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# History of Islamic Philosophy

Part I



EDITED BY

*Seyyed Hossein Nasr  
and Oliver Leaman*



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46 *Ibid.*, fols 235v – 238v.

47 See Jalāl al-Dīn Āshrīyānī, *Hastī az naẓar-i falsafih wa ʿirfān* (reprint: Tehran, 1982): 1–39.

48 Also discussed by Corbin in his *Terre céleste*: 2.1.

49 See Suhrawardī, *Opera* I: 108. Translation mine.

## CHAPTER 30

### Ibn 'Arabī

*William C. Chittick*



Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn al-'Arabī al-Ṭā'ī al-Ḥātimī is usually referred to as Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī. He was born in Murcia in al-Andalus on 17 Ramaḍān 560/28 July 1165 and died in Damascus on 22 Rabī' II 638/10 November 1240.<sup>1</sup> Known by the Sufis as al-Shaykh al-Akbar, "The Greatest Master", he wrote voluminously at an exceedingly high level of discourse, making him one of the most difficult of all Muslim authors. His *al-Furūḡāt al-makkiyyah*, which will fill a projected thirty-seven volumes of five hundred pages each, is only one of several hundred books and treatises.

Ibn 'Arabī discusses in extraordinary detail most if not all of the intellectual issues that have occupied Muslim scholars in fields such as Qur'ānic commentary, *Ḥadīth*, jurisprudence, *kalām*, Sufism and *falsafah*. He was both intensely loyal to the tradition and exceedingly innovative. His works present us with a remarkable reservoir of rich and fecund meditations on every intellectual dimension of Islam, and it would not be inappropriate to claim him as the most influential thinker of the second half of Islamic history. What Franz Rosenthal has called Ibn 'Arabī's "scintillating personality and thought"<sup>2</sup> have continued to fascinate and inspire Muslim thinkers down to the present. In the words of James Morris, "Paraphrasing Whitehead's famous remark about Plato – and with something of the same degree of exaggeration – one could say that the history of Islamic thought subsequent to Ibn 'Arabī (at least down to the 18th century and the radically new encounter with the modern West) might largely be construed as a series of footnotes to his work."<sup>3</sup>

The extent to which Ibn 'Arabī can be called a "philosopher" depends, of course, upon our definition of philosophy. If we take the word *falsafah* to refer to the specific school of thought in Islam that goes by the name, then Ibn 'Arabī cannot properly be called a *faylasūfī*. But if



we consider philosophy as a much broader wisdom tradition, rooted both in Islamic sources and in various pre-Islamic heritages, then Ibn 'Arabī certainly deserves the name *ḥaylasīf*, or, as he would probably prefer, *ḥakīm*. He himself distinguishes between these two senses of the term *ḥalsafah* by speaking of those who truly (*bi'l-ḥaqīqah*) deserve the name *ḥakīm* and those who have adopted the title (*laqab*); the former are the messengers, prophets and friends of God (*awliyā'*), while the latter are the *ḥalsafīyah* proper.<sup>4</sup> When Ibn 'Arabī praises "the divine Plato" as a *ḥaylasīf*, he explicitly has this wider sense of the term *ḥalsafah* in view.<sup>5</sup>

Whether we consider philosophy in a narrow or broad sense, we need to ask three questions: To what extent was Ibn 'Arabī conversant with and influenced by the school of *ḥalsafah* proper? What were his views on *ḥalsafah*? What were his contributions to philosophical thinking?

### ACQUAINTANCE WITH *FALSFAH*

The idea proposed by Asín Palacios and others that Ibn 'Arabī's philosophical theories can be traced back to certain strands in the Greek tradition is no longer taken seriously by specialists. What is certain is that most of what he says is rooted in his own mystical intuition, or, to use his terminology, his unveiling (*kaṣf*) and opening (*ḥath*, *ḥuwāḥ*). This having been said, it is also clear that he was conversant with the fundamental sources of the Islamic tradition and the intellectual currents of his day, especially the wisdom tradition. Most of what he says is presented as commentary upon specific verses of the Qur'ān or passages from the *Ḥadīth*. He employs terminology current in Sufism, *ḥalsafah*, *kalām* jurisprudence, grammar and other sciences.

According to Rosenthal there is little evidence that Ibn 'Arabī actually read any books of *ḥalsafah*, with the sole exception of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Sirr al-asrār* or *Secretum secretorum*, the political parts of which were of interest to him. He seems to have been more familiar with *kalām*. He sometimes refers to well-known *mutakallimūn*, but again it is not clear whether he had actually read their works – which he practically never cites – or was relying on general knowledge present in the intellectual circles in which he moved.

Although sometimes Ibn 'Arabī ascribes wise sayings to specific Greek philosophers, he almost never mentions Muslim philosophers by name. The major exception is provided by his well-known account of his encounter with Ibn Rushd, which took place when he was about fifteen. But there is no evidence that he had actually read any of Ibn Rushd's books, and he describes him as a scholar of the *Shari'ah* rather than as a *ḥaylasīf*.<sup>6</sup>

Most major philosophical issues are at least mentioned in Ibn 'Arabī's works. As Rosenthal remarks, "All the accepted parts of philosophy were alive in his educational background. It was almost inevitable for him to touch on them."<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps fair to say that the type of philosophizing in which he engages has deep kinships with that of the Ikhwān al-Safā', but it is going too far to claim, as Nyberg did, that the Ikhwān's work provided him with a direct source.<sup>8</sup>

In discussing Ibn 'Arabī's acquaintance with philosophical issues, Rosenthal outlines the importance he gives to epistemology and logic, ethics, politics, man as microcosm, cosmology (especially time) and metaphysics. He summarizes his remarks on Ibn 'Arabī's philosophical leanings by saying:

It would be possible to go on and investigate everything Ibn 'Arabī says page by page, line by line, and find that there always is a close connection with ideas "philosophical" in origin. . . . Philosophy, whether in the Muslim or the classical meaning of the term, constitutes the frame of reference for Ibn 'Arabī's view of the world.<sup>9</sup>

This is certainly true as long as we keep in mind that for Ibn 'Arabī himself, "philosophy" in this wide sense of the term is identical with the wisdom about which the Qur'ān says, "He who has been given wisdom has been given much good" (2: 269).

To provide an idea of the nature of Ibn 'Arabī's specific references to *ḥalsafah* in its narrow sense, we can mention a few of his many references to the *ḥalsafīyah* or the *ḥukamā'*.

According to Ibn 'Arabī, the philosophers can be divided into two groups, the Islamic (*islāmī*) and those who do not consider themselves bound by the revealed religions (*al-sharā'ī*).<sup>10</sup> The philosophers are mistaken in their understanding of the famous aphorism, "Nothing emerges from the One but one"<sup>11</sup> and in their idea that God can be the "cause" (*'illah*) of the cosmos.<sup>12</sup> Their position on the order of the coming into existence of the cosmos (*tartīb takwīn al-'ālam*) is different from Ibn 'Arabī's.<sup>13</sup> They can be divided into two groups on the question of the resurrection, those who deny it completely, and those who deny the return of physical bodies but affirm spiritual retribution.<sup>14</sup>

Ibn 'Arabī sometimes refers to the philosophers as those who recognize that purifying the soul takes human beings to a place where knowledge and moral perfections can be acquired from the celestial spheres. However, they attribute what they acquire to the spiritual powers and disengage it from God's consideration, and to this extent they are known as *kuffār*, "truth concealers" (or "unbelievers", though the first translation is closer to Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of *kufī*).<sup>15</sup> When the philosophers say that the goal of philosophy is gaining similarity to God

or theomorphism (*al-tashabbuh bi'l-ilāh*), they mean the same thing that the Sufis mean when they talk about assuming the character traits of God (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*). Nevertheless, their idea of *tashabbuh* is untenable.<sup>16</sup>

Although Ibn 'Arabī is often critical of the philosophers, in general he prefers their views to those of the *mutakallimūn*.<sup>17</sup> One weakness of *kalām* is that it has no entrance into cosmology or psychology. As Ibn 'Arabī puts it, the philosopher is "he who combines knowledge of God, nature, mathematics, and logic". But the theologian as theologian has no knowledge of nature.<sup>18</sup>

In a few issues, Ibn 'Arabī does prefer the theological over the philosophic position. Thus he supports the Ash'arite doctrine that prophecy can only be attained by God's designation (*ikhtisās*), not by effort (*iktisāb*), and he extends this discussion to include knowledge of the soul's entelechy. Since knowledge of the nature of everlasting felicity depends upon a knowledge of God's own self (*nafs al-haqiq*), none can acquire this knowledge unless God provides it, and God provides it only by means of the prophets.<sup>19</sup>

### VIEW OF FALSAFAH

Generally speaking, it is impossible to disengage Ibn 'Arabī's position on *falsafah* from his views on *kalām*. He usually lumps together the authorities in both traditions and refers to them by such terms as "the people of theory" or "consideration" (*ahl al-nazar*), "the rational thinkers" (*al-ūqalā'*) and "the people of thought" or "reflective thinkers" (*ashāb al-fikr*). Sometimes he considers jurists in the same category, but he is likely to treat the latter more harshly and call them *ahl al-rusūm*, "the people of designations", or "the exoteric thinkers".

To grasp Ibn 'Arabī's views on the rational thought processes typical of philosophy and *kalām*, we need to take a broad view of his whole intellectual project. Certainly he wants to affirm that the unveiling achieved by Sufi practitioners is a mode of knowing superior to reason (*ʿaql*). Nevertheless, he also affirms that reason is necessary for acquiring a true knowledge of things, and this affirmation is deeply rooted in his fundamental vision of reality. In fact, reason is so necessary in his view of things that *tauhīd*, the *sine qua non* of salvation, depends upon it.<sup>20</sup>

Ibn 'Arabī maintains that human beings owe their uniqueness to the fact that they were created in the image of God and are able to actualize within themselves all God's Attributes. This involves a simultaneous transformation of both existence and knowledge: perfected human beings come to know God as God is in Himself and, at the same time, to manifest God's Attributes through their mode of existence in the cosmos. The

modalities of human perfection are infinitely diverse, but the highest stages of perfection demand that the Divine Attributes be so harmoniously balanced in their manifestation that the person represents a perfect image of the "Divine Presence" (*al-hadrat al-ilāhiyyah*), i.e., the all-embracing Being that is designated by the word "Allāh".

Ibn 'Arabī refers to this highest stage of human perfection by many names. For example, he calls it the "station of no station" (*maqām lā maqām*), because people who achieve it, while participating in every Attribute of God, cannot be limited or defined by any Attribute whatsoever. He calls the one who reaches this station the "Verifier" (*mubtaqqiq*) or "the possessor of two eyes" (*dhū l-ʿaynayn*). With one eye, such people see their own creaturely uniqueness; with the other, they see their identity with God. They witness themselves as both near to God and far from Him, both real and unreal, both existent and nonexistent. In one respect they make manifest all Divine Attributes, and in another respect they conceal them all.

In theological language, Ibn 'Arabī describes the vision achieved through human perfection as the balanced combination of the declaration of God's incomparability (*tanzīh*) and that of His similarity (*tashbīh*). The *mutakallimūn* considered *tanzīh* the correct position and condemned *tashbīh*. Ibn 'Arabī embraces *tashbīh* so long as it is kept in balance with *tanzīh*. Neither term can be employed to refer to God in any exclusive sense.

It is important to grasp how Ibn 'Arabī correlates *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* with the two broad categories of Divine Attributes that are often discussed by Muslim thinkers. These are called the Attributes of Mercy (*Rahmah*) and Wrath (*Ghadab*), or Bounteous (*Faḍl*) and Justice (*ʿAdl*), or Beauty (*Jamāl*) and Majesty (*Jalāl*), or Gentleness (*Lūf*) and Severity (*Qahr*). The Qur'ān and the tradition associate gentle and beautiful Attributes with God's nearness to His creatures; whereas they connect severe and majestic Attributes with His distance from creation.

Generally speaking, Ibn 'Arabī maintains that God is understood in terms of *tanzīh* inasmuch as He is inaccessible, but He is grasped in terms of *tashbīh* inasmuch as He is "closer to the human being than the jugular vein" (Qur'ān 50: 16). When the Qur'ān says that God created human beings with His own two Hands (38: 75), Ibn 'Arabī understands this to mean that He employed Attributes of both *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* to bring His own image into existence. Hence God is both present with His creatures and absent from them.<sup>21</sup>

Ibn 'Arabī's position on the intimate connection between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* has a direct bearing upon epistemology. In brief, reason is innately constituted to set up distinctions and differentiations and thus to think abstractly. In Ibn 'Arabī's view the rational thinkers — whether *mutakallimūn* or philosophers — dissect reality such that they lose sight

of the underlying unity of all things, and they do this because of the inherent nature of the rational mode of understanding. In other words, rational perspicuity keeps God at a distance by affirming *tanzih* and denying *tashbih*. As a result, both *falsafah* and *kalām* focus on God's Majesty, Severity and Wrath and tend to lose sight of His Beauty, Gentleness and Mercy.

In contrast, those who undergo unveiling (*ahl al-kashf*, *al-mukashshifūn*) perceive God's presence in all things, and they do so through the fact that unveiling is rooted primarily in imagination (*khayāl*), which bridges gaps, establishes relationships and understands by means of concrete images. As a result, unveiled Sufis see God in all things and focus on His nearness – His Mercy, Compassion, Gentleness and Love. Through affirming *tanzih*, people recognize the otherness (*ghayriyyah*) of all things; through affirming *tashbih*, they acknowledge God's "withness" (*ma'iyah*, a term derived from the Qur'anic verse "God is with you wherever you are" (57: 4). To focus upon either *tanzih* or *tashbih* and to de-emphasize the other perspective is to distort the actual relationship between God and the world. True knowledge depends upon seeing all things with both the eye of imagination and the eye of reason.

The harmony that needs to be established between reason and imagination does not mean that *tanzih* and *tashbih* have equal rights in all situations. In the last analysis, *tashbih* predominates, even if *tanzih* has a certain priority in the present world. The theological principle here is set down in the famous *ḥadīth*, "My [God's] Mercy takes precedence over My Wrath." In other words, nearness to the Real (*al-haqq*), which is Sheer Being (*al-Wujūd al-Mahd*) and Absolute Good (*al-Khayr al-Mutlaq*), is more basic to existence than distance from Him, because nearness provides existent things with everything they have. Their distance, though necessary in order for creation to take place, marks their connection with non-existence (*adam*), also known as the unreal (*bātil*).

God's never-ceasing presence with the creatures must show its effects. Absence has no roots in Being, no foundation in the Real. Hence God's presence – Mercy – predominates, in this world and the next. Wrath and chastisement pertain to situations that are accidental to the universal economy of the Good and the Real. A Qur'anic proof text that Ibn 'Arabi often cites here is 7: 156: "Said He, 'My Chastisement – I strike with it whom I will, and My Mercy embraces all things.'" Ibn 'Arabi constantly comes back to the theme of mercy as the underlying, all-embracing, fundamental quality of reality that must show itself in the end (*bil-ma'āl*).

Prophetic revelation appeals to both reason and imagination. Through presenting reason with the fact of God's distance, it allows human beings to establish *tanzih* and to recognize their created nature as God's servants. To the extent that people actualize servanthood by following the *Shari'ah*, they will be brought into nearness with God. Ibn

'Arabi frequently tells us that unveiling depends upon careful observance of the Qur'anic instructions as embodied in the Prophet's *Sunnah*. The proof text that he cites most often is Qur'an 2: 282: "Be godfearing, and God will teach you", through a teaching without any intermediaries. This God-given knowledge allows people to see God's presence, as they will in the next world. There they will no longer reason, they will simply see. Instead of being cut off from reason's distant object, they see God's self-disclosure (*tajalli*).<sup>22</sup> But those who have been dominated by reason and separation in this world will perceive God as distant, i.e., in terms of Attributes of Wrath and Severity; in contrast, those who gave unveiling the pride of place will perceive God as near, i.e., in terms of Attributes of Mercy and Gentleness.

Looked at in broad terms, Ibn 'Arabi's position on *tanzih* and *tashbih* reveals his project to integrate all Islamic learning under the umbrella of *tawhid*. But the Sufi perspective, which by and large emphasizes *tashbih* and stresses God's Mercy and nearness rather than His Wrath and distance, is seen as having the upper hand. The rational endeavours of the philosophers and theologians, though useful and sometimes necessary, need to be subordinated to the direct knowledge that is made accessible through the prophetic messages and is actualized through unveiling. The Verifiers, who see with both eyes, realize perfect knowledge through the heart (*qalb*), which "fluctuates" (*qalib*) between reason and unveiling and sees God in terms of both *tashbih* and *tanzih*.<sup>23</sup>

Most of Ibn 'Arabi's frequent mentions of the rational thinkers are found in contexts in which he is explaining the inadequacies of reason and reflection (*fikr*) for a full knowledge of the truth. Philosophers and theologians deceive themselves by thinking that they can know God's Essence (*Dhāt*) through reflecting upon it. Moreover, because of reason's inability to grasp *tashbih*, they insist upon explaining away (*ta'wil*) those Qur'anic verses that speak of God in creaturely terms. If they were able to see with the eye of unveiling, they would recognize that God expresses the nature of His own self-disclosures through the very verses that they want to explain away.<sup>24</sup>

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHY

Many of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, especially the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, were widely disseminated within a century of his death.<sup>25</sup> Little research has been carried out either on the contents of these writings or on the ways in which they may have influenced later thinkers. But it is sufficient to open any work on metaphysics, cosmology or psychology in the later period to see traces of his terminology and ideas, if not explicit indebtedness to his theories. Three specific questions to which Ibn 'Arabi made major

contributions are pervasive in much of the later philosophic literature (in both the broad and the narrow senses of the term philosophy): the Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*), the World of Imagination (*ālam al-khayāl*), and the perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*). In what follows, I summarize these theories, which are intimately intertwined.

Ibn 'Arabī himself never employs the expression *wahdat al-wujūd*, but the term gradually came to be adopted by his followers to designate his position.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the idea permeates his thinking, and its philosophical relevance is apparent already in the words. *Wujūd* dominated the concerns of the philosophers, and *falsafah* itself had sometimes been defined as the study of *wujūd* as *wujūd*. By Ibn 'Arabī's day the term was employed by philosophers, theologians and Sufis in reference to God.

In using the term *wujūd*, Ibn 'Arabī usually keeps its etymological sense in view. For him *wujūd* means not only "to be" or "to exist", but also "to find" and "to be found". As applied to God, the word means both that God is and cannot not be, and that He finds Himself and all things and cannot not find them. In other words, *wujūd* designates not only existence but also awareness, consciousness and knowledge.

When applied to creatures, the word *wujūd* demands the question, "In what sense is it proper to use the term?" *Falsafah* provided the standard answer: God's *wujūd* is Necessary (*wājib*), while the creature's *wujūd* is possible or contingent (*mumkin*). Ibn 'Arabī frequently employs this terminology, but he uses many other terms and images to bring out the ambiguous nature of the possible things, hanging as they do between the absolute *wujūd* of God and absolute nothingness (*al-ādām al-muṭlaq*).

Ibn 'Arabī by no means spends as much time discussing *wujūd* as one might think if one were to look only at the later literature, which habitually associates his name with the term *wahdat al-wujūd*. The fact that *wujūd* was singled out as representing his primary focus of attention has more to do with the philosophical orientation of the later Sufi tradition than with Ibn 'Arabī's actual writings. Nevertheless, if Ibn 'Arabī's discussions of the term were gathered together under one cover, they would certainly represent a major book.

Ibn 'Arabī's critics, most notably Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328), claimed that he made no distinction between the *wujūd* of God and the *wujūd* of the cosmos. In fact, it is easy to pick out passages from the *Futūḥāt* that support this claim. But from what has already been said about the pivotal nature of the dialectic between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* in Ibn 'Arabī's writings, it should be clear that passages identifying the *wujūd* of God with that of the cosmos represent the perspective of *tashbīh*. They are always offset, in Ibn 'Arabī's own writings, by discussions of *tanzīh*, in which the distinction between God and the world is vigorously affirmed. In several passages Ibn 'Arabī sums up his position with the statement "He/not He" (*huwa lā huwa*). The nature of the world's *wujūd*

can only be understood by both affirming and denying its identity with God's *wujūd*. One must look upon things with both eyes. Neither reason, which affirms God's otherness, nor unveiling, which affirms God's sameness, allows for a global understanding of the nature of things.

It needs to be kept in mind that the term *wahdat al-wujūd* in its literal sense does not do justice to Ibn 'Arabī's position. It is true that he frequently affirms that *wujūd* is a single reality. But this single reality is self-aware — it "finds" itself — and in finding itself it knows the infinite possibilities of its own deployment in every mode of being found. The universal categories of these possible modes are designated by the Divine Names, but their particularities are known as the "things" (*ashyā'*) or the "entities" (*a'yān*), and these are immutably fixed (*shābit*) in God's Knowledge. By knowing Himself, God knows all the possibilities of *wujūd*, which are all things. Hence God is the One/Many (*al-Wāḥid al-Kathīr*) — One in His *wujūd* and Many in His knowledge. If *wujūd* is one, yet *wujūd*'s one knowledge comprehends the reality of all manyness. It is highly significant that the first direct member of Ibn 'Arabī's school of thought to employ the term *wahdat al-wujūd* in a technical sense, Sa'īd al-Dīn Farḡānī (d. 695/1296), juxtaposed it with the expression *kathrat al-ilm* ("the manyness of knowledge").<sup>27</sup>

The cosmos can come into existence only on the basis of these two poles of reference — *wujūd* and knowledge. On the basis of the manyness of knowledge, God gives each thing a dependent or contingent *wujūd* in keeping with the demands of the thing's specific reality. Inasmuch as a thing has *wujūd*, it is He, but inasmuch as it represents a determined and defined reality that does not allow it to manifest *wujūd* as such, it is not He. *Wujūd* is one in itself, but infinitely diverse in its self-delimitations. The diversity of the universe represents a true diversity of realities, but in the matrix of a single *wujūd*.

*Wujūd* in Ibn 'Arabī's view is analogous to light, while each thing is analogous to a specific and distinct colour. The reality of the distinct colours is not compromised by the fact that each colour makes a single light manifest. No colour has any existence whatsoever without light. Every colour is identical with light, but light remains distinct and incomparable with each colour as also with the sum total of colours. Each thing "exists" (*maujūd*), but in a specific mode that does not detract from the incompatibility of *wujūd* itself. Each thing is thus identical with *wujūd* and distinct from it at one and the same time.

Ibn 'Arabī's teachings on imagination (*khayāl*, *mithāl*) apply the ontology of He/not He to every level of existence. He employs the word imagination to refer to everything that pertains to an intermediate state, not only to the faculty of the mind that complements reason. The standard example of an imaginal reality is a mirror image, which is neither the mirror nor the thing that is imaged, but a combination of the two sides.

Imagination in the broadest sense applies to the cosmos itself and to everything within it, since the cosmos is neither *wujūd* nor *ʿadam* but something in between. In a narrower sense, the universe is made up of two grand worlds, delineated in the Qurʾān and the tradition as the Visible (*al-shahādāt*) and the Invisible (*al-ghayb*), or the world of bodies and the world of spirits, or the world of meaning (*maʿnā*) and the world of sense perception (*ḥis*). Between the two worlds lies a World of Imagination that is neither purely spiritual nor purely bodily, neither perceptible by the external senses nor free of sensory qualities. Within the World of Imagination, unveiling takes place, the angels descend to the prophets with revelation, and all the after-death events described in the Qurʾān and *Ḥadīth* take place as described.

On the microcosmic level, imagination pertains to the domain of the soul, which is intermediate between Spirit (God's breath) and body (clay). Practically all human awareness occurs within imagination. The imaginal nature of human awareness is especially obvious in dreaming, where each dream image is both the same as and different from what it images; alternatively, it is both the same as and different from the soul. Meaning and sense perception, or the spiritual and the bodily, interact within the soul in two basic ways. Either spiritual things become corporealized, or corporeal things become spiritualized. In other words, the pure awareness of the spirit becomes present to the soul through words and imagery, while the external world of corporeality is lifted up to the soul's imaginal level of existence by means of the senses. Ibn ʿArabī's psychology, which involves enormously complex discussions of many stages of perfection leading to the ability to see God with both eyes, depends upon a conscious representation of the soul's infinite interior world as one of imaginal existence.

The idea of the perfect human being provides Ibn ʿArabī's vision of God and the universe, or of *wujūd* and imagination, with a teleology. God created the universe in order to be known, as the famous *ḥadīth* of the Hidden Treasure tells us. But this knowledge can be actualized only through human beings. Created in God's image, they possess the potential to know and to live all His Attributes. Those people who do so are the perfect human beings, commonly called the prophets and the friends (*awliyāʾ*) of God.

Human existence represents the great middle point of reality. It is wrapped in ambiguity, since every attribute of *wujūd* – save only the necessity that pertains exclusively to the Necessary Being – is present within it. In any given case, the possibilities that have been actualized remain unknown to all but God.

As microcosms, human beings embrace the three worlds: spirit, imagination and body. Either of the two sides or the middle can dominate in their make-up, and, at each point in the trajectory of their becoming,

the relationship among the three levels changes. If, in Ibn ʿArabī's way of looking at things, all things are imagination, the human being represents the sum total of every modality of imagination. Each thing in the universe, Ibn ʿArabī tells us, is a *barzakh*, an "isthmus" or intermediary stage of existence, since "*wujūd* has no edges."<sup>28</sup> Human beings are – potentially, at least – the Supreme *Barzakh*, embracing every possibility of existence. Human becoming represents the unfolding of what people are, but, from the human perspective, the course of this unfolding is not fixed. Freedom plays an important role. Revelation, and more specifically the prophetic *Sunnah* as set down in the *Sharīʿah*, designates the proper road of human development. Those who follow the Prophet perfectly become his inheritors (*wārith*) in knowledge, stations (*maqāmāt*) and states (*ahwāl*). Ibn ʿArabī constantly comes back to the theme that those who wish to achieve perfection must observe the prophetic model in all its details.

The perfect human being, having actualized every possibility of knowledge and existence placed within Adam when God "taught him all the names" (Qurʾān 2: 31), fulfils the purpose of creation. This purpose is rooted in the nature of *wujūd* itself and necessitated by the One/Many, though God remains free of all external constraint, since He is "independent of the worlds" (Qurʾān 3: 97). As the infinite middle ground – the Supreme *barzakh* or Nondelimited Imagination – the perfect human being manifests within his own becoming all the Attributes of God and creation, without being constricted and confined by any of them. He is the incarnation of He/not He, standing in the station of no station.<sup>29</sup> As Ibn ʿArabī writes,

The Divine Presence has three levels – manifest, non-manifest, and in-between. Through this last the Manifest becomes distinct and separate from the Non-manifest. This last is the *barzakh*, because it has a face toward the Non-manifest and a face toward the Manifest. Or rather, it itself is the face, for it cannot be divided. It is the perfect human being. The Real made him stand as a *barzakh* between the Real and the cosmos. Hence he makes manifest the Divine Names, so he is Real, and he makes manifest the reality of possible existence, so he is creature. That is why God made him in three levels: intellect and sense perception, which are the two sides, and imagination, which is the *barzakh* between meaning and sense perception.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 By far the best and most thoroughly documented account of his life is provided by Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur – the Life of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. P. Kingsley (Cambridge, 1993). On Ibn 'Arabi's philosophic ideas, see W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, 1989); M. Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore – Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law*, trans. D. Streight (Albany, 1993); *Seal of the Saints – Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. L. Sherrard (Cambridge, 1993); M. Chodkiewicz, W. C. Chittick, C. Chodkiewicz, D. Gril and J. W. Morris, *Les Illuminations de La Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations: Textes choisis/Selected Texts* (Paris, 1988); H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. R. Mannheim (Princeton, 1969); T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Los Angeles, 1983); and S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, chapter 3.
- 2 Franz Rosenthal, "Ibn 'Arabi between 'Philosophy' and 'Mysticism'", *Oriens*, 31 (1988): 33. This is a fine study to which I owe a number of details of what follows.
- 3 "Ibn 'Arabi and his Interpreters", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 106 (1986): 539–51, 733–56; 107 (1987): 101–19. Morris provides a good deal of evidence for this statement (which is found on p. 733) in the text of this article.
- 4 Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah* (Cairo, 1911; reprinted Beirut, n.d.), 1: 240, l. 32.
- 5 See Rosenthal, *op. cit.*: 15; for the whole passage, see Chittick, *op. cit.*: 202–4.
- 6 For accounts of this meeting, see Addas, *op. cit.*: 53–8; Corbin, *op. cit.*: 38–44; Chittick, *op. cit.*: xiii–xiv. For Ibn 'Arabi's reference to Ibn Rushd as a master of the *Shari'ah*, see his *Futūḥāt*, 1: 325, l. 16, discussed in Chittick, *op. cit.*: 384 n. 13.
- 7 Rosenthal, *op. cit.*: 21.
- 8 H. S. Nyberg, *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al-'Arabi* (Leiden, 1919): 145; Rosenthal, *op. cit.*: 19. M. Takeshita has illustrated some of the precedents for a few of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas in *Ibn 'Arabi's Theory of the Perfect Man and its Place in the History of Islamic Thought* (Tokyo, 1987).
- 9 Rosenthal, *op. cit.*: 33.
- 10 Ibn 'Arabi, *op. cit.*, 2: 591, l. 35; this helps explain his reference to a *ḥaylasūf islāmī* in *ibid.* 2: 124, l. 23.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 2: 434, l. 22; 4: 231, l. 31.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 1: 261–2.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 2: 469, l. 23; 677, l. 8.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 2: 599, l. 20.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 3: 84, l. 30. Ibn 'Arabi sometimes contrasts the *mi'rāj* or spiritual ascension of the follower of the Prophet with that of the "considerative thinker" (*qāḥib al-naṣar*), by whom he certainly means the philosopher (e.g., of the type represented by the Brethren of Purity) rather than the *mutakallim*. See *ibid.*, 2: 273–83.
- 16 Ibn 'Arabi, *op. cit.*, 2: 126, l. 8; 483, l. 28; 3: 190, l. 30; see the translation of the second passage and the detailed discussion of *takḥalluq* in Chittick, *op. cit.*: 75–6, 283–8.
- 17 Ibn 'Arabi, *op. cit.*, 1: 240, l. 32.

- 18 *Ibid.*, 1: 261, l. 7.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 2: 595, l. 32; 3: 37, l. 8; 79, l. 28.
- 20 See Chittick, *op. cit.*: 232–5.
- 21 See *ibid.*: 277–8. For the broad ranging implications of this view of complementary Divine Attributes for Islamic thought, with frequent reference to Ibn 'Arabi's position, see Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: a Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany, 1992).
- 22 For Ibn 'Arabi's views on after-death experience and eschatology, which also influenced later Islamic philosophy deeply, see Chittick, "Death and the After-life", chapter 7 of *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn 'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, 1994); Morris, "Lesser and Greater Resurrection", in Chodkiewicz *et al.*, *op. cit.*: 159–84.
- 23 On the heart, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*: 106–12.
- 24 For details on the relationship between *tashbih* and *tanzih* on the one hand and reason and unveiling on the other, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, especially parts 4 and 5.
- 25 The *Fuṣūṣ* has been translated into English several times, most notably by R. W. J. Austin, *Ibn al-'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom* (Ramsey, N. J., 1981). For translations of other works, see the bibliographies of Chittick, *Sufi Path*, and Addas, *op. cit.*
- 26 For a detailed discussion of the history of the term and the meanings that have been given to it by various authors, see Chittick, "Rūmī and *Wahdat al-Wujūd*", in *The Heritage of Rumi*, ed. A. Banani and G. Sabagh (Cambridge, 1994).
- 27 Cf. Chittick, "Spectrums of Islamic Thought: Sa'īd al-Dīn Farḡānī on the Implications of Oneness and Manyness", in *The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism*, ed. L. Lewisohn (London, 1992): 203–17. See also Murata, *op. cit.*: 67.
- 28 Ibn 'Arabi, *op. cit.*, 3: 156, l. 27; Chittick, *Sufi Path*: 14.
- 29 On the perfect human being and the station of no station, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, chapter 20.
- 30 Ibn 'Arabi, *op. cit.*, 2: 391, l. 20.

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