

The Passing of  
the Moments  
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Ibn al-‘Arabī, one of the most prolific authors of the Sufi tradition, is typically stereotyped as the spokesman for the Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*), a concept that is then interpreted in keeping with the understanding of the observer. The fact is, however, that very few scholars—not to mention the general run of opinionated people—actually have any clear idea of what he was talking about. Among the many Orientalist misinterpretations is that offered by Louis Massignon, who holds that Ibn al-‘Arabī presents us with a “static, existential monism,” a dry, rationalistic system that departs from the lived experience of the divine Reality that was central to early Sufism. The fact is, however, that few notions are as basic to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s world-view as “the renewal of creation at each instant” (*tajdīd al-khalq ma‘ al-ānāt*) and the vision of this ongoing dynamism by means of “unveiling” (*kashf*), or supra-rational perception. As he explains, human beings are faced with two basic realities: on the one hand, there is the Real Being (*al-wujūd al-haqq*), called “God” in theological language, and, on the other, the self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of that Being. Everything other than God (i.e., the cosmos in its infinity) is that Being’s disclosure of its own characteristics and qualities. Nothing other than God subsists for more than a moment. Each self-disclosure of the Uniquely One is unique and one, and each is replaced instantaneously by another self-disclosure, ad infinitum.

This duality of the One Being and its infinite self-disclosures gives rise to two basic ways of understanding God: transcendence or “asserting incomparability” (*tanzīh*) and immanence or “asserting similarity” (*tashbih*). Inasmuch as the One is uniquely and absolutely One, It is utterly other, forever unknowable, and always incomparable with all things. Inasmuch as It discloses Itself to all things without cease and without repetition, It is immanent and similar.

This complementarity of the One and many, Being and Its self-disclosure, God and the world, transcendence and immanence, absence and presence, invisible and visible, unknowable and knowable, suffuses Islamic thought. In one of his countless expositions of the two complementary poles, Ibn al-‘Arabī addresses two terms which, in a

good deal of the Western literature, have come to typify Sufi discourse (even though the two are not especially prominent in the texts): These are annihilation (*fanā*) and subsistence (*baqā*). Their Qur'anic source is the verse, "All that is upon it [the earth] undergoes annihilation, and there subsists the face of thy Lord, possessor of majesty and generosity" (55:26-27). The obvious meaning of the verse is "All things are perishing but His face" (Qur'an 28:88). God's "face" is then His Essence or Reality. But, is this a promise for the future as many theologians read it, or does it pertain to the present moment, as Sufis typically explain? The fact is, as the Ash'arite theologians imply and Ibn al-'Arabī asserts with force, all things are constantly being annihilated and recreated. The only reality that stays in its state is the Real Being. In Ibn al-'Arabī words,

Everything other than the Essence of the Real is intervening imagination and vanishing shadow. No created thing remains 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—upon a single state; rather, it undergoes continual change from form to form constantly and forever.

What then is the actual situation of the reality that we perceive? To what extent is it permanent, and to what extent is it punctuated by **lapses**? Ibn al-'Arabī provides a typically ambiguous answer in the seventeenth of the twenty-three subsections of chapter 369 of his monumental *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* ("The Meccan Openings"), a chapter that is dedicated to "the storehouses of [the divine] munificence." These storehouses are mentioned in Qur'an 15:21: "There is nothing whose storehouses are not with Us, and We send it not down but in a known measure." In other words, the principles of self-disclosure are latent in the Essence of the Real Being Itself.

One of the masters said concerning this storehouse that it comprises "the annihilation of him who was not and the subsistence of Him who has always been."

This is an issue in which some people become agitated—those whose unveiling has not been consolidated and whose witnessing has not reached realization. After all, sometimes a flash of the object of people's seeking lights up for them, and they remain satisfied with it, short of the full achievement and consummation of the state. Then they judge this station through what they have witnessed of it, with either conjecture, or certitude that they have achieved it fully.

I have seen some of the Men with this attribute. Something of this sort overtook Sahl ibn 'Abdallāh al-Tustarī—who was outstanding in this task—concerning the knowledge of the Isthmus [the intermediary world between death and the Resurrection]. A glimmer passed over him, and he came to

encompass in knowledge the situation of the people in the Isthmus. But he did not halt in order to see if its folk underwent any change into diverse states, or if they continued on in one state. Hence he judged that they subsist in a single state, just as he saw them. So his vision was sound and truthful, but not his judgment that they would stay permanently as he saw them until the day of the Uprising.

As for those whom I have seen who are the folk of this attribute, I have seen that when they are taken from themselves, they return quickly and do not subsist in that. I asked one of them, "What is it that brings you back so quickly?"

He said to me, "I fear that my entity will cease to exist because of what I see."

So, he feared for himself. Those who have this state will not possess a strong footing in the realization of any affair and they will not be among those who are firmly rooted in it. If they were to confine themselves to what they view face-to-face and refrain from making judgments, that would be better for them.

When outsiders hear the like of this from a truthful person, and they also hear that things are not fixed in a single state in the Isthmus, they imagine that the Sufis disagree among themselves in such things. But this is not a disagreement. He who is firmly rooted upholds what he witnesses, and that is the extent of his knowledge. He who is not firmly rooted also upholds what he witnesses, but he adds to it the judgment that things stay fixed. Had he stood in the station for a while, he would have seen change and alteration in the Isthmus, just as occurs in this world, for "each day"—which is the indivisible moment—God is "upon some task." God says, "All those in the heavens and the earth ask of Him; each day He is upon some task" [Qur'an 55:29].

Creation is new wherever it may be—in this world, in the next world, and in the Isthmus. Hence it is impossible for a state to subsist in one entity for two breaths or two moments, because God embraces all things and the cosmos stays forever poverty-stricken toward God. Hence it must change at each instant, so God creates it at each instant. The states of the entities are renewed instant by instant, and the properties of these entities, in accordance with their realities, bestow upon the One Entity the fact that, were it correct for the entities to have being, they would have it by means of these states.

Among our companions, some see that the states of the possible, fixed entities are preserved in the Entity of Being. The entities themselves have no being whatsoever—on the contrary, they have fixity and they display properties in the Manifest Entity, which is the True Being.

Others of our companions see that the entities become qualified by being

inasmuch as they acquire it from the Real. The entities are one through the substance, even if they become many. The Real drapes them with states instant by instant, since they have no subsistence except through the states. Hence the Real renews the states in the entities at each moment.

The words “the annihilation of him who was not” accords with the first view. No trace of him remains in the entity of Being. Hence he is stripped of descriptions. This is the state of asserting incomparability [transcendence, *tanzih*]. He “who has always been” subsists as He is in His Entity, and He is the “Independent of the worlds” [Qur’ān 3:97]. The cosmos is nothing but the possible things, and He is independent of their signifying Him, since there is nothing—as we have said—seeking to be signified. After all, the possible things in their fixed entities are witnessed by the Real, and the Real is witnessed by the possible entities through their fixed—not existent—eyes and eyesight. Hence He witnesses them as fixity, and they witness Him as Being.

The other view [which is that of immanence] observes the being of the possible things’ entities, the traces of the divine names within them, and the Real’s replenishing them through those traces so that they may subsist. The person who witnesses this state sees that both the traces and the entities that receive them are annihilated. But the situation in itself exists as it was. In itself, nothing is annihilated—it is annihilated for the one who has this view. Hence no object of witnessing subsists for him save God; the existent things are enwrapped in the Being of the Real, and they become absent from the gaze of the possessor of this station. In the same way, the entities of the stars become absent from the gazer at the rising of the greatest lamp, the sun. Then he holds that their entities have been annihilated from being, but in actual fact they have not been annihilated. On the contrary, they are in their state of possibility in their spheres, according to their properties and their courses. Both these views have been known from the Sufis.

Some of the possessors of this station make creation’s situation with the Real like that of the moon with the sun in respect to the light that becomes manifest in the moon. The moon has no light in respect of its essence, nor is the sun or the light of the sun within it. However, eyesight perceives it like that. So the light that is in the moon is nothing other than the sun. So also is the being that belongs to the possible things. It is nothing other than the being of the Real, like a form in a mirror. The sun is not in the moon, but the light that the moon deploys upon the earth at night when the sun’s light is absent is none other than the sun’s light, though it is ascribed to the moon. In the same way, it is said concerning the Speech of God, “It is the words of a noble mes-

senger” [69:40], and it is said concerning the words of the Messenger when he recites that Speech—and the words of everyone who recites the Qur’ān — “It is the Speech of God.”

Each of these doctrines has a correct sense, and unveiling may occur in everything we have mentioned. So, for the Folk of God, disagreement is agreement, because they shoot from a single bow.

The affair goes back and forth between the annihilation of an entity and the annihilation of a state. Nothing in the cosmos brings together the opposites save the Folk of God specifically, because He whom they have realized is He who brings together opposites, and through Him the gnostics know. For “He is the First and the Last and the Manifest and the Nonmanifest” [Qur’ān 57:3] in respect of One Entity and one relation, not in respect of two diverse relations. Hence they have departed from what is rationally understood, and rational faculties do not bind them. Rather, they are the divine ones, the Realizers. The Real has bestowed realization upon them in what He has given them to witness, so they are and they are not. “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw” [Qur’ān 8:17], so He affirmed and He negated. “God is sufficient” and enough “for us” [Qur’ān 3:173].

In this situation, Shaykh Abu’l-‘Abbās ibn al-‘Arif al-Shanhāji was the leader. He used to say, “The Real becomes clear when the tracing dissolves.”

Shaykh Abū Madyan used to say, “There is no escape from the subsistence of the tracings of servanthood so that taking pleasure in the witnessing of Lordship may occur.”

Al-Qāsim ibn al-Qāsim, one of the shaykhs of al-Qushayrī’s *Risāla*, used to say, “The witnessing of the Real is an annihilation within which there is no pleasure.”

Each of these speakers has spoken the truth. After all, I have already explained in this book that no two individuals will ever come together in one self-disclosure and that the Real never repeats self-disclosure to any individual in one form. We have already said that His self-disclosures are diverse, because they include all suprasensory, spiritual, angelic, natural, and elemental forms. Thus, in whatever form He wills, He becomes manifest, just as “in whatever form He wills He mounted you” [82:8], and, in this path, “in whatever form He wills,” He gives you a station. The mounts are diverse, but the rider is one.

When He discloses Himself to someone in suprasensory forms, he will maintain that the tracings are annihilated. When He discloses Himself to someone

in natural and elemental forms, he will maintain that he takes pleasure in the witnessing. When someone maintains that there is no pleasure in the witnessing, then to him the self-disclosure was in spiritual forms. All are truthful and speak of what they have witnessed. But which witnessing is highest? In this I put your own tasting in charge so that it may let you know what I know.

And I keenly appeal to you to respect a discipline that has disappeared nowadays, namely theology.... Understand what theology was in the old days, in the seventeenth century still, not to mention earlier. Why has there been such an alliance between philosophy and theology? It was not only because of God. It is not stories of God that bind theology and philosophy in an alliance; it is all the same more beautiful than that. It is that theology is an extraordinary logic. Indeed, I think that there is no possible logic without theology. Why? ... Nowadays, we are told that there is no logic without paradoxes; it is even certain famous paradoxes that, in Bertrand Russell and in others, were at the basis of the construction of modern logic. But this situation of a fundamental knot tying logic to the paradox is not recent; it is simply that before, it is theology that supplied logic with the paradoxical matter that's absolutely necessary to it. In what form? The Trinity, three persons in one; transubstantiation, the body of Christ and the bread; the resurrection, the resurrection of bodies ... But understand, it is the paradoxical material that's inseparable from a pure logic. They didn't need to find it in a set theory in the seventeenth century, for they did not know the latter—although that was not the actual reason. Theology is more fertile in paradoxes than mathematics. And if theology has such an intense life, it is because it plays this part. It is true that these paradoxes are not without danger since for nothing one can get oneself condemned and, even worse, burned.

Gilles Deleuze, "The Tavern," Seminar on Leibniz, Vincennes, St Denis, February 24, 1987