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John Dillon (2005)

## IBN AL-'ARABĪ

(1165–1240)

Muhyī al-Dīn Muhammad ibn 'Alī, known as Ibn al-'Arabī (or Ibn 'Arabī, without the definite article), was arguably the most influential philosopher of the second half of Islamic history. Born in Murcia in Muslim Spain in the year 1165, he left the west permanently in 1200, settled in Damascus in 1223, and died there in 1240. He is not normally classified as a philosopher (*ḥakīm*) because he made no attempt to fall into line with the schools of thought that adopted Greek methodologies. Nonetheless, "love of wisdom" was central to his project, and he praised the high aspiration of "the divine Plato" and others who engaged in the philosophical quest. With extraordinary faithfulness to the sources of the Islamic tradition and unprecedented originality, he offered diverse interpretations of the fundamental issues of philosophical and theological thought. He was enormously prolific, yet maintained a consistently high level of discourse without repeating himself. He has typically been classified as a "Sufi" or a "mystic," but this simply means that he supplemented rational investigation with suprarational intuition, not that he avoided philosophical issues. His pervasive influence was not eclipsed until the collapse of Islamic institutions under the pressure of colonialism and modernity. Current renewed interest in his legacy throughout the Muslim world stems largely from the realization that the Enlightenment project has reached a dead end.

Henry Corbin (1969) suggests that Ibn al-'Arabī's meeting during his teenage years with Averroes (d. 1198), the last of the great peripatetics, symbolizes the parting of the ways between Islamic and Christian civilizations. According to Ibn al-'Arabī's account, his father had told Averroes that his son had been opened up to the invisible realms, and Averroes requested a meeting. He asked the boy if philosophical theory (*nazar*) reached the same conclusions as divine unveiling (*kashf*). Ibn al-'Arabī replied, "Yes and no: Between the yes and the no, spirits fly from their matter and heads from their bodies" (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, p. 154). In Corbin's reading, Ibn al-'Arabī and subsequent Muslim philosophers preserved

the creative tension between the "yes," or the affirmation of the legitimacy of rational thought, and the "no," or the declaration of its inadequacy in face of the divine. In contrast, European thought, partly under the influence of Latin Averroism, lost the balance between reason and intuition and fell into deep dichotomies between philosophy and theology, science and religion, history and symbol, mind and heart.

Corbin considered Ibn al-'Arabī's main theoretical contribution to lie in his stress on *khayāl*, "imagination" or "image," specifically the human faculty of creative imagination and the cosmic *mundus imaginalis*, the "imaginal"—not imaginary—world located between the sensible and intelligible realms. Though this world had been implicitly affirmed by Avicenna's cosmology, it was denied by Averroes. When Ibn al-'Arabī reformulated Avicenna's thought in terms of imagination, the eventual result was a synthetic rather than analytic philosophical vision that stressed the essential unity of human beings and the cosmos.

Corbin, however, neglects a third and deeper meaning of the word *khayāl*. It also denotes the cosmos as a whole, the realm of contingency and becoming. While discussing the cosmos as image, Ibn al-'Arabī offers unprecedented analyses of *wujūd*, "being" or "existence," the basic topic of the philosophers. He follows the Avicennan picture by classifying *wujūd* into two basic sorts—necessary (*wājib*) and contingent (or possible, *mumkin*)—but he reminds us that the Arabic word *wujūd* also signifies consciousness, awareness, finding, ecstasy, and bliss; and he reformulates the whole discussion in terms of the Qur'anic doctrine of divine names and attributes. The Necessary *Wujūd* is not only that which is and cannot not be, but also that which knows and cannot not know, lives and cannot not live, loves and cannot not love. To say that the cosmos is the realm of contingent *wujūd* means that it stands halfway between being and nothingness, awareness and unconsciousness, life and death, mercy and wrath. In the same way, the *mundus imaginalis* is the intermediate realm of cosmic becoming, situated between the luminosity of the angelic realm and the darkness of corporeality. As for the human self (*nafs*), it is the imagination of the microcosm, hanging between heaven and earth, spirit and body, intelligence and ignorance, virtue and vice.

In later times Ibn al-'Arabī came to be known as the great expositor of *wahdat al-wujūd* or "the Oneness of Being," even though he and his immediate followers did not employ the expression (at least not in a technical sense). Ontology was unquestionably central to his proj-

ect, but so were epistemology, hermeneutics, theology, cosmology, spiritual psychology, ethics, and jurisprudence. He addressed all of the basic fields of human understanding, yet he was not attempting to provide an overarching system. Rather, he was adumbrating the major categories of human cognitive participation in the infinite and never-repeating disclosures of the Necessary *Wujūd*, disclosures that are none other than the imaginal realm known as the cosmos. He employs the mythic language of the Qur'an to provide a broad framework for the stations of wisdom that designate the realms of human possibility, and he assures us that each of the 124,000 prophets sent by God embodies a distinct archetype of human perfection. His most famous book, *Fuṣūṣ al-hikam*, is arranged in terms of twenty-seven prophetic Logoi, each of which incarnates a specific divine attribute.

To provide some sense of the scope of his work, a few of the many themes that he discussed with unparalleled thoroughness and which then reverberated down through Islamic intellectual history will be outlined:

#### WISDOM AS REALIZATION

According to the Qur'an, one of God's names is *haqq*, a word that designates reality, truth, appropriateness, rightness, right (as in "human rights"), and justice, along with the corresponding adjectives. From al-Kindī onwards, Muslim philosophers often defined their discipline in terms of this word. As al-Kindī put it at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, "The philosophers' purpose in their knowledge is to hit upon the *haqq* and, in their practice, to practice according to the *haqq*" (*Rasā'il al-Kindī al-falsafiyya*, p. 25). They took *haqq* in its purest sense as a designation for the Necessary *Wujūd* in itself, but they also recognized that it denotes the realm of contingency known as the cosmos, the truth that is to be grasped (right understanding), and the embodiment of truth in correct activity (ethics and virtue). To say that the cosmos is the realm of *haqq* means that human beings, like everything else, manifest truth, reality, and right in their essential nature.

In contrast to other things, however, human beings partake of enough freedom to affect the degree to which they understand and embody *haqq*, and it is this that necessitates praxis. The quest for wisdom is then called *tahqīq* (from the same root as *haqq*), that is, "realization"—literally "actualizing *haqq*." *Tahqīq* is contrasted with *taqlīd*, "imitation" of the beliefs and opinions of others. To be a sage demands far more than studying philosophy and memorizing the words of Aristotle and

Avicenna. The real goal is to see *haqq* for oneself (*theōria* as vision) and to act in keeping with one's own impartial seeing. To the extent that people remain imitators, they are held back from their human substance. To the extent that they achieve realization, they participate in *haqq*, that is, the reality and consciousness of the Necessary *Wujūd*. The quest for wisdom remains intensely personal, for the cumulative theories of philosophers and scientists, not to speak of the conventional, imitative knowledge of society, are as nothing compared to the knowledge of self that only the self can achieve for itself.

#### THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF LOGIC AND MYSTICISM

Ibn al-'Arabī's account of his encounter with Averroes highlights two terms, "theory" and "unveiling." The former designates the rational and discursive knowledge achieved by philosophers and theologians, the latter the suprarational intuition granted to mystics and visionaries. A good deal of Ibn al-'Arabī's writing deals with the inadequacies of exclusive reliance on one or the other of these two modes of understanding. Theory he calls "the eye of reason," and unveiling "the eye of imagination." Both are located in the "heart" (*qalb*), which, in Islam as in China and other traditional contexts, is the seat of consciousness and selfhood. The quest for realization is the attempt to actualize the vision of both eyes and to achieve the harmonious marriage of logos and mythos, philosophy and poetry, science and art.

#### THE HARMONY OF THE ONE AND THE MANY

The eye of reason has the capacity to discern the individual reality—the essence or quiddity—of each thing. In contrast, the eye of imagination is able to perceive the actual presence of the Necessary *Wujūd* in all that exists. Reason acknowledges difference and recognizes its *haqq*—its reality, appropriateness, and rightness. It grasps that the Necessary *Wujūd* is utterly other than the cosmos and the existents (*mawjūdāt*). In contrast, imagination perceives sameness and denies otherness. It finds the face of the Necessary *Wujūd* in every contingency. Theologically, this means that reason perceives God as distant and asserts his incomparability or transcendence (*tanzīh*); imagination sees God as present and asserts his similarity or immanence (*tashbīh*). Only the heart that sees simultaneously with both eyes can understand God, the universe, and the self as they truly are. The sage does not fall into the traps laid down by the principle of noncontradiction. Instead he grasps the exact manner in which all

things pertain to the imaginal realm of both/and, or neither/nor. According to Ibn al-'Arabī's most succinct formulation of the actual state of affairs, the sage sees that everything in the cosmos is "He/not He" (*huwa lā huwa*)—God/not God, being/nothingness, necessity/impossibility, consciousness/unawareness.

#### LANGUAGE AS THE DETERMINANT OF REALITY

We perceive only language, for at root nothing is accessible to us but the Logos, the self-expression of the Necessary *Wujūd* (called the "Active Intellect" by the peripatetic philosophers). According to the Qur'an, "When God desires a thing, He says to it 'Be!', and it comes to be." In Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, what "comes to be" is the infinite words of God articulated in "the Breath of the All-Merciful" (*nafas al-rahmān*). God's mercy, his all-embracing bounty and kindness, is the Necessary *Wujūd* itself, which demands the existence of every possibility. Within the Breath, God voices all things as letters, words, and sentences, arranging them in three grand books: the cosmos, the human self, and revelation. All language, whether divine, cosmic, or human, pertains to the imaginal realm, for words are neither the speaker nor other than the speaker, neither the spoken nor other than the spoken. The key to deciphering the message inscribed in cosmos and self lies in prophetic revelation, which explicates the Logos in the language most accessible to human understanding.

#### THE CORRELATION BETWEEN MACROCOSM AND MICROCOSM

The Breath of the All-Merciful deploys itself as a hierarchy of being and consciousness on three basic levels: intelligence or spirit, imagination or soul, and corporeality. Each of these ontological levels is inhabited by appropriate entities (e.g., angels, jinn or psychic beings, inanimate objects). The sum total of the three levels along with the infinite proliferation of inhabitants is the cosmos. The cosmos is then called the "macrocosm" when contrasted with the human being as microcosm. What differentiates the human microcosm from all other creatures is its all-comprehensive image of the Necessary *Wujūd*. The macrocosm embraces all contingent beings in their distinctiveness, all the individual words uttered by the All-Merciful Breath. The microcosm combines all the characteristics of macrocosmic reality in a unified and focused whole that opens up inwardly in the direction of the undifferentiated Logos.

#### ANTHROPOCOSMIC TELEOLOGY

The cosmos can be looked upon as a static hierarchy, but Ibn al-'Arabī more typically describes it in terms of the dynamism of its unfolding. We and all things come into existence from the One in a quasi-neoplatonic manner, but our existential concerns are determined by the path we follow in retracing our steps to the Origin. Given that consciousness and self-awareness are centralized in the human microcosm, the way back to the One—which is the Necessary *Wujūd*, the unity of Being, Consciousness, and Bliss—goes by way of the full realization of the human self as the immanent Logos. The purpose of human life is the recovery of the original unity of being and intelligence by way of self-understanding. But self-understanding cannot be achieved without understanding the cosmos and revelation, and none of these three grand books can be deciphered unless they are read with both eyes of the heart. The cosmic subjectivity of the human state is so central that it provides the *raison d'être* for the existence of the world. Human beings—or rather, those whom Ibn al-'Arabī calls "perfect human beings" (*al-insān al-kāmil*)—are the final cause of the contingent realm. In them alone are realized God's words as related by Muhammad in the famous saying, "I was a Hidden Treasure and I desired to be known, so I created the creatures that I might be known."

*See also* al-Kindī, Abū-Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq; Aristotle; Averroes; Averroism; Corbin, Henry; Enlightenment, Islamic; Imagination; Islamic Philosophy; Macrocosm and Microcosm; Mysticism, History of; Sufism.

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## IBN BĀJJA

(d. 533 AH/1138 CE)

Abū-Bakr Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā ibn al-Sāyigh ibn Bājja, the Islamic philosopher, was known to the medieval Scholastics as Avempace. He was born in Saragossa at the end of the fifth century AH, eleventh century CE, and died in Fez, Morocco, in 533 AH/1138 CE. During his brief life he endured the tribulations occasioned by the Christian "reconquest" of Andalusia. It is known that he wrote several commentaries on Aristotle's treatises and that he was very learned in medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. He was involved in the quarrel initiated by the Peripatetics, during which al-Bitrogī, whom the Scholastics called Alpetragius, distinguished himself. Ibn Bājja opposed his own hypotheses to Ptolemy's system.

Ibn Bājja's philosophical works have remained incomplete, notably the treatise that gained him his reputation, *Tadbīr al-motawahḥid* (The rule of the solitary). For a considerable length of time this treatise was known only through a detailed analysis of it in Hebrew by Moses of Narbonne (fourteenth century) in his commentary on the *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* of Ibn Ṭufayl, the pupil of Ibn Bājja. Salomon Munk based his account of Ibn Bājja on this analysis. The Arabic original (now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford) was rediscovered by Miguel Asin Palacios.

The work's central theme is that of an *itinerarium* leading the man-spirit to unite itself with the Active Intellect ('*Aql fa' al, Intellegentia agens*). He who speaks of a "rule" or "discipline" assumes a mode of life regulated by actions demanding reflection, and this can be found only in the solitary man. This is why the solitary man's discipline should be the model for a member of the perfect City and the ideal State. The ideal State, it must be noted, is not the result of a priori conceptions, nor can it come into being by a political coup d'état; much more than a mere "social" reform, it is the fruit of a reform of customs

that seeks to realize the fullness of human existence in each individual. For the time being, the solitary individuals live in imperfect states, with neither judge nor doctor except God. Their task is to become members of the perfect City. In order to found the regime of these individuals it is necessary at first to analyze and classify human actions, using the forms that they strive to fulfill as the point of departure.

For this reason the treatise is presented essentially as a "theory of spiritual forms," a sketch of the phenomenology of the spirit. The spirit progressively evolves from forms engaged in matter to forms that have been abstracted from it. Having then become intelligible in act, these forms thereby attain the level of intellect in act, reaching the level of pure spiritual forms, those forms that, inasmuch as they exist for the Active Intellect, have not had to pass from power to act.

Ibn Bājja imposed upon Islamic philosophy in Spain a completely different orientation than did Mohammad al-Ghazali. The motives of the solitary individual, of the stranger, and of the *allogène*, however, merge with the motives typical of the mystical gnosis in Islam. The same type of spiritual man is realized in these individuals, although their perception of the common goal differs and thereby the choice that determines their course. One of these courses in Spain was that of Ibn Masarra, which was continued by Ibn al-Arabi. Another was that of Ibn Bājja, later continued by Averroes.

See also al-Ghazālī, Muhammad; Averroes; Ibn al-'Arabī; Ibn Ṭufayl; Islamic Philosophy; Logic, History of; Logic in the Islamic World; Peripatetics.

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Ibn Bājja's *Tadbīr al-motawahḥid* has been edited and translated into Spanish by Miguel Asin Palacios as *Avempace, El régimen del solitario* (Madrid and Granada, 1946); the first section has been translated into English by D. M. Dunlop in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1945): 61–81.

For discussions of Ibn Bājja's philosophy, see Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Vol. I (paperback, Paris: Gallimard, 1964), pp. 317–325; S. H. Masumi, *Ibn Bajjah's 'Ilm al-Nafs* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1961); and Salomon Munk, *Mélanges de philosophie juive et arabe* (Paris: A. Franck, 1859; new ed., Paris: J. Vrin, 1955).

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