

Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World

by William C. Chittick
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A Review Essay by Peter Samsel

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Those who have made a particular study of Sufism, particularly in its more intellectual or doctrinal aspects, will have long been acquainted with the prolific and masterly scholarship of William Chittick. Having completed a number of fine studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī – the preeminent master of theoretical Sufism – Chittick has more recently turned his scholarly attention to the Islamic philosophical tradition, particularly as represented by Afḍal-Dīn Kāshānī and Mullā Ṣadrā. These two closely overlapping domains – Sufism and philosophy – comprise in tandem what Chittick terms the “Islamic intellectual tradition”. The present work, written for a general audience, gathers a number of essays that address the tradition’s basic character, fundamental concerns, contemporary eclipse and enduring pertinence. At heart, it addresses the ultimate potentiality of what it means to be human, along with the very real and terrible cost of the forgetting of this potentiality.

The Character of Intellectual Knowledge

The central concern of the present work is the explication and defense of a particular possibility of human knowing, one almost completely unrecognized and forgotten in the modern era. Chittick terms such knowledge “intellectual knowledge”, “realization” or “verification”, from the Arabic *taḥqīq*. In contrast, the vast majority of what passes for knowledge is *taqlīd*, “transmitted knowledge”, “following authority” or “imitation”. Transmitted knowledge is that which we take from others, whether through education, reading, conversation, the media or any of the thousand and one means through which such knowledge may be acquired.

The latter knowledge is utterly familiar; the former, barely cognizable. Nevertheless, the contraposition of intellectual knowledge to transmitted knowledge holds a vital clue: intellectual knowledge is that knowledge that we do not – indeed cannot – receive from others, whether in imitation or on authority; it can only arise from one’s own insight, one’s own verification. As Chittick explains,

If transmitted knowledge is our ordinary, everyday sort of knowledge, intellectual knowledge is something quite different. Knowledge only qualifies as intellectual when knowers know it at the very root of their own intelligence and without any intermediary – not even imagination and cogitation.¹

Here, even one’s powers of sense perception, intuition, imagination or cogitation are, in a sense, “others” – faculties distinct from the self – and as such, any knowledge as may be received from them must be other than intellectual knowledge.

How is such knowledge to be attained, if neither from others nor by the exercise of one’s own faculties? Chittick suggests that, “It must be realized within oneself through a long process of mental training and inner purification.”² Although another may serve as midwife to such knowledge, its actual attainment is necessarily one’s own. A consideration of mathematical knowledge may prove helpful by way of analogy. If a mathematical proof is learned rote without the awakening of one’s insight, one cannot be said to have understood it; only when its various steps are grasped, whether disparately or collectively, is the knowledge of the proof one’s own – *taqlīd* transformed into a kind of *taḥqīq*.

Mathematical knowledge was traditionally considered an “intermediate science” between transmitted knowledge and intellectual knowledge precisely because of the immediacy and certainty characteristic of it. As Chittick observes, “If mathematics was traditionally considered an intellectual science of sorts, this is because its principles can be discovered within oneself without the need for transmission.”³ Yet mathematical knowledge, given both its proper objects and mode of analysis, is not the same as intellectual knowledge. One may see this distinction in the exercise of faculties involved in mathematics: one reasons one’s way through a proof to a certain conclusion; one does not grasp that same conclusion at the root of one’s own selfhood.

Yet, again by way of analogy, there are degrees of mastery and insight in mathematics that may be suggestive of the potentialities of intellectual knowledge: at one end of the scale, the rank novice may grope haltingly through a derivation; at the other end, one may find a Gauss, Euler or Ramanujan, for whom the solution to even a vexing mathematical problem may appear entire in a single flash of insight. Despite this suggestiveness, the concerns of mathematical and intellectual knowledge are quite distinct: for the former, the proper objects of study include numbers, geometric shapes and various abstract constructions; those of the latter could be said to comprise the proper domains of the Real itself.

The Content of Intellectual Knowledge

These domains of verification characteristic of intellectual knowledge are gathered by the tradition under four headings: “metaphysics, cosmology, spiritual psychology and ethics,”⁴ or, alternatively, God, the cosmos, and the soul and its rectification. One might also understand these four categories in terms of the traditional Islamic discussion of the Origin and Return, in which the domains of metaphysics and cosmology are concerned most particularly with the origin of all things from God, while spiritual psychology and ethics are concerned most particularly with the human return to God. Overarching these categories, however, is the single truth that is the ultimate concern of intellectual knowledge. This central insight, termed *tawhīd*, or “asserting the unity of God”, is summarized by Chittick as,

All reality is unified in its principle. Everything in the universe comes from God and returns to God, and everything is utterly and absolutely dependent upon God here and now, always and forever, in every time and in every place.⁵

The basic intuition of *tawhīd* was seen by the tradition as self-evident. Indeed, such is still the situation, even if the implications of this intuition are more obscured. Thus, our fundamental cognition of the world and ourselves is in terms of unities: a car is not a collection of parts, but *a* car; a painting not a collection of pigments, but *a* painting. Further, foundational conceptions such as justice, harmony and beauty are ultimately grounded in a conception of unity in the absence of which they are unintelligible: in each, there is the coherence and resolution of seemingly isolated parts into a larger unity. Finally, every call for unity, whether socially, politically or otherwise could be said to be grounded in this intuition, while many of the modern sciences – such as physics – are positively obsessed with the discovery of underlying unity. As Chittick observes, “From the standpoint of the intellectual tradition, the intuition of *tawhīd* drives every quest for knowledge. All seekers of knowledge already understand at some level of their being that things are coherent, intelligible and interconnected.”⁶

The tradition further saw that knowledge of *tawhīd* was not only self-evident in its basic intuition, but ultimately was the only certain knowledge available, its certainty being grounded precisely in its transcending of the contingencies that mark every kind of “factual”, transmitted knowledge. As Chittick asserts, “Historical contingencies cannot touch *tawhīd* because, once it is grasped, it is seen as so foundational that it becomes the unique certainty upon which the soul can depend.”⁷ Again, the analogy with mathematics is apt: once grasped, one can be said to know the Pythagorean Theorem with a certainty greater than that of any learned fact, precisely because the contingent character of transmitted knowledge does not apply to it. The certainty of mathematical knowledge is intimately related to its objects, which, by their nature, are never to be found as such outside the self, but are instead directly apprehended from within. The knowledge of unity is even more profoundly related to its object, for one participates in unity

in one's very being: just as objects such as a car or painting partake of unity in order to be what they are, so the subject, one's very self, also partakes of this unity at the root of one's selfhood, for there is ultimately self-awareness, not self-awarenesses, just as there is self-identity, not self-identities.

Although one may perceive the phenomenal traces of unity both without and within, none of these are unity as such; rather, they are so many instantiations of unity, just as, in mathematics, every square shape is a particular instantiation of a foundational squareness that uniquely transcends any of its instances. Similarly, there may be seen to be a unique, transcendent unity that stands principally in relation to any of its instantiations. This foundational unity may be termed the Absolute, the Real, the One, or – more simply – God. It is the root of all things, “the only reality that is truly real,”⁸ as Chittick observes, and for this reason, one may see that “...the only dependable and real knowledge is awareness of the First Real.”⁹ The unique certainty that the knowledge of *tawhīd* bears as an implicit human possibility may thus be seen to rest upon two conjoined foundations: that the object of the knowledge of *tawhīd* is the Real itself, and that one participates in *tawhīd* in one's very selfhood.

The innate potentiality to grasp, however tentatively and imperfectly, the truth of *tawhīd* – of the principial unity above all contingent unities – was understood by the intellectual tradition as inherent to the human state, part of the “innate disposition” – or *fiṭra* – of humanity. The intuition of this truth is central to human orientation: as Chittick assesses,

Once we understand things in terms of *tawhīd*, we can understand the origin and destiny of the cosmos and the soul, and we can also grasp the present status of the world in which we live. *Tawhīd* answers the ultimate questions and allows people to orient themselves in terms of real beginnings and real ends.¹⁰

The fundamental intuition of *tawhīd* may not be understood monolithically, but rather must be grasped in light of an all too evident multiplicity. In the view of the tradition, unity is at once the ground and source of multiplicity, which necessarily arises from it. In the bringing forth of multiplicity from unity, of contingency from necessity, the first reflection or extension of the Real in its absolute unicity is pure consciousness or awareness. As Chittick states,

It was obvious to Muslim thinkers that the One God creates intelligently, and that the first manifestation of his reality, the contingent being closest to his unity, the stage of created actuality nearest to his utter and absolute simplicity, is pure intelligence and awareness.¹¹

The created order cannot arise from any act of making or fabrication, which would impart a reality apart from the Real, but rather is the self-knowledge of the Real itself. For the Real, knowledge is creative, and the known creation necessarily borrows it being from the knowledge of the Knower: “In the last analysis, the universe has no existence save as an epiphenomenon of God's knowledge and consciousness.”¹² This first, reflective capacity of the Real through which the created order is manifested is termed the Intellect, or First Intellect. As Chittick describes,

The first reality that the Supreme Reality brings into existence, the Intellect or Spirit, is as similar to that Reality as any contingent thing can be. It is aware with a contingent awareness of all that may possibly be. The Real gives rise to multiplicity by means of this first, contingent reality.¹³

The First Intellect cannot be understood as apart from the Real; rather, in light of *tawhīd*, it must be properly seen as an aspect of the Real, the first extension of the Real out of its own transcendent interiority. That which is known by the sustained knowing of the First Intellect – the created order itself – is likewise, in light of *tawhīd*, not truly separable from the First Intellect or the Real. Yet there might be said to be distinction without separability, without which the Real would remain utterly unknown and the created order unmanifest. The first distinction of the Real, as we have seen, is that of consciousness, which in turn seeds that most basic distinction between subject and object. The first, ontological subject must necessarily be the First Intellect itself, to which the entire created order stands as object. Within the created order, however, the subject of greatest relevance is man himself, the cosmos his object of contemplation and knowledge. The remarkable capacity for conscious awareness, for objective and comprehensive knowledge, for the grasping of utterly immaterial truths is what most wholly and uniquely

distinguishes man, in his particular subjectivity, from the manifest cosmos in any of its vast and myriad aspects. As Chittick observes, “The human soul is a knowing and aware subject that has the capacity to take as its object the whole cosmos and everything within it.”¹⁴

The human soul and the cosmos were seen by the tradition as forming the microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects, respectively, of a comprehensive “anthropocosmic” manifest creation. As Chittick notes, “The soul, then, is the subjective pole of manifest reality, and its counterpart is the cosmos, the objective pole.”¹⁵ As subjective microcosm and objective macrocosm, both stemming from the same overarching metacosmic reality, the soul and cosmos cannot be held as separate, but rather must be properly seen as intimately connected. As Chittick emphasizes, “So closely intertwined are soul and cosmos that...their relationship can properly be called ‘organismic’. They can be understood as one organism with two faces.”¹⁶ The organismic relation between soul and cosmos may ultimately be seen as a wholly natural consequence of the unity of the Real; as Chittick clarifies,

...the axiom of *tawhīd* infused all intellectual endeavor. The philosophers saw all things as beginning, flourishing and ending within the compass of the One Source, so they could not split up the domains of reality in more than a tentative way. They were not able to disengage knowledge of the cosmos from knowledge of God or knowledge of the soul. It was impossible for them to imagine the world and the self as separate from each other or from the One Principle.¹⁷

The Perfection of Intellectual Knowledge

The unique subjectivity of the human soul, the particular comprehensiveness of human consciousness and intelligence, the innate human disposition to grasp the truth of *tawhīd*, all conform man for the possibility of a fundamental perfection, termed by the tradition the “*taḥqīq* of *tawhīd*”, the verification of unity. The innate human intuition of unity may be matured to a more profound, transformative and ultimately perfected vision. Chittick, in describing the stages of this verification, clarifies that,

At the beginning...*tawhīd* is simply an inchoate intuition. It is then awakened and articulated by transmitted knowledge. Gradually it can grow into an actualized understanding, then a rational certainty, then a supra-rational comprehension of the way things are, and then a vision that transcends the vision of the eyes just as oracular vision transcends blindness.¹⁸

The nature of this verification cannot be of intellectual or theoretical knowledge alone but must necessarily encompass the entirety of man’s interior life; knowledge entails conformation as its consequence: “To know is to be.”¹⁹ The conformation necessarily inherent in *taḥqīq* is clear in the very meaning of the term; as Chittick explains,

Taḥqīq derives from the same root as *ḥaqq*, which means truth, reality, appropriateness, rightness, responsibility and duty. *Taḥqīq* means not only to understand the truth, rightness and appropriateness of things, but also to respond to them correctly by putting into practice the demands that they make upon the soul.²⁰

At the beginning of the intellectual quest, the familiar assumption of separateness – inherent in the very nature of manifestation – dominates the soul’s understanding: the soul perceives itself as self-abiding, independent at once from both the Real and the cosmos. In overcoming this perception of separateness, the soul must cultivate those qualities that conform to the *ḥaqq*, the reality, of things. As this reality is grounded most fundamentally in the unity of the Real and the attendant anthropocosmic character of manifestation, these qualities may be seen as those that at once work to render the soul objective to itself and the cosmos subjective to the soul. As Chittick elucidates,

The very structure of the intellectual quest stressed not only the achievement of right knowledge through the unification of subject and object, but also the actualization of sound moral character and the cultivation of virtue. The quest aimed at overcoming the soul’s self-centeredness, to train

it to detach itself from its individualistic tendencies, and to point the way toward bridging the gap between self and other.²¹

Such adorning virtues as compassion and justice may be seen quite evidently as bridging this gap, while such fundamental moral precepts as the golden rule – or ethic of reciprocity – may be seen in direct consequence of the anthropocosmic vision.

Ultimately, the soul must rectify its own reality, both in vision and virtue, if it is to know its own ground. The qualities that the soul cultivates are, in a profound sense, not its own, but those of the Real itself; by so cultivating them, the soul brings itself into conformity with the Real. Just as it is called to give each thing its *haqq*, to appropriately acknowledge its reality, so too it must give itself its *haqq*, which, in light of *tawhīd*, must ultimately trace to the Real itself. Here, the cosmogenic First Intellect may be seen in its full consequence, for it is not only the subject in relation to objective manifestation, but it is also the root of every subject within manifestation; as Chittick clarifies, “This living intelligence...lies at the root of every subject and every object.”²² The consequence of this in relation to man follows directly: “...the human self is grounded in a trans-historical intelligence and ultimately in Absolute Reality”²³

To relate this seemingly rarefied understanding to concrete, prosaic experience, one might consider the problem of learning, or “Meno’s Paradox” – of how one may recognize knowledge if one does not first possess it – first discussed by Plato in the *Meno*,²⁴ leading in turn to his doctrine of *anamnesis*, or recollection of the soul. The problem of learning is a real philosophical problem, as much with us now as with Plato, as is particularly evident in such fields as linguistics and language acquisition. Within the naturalistic worldview of modernity, this problem is basically irresolvable, apart from an *ad hoc* appeal to some undefined human innateness. For that matter, the possibility of reason as a truth perceiving faculty is also irresolvable under this worldview, as such figures as C.S. Lewis, Victor Reppert and Alvin Plantinga have philosophically demonstrated.²⁵ In contrast, within the understanding of the Islamic intellectual tradition, the very anthropocosmic character of the created order, grounded in the metacosmic First Intellect, immediately resolves both problems, for as Chittick observes,

It was understood that intelligence is not only that which grasps and comprehends the real nature of things, but also that which gives birth to things in the first place. Everything knowable is already latent within intelligence, because all things appear from intelligence in the cosmogenic process.²⁶

To clarify the distinction of this view from Plato’s, for Plato, *anamnesis*, and therefore knowledge, is possible because the soul has gathered an infinite store of experience through the “horizontal” travail of innumerable incarnations; in contrast, for the Islamic intellectual tradition, knowledge is possible because the soul, in its root-subjectivity, is “vertically” grounded in the Intellect that gives rise at once to the knowing subject and the objects of knowledge. In the end, of course, subject, object and any knowledge between them are one, are in fact the One. It is this root understanding that cuts through the glamour of all the phenomenal possibilities that confront the soul, for there are a thousand and one ways that the soul may occupy itself, but every one of them finds its ground in the First Intellect, as does the soul itself. With this seen, all the thousand and one choices collapse to a single choice, the only true human choice: to trace through one’s selfhood to the transcendent Intellect shining within. As Chittick asserts,

It is precisely this possibility of transcendence that marks the highest human calling. Indeed, when a tradition acknowledges this calling, it also acknowledges that this alone is the truly *human* calling. Every other calling turns people away from their root selfhood, which is the image of the Supreme Reality, if not that Reality itself.²⁷

To realize oneself as the Real is to achieve by consequence at once freedom and omniscience. Only the Real is above contingency, above both boundedness and limitation. To recognize this within oneself and for oneself is to participate in this same unlimitedness; as Chittick affirms, “The great spiritual and contemplative traditions...are unanimous in declaring that it is indeed possible to become free of limitations and to act as the vehicle through which the Unobserved Observer observes.”²⁸ As all things

come into being through a cosmogonic act of knowledge by the First Intellect, the unlimitedness of the Real bears as its natural corollary omniscience: the Real as root of all knows all. In consequence, the human participation in this omniscience is in the nature of the unitary essence of all things rather than their manifold differentiation. Chittick, speaking of knowledge of the sage, elucidates that,

...they achieve omniscience, though not in a differentiated way. This is a unitary understanding, an awareness of all things at their root. It is a spontaneous knowing, a blossoming of consciousness, and awakening to reality – all without reflection or thought. It is to see things as they are seen by the First Intellect before their appearance as coagulations in the universe.²⁹

Ultimately, however, the very unlimitedness of the Real bears in consequence that the human participation in the Real can have no closure and no end; as Chittick affirms, “The quest can have no closure, because the Infinite and Absolute can never be reached, though it reaches everywhere.”³⁰

The Rejection of Intellectual Knowledge

If the worldview of the Islamic tradition is dominated by the vision of unity – *tawhīd* – then that of modernity, may, in contrast, be said to be dominated by its opposite – *takthīr* – the scattering of concerns into multiplicity and the loss of any unific intuition or awareness. As Chittick observes, “Modern times and modern thought lack a single center, a single orientation, a single goal, any single purpose at all.”³¹ The consequence of this loss can be seen in the drive for novelty and the “secular paganism” of mundane concerns elevated to the status of divinities. Thus, as he clarifies, “In Islamic theology, God is *qadīm*, ‘ancient’ or ‘eternal’. He has always been and always will be. In modernity, the gods are new.”³² Further,

The gods in a world of *takthīr* are legion. To mention some of the more important ones would be to list the defining myths and ideologies of our times – freedom, equality, evolution, progress, science, medicine, nationalism, socialism, democracy, Marxism.³³

A central term for the type of thinking that dominates modernity is scientism, taken, in an immediate sense, as the unwarranted extension of scientific claims, thinking and approaches into domains beyond their legitimate competence; more significantly, however, science – and its inevitably accompanying scientism – is bound at its root with the perspective of *takthīr*: as Chittick perceives, “modern science yields disunity and dissonance by definition.”³⁴ Putting the matter more bluntly,

Science gains its power from rejection of any sort of teleology, brute separation of subject and object, refusal to admit that consciousness and awareness are more real than material facts, exclusive concern with the domain of the senses, and disregard for the ultimate and the transcendent.³⁵

Just as the transcendent Real is rejected, so must *tawhīd* be rejected, save in its most material ramifications; in terrible consequence, so also is the return to God; as Chittick judges, “...modernity is propelled by a certain type of false thinking that is intensely antithetical to the three principles of Islamic faith – *tawhīd*, prophecy and the Return to God.”³⁶

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, knowledge is bound up with self rectification: the soul must give each thing its *ḥaqq*, its reality, if it is to draw into conformity with, and knowledge of the Real. For modern science, no such equivalent concern pertains. As Chittick assesses,

A methodology that yields an unbridgeable gulf between truth and ethics is ignorance, not knowledge. Such an approach ignores the *ḥaqq* of things – both their true nature and the moral demands that they make upon us. Under the reign of *takthīr*, intelligence and virtue are torn from their roots in the real world.³⁷

More damningly, such a mode of knowledge, having rejected *tawhīd*, is condemned to wander among lesser concerns; as Chittick affirms,

Ignorance of the reality of the knower leads to using knowledge as a means to achieve illusory ends, and ignorance of the reality of the known turns the world into things and objects that can be manipulated for goals cut off from any vision of true human nature.³⁸

In sharp distinction to the Islamic intellectual tradition, the character of scientific knowledge is necessarily that of transmitted knowledge, rather than intellectual knowledge. As Chittick notes,

Modern science is indeed built on consensus, but this simply shows that it is fundamentally a transmitted science, not an intellectual science. Scientists do not verify and realize most of what they think they know. Rather, they accept it from their own authorities.³⁹

What, then, about the individual discoveries that a given scientist may make? This also fails to rise to the level of intellectual knowledge; as he further insists,

It can be argued that a modern scientist who makes a new discovery has “verified” and “realized” it for himself. The Muslim intellectual tradition would not have called this *tahqīq*, however, because it does not extend deep enough into the depths of the soul and spirit to recognize the real nature of things.⁴⁰

Further, the very character of the modern worldview not only fails to nurture the possibility of intellectual knowledge, but in fact rejects this possibility root and branch; as Chittick notes, “...in modern times, we live in a society that considers this sort of intellectual knowledge as an absurdity or an impossibility.”⁴¹

That this should be so is hardly surprising, as the reification and objectification of the cosmos inherent at once in science, scientism and the worldview of modernity intrinsically rejects both the transcendent grounding of man and the cosmos in the First Intellect as well as the anthropocosmic vision that is its natural concomitant. Instead, we are left with a vision in which, as Chittick observes, “The world and all its contents, including human beings in most of their roles, have been turned into isolated objects standing in ontological, spiritual and moral vacuums.”⁴² This vision is closely allied to the contemporary dominance of the methodology of instrumental rationality, which precisely “...sees the world as a conglomeration of objects and understands knowledge as the means to control the world.”⁴³ Such a methodology cannot but ignore the *haqq* of things, both in their ontological significances and their ethical rights. As Chittick rather damningly observes, “From the point of view of Islamic cosmology, what we call ‘science’ is a reading of the universe that ignores all but the most insignificant meanings that the cosmos has to offer.”⁴⁴ Even worse, however, is the forced truncation of man’s soteriological horizon: “As long as the truncated worldview of scientism remains the arbiter, no opening to the Infinite is possible.”⁴⁵

The Islamic intellectual tradition that Chittick so eloquently defends remains, at root, a possibility to be embraced insofar as man remains man in his intrinsic potentialities. Nevertheless, the intellectual tradition has not gone unaffected by modernity. As he clarifies,

...the intellectual approach about which I am writing has been moribund for over a century. A few people will speak for it, but their voices go largely unheard. The economic, political and social forces that drive activity in the rest of the world have not left Muslims behind.⁴⁶

This foreclosure is catastrophic not only for the intellectual tradition, but for the Islamic tradition as a whole; as he observes “...no religion can survive, much less flourish, without a living intellectual tradition.”⁴⁷ The signs of this loss in contemporary Islam are all too evident, as Chittick enumerates:

...the politicization of the community, the monolithic interpretations of Islamic teachings and unthinking acquiescence to the ideological preaching of Muslim leaders. Perhaps the deepest and most pernicious of these obstacles, however, is the general trend to reject all but the most superficial trappings of the Islamic tradition.⁴⁸

In the end, if the intellectual tradition is lost, the result can only be dogmatism, whether religious or secular; as he observes, “If we reject the possibility of intellectual knowledge, we are forced to cling to the shell of knowledge, and the result will be dogmatic closure.”⁴⁹ The two contemporary dogmatic

stances – religious or secular – while superficially so different, are at root much the same in consequence: in either, man is cut off from the possibility of intellection and the knowledge of the Intellect that he possesses *in potentia* by virtue of the human state. As such, he is cut off at his deepest root both from his true selfhood and from God.

A Platonic Perspective on Intellectual Knowledge

Having discussed the book under review in detail, we wish now to extend its concerns somewhat further. The possibility of intellectual knowledge is something necessarily universal in scope, as it is bound up with the possibilities of man *qua* man. As such, it necessarily extends beyond the confines of the Islamic intellectual tradition itself, such that a consideration of intellectual knowledge in other contexts may shed helpful light on its specific character. In particular, and as is specifically germane to those in the West, Plato has much to say on the matter in question. The three most critical instances in the Platonic Dialogues where the Intellect and the possibility of intellection are addressed all appear in the *Republic*: the metaphor of the sun, the analogy of the divided line and the allegory of the cave.

In the metaphor of the sun,⁵⁰ the sun is taken as metaphoric of the Form of the Good – equivalent, in Plato's terminology, to the peripatetic term First Intellect more commonly employed in the Islamic intellectual tradition – root source of our knowledge of the intelligibles, that is, everything knowable to our intellect, rather than our senses. Just as the eye requires the light of the sun in order to perceive physical objects, so does the eye of intellect require the illumination of the Form of the Good in order to grasp the intelligibles. Plato very clearly denotes the distinction between intellectual and transmitted knowledge in a middle passage of the metaphor:

When it [the soul] firmly adheres to that which truth and real being enlighten, then it understands and knows it, and appears to possess intellect: but when it adheres to that which is blended with darkness, which is generated, and which perishes, it is then conversant with opinion, its vision becomes blunted, it wanders from one opinion to another, and resembles one without intellect.⁵¹

Further, the Form of the Good is not only the ground of intellection, but is the generative source of all:

We may say, therefore, that things which are known have not only this from The Good, that they are known, but likewise that their being and essence are thence derived, whilst The Good itself is not essence, but beyond essence, transcending it both in dignity and in power.⁵²

In the analogy of the divided line,⁵³ Plato distinguishes between the sensible (*horaton*) and intelligible (*noeton*) domains, each of which may be further subdivided into two classes of objects and associated types of knowledge. To the lowest section of the sensible domain belong the shadows or reflections of physical objects, known through *eikasia*: image perception or imagination. To this section would also fall artistic representations of physical objects, which are a further remove from reality, as he clarifies in the analogy of the bed.⁵⁴ To the next section belong all physical, sensible objects – natural features, flora, fauna, artifacts and the rest – known through *pistis*: conviction or belief. From these domains, Plato next passes to the intelligible domains above the divided line. To the lowest intelligible domain belong the objects of mathematics. As Aristotle asserts in the *Metaphysics*,⁵⁵ Plato held that mathematical objects fell intermediate between those of the sensible domain and the intelligible Forms (*Eidos*). Frederick Copleston⁵⁶ suggests that, while physical objects are sensible particulars, and the intelligible Forms are necessarily intelligible universals, of which each is *sui generis*, the objects of mathematics are intelligible particulars – as demonstrated, for instance, by the plurality of circles in a geometric demonstration – and thus fall intermediate. Such objects are known through *dianoia*: reason or discursive thinking. To the highest domain belong the intelligible Forms, the perfect, intelligible realities that stand as originating prototypes to any physical instantiations. The Forms comprise so many aspects of intelligible, non-corporeal, universal, timeless, immutable being. They may be known through the highest human faculty: *noesis*: intellectual intuition or direct apprehension.

In the allegory of the cave,⁵⁷ Plato unfolds an allegory or myth that embodies both the metaphor of the sun and the analogy of the divided line. A row of prisoners, chained from birth, face the rear wall of a

cave, upon which shadows are thrown and echoes sound from figures passing along a raised path behind them, illumined from a fire beyond. Outside the cave proper is the daylight world of all those things illumined by the sun itself. Most prisoners spend their lives seeing only shadows, hearing only echoes; a rare few may free themselves sufficiently from their chains to turn and see the actual figures that are the source of the shadows; fewer still will leave the cave and enter into the world of clear, sun-illumined objects; a precious handful will then turn to see the sun itself, source of all illumination. The state of imprisoned shadow perception is that of *eikasia*, limited, distorted understanding dominated by prejudice, passion and sophistry; to turn and see the figures themselves is a conversion to *pistis*, true conviction, a clear vision of sensible reality. The fire in the cave represents the sensible sun of our experience, whereas the sun above the cave is the intelligible sun, the Form of the Good. The entrance to the cave is then the divided line, the demarcation between sensible and intelligible realities. As in the metaphor of the sun, in the lower, sensible world, one perceives through sight; in the intelligible world, one perceives through that function of which sight is itself metaphoric: that of the eye of the soul, intellection, *noesis*. To then come out of the cave into the sunlit world is to rise to *noesis*, to the direct apprehension of the intelligible Forms; finally, to look upon the sun itself is to raise one's intellect to the knowledge of the Form of the Good itself, the *summum bonum* of human possibility; lastly, the one so graced may descend back into the cave, among his former companions, in an attempt to free those whom he may and show them what he himself has seen; this, of course, is the burden and promise of *paideia*, of philosophic education.

In light of this specifically Platonic understanding, we may turn again to consider the concerns of the Islamic intellectual tradition and the particular nature of the intellectual crisis that modernity represents. At root, the Islamic intellectual tradition is concerned, as with Plato, with the possibility of *noesis*, and with the nurturance and fruition of this possibility for those souls capable of it. The lower intellectual function, *dianoia*, is of course recognized and even plays a vital role, as in the exercise of *dialectic*, but is subordinated in ultimate importance to *noesis*. Similarly, mathematics was considered by the Islamic intellectual tradition as an "intermediate science", below *taḥqīq*, in agreement with Plato's placement of *dianoia* and the understanding of mathematical objects in the divided line. In contrast, the intellectual crisis of modernity may be understood Platonically as the specific rejection of the possibility of *noesis* and its displacement by *dianoia*. Thus, comparing the terminology of the Islamic intellectual tradition to that of the Platonic tradition, we may see that *taḥqīq*, intellectual knowledge, is equivalent to *noesis*, *taqlīd*, transmitted knowledge, is equivalent – taken perhaps in its less reliable and more reliable aspects, respectively – to *eikasia* and *pistis*, and intermediate between *taḥqīq* and *taqlīd* may be found mathematical knowledge and *dianoia*. The nature of modern science may then be seen as falling largely between *pistis* and *dianoia*, the non-mathematical sciences, such as biology, falling more towards the former, the mathematical sciences, such as physics, falling more towards the latter. The actual situation is more convoluted and contradictory than this, as most scientists, avowed materialists that they are, would deny the intelligible order entirely, accepting only the lower half of the divided line, despite the fact that many work daily with what are unquestionably intelligibles – the object of mathematics – in their practice as scientists.

The Experience of Intellectual Knowledge

The character and experience of intellectual knowledge – *taḥqīq* or *noesis* – is immensely subtle and difficult to grasp for all but the few who have familiarity with it. It is possible to come to a better sense of this knowledge through a careful review of what those who have experience of it have to say on the matter. We turn first, once again, to Plato. In his own commentary on the allegory of the cave, he addresses both the possibility and difficulty of intellectually apprehending the Form of the Good:

The whole of this image now, said I, friend Glauco, is to be applied to our preceding discourse [the allegory]: for, if you compare this region, which is seen by the sight, to the habitation of the prison; and the light of the fire in it, to the power of the sun; and the ascent above, and the vision of things above, to the soul's ascent into the intelligible place; you will apprehend my meaning, since you want to hear it. But God knows whether it be true. Appearances then present

themselves to my view as follows. In the intelligible place, the idea of *The Good* is the last object of vision, and is scarcely to be seen; but if it be seen, we must collect by reasoning that it is the cause to all of everything right and beautiful, generating in the visible place, light, and its lord the sun; and in the intelligible place, it is itself the lord, producing truth and intellect; and this must be beheld by him who is to act wisely, either privately or in public.⁵⁸

Closely conflated with the Form of the Good is the Form of the Beautiful, and on its apprehension, Diotima – the prophetess who has instructed Socrates so well on the nature of love – has much to say. As one progresses in the perception, first of sensible beauty, then of intelligible beauty, he may pass suddenly to an intellective vision of The Beautiful itself. As Socrates relates in the *Symposium*,

But now try, continued she, to give me all the attention you are master of. Whoever then is advanced thus far in the mysteries of Love by a right and regular progress of contemplation, approaching new to perfect intuition, suddenly he will discover, bursting into view, a beauty astonishingly admirable; that very beauty, to the gaining a sight of which the aim of all his preceding studies and labors has been directed....Here is to be found, dear Socrates, said the stranger-prophetess, here if any where, the happy life, the ultimate object of desire to man: it is to live in beholding this consummate beauty; the sight of which if ever you attain, it will appear not to be in gold, nor in magnificent attire, nor in beautiful youths or damsels....If this be so, what effect, think you, would the sight of beauty itself have upon a man, were he to see it pure and genuine, not corrupted and stained all over with the mixture of flesh, and colors, and much more of like perishing and fading trash; but were able to view that divine essence, the beautiful itself, in its own simplicity of form?⁵⁹

Finally, in Plato's *Seventh Letter*, he speaks of the sudden passage from *dianoia* – as in the context of *dialectic* – to *noesis*, from ratiocination to intellective vision. As with Diotima's description of the apprehension of the Form of the Beautiful, the vision comes "of a sudden" – *exaiphnes* – revealed to the soul as a sudden immediate presence:

For a thing of this kind [i.e. true being, the proper object of intellection] cannot be expressed by words like other disciplines, but by long familiarity, and living in the conjunction with the thing itself, a light as it were leaping from a fire will on a sudden be enkindled in the soul, and there nourish itself.⁶⁰

We next turn from Plato to Plotinus, arguably Plato's closest disciple, despite the centuries separating them, and a *Plato redivivus* – Plato revived – as Ficino, the Latin translator of both philosophers, esteemed. If Plato speaks of the Good as the preeminent principle, source and goal of all, Plotinus also speaks of this same reality as the One: it is the Divine, the Father, the Supreme, the goal of all our proper strivings. We begin with a remarkable autobiographical account of his own experience of *noesis* of the Good, taken from his collected philosophic discourses, the *Enneads*. In it, he is quite explicit regarding the distinction between intellection and reasoning, in the context of the fall from the higher experience to the lower:

Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-centered; beholding a marvelous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever within the Intellectual is less than the Supreme: yet, there comes the moment of descent from intellection to reasoning, and after that sojourn in the divine, I ask myself how it happens that I can now be descending, and how did the soul ever enter into my body, the soul which, even within the body, is the high thing it has shown itself to be.⁶¹

Just as for Plato, so for Plotinus, the philosophic life is bound to the life of virtue; no vision, no participation with the Divine, is possible without this: as he observes, "Without true virtue, God is only a word."⁶² In order to know the Good, one must become good; in order to behold the Beautiful, one must

become beautiful. The vision – *noesis, theoria* – comes suddenly, unbidden, to the soul, but it comes only to the soul prepared and purified to receive it:

“Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland”: this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso – not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father.

What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.

And this inner vision, what is its operation?

Newly awakened it is all too feeble to bear the ultimate splendor. Therefore the Soul must be trained – to the habit of remarking, first, all noble pursuits, then the works of beauty produced not by the labor of the arts but by the virtue of men known for their goodness: lastly, you must search the souls of those that have shaped these beautiful forms.

But how are you to see into a virtuous soul and know its loveliness?

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labor to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiseling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendor of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.

When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever unmeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity – when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step – you need a guide no longer – strain, and see.⁶³

The soul may begin to progress toward intellectual vision by the preparation of the rational faculty and the inculcation of virtue. How is it, though, that ratiocination, the act of *dialectic*, may pass to intellection? Plato spoke of this in his *Seventh Letter*; here, Plotinus addresses the same sudden arising of intellectual vision and its utterly different character from that ratiocinative act which had preceded it:

Knowledge of The Good or contact with it, is the all-important: this – we read – is the grand learning, the learning we are to understand, not of looking towards it but attaining, first, some knowledge of it. We come to this learning by analogies, by abstractions, by our understanding of its subsequents, of all that is derived from The Good, by the upward steps towards it. Purification has The Good for goal; so the virtues, all right ordering, ascent within the Intellectual, settlement therein, banqueting upon the divine – by these methods one becomes, to self and to all else, at once seen and seer; identical with Being and Intellectual-Principle and the entire living all, we no longer see the Supreme as an external; we are near now, the next is That and it is close at hand, radiant above the Intellectual.

Here, we put aside all the learning; disciplined to this pitch, established in beauty, the quester holds knowledge still of the ground he rests on but, suddenly, swept beyond it all by the very crest of the wave of Intellect surging beneath, he is lifted and sees, never knowing how; the vision floods the eyes with light, but it is not a light showing some other object, the light is itself the

vision. No longer is there thing seen and light to show it, no longer Intellect and object of Intellection; this is the very radiance that brought both Intellect and Intellectual object into being for the later use and allowed them to occupy the quester's mind. With This he himself becomes identical, with that radiance whose Act is to engender Intellectual-Principle, not losing in that engendering but for ever unchanged, the engendered coming to be simply because that Supreme exists.⁶⁴

From the Platonic philosophic tradition, we may turn once again to the Islamic intellectual tradition. The possibility of gnosis, unveiling or tasting of spiritual realities is a matter about which the tradition has much to say and of which many voices within the tradition speak. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, perhaps the preeminent scholar of the Islamic tradition, clearly distinguishes between three degrees of knowledge: intellectual knowledge, or fruitional experience, the rational ascertainment that may serve as a preparation for it, and transmitted knowledge:

Ascertainment by apodeictic proof leads to *knowledge*. Intimate experience of that very state is *fruitional experience*. Favorable acceptance of it based on hearsay and experience of others is *faith*. These, then, are three degrees, or levels, of knowledge – “God raises in degrees those of you who believe and those to whom knowledge is given.” (Qur'an 58:12)⁶⁵

Al-Ghazālī further describes the character of intellectual knowledge in the context of the lived reality of Sufism. The sense of unitive participation, its close correlation with the same sense as described by Plotinus above, and its utter dissimilarity to all that may have passed for knowledge before it is all too evident:

From the very start of the Way revelations and visions begin, so that, even when awake, the Sufis see the angels and the spirits of the prophets and hear voices coming from them and learn useful things from them. Then their “state” ascends from the vision of forms and likenesses to stages beyond the narrow range of words: so if anyone tries to express them, his words contain evident error against which he cannot guard himself. But speaking in general, the matter comes ultimately to a closeness to God which one group almost conceives as “indwelling”, and another as “union” and another as “reaching”: but all that is wrong....But really, one intimately possessed by that state ought not to go beyond saying: “There was what was of what I do not mention: So think well of it, and ask for no account!” Generally speaking, anyone who is granted nothing of that through fruitional experience grasps, of the reality of prophecy, only the name.⁶⁶

Ibn al-‘Arabī, perhaps the greatest mystical theologian of the Islamic tradition, similarly distinguishes between rational demonstration and intellective vision, clearly subordinating the former mode of knowledge to the latter. Again, the vision is not something which one achieves by one's own efforts, but rather is something that comes upon the soul:

Two ways lead to knowledge of God....The first way is the way of unveiling. It is an incontrovertible knowledge which is actualized through unveiling and which man finds in himself. He receives no obfuscations along with it and is not able to repel it....The second way is the way of reflection and reasoning through rational demonstration. This way is lower than the first way, since he who bases his consideration upon proof can be visited by obfuscations which detract from his proof, and only with difficulty can he remove them.⁶⁷

The Names of God mentioned in the Qur'an, denoting various Divine qualities and modes of relationship with the created order, may be understood as analogous to the Platonic Forms, as the initial deployment of Unity into multiplicity; just as the Forms trace ultimately to the Good, so the Names find their origin and root in the Divine. At the height of his spiritual ascension, or *mi'rāj*, Ibn al-‘Arabī, overwhelmed by the unitive annihilation and participation in the Divine, cries out,

When this happened to me, I cried, “Enough, enough! My parts are filled up, and my place does not encompass me!” By this He removed from me my possible dimension. I gained in this night-journey the true meanings of all the Names, and I saw them all returning to the One Named and

One Essential Reality. This Named was my very object of contemplation; that Essence was my very being. My journey took place only in me, and my pointing was only to me. Through this I came to know that I am a pure servant, without a trace of lordship in me at all.⁶⁸

As a final example of the experience of intellectual knowledge, we quote from an experience related by Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s chief disciple and foremost philosophic interpreter. Again, the suddenness of the vision, the sense of its compulsion independent of the soul’s volition and the sense of the present, participated immediacy with that envisioned are readily apparent in his account:

On the night before Tuesday, 17 Shawwāl 665...I underwent a subtle attraction from the Lord. In it God placed me before Himself and freed me all at once, without any gradual change, to turn toward Him with the face of my heart. He gave me news of the Presence of the Universal Knowledge of His Essence, from which every description, state and property becomes entified within the levels of existence...⁶⁹

The Anthropocosmic Vision

Having addressed in somewhat greater detail the very subtle matter of intellectual knowledge, we next turn to address the rather confounding doctrine of anthropocosmism, of the intimate relationship between the human microcosm and the cosmic macrocosm. Chittick notes the pervasiveness of this doctrine in the Islamic intellectual tradition, closely related to the Qur’anic understanding of the Names, or signs, of God and the microcosmic and macrocosmic contexts that jointly serve as theaters for their instantiation. As Sachiko Murata observes,

Many authors allude to the macrocosm and microcosm through the expression “the horizons and the souls” (*al-āfāq wa’l-anfus*). This expression goes back to the Qur’anic verse, “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within their own souls, until it is clear to them that He is the Real.” (41:53)⁷⁰

Within the worldview of philosophic naturalism, such a doctrine is utterly unintelligible: there is no metacosmic reality to which man and the cosmos stand in common relation, just as there is no deep relation between man and the cosmos, apart from the fact that both are equally devoid of anything but materiality, for the most that might be said is that “we are all stardust”. Nevertheless, the doctrine of anthropocosmism has been common to every traditional civilization prior to the rise of modernity. For that very reason, it has also engaged the thought of many of the most significant scholars of religion and world philosophy of the past century. Chittick acknowledges the contemporary scholar of Confucian thought, Tu Wei-ming, as his specific inspiration for the term *anthropocosmism* that he employs, but he is fully aware that Tu has in turn borrowed this from the doyen of the modern discipline of comparative religion, Mircea Eliade. In fact, the net can be cast considerably wider still. Given both general unawareness of the pervasiveness of this doctrine as well as the difficulty of contemporary individuals to come to any kind of understanding of how it might possibly be reflective of reality, we have gathered in what follows a garland of passages from various leading scholars specifically addressing the matter in an attempt at its further elucidation.

We begin with Mircea Eliade, for whom the matter was of considerable concern, so much so that he contemplated an entire monograph on the subject, as he relates in his journal: “I was planning then, in May of 1940, to write a book, *Anthropocosmos*...”⁷¹ Eliade attempts to explain something of the anthropocosmic experience common to premodern humanity and the comparative loss and constriction of the typically modern individual:

Prior to the Renaissance (and, from then on, exclusively on popular planes) man felt himself integrated into a Cosmos which he assumed and expressed in macanthropic images. All kinds of existential realities were lived, then, on a cosmic plane. For the modern man, such experiences can seem “alien”, “objectivized”, but for the man of traditional societies, there exists a perfect *porosity* between all cosmic planes. The experience of a starry night, for instance, is equivalent

to a very intimate, personal experience on the part of a contemporary individual. By projecting himself or homologizing himself with everything, the pre-Renaissance man did not betray himself; he did not “alienate” himself in the Heideggerian *man*. There is nothing “impersonal”... in the whole anthropocosmic experience of the man of archaic and traditional societies.⁷²

He also touches upon the various systems of symbolic homologies relating the microcosmic and macrocosmic domains:

But the historian of religions encounters other homologies that presuppose a more developed symbolism, a whole system of micro-macrocosmic correspondences...These anthropo-cosmic homologies concern us particularly in so far as they are ciphers of various existential situations. We said that religious man lives in an open world and that, in addition, his existence is open to the world. This means that religious man is accessible to an infinite series of experiences that could be termed cosmic. Such experiences are always religious, for the world is sacred.⁷³

One of the fundamental loci of symbolic interrelation is the human body itself, as he clarifies,

Still with the aid of the history of religions, man might recover the symbolism of his body, which is an anthropocosmos...By regaining awareness of his own anthropocosmic symbolism – which is only one variety of the archaic symbolism – modern man will obtain a new existential dimension, totally unknown to present-day existentialism and historicism: this is an authentic and major mode of being, which defends man from nihilism and historical relativism without thereby taking him out of history.⁷⁴

Closely bound to symbolic homology, the material and subtle elements that comprise the cosmos are also to be found in man:

The alchemist accepts the traditional identity of microcosm and macrocosm, so familiar to Chinese thought...The microcosm which the human body is, is likewise interpreted in alchemical terms...Closely allied with the macrocosm, man possesses all the elements which constitute the cosmos and all the vital energies which secure his periodic renovation.⁷⁵

In all of this, what Eliade is centrally concerned with is the recovery of a forgotten relation, a forgotten experience of the world in terms of the anthropocosmic vision:

It is not a matter of making objective or scientific observations but of arriving at an appraisal of the world around us in terms of life, and in terms of anthropocosmic destiny, embracing sexuality, fecundity, death and rebirth.⁷⁶

There is what could be termed a symbolic discipline that must be brought into practice if this vision is to be achieved, a vision that is a vital opening for modern man trapped in an alienation of his own making:

[Symbols] identify, assimilate and unify diverse levels and realities that are to all appearances incompatible. Further still: magico-religious experience makes it possible for man himself to be transformed into a symbol. And only insofar as man himself becomes a symbol, are all systems and all anthropo-cosmic experiences possible, and indeed in this case his own life is considerably enriched and enlarged. Man no longer feels himself to be an “air-tight” fragment, but a living cosmos open to all the other living cosmoses by which he is surrounded. The experiences of the world at large are not longer something outside him and therefore ultimately “foreign” and “objective”; they do not alienate him from himself but, on the contrary, lead him towards himself and reveal to him his own existence and his own destiny.⁷⁷

This discipline is frequently integrated with various forms of spiritual discipline. Speaking of the symbolic intent inherent in the exercise of Yogic breath control, he observes,

We can discern in such an exercise of *prānāyāma*, the will to relive the rhythms of cosmic Great Time...The proof that this is so, lies in the assimilation of the two “mystical veins”, *ida* and *pingala*, to the Moon and the Sun. As we know, *ida* and *pingala* are the two channels in which

the psycho-vital energy circulates through the human body. The assimilation of these two mystical veins to the Sun and the Moon perfects the operation that we called the “cosmicising” of the yogin. His mystical body becomes a microcosm; his in-breathing corresponds to the course of the Sun, that is, to the Day; his out-breathing to the Moon, that is, to the Night. Thence it is that the yogin’s respiratory rhythm becomes perfectly integrated with the rhythm of cosmic Great Time.⁷⁸

Similarly, speaking of the experience of mystical light in Taoist spiritual practice, he touches again on how anthropocosmic doctrine and spiritual practice are frequently closely bound:

The Light dwells quite naturally within a man, in his heart. One succeeds in waking it and putting it into circulation by a process of cosmo-physiological mysticism. In other words, the secret of the life and immortality of the body is written into the very structure of the Cosmos, and consequently into the structure of the microcosm also – for every human being is a microcosm.⁷⁹

We next turn to René Guénon, the remarkable French estotericist, perhaps the preeminent metaphysician of the twentieth century. As he clarifies the relation between macrocosm and microcosm,

To understand clearly what follows, it will be important never to lose sight of the notion of the constitutive analogy of the “macrocosm” and the “microcosm”, by virtue of which all that exists in the Universe is found also in a certain fashion in man, which the *Vishvasāra Tantra* expresses in this way: “What is here is there, what is not here is nowhere.”⁸⁰

Again, the essential point of the doctrine is that what is to be found in the cosmos is also to be found in man, that the whole of the cosmos is, in a sense, contained in man. As Guénon expresses,

Avicenna said: “You believe yourself to be nothingness, yet the world abides within you.”...The similarity which exists between the macrocosm and the microcosm is such that each is the image of the other, and the correspondence of the constitutive elements shows that man must first of all know himself so that he may then know all things, for in truth, he can find all things within himself.⁸¹

The correspondence between man and the cosmos may also be approached in terms of different domains of manifestation, as he clarifies,

...a being such as man, as a “microcosm”, must necessarily participate in the “three worlds” and have in himself elements that correspond to them respectively; and indeed, the same general ternary division is applicable to him as well: by his spirit he belongs to the domain of supra-formal manifestation, by his soul to that of subtle manifestation, and by his body to gross manifestation...Moreover, it is man, and by this we must understand above all “true man” or fully realized man, who, more than any other being is truly the “microcosm”, and this again by reason of his “central” position, which makes him as it were an image, or rather a “summary” of the entirety of manifestation, for his nature...synthesizes in itself that of all other beings, so that there can be nothing in manifestation that does not have in man its representation and correspondence.⁸²

The symbolic relation between microcosm and macrocosm was also of concern to Ananda Coomaraswamy, an intellectual giant and one of the leading scholars of the twentieth century:

It may be further remarked that a comparison of the human head with the spherical cosmos occurs in Plato (*Timaeus*, 44d ff.). Incidentally, the saying that in man “there is nothing material above the head, and nothing immaterial below the feet” is far from unintelligible; the “Man” is cosmic; what is above his head is supracosmic and immaterial; what below his feet is a chthonic basis which is his “support” at the nether pole of being; the intervening space is occupied by the cosmic “body”, in which there is a mixture of immaterial and material.⁸³

Further drawing the symbolic parallel between microcosm and macrocosm, and the metacosmic First Intellect overarching both, he observes,

Alike for Plato and the New Testament the immanent deity is the “top” or “head” of the microcosmic composite, as is the intelligible Sun the top and head and focus of all that it enlightens in the macrocosm.⁸⁴

Frithjof Schuon, the leading contemporary expositor of the *philosophia perennis*, similarly notes the close affinity between the doctrine of metaphysical unity and the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm: “...reality is one; for there is nothing in the macrocosm that does not derive from the metacosm and which is not to be found again in the microcosm.”⁸⁵ Similarly, he notes that the metacosmic Divine Spirit – for which one might readily substitute the term First Intellect – is at once the overarching reality of both macrocosm and microcosm, as well as the very reality of human microcosmic realization and thus of exit from the strictly cosmological domain:

In cosmology, there is an analogous – not identical – relationship between the Macrocosm, which serves as a “Divine Model,” and the microcosm: however, it is the latter that is “active” and the former that is “passive,” in the sense that the microcosm, being so to speak the “inner limit” of the cosmos – the “outer limit” being the manifested Divine Spirit – constitutes at the same time the way of exit from the cosmic illusion; and this exit will be brought about through this Spirit, which, for its part, is the direct manifestation of the Word.⁸⁶

We next move from more general overviews to specific scholarly engagements with anthropocosmic understanding in the context of various specific traditions, moving broadly from West to East. We have already touched upon the Platonic understanding of this doctrine, particularly in the *Timaeus*; here, we turn to C.S. Lewis, the great contemporary medievalist and Christian apologist, who speaks for the Western pre-modern Christian understanding:

Man is a rational animal, and therefore a composite being, partly akin to the angels who are rational but – on the later, scholastic view – not animal, and partly akin to the beasts which are animal but not rational. This gives us one of the senses in which he is the “little world” or microcosm. Every mode of being in the whole universe contributes to him; he is a cross-section of being. As Gregory the Great says, “Because man has existence in common with stones, life with trees, and understanding with angels, he is rightly called by the name of the world.”⁸⁷

Vladimir Lossky, the great contemporary scholar of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, similarly speaks for this understanding in the context of the Christian East:

The world follows man, since it is like him in nature: “the anthroposphere”, one could say. And this anthropo-cosmic link is accomplished when that of the human image is accomplished, with God its prototype: for the person cannot, without destroying himself, aspire to possession of his nature, his quality notably of microcosm in the world, but discovers his fullness when he gives it, when he assumes the universe to offer it to God.⁸⁸

A similar observation is made by Gershom Scholem, the great contemporary scholar of Jewish Kabbalah, with respect to that tradition; commenting on a Kabbalistic interpretation of the Book of Job, he observes, “In this interpretation, therefore, the metaphysical and psychological element are closely intertwined; or to be more exact, they are one.”⁸⁹ In a similar manner, commenting on the development of the concept of the *Shekhinah* in Kabbalah, he notes, “Here I cannot distinguish between the psychological and the historical process, the peculiar unity of which constitutes the decisive step taken by Kabbalistic theosophy.”⁹⁰

The close interrelation of psychology and cosmology was also of concern to the great scholar of Islamic and specifically Shī’ite esotericism, Henry Corbin, who asserts in consequence of the imaginal realm elucidated by Ibn al-‘Arabī, “Psychology is indistinguishable from cosmology; the theophanic imagination joins them into a psycho-cosmology.”⁹¹ Similarly, in his discussion of visionary geography in Shī’ite esotericism, he observes, “The mountain tops of the Earth of visions are the mountain tops of the soul. The two archetypal Images, the *Imago Terrae* and the *Imago Animae*, correspond to one another: *the mountain of visions is the psycho-cosmic mountain.*”⁹² Finally, in his treatment of the literary

peculiarities of the genre of visionary recitals, he notes, “The *ta’wīl* of the soul – the exegesis that leads the soul back to its truth (*ḥaqīqat*) – transmutes all cosmic realities and relations and restores them to symbols; each becomes an Event of the soul, which, in its ascent, its *Mi’rāj*, passes beyond them and makes them interior to itself.”⁹³

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the leading contemporary scholar of Islamic cosmology and philosophy, notes, in an early work, both the centrality of the anthropocosmic doctrine to certain Islamic intellectual schools as well as the universality of this doctrine across traditions:

All the principles and concepts which have been explained thus far are integrated by the Ikhwān [al-Ṣafā’] into the closely related ideas of the analogy of the microcosm and macrocosm and the chain, or hierarchy, of being. Both of these ideas are universal and far from being limited to Greek, Islamic or Christian cosmologies, have their exact counterparts in China, India and elsewhere.⁹⁴

The same doctrine is extensively treated by the Hermetic Egyptologist René Schwaller de Lubicz, a critical figure in twentieth century esotericism, who devoted an entire chapter to the doctrine of Anthropocosmos in his magnum opus, *The Temple of Man*:

In India the tradition of *vastupurusamandala*, of basing the plan of a temple on Cosmic Man, is still alive. The model image for the cathedrals of the Middle Ages was Christ on the Cross. In Egypt, we know of at least one other temple patterned on the human figure...all initiatory temples are founded on the principle of Anthropocosmos, that is, man as Universe, the anthropomorphization of divine thought...The rationalist tendency is to study the component part of a whole in light of the characteristics revealed by the whole...In the principle of *purusa*, or Anthropocosmos, there is an altogether different point of view: man is not the component part but the final product. He is not part of the Whole but the living expression of this Whole; and it is, on the contrary, the Universe that appears as a dispersal of the parts...⁹⁵

Turning next to India, one finds again that the doctrine, and its ethical consequences, is central to Vedic thought, as confirmed by the contemporary Vedic scholar, Raimundo Panikkar:

The dichotomy between an ethical and a cosmic order is foreign to Vedic thinking, not because the ethical order is ignored but because the really existential order is anthropocosmic and thus includes both the ethical and the cosmic in one.⁹⁶

This understanding, far from being merely abstract, inheres in the practice of sacred recitation and ritual as well, as he further clarifies,

The *shanti mantra* or invocation of peace is an essential utterance at any beginning, and especially at the end of a sacred action or of the recitation of a sacred text. How can a holy word be uttered or heard unless there is peace in heaven, on earth, and in the human heart? The discord and dissonances in the universe and among Men have first to be pacified before any real, that is, sacred, act can take place. Here again we find a process of the anthropocosmic interaction. There can be no peace in the human heart if there is no peace on earth, but, conversely, there can be no earthly peace if there is discord in Man’s inner being. The one affects the other and, at the same time, both interact with the world of the Gods in the same kind of double relationship.⁹⁷

The anthropocosmic understanding is also central to the various schools of Yoga and Tantra, as Giuseppe Tucci, the great Italian scholar of Hinduism and Buddhism, explicates in the context of the mandala,

But although the individual lives this drama, experiences it and enjoys its fruits, is it not perhaps possible to do without the *mandala* and to situate in the individual himself the symbolism which it represents? The transition was facilitated by the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm, a correspondence which is the fundamental proposition of Yoga and which is accepted by the gnostic sects of India and not of India alone. Not only is the body analogous to the universe, in its physical extent and divisions; but is also contains within itself all the Gods.⁹⁸

Much the same observation in relation to Hindu and Buddhist Tantric schools is made by Adrian Snodgrass, the leading contemporary scholar of traditional architectural symbolism:

Hindu and Buddhist thinking assumes the existence of a strict analogy between the macrocosm and the microcosm, that is, between the “world” constituted by the individual being on the one hand and the total cosmos on the other. The *Tantras* describe a highly complex cosmophysiology in which the bodily organs and function are equated with cosmic counterparts – the directions, the planets, the constellations, the gods and so on.⁹⁹

As touched upon previously, one of the domains in which the anthropocosmic doctrine is notable is in sacred architecture, as is particularly evident in both Hinduism and Buddhism. George Michell, a leading scholar of Hindu art and architecture, observes, in the context of the cosmology of the Hindu temple plan,

By constructing this diagram to regulate the form of the temple, a symbolic connection is created, binding together the world of the gods – the universe, and its miniature reconstruction through the work of man – the temple. The assumption permitting such an identification of the universe with its model is that of a spatial and physical correspondence between the worlds of god and man...[The temple plan] may also contain an image of the cosmic man arranged diagonally, each square connected with some portion of his body. This cosmic figure is identified with the processes of the creation of the universe and its underlying structure.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, Lama Anagarika Govinda, a leading early expositor of Tantric Buddhism to the West, notes in the context of the symbolic cosmology of the Buddhist *stūpa*,

“Verily, I tell you,” the Buddha once addressed his disciples, “the world is within this six feet high body!”...The symbolism of the *stūpa*, therefore, can be read in the cosmic as well as in the psychic sense. Its synthesis is the psycho-cosmic image of Man, in which the physical elements and laws of nature and their spiritual counterparts, the different world-planes and their corresponding stages of consciousness, as well as that which transcends them, have their place.¹⁰¹

Moving to a consideration of Taoism, the remarkable Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu observes, in his analysis of the nature of the Taoist Perfect Man,

Thus the Perfect Man is in every respect a Perfect image of Heaven and Earth, i.e. the Way as it manifest itself as the world of Being. The Perfect Man exists by the very same principle by which Heaven and Earth exist. And that principle common both to the Perfect Man and the activity of the Way is the principle of Non-Doing or “being-so-of-itself”.¹⁰²

Finally, we turn once again to Tu Wei-Ming and to the Confucian tradition, its anthropocosmic vision and the ethical consequences of this vision for man:

The Confucian perception that human beings are earthbound yet strive to transcend themselves to join with Heaven clearly indicates that Confucians see humanity as more than an anthropological concept but as an anthropocosmic idea....To fully express our humanity, we must engage in a dialogue with Heaven, because human nature, as conferred by Heaven, realizes itself not by departing from its source but by returning to it...Humanity is Heaven’s form of self-disclosure, self-expression and self-realization...the anthropocosmic vision is so much an integral part of Confucian moral persuasion that, without an appreciation of the basic anthropocosmic (thus meta-ethical) principles, we cannot understand how Confucian ethics actually works.¹⁰³

Similarly, as he observes, regarding anthropocosmism and human perfection,

Indeed, the Confucian vision of “forming one body with Heaven and Earth and the myriad things” is anthropocosmic in the sense that the complete realization of the self, which is tantamount to the full actualization of humanity, entails the unity of humankind with Heaven.¹⁰⁴

Further Resources in the Islamic Intellectual Tradition

Although *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* is intended as an introductory book for a general audience, one unfortunate consequence is that the reader is left with little indication as to where to turn further for a deeper understanding of the intellectual tradition that Chittick has so ably outlined. Fortunately, such resources are available; many of the most significant authored or translated by Chittick himself. The first reference to turn to should arguably be William C. Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), particularly the second and third chapters – “The Worldview of Islamic Philosophy” and “Basic Philosophical Notions” – which are valuable companion essays to the book under review. The book as a whole addresses the philosophy of the little known Persian philosopher Afḍal-Dīn Kāshānī, but in fact serves as an extremely valuable introduction to the Islamic philosophical tradition in, as it were, its own authentic voice. A similarly helpful, somewhat less accessible volume is William C. Chittick, *The Elixir of the Gnostics* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2003), a translation of a reworking and augmentation into Arabic by Mullā Ṣadrā, a towering figure in the Islamic intellectual tradition, of a Persian philosophical work by Kāshānī. If Mullā Ṣadrā represents a major strand of the intellectual tradition, then Ibn al-‘Arabī, revered widely as the *shaykh al-akbar* or greatest spiritual master, clearly represents another dominant and extremely far reaching strand of the same tradition. The two works, William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) and William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), no doubt already familiar to many of the readers of this journal, are the best available sourceworks presenting the full depth of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s intellectual vision. Finally, the work of Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) – a book perhaps too readily and exclusively understood as on Islamic gender relationships or comparative Islamic-Chinese philosophical thought – is perhaps the single most valuable resource available on Islamic cosmology and spiritual psychology and should be a prime reference work in pursuing the themes of the book under present review further.

Notes

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15. Ibid., p.127.
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17. Ibid., p.117.
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52. Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, 509b; Ibid., p.436.
53. Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, 509d-513e.
54. Plato, *Republic*, Book X, 597a-598b.
55. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987b.
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58. Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, 517b-c; Taylor, *The Works of Plato, Vol.I*, p.441.

59. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e-211e; Thomas Taylor (tr.), *The Works of Plato, Vol.III* (Somerset, UK: Prometheus Trust, 1996), pp.541-2.
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