

Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination

THE SUFI PATH OF KNOWLEDGE



WILLIAM C. CHITTICK

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And say: “My Lord, increase me in knowledge!”

(Koran 20:114)

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THE
SUFİ PATH
OF
KNOWLEDGE



William C. Chittick

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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Somewhere along the line, the Western intellectual tradition took a wrong turn. Arguments arise over when and why this happened. Many important thinkers have concluded that the West never should have abandoned certain teachings about reality which it shared with the East. They have turned to the Oriental traditions in the hope of finding resources which may help revive what has been lost and correct the deep psychic and spiritual imbalances of our civilization.

One result of this ongoing search for a lost intellectual and spiritual heritage has been the rediscovery of the importance of imagination. In putting complete faith in reason, the West forgot that imagination opens up the soul to certain possibilities of perceiving and understanding not available to the rational mind. One of the important contemporary thinkers who have pointed in this direction is the late Henry Corbin, who has bequeathed to us the word "imaginal." As Corbin has explained in his works, the "imaginal world" or *mundus imaginalis* possesses an independent ontological status and must be clearly differentiated from the "imaginary" world, which is no more than our individual fantasies. Once we lose sight of the imaginal nature of certain realities,

the true import of a great body of mythic and religious teachings slips from our grasp.

All religious traditions accord a central role to imagination, though not necessarily by this name. The *mundus imaginalis* is the realm where invisible realities become visible and corporeal things are spiritualized. Though more real and "subtle" than the physical world, the World of Imagination is less real and "denser" than the spiritual world, which remains forever invisible as such. In Islam, the later intellectual tradition never tires of discussing the imaginal realm as the locus wherein spiritual realities are seen in visionary experience and all the eschatological events described in the Koran and Hadith take place exactly as described. If on the Day of Resurrection, as reported by the Prophet, "death is brought in the form of a salt-colored ram and slaughtered," this is because imaginal existence allows abstract meanings to take on concrete form. And if all the works we performed during our lives are placed in the Scales, the good deeds in the right pan and the bad deeds in the left, this is because imagination brings about the subtilization of corporeal activities.

By granting an independent ontolog-

ical status to imagination and seeing the visionary realm as the self-revelation of God, Islamic philosophy has gone against the mainstream of Western thought. It offers precious assistance to those in the West who "refuse to relegate imagination to a subordinate role in an epistemological framework."¹ But in spite of Corbin's prodigious efforts, the resources of the Islamic tradition have hardly been touched. Even the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabī, to whom Corbin dedicated his masterly study, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*,² remain for the most part unexplored and unexplained.

Corbin performed the great service of introducing the Western world to many uniquely Islamic ways of expressing philosophical positions, but it is beyond the capacity of a single individual to bring out everything worthy of consideration. Moreover, in his zeal to revive the honor due to the imaginal realm, Corbin tended to de-emphasize the cornerstone of Islamic teachings, *tawhīd*, the "declaration of God's Unity." It is as if Corbin was so entranced by the recovery of the imaginal that he had difficulty seeing beyond it.

From the point of view of the Islamic intellectual tradition, the tendency to become transfixed by the multiple apparitions of the One represents a danger inherent in the current revival of interest in imagination. It is clear, for example, that certain varieties of Jungianism divinize the imaginal world, giving to the soul an autonomous status never granted to it by the great traditions. Man's own domain of microcosmic imagination is posited as the Real, since "God" is merely the soul's projection. But this—in the Islamic view—is to fall into the error of associating other gods with God (*shirk*), the opposite of *tawhīd*. We are left with polytheistic multiplicity, and the "gods" are reinstated as real entities possessing insuperable differences.

Corbin never fell into such a position, which would have betrayed the central teaching of the texts with which he was

concerned. Nevertheless, if his approach to Islamic thought is to be understood as reflecting the concerns of his sources, it needs to be tempered by more attention to the ultimate Unity lying behind the theophanic facade of created existence. At the same time, certain studies of Ibn al-'Arabī which have been concerned almost exclusively with his metaphysical and philosophical teachings have gone to the other extreme, failing to emphasize the essential role which Ibn al-'Arabī accords to imagination. In fact, his metaphysics cannot be understood without grasping imagination's importance, and his view of imagination cannot be understood outside the realm of metaphysics. The present study is an attempt to bring these two sides of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings back into balance. It is hoped that just as Ibn al-'Arabī has played an important role in reviving imagination as a topic of religious and philosophical concern in the West, so also he may provide a pointer toward the One in the midst of imaginal multiplicity.

The Life and Works of Ibn al-'Arabī

Few Muslim spiritual authorities are so famous in the West as Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn al-'Arabī (A.H. 560–638/A.D. 1165–1240). In the Islamic world itself, probably no one has exercised deeper and more pervasive influence over the intellectual life of the community during the past seven hundred years. He was soon called by his disciples and followers al-Shaykh al-Akbar, the "Greatest Master," and few who have taken the trouble to study his works would dispute this title, though some would argue over the direction in which his greatness lies.³

The Shaykh was born in Mursiya in al-Andalus (Murcia in present-day Spain). His father seems to have been a government employee in the service of Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd Mardanīsh, the

ruler of Murcia. The family must have held a high social position, since his maternal uncle was ruler of Tlemcen in Algeria and he himself was on familiar terms with several local kings in his later life. When the Almohad dynasty conquered Murcia in 567/1172, the family moved to Seville, where his father was again most likely involved with government service. Ibn al-ʿArabī himself was employed in the early part of his career as a secretary to the governor.

In 590/1193, at the age of thirty, Ibn al-ʿArabī left Spain for the first time, traveling to Tunis. Seven years later, a vision instructed him to go to the East. He made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 599/1202, and from there traveled extensively in the central Islamic lands, staying for various lengths of time in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Rūm (present-day Turkey), though he never went to Iran. In 620/1223 he settled in Damascus, where he and a circle of disciples remained until his death in 638/1240. He spent his life in study, writing, and teaching. At the same time, he was involved in the social and political life of the community. He was on good terms with at least three local kings, one of whom became well-versed in his writings. In a document dated 632/1234, he gives permission to the Ayyubid Muẓaffar al-Dīn Mūsā, who ruled in Damascus between 627/1229–30 and 635/1238, to teach all his works, of which he lists 290. In the same document, he mentions by name ninety masters of the religious sciences with whom he himself had studied.

Ibn al-ʿArabī provides many details of his personal life in his works, and we can be grateful that the major scholarly task of bringing these together and analyzing them has finally been accomplished, in a forthcoming book by Claude Chodkiewicz-Addas.⁴ The best account in English is provided by the autobiographical descriptions of Ibn al-ʿArabī's meetings with some of his contemporaries, *Sufis of Andalusia*, along with the translator's introduction.⁵ The reader of that work will soon realize that

Ibn al-ʿArabī lived in a universe foreign to our own, where the extraordinary and miraculous were everyday occurrences.

One of the most obvious of the miraculous sides to the career of the Greatest Master was his literary production. Osman Yahia, in his two-volume history and classification of Ibn al-ʿArabī's works, estimates that Ibn al-ʿArabī wrote 700 books, treatises, and collections of poetry, of which 400 are extant. The *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* alone will fill a projected 17,000 pages in Yahia's critical edition. One of the most daunting prospects faced by a scholar is to read the whole *Futūḥāt*, not to mention the other works available in printed editions or manuscripts. The problem is not simply the sheer volume of his production. His whole corpus stands at an extremely high level of sophistication and demands familiarity with all the Islamic sciences. This helps explain why the Shaykh al-Akbar, in spite of the intrinsic interest of his works and his wide-spread influence, has been relatively neglected by modern scholars.

The *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* is a vast encyclopedia of the Islamic sciences within the context of *tawḥīd*, the profession of God's Unity that forms the core of Islam. The book includes 560 chapters, several of which would be major books if published separately. Ibn al-ʿArabī discusses in copious detail the Koran, the Hadith, events in the life of the Prophet, the detailed rulings of the Shari'a, the principles of jurisprudence, the divine names and attributes, the relationship between God and the world, the structure of the cosmos, the make-up of the human being, the various human types, the path by which human perfection may be attained, the stages of the ascent to God, the ranks and kinds of the angels, the nature of the jinn, the characteristics of time and space, the role of political institutions, the symbolism of letters, the nature of the interworld between death and Resurrection, the ontological status of heaven and hell, and so on. The list could be extended for pages.

Though the *Futūḥāt* is but one of Ibn al-ʿArabī's works, most of the topics about which he has written are discussed in some detail within it. However, he frequently points out that what he knows and could put down in writing if it were opportune or necessary to do so bears no relationship with what he has written. As he remarks matter-of-factly—and, one suspects, without exaggeration—, “What we deposit in every chapter, in relation to what we have, is but a drop in the ocean” (II 578.19).⁶ In one ninety-chapter section of the *Futūḥāt*, he provides in each chapter a list of the related topics which he could have discussed, and these lists alone will fill more than 400 pages of the *Futūḥāt* in its new edition.⁷

The Meccan Openings

What is the significance of Ibn al-ʿArabī's life and writings for Islamic intellectual history? More specifically, since this question can be answered from many points of view, how did he and his followers perceive the significance of his work? One way to gain a certain insight into this question is to meditate upon the title of his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, “The Meccan Openings.”

In Ibn al-ʿArabī's technical vocabulary, “opening” (*futūḥ*) is a near synonym for several other terms, such as unveiling, tasting, witnessing, divine effusion, divine self-disclosure, and insight. Each of these words designates a mode of gaining direct knowledge of God and of the unseen worlds without the intermediary of study, teacher, or rational faculty. God “opens up” the heart to the infusion of knowledge. The word “opening” suggests that this type of knowledge comes to the aspirant suddenly after he had been waiting patiently at the door. It involves neither “self-exertion, raising up the gaze, nor seeking” (II 505.17), that is, seeking after that

particular knowledge, since man must always seek after God Himself. Opening is the type of knowledge given to the prophets (though it is not equivalent to scripture): They receive it directly from God without rational inquiry or reflective consideration.

The prophets and the friends among the Folk of Allah have no knowledge of God derived from reflection. God has purified them from that. Rather, they possess the “opening of unveiling” through the Real. (III 116.23)

If a person wants to achieve opening, he must discipline himself according to the norms of the Shariʿa and the Tariqa (the spiritual path) under the direction of a spiritual master or “shaykh” who has himself traversed the path. In several verses the Koran tells us that God may bestow knowledge upon His servant if He wills. Most commonly, Ibn al-ʿArabī quotes the verse, “Be godfearing and God will teach you” (2:282). This “god-fearingness” which prepares the disciple for God's teaching entails his complete absorption in putting the revealed Law into practice and invoking (*dhikr*) the name of God under a shaykh's guidance. Until the disciple reaches opening, he will have to seclude himself from people through spiritual retreats (*khalwa*), though after full opening, retreat and presence in society (*jalwa*) are the same. As Ibn al-ʿArabī remarks, if a person wants to gain knowledge of things as they are in themselves, “He should follow the path of the great masters and dedicate himself to retreat and invocation. Then God will give direct awareness of that to his heart” (I 120.12). “Unveiling comes to them in their retreats when the divine lights dawn within them, bringing sciences purified of corroding stains” (II 600.3).

The knowledge which is opened up to the seeker is the knowledge of the Koran, the Divine Speech. “Nothing is opened up to any friend of God (*walī*) except the understanding of the Mighty Book” (III 56.2).

The perfect inheritor (*wārith*) of the Prophet among the friends of God is he who dedicates himself exclusively to God through His Shari'a. Eventually God will open up in his heart the understanding of what He has sent down upon His messenger and prophet, Muḥammad, through disclosing Himself to him in his inward dimension (*bāṭin*). (I 251.3)

Opening is not a goal that every disciple will reach. The least of the necessary qualifications is the "godfearingness" referred to earlier, an attribute which Muslims have always perceived as the epitome of human perfection. As the Koran says, "The most noble among you in God's eyes is the most godfearing" (49:13). Innumerable factors combine to make up an individual's preparedness for opening. One disciple may practice sincerely and assiduously throughout his life and never have his heart opened up to the unseen world. Another may practice for a relatively short period of time and reach the goal. The nature of the opening itself depends largely upon the individual human nature. Ibn al-ʿArabī never tires of reminding us of the saying of Junayd, "The water takes on the color of the cup."

It should be noted that "opening" in the technical sense cannot be applied to any and every sort of "inrush" (*wārid*) from a world normally closed to the psyche. Ibn al-ʿArabī, like other Sufis, provides many criteria for distinguishing among different types of paranormal perceptions. Like others, he divides the "incoming thoughts" (*khawāṭir*) which reach the heart into four categories: divine (*ilāhī*), spiritual (*ruhānī*), ego-centric (*nafsānī*), and satanic (*shayṭānī*).⁸ One of the tasks of the spiritual master is to discern the source of the incoming thought and give instructions to the disciple so that he can maintain his psychic and spiritual balance. Confusion among the different kinds of inspiration poses tremendous dangers for the soul in this world and the next. From the Sufi perspective, one of the most obvious signs of the deviation of most contemporary

"spirituality"—especially of the "New Age" variety—is its inability to discern the source of inrushes.⁹

Ibn al-ʿArabī's extraordinary spiritual career was marked by many signs, not the least of which being the fact that he reached opening at a young age in the space of an hour or two. His disciple Shams al-Dīn Ismāʿīl ibn Sawdakīn al-Nūrī (d. 646/1248) quotes him as follows:

I began my retreat at the first light (*fajr*) and I had reached opening before sunrise. After that I entered the "shining of the full moon"¹⁰ and other stations, one after another. I stayed in my place for fourteen months. Through that I gained all the mysteries which I put down in writing after opening. My opening was a single attraction in that moment.¹¹

Ibn al-ʿArabī experienced this opening while still a youth. His famous encounter with the chief judge of Seville, the great jurist and philosopher Ibn Rushd (known to the Latin West as Averroes, d. 595/1198), took place after the completion of this retreat. He tells us that his father, a good friend of Ibn Rushd, had told the judge something of his son's experiences.

Ibn Rushd was eager to meet me, because of what he had heard and what had reached him concerning what God had opened up for me in my retreat. . . . I was still a youth (*ṣabī*). My face had not yet put forth a beard, and my mustache had not yet grown.¹² When I entered in upon him, he stood up in his place out of love and respect. He embraced me and said, "Yes." I said, "Yes." His joy increased because I had understood him. Then I realized why he had rejoiced at that, so I said, "No." His joy disappeared and his color changed, and he doubted what he possessed in himself.

He said, "How did you find the situation in unveiling and divine effusion? Is it what rational consideration gives to us?"

I replied, "Yes and no. Between the yes and the no spirits fly from their matter and heads from their bodies." His color turned pale and he began to tremble. He sat reciting, "There is no power and no

strength but in God," since he had understood my allusion. . . .

After that, he sought from my father to meet me in order to present to me what he himself had understood: He wanted to know if it conformed with or was different from what I had. He was one of the great masters of reflection and rational consideration. He thanked God that in his own time he had seen someone who had entered into the retreat ignorant and had come out like this—without study, discussion, investigation, or reading. He said, "This is a state that we had confirmed rationally, but we had never seen anyone who possessed it. Praise belongs to God, that I should live in the time of one of its possessors, those who have opened the locks upon its doors. Praise belongs to God, who singled me out to see him!" (I 153.34)¹³

Ibn al-ʿArabī confirms, though rather allusively, Ibn Sawdakīn's report that he gained all his knowledge through his initial opening and that his writings consisted of the gradual expression of that knowledge in verbal form. The Shaykh al-Akbar does not mention the term "opening" itself in this account, but he alludes to it through mention of "knocking on the door." He is commenting on these verses found towards the beginning of the *Futūḥāt*:

When I kept knocking on God's door
I waited mindfully, not distracted,
Until there appeared to the eye the glory
of His Face
and a call to me, nothing else.
I encompassed Being in knowledge—
nothing is in my heart but God.
(I 10.26)

Everything we have mentioned after that [vision of the glory of God's Face] in all our speech (*kalām*) is only the differentiation of the all-inclusive reality which was contained in that look at the One Reality. (II 548.14)

Though all Ibn al-ʿArabī's knowledge may have been included in undifferentiated form in the initial opening, this does not imply that the door stayed

closed to him after that. Quite the contrary, his soul was constantly being unveiled by the inrushes of divine wisdom. He frequently met with the Prophet Muḥammad and other prophets in the unseen world, and many of the great contemporary or past Sufis would appear to him in the imaginal realm. In the case of Ibn al-ʿArabī at least, once the door to the invisible world was opened, it stayed open.

This brings us to the second element in the title of the *Futūḥāt*, the adjective "Meccan." Ibn al-ʿArabī explains that the particular openings which make up the contents of this work began during his pilgrimage to Mecca in the year 598/1202. We know that he began writing the *Futūḥāt* in the next year, and he was not to finish the first redaction until after settling in Damascus twenty-one years later. In dedicating the *Futūḥāt* to one of his disciples, he alludes to the role of Mecca by mentioning God's "house" and "sanctuary."

God set up in my thoughts that I make known to my dear friend—God preserve him—some of the gnostic sciences which I had acquired in my absence and, likewise, that I bestow upon him—God ennoble him—some of the pearls of knowledge which I had gained in my exile. Hence I wrote for him this unique treatise, which God has brought into existence as an amulet against the impediments to knowledge for every pure companion, every verifying Sufi, and for my dear friend, blameless brother, and approved son, ʿAbdallāh Badr al-Ḥabashī al-Yamanī, the freedman of Abū Ghanāʾim ibn Abī'l-Futūḥ al-Harrānī.¹⁴ I named it "The Treatise of the Meccan Openings concerning the True Knowledge of the Mysteries of the Master and the Kingdom." Most of what I have deposited in this treatise was opened up for me by God when I was circumambulating His noble House or while I was sitting in a state of waiting mindfully for Him in His noble and exalted Sanctuary. (I 10.16)

The *Futūḥāt*, then, is essentially a compendium of some of the sciences which

were given to Ibn al-ʿArabī during his experiences of opening. He frequently stresses this point in explaining the manner in which he wrote the work. His words are not the result of any reflective or rational process, but bestowed by the Divine Presence.

We are not one to quote the words of the philosophers, nor the words of anyone else, since in this book and in all our books we only write that which is given by unveiling and dictated by God. (II 432.8)

This book is not a place for that which is given by the proofs of the reflective powers, only for that which is given by divine unveiling. (II 389.6)

The aim of our book is not to speak about considerative and reflective relationships. Its subject is only the sciences of unveiling given by God. (II 655.5)

The books we have composed—this and others—do not follow the route of ordinary compositions, nor do we follow the route of ordinary authors. . . . My heart clings to the door of the Divine Presence, waiting mindfully for what comes when the door is opened. My heart is poor and needy, empty of every knowledge. . . . When something appears to the heart from behind that curtain, the heart hurries to obey and sets it down in keeping with the commanded bounds. (I 59.12)¹⁵

Koranic Hermeneutics

Islamic civilization is clearly logocentric. Ibn al-ʿArabī places himself squarely in the mainstream of Islam by basing all his teachings upon the Koran and the Hadith. In this respect he parts company with the philosophers and proponents of Kalām, who were far more likely to derive their sciences from other sources. Ibn al-ʿArabī confirms his own logocentrism by claiming repeatedly that the knowledge gained through opening pertains to the meaning of the Koran. This is a point of fundamental impor-

tance, too often forgotten in studies of the Shaykh. The “Meccan Openings,” like the Shaykh al-Akbar’s other works, are nothing if not commentary upon the Holy Book.

In order to enter into the universe of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Koranic hermeneutics, one must first cast away all preconceived notions of how a text should be read. In the Shaykh’s view, the Koran is the concrete, linguistic embodiment of Real Being, God Himself. At the same time, the revealed Speech is dominated by the attributes of mercy and guidance — perfectly in keeping with Being Itself, since, according to the famous hadith, “God’s mercy precedes His wrath.” The Divine Speech guides through its “signs” (*āyāt*) or verses, just as the cosmos — which is also the Speech of God, articulated within the “Breath of the All-merciful”—gives news of God through its signs, which are the phenomena of nature. The revealed, written Speech can be more readily understood than the revealed, cosmic Speech. It provides the key through which “opening” can take place—the opening of the door to comprehension of the signs within the macrocosm and the microcosm, the universe around us and within us. Ibn al-ʿArabī frequently quotes the Koranic verse, “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that He is the Real” (41:53).

The revealed Book is the actual, true, authentic embodiment of God’s Speech. Its every letter is full of significance, since the book manifests the divine realities in both its form and meaning. It is true that the same thing can be said about the cosmos, but the written Book has the advantage of having been given a linguistic form that necessarily corresponds with Absolute Truth, which is God. This linguistic mode of existence appeals directly to the distinguishing feature of human beings, the *nūṭq* or “rational speech” which makes them “rational animals” (*ḥayawān nāṭiq*). The Book is the *barzakh* or isthmus between man’s intelligence and God’s knowledge of things as they

are in themselves. It provides the God-given and providential means whereby man can come to know things in themselves, without the distortions of egocentrism.

If all of Ibn al-ʿArabī's works are essentially Koranic hermeneutics, this is because ultimate truth can only be perceived with the help of divine guidance, and divine guidance has taken certain specific forms. "Enter houses by their doors," the Koran commands (2:189). One cannot take God's house by storm. One enters by the door, when invited. Any attempt to climb through the windows would display blatant discourtesy (*sū' al-adab*), an attribute which automatically disqualifies the would-be hermeneut.

Because the Book in its actual, revealed form is the embodiment of the divine mercy and guidance, Ibn al-ʿArabī displays tremendous reverence for the literal text. The linguistic form of the text takes precedence over all else. Certain Western scholars have portrayed Ibn al-ʿArabī as a great practitioner of esoteric commentary (*ta'wīl*), whereby the literal meaning of the text becomes a window through which one looks into the invisible realm. One can agree with this statement, so long as it is understood that no Muslim commentator has been as concerned as the Shaykh to preserve the Book's literal sense. Ibn al-ʿArabī never denies the literal and apparent meaning. But he frequently adds to the literal sense an interpretation based upon an opening which transcends the cognitive limitations of most mortals. He often tells us that God may unveil meanings of the text to the gnostic which others have never perceived, and these unveilings can be trusted as long as they do not gainsay or contradict the literal meaning. They are additional interpretations which can add to our understanding of the manner in which the Divine Reality discloses Itself. At the same time, no matter how true they may be, they can never have the slightest effect upon the commands and prohibitions of the revealed Law.

Koranic interpretation is a simple one, perfectly logical once one accepts that "There is no god but God and Muḥammad is His Messenger": God intends every meaning which a speaker of the language can understand from the literal sense of the text. It is God who created the speakers of the language, brought the language into existence, and revealed the Book. God's purpose in revelation was clarification, not obfuscation. "God sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people, that [the messenger] might make clear to them" (Koran 14:4). But God had to provide a scripture in the language of the recipients which could guide a whole tradition over history, not simply a few tribesmen of one generation. God spoke in a language which would meet the spiritual needs of all those who encounter the Book. Hence, Ibn al-ʿArabī is constantly analyzing the meaning of words as they have been understood by the speakers of the Arabic language to whom the Koran is addressed, though not necessarily as the specialists in various sciences have defined them.

The Shaykh treats each word of the Koran and the Hadith with the utmost reverence. No word is accidental. God and His Messenger never speak without saying exactly what they mean. We cannot replace one word with another and say that this is what was really meant. Nor can we interpret the meaning, by "taking the word back" (*ta'wīl*) to its archetype in the world of divine realities, if that means denying or denigrating the literal sense. It is vitally important to understand the meaning of each individual word and to realize that each expresses in a concrete mode a certain dimension of the Divine Reality not denoted by any other.

The Study of Ibn al-ʿArabī in the West

A great deal can be learned about Ibn al-ʿArabī by showing the sources of his teachings in earlier writings. Michel

Chodkiewicz's excellent study of "sanctity" (*walāya*) and related concepts, *Le sceau des saints*, provides a sound outline of the type of work that needs to be done for dozens if not hundreds of technical terms.¹⁶ But it is not the purpose of the present work to contribute anything to the task of pinpointing the sources of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings. In spite of the importance of this task, a second task appears even more essential to the present writer, and that is to answer such questions as the following: What was Ibn al-'Arabī actually talking about? What are his basic teachings? How did he himself perceive the goal of his writings? Implicit in these questions is another: What does Ibn al-'Arabī have to contribute to the intellectual and spiritual needs of the present age?

Questions such as these underlie the two most comprehensive works we possess on Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings, the aforementioned study by Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism—A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*.¹⁷ Both works combine great erudition with a sympathetic understanding of their subject. Izutsu's study is unique for the clarity of the exposition and the careful attention paid to the linguistic nuances of Ibn al-'Arabī's work. It is limited by a number of factors, and I mention these not to criticize Izutsu's invaluable study, but to situate it within a wider context. First, Izutsu deals almost exclusively with a single work of Ibn al-'Arabī, the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. To understand the significance of this point, we need to take a brief look at the *Fuṣūṣ*.

The *Fuṣūṣ* played a special role among Ibn al-'Arabī's writings from the beginning. The Shaykh himself tells us in its preface that it was handed to him by the Prophet in a "heralding vision" (*mubashshira*). The second generation *Fuṣūṣ* commentator Mu'ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 690/1291) informs us that Ibn al-'Arabī forbade his disciples from having the *Fuṣūṣ* bound along with any other book.¹⁸ But the *Fuṣūṣ* is a short work (180 pages in the printed edition) and undertakes a relatively specific task. In gen-

eral, it aims to clarify the Koranic picture of the major prophets, thereby showing how the earthly career of each prophet manifests a specific divine reality or archetype. As a result, the *Fuṣūṣ* says a great deal about the divine names, prophetology, ontology, and several other important topics of Ibn al-'Arabī's immediate concern. But it emphasizes certain doctrines while leaving out anything but allusions to several major dimensions of Ibn al-'Arabī's overall teachings. Moreover, Ibn al-'Arabī makes no attempt to explain what he does discuss with any detail or clarity. Hence the text has always been read in the Islamic world with a commentary or a teacher or both.

It is important to grasp the central role which the *Fuṣūṣ* has played in the Islamic intellectual tradition. No other book of Ibn al-'Arabī has been as widely read or commented upon. But the tradition, providentially no doubt, took the interpretation of the *Fuṣūṣ* in a specific direction, and that direction happens to be one which often appeals to modern intellectuals cut off from spiritual practice. Beginning with the first important commentator on the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-'Arabī's step-son Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), practically all *Fuṣūṣ* commentators have discussed the text largely within the context of Islamic philosophy.¹⁹ This, of course, is *Islamic* philosophy, so it does not contradict the commands and prohibitions of Islamic Law. All those commentators about whom anything is known were devout practitioners of Islam and Sufism. They observed the Shari'a with care, and they had no need to be reminded of its importance, since it was an integral part of their everyday lives. Hence, their special attention to the philosophical dimensions of the text did not run contrary to other, more spiritual and practical dimensions of the text, but it did tend to obscure them.

Qūnawī, a Persian, had a profoundly different intellectual make-up from his master. For one thing, Qūnawī's works are crystal clear and eminently systematic, while no one would say the same about the works of the Shaykh al-Akbar.

Qūnawī was the spiritual inheritor of Ibn al-ʿArabī and the guide of a large number of disciples.²⁰ At the same time he was known as a great master of the religious sciences, Hadith in particular, and people came to Konya from all over the Islamic world to study with him. Not all of them, and perhaps not many of them, would have been his disciples on the Sufi path.

Qūnawī was better versed in Peripatetic philosophy than Ibn al-ʿArabī and made active attempts to harmonize it with the intellectual expression of Sufism. This attempt at harmonization appears in the manner in which he brings the discussion of *wujūd* (Being, existence) to the forefront. Philosophy was generally defined as the study of *wujūd* qua *wujūd*. Ibn al-ʿArabī frequently discusses *wujūd*, but there is no special internal reason why his followers would have extracted this particular term from his writings and placed it at the center of their concerns. This was done as a result of various external factors personified by Qūnawī himself. He and his disciples set the stage for the later understanding of Ibn al-ʿArabī's works throughout the Islamic world, since the tradition of *Fuṣūṣ* commentary goes straight back to Qūnawī. The first full commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* was written by Jandī, who was Qūnawī's spiritual disciple and who undertook the work at the instruction of his master. Then Jandī's student ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 730/1330) and Kāshānī's student Dāwūd Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350) wrote what are probably the two most influential commentaries of the tradition. Qūnawī's influence is clear in all these works. In the case of Qayṣarī, even the Arabic style reflects Qūnawī's works. In all these commentaries, discussion of *wujūd* stands at the forefront. Qayṣarī's long introduction to his commentary is a masterly summa of philosophical Sufism in an eminently systematic style.²¹

Though Qūnawī's influence helped determine the direction in which the *Fuṣūṣ* was to be interpreted, he was in

fact the instrument whereby an inevitable process occurred. The study of Ibn al-ʿArabī could not have been reserved for those who had the requisite spiritual aspiration and "godfearingness." Since Ibn al-ʿArabī dealt with questions of interest to all sorts of scholars, his works were soon being read by many of the learned, not only Sufis. The Shaykh himself consciously employed the terminology of Kalām and philosophy—not to speak of jurisprudence—and he often criticizes the approach of the contemporary authorities of these sciences. The learned masters could not be blamed for reading him or attempting to answer his criticisms.

In short, Ibn al-ʿArabī helped bring the teachings of Sufism into the mainstream of Islamic intellectuality, which in any case was moving more toward philosophy than Kalām. In addition, from the 7th/13th century onward, Islamic intellectuality tends toward synthesis. Many authors contributed to the harmonization of divergent intellectual perspectives, such as Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl (d. 587/1191), the founder of the "Illuminationist" school of philosophy, and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), the first systematic Shīʿite theologian and the great revivifier of the teachings of Avicenna. It was only logical that Sufism should play a major role in this harmonization of different intellectual streams. Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) had begun this task long before Ibn al-ʿArabī, and Ibn al-ʿArabī himself contributed to it by employing the terminology of all the intellectual perspectives. But Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī played an especially important role by systematizing Ibn al-ʿArabī's teachings and placing emphasis upon those dimensions of his thought which could easily be reconciled with the philosophical approach. Especially significant in this respect is the correspondence which Qūnawī initiated with Ṭūsī, the great Peripatetic. In his Persian letter accompanying the first of the two Arabic treatises which he sent to Ṭūsī, Qūnawī tells him that his purpose in posing vari-

ous questions concerning the Peripatetic position was to combine the conclusions derived from logical proofs with those gained by unveiling, opening, and face to face vision of the unseen world.²²

To return to Izutsu's outstanding study of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings: Izutsu limits himself to an analysis of the mainly philosophical and metaphysical discussions of the *Fuṣūṣ*. Moreover, he quotes copiously from the writings of Kāshānī to explain Ibn al-'Arabī's meaning, and, as was pointed out, Kāshānī is a third-generation commentator on the *Fuṣūṣ*, firmly entrenched in the line of Qūnawī and the movement to bring Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings into harmony with philosophy. Hence Izutsu's study is especially valuable for showing how the *Fuṣūṣ* was read by the later commentators and how the Shaykh's teachings were being integrated into the philosophical tradition, but it does not necessarily reflect the central concerns of the *Fuṣūṣ* itself, nor, with greater reason, those of Ibn al-'Arabī.

Moreover, Izutsu's personal interests lie mainly in the abstract discussions of philosophy, not in the *mundus imaginalis*, nor in the practical sides of Islamic spirituality. He is one of the few non-Muslim scholars who have grasped the tremendous philosophical and linguistic riches waiting to be mined in later Islamic thought, and he has made unique contributions to the study of this tradition.²³ But his personal predilections deeply color his perception of Ibn al-'Arabī. The latter is presented not so much as he is in himself, but as one source for data to be employed in Izutsu's philosophical project, to which he seems to be alluding in the expression, "Toward a Metaphilosophy of Oriental Philosophies."²⁴

The second vitally important study of Ibn al-'Arabī is Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*. Corbin has been able to present Ibn al-'Arabī as a thinker worthy of our most serious consideration because of the contributions he can make to the philosophical

and hermeneutical concerns of the continental tradition. Corbin's rhetorical flourishes and passion for his subject put his work into a unique category. Few would doubt the relevance of Ibn al-'Arabī to modern thought after reading Corbin. But Corbin, like Izutsu, has certain limitations. More than Izutsu, Corbin is concerned with his own philosophical project, as elaborated in dozens of books, several of which have now been translated into English. Any reader of *Creative Imagination* soon begins to wonder where Ibn al-'Arabī ends and Corbin begins. The lines are not clear, especially if one does not have access to the Arabic texts. Certainly we come to realize that Ibn al-'Arabī is a precious larder from which all sorts of delicious vittles can be extracted. But most people familiar with the original texts would agree that Corbin has highly individual tastes. Moreover, like Izutsu, though not to the same extent, Corbin deals mainly with the *Fuṣūṣ*, making few references to relevant passages in Ibn al-'Arabī's other works.

While Izutsu places stress on Ibn al-'Arabī's abstract metaphysical teachings, Corbin emphasizes the Shaykh's depiction of a visionary pleroma where God reveals Himself uniquely to each spiritual aspirant, leading him into the *mundus imaginalis* and beyond. Izutsu stresses the God who can be understood through reason, while Corbin depicts the God of theophany who can be grasped by imagination. Where both authors come together is in failing to bring out the practical sides to Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings and his insistence on weighing all knowledge in the "Scale of the Law," the norms revealed through the Koran and the Sunna of the Prophet.

The only other study of Ibn al-'Arabī which is as firmly grounded in the texts and as seminal as these two is Chodkiewicz's *Le sceau des saints*, though it is more limited in scope, making no attempt to provide a broad overview. By placing the concept of "sanctity" within its historical perspective and showing

how Ibn al-ʿArabī understands it, Chodkiewicz has contributed important insights into both the theoretical and practical sides of Ibn al-ʿArabī's teachings. His stress on the importance of practice and the observance of the Shari'a provides a highly beneficial antidote to some of the filtered and refined potions fed to us by Izutsu and Corbin. But the self-imposed limitations of the study leaves us craving for more. Chodkiewicz's forthcoming anthology of the *Futūḥāt*, with selections in both French and English, promises to be a major step forward in our understanding of the full range of Ibn al-ʿArabī's teachings.²⁵

The Present Work

The present study is an attempt to lead the reader into Ibn al-ʿArabī's own universe in a language accessible to non-specialists. In writing the book, I tried to avoid any preconceptions as to what Ibn al-ʿArabī should be saying or what he has to offer. Instead, my goal was to translate or "carry over" his teachings as they are actually found, mainly in the *Futūḥāt*, into a language which does justice to his concerns, not our concerns. I have tried to open the door to Ibn al-ʿArabī's larder and allow the reader to look in, if not actually step inside. Naturally, certain dainties have attracted my attention more than others, and it is these which I tend to pick out.

The form of the book reflects several specific goals, foremost among them the wish to preserve the overall context of Ibn al-ʿArabī's teachings as he himself presents them. This meant that I have tried not to extract the essence of what he is saying, in contrast to most other studies. Rather, I have allowed him to express himself in his own words and within the context of the particular Koranic verses or hadiths which he is explicating at the moment. One cannot separate out the "interesting teachings" without doing harm to the whole. I have

also avoided making connections between Ibn al-ʿArabī's ideas and those of other Sufis, other Muslim intellectual authorities, other religious traditions, and the contemporary world, since these are fields of investigation which know no limits. Perhaps others will be inspired to follow up the obvious leads.

Some people might object that I should have translated a single work instead of picking and choosing. But there are many drawbacks to that approach, especially at the present state of our ability to understand the Shaykh's writings on the one hand and then to express them within the confines of an alien universe of discourse on the other. Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* has been translated into English several times, in each case with mixed results. The best of these translations, that by R.W.J. Austin, still leaves a great deal to be desired, even on the level of conveying accurately the sense of the text.²⁶ In the original Arabic, much of the text is unintelligible without detailed commentary, which none of the translators have provided. A commentary sufficient to situate the work within Ibn al-ʿArabī's world view and to explain his meaning in every case would be far longer than the *Fuṣūṣ* itself. As with most of Ibn al-ʿArabī's major writings, the *Fuṣūṣ* contains everything, but in such an allusive and undifferentiated form that it is impossible to grasp the meaning without detailed explanation.

One of the advantages of working with the *Futūḥāt* is that Ibn al-ʿArabī is not afraid to go into detail. If he does not explain a topic fully in one passage, he is likely to throw a good deal of light on it elsewhere. The translator can choose the clearest and most complete exposition of various points and leave out the allusions to other teachings not completely relevant to the point he is trying to clarify. Perhaps even more importantly, the text of the *Futūḥāt* is available to us in an excellent edition. Though originally published in Cairo in 1911, it surpasses the standards of most modern critical editions published in the East. Moreover,

Osman Yahia's new edition, with incredibly detailed apparatus, is a great boon to the scholar, though unfortunately, only ten volumes have appeared (of a projected thirty-seven).

It will be a long time before anyone will be able to translate a major work of Ibn al-'Arabī into comprehensible English without extensive notes and commentary, or even with extensive notes and commentary. His writings pose many difficulties. They are full of allusions to all sorts of esoteric wisdom, and frequently even the prose takes on a symbolic and visionary aura that is practically impossible to fathom. One of the major difficulties presented even by those passages in his writings which are relatively clear is the interrelationship of all discussions with everything else. In order to understand one point, one has to understand all points. This is why, in traditional circles, it was not uncommon for a master to spend several hours commenting on each line of the *Fuṣūṣ*, and a single reading of the text could take many years.

The interrelatedness of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings helps explain the repetitions which are characteristic of his style and which have been preserved in the translations and my own commentary. But most repetitions add new nuances and fresh interrelationships not discussed in other contexts. Any attempt to avoid repetition would mean tearing the ideas out of context and imposing upon them a systematic exposition foreign to the original texts.

Ibn al-'Arabī never tires of stressing the unique characteristics of the knowledge he and other "Folk of Allah"—as he refers to his peers—are trying to impart. Because their science derives from divine opening and not discursive thought, it is intimately interrelated on all levels, though reason often fails to see the connections.

In its root, the existence of the cosmos is tied to the Being who is Necessary through Himself. Hence each part of the cosmos is tied to every other part, and

each is an interconnecting link on a chain. When man begins to consider the science of the cosmos, he is taken from one thing to another because of the interrelationships. But in fact, this only happens in the science of the Folk of Allah. Their science does not follow the canon of those of the learned who know only the outward appearances of phenomena. The canon of the Folk of Allah ties together all parts of the cosmos, so they are taken from one thing to another, even if the scholar of outward appearances sees no relationship. This is knowledge of God. . . .

He who knows the Koran and realizes it will know the science of the Folk of Allah. He will know that their science does not enter into limited chapters, nor does it follow the canon of logic, nor can it be weighed by any scale. It is the scale of all scales. (III 200.26)

Most people work contrary to this direct tasting [of the divine things]. That is why their speech is not tied together. He who considers their speech looks for a root to which all their words go back, but he does not find it. But each part of our speech is interrelated with the other parts, since it is one entity, while these things I say are its differentiation. A person will know what I am saying if he knows the interconnection of the verses of the Koran. (II 548.15)

I began this book with the idea of providing a more or less comprehensive overview of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings in the style of my study of Rūmī, *The Sufi Path of Love*. Several months of writing made it clear to me that I could not possibly provide a reasonable survey of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings under one cover, so I divided the topics into several major headings, with the idea of publishing a second volume at a later date. As the book originally developed, I wrote ten chapters on cosmology, anthropology, and the cosmic role of perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) after Chapter 8, but it soon became obvious that I could not do justice to these topics along with the other topics which needed to be discussed. I put those chapters aside with the hope of coming back to them on another occasion. In the notes I refer to them as *Cosmology*.²⁷

I am painfully aware of the inadequacies of my own explanations of the Shaykh's teachings. I cannot claim to understand everything he is talking about, and in any case I have usually been forced to oversimplify my own comments, since one cannot keep on qualifying oneself in every paragraph. The reader should keep in mind that all my own explanation is tentative, and much of what Ibn al-'Arabī himself says is modified by what he says in other contexts. In any case, summaries and simplifications of his teachings are unavoidable as soon as we want to gain an overview of his ideas. Definitions have to be provided for terminology, however tentative these may be.

In each chapter I have been torn between the wish to do justice to the topic by presenting it in its full context, and the knowledge that the book will have to have certain limits to be published and read. More than anyone else, I know that compromises have been made and that the book represents nothing close to a final statement of Ibn al-'Arabī's positions. I too have been forced to offer but a few table scraps from the Shaykh's inexhaustible kitchen.



Though but a preliminary and incomplete survey of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings, the present book brings to fruition some twenty years of study. I began reading Ibn al-'Arabī's works in the original language at Tehran University, where I edited a commentary on one of his treatises as a Ph.D. dissertation under the guidance of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a project which was completed in 1973 and published in 1977. During those years, Toshihiko Izutsu spent three months of

the year in Tehran, and in 1972 he graciously accepted to teach the *Fuṣūṣ* to myself and two others. We finally completed the text in 1978, when Izutsu was teaching full time at the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, which had recently been founded under the directorship of Nasr. The late Henry Corbin also taught at the Academy, and his intellectual presence was always palpable. I also had the opportunity to study some of the works of Ibn al-'Arabī's followers with the sage of Mashhad, Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Ashtiyānī. To all these teachers I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude, and to all of them I submit my apologies for the inadequacies which remain in the present work.

I first conceived of this book in 1983, soon after publishing *The Sufi Path of Love*. At that time I began reading the *Futūḥāt* systematically. As I moved forward in the text, I read more and more slowly. As my understanding increased, I took detailed notes on passages that at first I would have skimmed. Soon I was finding unexpected ramifications on every page. It began to appear that it would take many, many years to finish the text. In the meantime I had applied to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Fellowship for Independent Study and Research to write a book on Ibn al-'Arabī, and this was granted for 1986–87. I gratefully accepted this generous gift and began writing the book without having finished the *Futūḥāt*, not to mention many other works of the Shaykh which I could have consulted. Since I am completely convinced of the truth of Ibn al-'Arabī's claim that everything he writes is intimately interrelated, I have reason to hope that the texts presented here will not portray his teachings in an unbalanced manner.

1

Overview

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1. THE DIVINE PRESENCE

Finding God

How can I find God?

Ibn al-ʿArabī maintains that all human beings must seek to answer this question. Having answered it, they must then set out to verify the truth of their answer by finding God in fact, not in theory. He refers to those who have successfully verified the truth of their answer as the People of Unveiling and Finding (*ahl al-kashf waʿl-wujūd*). They have passed beyond the veils that stand between them and their Lord and stand in His Presence. The path they have traversed is open to everyone. It is the path brought by the prophets and followed by the friends of God (*al-awliyāʾ*), and it is the path set down in incredible detail in Ibn al-ʿArabī's works. To understand how he conceives of the problem, the path, and the goal is the major task of the present study. We begin by examining the question: "How can I find God?"

"Finding" renders the Arabic *wujūd*, which, in another context, may be translated as "existence" or "being." The famous expression "Oneness of Being" or "Unity of Existence" (*wahdat al-wujūd*), which is often said to represent Ibn al-

ʿArabī's doctrinal position, might also be translated as the "Oneness" or "Unity of Finding." Despite the hundreds of volumes on ontology that have been inspired by Ibn al-ʿArabī's works, his main concern is not with the mental concept of being but with the experience of God's Being, the tasting (*dhawq*) of Being, that "finding" which is at one and the same time to perceive and to be that which truly is. No doubt Ibn al-ʿArabī possessed one of the greatest philosophical minds the world has ever known, but philosophy was not his concern. He wanted only to bask in the constant and ever-renewed finding of the Divine Being and Consciousness. He, for one, had passed beyond the veils, though he was always ready to admit that the veils are infinite and that every instant in life, in this world and for all eternity, represents a continual lifting of the veils.

To find God is to fall into bewilderment (*ḥayra*), not the bewilderment of being lost and unable to find one's way, but the bewilderment of finding and knowing God and of not-finding and not-knowing Him at the same time. Every existent thing other than God dwells in a never-never land of affirmation and negation, finding and losing,

knowing and not-knowing. The difference between the Finders and the rest of us is that they are fully aware of their own ambiguous situation. They know the significance of the saying of the first caliph Abū Bakr: "Incapacity to attain comprehension is itself comprehension." They know that the answer to every significant question concerning God and the world is "Yes and no," or, as the Shaykh expresses it, "He/not He" (*huwa lā huwa*).

Chodkiewicz points out that it would not be far from the mark to say that Ibn al-ʿArabī never writes about anything except sanctity, its paths, and its goals.¹ The saints, a term which will be translated here in one of its literal meanings as "friends (of God)," have found God in this life and dwell in His Presence. Ibn al-ʿArabī often refers to them as the "gnostics" (*ʿarifūn*). They see and recognize God wherever they look. The Koranic verse, "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God" (2:115) has become the description of their spiritual state. Others are prevented from seeing Him by veils, but God's friends know that He is the veils and the others. Not that the friends are muddle-headed. They do not say "All is He"² and leave it at that. They say, "All is He, all is not He," and then proceed to clarify the various points of view in terms of which the situation can be perceived. If they happen to be among those friends whom Ibn al-ʿArabī considers of the highest rank—the "Verifiers" (*al-muḥaqqiqūn*)—they will have verified the truth of their vision of God on every level of existence and finding, not least on the level of intelligence and speech, the specific marks of being human. Hence they and Ibn al-ʿArabī in particular will provide sophisticated expositions of the exact nature of the ontological and epistemological ambiguity that fills the Void and is commonly referred to as the "world." The bewilderment of the Verifiers in respect to God as He is in Himself never prevents them from finding Him as Light and Wisdom and from employing the fruits of those

divine attributes to illuminate the nature of things and put each thing in its proper place.

"How can I find God?" This question means: How can I remove the veils that prevent me from seeing God? We dwell now in the situation of seeing the Not He in all things. How can we also perceive the universe as He?

We ourselves are included among the "things" of the universe. So "How can I find God?" also means: How can I remove those veils that prevent me from *being* God in that respect where the "He" must be affirmed. "Finding," it needs to be repeated, is never just epistemological. It is fundamentally ontological. Being precedes knowledge in God as in the world; nothing knows until it first exists. And as the oft-quoted Sufi saying maintains, "None knows God but God." Both knowledge and being are finding.

Worlds and Presences

The mystery of He/not He begins in the Divine Self and extends down through every level of existence. In clarifying the manner in which God is found—in affirming the "He" in all things—Ibn al-ʿArabī also affirms the Not He and explains the nature of everything that fits into that category, i.e., "everything other than God" (*mā siwā Allāh*), which is how Muslim thinkers define "the world" (*al-ʿālam*). He also speaks in detail about "worlds" in the plural. These might best be conceived of as subsystems of the Not He considered as a single whole. Two such worlds are the "greater" and the "lesser" worlds, i.e., the macrocosm (the universe "out there") and the microcosm (the human individual). Three more are the spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal worlds, referred to in concrete imagery as the worlds of light, fire, and clay, from which were created respectively the angels, the jinn, and the body of Adam. In order to distinguish

between these two senses of the term world, in what follows *‘ālam* in the sense of the world as a whole will be translated as “cosmos” or “universe,” while in the sense of one world in relation to other worlds, it will be translated as “world.” When reference is made to “cosmology,” what is meant is the study of the cosmos in the sense defined here, that is, the study of “everything other than God.” In contrast, modern cosmology has in view not the cosmos as a whole, but a single one of the many worlds.

Considered as other than God, the sum total of everything that exists is the cosmos or all the worlds. But considered as not other than God and as somehow identical with the He (*al-huwa*), the existing things are more likely to be referred to in terms of the “presences” (*ḥaḍra*). The term “presence” is used to refer to most of the “worlds,” though not to “the cosmos” as such. Thus the spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal “worlds” are also referred to as “presences.” The sense of the term is that, for example, the “Presence of Imagination” (*ḥaḍrat al-khayāl*) is a domain in which everything that exists is woven out of images. As a result, all things in this domain are “present” with imagination. In the same way, all things that reside in the Presence of Sense Perception (*ḥaḍrat al-ḥiss*) can be perceived by the senses. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s followers, beginning with Qūnawī, wrote in detail about the “Five Divine Presences,” by which they meant the five domains in which God is to be “found” or in which His Presence is to be perceived, i.e., (1) God Himself, the (2) spiritual, (3) imaginal, and (4) corporeal worlds, and (5) perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).³

In the last analysis, there is but a single presence known as the Divine Presence (*al-ḥaḍrat al-ilāhiyya*), which comprehends everything that exists. Ibn al-‘Arabī defines it as the Essence, Attributes, and Acts of Allah (II 114.14). Allah is known as the “all-comprehensive” (*jāmi‘*) name of God, since it alone designates God as He is in Himself in the wid-

est possible sense, leaving out nothing whatsoever of His Reality. Other names, such as Creator, Forgiving, and Vengeful, designate Him under certain specific aspects of His Reality.

The Divine Presence is that “location” where Allah is to be found, or where we can affirm that what we find is He. It includes the Essence (*dhāt*) of Allah, which is God in Himself without regard to His creatures; the attributes (*ṣifāt*) of Allah, also called His names (*asmā’*), which are the relationships that can be discerned between the Essence and everything other than He; and the acts (*af‘āl*), which are all the creatures in the cosmos along with everything that appears from them. Hence the term “Divine Presence” designates God on the one hand and the cosmos, inasmuch as it can be said to be the locus of His activity, on the other.

Ibn al-‘Arabī most often uses the term presence to refer to the sphere of influence of one of the divine names. For example, God is Powerful, so the “Presence of Power” is everything in existence that comes under the sway of His power, including the whole of creation. But the Presence of Power is more constricted, for example, than the Presence of Knowledge. No matter how powerful God may be, He cannot make Himself ignorant of what He knows. This way of thinking, which infuses Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings, has far-reaching implications for theological speculation.

“Where can I find God?” One obvious answer: Wherever He is present. But how is God present in things? God is certainly present through the properties of His Essence, which is He Himself, His very Being. Allah, God as described by the all-comprehensive name, has an influence upon everything in the cosmos. Everything that exists, by the fact of existing, manifests something of the Divine Presence, which by definition embraces all that exists. But every name of God has its own presence, which means that God makes Himself present to His creatures in various modalities. In each case it is God who reveals Himself, who is pres-

ent in the created thing, but God as the Abaser (*al-mudhill*) is not the same as God as the Exalter (*al-mu'izz*). "Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt and Thou abasest whom Thou wilt" (Koran 3:26). God as the Life-Giver (*al-muhyi*) is not the same as God as the Slayer (*al-mumit*). God encompasses all things, but some are exalted and some abased, some alive and some dead.

"Where can I find God?" Wherever He is present, which is everywhere, since all things are His acts. But no act is identical with God, who encompasses all things and all acts, all worlds and all presences. Though He can be found everywhere, He is also nowhere to be found. He/not He.

Being and Nonexistence

From the first, Islam's primary teaching has been that God is one. It did not take long before theologians and philosophers were struggling with the perennial intellectual task of explaining how multiplicity could have arisen from a reality that is one in every respect. Ibn al-'Arabī sees one explanation in the doctrine of the divine names, which provides the infrastructure for most of his teachings. But even more fundamental is the question of the nature of existence itself. Before talking about God and His attributes, we can search for Oneness and uncover the root of multiplicity in the nature of existing things.

We return to the word *wujūd*, "finding," "being," or "existence." Ibn al-'Arabī employs the term in a wide variety of ways. Without getting embroiled at this point in philosophical niceties, we can discern two fundamental meanings that will demand two different translations for a single term. On the one hand we "find" things wherever we look, both in the outside world and inside the mind. All these things "exist" in some mode or

another; existence can be said to be their attribute. The house exists and the galaxy exists in the outside world, the green-eyed monster exists in the hallucinations of a madman, on the film screen, and on the written page. The modes are different, but in each case we can say that something possesses the attribute of being there. When Ibn al-'Arabī speaks about any specific thing or idea that can be discussed, he uses the term existence in this general sense to refer to the fact that something is there, something is to be found. In this sense we can also say that God exists, meaning, "There is a God."

In a second sense Ibn al-'Arabī employs the word *wujūd* when speaking about the substance or stuff or nature of God Himself. In one word, what is God? He is *wujūd*. In this sense "finding" might better convey the sense of the term, as long as we do not imagine that God has lost something only to have found it again. What He is finding now He has always found and will ever find. Past, present, and future are in any case meaningless in relation to God in Himself, since they are attributes assumed by various existent things in relation to us, not in relation to Him. But "finding" is perhaps not the best term to bring this discussion into the theological and philosophical arena where Ibn al-'Arabī wants it to be considered. We are better off choosing the standard philosophical term "Being," which has normally been chosen (along with "existence") by Western scholars when they have wanted to discuss the term *wujūd* in English. However, one needs to keep in mind the fact that "Being" is in no way divorced from consciousness, from a fully aware finding, perception, and knowledge of the ontological situation. Since this point tends to be forgotten when the term is discussed, I will have occasion to come back to it, hoping for the reader's indulgence.

In what follows, "Being" in upper case will refer to God as He is in Him-

self. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, Being is in no sense ambiguous or questionable, though our understanding of Being is something else again. Being is that which truly is, while everything else dwells in fog and haziness. Hence, when we say that something—anything other than God—“exists,” we have to hesitate a little in saying so. The statement is ambiguous, for just as a thing pertains to existence, so also it lies in the grasp of existence’s opposite, nonexistence (*ʿadam*). Every existent thing is at one and the same time He (Being) and Not He (not-being, absolute nothingness). Only God is Being without qualification, without hesitation, without doubt.

God is sheer Being, utter Plenitude, pure Consciousness. Any given entity in the cosmos is at best a dim reflection of some of these qualities. Ibn al-ʿArabī commonly employs the term “existent” (*mawjūd*) to refer to the existing things, a term which, through its derivative grammatical form, suggests the derivative nature of the existence that is ascribed to the things. As will become clear when we discuss the “immutable entities” (*al-aʿyān al-thābita*), this ascription of existence to the things is in any case a mode of speaking more than a strict description of the actual situation. In fact, existence is but the reflected brilliance of Being, and there is only a single Being, God Himself.

God is Light, as the Koran affirms (24:35). Like so many other Muslim thinkers, at least from the time of al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-ʿArabī identifies Light with Being and employs the symbolism of visible light to explain the relationship between Being and nonexistence. God is Light and nothing but Light, while the things are so many rays reflected from Light’s substance. In one respect they are Light, since nothing else can be found; in another respect they are darkness, since they are not identical with Light itself. But darkness has no positive reality of its own, since its defining characteristic is the absence of Light. In the same way the

defining characteristic of each existent thing is its absence of Being. Though it reflects Being in one respect, it is nonexistent in another. He/not He.

Being or Light is that which by its very nature finds itself, though it cannot be perceived—i.e., embraced, encompassed, and understood—by “others.” First, because there is nothing other than Light that might do the perceiving. There is only Light, which perceives itself. Second, because if we accept that certain things “exist,” or that there are rays of light shining in an area which we can call the Void, these things or rays can only perceive themselves or their likes, not something infinitely greater than themselves of which they are but dim reflections. The shadow cannot perceive the sunlight, and the sunlight cannot embrace the sun. Only the sun knows the sun. “None knows God but God.”

How does manyness arise from Oneness? Being is Oneness, while nothingness as such does not exist in any respect. But we already know about Being that It is Light, so It radiates and gives of Itself. Hence we have three “things”: Light, radiance, and darkness; or Being, existence, nonexistence. The second category—radiance or existence—is our particular concern, since it defines our “location” for all practical purposes. Its most obvious characteristic is its ambiguous situation, half-way between Being and nonexistence, Light and darkness, He and Not He. Ibn al-ʿArabī sometimes calls it existence, and sometimes nonexistence, since each attribute applies to it. “Nonexistence” can thus be seen to be of two basic kinds: Absolute nonexistence (*al-ʿadam al-muṭlaq*), which is nothingness pure and simple, and relative nonexistence (*al-ʿadam al-idāfi*), which is the state of the things considered as Not He.

Our classification of the kinds of reality has gradually become more complex. We began with Being and existence, then looked at Being and nonexistence, then at Being, existence, and nonexistence, and now we turn to a fourth picture of

the basic structure of reality: Being, relative nonexistence, and absolute nonexistence, the last of which we can call “nothingness.” Only Being truly is, while nothingness has no existence except of a purely speculative and mental kind. So “everything other than God”—the cosmos—is relative nonexistence. But anything which is relatively nonexistence is also relatively existent.

Plurality and manyness arise from the very nature of existence (we could also say, from the very nature of nonexistence, but then the discussion would take a different turn; that perspective will come up in due time). It is plain to everyone that “brightness” is not all of a single intensity. Some brightness is stronger, some weaker; some is closer to light, some farther away. We can also say that some existents are more intense than others, but here the point is not so obvious. To make the point clear, it is best to talk not about Being itself but about the attributes of Being, i.e., those qualities that are denoted by the divine names, and examine how they are reflected in existence.

Take “finding,” for example, which is identical with consciousness and self-awareness, or with “knowledge” as a divine attribute (and also as a human attribute in the context of Sufi texts). It should be obvious that some people are more aware than others, some more knowledgeable than others. This is Ibn al-‘Arabi’s doctrine of *tafāḍul*, “ranking in degrees of excellence,” or “some being preferred over others,” or “some surpassing others.” The term is derived from such Koranic verses as, “God has caused some of you to surpass others in provision” (16:71). Knowledge is among the greatest bounties which He has provided for His creatures, but He has not given it to everyone equally. The Koran says, “We [God] raise in degrees whomsoever We will, and above each one who possesses knowledge is someone who knows [more]” (12:76).⁴ And it asks, “Are they equal—those who know and those who know not?” (39:9).

Existence or the cosmos is a vast panorama of ranking in degrees in every conceivable quality and attribute. No two things are exactly the same. Two things must differ in at least one attribute, or else they would be the same thing. The attributes depend upon Being, though they gain specific coloring from nothingness. Without first existing, a thing cannot be large or small, intelligent or ignorant, living or dead. Without light, there can be no red or green or blue. Everywhere we look we see hierarchies of attributes. If someone knows, someone else knows more, and someone else less. No two existents know exactly the same thing or the same amount. If we shared in God’s infinite knowledge, we would be able to discern a hierarchy of the knowing things in creation for all eternity from the least knowledgeable to the most knowledgeable. Each individual thing at any point in the trajectory of its existence would fit into a specific niche in the hierarchy. And the same thing can be said about every attribute that pertains to Being as well as about that global unity of Being’s manifest attributes known as “existence.” There is a gradation in the intensity of existence—or light—to be perceived in all things. No two things are exactly the same in the degree or mode of their existence.

The Divine Attributes

“Allah,” the all-comprehensive name, refers to all attributes of Being at once. It also alludes to Being’s relationship with the whole hierarchy of existence that reflects Its attributes in varying intensities, a hierarchy that is called, in the language of the theologians, the “acts of God.” Other divine names refer to relatively specific attributes of Being, such as Life, Knowledge, Desire, Power, Speech, Generosity, and Justice. According to a saying of the Prophet, there are ninety-nine of these “most beautiful” divine

names, though other names are expressed or implied in the Koran and various prophetic sayings. Each name enunciates an attribute of God, Sheer Being. The effect (*athar*) or property (*ḥukm*) of each name can be traced within existence, if, that is, we are given the insight and wisdom to do so. This in fact is the task that Ibn al-ʿArabī undertakes in the *Futūḥāt*, though he is fully aware that every book in the universe would be insufficient to record all the properties of the divine names, all the “words” of God. As the Koran puts it, “Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea—seven seas after it to replenish it—[were ink,] yet would the words of God not be spent” (31:27).

As was pointed out earlier, the name Allah refers to God’s Essence, attributes, and acts. The Essence is God in Himself without reference to anything else. As such God is unknowable to any but Himself. He is, as Ibn al-ʿArabī quotes constantly, “Independent of the worlds” (Koran 3:97), and this includes the knowledge possessed by the worlds. God as the Essence is contrasted with God inasmuch as He assumes relationships with the cosmos, relationships denoted by various divine names, such as Creator, Maker, Shaper, Generous, Just, Exalter, Abaser, Life-Giver, Slayer, Forgiver, Pardoner, Avenger, Grateful, and Patient.

Inasmuch as God’s Essence is Independent of the worlds, the cosmos is Not He, but inasmuch as God freely assumes relationships with the worlds through attributes such as creativity and generosity, the cosmos manifests the He. If we examine anything in the universe, God is Independent of that thing and infinitely exalted beyond it. He is, to employ the theological term that plays a major role in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s vocabulary, “incomparable” (*tanzīh*) with each thing and all things. But at the same time, each thing displays one or more of God’s attributes, and in this respect the thing must be said to be “similar” (*tashbīh*) in some way to God. The very least we can say is that it exists and God exists, even

though the modalities of existence may be largely incomparable. Many scholars have employed the terms “transcendence” and “immanence” (or “anthropomorphism”) in referring to these two ways of conceptualizing God’s relationship with the cosmos, but I will refrain from using these words in an attempt to avoid preconceptions and capture the nuances of the Arabic terminology.

When Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks about the Essence as such, he has in view God’s incomparability. In this respect there is little one can say about God, except to negate (*salb*) the attributes of created things from Him. Nevertheless, the Essence is God as He is in Himself, and God must exist in Himself before He reveals Himself to others. Both logically and ontologically, incomparability precedes similarity. It is the ultimate reference point for everything we say about God. A great deal can indeed be said about Him—that, after all, is what religion and revelation are all about—but once said, it must also be negated. Our doctrines, dogmas, theologies, and philosophies exist like other things, which is to say that they also are He/not He. Discerning the modalities and relationships, distinguishing the true from the false and the more true from the less true, is the essence of wisdom.

When Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks about God’s attributes and acts, he has in view the divine similarity. In this respect many things can be attributed to God, although it is best to observe courtesy (*adab*) by attributing to Him only that which He has attributed to Himself in revelation. What He has attributed to Himself is epitomized by His names and attributes, the discussion of which delineates Ibn al-ʿArabī’s fundamental approach to the exposition of the nature of things. The attributes are reflected in the acts, i.e., all things found in the cosmos. God’s “power” is reflected passively in everything He has made and actively in suns, volcanoes, seas, bees, human beings, and other creatures. His Hearing is found in every animal and perhaps in 9

plants as well. His Speech is certainly reflected in the cries, calls, and chirps of animals, but only in the same way that a glowing ember may be said to manifest the light of the sun. Only in the human being, the crown of that creation with which we are familiar, can speech reach a station where it expresses intelligence and truth and, in prayer, becomes discourse between man and God. "Call upon Me," says God in the Koran—to man, not to monkeys or parrots—"and I will answer you" (40:60).

For Ibn al-ʿArabī the divine names are the primary reference points in respect to which we can gain knowledge of the cosmos. In the *Futūḥāt* he constantly discusses words and technical terms that were employed by theologians, philosophers, and Sufis before him. For example, he has chapters devoted to many of the states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) that are discussed in detail in Sufi works. These represent the psychological, moral, and spiritual attributes and perspectives that mark degrees of spiritual growth which travelers on the path to God must experience, assimilate, and in most cases pass beyond. Examples include attributes that are paired and usually must be actualized together, such as hope and fear, expansion and contraction, intoxication and sobriety, annihilation and subsistence; and other attributes which are viewed as marking a kind of ascending hierarchy, such as awakening, repentance, self-examination, meditation, ascetic discipline, abstinence, renunciation, desire, refinement, sincerity, confidence, satisfaction, gratitude, humility, joy, certainty, courtesy, remembrance, good-doing, wisdom, inspiration, love, jealousy, ecstasy, tasting, immersion, realization, and unity.⁵ Ibn al-ʿArabī devotes about 200 chapters of the *Futūḥāt* to such terminology. The point to be made here is that his characteristic mode of approach is to discuss briefly what previous masters have said about these qualities and then to bring out what he calls the "divine root" (*al-aṣl al-ilāhī*) or the "divine origin" (*al-mustanad al-ilāhī*) of the

quality in question. What is it about God—Allah, the all-comprehensive Reality—that allows such a quality to be manifested in existence in the first place and then to be assumed by a human being? In a few cases the answer is immediately clear. "Love" is attributed to God in many places in the Koran, so the love that the spiritual traveler acquires must be a reflection of that divine love. But in most cases the divine root can only be brought out by a subtle analysis of Koranic verses and hadiths. Invariably, these analyses circle around the names and attributes that are ascribed to God in the revealed texts.

It must be concluded—from the above and a great deal more evidence that will present itself naturally in the course of the present book—that the divine names are the single most important concept to be found in Ibn al-ʿArabī's works. Everything, divine or cosmic, is related back to them. Neither the Divine Essence nor the most insignificant creature in the cosmos can be understood without reference to them. It is true that the Essence is unknown in Itself, but it is precisely the Essence that is named by the names.⁶ There are not two realities, Essence and name, but a single reality—the Essence—which is called by a specific name in a given context and from a particular point of view. A single person may be father, son, brother, husband, and so on without becoming many people. By knowing the person as "father" we know him, but that does not mean we know him as brother. Likewise, by knowing any name of God we know God, but not necessarily in respect of another name, nor in respect to His very Self or Essence.

In the same way, God's creatures must be known in terms of the divine names for any true knowledge to accrue. Every attribute possessed by a creature can be traced back to its ontological root, God Himself. The existence of the creature derives from God's Being, its strength from God's power, its awareness from God's knowledge, and so on.

Obviously there are many more attributes in creation than those delineated by the ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names. So the task of explaining the divine root of a thing through language is not at all straightforward.⁷ If it were, the *Futūḥāt* would fill 100 pages instead of 17,000. However this may be, it is sufficient for present purposes to realize that the Essence manifests Itself in the divine names, and the names in turn are revealed through the divine acts.

The Divine Acts

The term “acts” has many synonyms that Ibn al-‘Arabī is more likely to employ, though each synonym has its own connotations and nuances that can only become clear when it is explained in detail and employed in context. Acts are found in the intermediate domain known as existence, so their state remains forever ambiguous. To what extent they reflect the light of Being is always at issue. The word acts itself implies their existence, since the acts pertain to the Divine Presence, and by definition God is Sheer Being. In a similar way the synonymous term “creatures” (*khalq, makhlūqāt*) demands that the acts be the result of the activity of the divine name “Creator” (*kḥāliq*), whose business is to bring things out from nonexistence into existence. Here also, the term emphasizes the light of Being reflected in the things of the cosmos. Another common term applied to anything in the cosmos is “form” (*ṣūra*). As Ibn al-‘Arabī says, “There is nothing in the cosmos but forms” (II 682.20). But the term “form” normally calls to mind a second reality which the form manifests. X is the form of y. This second reality is often called the “meaning” (*ma‘nā*) of the form.

At first sight the term “existents” (*maʾjūdāt*) clearly affirms the reality of the created things, but a more careful analysis makes it ambiguous, since exis-

tence itself stands in an intermediary situation. Nevertheless, we can contrast “existents” with “nonexistents” (*ma‘dūmāt*), in which case a clear distinction must be drawn. Here the point is that there are degrees of participation in the light of Being.

Those things that are “existent” can be “found” in the outside world through our senses. But those things that are “nonexistents” cannot be found. However, they are not pure nothingness, since “nonexistence” is an ambiguous category, not too much different from existence. The nonexistence of the things is clearly a relative (*iḍāfi*) matter. For example, a person may claim that galaxies are nonexistent, and in relationship to his understanding, this may be a true statement. On another level, your fantasies are nonexistent for me, existent for you. On the cosmic level, any creature which can be found in the outside world is existent as long as it continues to be found there. But when it is destroyed or dies or decays, it ceases to be found in its original form, so it is nonexistent.

Any creature that God has not yet brought into existence is also nonexistent, though it certainly exists in some mode, since it is an object of God’s knowledge. It is “found” with God. He knows that He will bring it into the cosmos at a certain time and place, so it exists with Him, but is nonexistent in the cosmos.

Ibn al-‘Arabī employs the term “objects of [God’s] knowledge” (*ma‘lūmāt*) synonymously with the term “nonexistent things.” Both terms denote things or creatures as found with God “before” or “after” they have existed in the cosmos. However, it needs to be kept in mind that these things never “leave” God’s knowledge, so everything existent in the cosmos at this moment is also a “nonexistent object of knowledge.” Here again its situation is ambiguous.

One of the more common and probably best known terms that Ibn al-‘Arabī employs for the nonexistent objects of God’s knowledge is “immutable entity”

(*ʿayn thābita*). Entity here is synonymous with “thing” (*shayʿ*), and “thing,” as should be apparent from the way I have been employing the term all along, is “one of the most indefinite of the indefinites” (*min ankar al-nakirāt*), since it can be applied to anything whatsoever, existent or nonexistent (though it is not normally applied to God as Being). The “existent things” are the creatures of the cosmos (though never ceasing to be nonexistent objects of God’s knowledge). The “nonexistent things” are objects of knowledge, also called the “immutable entities.” These things or entities are immutable because they never change, just as God’s knowledge never changes. He knows them for all eternity. Here of course we enter onto the very slippery ground of free will and predestination, one of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s favorite topics.

When discussing *wujūd*, the central concern of the Muslim Peripatetics such as Avicenna, Ibn al-ʿArabī often borrows the Peripatetic term *wājib al-wujūd*, Necessary Being, that which by its very nature *is* and cannot not be; this is what we have been referring to as “Being.” In this context the entities are called the “possible things” (*numkināt*), since they may or may not exist in the cosmos. In respect to their own possibility, which is their defining characteristic, their relationship to existence and nonexistence is the same. An “immutable entity” is a nonexistent possible thing. If God “gives preponderance” (*tarjih*) to the side of existence over nonexistence, it becomes an existent entity, an existent possible thing. Like “entity” and “thing” and unlike “existent,” the ontological status of a possible thing has to be specified.

These few words that are employed in various contexts as synonyms for the term “acts” all share a certain ambiguity in terms of their referents. To repeat, this is because they are used to describe the domain of existent things, which is ambiguous by nature. Only Being—the Necessary Being—is absolutely unquestionable and unambiguous. But since It is utterly free of every limitation that can

be applied to anything else, we can only know It by negating from It all the ambiguities of “that which is other than Being.” Things, immutable entities, existent entities, acts, creatures, existents, nonexistents, possible things, and anything else we can name are in themselves “Not He.” This is what might be called God’s radical transcendence, His utter and absolute incomparability. From this point of view, true knowledge of God can only come through negation. This is the classical position of much of Islamic theology, but, however essential and true, it must be complemented—in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s view—with the acknowledgment that the acts do possess a certain derivative actuality and existence, all the more so since we are situated in their midst and cannot ignore them. Everything other than God is Not He, which means that everything other than God is not Reality, not Being, not Finding, not Knowledge, not Power, etc. Nevertheless, we do “find” the effects of these attributes in the existent things, and this lets us know that He is present. “We are nearer to [man] than the jugular vein” (Koran 50:16). “Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God” (2:115).

The Macrocosm

The existent things are not scattered randomly, in spite of their ambiguous status. God is the Wise, and wisdom (*ḥikma*) discerns the proper place of things and puts them where they belong. God is also “Uplifter of degrees” (*rafiʿ al-darajāt*), so He arranges all things according to the requirements of their own attributes and qualities. This is the source of the “ranking in degrees” (*tafāḍul*) already mentioned. These names provide important theological roots for the various cosmological teachings found in the works of Muslim authors. Like many other Muslim cosmologists, Ibn al-ʿArabī bases his scheme largely on the

data of the Koran and the Hadith. In the present work I can only provide a brief outline of the cosmos as he pictures it.

The Koran and Hadith are full of terms, many of them presented as complementary pairs, that suggest the dimensions of the cosmos: Light and darkness, the heavens and the earth, this world and the next world, the origin and the return, spirit and body, life and death, sun and moon, day and night. All these Koranic pairs find an appropriate place in Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmology. To them must be added various sets of terms such as stars, planets, and mansions of the moon; earth, air, water, and fire; animals, plants, and inanimate objects; and so on throughout the natural universe. It is well known that few if any sacred texts pay as much attention as the Koran to natural phenomena, which the Koran calls the "signs" (*āyāt*) of God. Add to these texts the indigenous knowledge of the Arabs and the Greek and Persian legacies that were very early taken over by the Muslims, and one begins to have an idea of the rich sources of Islamic cosmology.

To gain an overview of Ibn al-'Arabī's system, it may be best to suggest some of the implications of one of the most basic and suggestive of all pairings, that of "light" (*nūr*) and "darkness" (*ẓulma*). We have already seen that God is the Light of the heavens and the earth, and that Light is synonymous with Being. The "darkness" which stands opposite this uncreated Light of God is "nothingness," absolute nonexistence. But there is also a created light that pertains to the cosmos. *Nūr*, like *wujūd*, is applied to both God and the creatures. The angels (*malā'ika*), for example, are—according to the Prophet—created from light, which is to say that their very substance is woven from light. This is not the Light which is God, for God in Himself is infinitely incomparable, even with the greatest of the angels, all of whom are His creatures. So the light out of which the angels have been shaped and formed is the immediate radiance of Light or Being. Then there

are other creatures who are dark in relation to the angels, since they have been made out of clay. These things cannot be pure and utter darkness, since they exist. Their light or existence is obscured by their distance from the Absolute Light which is the source of cosmic light, but it is real light. These creatures created out of relative darkness—that is, extremely dim light—inhabit the earth, which itself is basically "clay" (earth and water), though the more luminous elements, air and fire, also play important roles (the four elements are known as the "pillars" [*arkān*] of terrestrial existence).

The slightest meditation on the relationship between light and darkness shows that they are relative things. In a dark room, a candle is a bright light, but in the desert at noon it is virtually nonexistent. Fireflies fill the nights of June with radiance, but no one finds them in the daytime. The moon is a marvelous lamp, but it quickly flees the scene when the sun appears. Much of the terminology that Ibn al-'Arabī employs in referring to existent things possesses this same relativity, and indeed one can say that every attribute that is applied to every existing thing in the universe has to be understood in relative terms. This type of relativity fits into the category of "ranking in degrees" or *tafāḍul*. If an angel is made out of light, it is nevertheless dark in relation to God. If a stone is dark, it is nevertheless light in relation to nothingness. If one person is intelligent, someone can always be found who is more intelligent. The only absolutes are the Divine Essence on the one hand and "nothingness" on the other. These are the two poles between which the cosmos takes shape.

All the basic terms that Ibn al-'Arabī employs to describe the structure of the cosmos must be viewed in relative terms. When we say that there are "two" basic kinds of existent, those made of light and those made of clay, this means that pure created light and pure clay are, relatively speaking, two cosmic poles. Between them all the existent things in the cosmos are arranged according to any attribute

that one wants to take into account. When Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks about the “hierarchy of the cosmos” (*tartīb al-ʿālam*), as he does in great detail in many passages of the *Futūḥāt*, he has in view the various degrees of existence or finding, the “ontological levels” (*marātib al-wujūd*) of the universe, or in other words, the various degrees in which the creatures participate in the Divine Presence. But when he has in view the various positive divine attributes such as knowledge, power, or generosity, then he uses the term *tafāḍul* or ranking in degrees to describe how each creature reflects or participates in these attributes to a different extent.

Some of the most important pairs of terms that are used to relate the existent things to the two poles of the cosmos are luminous (*nūrānī*) and dark (*ẓulmānī*), subtle (*latīf*) and dense (*kathīf*), spiritual (*rūḥānī*) and corporeal (*jismānī*), unseen (*ghayb*) and visible (*shahāda*), high (*ʿulwī*) and low (*sufīlī*). Each term designates a relative situation. What is subtle in relation to one thing is dense in relation to another. When it is said that the angels are luminous, subtle, spiritual, unseen, and high, a relationship is envisaged with all those things that are dark, dense, corporeal, visible, and low. It is not forgotten that the angels are in fact dark and dense in relationship to the infinite Light of God.

Viewed in the context of relative contrast and conflict, each attribute is taken to be incompatible with its opposite. This means that the angels have no direct relationship with the things of the corporeal world. Light does not perceive the darkness, nor does darkness comprehend the light. The angels are pure unitive awareness, while the corporeal things, as such, are conglomerations of unconscious parts and conflicting bits. Each part, which may be viewed as a relatively independent corporeal thing, has come into existence through a temporary marriage of the four elements in a specific balance that gives it its elemental characteristics (e.g., the ascending or fiery element may dominate over the descending

or earthy element). But viewed as a continuous hierarchy, the existent things are ranged between the most intense created light and the most intense darkness (= the least intense light), and this tells us that there must be innumerable degrees of intermediate creatures between “pure” light and “pure” darkness. In this context, it needs to be remembered, “pure” means the most intense in existence; it does not signify absolute, since Absolute Light is God, while absolute darkness is sheer nothingness.⁸ These intermediate degrees are known as *barzakhs* (literally “isthmuses”).

A *barzakh* is something that stands between and separates two other things, yet combines the attributes of both. Strictly speaking, every existent thing is a *barzakh*, since everything has its own niche between two other niches within the ontological hierarchy known as the cosmos. “There is nothing in existence but *barzakhs*, since a *barzakh* is the arrangement of one thing between two other things . . . , and existence has no edges (*ṭaraf*)” (III 156.27). Existence itself is a *barzakh* between Being and nothingness. In the hierarchy of worlds which makes up the cosmos, the term *barzakh* refers to an intermediate world standing between the luminous or spiritual world and the dark or corporeal world. The term is relative, like other cosmological terms, but it helps us to situate existent things in the cosmos with a bit more precision. Instead of saying that things are either spiritual or corporeal, we can now say that they may also be *barzakhī*, that is to say, neither spiritual nor corporeal but somewhere in between.

The term *barzakh* is often used to refer to the whole intermediate realm between the spiritual and the corporeal. In this sense the term is synonymous with the World of Imagination (*khayāl*) or Images (*mithāl*). From this perspective, there are basically three kinds of existent things: spiritual, imaginal or *barzakhī*, and corporeal. The imaginal world is more real than the corporeal world, since it is situated closer to the World of Light, though

it is less real than the spiritual and luminous realm of the angels. "Imaginary" things possess a certain kinship with imaginal things, but only as a sort of weak reverberation. Nevertheless, we can gain help in understanding the nature of the World of Imagination by reflecting upon our own mental experience of imagination.

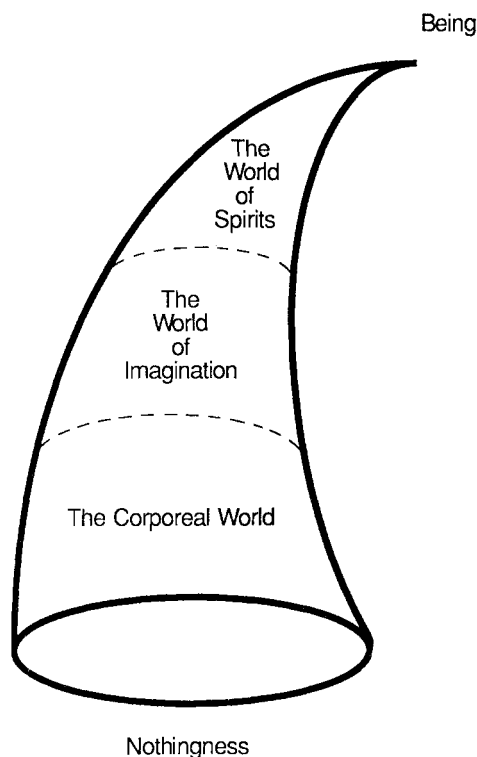
The most specific characteristic of the things found within the domain of imagination, on whatever level it is considered, is their intermediary and ambiguous status. When we understand the pairs of terms mentioned above as extreme "poles" or as relatively absolute ontological situations, then we can see that nothing found on the imaginal level corresponds to one or the other of the two poles. Imaginal existents are neither luminous nor dark, neither spiritual nor corporeal, neither subtle nor dense, neither high nor low. In every case they are somewhere in between, which is to say that they are "both/and." When we consider the pairs of terms which denote the extremes as relative terms, then all of them apply to imagination, depending on the perspective. Imaginal things are subtle in relation to the corporeal world, but dense in relation to the spiritual world. They are luminous in relation to visible things, but dark in relation to unseen things. Ibn al-'Arabī often employs expressions like "corporealization of the spirits" (*tajassud al-arwāḥ*) and "spiritualization of the corporeal bodies" (*tarawḥun al-ajsām*) to explain what sorts of events take place in the imaginal realm. It is here, he says, that the friends of God have visions of past prophets or that, after death, all the works of a person will be given back to him in a form appropriate to the intention and reality behind the work, not in the form of the work itself.

Those Muslim thinkers who deal with the imaginal world—and there are many, as Corbin's researches have helped to show⁹—love to point to dreams as our most direct and common experience of its ontological status. In the dream world, the things we perceive share in

the luminosity of our own consciousness, yet they are presented to us as corporeal and dense things, not as disembodied spirits. Since the World of Spirits manifests directly the unity of the divine, angels have no "parts," while the world of corporeal things appears to us as indefinite multiplicity. But the world of dreams combines unity and multiplicity. A single dreaming subject perceives a multiplicity of forms and things that in fact are nothing but his own single self. Their manyness is but the mode that the one consciousness assumes in displaying various facets of itself.

It was just said that the most specific characteristic of imaginal things is their intermediary and ambiguous situation. From everything we have said about existent things in general, it should be clear that all existent things share in a similar ambiguity, since they are neither Being nor nothingness, but somewhere in between. Existence as a whole, as was said above, is a *barzakh*, an intermediary realm between Being and nothingness. Hence existence as a whole can be called "imagination." When Ibn al-'Arabī uses the term imagination, he most often has in mind the intermediary realm between the spiritual and corporeal worlds. But sometimes he means existence per se. In a few passages he clarifies the distinction between the two kinds of imagination by calling the cosmos "nondelimited imagination" (*al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*) and the imaginal world "delimited imagination" (*al-khayāl al-muqayyad*). The accompanying diagram shows the overall structure of Ibn al-'Arabī's most elementary cosmological scheme. Note that there are two intermediary domains, existence as such (= nondelimited imagination), which stands between Being and nothingness, and the imaginal world (= delimited imagination), which stands between the spiritual and the corporeal worlds.

It needs to be kept in mind that the cosmos is "imagination" only in the specific sense of the term as defined above. In no sense does this imply that things "out there" are imaginary, any more



Nondelimited Imagination. (Ibn al-ʿArabī describes nondelimited imagination as a “horn made out of light” [I 306, translated in Chapter 7])

than we ourselves are imaginary. We ourselves are part of the cosmos and partake of its ontological status, and it provides our only path to true knowledge of ourselves and of God. Moreover, the cosmos is God’s imagination, not our imagination. He imagines everything other than Himself, but by so doing, He gives all things a certain mode of real and seemingly independent existence. This nondelimited imagination of God is also God’s self-manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) or self-disclosure (*tajallī*), terms that will be discussed in detail as we go along. For now, it is sufficient to look at one implication of the term “self-manifestation.”

According to the Koran (57:3), God is the Outward or Manifest (*ẓāhir*) and the Inward or Nonmanifest (*bāṭin*). It can be said that God is Nonmanifest in the sense

that His Essence in Itself remains forever unknown to the creatures, while He is Manifest inasmuch as the cosmos reveals something of His names and attributes. The question arises as to which divine attributes are revealed by the divine acts. The answer is that, generally speaking, every name of God has loci of manifestation (*mazāhir*; sing.: *mazhar*) in the cosmos, some obvious and some hidden. The universe as a whole manifests all the names of God. Within the existent things is found every attribute of Being in some mode or another. Even such attributes as incomparability and unknowability that apply in a strict sense only to the Essence can be found in a relative sense among the possible things. Or again, one could say that every divine attribute is found in an absolute sense in God alone, but in a relative sense in the creatures. The cosmos considered as a single whole is the locus of manifestation for all the divine names, or what comes down to the same thing, for the name Allah, which is the name that brings together all the other names. Hence, says Ibn al-ʿArabī, God created the cosmos in His own image, or, to use a better translation of the Arabic term *ṣūra*, in His own “form.” So also, as the Prophet reported, “God created Adam upon His own form.” Hence the universe is a great man (*insān kabīr*),¹⁰ while man is a “small universe” (*ʿālam ṣaghīr*).

The Microcosm

So far we have been leaving human beings out of the picture. The reason should be obvious: They do not fit neatly into any of the categories discussed so far. Are they corporeal things? Yes, but they also have a spiritual dimension. Are they dense, dark, low? Yes, but also—in their inward dimensions, at least potentially—subtle, luminous, and high. In other words, human beings can be de-

scribed by most if not all of the attributes that are attributed to the cosmos. Speaking about the general human situation without reference to specific individuals, it can be said that human beings embrace a hierarchy of all things within existence, from the most luminous to the darkest. They were created from God's Spirit breathed into the clay of this world (Koran 15:28–29, 32:7–9, 38:71–72), so they combine the most intense light of existence and awareness with the dullest and most inanimate dust of the universe.

The microcosm reflects the macrocosm in two ways which are of particular significance for Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings: as a hierarchy of existence and as a divine form, a theomorphic entity. The three basic worlds of the macrocosm—the spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal—are represented in man by the spirit (*rūh*), soul (*nafs*), and body (*jism*). That the spirit should be spiritual and the body corporeal presents no difficulties. But what does it mean to say that the soul pertains to the imaginal world?

The human spirit is also God's spirit. The Koran attributes the spirit breathed into Adam to God with the pronouns "His" (32:9) and "My" (15:29, 38:72). Hence this spirit is called the "attributed spirit" (*al-rūh al-idāfī*), i.e., attributed to God, a term which suggests its ambiguous status, both divine and human at once. The spirit possesses all the spiritual or angelic attributes, such as luminosity, subtlety, awareness, and oneness. Clay stands at the opposite pole of the existent cosmos: dark, dense, multiple, dispersed. No connection can be established between the one and the many, the luminous and the dark, without an intermediary, which in man's case is the soul, the locus of our individual awareness. The spirit is aware of God, though not of anything less than God. But we—at least before we have refined our own souls—have no awareness of the spirit. Clay is unaware of anything at all. The soul, which develops gradually as a human being grows and matures, becomes aware

of the world with which it is put in touch in a never-ending process of self-discovery and self-finding. Ultimately it may attain to complete harmony with the spirit.

The soul is luminous and dark, subtle and dense, one and many. In some human beings its luminous or ascending tendency dominates, in others its dark or descending tendency. Here the Koranic revelation uses the language of guidance and misguidance, prophets and satans. Without discussing this question, it is easy to see that there must be a vast hierarchy of souls, ranging from the most spirit-like luminosity to the most clay-like darkness. The soul—that is to say our own self-awareness—represents an unlimited possibility for development, whether upward, downward, or sideways.

Just as the soul can be spoken about in terms of the single divine and cosmic attribute of light, so also it can be discussed in terms of every name of God. "God created Adam upon His own form" means that He placed within man every one of His own attributes, just as He placed all of His attributes within the cosmos. But in the cosmos they are scattered and dispersed, while in man they are gathered and concentrated. In the cosmos the divine names are relatively differentiated (*mufaṣṣal*), while in man they are relatively undifferentiated (*mujmal*). The growth of the human soul, the process whereby it moves from darkness to light, is also a growth from death to life (*ḥayāt*), ignorance to knowledge (*'ilm*), listlessness to desire (*irāda*), weakness to power (*qudra*), dumbness to speech (*kalām*), meanness to generosity (*jūd*), and wrongdoing to justice (*qist*). In each case the goal is the actualization of a divine attribute in the form of which man was created, but which remains a relative potentiality as long as man does not achieve it fully. All the "states" and "stations" mentioned earlier can be seen as stages in the process of actualizing one or more of the divine names.

Cosmic Dynamics

In most of the previous discussion, the macrocosm and microcosm have been envisaged as relatively static entities. But a little meditation upon the human state has been sufficient to remind us that the microcosm hardly stands still. Humans may be made of three worlds, but the relationship among the worlds does not remain the same throughout a person's life. People may have been created in the divine form, but there is an immeasurable difference between someone who has brought out the divine knowledge and power which had previously been latent within himself and someone else who has remained ignorant and weak. And just as the microcosm represents a gradual manifestation of the divine names, so also does the macrocosm.

The outstanding feature of the cosmos is its ambiguous status, the fact that it is He/not He. In other terms, the cosmos is imagination, and imagination is that which stands in an intermediary situation between affirmation and denial. About it one says "both this and that," or, "neither this nor that." The universe is neither Being nor nothingness, or both Being and nothingness. It is "existence" in the way this term has been defined. This description of the cosmos is basically static and nontemporal. What happens when we take time into consideration? Another dimension of ambiguity is added. In other words, if we take an existent thing at any moment in time without reference to past or future and try to define its situation, we will come up with a hazy sort of definition, a not very successful attempt to pinpoint its situation between Being and nothingness and in relation to the divine names. But if we look at that thing in the next moment in time, ambiguity has increased, since the situation has changed, relationships have altered, and we need a new definition in order to take the changes into account. Just as no two things in the cosmos considered synchronistically are exactly the

same—since each fits into its own particular niche on each of the cosmic hierarchies that are defined by luminosity, knowledge, power, and the other divine attributes—so also no single thing considered temporally is exactly the same in two successive moments. This is Ibn al-'Arabī's well-known doctrine of the "renewal of creation at each instant" (*tajdīd al-khalq fī'l-ānāt*), a term derived from such Koranic verses as, "No indeed, but they are in confusion as to a new creation (*khalq jadīd*)" (50:15).

All things change constantly because none of them is the Essence of God, which alone is absolutely changeless and eternal. Certain angelic or other creatures may survive for countless aeons and from our point of view appear to be "eternal," but in the end, "Everything is annihilated except His Face" (Koran 28:88). Compared to Eternity, the longest duration imaginable is but the blink of an eye. Moreover, no angel remains fixed in its place. Angels have wings—two, three, and four according to the Koran (35:1)—so they flap them. Every flap takes them to a new situation. Galaxies may last from one "big bang" to the next, or the universe may exist "steadily" and "forever." But one glance allows us to understand that physical reality is constantly changing, slowly or quickly. If we need the tools of modern physics, we can employ them to convince ourselves that "solidity" and permanence are but illusions. When the veil is lifted, says the Koran, "You will see the mountains, that you supposed to be fixed, passing by like clouds" (27:88).

All things change constantly because "Each day He is upon some task" (Koran 55:29). God's tasks (*shu'ūn*), says Ibn al-'Arabī, are the creatures, and His "day" (*yawm*) is the indivisible moment (*ān*). Each instant God's relationship to every existent thing in the cosmos changes, since each instant He undertakes a new task. To employ another of Ibn al-'Arabī's favorite expressions, "Self-disclosure never repeats itself" (*lā takrār fī'l-tajallī*). In the traditional Islamic world,

brides were kept veiled from their husbands until the wedding night. Then came *jilwa*, "the removal of the bride's veil." From the same root we have the word *tajallī*, "self-disclosure" or "God's unveiling Himself to the creatures." The cosmos, made upon God's form, is His unveiling, and He never repeats the manner in which He shows His Face, for He is infinite and unconstricted. The Divine Vastness (*al-tawassu' al-ilāhī*) forbids repetition.

The evanescent and changing nature of existence, or the cosmos as ever-renewed creation and never-repeated divine self-disclosure, is evoked by one of Ibn al-'Arabī's best-known names for the substance of the universe, the "Breath of the All-merciful" (*nafas al-rahmān*). God breathes out, and while breathing, He speaks. But only His Speech is eternal, not His spoken words as words. Every word appears for an instant only to disappear from the created cosmos forever (though it remains immutably present in His knowledge). Every part of every existent thing is a "letter" (*ḥarf*) of God. The creatures are words (*kalima*) spelled out by the letters, the trajectory of a creature's existence is a sentence (*jumla*), and each world a book (*kitāb*). All the words and all the books are uttered by the All-merciful, for God "embraces all things in mercy and knowledge" (Koran 40:7). Through knowledge He knows all things, both in their nonexistent state as immutable entities and in their existent state as things in the cosmos. Through mercy He has pity on the nonexistent things by answering their prayers to be given existence. For possibility (*imkān*) is a prayer, a call to the Necessary Being, who at every instant recreates the cosmos in a new form as the sun throws out fresh light. His infinite Mercy—identified by Ibn al-'Arabī's followers explicitly with Being Itself—answers every prayer for existence.

When considering the transformations and transmutations undergone by the cosmos at each instant, it is well to remember that from a certain point of

view the direction of the movement is away from the Center, just as light shines out only to dissipate itself in indefinite distance, and words are uttered only to dissolve into space. It is true that everything returns to God. This is a Koranic leitmotif and a principle of Islamic belief. But the mode of return is different from the mode of appearance. As Ibn al-'Arabī points out, the corporeal universe continues moving down and away from its spiritual root.¹¹ Nevertheless, things disappear only to be taken back to God. The Return takes place in a "dimension" of reality different from that of the Origination. Ibn al-'Arabī declares that everything which disappears from manifestation goes back to nonmanifestation from whence it arose. Every death is a birth into another world, every disappearance an appearance elsewhere. But the overall movement never reverses itself, since the cosmic roads know only one-way traffic. To return to "there" from "here," we have to take a different route than the one by which we came.

The Return to God

All things return to God, but most of them go back in roughly the same form in which they came. Speaking for the angels, Gabriel is quoted as saying, "None of us there is but has a known station" (Koran 37:164). Ibn al-'Arabī remarks that his words apply in fact to every kind of creature except two: human beings and jinn.¹² A pear tree enters this world as a pear tree and never leaves as a pumpkin. A rhinoceros does not become a monkey or a mouse. Only human beings (leaving jinn out of the picture) come into the universe as a tremendous potentiality for growth and maturation, but also for deviation, degradation, and deformation. Outwardly they remain human as long as they stay in this world, but inwardly they may become almost anything at all. They come in as men,

but they may leave as pumpkins or monkeys or pigs.

On the one hand, human beings return to God by the same invisible route followed by other creatures. They are born, they live, they die, and they are gone, no one knows where. The same thing happens to a bee or an oak tree. This is what Ibn al-ʿArabī and others call the “compulsory return” (*rujūʿ idṭirārī*) to God. Whether we like it or not, we will travel that route. “O man, you are laboring toward your Lord laboriously, and you shall encounter Him!” (Koran 84:6). On the other hand human beings possess certain gifts which allow them to choose their own route of return (this is the “voluntary return,” *rujūʿ ikhtiyārī*). Man can follow the path laid down by this prophet or that, or he can follow his own “caprice” (*hawā*) and whims. Each way takes him back to God, but God has many faces, not all of them pleasant to meet. “Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God” (2:115), whether in this world or the next. If we want to know what these faces are like, we can get a rough idea by meditating upon the “divine roots” of all things, God’s names. He is full of Mercy (*rahma*), but He is not above showing His Wrath (*ghaḍab*). He is the Forgiver (*al-ghafūr*) and the Blessing-giver (*al-munʿim*), but He is also the Avenger (*al-muntaqim*) and the Terrible in Punishment (*shadīd al-ʿiqāb*). Each of these names represents a “face” of God, and no one can think that the properties (*aḥkām*) of each name are the same. Paradise, says Ibn al-ʿArabī, is the locus of manifestation for God’s mercy, while hell is the locus of manifestation for His wrath.

What will decide the divine face to which a person returns? This is one of the most complex of all issues, not least because it immediately moves us into the realm of free will and predestination, one of the most puzzling of all questions that arise when the divine things (*al-ilāhiyyāt*) are discussed. The brief answer to the question, “Are we free?” (or, “Are we predestined?”) is “Yes and no,” and it re-

mains to sort out the different perspectives from which our ambiguous situation can be understood. For the present, we will look only at the freedom that sets human beings apart from other creatures and allows them to “choose” their route of return to the Divine Reality. Later Ibn al-ʿArabī will be quoted on the subtleties of various divine relationships which counterbalance the appearance of freedom. But we need to begin with the fact that human beings experience themselves as free agents and that their freedom is sufficiently real in the divine scheme of things for God to have sent thousands of messengers warning human beings to make proper use of it.

The divine root of human freedom and of the fact that we choose the route by which we return to God is the fact that God created man upon His own form. In its primordial nature (*fiṭra*) every human microcosm is the outward form (*ṣūra*) of an inward meaning (*maʿnā*) that is named “Allah.” Allah, the all-comprehensive name, denotes not only the Essence of God but also the sum total of every attribute that the Essence assumes in relationship to the creatures. However, human beings do not enter the world as full-fledged divine forms. They start out as a sort of infinite potentiality for actualizing the all-comprehensive name. At the beginning they are only empty shells, the dimmest of apparitions dancing on the farthest of walls. Between the apparition and Absolute Light stands a yawning chasm, an endless void. True, the apparition in relation to absolute darkness is light, but in effect it is shadow. To connect the apparition to the Light which it manifests is the human task. This involves a process through which light is intensified and darkness overcome. The dim apparition remains on the wall for all to see—the body remains a fixed reality until death—but the human consciousness travels in the direction of the Light.

Different people make different choices. Some prefer to play with apparitions, some seek out various degrees of

light, some turn their gaze to the Absolute Light and can be satisfied with nothing less. The degrees of light's intensity are practically limitless. Every degree can become a person's waystation (*manzil*), but a "waystation" exists only for the traveler to move on to the next. The journey goes on forever. How can the finite encompass the Infinite?

All paths do not lead in the direction of Absolute Light. A person may continue to wander in apparitions in this world and the next, or become transfixed by one of the innumerable *barzakhs* or interworlds that fill the chasm. Here we meet the imponderables of human destiny. Few are the human beings who have witnessed the interworlds with the clarity and perspicacity of Ibn al-'Arabī and returned to map them out.

When human beings return to God, whether by compulsion or their own free choice, they go by way of the intermediate worlds. The general characteristics of these worlds have to be sought out in the divine names which they manifest. The Koran tells us to pray, "Guide us on the straight path" (1:5). Just as this straight path of return can be imagined as an ascent through an ever increasing intensity of light that opens up into the Infinite Light of God, so also it can be envisaged in terms of many other divine attributes. To increase in light is to increase in life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, and so on. This is the process of actualizing all the divine names that are latent within the primordial human nature by virtue of the divine form.

Assuming the Traits of God

One of the most common terms that Ibn al-'Arabī employs to describe the process whereby man comes to manifest the divine attributes is *takhalluq*, "assuming the traits." The term must be understood in relation to one of its root mean-

ings as found in the word *khuluq*, which may be translated as "character" in a general sense or "character trait" in a specific sense. Its full connotations cannot be understood without reference to a few of its antecedents in the tradition.

In the most important scriptural use of the term, the Koran addresses the Prophet, telling him that he has a "*khuluq 'azīm*" (68:4). English translators have rendered the expression as "mighty morality" (Arberry), "sublime nature" (Dawood), "tremendous nature" (Pickthall), "sublime morals" (Muhammad Ali), "sublime morality" (Habib), "tremendous character" (Irving), etc. These translations show an attempt to bring out the term's moral and ethical connotations on the one hand and its ontological roots on the other, for it is separated only by pronunciation (not in the way it is written) from the term *khalq*, "creation." For an Ibn al-'Arabī, the "tremendous character" of the Prophet has to do not only with the way he dealt with people, but also with the degree to which he had realized the potentialities of his own primordial nature, created upon the form of God. Qualities such as generosity, justice, kindness, benevolence, piety, patience, gratitude, and every other moral virtue are nothing extraneous or super-added to the human condition. On the contrary, they define the human condition in an ontological sense. Only by actualizing such qualities does one participate in the fullness of existence and show forth the qualities of Being.

Just as a person's character is referred to by the term *khuluq*, so also each of his moral traits, whether good or bad, is called by the same term. The word's plural, *akhlāq*, may be translated as "moral traits," though in a philosophical context it is usually rendered as "ethics." A few of the hadiths in which this term is employed can suggest some of the connotations it carries in the tradition. The Prophet was asked, "Which part of faith is most excellent?" He replied, "A beautiful character." "The most perfect of the faithful in faith is the most beautiful of

them in character.” “The best thing in the Scale on the Day of Judgment will be a beautiful character.” “Every religion has its moral character, and the moral character of Islam is modesty (*al-ḥayāʾ*).” “The Prophet used to command people to observe noble character traits (*makārim al-akhlāq*).” “I was sent [as a prophet] to complete the beautiful character traits (*ḥusn al-akhlāq*).” “Among the best of you is the most beautiful in character traits.”¹³

It is not difficult to see the connection between good character traits and the divine names. Note first of all that the adjective “beautiful” employed in many of these hadiths is the same as that which is applied to the “Most Beautiful Names.” Many moral traits are also divine attributes, such as repentance (corresponding to the name *al-tawwāb*), faith (*al-muʾmin*), generosity (*al-karīm*), justice (*al-ʿadl*, *al-muṣiṭ*), forgiveness (*al-ghaffār*, *al-ghafūr*), pardon (*al-ʿafū*), patience (*al-ṣabūr*), gratitude (*al-shakūr*), forbearance (*al-ḥalīm*), wisdom (*al-ḥakīm*), love (*al-wadūd*), dutifulness (*al-barr*), and clemency (*al-raʿūf*). Moreover, if the question is asked, “What are God’s ‘character traits’?”, one can answer only by listing His names. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the expressions “assuming the character traits of God” (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*) and “assuming the traits of God’s names” (*al-takhalluq bi asmāʾ Allāh*) are synonymous, and they are identical with the spiritual path of the Sufis.

Theomorphic Ethics

In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s way of looking at things, human beings assume many of the traits of God, to a certain degree and more than any other terrestrial creatures, as a matter of course by the fact of living a life in the divine/human form. A normal child cannot grow up without manifesting life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, hearing, sight, and other divine

attributes. Especially significant here is the degree to which humans display the attributes of knowledge (or intelligence¹⁴) and speech, since these are fundamental in setting them apart from other creatures. The presence of the qualities just mentioned (leaving aside for a moment the question of the intensity of their manifestation) is the mark of theomorphism and the sign of being human. But a person who aspires to become more than a human animal will have to actualize other divine qualities which are likely to remain latent in the “natural” human state, that is, those traits which have a specifically moral connotation, such as generosity, justice, forbearance, and gratitude.

It must always be kept in mind that Sufi ethics, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s in particular, is grounded in ontology. In other words, noble character traits are not extraneous qualities that we might acquire if we aspire to become good human beings but which have no real bearing upon our mode of existence. On the contrary, they define our mode of existence, since they determine the extent to which we participate in the fullness of the Light of Being. It is easy to conceive of existence as light and to understand that a more intense light is a more intense existence, and that absolute Light is Sheer Being. But one must also understand every divine attribute and moral trait as a mode—or color, if you like—of light. Absolute Being is sheer generosity. To gain proximity to Being by increasing the intensity of one’s existence is to become more generous by the very nature of things. Greed, impatience, injustice, cowardice, arrogance, and avarice are not only moral faults but also ontological lacks. They mark the weakness of the reflected Light of Being in the human individual.¹⁵

Everyone who has studied traditional ethics knows that one cannot become virtuous and ethical through wishy-washy do-goodism. A work like Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī’s *Nasirean Ethics* makes abundantly clear that a key ingredient in the virtuous human soul is equilibrium

among the moral traits, and this depends on an intelligent and wise discernment of relationships and aspects.¹⁶ Too much justice without generosity will end up in tyranny, and too much forgiveness without justice will lead to chaos. In ethics and morality, balance is everything. So also is the case, Ibn al-ʿArabī would add, in assuming the traits of the divine names, which is what ethics and morality are all about. It is especially difficult to assume the traits of the names because all the names do not stand on the same level. Hence, some must be displayed before others, and some must even be avoided until God bestows them on man in accordance with His wisdom.

It is clear that a certain hierarchy exists among the names. For example, God does not do something (power) without wanting to (desire). He cannot desire to do something without discerning its situation (knowledge). And He cannot have knowledge without existing in the first place (life). Human attainment to generosity and justice presupposes a certain degree of intelligence and speech. But where this question takes on special importance is in divine names such as Magnificent (*al-mutakabbir*), Overbearing (*al-jabbār*), Overwhelming (*al-qahhār*), Inaccessible (*al-ʿazīz*), Tremendous (*al-ʿazīm*), and All-high (*al-ʿalī*). In Ibn al-ʿArabī's view, the person who actualized these qualities most patently was the Pharaoh of the Koran, who said, "I am your lord the most high" (79:24). But we do not have to search that far, since most any office has its own would-be pharaoh. Obviously these divine qualities cannot be displayed in isolation from other qualities, or moral disaster ensues.

The general principle that determines which names should be acquired and which should be avoided derives from the relative ontological status of the names. It can be stated succinctly in terms of the well-known prophetic saying, "God's Mercy precedes His Wrath." This means that Mercy always takes priority over Wrath within the divine acts. The whole of the cosmos is nothing but

the Breath of the All-merciful. Wrath, then, is an offshoot of mercy in relation to certain creatures. However, it may take aeons before those creatures realize that the wrath they had been tasting in the concrete form of infernal punishment was in fact mercy. From the human perspective, there is a real and fundamental difference between mercy and wrath, even if, in the divine overview, wrath derives from and leads back to mercy. In short, mercy pertains to the very nature of Being Itself, so it encompasses "all things" (as the Koran insists [7:156, 40:7]), but wrath is a subsidiary attribute of Being assumed in relation to specific existents for precise and determined reasons.

A similar analysis could be made of many corresponding pairs of divine attributes, such as forgiveness and vengeance. Several sets of contrary divine names describe the faces of Being turned toward the creatures. These attributes can be divided into two broad categories, the names of beauty (*jamāl*) and the names of majesty (*jalāl*), or the names of gentleness (*luṭf*) and the names of severity (*qahr*). The created properties of these two sets of attributes provide a significant parallel with the two fundamental perspectives on the Divine Being discussed earlier: incomparability and similarity.

Inasmuch as God is incomparable with all created things, He can only be understood in terms of the attributes denoting His distance, transcendence, and difference. In this respect, human beings sense the majesty and tremendousness of God and perceive Him as Magnificent, Overbearing, Overwhelming, Inaccessible, All-high, Great, Slayer, King. These attributes demand that all created things be infinitely far from Him. The things are totally Not He; He is Being and they are nonexistence. To the extent any relationship can be envisaged between the Creator and His creature, He is the stern and distant father (though Islam avoids this particular analogy because of its Christian connections). The

human situation in this respect is total slavehood or servanthood (*'ubūdiyya*). God is self-sufficient and independent (*al-ghanī*), while man is utterly poor (*al-faqīr*) toward Him. Man cannot aspire to assume the divine traits of majesty or even to gain proximity to them, since they mark the difference between God and creation, between Being and nonexistence. To claim such attributes for oneself is, in effect, to claim divinity, an unforgivable sin.

When God's similarity with the creatures is affirmed, the situation appears in a different light. In respect of His similarity, God is seen as immanent and near. He appears in the guise of gentleness, mercy, beauty, generosity, love, forgiveness, pardon, bestowal, and beneficence. Because He possesses these attributes, the existence of every individual creature is a matter of His immediate concern. In this respect one might say that "She" is a compassionate mother who never fails to look out for the welfare of Her children.¹⁷ The human response to this relationship is love, devotion, and the desire to move nearer to the Source of light. It is in this respect that human beings are created upon God's form and can actualize the fullness of their theomorphic nature. If in the first respect man is God's slave, in the second respect he may become His "vicegerent" (*khalīfa*) and "friend" (*walī*)—two important technical terms.

Incomparability and the names of majesty are demanded by the fact of God's Being and our nonexistence. But our nonexistence is somehow woven with existence. The dimmest light is nevertheless light. And the dimmest light is more real than total darkness. Mercy—which is Being and Light—pervades everything that exists. In contrast, Wrath is like the repercussion of nothingness. It is God's answer to a nonexistent thing which has been given existence through generosity and compassion, and yet claims a right to exist. Incomparability affirms the reality of Being in the face of everything that is not-being, but similarity affirms the ul-

timate identity of all existence with Being. Incomparability says Not He, similarity says He. And He is more real than Not He. The attributes of similarity and beauty overcome those of incomparability and majesty in the same way that light erases darkness, mercy overcomes wrath, and nearness negates distance.

But man cannot claim light and nearness for himself. His first task is to be God's servant, to acknowledge His majesty and wrath, and to avoid any attempt to assume as his own those attributes which pertain to incomparability. He must seek out mercy and avoid wrath. It is true that man is a theomorphic entity, made upon the form of all the divine names, but there is a right way and a wrong way to assume the divine traits. Once a human being has been infused with the divine mercy and filled with its light, the attributes of majesty appear within him as a matter of course. But they always present dangers. The sin of Iblis (Satan) was to perceive that the light within himself was more intense than in Adam and to say as a result, "I am better than he—Thou created me of fire and him of clay" (Koran 7:12, 38:76). As a result he claimed a greatness which did not in fact belong to him. Or, as Ibn al-'Arabī might say, he came to manifest the divine name Magnificent outside of its proper limits within the created world. He claimed incomparability for himself and as a result came face to face with the divine Wrath. The only thing a person can ever claim for himself is nonexistence, which, in religious terms, is to be God's servant. Indeed, Ibn al-'Arabī places servanthood at the highest level of human realization. After all, it was through his servanthood that Muḥammad was worthy to be God's Messenger (*'abduhu wa rasūluhu*). Total obliteration before the divine incomparability results in a full manifestation of the divine similarity. Not He is simultaneously He.

The priority of mercy over wrath can also be explained in terms of the precedence of unity over multiplicity. God in Himself is One Being, while existence

appears as an indefinite multiplicity of things. The divine names stand as a kind of *barzakh* between Oneness and manyness. There is but a single Being, yet the names represent a multiplicity of faces that Being assumes in relation to the created things. The Essence Itself, or Being considered without the names, is what Ibn al-ʿArabī sometimes calls the Unity of the One (*aḥadiyyat al-aḥad*) in contrast to Being considered as possessor of the names, which is the Unity of Manyness (*aḥadiyyat al-kathra*). God as such, taking both perspectives into account, is then the "One/Many" (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*). Here Oneness precedes manyness, since, without Being the many things cannot exist. In the same way, light precedes the colors, and mercy precedes wrath.

From the perspective of Unity and multiplicity, the Divine Presence appears as a circle whose center is the Essence and whose full deployment is the acts in their multiple degrees and kinds. The concentric circles surrounding the Center represent the ontological levels, each successive circle being dimmer and weaker than the preceding circle. Here the divine names are the relationships that the Center assumes in respect to any place on the circle. Each "place" can be assigned coordinates in terms of its distance from the Center (i.e., its degree on the ontological hierarchy) and its relationship with other points situated on the same concentric circle (i.e., its relationship with things in its own world). But the situation is made incredibly complex because of the nature of the Center, which can be viewed in respect of any ontological attribute—any name of God. The Center is not only Being, it is also Absolute Life, Knowledge, Desire, Power and so on. The Center is One, yet it assumes a relationship with each location on the circle in terms of each attribute. Desire has one effect upon each specific point, while Power has another effect. By the same token, each point is both passive (in relation to the activity of the attribute) and, to the extent that it is colored by the attribute and displays it as its own, active toward

other points on the circle. When light shines upon the moon, the moon illuminates the night sky. When any attribute of Being displays its properties within a given existent, those properties are reflected in the direction of other existent things in an indefinite concatenation of relationships.

This cosmos of interrelating "points," each reflecting the Center in its own unique fashion, is by no means static. All sorts of movements can be discerned on any given concentric circle or between the various circles, the ultimate significance of which can only be judged in terms of the changing relationship with the Center. But this much is relatively clear: The "precedent attributes" of God display their properties ever more clearly as one moves toward the Center, while the secondary and subsidiary attributes become stronger as one moves toward the periphery. Where is mercy? With Being, Light, Knowledge, Unity. Where is wrath? With nonexistence, darkness, ignorance, multiplicity, dispersion.

The dispersive movement toward the periphery is a positive creative force. Without it, Light would not shine and the cosmos would not come into existence. The divine attributes manifest themselves in an undifferentiated mode (*mujmal*) at the level of the intense light of the angels and in a boundlessly differentiated mode (*taḥṣīl*) at the level of the sensory cosmos in its full spatial and temporal extension. But once this full outward manifestation is achieved, it is time for the unitive movement to take over, and an active and conscious participation in this movement is the exclusive prerogative of human beings.

Man enters into the corporeal world where the differentiated attributes of Being begin their reintegration into an all-comprehensive unity, since he is created upon the divine form even as an infant. The attribute which rules over the return to the center is "Guidance" (*hidāya*), while the dispersive movement within the human sphere that prevents and precludes the return toward the Center is

called "Misguidance" (*idlāl*). The unitive movement finds its fullest human expression in the prophets and the friends of God, who are the loci of self-disclosure for the divine name the "Guide" (*al-hādī*). The dispersive movement finds its greatest representatives in Satan and his friends (*awliyā' al-shayṭān*), who manifest the divine name "Misguider" (*al-muḍill*). Misguidance is closely allied to Wrath and therefore must be considered a branch of mercy and guidance, but the positive effects of the attribute in the long run—taking perhaps innumerable aeons—cannot obviate the negative effects in the relatively short run, effects which the Koran refers to as punishment, chastisement, and the pain of the Burning.

The prophets present guidance to mankind in the form of the divine messages, which frequently appear as scriptures. In order to achieve full humanity, people must move toward the mercy, light, and unity which stand at the center of the circle of existence. Guidance is the only door which leads in that direction. If human beings ignore the message of the prophets, they will fall into one of the innumerable paths laid down by the satans, all of whom manifest misguidance. Hence they will remain in dispersion and come under the sway of the divine wrath. Though mercy precedes wrath and manifests itself even in the midst of wrath, there is a more specific kind of mercy which leads to happiness and felicity immediately after death and at the Resurrection and which can only be actualized through putting oneself into harmony with guidance. Hence Ibn al-'Arabī distinguishes between the "mercy of free gift" and the "mercy of obligation." God gives the first to all creatures without distinction, while He has obliged Himself to confer the second only on the "godfearing." Both mercies are referred to in the Koranic verse, "My mercy [of free gift] embraces all things, but I shall prescribe it [in specific instances] for those who are godfearing and pay the alms, and those who indeed

have faith in Our signs, those who follow the Messenger" (7:156). The first mercy manifests itself even in chastisement and infernal wretchedness, while the second displays itself only as felicity.

The Scale of the Law

By way of the voluntary return man strives to assume God's character traits, or to manifest the divine names in whose form he was created. But what are the divine names? What is "manifestation"? How can it be achieved? How can an apparition on an infinitely distant wall get up and walk back to the sun? How can darkness, which has no real taste or understanding of light, become light? How do we, blind and ignorant shadows of existence, discern the difference between Being and nothingness? Can ignorance become knowledge, listlessness desire, weakness power, dumbness speech, greed generosity, wrongdoing justice? How can a bare specter woven of ambiguities be transformed into clarity, discernment, wisdom, certainty? How can we distinguish the properties of mercy from the properties of wrath within the created universe, where all things appear confused? Once having seen how God's mercy and love manifest themselves, how do we ourselves become mercy and love? Ibn al-'Arabī answers these and similar questions the same way other Muslims answer them: Stick to guidance and avoid misguidance, follow the prophets and flee the satans.

Like all Muslims Ibn al-'Arabī considers prophecy and revelation facts of human existence, phenomena that have been observed wherever there have been people, from the time of Adam—the first prophet—down to Muḥammad, the last of the prophets. All human beings have access to and are required by their very humanity to follow the revealed guidance. The Shaykh discusses the nature and function of prophecy (which has

now come to an end) and the process of becoming a "friend of God" (which will continue until the end of time) in voluminous detail. For the full significance of the whole range of his teachings to be understood, they must always be tied back to the reality of prophecy and friendship, as Chodkiewicz has illustrated so well in *Le sceau des saints*.

One of the most common terms that Ibn al-ʿArabī employs in referring to revelation in both a general sense and the specific sense of the Koran and the Sunna is *sharʿ*, which will be translated as "Law" and from which the well-known term *Shariʿa*, the revealed law of Islam, is derived. The original sense of the term is "to enter into the water to drink of it," said of animals. Secondly it means a clear and open track or path. It came to be applied metaphorically to the clear and obvious path which leads to God, or in other words, the Law which God revealed as guidance to mankind. Ibn al-ʿArabī often speaks of revealed Law in general terms, showing plainly that he means revelation in a universal sense, given to all peoples throughout history, down to Muḥammad. But when he turns to specific applications and interpretations of principles, he always remains within the Islamic universe. He discusses Jesus, Moses, Abraham and other prophets in detail, sometimes even telling of his own encounters with them in the invisible world. But these are Muslim prophets through and through, their qualities and characteristics defined largely by the picture of them drawn in the Koran, the Hadith, and the Islamic tradition in general. No Christian or Jew, if given the chapter on Jesus or Moses from the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* without being told the author, would imagine that it had been written by an authority of his own tradition.

According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the Law is the scale (*al-mizān*) in which must be weighed everything having to do with God, knowledge, love, spiritual realization, and the human state in general. Without the Scale of the Law, we will re-

main forever swimming in a shoreless ocean of ambiguity. Only the Scale can provide a point of reference in terms of which knowledge and all human endeavors may be judged. The Law makes it possible to move toward the Center and avoid wallowing in indefinite dispersion, overcome by ignorance, multiplicity, and misguidance.

One might say that the function of the Law is to sort out relationships and put things in their proper perspective, thus providing a divine norm for human knowledge and action. Faced with He/not He wherever they look, human beings cannot possibly search out the He and cling to light without a discernment deriving from Light Itself. No doubt everyone has an inner light known as intelligence, but that also needs correct guidance to grow in intensity and begin functioning on its own. Only the friends of God have reached the station where they can follow the inner light without reference to the outer Law. But this, as Ibn al-ʿArabī would say, is a station of great danger (*khatar*). Iblis and countless "spiritual teachers" have been led astray by it. The law remains the only concrete anchor.

It was said earlier that in "ethics" or assuming the character traits of God—which, precisely, is the Sufi path—equilibrium is everything. The divine names must be actualized in the proper relationships, the names of beauty preceding those of wrath, generosity dominating over justice, humility taking precedence over magnificence, and so on. The perfect equilibrium of the names is actualized by the perfect assumption of every trait in the form of which human beings were created. In a word, perfect equilibrium is to be the outward form of the name "Allah," the Divine Presence. The person who achieves such a realization is known as perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), one of the most famous of Ibn al-ʿArabī's technical terms.

There are many different types of perfect men. Briefly stated, all of them represent full actualizations of the name Al-