

THE VIEW FROM NOWHERE: IBN AL-'ARABĪ ON
THE SOUL'S TEMPORAL UNFOLDING

Discussion of the soul was foundational to Islamic philosophy.¹ Seekers of wisdom wanted to become wise, and that demanded the soul's transformation. To achieve transformation, they had to know the nature of both the soul and the world, for the soul is the subjective counterpart of the outside realm—one of many meanings that Muslim thinkers saw in the Koranic verse, "God taught Adam the names, all of them" (2:31).

In the view of Avicenna, the philosopher's goal is to transform the soul into "an intellective world within which is represented the form of everything, the arrangement intelligible in everything, and the good that is effused upon everything," beginning with the Origin of all things and comprising knowledge of "all of existence." The soul must turn into an intelligible world, parallel with the whole existent world, and it must witness "absolute comeliness, absolute good, and real, absolute beauty while being united with it."²

A full grasp of what Avicenna is saying here would demand explication of his world view as detailed in his metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, and ethics, which is not at all my task here. I simply want to stress that transformation of the soul was a basic concern even for the relatively staid Peripatetic philosophers, not just the more "mystically-minded" thinkers such as Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240).³ Although not classified as a *faylasūf* by historians of Islamic philosophy, he was certainly a philosopher in the sense of the term *ḥakīm*, "sage," or in the broad sense in which the word "philosopher" is used nowadays. The specific issue I want to address here is how he understands temporality; and, given the tradition's stress on transformation and self-realization, I want to look specifically at how temporality is involved with the soul's becoming.

In order to keep the discussion focused—which is not easy when dealing with Ibn al-'Arabī—I will talk about temporality mainly in terms of *ḥudūth*, though several other words could easily be used for the same ends. *Ḥudūth* means to arrive newly, to come to be, to happen, to occur. It is contrasted with *qidam*, which means to precede, to be old, to be ancient.

In technical language, *ḥudūth* means to have an origin and to enter into time; *qīdam* means to have no origin, to be outside of time, to be eternal.

The Unique Reality that gives rise to the universe—Avicenna's Necessary Being and Ibn al-'Arabī's Real Being (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*)—has the attribute of *qīdam*, and everything else partakes of *ḥudūth*. In other words, the cosmos, which Ibn al-'Arabī typically defines as "everything other than God" (*ma siwa'llāh*), is an occurrence, a new arrival, and so also is everything within it. This does not mean, however, that the world came into being at some moment in the past and has continued to be, but rather that new arrival is a real and permanent attribute of everything other than God at every moment always and forever.

In discussing the Real Being, Ibn al-'Arabī often develops the implications of the broad range of meanings found in the word *wujūd*. For him it can never mean the dry fact of simply being there. Although the word may have been used this way by some of the philosophers, it also means finding, grasping, perceiving, knowing, experiencing, enjoying. When Ibn al-'Arabī speaks of the Real Being, he is talking about that which fully and actually possesses all these attributes and effuses them on creation. Simply to speak of the Real as *wujūd* is to say that the Source of all is alive, conscious, and loving, and that its manifestations are governed by the same attributes. Indeed, Ibn al-'Arabī tells us that the divine name Alive (*al-ḥayy*) is a Koranic synonym for *wujūd*, and the cosmos is nothing but the ebullient manifestation of life and all of its concomitants.

In Ibn al-'Arabī's perspective, the cosmos itself is alive, because it partakes of the Living One from whom it appears. Like any living thing, it is constantly changing and transforming, but always in keeping with the principles demanded by the divine life, that is, consciousness, desire, power, generosity, wisdom, justice. To say that the cosmos is constantly changing is to say that new arrival is on-going and never-ending. One of the better known ways in which Ibn al-'Arabī expresses this notion is his doctrine of "the renewal of creation at each instant" (*tajdid al-khalq ma' al-ānāt*).

The term creation (*khalq*) is typically contrasted with Real (*ḥaqq*), in which case it designates the cosmos, everything other than God. The Real alone is *wujūd* by definition. Everything other than God is not *wujūd*, which is to say that in itself and for itself, it is not truly there, nor is it truly alive, conscious, and active. In itself it is nonexistent (*ma'dūm*).

Given that we observe the essentially nonexistent things that are collectively known as "creation" living and flourishing in some way, this can only be by virtue of reception of *wujūd*'s attributes and qualities from that which is truly alive. In the standard philosophical language that Ibn al-'Arabī often

employs, this is to say that possibility or contingency (*imkan*) is intrinsic to all things, and that nothing can give them *wujūd* except that which is *wujūd* by definition, that is, the Necessary *Wujūd*.

The Necessary or Real *Wujūd* is one. Its status is perfectly clear, in the sense that it alone is truly real, permanent, and eternal, truly alive and aware; it alone is the point of reference from which unreal, impermanent, and newly arrived things can be understood. Hence, the basic philosophical problem is to discern the status of "unreal" or "nonexistent" things. How is it that they manifest attributes of Real *Wujūd*, such as life and awareness, and even wisdom and compassion?

Ibn al-'Arabī maintains that *wujūd* in the case of both the Real and creation, the Eternal and the newly arriving, is the self-same reality. As he puts it, "In its own essence *wujūd* may be divided into that which has a first, that is, the newly arriving, and that which has no first, that is, the eternal."⁴ The fact that *wujūd* remains a single reality in whatever form it appears is what is typically meant when it is said, famously but not quite accurately, that Ibn al-'Arabī believed in *waḥdat al-wujūd*, "the Oneness of Being."⁵ In his terms, the Necessary Being is *wujūd* in its unknowable "essence" (*dhat*) or selfhood, and the possible thing is *wujūd*'s "self-disclosure" (*tajallī*). In other words, newly arrived things are the manifestation of the infinite possibilities latent in the Real Being.

For Ibn 'Arabī, the axiom of *wujūd*'s self-disclosure is that it never repeats itself (*lā takrār fi'l-tajallī*). Each being in the universe is a unique appearance of the Unique Being, and each moment of each being is a unique moment of new arrival. This means that the cosmos and all things within it undergo constant change always and forever.

The self-disclosure of the Real Being is essentially ambiguous, since the constantly transforming vistas that appear as the universe are neither Real *Wujūd* per se, nor completely other than it. As Ibn al-'Arabī remarks, everything is a changing image of the Real. Inasmuch as *Wujūd* appears in its own images, the images are real, but inasmuch as *Wujūd* stays hidden, they are unreal. Looking at the Koranic verse, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115), he tells us that everything is simultaneously God's face (*wajh*) and his veil (*hijāb*).⁶ He sometimes expresses the ambiguity of things by saying that the cosmos is God's dream, or, much more commonly, that it is imagination or image (*khayāl*).

Everything other than the Essence of the Real is in the station of transmutation, speedy and slow. Everything other than the Essence of the Real is intervening imagination and vanishing shadow.⁷

Ibn al-'Arabī describes the imaginal status of things in many contexts and with diverse analogies. For example:

No one knows what the newly arrived things are except he who knows what a rainbow is. The diversity of its colors is like the diversity of the forms of the newly arrived things. You know that no colored thing is there, nor any color, even though you witness it like that. So also is your witnessing of the forms of the newly arrived things in the *wujūd* of the Real, which is *wujūd* per se. Thus you say, "What is there is not there."⁸

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In terms of new arrival, the human soul is no different from anything else: What is there is not there. Renewed at every moment by the divine self-disclosure, the soul manifests and conceals the face of the Real. Nonetheless, it has a unique status among all newly arrived things, a status announced by the prophetic saying, "God created Adam in His own form."⁹ In other words, the human soul is a divine self-disclosure in respect of the fullness of the Real's ontological implications. "The fact that you are in the Form is the fact that you are a locus of manifestation for the divine names."¹⁰

This understanding of the cosmos and the soul in terms of the attributes of Real *Wujūd* is of course standard fare in the philosophical tradition, though Ibn al-'Arabī stresses it much more strongly than most. Avicenna, for instance, ascribes seven essential attributes to the Necessary Being—unity, eternity, knowledge, desire, power, wisdom, and generosity—and then explains that the implications of contingency can be understood only in terms of these attributes.

Although the soul was created in the divine form and is thereby a single locus in which the full range of the divine attributes may become manifest, the extent to which these attributes do in fact become manifest depends upon many factors, not least the free activity of the soul in its day-to-day experience of newly arriving *wujūd*. The purpose of striving for wisdom, in Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, is to actualize the diverse attributes latent in the divine form in perfect balance. He and many others call this actualization *al-takhalluq bi'l-akhlāq al-ilāhiyya*, "assuming as one's own the divine character traits." The philosophical tradition is thoroughly familiar with this discussion, though it is more likely to use expressions like *al-tashabbuh bi'l-ilāh*, "similarity to God," or *al-ta'alluh*, "theomorphism" or "deiformity."

Wujūd, as noted, is of two sorts, eternal and newly arriving, or *wujūd* in itself and *wujūd* in its self-disclosure. To speak of deiformity is to have in mind the integrated disclosure of the multiple attributes of *wujūd* in a single locus, namely the human soul. But in itself *wujūd* is one, with no

multiplicity whatsoever, and the soul must also strive to actualize the full implications of its oneness.

The oneness of the Real *Wujūd* transcends all number, limits, and forms. None knows the One *Wujūd* in its essence but the One *Wujūd* itself; things that partake of new arrival can only know the One through its multiple self-disclosures. The divine self-disclosures are realized globally and comprehensively in two loci: the differentiated form that is the cosmos and the undifferentiated form that is the soul (that is, in macrocosm and microcosm). Individual cosmic things are parts of the whole; their differentiation, specification, and partiality do not allow them to actualize the full range of the divine self-disclosure. In other words, everything in the universe manifests this or that face of God, and thereby it acts as a veil for all other faces. The soul, however, though a part of the cosmos in its bodily manifestations, partakes of the undifferentiated form of Real *Wujūd* in its invisible dimensions.

The form of the undisclosed divine Essence—of *wujūd* per se, not of *wujūd* in this face or that face—can be called “the form of formlessness,” and only the soul has access to it. To say that it may achieve this formless form is to say that in itself it has no essential form defining it as this or that. Its only essential form is not to have an essential form, in contrast to everything else in the universe. It has the potential to manifest all the divine attributes, all the divine faces, but in itself it has no defining attribute or face. It is essentially indefinable, so its development and unfolding over the course of a newly arriving human lifetime can never be known beforehand.

Ibn al-'Arabī sometimes talks about the indefinability of the soul in terms of the Koranic verse put into the mouth of the angels, “None of us there is but has a known station” (37:164). Everything other than human beings, he says, was created in a station (*maqām*) that does not change. There can be no surprises in nonhuman creatures. But human beings dwell in unknown stations until death.¹¹ In the case of our own selves, we do not and cannot know what we are dealing with. The more we try to limit and define ourselves, the more we miss our essential nature.

The Peripatetics talk about the soul as a “hylic intellect” (*'aql hayūlānī*), meaning that it is the prime matter in which the intellect can take form and be fully actualized. The extent to which the intellect does in fact become actualized determines the soul's ultimate destiny. In Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, the soul's hylic nature is established by the divine form, which is formless and hence capable of assuming every form.

The renewal of creation at each instant means that all things are constantly dressed in new forms, not just human beings. What distinguishes the human form is its ability to assume an infinity of forms, in contrast to other things,

which are limited and confined to “known stations.” To the objection that people are limited by their physical and psychological natures, Ibn al-‘Arabī replies that the soul in itself has no such limitations. Simply to begin with, its realm opens up into the *mundus imaginalis*, the World of Imagination, which is the most inclusive realm of cosmic existence, since it embraces all the possibilities of heaven and earth, the spiritual and corporeal realms. Imagination is precisely the realm of *taṣawwur*, “assuming forms” (though this term is typically translated as “concept” in keeping with its meaning in logic); there is no form that cannot appear in the imaginal world. As Ibn al-‘Arabī writes,

Through its reality [imagination] exercises its properties over every thing and non-thing. It gives form to absolute nonexistence, the impossible, the Necessary, and possibility. It makes existence nonexistent and nonexistence existent.¹²

Given that new forms arrive constantly, the soul at any given point of its unfolding manifests a specific divine face and stands in a determinate station—like the angels or other creatures. But, because of its essential formlessness, it has the possibility to assume any form and the freedom to shape the modalities in which it assumes them, and these are the “stations” through which it passes.

In Avicenna’s terms, the goal of the philosopher is to achieve the virtues and perfections of the soul and to actualize the intellect. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s terms, the goal is to pass through all the stations while achieving the perfections of each, and then to return to the indefinability of the original divine form. He calls this original indefinability “the station of no station” (*maqām la maqām*).

In brief, then, new arrival is an attribute of everything other than God, including the human soul. Whatever our definition of “time,” new arrival is a name for the cosmic situation that makes it manifest. To cite the words of two philosophical observers of a parallel tradition, “It is the pervasive and collective capacity of the events [read “new arrivals,” *ḥawādith*] of the world to transform continuously that is the actual meaning of time.”¹³ The soul, however, has no essential limits tying it to one form or another, even though its very essence demands that it arrive newly forever.¹⁴

The perfect soul—the soul that has realized the fullness of its own possibilities as divine form—has achieved a situation in which every perfection of Real *Wujūd* has been actualized in a manner appropriate to its constant new arrival. These perfections include the nondelimitation and nonspecificity of *wujūd* per se, the fact that it stands outside of every station, every limitation, every essence, every quiddity. As Ibn al-‘Arabī puts it,

The most all-inclusive specification is that a person not be delimited by a station whereby he is distinguished. . . . His station is that of no station.¹⁵

The people of perfection have realized all stations and states and passed beyond these to the station above both majesty and beauty, so they have no attribute and no description.¹⁶

The highest of all human beings are those who have no station. The reason for this is that the stations determine the properties of those who stand within them, but without doubt, the highest of all groups themselves determine the properties. They are not determined by properties.¹⁷

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What I have just said touches briefly on two or three of Ibn al-'Arabī's themes relevant to the temporal situation of the soul. Let me simply make one more point: Despite the fact that he is one of the most voluminous and non-repetitive authors in Islamic history, in a very real sense his only topic is the exposition of the never-ending new arrival of the soul. What he is doing in diverse ways is to map out the possible modalities of the soul's understanding of its own unfolding, placing emphasis on those that lead to the perfect realization of the form of formlessness. This is especially obvious in the way he situates most if not all of the 560 chapters of his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, in the context of specific sorts of knowledge that are granted to specific sorts of self-realization, as embodied in various prophets and sages. Each understanding of scripture, God, the cosmos, and the human soul pertains to a specific station of knowledge, a specific standpoint in reality. Only the Station of No Station provides the view from nowhere.¹⁸

NOTES

¹ The word I have in mind is *nafs* (cognate with Hebrew *nephesh*), the main reflexive pronoun in Arabic, which is to say that in many contexts it needs to be translated as "self." If I prefer "soul," it is for reasons of English usage. In the unvocalized Arabic script, *nafs* is written exactly the same way as *nafas*, "breath," and this congruence of breath and self has correlations with terms from other traditions, not least Sanskrit *atman*.

² For the Arabic text and a different translation, see Michael E. Marmura, *Avicenna. The Metaphysics of the Healing* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), p. 350.

³ For an introduction to Ibn al-'Arabī's philosophical teachings, see Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabī: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005). For detailed expositions of the issues discussed here, see idem, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

⁴ *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), vol. IV, p. 226, line 5; quoted also in Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 238.

⁵ For a history of the inaccurate ascription of this term to Ibn al-'Arabī and its use by his detractors and followers, see Chittick, "Rūmī and *Waḥdat al-wujūd*," *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, edited by A. Banani, R. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 70–111.

⁶ On the interplay of face and veil, see Chittick, *Sufism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), chapter 10; for details, see *Self-Disclosure*, chapters 3 and 4.

⁷ *Futūḥat* II 313.17; quoted in *Sufi Path* 118.

⁸ *Futūḥat* IV 167.12; quoted in *Self-Disclosure* 71.

⁹ One could follow the Biblical example and translate the word *ṣāra* as “image,” but *ṣāra* is the same term that is used by philosophers in their discussions of hylomorphism (and “image” should be saved for translating the technical terms *khayāl* and *mithāl*). In the Koran, God is the “Form-giver” (*muṣawwir*), and, we are told, “He formed you, and made your forms beautiful” (40:64). In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s usage, “form” rarely designates the intelligible reality or quiddity of a thing (for which he uses *ṣāra*’s correlative, *ma‘nā*, “meaning”), but rather the appearance of things, or the distinctive attributes that make them what they are, or their bodily guise. Like everything else, form undergoes constant change.

¹⁰ *Futūḥat* II 102.31. On the divine form, see *Self-Disclosure* 27–29.

¹¹ See *Sufi Path* 295.

¹² *Futūḥat* I 306.6. See *Sufi Path* 122–23.

¹³ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing, “Making This Life Significant”: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), p. 15.

¹⁴ On never-ending divine self-disclosure as the secret of the soul’s endless life, see Chittick, *Sufi Path* 156.

¹⁵ *Futūḥat* IV 76.31; *Sufi Path* 377.

¹⁶ *Futūḥat* II 133.19; *Sufi Path* 376.

¹⁷ *Futūḥat* III 506.30; *Sufi Path* 376.

¹⁸ Contra Ames and Hall, who maintain that “There is no view from nowhere,” given that “The field of experience is always construed from one perspective or another” (*Daodejing* 18).