

Şadr al-Dīn Qūnawī on the Oneness of Being

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MORE THAN any other figure Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638 A.H./1240 A.D.) must be credited with placing in the ascendancy the trend to expound the mystical experience of the Sufis in philosophical terminology.¹ After him many Sufis—such as Rūmī for example—continue to avoid philosophical jargon, to criticize the “wooden leg”² of the unaided human reason, to appeal primarily to man’s religious instinct, and to employ images and symbols as the primary means of exposition. But the Sufis now tend to use an increasing amount of philosophical and cosmological terminology to explain their teachings. Even the commentators of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* employ the metaphysical speculation of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s school to explain Rumi’s ideas.

One of the most important figures in the movement toward philosophical explication of mystical experience is Şadr al-Dīn Qunawī (d. 673/1274), Ibn al-‘Arabī’s foremost disciple and successor and also a close friend of Rūmī.³ In fact it is Qūnawī who makes Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings more respectable among the intellectual classes by discarding the often extravagant and exaggerated and sometimes ecstatically incoherent utterances of the master. He replaced them with sober and balanced expositions within the framework of the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet and often with a view toward conciliating the philosophers.⁴ His correspondences with Naşir al-Dīn Tūsī, the foremost Peripatetic philosopher of the age, illustrate well his attempt to express Sufi metaphysics in a language that the philosophers would find

¹On Ibn al-‘Arabī and his importance, see S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Cambridge, MA, 1964).

²“The ratiocinating reason is a wooden leg; a wooden leg is not much to stand on” (Rūmī). On Rūmī’s criticisms of the philosophers, see W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rūmī: An Introduction*, Tehran, 1974.

³See W. C. Chittick, “The Last Will and Testament of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Foremost Disciple and Some Notes on its Author,” *Sophia Perennis*, 4 (Spring, 1978), p. 43-58. See also my forthcoming study of Qunawī, tentatively entitled *Ascendant Stars of Faith*.

⁴I have listed Qūnawī’s most important works in the above article and will provide a complete bibliography in the forthcoming book. In this article I am relying mainly on his five published Arabic works: *al-Fukūk*, on the margin of Kāshānī’s *Manāzil al-sā’irīn* (Tehran, 1315/1897-8); *Miftāḥ al-ghayb*, on the margin of al-Fanārī’s *Misbāḥ al-ins* (Tehran, 1323/1905-6); *al-Nafahāt al-ilāhiyyah* (Tehran, 1316/1898-9); *al-Nuṣūṣ*, appended to Kāshānī’s *Manāzil al-sā’irīn* (Tehran, 1315/1897-8); also appended to Ibn Turkah’s *Tamhīd al-qawā’id* (Tehran, 1316/1898-9); *I’jāz al-bayān fī tafsīr umm al-Qur’ān* (Hyderabad-Deccan, 1368/1949); also published as *al-Tafsīr al-sufī lī-l-Qur’ān*, ed. by A.A. ‘Ata’ (Cairo, 1389/1969).

neither offensive nor foreign to their own mode of thought.⁵

In any case Qūnawī's presentation of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings provides the basis for most later interpretations of the master. A brief summary of his explanation of the "Oneness of Being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) will illustrate to what extent he adopted a philosophical style to express a mystical experience.

From the beginning of Islam Muslims were faced with the problem of how to understand the fundamental teaching of their religion, the profession of God's Unity (*al-tawḥīd*). On the plane of everyday religious beliefs and practices, the command to profess God's Unity was straightforward and clear enough. It amounted to the acceptance of the Islamic teachings—i.e., the double testimony of faith ("There is no god but God and Muhammad is His prophet") and the other pillars of the religion—both in theory and in practice. The very existence of Islam with its tremendous emphasis upon the Oneness of God proves that "God's Unity" posed no problem for the majority.

But men of an intellectual bent, those who became the philosophers and theologians of Islam, felt it necessary to propose explanations for God's Oneness in rational terms. They wanted to explain the nature of God in intellectual and logical terminology which would satisfy even the keenest and most searching of minds. In fact the whole history of Islamic thought can be viewed as a gradual unfolding of various possible means to justify and prove the religious teaching concerning God's Unity.

Among those who sought to explicate the meaning of God's Oneness were the Sufis. Unlike the peripatetic philosophers, the Sufis did not limit their knowledge to that which could be ascertained independently by the reason with the aid of the senses. Rather, like the theologians, they also accepted the Koranic revelation and the sayings of the Prophet as sources of true knowledge. But in addition—and here they are set apart from other schools—they held that "unveiling" (*kashf*) or direct vision of things as they are in themselves and in God was a further source of knowledge and certainty. For them mystical intuition held an intermediate place between the basis of the religious teaching, or revelation, and the rational faculty, which they considered the least reliable method of gaining knowledge.⁶

The most salient teaching of Ibn al-'Arabī's school came to be known as the "Oneness of Being." A careful study of Ibn al-'Arabī's works without reference to his commentators would not necessarily lead one to anticipate the primary importance this expression was to assume. In fact, his school's use of the term indicates the path it was to follow in interpreting the master. For the term "Being" is the most common name for the Ultimate Reality in peripatetic philosophy, whereas in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabī himself it is one of several terms, each of which has a claim to be the most prominent. But in the works of Qūnawī, Ibn al-'Arabī's spokesman and expositor, the discussion of the nature of Being supersedes all else.

"Being" or "existence" is, on the one hand, the most self-evident of realities, and

⁵See my "Mysticism vs. Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History: The al-Tūsī, al-Qūnawī Correspondence," *Religious Studies*, 17 (1981), 82-104.

⁶See *Ascendant Stars of Faith*, the first treatise.

on the other, the most hidden and unknown. The meaning of existence is self-evident because there is nothing of which we have knowledge or experience which does not “exist” in one mode or another. Even nonexistent and impossible things have a certain kind of existence in our minds, or else we could not conceive of them. Moreover, what we mean when we say that “something exists” is obvious to everyone. Even the most ignorant and unlettered of men knows the difference between having something and not having it, or between its existence and nonexistence (at least in relation to his own experience).

Now this self-evident “existence” of something is not, in the view of Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers, a mental construct or an abstract idea. For there is a reality called “existence” shared by all existent things. When we say “The tree exists” and “God exists,” the concrete reality of existence is shared by the two. There are not two different meanings for the word “exist,” nor does the word denote an abstraction appended to something else’s reality.

But here we are entering the domain of the true nature of existence as such. This is the most difficult of all things to grasp, the most hidden and inconceivable of all meanings. Without the aid of revelation and Unveiling man can never truly approach its understanding. For nothing stands outside of existence with which we might encompass and grasp it. All “things” about which we can speak exist in some mode, so existence encompasses all of them. We cannot find anything other than it with which to delimit and define it. If we try to define it, we must employ it in its own definition.

In any case, our purpose is not to enter into complex arguments about the nature of existence. The point is simply that, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers, existence is the most obvious of all realities, since everything that exists displays it to us. But at the same time, it is the most hidden of all realities in itself, for we cannot find any means with which to define it.

For the purpose of further discussion of the nature of existence, it will be useful to make a distinction between the two terms “Being” and “existence.” With these two terms we can express the two basic meanings of the single word “*wujūd*” in Arabic, meanings which for the moment we can refer to as “self-evident *wujūd*” and “hidden *wujūd*.” “Being” will signify the reality of existence as such, or existence without taking into account any of the things which display it to us. “Existence” will suggest this same reality as it is displayed to us in the creatures of the universe. The very structure of the latter word (*ex-sistere*) implies some sort of “standing out,” separation, definition, and delineation. By separation from unknowable Being, existence makes itself known to us.

The distinction between Being and existence is expressed in Qūnawī’s writings in a number of ways. Here we can help clarify it by employing two terms of fundamental importance: entification (*la’ayyun*) and nonentification (*ṣā-ta’ayyun*). In one respect Being is Being as such, with no attributes or definitions pertaining to it. This is the level of Nonentification or Nondelimitation (*itlāq*). Here Being must be considered as absolutely indeterminate. No entity or thing can be discerned, no label, no name: only Nondelimited Being.

From a second point of view Being can become entified. That is, we observe that different “entities” or things really exist. Being has taken on labels, names, and at-

tributes. We can speak of this and that. Each thing we mention displays Being to us, since it exists. This level of Being is known as entification or delimitation (*taqyid*).

From these two points of view we discern Nonentification and entification, or “Nondelimited Being” (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) and “delimited Being” (*al-wujūd al-muqayyad*), or simply, Being and existence. All other dualities and all multiplicity arise from these two basic realities—both of which are nothing but Being. In religious terminology and before entering into the fine distinctions which make the question much more complex the Sufis call these two realities the “Unseen” (*al-ghayb*) and the “Visible” (*al-shahādah*), or “God” and the “world” (*al-‘ālam*), which is defined as “that which is other than God”: *mā siwā Allāh*).

Qūnawī summarizes the above discussion as follows:

Being can be envisaged from two points of view: the first is that it is Being and nothing else. This is God. In this respect . . . God has no manyness, composition, attribute, description, name, designation, relation, or property. On the contrary, He is unalloyed Being. And when we say “Being,” we say so only to make ourselves understood. That is not His true Name. . . . [The second is that] when He perceives or is witnessed, addresses or is addressed, it is from behind the veil of His Might, which hides the ontological-level of His Self. . . . From this point of view the entification of His Being is beheld as delimited by the attributes which are concomitants of all entified things. . . . Then the entification of His Being becomes qualified by every description. It is named by every name. It becomes manifest in every delineation. It acts as a receptacle for every property. . . . It is perceived by every kind of perception. . . .”

“Entification” means the state of being an “entity” (*‘ayn*) or “thing” (*shay*). When Being becomes entified, all the myriad things or creatures come into existence. They “stand out”—at least in appearance—from Being as such, which remains forever nonentified, nondelimited, undefined, and indeterminate. Moreover, things “stand out” from Being to different degrees, which is to say that entification is relative, since one thing may be more delimited and defined than another. Just as a noun in a sentence may have no modifiers, one, or many, so existent things may be modified and defined by one or more entifications or delimitations which separate them from Being as such.

Hence Ibn al-‘Arabī’s followers speak of various degrees of entification within Being, i.e., various levels within which limits and definitions gradually increase. From the complementary point of view, by removing these delimitations we ascend ever closer to Sheer Being. These degrees or ontological-levels (*martabah*) are often summarized into the “Five Divine Presences” (*al-ḥaḍarāt al-ilāhiyyat al-khams*). In ascending order they represent the level of greatest entification and then four levels of ever increasing nonentification: the Sensory World (*‘ālam al-ḥiss*), the World of Imagination (*al-khayāl*) or Image-Exemplars (*al-mithal*), the World of Spirits (*al-arwāḥ*), the World of Divinity (*al-ulūhiyyah*), the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). Beyond these five Presences and outside of any entification whatsoever stands Nondelimited Being or Nonentification, also called the Essence (*al-dhāt*) or the Unseen He-ness (*al-huwiyyat al-ghaybiyyah*).⁸

⁷*al-Nuṣuṣ*, pp. 296/211-2, 298/214; also in *Miftāḥ al-ghayb*, pp. 78, 89.

⁸According to Qūnawī’s teachings, the Perfect Man is the “Point at the Center of the Circle of Being”

These points are often explained by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s followers in terms of the axiom, “Each entification must be preceded by nonentification.”⁹ In clarifying the meaning of this axiom we should keep in mind that the exact nature of the entifications mentioned—for example, whether or not they “really exist”—is ultimately immaterial in relation to the point which the argument seeks to illustrate. The “illustration” is only that, not an attempt at an incontrovertible proof.

If we observe an individual man, we see that he is determined and defined—“entified”—by his own time, place, circumstances, heritage, personality, etc., i.e., by everything which goes to make up his individuality. According to the axiom, this entification—the man’s individuality—is preceded by nonentification. In other words, each individual man is an entification or delimitation of man as such, or human nature. Since the nature of man is nonentified in relation to individuals, a myriad of entifications can take place within its limits. Men can exist in different times, places, circumstances; they can be male or female, large or small, young or old, rich or poor, intelligent or stupid, pious or wicked, strong or weak, etc. All of these attributes are “entifications” which nonentified man assumes. If besides being a “rational animal” man were also intelligent, there could be no stupidity. But the very existence of both stupidity and intelligence proves to us that man is nonentified in that respect, for “Each entification must be preceded by nonentification.”

But “man” himself is an entification. The nonentification which precedes him is “animals.” Since animal is nonentified in relation to man, not every animal is a man. On the contrary, there are innumerable other entifications of animal as well, such as elephant, horse, canary, and cricket. Again animal is an entification relative to “living corporeal body” (*al-jism al-nāmī*). When these bodies assume their respective entifications, not all of them become animals. On the contrary, most of them become plants. Then corporeal-bodies are nonentified in relation to animate and inanimate. Some are animals and plants, and some are minerals and stones. Next “substance” is nonentified relative to corporeal-bodies, since it may be either spiritual or corporeal. Finally we pass beyond all entification and reach Being itself.¹⁰

(*nuqṭah wasaṭ dā’irat al-wujūd*). As such, he is not attracted to any of the different kinds of entification in preference to any other. Hence his station stands in perfect correspondence (*muḍāhāt*), parallelism (*muḥadhāt*) and contraposition (*musāmatah*) to the Nonentification of Sheer Being. The Divinity is God and only God. He is opposed in His Attributes to the creatures which He created. He is Eternal, while they are temporal. But the Perfect Man is both Eternal and temporal, nor is he delimited by either. He possesses the attributes of both God and the creatures. He is the First Entification of the Essence. Qūnawī even states that “The Divinity is one of the ontological-levels (*marātib*) of the Essence-derived, Perfect, Human Reality (*al-ḥaqīqat al-insāniyyat al-kamāliyyat al-dhātiyyah*).” *al-Nafaḥāt al-ilāhiyyah*, p. 84. In any case, the problem of the Perfect Man and his exact relationship with the Essence and the Presences is exceedingly complex. I hope to analyze it thoroughly in a forthcoming study of Qunawī’s ideas.

⁹*Kull ta’ayyun masbūq bi-l-lā-ta’ayyun*. Qūnawī quotes this axiom in *al-Hādīyah*, one of the works he wrote in his correspondence with Tūsī, and refers to it in many of his works, such as *al-Nafaḥāt al-ilāhiyyah*, p. 286. See also Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣṣ*, ed. by W. C. Chittick (Tehran, 1977), pp. 26, 84.

¹⁰Qūnawī is well aware “Being” itself may be said to be an entification from a certain point of view. Therefore in the passage quoted above he states that “Being” is not the true Name of that Reality, only an allusion to it (*ishārah*). Since every Name implies entification, “The Name which can be named is not the true Name.”

Each entification is called an “entity” or “thing.” Qunawi divides them into two kinds: nonexistent entities (*al-a’yān al-ma’dūmah*) and existent entities (*al-a’yān al-mawjūdah*). He also speaks of the “thingness of immutability” (*shay’iyyat al-thubūt*) and the “thingness of existence” (*shay’iyyat al-wujūd*).

The first kind of entities are nonexistent and immutable. They are nonexistent because they have no existence which can be called their own in any respect and since they are not manifested within the world.¹¹ They are immutable because they are objects of God’s Knowledge, known from Eternity-without-beginning (*azal*) to Eternity-without-end (*abad*). Since God’s Knowledge, like God Himself, is eternal and unchanging, the objects of His Knowledge share in these same attributes. At this stage we can refer to the entities as the “immutable archetypal-entities” (*al-a’yān al-thābitah*), or as “realities” (*haqā’iq*) and “meanings” (*ma’ānī*).

The second kind of entities or things are manifested within the world. They are the same entities as in the first case, but now they exist outside of God’s Knowledge (*fi-l-khārij*), even though they retain their immutable nonexistence within it (*fi-l-’ilm*)—that is, they never cease to be known by God. But as objects of God’s Knowledge they are unknown to us and nonmanifest within the world, while as entities within the world they are known to us (at least potentially) and outwardly existent. The entities at this second stage are called “existent-entities” (*a’yān*), “existents” (*mawjūdāt*), or “engendered-existents” (*kā’ināt, akwān*).

It should be noticed that I have rendered *a’yān* as “archetypal-entities” in the first case and as “existent-entities” in the second. Ibn al-’Arabī and his followers employ the same Arabic word in both cases because the entities retain their own identity whether we consider them as nonexistent but immutable within God’s Knowledge, or existent and perishing within the world. Only the context can tell us whether by *a’yān* is meant archetypal entities, existent-entities, or the entities as such, without taking into account their existence or nonexistence. Here we should note also that according to Qūnawī, the term *a’yān* is synonymous with what the philosophers refer to as “quiddities” (*māhiyyāt*).¹²

The two stages of the entities referred to as “nonexistence” and “existence” both derive from the very nature of Nonentified Being. They are often referred to as its “necessary concomitants” (*lawāzim*).

Being as such—Nonentification—acts as a receptacle (*qābil*) for all entifications. Each entification represents one possibility of Being’s manifestation or one of its latent perfections. Each displays to us the fundamental nature of Being, even though in itself that nature is unknowable. When Being, as a result of its own infinite receptivity, becomes entified in the form of a particular entity, we come to know that that

¹¹“Nonexistent” only means nonexistent outside the Knowledge of God. In no way does it imply nonexistent in every sense. In *al-Hādīyah* Qūnawī goes to great length to explain to Tusi exactly what is meant by “nonexistent” in this sense, showing that the entities definitely possess “existence in Knowledge” (*al-wujūd al-’ilmī*).

¹²*Miftāḥ al-ghayb*, p. 67; *al-Nuṣūṣ*, p. 295/210. Most of the later Muslim philosophers, especially those of Mulla Ṣadrā’s school, concern themselves primarily with differentiating Being from the quiddities. Of course the Peripatetics such as Fārābī and Avicenna also make the distinction, but they do not base their whole philosophy upon it. Ibn al-’Arabī and his followers, especially Qūnawī, were extremely influential in making this discussion the basic one in later philosophy.

entity was one of the possible modes in which Being could show itself. Since the entity *is*, it displays the nature of “is-ness” or Being.

If we want to enumerate the perfections and possibilities of manifestation inherent within Sheer Being, we can begin by enumerating the entities. But since this task can have no end, we must find some way of summarizing Being’s perfections into general categories. For example, we can study the entities and come to the conclusion that *life* exists and that therefore it must be one of the perfections of Being as such.

But this task of delineating the nature of Being by studying the entities has always been considered by the Muslims as the basic role of the philosophers, not that of the Sufis.¹³ For as we said above, the Sufis were not primarily interested in the investigation and discoveries of reason. They believed that both revelation and Unveiling were more direct means of gaining access to true knowledge and to clearer and more accurate explications of the nature of Reality as such. So they considered it a waste of time to try to sound the nature of Being by sifting the phenomena of the outside world when two superior paths leading to the truth lay before them: on the one hand the Koran, the sayings of the Prophet, and the consensus of the community (*ijmā’*) and on the other direct mystical intuition. And invariably, they considered the first more valid than the second, so they sought aid from intuition and Unveiling to understand revelation. But they always held the latter to be the judge of the former, so Unveiling could never gainsay the Koran or the Prophet.¹⁴

In his correspondence with Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī Qūnawī writes in great detail about the weakness of reason and its ultimate inability to gain certainty concerning the realities of things. So when man reaches a conclusion through his reason,

It remains to be seen if that thing which has been concluded and judged to be true is true in reality in the very manner in which he believes it to be true. But this can only be known through Unveiling verified by God, or through divine revelation.¹⁵

For these reasons Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers discuss the nature of Being primarily in religious language. They considered the revealed sources far more reliable than any conclusion man could reach through his unaided reason. In their eyes the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet are in fact a Self-Manifestation of Nondelimited Being, a direct expression of the Inexpressible, a revelation of that which man could never discover through his own efforts. Moreover, even if he could discover certain dimensions or aspects of the truth through his reason, he could never acquire certainty concerning the truth of his knowledge through reason alone.

In the Koran, God calls himself by numerous “Names” (*asmā’*). Ibn al-‘Arabī

¹³At the beginning of the book of metaphysics in his *al-Shifā’*, Avicenna writes as follows: “The first subject of this science (philosophy) is existence *qua* existence. Then the problems of this science are the things which attach to existence *qua* existence without any preconditions” (*al-Shifā’*, Tehran, 1303/1887-88, p. 281.) In other words the philosopher’s task is to delineate the fundamental nature of existence as such. And since the peripatetics depended primarily upon man’s reason as the source of their knowledge, Avicenna and his followers studied existence without recourse to anything “beyond” reason, such as revelation or Unveiling.

¹⁴See *Ascendant Stars of Faith*.

¹⁵*al-Muṣṣiḥah*. This passage is also found in *I’jāz al-bayān*, p. 121/20-21.

and his followers consider each Name an explication of “the Essence in respect to entification.”¹⁶ Each Name represents one of the universal entifications of Nonentified Being. In keeping with them all the particular entifications—i.e., the entities—come into existence.

The Names or Attributes (*ṣifāt*)¹⁷ are divided into four or sometimes seven primary perfections: Life, Knowledge, Will, Power; and then, Speech, Hearing, and Seeing (often Generosity and Equity are listed in place of the last two).¹⁸

To say that God possesses these primary perfections means that these are Sheer Being’s principle attributes, in keeping with which all entities become manifest within the world. Whatever exists, by the very fact of its existence, must possess all these attributes. For the nature of Being remains the same wherever it displays itself.

Here we face the problem of the different kinds of entities. If each entity is nothing but the Self-Manifestation of Being, why does each differ from every other? Why does each act as a “receptacle” for Being to a different degree and in a different manner? The nature of receptivity (*qābiliyyah*) is one of the basic teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s school. Here we will only remark that the gradation of the entities within the Five Divine Presences depends upon the degree to which they act as receptacles for Being. Some entities—such as the First Intellect and the Perfect Man¹⁹—act as total receptacles. Within them all Being’s perfections become manifest. But most entities act as receptacles for only some of Being’s attributes. So most of the attributes remain nonmanifest within them.

This last is an important point. Each entity is nothing but a Self-Manifestation of Being. To the extent that it *exists*, it is Being, for nothing else *is*. Since each entity is Being—or else it would not exist—each of them possesses Being’s perfections. According to the Sufi saying, “Being descends with all its soldiers.” But since the entities possess differing receptivities, they manifest these perfections outwardly in various degrees. In other words, each entity can only display certain of Being’s perfections, while it keeps the rest hidden within itself. The only exception is the Perfect Man, who manifests all Being’s perfections, both those which pertain to unity and summation on the one hand, and those which display articulation and deployment on the other.

Naturally the perfections of Being are not limited to four or seven. The Divine

¹⁶See *Ascendant Stars of Faith*, Glossary, NAME.

¹⁷These two terms are practically synonymous. See *Ascendant Stars*, Glossary, ATTRIBUTE.

¹⁸See *Ascendant Stars*, Glossary, PILLARS; also Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ*, pp. 40-42.

¹⁹The difference between the First Intellect and the Perfect Man seems to come down to this: the First Intellect—also called the “Supreme Pen” and “Gabriel,” and referred to by the Prophet as “my spirit” (*ruhī*)—represents the existence of the Perfect Man within the World of Spirits. Since the Perfect Man is the fifth and All-Comprehensive Presence (*al-ḥaḍrat al-jāmi‘ah*), he embraces the other four Presences and encompasses all things. His spirit is the World of Spirits, his soul is the World of Imagination and his body corresponds to the Sensory World. So the First Intellect, although it embraces all things potentially—since it acts as a receptacle for Being as such—does not do so actually. Moreover, beyond the First Intellect stands the *reality* of the Perfect Man, i.e., his immutable archetypal-entity, which is identical to the Presence of Divinity. So the Perfect Man’s Reality belongs to the realm of inward nonmanifestation, whereas the First Intellect as such is the first creature of God, or the first outward manifestation of Being. Since the Perfect Man comprehends all Presences, beyond him stands only Nonentified Being or the Essence. In other words, the Perfect Man represents the Five Presences viewed as a unity, whereas the First Intellect is only one of the Presences.

Names are usually said to number 99, or sometimes 1001. But ultimately Being's perfections are infinite, since each entity is nothing but one of them. In other words, the "immutable archetypal-entities" are in reality the infinite Names of God.²⁰

The entities are either nonmanifest and "nonexistent"—although known in God's Knowledge—or outwardly manifest and existent. In either case, they are the same entities. The only difference is that in the first case they do not share in Being except as concomitants of God's Knowledge. In other words, they have no independent or outward existence. In the second case God has given them existence outside of His Knowledge. Hence they display themselves as separate and independent existents, even though their existence belongs to God, the only Being there is.

God as He is in Himself is Sheer, Nondelimited Being. But Being becomes entified in keeping with its infinite perfections. The first entification which Being undergoes can be said to be God's Knowledge of Himself. Through it "God reveals Himself to Himself in Himself" (*tajallā bi-dhātih li-dhātih*).

When the Sufis discuss the various entifications Being undergoes, beginning with the first and followed successively by others, they are referring to the fact that we must conceive of certain realities before we can understand how other realities come into existence. For example, there must be an "Essence" before we can conceive of attributes. Hence the word "Essence" in Arabic, *dhāt*, is short for *dhāt al-waṣf*, which denotes the "possessor of description," or that which is described by attributes. In other terms, an attribute must belong to something, just as entification must be preceded by nonentification.

The various levels of entification derive from our study of Being from a particular point of view, which is that of causal succession. So when we say that "God comes to know Himself through the First Entification," this does not mean that there is some ontological state or point in time when God does not know Himself. He knows Himself from all eternity. By His very nature He knows Himself, for Knowledge is one of His primary Attributes. However, we cannot know that *very nature*, for that in itself is beyond entification. It is the Essence which cannot be properly designated by any name or attribute. We can only speak correctly about Being from the point of view of its entification.

The fact that God has knowledge of Himself means that He has knowledge of Being and all its perfections. In other words, Being is conscious of itself and, by that very fact, of all its concomitants, which are nothing but itself. According to the famous saying of the Prophet, God said, "I was a Hidden Treasure." This Treasure is Being considered from the point of view of its latent perfections and possibilities of manifestation. It is Hidden because it is nonentified.

When God knew the Hidden Treasure at the stage of the First Entification, He knew all His own Names and Attributes, for He knew the very nature of Being itself, including its infinite possibilities of entification. So when God knew Himself, He knew all the entities. This Self-Knowledge which embraces the knowledge of all the latent existents is called the "Unseen Theophany" (*al-tajallī al-ghaybī*) or the "Most Holy Effusion" (*al-fayḍ al-aqdas*). All the entities are objects of God's Knowledge, but they remain nonexistent and nonmanifest. Only God knows them, since no

²⁰Qunawi and his followers state this explicitly. See *Ascendant Stars*, Glossary, ATTRIBUTE, NAME.

“others” (*aghyār*) exist. The others at this stage are only possibilities and potentialities of outward manifestation hidden within the One Being.

Among God’s Names are “Outwardly-Manifest,” “Light,” and “Creator.” They indicate that by its very nature, Nondelimited Being displays itself outwardly. By its nature, Being radiates and effuses. It creates creatures, which are nothing but existent-entities. So Being’s very nature as indicated by its Names tells us that it must transfer each of the jewels kept within the Hidden Treasure from inward non-manifestation (*butūn*) within Knowledge to outward manifestation (*zuhūr*) in the created universe. Only through the “separation” from their source are the entities able to display all their own perfections. If they were to remain nonexistent within Knowledge, the Hidden Treasure would remain hidden and unknown. But according to the Prophet’s saying, God “wanted to be known,” a fact which is also indicated by the various Names which denote manifestation. So creation must take place.²¹

The manifestation of archetypal-entities within the world as existent-entities is called the “Visible Theophany” (*al-tajallī al-shahādī*) or the “Holy Effusion” (*al-fayḍ al-muqaddas*). Through it the nonexistent entities become “connected” (*iqtirān*) with Being. Or they act as “receptacles” for it to the extent their preparedness (*isti’dād*) allows. But the existence they now possess is only “lent” to them temporarily. After manifesting their perfections, they must return their existence to its owner.

We may quote the following as one of many passages in which Qūnawī alludes to the nature of the two theophanies, the Unseen and the Visible:

God knows all things as a result of His very Knowledge of His own Essence. . . . Then He bestows existence upon the world in accordance with His Knowledge of it in Himself from Eternity-without-beginning. So the world is the form and locus-of-manifestation (*mazhar*) for His Knowledge. And He never ceases to encompass all things in Knowledge and Being. . . . Everything which becomes manifest becomes manifest only from Him, since nothing else possesses an existence which might accompany His Being. This is the news given by the Prophet: “God is, and nothing is with Him.”²²

In another passage Qūnawī summarizes the ontological process more succinctly: “Glory be to Him who entified the archetypal-entities through the Most Precedent, Most Holy Effusion, and who generated the engendered-existents through the Precedent, Holy Effusion!”²³

The manifestation of the entities within the created world is also explained using terminology more familiar to the peripatetic philosophers. Being is “Necessary” (*wājib*), while the entities are “possible” (*mumkin*). Being exists by its very nature, which is to say that it must exist, it cannot not exist. But the entities are nonexistent by their very nature, since only Being *is*. However, they possess the receptivity to become joined to Being. If God should so “choose” (*tarjīḥ*), He lets this receptivity

²¹Qūnawī explains the reason for creation from a number of different points of view. Here I have only considered one of them.

²²*I’jāz al-bayān*, p. 220/112.

²³*Mir’āt al-’arīfīn wa mazhar al-kāmilīn fī multamas Zayn al-’Abidīn*, Süleymaniye Library (Istanbul): Halet Ef. 245/22. Crh. 2097/1, Aya Sofya 4248/14, etc.

become actualized and they enter into creation. Otherwise, they remain nonexistent within His Knowledge.

Ultimately, all the entities are necessary, but “through the Other” (*bi-l-ghayr*), not in themselves. For an entity is a possibility of entification possessed by Nonentified Being. And since Nonentified Being is by definition nondelimited and nonrestricted, nothing can prevent that entity from entering into existence when the appropriate moment arrives, or in other words, when God chooses its existence over its nonexistence.

As for the “impossible existent” (*al-mumtani*), that is not only nonexistent, it is also a “nonentity.” Being can never become entified in keeping with it, since it is contrary to Being’s very nature. At most, it can have a certain kind of mental existence, in the sense that it can be known that Being can never become entified in such a form.

In the last analysis the entities do not “borrow” existence from God. Nor do they “share” in Being, become “connected” to it or act as “receptacles” for it. All of these expressions are only manners of speaking. They are images employed to explain a phenomenon whose reality is almost inexplicable, since it derives from the very depths of the nature of Unknown Being itself. In many passages Qūnawī’s words recall the famous dictum of Ibn al-‘Arabī: “The entities have never even smelt the fragrance of existence.” For the entities themselves never come into existence. They never leave their original abode within Knowledge. Why? For the simple reason that Being is One and Indivisible. So whatever exists is by that very fact Being itself. The “existent-entity” is in fact nonexistent and nonmanifest, and only Being is displayed.

Qunawi writes,

The greatest of all obscurities and veils is the pluralities which occur within the One Being because of the effects of the immutable archetypal-entities within it. Men imagine that the entities become outwardly-manifest in existence and through existence. But only their *effects* become manifest within existence. Manifestation and outwardness belong only to Being, but on the precondition of having become plural through the effects of the entities within it. Nonmanifestation is an intrinsic attribute of the entities, and also of Being in respect to the concept of its Oneness.²⁴

There remains the question of what Qūnawī means by the “effects” (*athār*) of the immutable archetypal-entities. To answer this question briefly, it may be useful to allude to a term employed by later philosophers, particularly of Mullā Ṣadrā’s school, and then to develop an image often employed by Qūnawī and his followers.

Mullā Ṣadrā refers to the quiddity—i.e., the entity—as a “limitation pertaining to nonexistence” (*ḥadd ‘adamī*). In other words the entification and thingness—the “what-is-it-ness”—of each thing is a limitation and restriction imposed upon Nondelimited Being. The things become entified by nonexistence, which, as Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers affirm, is the specific property of the entities, because we can only speak of something, an entity or a quiddity, when one or more of Being’s

²⁴*al-Nuṣūṣ*, p. 299/215; quoted in Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ*, pp. 47-48.

perfections have been subtracted from it. Being in its full perfection is Nonentified and Unknown.

Qunawi often employs the image of light to clarify the nature of the entity. Now “Light” is one of the Names of God. It is synonymous with Being, for light is defined as “that which is manifest in itself and makes other things manifest.” In the same way, Being is manifest in itself—the “Outwardly-Manifest” is one of its Names—and through its theophany it brings all things into outward existence.

In itself, Light is imperceptible. It is unknowable and unfathomable, since it is the very Essence of God. But it makes other things perceptible. Opposed to it is darkness (*ẓulmah*), which is synonymous with nonexistence. In itself darkness is imperceptible, since it does not exist. Nor can it make anything else perceptible, since it has no positive reality or power with which to do so. But between Light and darkness stands the level of “brightness” (*diyāʾ*), which is a mixture of the two.

Brightness can be perceived, and through it perception takes place. So each of the three levels has a particular excellence pertaining exclusively to itself: the excellence of True Light lies in its priority and principality (*aṣālah*), for through it every hidden thing becomes manifest. The excellence of darkness is that when it becomes combined with True Light, that Light can be perceived, although beforehand this was impossible. And the excellence of brightness is that in its very essence it combines the two things and possesses the two excellences.²⁵

Being in itself is True Light and hence cannot be perceived, for it is nonentified. The entities in themselves are darkness. They have no existence and cannot be manifest. But the entification of Being corresponds to brightness, which is perceptible and which causes other things to be perceived. All the engendered-existents deployed throughout the Divine Presences pertaining to creation become manifest as a result of this mixture.

The above image makes it apparent that the specific properties of each entity are delineated by nonexistence, in the sense that the entity’s nonexistence veils some of Being’s perfections. Thus the entity entifies Being and allows it to become manifest. When darkness becomes mixed with imperceptible Light, brightness is perceived. But this brightness is nothing but Light, but seen, as it were, “through a glass, darkly.” What exists is only Being, but within it the “effects” of the entities can be perceived. The effect of darkness upon Light is to make it dim.

The symbolism of colors has also been employed by Qūnawī’s followers, as for example in the lines of Jāmī (d. 898/1492):

Upon the entities—colored bits of glass—fell the ray of the Sun of Being.

Whatever the hue of the glass—red, yellow, blue—the Sun showed itself in that very color.²⁶

Of course, some people have objected to Jāmī’s image,²⁷ since it seems to imply

²⁵*al-Fukūk*, pp. 223-24; quoted in Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ*, p. 178.

²⁶*Naqd al-nuṣūṣ*, p. 72.

²⁷For example, ‘Abd al-Rahīm Damāwandī in his work *Miftāḥ asrār al-ḥusaynī*, ed. by S. J. Āshṭiyānī (Mashhad, forthcoming).

that the entities possess a certain reality separate from that of Light. But in fact the “bits of glass” are nothing but the entification of Light itself through the Most Holy Effusion.

At the risk of going too far in interpreting Qūnawī’s ideas in modern and perhaps misleading terms, one can remark that the nature of physical light and its relation to the colors also provides a good image for Nonentified Being and the effects of the entities upon it.

All colors are contained within pure light. Each is like a perfection hidden within light’s essence. But only when light undergoes limitation are we able to perceive its myriad possibilities of manifestation. Only when we remove certain wavelengths can we perceive other wavelengths. The objects illuminated by light play exactly the role of the entities. In themselves these objects have no luminosity. But when light falls upon them, they act as a receptacle for certain of its possibilities of outward manifestation while keeping other possibilities nonmanifest. So through the effects of the objects we can observe all the colors of the rainbow. That which is essentially darkness has allowed us to understand the nature of light.

The objects which reflect light correspond to the archetypal-entities. The light they reflect and which we perceive corresponds to the existent-entities. What we perceive is only light, but light which is colored by the effects of the objects. However, we have to keep in mind that in contrast to the objects, which are separate from light, the archetypal-entities are not separate from Being. They are only the diverse possibilities of outward manifestation latent within the very nature of Being itself. They correspond to the Most Holy Effusion or the Unseen Theophany. Being first possesses unseen possibilities of outward manifestation (= the objects), then it reveals itself in keeping with those possibilities (= the light which makes the objects manifest).

So in all levels and at all stages, Being is Being and nothing else. At the level of Nonentification, Being is absolutely nondelimited. At the stage of the Most Holy Theophany, it is delimited by various latent possibilities of outward manifestation. At the third and final stage, the Holy Theophany, Being becomes delimited by actual manifestation within the created universe.

In all cases the entities remain “nonexistent” in themselves. They are nothing but the possibilities of entification inherent within Nonentified Being, so they derive their total reality from it. Both their inward immutability and nonexistence in God’s Knowledge and their outward manifestation and existence derive absolutely from Being as such.

Whatever we perceive is entified Being, but Being itself is nonentified and therefore transcends perception of any kind. All the myriad things of the universe are only the manifestation of the perfections latent within Being. They are Being’s necessary and natural concomitants. They differ from each other because of their own peculiar characteristics and properties. But considered in terms of these characteristics, i.e., as individual entities, they have no independent existence. In fact, they are nonexistent, since only Being is. But considered in relation to Being itself, they are nothing but that very Being. So all things are Being, since nothing else exists. In other words, all things are one reality, since Being is One.

In conclusion, we may quote once again from Qūnawī himself:

The source of God's Knowledge of the world is His very Knowledge of Himself. The world becomes related to His Knowledge through the outward manifestation of the relations (= entities) existing within His Knowledge, which are the objects known. He knows the infinite things since His Knowledge encompasses all things and He is the Origin of everything. So He knows His Essence, the concomitants of His Essence, and the concomitants of the concomitants, singly and together, in summated-unification (*ijmāl*) and in particularized-deployment (*tafṣīl*). So it continues, *ad infinitum*. . . . The existence which things possess depends upon Him, whereas His Being does not depend upon them. In His Reality He is independent of all things, and in its existence each thing is utterly in need of Him. There is no relation between Him and the things except Grace (*al-'ināyah*) . . . which in reality is the effusion of His ontological Light upon those things imprinted within the mirror of His Unseen, i.e., the relations known within Knowledge. They possess the preparedness to act as receptacles for His ontological Decree and to be His loci-of-manifestation.²⁸

²⁸*al-Nuṣuṣ*, pp. 297-98/213; *Miftāḥ al-ghayb*, pp. 82-89.