in the real world, in whatever mode it may be found. God is identical with *wujûd* since He is that which cannot not be found (at least by Himself), while everything else possesses what may be referred to as *wujûd* in respect of the fact that God has given *wujûd* to it. For detailed discussions of the meaning of *wujûd* in Ibn al-'Arabî's thought, cf. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 3, 6, 80-81, 133, 212, 226-227 et passim.

5 If human beings had been created in the form of one of the specific divine names, this would have limited their reality and made it impossible for them to have knowledge of all things. Cf. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 304.

6 Ibn al-'Arabî often points to this and similar verses to illustrate some of the "mysteries" of the divine knowledge. The Koran reiterates in several places that God knows all things, even the leaves that fall from the trees. So how could He not know him who struggles and him who does not? What is at issue in such verses concerns the testing and trial (*ibtilâ'*) of mankind so that they and others will be able to perceive their own natures. Cf. *Futûhât* II 515, 534, 537, 543, 692; III 111, 134.

7 On this highest stage of human perfection, referred to by such names as the "station of no station," cf. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, chap. 20.

8 E.g., I 272.15, 279.6; II 114.1, 148.17, 160.4. Al-Ghazâli among others says the same thing (*Ihyâ 'ulûm al-dîn* IV.6.8; [Cairo: Matba 'at al-'Âmirat al-Sharafiyya, 1326-27/1908-09], IV, p. 230).

9   For detailed explanations of the meaning of this concept, see Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*; idem, "Rumi and *Wahdat al-Wujûd*"; idem, "Ebno'l-'Arabî's Doctrine of the Oneness of Being," *Sufi* [London], 4 (1989-90), pp. 6-14.

10   For two more passages making the same points, cf. I 350.10; II 198.28.