On Sufi Psychology:  
A Debate between the Soul and the Spirit  
William C. Chittick

The writings of Professor Toshihiko Izutsu have long been savored by those convinced of the pertinence of Islamic thought to the social and spiritual crises of the contemporary world. The publication last year of his Creation and the Timeless Order of Things reminds us that his works, which occupy the intellectual tip of the iceberg that is interest in Sufism, have a wide and growing audience in North America. The current popularity of Sufism is part of the broader fascination with everything that breaks with the mechanistic and scientific world view that has brought modern civilization to its present impasse. All sorts of people are searching for solutions to the encroaching dissolution of personalities, social structures, and environments that are all too obvious in the modern world. The interest in Professor Izutsu's brilliant and broad-ranging works suggests that for many of them the intellectual roots of the present predicament need to be elucidated before lasting practical solutions can be found.

Although Professor Izutsu, in his search for what he has called a “metaphilosophy of oriental philosophies,” focused on philosophical issues, he frequently reminded his readers that the Islamic and Oriental traditions have always kept in view the necessity of psychological and spiritual transformation. One cannot come to understand the nature of existence without transcending ordinary consciousness.

14. ibid., I. 15. 24, p. 112; A Thousand Teachings, p. 144.
16. Śaṅkara, Upadesāhasrī, I. 15. 25, p. 113; A Thousand Teachings, p. 144.
19. Śaṅkara, Brahmasūtrabhāṣya, II. iii. 31, p. 541; III. ii. 9, pp. 635–637.
20. Śaṅkara, Upadesāhasrī, I. 17. 25, p. 135; A Thousand Teachings, p. 162.
21. ibid., I. 17. 65, p. 141; A Thousand Teachings, p. 166. In his Chāndogypopaniṣadbhāṣya, Śaṅkara interprets this term in the sense of “the base of words” (vāg-ālambana). Cf. Śaṅkara, Chāndogypopaniṣadbhāṣya, VI. i. 4, p. 505.
22. The word turya appears in Bhadāranyakopaniṣad, V. xiv. 3–7; turya in Maitreyopaniṣad, VI. 19 and VII. xi. 7–8; caturtha in Māndūkypopaniṣad 7.
23. Śaṅkara, Upadesāhasrī, I. 10. 4, p. 85; A Thousand Teachings, p. 123.
24. ibid., I. 11. 6, p. 88; A Thousand Teachings, p. 126.
25. ibid., I. 15. 29, p. 113; A Thousand Teachings, p. 145.
26. Śaṅkara, Brahmasūtrabhāṣya, I. i. 4, p. 87; II. iii. 41, p. 552; Upadesāhasrī, I. 7. 2, p. 81; I. 11. 6, p. 88; I. 13. 19, p. 98; I. 15. 38, p. 115; I. 18. 26, p. 150; I. 18. 94, p. 161.
27. Śaṅkara, Brahmasūtrabhāṣya, I. i. 4, p. 87.
If people do not recognize the world for what it is, the problem lies in the subject, not the object. As Professor Izutsu remarks in a typical passage from his writings,

[M]etaphysics or ontology is inseparably connected with the subjective state of man, so that the self-same reality is said to be perceived differently in accordance with the different degrees of consciousness.

In works on Sufism, the issue of degrees of consciousness is addressed far more often than questions of ontology or metaphysics. In what follows, I offer a glimpse of the types of issues that are addressed in Sufi studies of human consciousness by presenting the example of a single text, written probably in the seventeenth century by one 'Abd al-Jalil of Allahabad, who can be considered an intellectual follower of the school of Ibn al-'Arabi. He is probably identical with 'Abd al-Jalil ibn Šadr al-Din Ilāhābādī, the author of a book called Iršād al-sālikūn, a collection of invocations (adhkār) of the Chishtis and others. In a manuscript copy of this book, he says that he was requested to write it because “I had written many treatises in the science of taqwīd concerning the realities, the gnostic sciences, and the intricacies, but a treatise was needed...in the science of the wayfaring [ṣu`āl], the invocations, and the disciplines that take the traveler in the direction of the divine gnostic sciences, a treatise that would be the key to gnosis as such in a manner that opens the lock of the hearts.”

Like many other works I saw in India, this treatise provides evidence that the importance of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī’s criticisms of Ibn al-'Arabi in the history of Sufism has been vastly overrated by modern scholars. Most of the later authorities who supported Ibn al-'Arabi's positions hardly even bothered to refer to Sirhindī, since they found his criticisms superficial and self-inflating. In Su'āl wa jawāb, 'Abd al-Jalil alludes to Sirhindī as “one of the recent Suls [who] have objected to your persuasion, saying that Oneness is in shukfiyā, not in wujūd.” Ibn al-'Arabi responds by pointing out quite rightly that in the Futūḥat, he has already said everything such critics have said, because there he presents all valid points of view. The problem lies in the critics’ inability to see beyond their own limitations.

The manuscript that I want to discuss here, Rūh wa nafs or 'Ubūdat al-taṣyīn, is similar to the first in both length (22 pages of 21 lines) and the fact that it is presented as a visionary conversation, but in this treatise the two principles are the spirit (rūḥ) and the soul or self (nafs). On the one hand this work discusses many of Ibn al-'Arabi’s ideas on existence or being (wujūd) and its levels, the nature of the “things” (aṣḥāb) or the “immutable entities” (al-a'yān al-thābita), the unknowability of the Divine Essence, and the experiences that take place in the afterlife. On the other it provides an interesting example of spiritual psychology, since it analyses the forces at work in the human microcosm in terms that recall earlier currents of Sufi teachings and reflect the developments and debates going on in the subcontinent. It is the psychological theme that I wish to follow up on here.

Given the current dismal state of our knowledge of the development of Islamic thought in India, it would be impossible to trace the numerous Sufis, theologians, and philosophers whose views may be some of the technical terminology and phraseology of Ibn al-'Arabi's writings. This current had been set in motion by figures such as 'Alī al-Dawla Simnānī (d. 737/1336) and it was continued by Gisū Darāz (d. 825/1422) and others. The last part of the work alludes briefly to the position of the most famous of these critics, the Naqshbandī shaykh, Ahmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624).
reflected in the treatise. The best I can do is to point to the roots of some of the ideas in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabi and other relatively early figures. It would be difficult to say to what extent 'Abd al-Jalil is influenced directly by Ibn al-'Arabi in these two treatises, since he may have known Ibn al-'Arabi's works largely through the tradition of criticism and commentary. The one book that he almost certainly had read, though he refers neither to its title nor to its author, is Naqd al-nuṣūṣ fi sharh naṣīḥ al-fuṣūṣ by 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmi (d. 898/1492). In Rūḥ wa nafs this work is quoted or paraphrased at least twice, and a passage that is attributed to “one of them” is taken from al-Fukūk by Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawi, most likely through the intermediary of Naqd al-nuṣūṣ.5

Sufi Psychology

Much of Sufi theoretical teaching has to do with the invisible dimension of the human being, the ambiguous something that fills the vast “space” between the human body and the Essence of God, a something that we might today refer to as “consciousness.” In discussing this something, the earliest texts usually employ various terms derived from the Koran and the Hadith—such as soul (nafs), spirit (rūḥ), heart (qalb), intellect (aql), and mystery (sirr)—without much elaboration or explanation. But already by the third/ninth century, Sufi authors like al-Ḥakim al-Tirmidhi—note that the early Muslim philosophers—employ such terms to describe a hierarchy of increasingly invisible levels, tendencies, or dimensions reaching as far as the divine realm. In the theoretical discussions provided by al-Tirmidhī, al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111),10 Ḥiz al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. 735/1335),11 and many others, it is clear that the multiplicity of words does not imply a multiplicity of independent entities. Instead, the words are diverse names given to a single reality—the unseen dimension of the human being—in respect of its different attributes, dimensions, or stages.12

Since these aspects of human consciousness are by definition invisible and difficult to pinpoint, the terminology tends to be fluid. For example, the definitions some authors provide for nafs frequently correspond to what others refer to as rūḥ. This is seen most clearly in the discussion initiated by the philosophical tradition concerning the three basic levels in which the inner dimension of things manifests itself outwardly, that is, the plant, animal, and human levels. Some texts speak of the plant, animal, and human “soul,” while others prefer the term “spirit.” Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawzi’s work Kitāb al-rūḥ devotes a good deal of space to the fact that the early sources do not clearly distinguish among the terms. Nevertheless, many authors do distinguish among them, and their descriptions of the differences provide us with detailed insights into the Muslim understanding of human consciousness.

The discussion of the different levels or dimensions of the human being was by no means simply theoretical, particularly for the Sufis. In other words, these unseen realities were defined and differentiated with a specific aim, which was for them to be experienced as distinct levels of consciousness by the traveler on the path to God. Without the theoretical and linguistic “embodiment” of the tendencies of the soul, it is impossible to come to grips with one’s own inner nature. The descriptions made it possible for spiritual travelers to picture, localize, and personify their own psychic and spiritual tendencies within the sea of consciousness, that unbounded imaginal universe that is sometimes called the “ocean of the soul” (baḥr al-nafs). Once this was accomplished, it was possible to strengthen what needed strengthening or pass beyond what needed to be overcome.

One can recall here the distinctions among the ascending levels of the human reality made by Kubrawī authors, distinctions that have been studied in some detail by Henry Corbin and others. Thus, for example, the founder of the Kubrawī Order, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1220), refers to five basic levels of the self—intellect, heart, spirit, mystery, and the hidden (khaṭīb). A later Kubrawī authority, ‘Alā’ al-Dawla Simnānī, refers to seven levels—body or mold (qālab), soul, heart, mystery, spirit, the hidden, and the Real (ḥaqq).13 These authors clearly bring out the practical relevance of these classifications for the spiritual travelers, since they also discuss the vision of colored lights, or “photisms” as Corbin calls them, that signal the experience of the different levels.14

Ibn al-'Arabi provides a vast amount of material on the different
levels of the self, but the six or seven ascending “subtle realities” (latā‘if), so important in the Kubrawi literature and much of the later tradition, are probably not discussed in his works in any systematic manner. In general, he speaks of three basic levels in both the macrocosm and the microcosm—spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal; or spirit, soul, and body. Inasmuch as these three levels are tied to the experiential side of the path to God, the traveler’s goal is to bring them into harmony, and this takes place through the “heart” (qalb), which is the spiritual organ par excellence in Ibn al-'Arabi’s teachings. In the writings of Ibn al-'Arabi’s followers, especially Şadr al-Din Qūnawi and his immediate disciples, emphasis is placed on the heart as the harmonious union of all the attributes of spirit and soul.15

Ibn al-'Arabi also discusses the “mystery” (sirr) as a still higher stage of awareness, beyond the level of spirit. In his teachings, the mystery, or, more often, the “divine mystery” (al-sirr al-ilāhī), is the individual’s reality as known by God himself. It marks the furthest limit of what the gnostic can come to know, since ultimately no one can know anything but himself, while the Divine Essence remains forever unknowable. In other terms, the mystery is the “immutable entity,” the reality or quiddity of a thing fixed forever with God. It is also called the “specific face” (al-wajh al-khāṣṣ), that is, the face of God turned toward one individual rather than any other, thereby defining the reality of the individual.16 Not only human beings, but everything in existence has a specific face, different from the specific divine faces turned toward other things, since, if God “looked at” two things in exactly the same way, they would be the same thing. Here we have a corollary of one of Ibn al-'Arabi’s most oft-repeated axioms: God never discloses himself in the same manner to two individuals. Or, “Self-disclosure never repeats itself.”18

The Setting
Although ‘Abd al-Jalīl’s treatise deals with two major dimensions of Sufi teachings—the psychological and the metaphysical—the narrative development emphasizes psychology. The text reaches a climax with an integration of diverse dimensions of human consciousness and a vision of the oneness of all things in God. The manner in which this is achieved recalls both a Kubrawi-style hierarchy of levels and the specific teachings of Ibn al-'Arabi and his followers concerning the soul, spirit, heart, and mystery.

The text is presented within the context of the long-standing debates in India over the status of the human being in relationship to God. More specifically, what are the practical results of the spiritual realization of the gnostic? Once the supreme union is achieved, can any distinction be drawn between God and the world? Granted that “All is He” (hūma ‘āst)—the slogan that was taken as typifying the position of those who believed in the “Oneness of Being” (waḥdat al-wujūd)—of what relevance to the gnostic are the commands and prohibitions of the Shariah?

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī’s criticisms of Ibn al-'Arabi arose out of this background. Sirhindī is not in fact criticizing Ibn al-'Arabi himself, but rather the position ascribed to Ibn al-'Arabi by certain groups of Muslims who then used this position to justify their own neglect of the Law or of doctrinal teachings that Sirhindī considered essential. It is clear that ‘Abd al-Jalīl had this same background in view, since he goes to great lengths to dispute some of the important arguments of those who maintain the commonly accepted misconceptions concerning Ibn al-'Arabi’s position, what one might call “popularized waḥdat al-wujūd” or the “religion of ‘All is He.’”

The treatise begins as follows: ‘Abd al-Jalīl is sitting in meditation when two forms appear to him, one luminous and one dark. The two forms greet each other and then introduce themselves. The dark form calls itself the governing power of the whole universe, a power so intermixed with the creatures that they refer to it as their own “self” or “soul” (nafs). The luminous form tells him that it is the power through which all things have life; it is called “spirit” (ruḥ), because within it all creatures find their “rest” (rāwḥ) and “repose” (rayḥūn).

In the Sufi discussion of spirit and soul, the spirit is almost invariably conceived of as lying on a higher plane, as is clearly the case here, since light is higher than darkness. The spirit’s “luminous” appearance connects it with the divine name Light and the radiance of the world of the angels, who, according to the Prophet, are “made of light.” The soul is then connected to the opposite pole of manifesta-
tion, where light has lost its original intensity and become thoroughly mixed with darkness. 'Abd al-Jalil does not mean to imply here that the soul is absolutely dark, but rather relatively dark, as compared to the spirit. Absolute darkness would be absolutely nonexistent and therefore imperceptible in any mode. Moreover, the soul manifests certain positive dimensions of reality, as becomes obvious later in the text.

The two forms then speak about their respective religions. The soul says that it follows the great lover Iblis, who is the locus of manifestation (mażhar) for the divine name Misguider (al-muḍill). The spirit says that it follows him who carried God's Trust (amāna) and became his vicegerent (khalīfa), the prophet Muhammad, who is the locus of manifestation for the names God (allāh) and Guide (al-hāḍī).

With the mention of the term mażhar or "locus of manifestation" we are alerted to the fact that the text looks back to Ibn al-'Arabi's specific technical terms and his mode of discussing relationships. The general idea that the divine names are the roots or realities of the phenomena that appear in world and the soul, while the phenomena are the places where the names manifest their properties and effects, is of course found in a wide range of Sufi writings, not only in Ibn al-'Arabi, and it is plainly prefigured in the Koran. But the term mażhar in this meaning is one that Ibn al-'Arabi claims as his own coinage and that typically occurs in discussions of his ideas.

A "locus of manifestation" for a divine name is a place where the name displays outwardly its properties (al-ta'kīm), traces (al-thār), or specific characteristics (khawāṣṣ). Each name has innumerable loci of manifestation, and an individual entity may act as the locus of manifestation for many different names. Thus the human being, for example, is made in "the form of God," which is to say that he is the locus of manifestation for the specific name God. By the same token, a human being manifests the specific characteristics of every divine name, since God itself is the "all-comprehensive name" (al-ism al-jāmi'), which embraces the properties of all the names.

Although all human beings manifest the name God—it is this, and this alone, according to Ibn al-'Arabi which makes them human—only those who merit the title "perfect human being" manifest the name God in a mode that corresponds to God as he is in himself. Other human beings—whom Ibn al-'Arabi refers to as "animal human beings" (al-insān al-ḥayawān)—fail to actualize the full potentiality of the human state. Hence they are dominated by characteristics that pertain to one or more of the lesser names embraced by the name God. In the case of the "friends of God" (awliyā' allāh) and the faithful, these lesser names are names of mercy and gentleness, while in the case of the unbelievers, these names project wrath and severity. As the hadīth qudsi tells us, God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath, so mercy is closer than wrath to God's essential reality. Hence the names of mercy and gentleness demand nearness to God and "felicity" (sa'āda) in the next world, while the names of wrath and severity demand distance from him and "wretchedness" (ghnāra).

The gentle and merciful divine names bring about the actualization of the full human potential along with harmony and equilibrium among the loci of manifestation. In other words, a human being who is the object of God's mercy in this sense manifests fully and appropriately all the individual divine names (including the wrathful names) embraced by the name God. That is why, in this passage, the spirit does not limit itself to saying that Muhammad is the locus of manifestation for the name God, since all human beings share in this particular characteristic, though clearly not in the same mode or degree. The spirit adds that the Prophet is also the locus of manifestation for the name Guide, the function of which is to spread God's salvific mercy among the creatures and to open them up to ultimate felicity.

The opposite of the Guide is the Misguider, a divine name that is found in some of the traditional lists of the ninety-nine names and is implied by several passages in the Koran where God is the subject of the verb "to misguide." The Koran attributes this name specifically to Satan in one verse (28:15). That the soul or self is connected to satanic forces is suggested by a number of Koranic verses and made more explicit in the hadīth literature. In short every human being has a tendency that is opposed to guidance and rejects the truth, and this is referred to as nafs—soul, self, or ego.
The fundamental tendencies or inclinations of the inner dimension of the human being are summarized in the well-known distinction, based on Koranic terminology, among three types of nafs, representing three main stages of human consciousness: the soul “commanding to evil” (amnndra bi’lsii’), the soul “blaming” (lawmamn) itself for its own shortcomings, and the soul “at peace” (m7tmn’inna) with God. At the first stage, the soul dwells in the darkness of ignorance, forgetfulness, and misguidance, while in the third stage the soul has been transmuted into the light of knowledge, remembrance, and guidance. The middle stage represents a struggle between the opposing forces that are frequently, as in ‘Abd al-Jalil’s treatise, ascribed respectively to “spirit” and “soul.” These are guidance and misguidance, knowledge and ignorance, remembrance and forgetfulness, light and darkness.

In short, ‘Abd al-Jalil’s description of the spirit and soul reaffirms the well-known opposition between the ascending, luminous, and angelic tendency of the human being, and the descending, dark, and satanic tendency. We are prepared for a replay of the struggle between guidance and misguidance, the prophets and the satans. But we are also dealing here with Ibn al-‘Arabi’s intellectual universe, a fact that is announced at the beginning by some of the technical terminology and confirmed by many passages in the text itself, where Ibn al-‘Arabi’s terms are constantly employed and where he himself is quoted twice.

Since Ibn al-‘Arabi and wahdat al-wujūd lie in the background, it is natural that both the Prophet and the Satan—the leaders of the two religions represented by spirit and soul—are represented as loci of manifestation for the divine names. The discussion cannot take an exclusively dualistic and oppositional form in the manner of the legalistic and polemical approach characteristic of both jurisprudence and Kalām. Rather, what follows will have to show that opposition among the loci that manifest the divine names can be harmonized and made complementary through Unity, or in other words, through the fact that the name God is the coincidence of all opposites (jam’ al’addad).

The point of the debate is not so much that one side should win and the other lose. Rather, the opposition between the two sides prepares the way for a stretching and expansion of comprehension and consciousness. Opposite positions necessarily have to manifest the same Reality, since God comprehends all things. The task is not to answer yes or no, but to discover the right relationship between two yes’s. This does not imply that error has no reality, quite the contrary. But error arises not so much from the position itself as from one’s standpoint when one claims the truth of the position. It is a mistake to affirm a truth related to one level when one is standing in another level. Error derives from the mixing of levels, and deliverance from error can only come through a transmutation of consciousness that situates every level in its proper place.

The Debate

The main part of the text, detailing the contents of the debate between spirit and soul, is interesting both for the topics covered and the intrinsic content of the arguments. At the same time it reflects ‘Abd al-Jalil’s perception of long-standing controversies over many important doctrinal issues in Sufism. Some of these issues are still relevant in the contemporary scene, where one often meets conflicting positions similar to those maintained by spirit and soul. But in the contemporary “New Age,” the standpoint represented by the soul seems to have gained the upper hand, while the spirit’s perspective appears to be increasingly unpopular, since it reaffirms the necessity of the practice of the Law as the sine qua non for the understanding and affirmation of Unity.

The soul is depicted as a rather clever and crafty fellow, skillful in the intricacies of debate and not afraid to change its position when it is opportune to do so. The spirit is much more stable and somewhat stolid, reflecting the far-seeing prophetic wisdom that it manifests. At the outset the soul mentions Iblis as its guide, so the spirit feels duty-bound to warn it of Iblis’s shortcomings. The soul replies by having recourse to the esoteric knowledge of the spiritual path (tarāqa), which transcends the Shariah mentioned by the spirit, and by claiming—in the manner of the well-known Sufi defenses of Satan—that Iblis was the lover of God par excellence whose secret pact with
his Beloved would not allow him to bow to anyone else.

The soul appeals to a privileged, esoteric knowledge in several more passages in the ensuing debate, most of which focuses on the nature of oneness (wahdat) and that of Being or existence (wujūd), though the famous expression wahdat al-wujūd is never mentioned. In brief, the soul wants to claim an absolute Oneness that obliterates distinctions within wujūd and at the same time to maintain its own privileged identity with wujūd. Thereby it wants to show that distinctions among things are sheer illusion, so the Shariah is a veil that misleads the stupid. Those who are truly enlightened follow their own inner light, which is God himself.

The spirit protests that this appeal to absolute Oneness is in fact an appeal to one of wujūd’s many levels, thereby distorting wujūd’s reality. It is contradictory to affirm the absolute Oneness of God’s Essence and then to deny the relative manyness of his attributes. Both have to be affirmed, and then it will be seen that the divine attributes demand the reality—relative of course—of the cosmos. The Shariah’s necessity follows from the relative reality of the cosmos and the real distinctions among the levels.

In the first part of the treatise the soul makes a rather good case for an individualistic type of spirituality shorn from traditional supports. In the second part, where the soul has taken another tack, the arguments attempt mainly to claim the independence of the material world from any first principle. In both cases, the practical result of the soul’s argument is to declare the Law irrelevant and prophetic guidance useless if not positively harmful.

By the end of the debate, it is not completely clear who has won. Certainly anyone who inclines toward the religious universe of Islam will read the text as giving victory to the spirit, since all the soul’s arguments have been neatly answered from within the perspective of the Shariah in general and Ibn al-‘Arabi’s school in particular. But much of what the soul has said would be quite convincing to those who incline toward a Sufi esotericism cut off from the Shariah and alien to scholastic philosophizing.

Although ‘Abd al-Jalil means to support the spirit’s arguments over the soul, he also wants to acknowledge the relative validity of the soul’s positions. The soul is a locus of manifestation for a divine name, the Misguider, and this name has its rights. The Misguider cannot be negated, but must be harmonized with the higher names from which it derives. Although “God’s mercy precedes His wrath,” and therefore, by analogy, “God’s guidance precedes His misguidance,” both wrath and misguidance are divine attributes that have a positive, if limited, role to play in the total constellation of existence.

The beginning of the process whereby ‘Abd al-Jalil will harmonize the positions of soul and spirit is announced at the end of the debate proper, when the spirit realizes that its words have had no discernible effect on the soul. Hence the spirit proposes that they take their dispute to a third party to decide between them.

The Mystery’s Judgment

The third party to whom the spirit and soul have recourse is the “mystery,” the more inward dimension of the human reality that Ibn al-‘Arabi identifies with the “specific face” or immutable entity. In this context, however, ‘Abd al-Jalil does not have in mind Ibn al-‘Arabi’s definition of the mystery, but rather the seven-part hierarchy of the human being which by this period had become a commonplace in Sufi writings—body, soul, spirit, heart, mystery, hidden (khāfī), and most hidden (akhfū).

The mystery enters the discussion by addressing first the soul and then the spirit. It criticizes the soul for ruining the world of obedience and bringing Adam out from the Garden, but it praises the soul’s grasp of the station of oneness and its description of God’s self-disclosure (tajallī) in all things. Then the mystery says,

It is clear to me that oneness has become manifest to you in the station of nature. That is why your love is completely fixed upon the world of form. You love absorption in sensory passions and immersion in the illusory pleasures that darken the mirror of the heart and bring about punishment and disaster in the next world. If an appropriate love for form were to become established within you, you would undertake good acts and works, since forms in the next world will last forever, while the forms of this plane are obviously perishing and have no subsistence. You must
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In conclusion, the mystery focuses on the soul’s particular problem, which is the affirmation of selfhood or “soulhood” (nafsāniyya). The only way to achieve the vision of the inward levels of Oneness is to negate one’s selfhood, or to undergo “annihilation” (fānā). “There is no remedy except becoming lost and obliterated. They buy nothing there but a thing’s nonexistence and annihila-
tion.” 27

The mystery then turns to the spirit and praises it for its obedience and its attentiveness to the good that can be gained in the next world. But it warns the spirit that it also is not yet free of love for form. The danger remains that it will be so entranced by the garden that it will forget the face of the Gardener. The mystery criticizes the spirit for perceiving the station of oneness from the standpoint of the rational faculty (‘aql) and for not abandoning itself to love. The soul’s emphasis upon self-identification with the Real is a valid one, and it can only be experienced through love. ‘Abd al-Jalil then summarizes the rest of the mystery’s advice to the soul and spirit:

The mystery made clear that the entity of the servant has two sides, one the side of nondelimitation [išlāq] and the other the side of delimitation [taqqīd]. Servanthood [‘ubūdiyya] and lordship [rubūbiyya] must both be taken into account, since both are established in the servant’s entity. The soul had taken lordship into account and had desired to embrace immediate joy and pleasures, while the spirit had taken servanthood into account and had chosen the ease of obedience in order to grasp endless and everlasting deferred ease. Although both were flying in the world of tawfīd, out of caprice [hawā] the soul-vulture would it the end have stayed with the bones, while the spirit-nightingale would have inclined away from the rose garden of the Beloved’s face toward the garden’s fruit.

‘Abd al-Jalil’s assessment of the situation depends upon various teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s school that have been touched on during the debate and are here harmonized and put into relationship. Since the meaning of the passage is far from self-evident, it calls for a few words of explanation:

The inner human reality has two basic dimensions, here symbolized by the terms spirit and soul. In one dimension, which stands opposite God’s transcendence—or, in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s language, his incomparability (tanzih), independence (ghinā), and overwhelming power (qahir)—human beings are servants overcome by poverty, incapacity, and weakness. They possess nothing with which to affirm their own reality and are totally dependent for their existence and attributes
upon the Real (al-haqq). This dimension is manifested more clearly in the lower levels of the human being, that is, in the soul and the body, which display relatively little of the divine light.

In another respect, human beings manifest nothing but God. They are created in God’s form and worthy of being his vicegerents. To them “God has subjected,” as the Koran puts it, “everything in the heavens and the earth” (31: 20, 45: 13), so they are “lords” over all other creatures. This dimension of the human reality corresponds to God’s similarity (tashbih) and immanence, whereby he discloses himself in all things and most clearly in his chosen vicegerents. In this respect humans are “nondelimited,” since nothing limits the degree to which they can expand in knowledge and consciousness. In this context Ibn al-‘Arabi speaks of “perfect man” as the full outward manifestation of the Real, or the human being who has assumed all the divine names as his own character traits (al-takhaltuq bi asma’ Allāh).

Although servanthood and lordship appear at first sight to be contradictory and irreconcilable, in fact nothing but total and absolute servanthood allows a human being to be a true lord. Only the perfect servant can be God’s vicegerent. Just as God is God because he is both incomparable and similar, nondelimited and delimited, Essence and attributes, so also human beings are fully human only by being both servant and vicegerent, nothing and everything. This is one of the secrets of Muhammad’s title, ‘abdulhu wa rasūluhu, “His servant and His messenger.”

The soul manifests servitude and weakness, since it is overcome by darkness or distance from God, while the spirit manifests vicegerency, theomorphism, and lordship, since it blazes with the divine light. In other terms, the spirit is connected intimately to nearness, mercy, and guidance, while the soul dwells naturally in the domain of distance, wrath, and misguidance.

One might expect that ‘Abd al-Jalil would follow these correspondences and connect lordship to the spirit and servanthood to the soul, instead of saying, “The soul had taken lordship into account,...while the spirit had taken servanthood into account.” But along with distance and darkness go ignorance and arrogance. The soul looks at itself and does not see its own dark nature, but rather the luminosity that allows it to exist and be itself. Ignorant of its own darkness, it lays claim to a light that does not belong to it. In contrast the spirit possesses the luminosity of knowledge and sees itself in its proper relationship with the Real. It is, in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s terms, “god wary” (muttaqī), which means that it ascribes light, knowledge, and power to God and darkness, ignorance, and weakness to itself. Though it sees its own luminosity, it knows that next to the absolute light of God its own created light is nothing. Hence it acknowledges its servanthood.

Nonetheless, even in its claim to lordship, the soul manifests a positive dimension of the Real, for lordship is a divine attribute. The sin of the soul’s prophet, Iblis, is to have said, “I am better than he” (Koran 38: 76) and to have refused to prostrate himself before Adam. As the spirit says at the beginning of the debate, “According to the clear meaning of the verse, ‘I am better than he,’ the claim of betterness and selfhood—which negate the stage of love—became manifest from Iblis.” Following Iblis, the soul claims selfhood and betterness for itself. In doing so, it manifests the characteristics of lordship. In other words, by affirming selfhood and I-ness, the soul claims for itself a prerogative of God, since none truly has a right to say “I” except God. Just as “There is no real but the Real,” so also “There is no true I but the divine I.”

At the deepest level, the positive nature of the soul’s self-affirmation goes back to the fact that it finds wujūd in itself. Wujūd as such is the Divine Essence or Selfhood—the divine “I-ness”—and it manifests itself even in the darkest realms of the cosmos. And wujūd, it should be remembered, means not only “existence” or “being” but also and primarily “finding.” God’s “finding of himself” is known as wujūd, and so also the soul finds itself through wujūd’s light, but it does not notice that the light is not its own. The divine self-affirmation irradiates the darkness of nonexistence, and the soul in its darkness clings to the trace of light as its very self and survival. “Selfhood” and self-affirmation manifest God’s Essence.

In short, the spirit represents the human reality inasmuch as it sees itself and its own limitations objectively and effaces itself before God.
while the soul represents the human self inasmuch as it sees itself as central and affirms its own right to exist. The spirit rises beyond itself and affirms the Other, while the soul sinks within itself and affirms itself.

At this point in the text 'Abd al-Jalil once again acknowledges the soul's rights to its mode of manifesting the Real, while admitting his limited knowledge of the true situation: "O friend," he says, "I do not know which point of view God will take into account tomorrow." In other words, he does not know if God will treat the human being as a lord or a servant on the Day of Resurrection. However, one should exercise caution in one's dealings with God, and therefore one should observe the instructions brought by the prophets. The creature should actualize his servanthood here and wait to become a lord in the next world.

It strikes my mind that in this plane one should act by taking servanthood into account because of the sending of scriptures and angels, so that through their warning one can come out of the well of nature, remain protected from the disease of ignorance and atheism [la'fil], and reach the perfections of knowledge and works. Then, in the manifest abode of the next world, one will seal all this in the mode of lordship, in accordance with "My mercy precedes My wrath" and "My mercy embraces all things" [Koran 7: 156]. For in that place acts of obedience will be eliminated and all forbidden things will be allowed.

The Birth of the Heart
Having given advice separately to both spirit and soul, the mystery now addresses them together, telling them to become one. And, says 'Abd al-Jalil, who is observing the goings-on, "From the unification [ittiHâd] of the two, a marvelous state and wondrous shape appeared, called 'the heart,' which brings together the two sides and fluctuates between them."

The idea that the heart should be born from the marriage of spirit and soul goes back at least to Shihâb al-Dîn Suhrawardi (d. 632/1234) in 'Avârif al-ma'ârif.30 I have not come across this image in Ibn al-'Arabi's writings, but it is probably present somewhere, since his chief disciple Șadr al-Dîn Qûnawi expands on it in some detail, as does Qûnawi's disciple Sa'id al-Dîn Farghâni.31 The connection between the heart (qalb) and fluctuation (taqlilab) is an important element of Ibn al-'Arabi's teachings, but of course it has a long history in Islamic thought, being referred to in a number of hadiths, including mention of God as "He who makes hearts fluctuate" (maqallib al-qalb).32

Next 'Abd al-Jalil says, "When the mystery found worthiness for the gathering of all meanings in the heart, it pulled the heart to itself and joined it with itself." Once the heart is born, the mystery sees that the heart has the power to gather within itself all meanings (ma'âni). This point, so briefly stated here, is based on a rather complex exposition of the nature of the heart found in Ibn al-'Arabi's works. In short, he maintains that human beings perceive the Real in two fundamental modes, that of the afore-mentioned incomparability (tanzîth) and similarity (tashbîth). Incomparability is the point of view natural to the rational faculty ('âql), which innately desires to prove that "Nothing is like Him" (Koran 42: 11). Similarity is the point of view of imagination, which perceives the Real in his self-disclosure (taqlîb), that is, in the forms and images that make up the cosmos or “everything other than God.” Neither point of view is sufficient for a total view of God or of the things as they are in themselves.

The spirit personifies the rational dimension of human nature that can only understand “God” as being incomparable, while the soul represents the imaginal dimension that can only grasp God in images and symbols, or in the forms of his self-disclosure. That is why the mystery criticized the spirit for putting too much stock in reason, and the soul for perceiving the Real only at the level of self-disclosure in the forms of nature.

The heart, in Ibn al-'Arabi’s perspective, is limited neither by reason nor by imagination, neither by rational thought nor by the perception of forms. The heart represents the dimension of the human reality that brings together both kinds of perception in harmony, and since these cannot be maintained simultaneously, the heart "fluctuates" from one vision to the next. But the heart never denies the Real, whether in his incomparable and unknowable Essence or in
his self-disclosure to imagination through the sensory forms of the cosmos.

The spirit's self-effacement is connected with reason and incompatibility because the spirit grasps that "Nothing is like Him" and that all positive qualities belong to God; hence it sees that it is nothing in itself. In contrast, the soul's self-affirmation is connected to imagination and the vision of similarity, since it sees God manifesting himself within itself; hence it grasps that everything it possesses is similar to God and that all the divine attributes belong to it.

In short, by speaking of the heart's worthiness for "gathering all meanings," 'Abd al-Jalil means to say that the heart had integrated and harmonized the points of view of spirit and soul by combining nondelimitation with delimitation and incompatibility with similarity. Hence the mystery saw that the heart's level of consciousness involves awareness of all meanings, not simply those that pertain to one standpoint or the other. The mystery understood that the heart was worthy for knowing the level of inwardness and integration represented by itself, so it drew the heart to itself and became united with it.

But this is not the end of the story. Beyond the mystery, in the typical classification of the degrees of human consciousness, lie the "hidden" (khafl) and the "most hidden" (akhfât). All differentiation must be eliminated before the vision of absolute Unity.

Final Union

'Abd al-Jalil now provides an explanation for the two terms "hidden" and "most hidden." They represent the innermost dimensions of the human being that can be discerned when the microcosm and macrocosm are viewed as possessing a number of levels. From this point of view, the mystery perceives the nondelimited light of the Real manifest both within itself and beyond itself.

In the beginning, when the light of Nondelimitation had shone upon the mystery, it had found a flash of that light evident in itself; it had seen a kind of "hidden" light outside itself, and a kind of "most hidden" light that its understanding and imagination could in no way reach but that it knew to be further away from itself.

At the beginning, in other words, the mystery had perceived the hidden and most hidden lights beyond itself, just as it had perceived a light within itself and saw the spirit and soul as below itself. Hence it would seem that "mystery" signifies a middle point of human consciousness, suspended halfway between the darkness of the body and the infinite Light of God. Once the two lowest levels of consciousness, soul and spirit, join together and become the heart, the mystery is able to integrate them into itself. Now it can become integrated into the higher levels, the hidden and most hidden. It is able to accomplish this because it has been strengthened through the two powers represented by the spirit and soul within the heart. "Through joining with the all-comprehensive heart, a strengthening appeared within the mystery."

The spirit and soul, as dimensions of the heart, now become the means for a two-fold experience of both the hidden and the most hidden lights. The spirit's attribute is self-effacement before the One, since it tends toward annihilation (janâ') in the Real. But the soul's attribute is self-affirmation, since it tends to see the divine light as its own and to perceive itself as subsisting (baqâ') through the divine attributes. "Through the light pertaining to the spirit, the mystery dissolved into the hidden light, and through the strength of the I-ness pertaining to the soul it became identified with that hidden light." In other words, the luminosity of the heart's spirit-nature allows the mystery to become effaced and annihilated in that even greater light called the "hidden." But the soul-nature demands self-affirmation, so in the midst of dissolution the mystery finds itself and sees that it is now identical with the hidden light.

Next 'Abd al-Jalil offers an explanation for the "words of ecstasy" (sha'îyyâlat) of the Sufis. For now the mystery, like Hallâj and Bâyâzid, speaks from the viewpoint of "I am the Real": "Here it became a stream joined to the ocean and called out, ‘Glory be to me, how tremendous is my rank!’" At the same time, this invisible core of the human reality experiences the "fluctuation" of the heart, so its gaze shifts from the point of view of the soul to that of the spirit,
from that of affirming itself to that of negating itself before the source of light.

When the mystery's gaze fell upon the infinity of the Ocean, it said, "My God, though I said, 'Glory be to me, how tremendous is my rank!,' now I repent. I cut off the belt of unbelief and say, 'There is no god but God,' so that through the blessing of these words I may be obliterated in the most hidden light."

Once again the mystery experiences annihilation, but the selfhood of the soul reasserts itself, and identity with the most hidden is established. "It lifted its head within the world of annihilation and began to say through the strength of the I-ness of the soul, 'I am the most hidden,' and it threw up the waves of claiming to be the ocean."

At each level—hidden and most hidden—a dual experience has occurred. Only after self-affirmation within the most hidden light can all trace of duality be erased so that the ultimate union may be experienced. Beyond the most hidden lies the infinite light of the Essence, also called the Unseen He-ness (ghayb-i huwiyyat), and at this point in the narrative, the Essence asserts its authority: "Just as this happened, the voice of the He-ness shouted out, 'and within the most hidden am I.'" Here 'Abd al-Jalil is alluding to what is ostensibly a hadith qudsi, whose text I have seen recorded as follows: "Verily within the body of the son of Adam is a lump of flesh, within the lump of flesh a heart, within the heart a spirit, within the spirit a light, and within the light a mystery; and within the mystery am I." With this re-assertion of God's ultimate authority, the right relationships are established, and all levels of the human reality experience a mode of identity with the One. Even the most hidden, which is the highest level, finds itself negated in the Real.

Through awe before that sound, the ocean of the most hidden became dry, such that none of the water of existence remained within it. In this state, all of them became one. The most manifest and the most hidden mixed together. All of itself cried out, "Whose is the kingdom today? God's, the One, the Overwhelming!" [Koran 40: 16].

In the supreme union, everything in the human being is negated as a self-subsistent reality only to be reaffirmed as God's self-disclosure.

As a result of this vision, 'Abd al-Jalil loses consciousness.

Here I had passed away from myself and become selfless. When I became slightly aware, the sound of "and within the most hidden am I" kept on falling into my ear from my own tongue. Out of the terror of this business I awoke. I said, "There is no power and no strength except in God, the High, the Tremendous."

This prophetic formula expresses once again the true reality of the servant—his nothingness before God.

Finally, 'Abd al-Jalil offers a comment that situates the whole episode firmly within the imaginal universe described by Ibn al-'Arabi. He tells us that everything that he had witnessed had been the imaginal embodiment of unseen realities.35

I understood that all of this had been I; all of these were the forms of my own knowledge. These discussions had been my own imaginal concepts [takhayyul] that had assumed form.

'Abd al-Jalil's concluding prayer reestablishes his feet firmly on the ground of servanthood, the right attitude to be maintained in the present world: "I ask forgiveness from God for everything that God dislikes and I repent to him, and I am the first of those who have faith."

In short, this brief treatise demonstrates a sophisticated grasp of the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabi's school and a profound awareness of the complexity of the human reality. 'Abd al-Jalil offers none of the simple-minded polemics that often occurs between supporters of wakdat al-aujjar and watdat al-shuhid, but instead demonstrates that he—like many other Indian Sufis—was completely aware that the only way to bring out the highly nuanced structure of the human reality and the subtle transmutations of consciousness experienced on the path to God is to acknowledge the validity of a wide variety of perspectives while recognizing the relativity of each of them, since absolute truth resides in God alone.
Notes


2. Izutsu, Creation, p.7.


5. Institute of Islamic Studies, ms no. 2139.

6. For information on other relevant Indian Sufi texts, see Chittick “Notes on Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Influence in India,” Muslim World 72 (1992), pp. 218-21.


8. A. H. Roay, in a footnote to his edition of Kāshānī’s Mishāh al-khīdāya, p. 82, remarks that the hierarchy “in general use among the gnostics” is nature (ṭāb), soul, heart, spirit, mystery, the hidden (khf), and the most hidden (akhf). In discussing the general view of the later tradition in the subcontinent, Mir Vafaiyuddin distinguishes self (nafs), heart, sirr, and spirit as the main levels (pp. 80 ff.).


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27. On the importance of annihilation for establishing a true perspective on the nature of things, see Izutsu, Creation and the Timeless Order, pp. 11-20 and passim.

28. On this claim as a characteristic of Iblis in Sufi psychology, cf. Awn, Satan’s Tragedy, p. 34.

29. Ibn al-‘Arabi points out that any “claim” (da‘wā or iddi‘a) contradicts the fundamental ontological poverty of creatures and therefore displays ignorance of the true situation (cf. Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, p. 152 and index under “claim”). See also Awn, Satan’s Tragedy, pp. 90–96; and Rōmi, as quoted in Chittick, Sufi Path of Love, pp. 191–93.

30. In Chapter 56, “Fi ma‘rifat al-insān nafsahu wa mukāshafat al-ṣūfiyya min dhālīk” (Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-‘Arabi, 1966, p. 450). These passages are amplified on in Persian by ‘Īzz al-Dīn Kāshānī in Miṣḥah al-ḥidiyya, pp. 97 ff. English translations of both Suhrawardi’s and Kāshānī’s discussions are found in Murata, Tao of Islam, chapter 10.

31. Cf. for example Ṭabīr al-bayān fi taqrīr shu‘ab al-taqrīb; Farghānī discusses the idea in the introduction to his Muntaha‘l-maddrik. For details, see Murata, Tao of Islam, chapter 10.


34. Ibn al-‘Arabi and his followers frequently quote this verse as asserting the point of view of the overwhelming authority of God’s Unity, which erases all difference and otherness. Cf. Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, p. 314 (note 6).

35. In Ibn al-‘Arabi’s perspective, human beings perceive only through the veil of imagination, so they never worship anyone but the god of their own beliefs (see Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism, pp. 83 ff.; Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, chapter 19; idem, Imaginal Worlds [Albany: SUNY Press, 1994], chapter 9).

Unity of Ontology and Epistemology in Qayṣāri’s Philosophy

Akira Matsumoto

This paper aims at clarifying the logical relationship of the theory of “the unity of being” (waḥdah al-wujūd) with two key Sufi concepts namely “prophethood” (nabwah) and “closeness to God” (walāyāh). Both concepts of “prophethood” and “closeness to God” have Qur’anic origin, but they were elaborated and enriched as the Sufi theory on world understanding developed. These two concepts have worked as mainstays in the philosophic construction of the “Unity of Being” ever since Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240) established its foundation.

In the school of the Unity of Being, God is the unique, eternal and absolute being, and nothing has real existence except God. If anything is said to have existence, it has it in a metaphorical sense and not in a real sense. In addition, the world is understood as a manifestation of God, the absolute being. So, the philosophy of the Unity of Being is a theory for a holistic understanding between the eternal and the finite.

Yet in the tradition of Ash‘arite theology (which is the dominant theological school in the Sunnite world), the eternal-finite relationship is usually explained from the viewpoint of a personal relation ship between God and his creatures. In this school, the creation and destruction of things are explained by making use of the concept of “preponderation” (tarjīḥ), which means that God shifts the centre o
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