

The Disclosure of the Intervening Image: Ibn ‘Arabî on Death

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Existence is nothing but image
but in truth it is the Real.
Whoever understands this
has grasped the secrets of the path.
—Ibn ‘Arabî¹

One of the best known and most controversial of Muslim thinkers, Ibn ‘Arabî was born in Islamic Spain in 1165. He eventually settled in Damascus, where he taught and wrote for twenty years until his death in 1240. His intellectual radiance quickly spread throughout the Islamic world, from Black Africa and the Balkans to Indonesia and China.² Despite the fact that reformers and modernists have been targeting him since the nineteenth century as an emblem for every shortcoming of traditional Islamic society, in recent years his influence has been making a comeback. Largely dismissed as incoherent by the early Orientalists, he has been regarded with much more respect by recent scholarship.

Underlying Ibn ‘Arabî’s enormous literary output is the concern to explicate reality in all its dimensions. Although thoroughly rooted in the unifying vision offered by the Koran, he speaks as a universalist and not as a particularist, which helps explain some of the hostility that he stirred up even before our modern age of rampant parochialism and passionate ideology. Far from offering a “system,”

as some modern observers have claimed, he displays instead a vast survey of legitimate points of view, symbolized by the “ninety-nine names of God” and the “124,000 prophets” that are said to have been sent from Adam down to Muhammad. Among the many basic topics that he explains with unprecedented detail and extraordinary insight is eschatology, the third of the three principles of Islamic faith after divine unity and prophecy.³

In the secondary literature, Ibn ‘Arabî is most commonly said to be the founder of the school of *wahdat al-wujûd*, “the unity of existence” or “the oneness of being,” but this is an enormous oversimplification. If we must characterize him briefly, it would be better to think in terms of both his methodology and its fruit. The former he commonly calls *tahqîq*, which means verification, realization, and actualization. It is to utilize every available path to knowledge in order to know and experience the infinity of the self.⁴ The “self”—*nafs*, a word that is also commonly translated as “soul”—is the subject that can take as its object everything in reality. The fruit of self-realization is called *al-insân al-kâmil*, “the perfect human being.”⁵

The perfection achieved through *tahqîq* involves an inner transformation such that the self comes to be identical with the infinity that it knows. The quest for omniscience has of course been present in Western thought at least since Aristotle, and it has obvious parallels in Hinduism and Buddhism. Peculiarly in Ibn ‘Arabî’s case, his voluminous and extraordinarily sophisticated writings are the clear fruit of achieving the goal—or so it has appeared to much of the later tradition. Ibn ‘Arabî refers to the achievement of all-encompassing knowledge as the “Muhammadan station,” thereby mythifying it in terms of the well-known Islamic teaching that Muhammad knew everything that had been revealed to all the prophets who had come before him. He also calls it “the station of no station” (*maqâm lâ maqâm*), meaning thereby that perfection is achieved only by those who know the self as no specific thing—*neti neti* as the Upanishads would have it. As long as human individuals experience themselves as confined and limited, they deserve to be called this or that. True freedom is achieved only by those who pass beyond every specificity.⁶

If the human self is no specific thing, this is because it was created in the “image” (more literally “form,” *sûra*) of God, who cannot be confined to any category. The tradition refers to the original purity of the human self as *fitra*, “primordial nature.” The Prophet said, “Every child is born according to *fitra*, but its parents make it a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian.” In Taoist terms, the primordial nature of the self is to be an “uncarved block.” Once the block has been carved or the child has been made into a Christian, the pri-

mordial simplicity is lost. Achieving the fullness of human possibility demands recovering the state of nondetermination.

In conceptualizing human perfection, Ibn ‘Arabî draws from all the resources of the Islamic sciences and runs the gamut of literary expression, from mythic and poetic to philosophic and scientific. Especially important for his formulations are the divine names so profusely mentioned in the Koran. If God created human beings in his own image, this can only mean that they have the potential to understand, emulate, and actualize every name that properly applies to God, who is the foundation of all reality, or, to use the common Koranic expression, “the Real” (*al-haqq*). Every divine name and attribute pertains truly to the Real, and each displays its traces throughout the universe. Human beings have sufficient freedom to discover, realize, harmonize, and unify all the names. To do so they must embrace every possibility of human becoming and reject the fixity and limits of every station and situation.

In Ibn ‘Arabî’s way of looking at things, human beings enter into the universe at the culminating stage of reality’s outward flow. The world is a continuous and never-ending process of divine self-disclosure (*tajallî*), a constant bubbling up and boiling over of existence and awareness, a ceaseless flow from unity into multiplicity and consciousness into nescience. What comes to be disclosed is the hidden nature of the absolutely Real, which embraces every possibility of being and knowledge. The motive for this self-disclosure is love. As the divine saying has it, “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created the creatures that I might be known.”

Like Avicenna before him and Rumi after him, Ibn ‘Arabî stresses the importance of love as the motivating force underlying all of creation.⁷ He often highlights the implications of the prophetic saying, “God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.” If God created the universe because he “loved to be known,” this means that knowing him is beautiful and that all creatures know by their very modality of being. Moreover, creatures follow God in loving beauty, and every beauty is a glimmer of the Beautiful.

None but God is loved in the existent things. It is He who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover—and there is nothing that is not a lover. The universe is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him. . . . Although they all love only their own Creator, they are veiled from Him by the love for Zaynab, Su’âd, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world.⁸

Human beings mark the point where the dispersive and externalizing movement initiated by love turns back upon itself. If the

Real “loved to be known,” knowing him demands loving him in return. People enter into existence as germinal images of the Real. Their individual configurations replicate everything deployed in the indefinite spatial and temporal expanse of the universe. They have the possibility of developing into full-blown manifestations of the Real’s simplicity and all-comprehensive unity only if they love him fully and achieve identity with every quality latent in the Hidden Treasure.

Human beings become totally absorbed in the love of God because they were made in His image, as reported in the hadîth, so they turn toward the Divine Presence with their whole essence. That is why all the divine names become manifest within them.⁹

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Few notions are more central to Ibn ‘Arabî’s conceptual arsenal than *khayâl* (“imagination” or “image”). The word denotes both the power that allows us to picture things in the mind and the mental pictures. It implies not only an internal faculty, but also an external reality, as is shown by the fact that the same word is also used for the images seen in mirrors or on a screen.¹⁰ Before Ibn ‘Arabî, imagination had long been discussed to highlight the intermediacy of the subjective realm, which is an image of both the knowing self and the known object. In the mythic terms of the Koran, imagination came into being when God “blew of His spirit” into the clay from which he had shaped Adam’s body with his own two hands. It is none other than the self that arises at the meeting point of darkness and infinite light. As the very stuff of the self, imagination is the encounter between the vitality of intelligence and the signs and sediments perceived by the senses. Spiritual realities descend into it, and objects of sense perception rise up to it. Within it awareness and unawareness, depth and surface, meaning and words, spirit and clay, inward and outward, non-manifest and manifest, coalesce and become one. Only at its level can the lover imagine the beauty of the Beloved, thereby igniting the fire of love.

If the self is nothing but the image of both spirit and body, so also the universe is nothing but the image of both Absolute Reality and sheer nothingness. The world and the soul are neither fully real nor fully unreal, neither existent nor nonexistent, neither known nor unknown. Both shimmer endlessly between light and darkness.

Everything other than the Essence of the Real undergoes transmutation, speedy and slow. Everything other than the Essence of the Real is inter-

vening image and vanishing shadow. No created thing remains upon a single state in this world, in the hereafter, and in what is between the two, neither spirit, nor soul, nor anything other than God—I mean the Essence of God. Rather, it undergoes continual change from form to form constantly and forever. And imagination is nothing but this. . . . The universe has become manifest only in imagination. It is imagined in itself. It is, and it is not.¹¹

As all-comprehensive images of the Real, universe and soul reflect each other. The universe is outward, deployed, dispersed, and objectified; the self is inward, concentrated, focused, and subjectified. The self is aware and conscious, the world unaware and unknowing—relatively speaking, of course, because there can be no absolutes when the stuff of reality is intermediacy and flux. Through its inwardness the soul finds itself and others, and through its outwardness the world deploys what is potentially knowable to the soul. If “God taught Adam all the names” (Koran 2:30), this means that everything deployed and dispersed in the universe is already known to primordial human nature, the *fitra* that has no specific identity. Regaining Adamic perfection means to recognize what we know. “All the names” means every possibility of being and becoming present in the Real. The qualities and characteristics of created things are the names of their Creator. Through the path of self-realization, the soul comes to experience the designations of the names in the imaginal realm where being and awareness are the same.

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Human subjectivity is the inward side of the manifest universe, and the world’s objectivity is the outward side. This is not to deny the inwardness of animals and other creatures, to which Ibn ‘Arabî devotes a good deal of attention. Rather, it is to say that what characterizes humans is the potential to be aware of everything, in contrast to the limited horizons of other things. It is precisely the blinders on non-human beings that make them pertain more to the objective than to the subjective realm. The inner limitations and psychic boundaries of animals appear as the diversity of their species. In contrast, human beings are outwardly similar but inwardly disparate. The primordial purity of human nature, made in the image of the infinite and unlimited, allows for vast differences in inner being and awareness. The diversity of life-forms in the external world provides only the barest hints at the unboundedness of the soul’s inner realm. Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabî tells us that the world of imagination is by far the vastest realm in existence,

“because it exercises its ruling property over every thing and non-thing. It gives form to absolute nonexistence, to the impossible, to the Necessary, and to possibility. It makes existence nonexistent and nonexistence existent.”¹²

Human beings become what they are by actualizing various ontological and psychological potentialities in never-repeating combinations. Their true world is that of awareness and imagination, but its panorama remains hidden from those who make no attempt to reverse the outward flow and focus awareness back on the source. Loving Hind, Su’ad, and Layla, they lose sight of the real Beloved and remain transfixed by the mirroring surface.

The world as a whole is nothing but an image of the Beautiful. The soul’s awareness of itself depends upon its perception of the world’s image within itself. Perception is never anything but awareness, which is to say that it can only pertain to the realm of the soul. It follows that people cannot recognize the world and themselves for what they are without awareness of their own immersion in the ocean of imagination. But, just as imagination is the realm of disclosure and recognition, so also it is the domain of concealment and deception. It embraces both illumination and obscurity and is peopled by both demons and angels. Its ambiguity and intermediacy suggest the imperative for prophetic revelation, which provides the keys to differentiate angel from demon and beauty from glimmer.

In sum, each human self is a unique subjectivity, complemented by the objectivity of the universe. Both soul and world are images of the absolute Subjectivity/Objectivity, which is the Real. Human primordial nature is essentially unhampered by any quality or characteristic, but most people freely choose to carve themselves into specific blocks. Falling in love with transient beauty, they fail to realize that they have the potential to aim for the Beautiful and transcend every limitation of existence and awareness.

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The Koran and the Prophet provide numerous accounts of the world after death. Ibn ‘Arabî finds the key to the interpretation of these accounts in the very stuff of the human self, which possesses the potential to assume the form of everything in reality. Although people are formless in their *fitra*, they gradually become shaped and determined by the paths that they follow as their lives unfold. Some of these paths lead toward the fullness and wholeness of the divine image, and some block the radiance of the divine light. Some people become attuned to the universality and absoluteness of the Real, and others perceive reality as dissonance, disequilibrium, and dis-

solution. The soul's situation in the total configuration of reality comes to be determined by the objects upon which it fixes its attention and focuses its love. You become what you love.

Death turns the soul inside out. The human self is left to stand on its own without the stabilizing fixity of the objective world. Objects disappear as independent things, and the divine self-disclosures come to the surface. People experience themselves in imaginal forms appropriate to their own loves and aspirations. As the Koran puts it in speaking to the soul that has just died, "We have lifted from you your covering, so your sight today is piercing" (50: 22).

God created human beings in an inverted configuration, so they find the next world in their inwardness, and the present world in their outwardness. Their outwardness is limited by form, so God prescribes limits for them through revelation. Inasmuch as their outwardness does not change, they do not change. However, they undergo constant variation in their inwardness. They fluctuate in their thoughts according to the forms in which thoughts occur to them. So also will be the situation in the next world. . . . The next world is the inversion of this world's configuration, and this world is the inversion of the next world's configuration. Human beings [there] are the same as human beings [here]. Hence you should strive here so that your thoughts may be praiseworthy according to revelation. Then your form in the next world will be beautiful.¹³

Given the essential unlimitedness of the human self and the fact that nothing is impossible in the realm of imagination, the modalities of posthumous becoming are beyond reckoning. The only way to ensure a congenial afterlife is to love the Beautiful and recover the primordial purity of God's image. This is precisely the aim of *tahqiq* or "realization," the process of discovering and actualizing the full range of the divine names latent in the self.

The world after death is the awakening to the endless self-disclosures of the Real. The stages of the return to God in this life map out in broad strokes the infinite imaginal realm where disclosures will be seen for what they are. Every stage on the path to God prefigures one of the homesteads of the next world. Human nature finds the imperative to follow the path in the hunger to know the divine names and find their substance within the self, a hunger that is commonly known as love.

Despite a general tendency in much of Islamic theology to stress the rigors of divine justice and punishment, Ibn 'Arabi focuses on the divine beauty and mercy. The Real, he points out, is precisely that and nothing else. All else is derivative and unreal. Nothing can subsist except in function of sheer reality, pure being, total consciousness, and utter good.

God created the cosmos only for happiness in essence. Misery occurs in the case of those for whom it occurs as an accident. This is because nothing comes forth from the Sheer Good in which there is no evil—which is the Being of the Real that gives existence to the cosmos—except that which corresponds with it, and that is good specifically.¹⁴

People taste the good of reality in the experience of love, which is simply the recognition of God's presence in the world and the desire to realize the divine image within themselves.

Among us are those who know God in this world, and among us are those who do not know Him until they die loving some specific thing. Then, when the covering is lifted, they will come to understand that they had loved only God, but they had been veiled by the name of the created thing.¹⁵

Loving the Real in his reflections constricts the soul, whose true scope is defined by its ability to receive the infinity of the divine self-disclosures. Ibn 'Arabî explains that this world is in fact nothing but the testing ground for love, where devotion to other than the Real can be weeded out. In his chapter on love in the *Futûhât*, he offers a list of the qualities and characteristics of lovers, and then he devotes a semi-independent treatise to explaining what he means. In explaining one of the lovers' attributes, he tells us that death is necessitated by God's love for his own image.

Lovers are described as "craving to emerge from this world and encounter his Beloved." This is because part of the reality of the soul is to seek ease. Heartache is suffering, concealing it is even worse suffering, and this world is the place of heartaches.

The encounter craved by lovers is a specific encounter designated by the Real, since He is already witnessed in every state. He designates whatever homestead He will, making it the place of a special encounter because of His craving for us. We reach it only by emerging from the abode that contradicts this encounter, and that is the abode of this world. The Prophet was given the choice between remaining in this world and being transferred to the next. He said, "The Higher Companion!" because in this world he had the lower companionship.

A report tells us, "When someone loves to encounter God," that is, through death, "God loves to encounter him. And when someone dislikes to encounter God, God dislikes to encounter him," because He will encounter him in his death with what He dislikes, and that is veiling Himself from him. As for those of His servants who love to encounter Him, He discloses Himself to them.

Encountering God through death has a flavor not found in encountering Him in the life of this world. In death we are related to Him as mentioned in His words, "We shall surely attend to you at leisure, O jinn and men!" (Koran 55:31). In our case, death is for our spirits to achieve leisure from governing our bodies. So, lovers desire and love to taste this directly, and it will only occur at the emergence from this world through death, not in ecstatic states (*hâl*). It happens when they depart from the physical

frames with which they have gained familiarity from the time they were born, and through which they have become manifest. Or rather, the frame was the cause of their becoming manifest.

So, God separates them from this body because they are attached to it. This pertains to the divine “jealousy” (*ghayra*) toward His servants. He loves them and does not desire them to have attachment to “others” (*ghayr*). Hence He created death and He made it a trial for them so as to put their claims to love Him to the test. When the ruling property of death expires, “John sacrifices it between the Garden and the Fire.” Then no one will die in the two abodes.

This then is the cause of their craving to emerge from this world so as to encounter the Beloved, for jealousy is hardship. When death is sacrificed, it turns into a specific life after death, for “People are asleep, and when they die, they wake up.”¹⁶

The human craving to reach what they love is the corollary of God’s craving to encounter human beings. Universe is driven by God’s love for human beings, and they alone can love him fully in return. Among the one hundred and some revelations of knowledge that Ibn ‘Arabî recorded in his book *al-Tajalliyât al-ilâhiyya* (“The Divine Self-disclosures”), one in particular, “the self-disclosure of perfection,” seems especially pertinent to the divine love that prepares the soul for the full disclosure of the intervening image.

Listen, My lover! I am the entity upon which the created realm is intent. I am the center point of the circle and its circumference. I am its compound things and its simple things. I am the affair that descends between heaven and earth.

I created perceptual faculties for you only so that you might use them to perceive Me. When you perceive Me, you perceive your own soul. Do not wish to perceive Me by your soul’s perception. With My eye you will see Me and you will see your soul, not with the eye of your soul. And you will see Me.

My lover, how long shall I call you and you not listen? How long shall I show Myself to you and you not see? How long shall I wrap Myself in aromas for you, and you not smell Me, and in flavors, and you not taste Me?

What is wrong with you that you do not feel Me in the objects you touch? What is wrong with you that you do not perceive Me in the things you smell? What is wrong with you that you do not see Me? What is wrong with you that you do not hear Me? What is wrong with you? What is wrong with you? What is wrong with you?

I am more pleasurable to you than any pleasure, I am more desirable to you than any desire, I am more beautiful to you than any beauty—I am the Lovely, I am the Comely.

My lover! Love Me, love no other! Love Me passionately! Be enraptured by Me, not by anyone else! Embrace Me! Kiss Me! You will join with none more fully than with Me.

All desire you for themselves, but I desire you for you. Yet, you flee from Me.

My lover, you are not fair with Me. If you approach Me, I will approach you much more than you approach Me, and I am nearer to you

than your own soul and breath. Who among the creatures acts like this with you?

My lover, I am jealous of you for you. I do not love to see you with others but not with you. Be with Me through Me! I will be with you as you are with Me, though you be unaware.

My lover! Union! Union!
 Were we to find the way
 to separation,
 we would not taste separation
 with separation's flavor.

My lover, come! My hand, and yours. Let us enter in upon the Real that He may judge us with the judgment of eternity.

My lover, among all quarrels, one is the most pleasurable of pleasures, and that is the quarrel of lovers. The pleasure occurs in the arguing.

I tried to slay her
 by loving her
 so that she would not quarrel with me
 at the resurrection.

“Say: Have you any knowledge of the angels when they were quarreling?” (Koran 69:38). Were it not for the excellence of the quarrel, would there be any standing before the Judge? What is more pleasurable than to stand and witness the Beloved? My heart! My heart!¹⁷

Notes

¹ Ibn 'Arabi, *Fusûs al-hikam* 159.

² On his life, see Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*. For some of the best recent scholarship on his teachings and influence, see Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore* and idem, *The Seal of the Saints*.

³ For a broad survey of Islamic teachings on death and resurrection, see Chittick, “Eschatology.” For some of Ibn 'Arabi's own teachings, see Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, Chapter 7, and idem, “Ibn al-'Arabi's Hermeneutics of Mercy.”

⁴ Three basic routes to knowledge have been recognized in Islamic civilization: divine speech (or prophetic revelation), rational investigation, and suprarational intuition. Before Ibn 'Arabi's time, each of these routes was stressed by one of the three prevalent intellectual outlooks (which can be designated broadly as theology, philosophy, and theoretical Sufism). Ibn 'Arabi, however, maintained that all three routes need to be utilized fully in the investigation of any issue of ultimate human significance, and he offered numerous arguments to explain why none of them can be sufficient in itself. See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, especially Parts 4 and 5.

⁵ For detailed studies of Ibn 'Arabi's teachings, with ample quotation from the original texts (including many passages dealing with death and resurrection), see Chittick, *Sufi Path* and idem, *Self-Disclosure*.

⁶ On the station of no station, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, Chapter 20; idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, Chapter 10.

⁷ For his teachings on love, see Chittick, “The Divine Roots of Human Love.”

⁸ Ibn ‘Arabî, *al-Futûhât al-makkiyya* volume II, 326, line 19. Chittick, *Sufi Path* 181. All translations here are either new or revised. In cases where I have published a previous translation (typically with much more of the surrounding text), I refer to its location.

⁹ *Futûhât* II 325.30; *Sufi Path* 286.

¹⁰ The word *screen* here is not anachronistic. In at least two passages Ibn ‘Arabî discusses the images on the screen (*sûtâra*) of the shadow-play to explain how imagination exercises its cosmic powers. His contemporary Ibn al-Fârid, the greatest of the Arabic-language Sufi poets, speaks of the shadow-play in a similar context. For a translation of the relevant passages from Ibn ‘Arabî, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure* 60; and idem, “Two Chapters,” 102. For the passage in Ibn al-Fârid, see *The Poem of the Way*, lines 2130–2237, or Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* 189–91, 260–2.

¹¹ *Futûhât* II 313.17; *Sufi Path* 118.

¹² *Futûhât* I 306.6; *Sufi Path* 122.

¹³ *Futûhât* IV 420–1; *Imaginal Worlds* 108–9.

¹⁴ *Futûhât* III 389.21; *Self-Disclosure* 365; *Sufi Path* 291.

¹⁵ *Futûhât* IV 260.27.

¹⁶ *Futûhât* II 351.16.

¹⁷ Ibn ‘Arabî, *al-Tajalliyât al-ilâhiyya* 461–66.

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