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# Ibn ‘Arabī on the Ultimate Model of the Ultimate

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William C. Chittick

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Ibn ‘Arabī was born in Murcia in 1165 and died in Damascus in 1240.<sup>1</sup> He left behind several hundred books and treatises full of subtle disquisitions on the Qur’ān and its theological, philosophical, psychological, mystical, social, and legal implications. His works were widely influential in the development of metaphysics, philosophy, cosmology, and spiritual psychology before the modern period. In the eyes of many scholars, he deserved the title al-Shaykh al-Akbar, “The Greatest Teacher,” because he integrated the diverse fields of learning that had been flourishing for several centuries and he reformulated the Qur’ānic worldview with unprecedented breadth and depth. Other scholars, however, considered him a baleful influence on the tradition, and within a century after his death, a good deal of opposition to his writings had begun to coalesce. Perhaps the main cause of the opposition was that he forced his readers—especially in his most famous book, *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)*—either to turn away in shock, to throw up their hands in bewilderment, or to reconsider their most cherished beliefs. Scholars who found the essence of Islam in their own narrow specialties, not least jurists and experts in Kalam (scholastic theology), either ignored him or did what they could to discredit him.

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## Being and Consciousness

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Perhaps the best place to start tracing out Ibn ‘Arabī’s model of Ultimate Reality is to look at the notion of *wujūd*, a word that has been closely linked with his name ever since the Ḥanbalī polemicist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) accused him of espousing

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview of his teachings and a bibliography of important secondary sources, see Chittick (2008).

W.C. Chittick (✉)  
Department of Asian and Asian-American Studies, Stony  
Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, USA  
e-mail: william.chittick@stonybrook.edu

24 *waḥdat al-wujūd*, “the oneness of existence.” According to Ibn Taymiyya, this meant  
 25 that Ibn ‘Arabī failed to distinguish between God and creation. He was, in other  
 26 words—as similar polemicists in the West were wont to say—a “pantheist.” Ibn  
 27 ‘Arabī, however, never used the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd*, nor did any of his  
 28 early followers suggest that he spoke for it. Nonetheless, from Ibn Taymiyya down  
 29 into modern times, supporters and detractors have ascribed *waḥdat al-wujūd* to him,  
 30 even if there is little or no agreement as to what exactly it means.<sup>2</sup>

31 This having been said, there is no doubt that both oneness and existence are foci  
 32 of Ibn ‘Arabī’s attention. The word *wujūd*, commonly translated as “existence” or  
 33 “being,” entered the mainstream of philosophical discussions from the time of  
 34 Avicenna (d. 1037), the greatest representative of the Peripatetic school. Famously,  
 35 Avicenna classified *wujūd* as necessary, possible, or impossible. Although the word  
 36 had been adopted as the nearest Arabic equivalent of *ousia*, its everyday meaning is  
 37 to find, experience, feel, and perceive, and it was used in this sense in both the  
 38 Qur’ān and early Sufism. In contrast to some philosophers, though certainly not all,<sup>3</sup>  
 39 Ibn ‘Arabī never ignored the word’s literal meaning, nor did he neglect the fact that  
 40 the Kalam experts included the word’s active participle, *al-wājīd*, “the finder,”  
 41 among God’s “most beautiful names” (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*). As a divine attribute, *wujūd*  
 42 signifies not only the fact that God is—and, as Avicenna and other philosophers  
 43 prove to their own satisfaction, cannot not be—but also the fact that he necessarily  
 44 finds, experiences, and knows.

45 When Ibn ‘Arabī spoke of the Ultimate Reality in philosophical terms, he fre-  
 46 quently called it *al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*, that is, the True or Real Being/Consciousness, or  
 47 simply *al-ḥaqq*, the True, the Real (another Qur’ānic divine name). Along with the  
 48 philosophers generally, he held that in contrast to everything else, Real *Wujūd* has  
 49 no quiddity or “whatness” (*māhiyya*). When we ask *what* it is, the only proper  
 50 answer is *that* it is. In other words, *wujūd* is no specific thing, but rather that which  
 51 gives rise to every specific thing. “Things” (*ashyā’*, pl. of *shay’*), whether perceived  
 52 as external or internal to us, are “delimitations” (*taqyīd*) of *wujūd*, or, employing the  
 53 past participle of *wujūd*, they are *mawjūd*, “existent/found,” though the modalities  
 54 of their foundness are diverse.

55 As no specific thing, Real Being/Consciousness is “nondelimited” (*muṭlaq*). It is  
 56 so utterly and absolutely nondelimited that it is not delimited by nondelimitation,  
 57 which means that it displays its presence in all delimited things. One can say that  
 58 metaphysics, often defined as the investigation of “existence qua existence,”  
 59 addresses the various degrees and modalities of *wujūd*’s presence. This brings us  
 60 back to Avicenna’s basic question: In any given case, is *wujūd* present necessarily or

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the expression and various meanings that have been ascribed to it, see Chittick (1994).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, an Aristotelian and contemporary of Ibn ‘Arabī, writing in Persian, classified *wujūd* into two basic sorts, which he called “being” (*ḥastī*, cognate with “is”), and “finding” (*yāftī*). Then we have a hierarchy: potential being (e.g., a seed), actual being (a tree), actual being along with potential finding (the soul), and actual being along with actual finding (the fully realized intelligence). See Chittick (2001, pp. 41–45).

possibly (contingently); and, what can we mean when we say that *wujūd* cannot possibly be present? Or, to put this in terms closer to how Ibn 'Arabī would formulate it, in all of reality, what is it that must be found, what is it that may be found, and what is it that cannot possibly be found?

In discussing things, also called “entities” (*'ayān*, pl. of *'ayn*), Ibn 'Arabī is addressing precisely what Avicenna calls possibility or contingency (*imkān*). Each thing, as a delimitation of the Nondelimited Real, is possible, which is to say that its relation to existence and nonexistence is equal. It does not exist in itself, or else it would be necessary; nor is it nonexistent (*ma'dūm*) in every respect, or else it could never be found. All entities are in fact found (*mawjūd*) by the Supreme Consciousness that is the Real *Wujūd*, the Ultimate Reality. The Real is aware of them as possibilities of delimitation embraced by its own absolute nondelimitation. Famously, Ibn 'Arabī calls the possible things “fixed entities” (*al-a'yān al-thābita*), which is to say that, although they have no existence of their own, they are potentialities of manifestation fixed in the Being/Consciousness that is the Real. They are, in short “the nonexistent, known things” (*al-ashyā' al-ma'dūma al-ma'lūma*).

## Self-Disclosure

*Al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*, “the Real Being/Consciousness” is the Ultimate Reality, utterly nondelimited and ineffable, a no-thing that is thereby distinct from every thing and that gives rise to all things by its own self-delimitation. We cannot talk about it in positive terms, because it is unknowable and unspeakable, so language serves merely to point in its direction. All positive knowledge that we do have pertains to things, not to the Real in itself. This, in brief, is the apophatic side to Ibn 'Arabī's model of the Ultimate Reality.

As for the cataphatic side, this implies first that, by knowing anything at all, we are in fact knowing a delimitation of Nondelimited *Wujūd*. As for “knowing,” it is simply our *wujūd*, our finding that we find and are found, our presence to our own finding. Such finding underlies all consciousness and explication, just as it underlies all existence. Ibn 'Arabī often refers to the source of finding and being found, with the word *tajallī*, a verbal noun derived from a Qur'ānic verse in which God “discloses himself” (7:143). This word, which had been used by Avicenna and others to speak of the intimate connection between the Necessary Being and the cosmos, can be translated literally as “self-disclosure” or “self-manifestation,” though historians commonly render it as “theophany” or “epiphany.” If we ask why the Real *Wujūd* discloses itself, we are asking why it is *wujūd* and not a thing. If it were this thing or that thing, it would thereby be a possibility and not exist in itself; it could only come into existence upon receiving existence from something else. At this point it would turn into something whose existence is “necessary through the Other” (*wājib bi'l-ghayr*), as Avicenna had also pointed out. In contrast, as a no-thing, the Real Being/Consciousness has no needs whatsoever—this is precisely what is meant by its necessity, its utter lack of thingness and neediness for anything else. The

102 Necessary Being cannot not *be*, and it can have no need for *things*, which in  
 103 themselves are nonexistences. The Real *Wujūd* is simply that which is and that  
 104 which finds, that which cannot not be and cannot not find. It is free of all the limita-  
 105 tions that define every specificity, every entity.

106 One of the many Qur’ānic divine names that Ibn ‘Arabī employs to explicate  
 107 the notion of *wujūd* and bring out the nuances of the Real’s self-disclosure is  
 108 light (*nūr*). The word is often defined as that which is manifest in itself and  
 109 makes other things manifest. This is an apt description of the Real *Wujūd* and its  
 110 self-disclosure—it is manifest through its own self and makes others manifest.  
 111 By making things manifest (*āhir*), it makes them known, perceived, and found,  
 112 that is, *mawjūd*. All knowledge, perception, and consciousness are modalities of  
 113 finding the Real Light, for, as the Koran says about God, he is “the light of the  
 114 heavens and the earth” (24:35). This Light bestows foundness and finding on all  
 115 things, each in its own measure—not in the measure of the Light itself. Looking  
 116 at the manner in which the human soul finds itself and others, Ibn ‘Arabī remarks,  
 117 “Were it not for light, nothing whatsoever would be perceived, whether it be an  
 118 object of knowledge, or an object of sense perception, or an object of imagina-  
 119 tion.... The faculties of smell, taste, imagination, memory, reason, reflection,  
 120 conception, and everything through which perception takes place are all light.”<sup>4</sup>  
 121 Each faculty, in other words, is a different modality through which the finder  
 122 finds the found.

123 The self-disclosure of the Real *Wujūd* assumes three all-comprehensive  
 124 forms: the cosmos, the human being, and scripture. The word for cosmos,  
 125 ‘*ālam*, derives from the same root as the word for knowledge, ‘*ilm*, and mark,  
 126 ‘*ālāma*. Classical dictionaries define ‘*ālam* as “that through which knowledge  
 127 occurs” or “that through which God is known.” Ibn ‘Arabī is simply asking his  
 128 readers to remember the word’s etymology when he says, “We mention the  
 129 *cosmos* with this word to give *knowledge* that by it we mean that God has made  
 130 it a *mark*.”<sup>5</sup>

131 Ibn ‘Arabī typically describes the cosmos as “everything other than God” (*mā*  
 132 *siwa’llāh*). In other words, it is the entirety of the Real’s self-disclosure. When we  
 133 keep in mind the infinity and nondelimitation of the Real and the delimitation and  
 134 restrictedness of everything else, it becomes clear that the cosmos can have no  
 135 beginning and no end, for it is simply the self-disclosure of the Infinite Real within  
 136 the delimitations of finite things, and no limits can apply to the self-disclosing  
 137 Infinite. As Ibn ‘Arabī remarks, “The Infinite does not enter into [manifest] *wujūd*  
 138 all at once; rather it enters little by little, with no end.”<sup>6</sup> The cosmos is then the sum  
 139 total of all entities, all possible things, over the span of beginningless and endless  
 140 duration. Duration does not mean time as we understand it, for time, space, and  
 141 other such notions are names given to general principles which, in our understand-  
 142 ing, lie behind the world’s multiplicity, dispersion, and endless change. By no

<sup>4</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, vol. 3, pp. 276–277).

<sup>5</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, vol. 2, p. 473, line 33).

<sup>6</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, vol. 2, p. 482, line 26).

means, however, does our specific cosmic niche even begin to exhaust the possibilities of manifestation called “everything other than God.”<sup>7</sup>

The cosmos, then, is everything that is not the Ultimate Reality per se, and within it appear the entities, which are the infinite things known to the divine omniscience. As such, the cosmos can be called “the great cosmos” (*al-‘ālam al-kabīr*). We can imagine it as a boundless, luminous sphere, shining forth from the dimensionless center, Nondelimited *Wujūd*, and ranged in every possible degree of intensity and color. In contrast, the human being is “the small cosmos” (*al-‘ālam al-ṣaghīr*), which is to say that the Real *Wujūd* discloses its own totality within each human being in a compressed and focused mode. In the microcosm, the side of finding predominates over the side of foundness, consciousness over unawareness, unity over multiplicity. In effect, the macrocosm that appears outside the human self is present as a potentiality of knownness inside the human self. All entities are latent in the microcosm, which helps explain the endless human desire to know—that is, to actualize the potential to encompass all things in awareness. Mythically, the human capacity for omniscience is voiced by the Qur’ānic verse, “God taught Adam the names, all of them” (2:30). This capacity, however, can never be actualized fully, even over the course of endless duration. As a result, “Increase in knowledge of God will never be cut off in this world or the next, for the actual situation has no end.”<sup>8</sup>

Human beings find themselves in the macrocosm yearning to know. At the same time, the microcosm, potentially embracing the knowledge of all that may be found, is “an ocean without shore,”<sup>9</sup> so it is prone to indefinite dispersion. The inner light of finding and intelligence provides the means to know, but people are faced with the question of how to actualize their potential without becoming dispersed in endless possibility. Ibn 'Arabī sees the solution to this difficulty in the third self-disclosure of the Real, scripture generally and the Qur’ān specifically. Scripture is

<sup>7</sup> In order to forestall the usual theological objections—namely, that to speak of beginningless and endless duration is to claim that the world is “eternal”—one can say briefly that for Ibn 'Arabī, the Arabic terminology itself nullifies such objections. “Eternity” (*qidam*) belongs exclusively to God in himself, and all things other than God, the sum total of which is the cosmos, are by definition *muḥdath*, literally, “caused to occur,” which is to say that they do not exist in themselves and must be given existence. Second, “the world” that theologians are talking about when they deny its everlastingness is not the same as the “cosmos,” even though the same Arabic word may be used, for the cosmos embraces anything other than the Nondelimited *Wujūd*, not least the posthumous realms known as paradise and hell. Scholars, by the way, commonly used the expression “18,000 worlds” when they wanted to refer to God’s endless creativity. Third, it is incoherent to talk about a time “before” the creation of the cosmos, given that God is the creator eternally, and time is a word that applies only to our own created circumstances. It seems to me that had Ibn 'Arabī been familiar with Hindu views of samsara and cosmic cycles (which he was not), he would have considered them good ways to explain the nature of the cosmos. In at least one place, when he tells of a visionary encounter with a man who existed before our common ancestor Adam, he alludes to cycles by saying that he recalls hearing a saying of the Prophet that there were a hundred thousand Adams (see 1911, 3:549.12). Ibn 'Arabī explains how he reconciles the philosophical notion of the world’s eternity with the theological insistence that it originates in time on more than one occasion. See Chittick 1989, pp. 84–85.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 3:317.31).

<sup>9</sup> Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 3:552.20).

169 God’s self-disclosure in human language. It provides the key to discerning the  
 170 principles, patterns, and archetypes that become manifest in the twin oceans of mac-  
 171 rocasm and microcosm.

172 Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that the literal meanings of the words Qur’ān and Furqān, the  
 173 book’s two primary names, point to its role in providing the cognitive keys to analy-  
 174 sis and synthesis, discernment and unification. Qur’ān means “that which brings  
 175 together” (though famously, it also means “recitation”), and Furqān means “that  
 176 which discerns and differentiates.” The self-disclosure of the Real in scripture, the  
 177 simultaneous manifestation of the principles of oneness and manyness, provides the  
 178 keys to discerning priorities and finding unity. Qur’ān and Furqān are the “two  
 179 eyes” with which people can situate themselves in the cosmos and open themselves  
 180 up to the harmonious actualization of their own endless potential. As Ibn ‘Arabī  
 181 writes in one passage,

182       When someone stops with the Qur’ān inasmuch as it is a Qur’ān, he has but a single eye that  
 183       unifies all things. But when someone stops with it inasmuch as it is a totality of things  
 184       brought together, then for him it is a Furqān. When we tasted this latter situation, we saw ...  
 185       that the schools have become multiple and the religions diverse. The levels have been dis-  
 186       tinguished, the divine names and the created traces have become manifest, and the names  
 187       and the gods have become many in the cosmos.<sup>10</sup>

## 188 Naming the Real

189 The Real *Wujūd*, which is the Supreme Being/Consciousness, discloses itself in the  
 190 three realms of cosmos, self, and scripture. The human microcosm finds itself as an  
 191 existing, finding thing, and wherever it looks it encounters the delimitations of the  
 192 Nondelimited. Through the linguistic keys provided by the Qur’ān/Furqān, people  
 193 come to understand that the Real is named by whatever they find, even though it is  
 194 nameless in itself. For, in respect of the self-disclosure of the Real, “The names of  
 195 God are infinite, since they become known from that which comes into being from  
 196 them, and that is infinite, even though the names are reducible to finite roots, which  
 197 are the ‘Mothers of the Names’ (*ummahāt al-asmā*) or the ‘Presences of the Names  
 198 (*ḥaḍarāt al-asmā*).”<sup>11</sup>

199 Muslim thinkers employed two basic methods of sifting through the names of  
 200 things in order to discern the root principles, the Mothers of the Names. The more  
 201 philosophical approach appealed to the innate light of intelligence (*‘aql*), its ability  
 202 to perceive the general contours of the Real’s self-disclosure by its own resources.  
 203 This is what Avicenna does when he argues first for *Wujūd*’s necessity, then for its  
 204 unity, eternity, consciousness, desire, power, wisdom, and generosity. Ibn ‘Arabī  
 205 appreciates this method and never hesitates to employ in his own writings, but he  
 206 prefers to draw his nomenclature from the Qur’ān. For him the philosophical method

<sup>10</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 3:94.16).

<sup>11</sup> Abu’l-‘Alā’ ‘Afīfī (1946, p. 65). For more on the infinity of the names, see Chittick (1989, p. 42).

has a limited usefulness, given that people cannot be sure that their rational faculties are trustworthy. The safer and more reliable route is to trust in God and meditate on the names by which he has named himself in the Qur'ān.

Ibn 'Arabī frequently discusses the divine names as “presences” (*ḥaḍarāt*).<sup>12</sup> Each name, he explains, designates the Unnamable in itself and, as such, is unfathomable. At the same time, it designates a specific quality of the Real's self-disclosure, one that is distinct from every other quality. This quality's sphere of influence is then its “presence,” discernible in the name's traces and properties found in the cosmos and the self. The presences are diverse, for God as the merciful does not disclose himself like God as the wrathful. Some names have greater “compass” (*iḥāṭa*) than others, and all are subsumed under “the Divine Presence” (*al-ḥaḍrat al-ilāhiyya*), which is the sphere of influence designated by the name “God” (*Allāh*), the Qur'ānic name of the Real *Wujūd* in both its unknown and self-disclosing modes. This name is “all-comprehensive” (*jāmi'*), because every other name refers back to it, both linguistically and ontologically. We say, “God is merciful, God is just,” and so on. In each case the specific name designates one quality of the Real's self-disclosure. The Divine Presence is thus the sphere of influence of the name God, and it embraces three basic realms: the Essence (*dhāt*), which is the nameless Real in itself; the attributes (*ṣifāt*), which are the universal qualities found in the Real's self-disclosure; and the acts (*af'āl*), which are the entities that make the traces and properties of the attributes manifest, that is, the entire cosmos and all that it contains.

Like Avicenna and others, Ibn 'Arabī sometimes discussed the primary presences embraced by the Divine Presence in terms of seven attributes, usually listing them as life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, and justice. He points out that the relative compass of these names is obvious in their meanings. If God is the knower, this means that he is already alive. If he is the desirer, this means that he desires something that he already knows. If he is the powerful, this means that he exercises his control because he desires to do so. His speech is then the articulation of the infinite entities over which he has power, his generosity the bestowal of being on the entities, and his justice the positioning of each entity in its proper place.

Speech plays an especially prominent role in Ibn 'Arabī's depiction of the relationship between the Real Being and its self-disclosure. His most elaborate cosmological scheme is built on the notion of “the Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-raḥmān*). He points out that the Qur'ān mentions two divine attributes as embracing all things: knowledge and mercy (e.g., Qur'ān 40:7). All things, whether existent or nonexistent, are embraced by the presence of God's knowledge. Mercy then designates the presence that bestows *wujūd* on things. As Ibn 'Arabī puts it, “*Wujūd* itself is a mercy for every existent thing (*mawjūd*).”<sup>13</sup> By speaking, God as the

<sup>12</sup>Take, for example, the book-length chapter 558 of the *Futūḥāt* (Ibn 'Arabī 1911) which explains each of the 99 names of God as a specific divine presence.

<sup>13</sup>Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 2:281.27).

247 All-Merciful existentiates the cosmic words in the substratum that is his breath.  
 248 The imagery here builds on the Qur'ān's mention of God's inexhaustible words  
 249 and its description of all things and happenings as "signs" (*āyāt*), the same word  
 250 that it uses to speak of its own verses. Thus the three self-disclosures of the Real—  
 251 the cosmos as macrocosm, the human self as microcosm, and scripture—are three  
 252 "books" (*kitāb*) composed of words, signs/verses, and chapters (*sūra*).

253 In this depiction of the Real's self-disclosure, things enter into existence in a  
 254 manner analogous to the way in which we articulate words. When we speak, our  
 255 words have no existence apart from our breath, but each word is distinct from  
 256 every other word and from the breath itself. Our spoken words disappear the  
 257 moment they are uttered, for they are "possible," which is to say that they have  
 258 no existence of their own, only inasmuch as we speak them. The cosmos may  
 259 appear stable, but in fact it is a constant re-voicing of existence, an endless re-  
 260 utterance of words, each word unique and unrepeatably. "There is no repetition  
 261 in self-disclosure," as Ibn 'Arabī often reminds us. At each instant each cosmic  
 262 word disappears, only to be replaced by a similar word. If the two words appear  
 263 the same to us, that is because of our inability to see things as they actually are.

264 In describing the nature of possibility—the constant need of the cosmic words for re-  
 265 articulation in the Breath—Ibn 'Arabī often resorts to the notion of *khayāl*, which means  
 266 both image and imagination. Thoughts and dreams are *khayāl*, as are reflections in mir-  
 267 rors. A mirror image is neither the thing that it reflects nor something else. A dream image  
 268 is both what it represents and the articulated consciousness of the dreamer. The cosmos is  
 269 then "God's dream,"<sup>14</sup> because the divine words are neither the All-Merciful Breath nor  
 270 other than the Breath, neither Real Being nor absolute nothingness.

271 Later scholars like Ibn Taymiyya, who read Ibn 'Arabī as claiming that all things are  
 272 identical with God, focused on the numerous ways in which Ibn 'Arabī showed that the  
 273 cosmos is none other than the Real—"All is He (*hama ūst*)," as this notion was later  
 274 expressed in Persian. They ignored the equally numerous ways in which Ibn 'Arabī dem-  
 275 onstrated that all things are absolutely other than God. In brief, Ibn 'Arabī's position is that,  
 276 inasmuch as the cosmos exists, it is the Real, and inasmuch as it has no claim on existence,  
 277 it is not the Real. Thus, it is "it/not it" or "He/not He" (*huwa lā huwa*). Its actual situation  
 278 is utterly ambiguous. "The whole cosmos is it/not it. The Real that is made manifest  
 279 through form is It/not It, the limited that is not limited, the seen that is not seen."<sup>15</sup>

## 280 Human Deiformity

281 When Ibn 'Arabī describes the articulation of cosmic words within the All-Merciful  
 282 Breath, he compares the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet to 28 levels of being, each  
 283 of which is dominated by the properties of a specific name's presence. Just as human

<sup>14</sup> See Chittick (1989, p. 120).

<sup>15</sup> Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 2:379.9).



letters are articulated by the gullet and mouth in a known order described by the classical grammarians, so also the levels of being appear in a specific order. Here Ibn 'Arabī is presenting an original version of a scheme often discussed by philosophers and commonly called “the origin and the return” (*al-mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*). It depicts the manner in which the Necessary *Wujūd* drives a chain of causation that makes the light of Being become ever more dispersed, differentiated, and externalized. Once the chain reaches the furthest reaches of darkness and scatteredness—that is, the four elements—the movement reverses direction and becomes gradually more integrated and unified. During the returning ascent, consciousness and finding become more intense, a fact that is apparent in the increasing internalization represented by the progression from minerals, to plants, to animals. Ibn 'Arabī and others sometimes speak of this descent and ascent as two arcs (*qaws*) of “the circle of existence/consciousness” (*dā'irat al-wujūd*).

In Ibn 'Arabī's detailed version of this well-known scheme, the 27th letter, representing the penultimate articulation of the Breath, is the human microcosm, which manifests the Divine Presence per se. The 28th and final letter then pertains to “the levels, stations, and waystations,” which disclose the presence of the name Lifter of Degrees (*rafī' al-darajāt*). This stage represents the varying levels of consciousness or self-realization (*taḥaqquq*) actualized by human beings over the course of their lifetimes. Sufi authors had often discussed these as the increasing levels of proximity to God that can be achieved by travelers on the path to spiritual perfection. Ibn 'Arabī brought ontology into this picture in a manner that had few precedents.

In explaining the vast spectrum of human possibility represented by the levels, stations, and waystations, Ibn 'Arabī built on the notion (discussed by Avicenna and others) of human perfection as “deiformity” (*ta'alluh*, from the same root as *Allāh*) and the similar theological notion of “characterization by God's character traits” (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*). In the case of God, “character traits” are the presences of the divine names, the general principles of the Real Being's self-disclosure. Each presence is described by a specific attribute such as life, knowledge, justice, mercy, wrath. As an all-comprehensive self-disclosure of the Real, the human microcosm has the potential to find the presence of each name within itself and bring it into actuality. At the same time, each person represents a unique delimitation of the Nondelimited, so each stands in a specific “station” (*maqām*) on the ascending arc. Every station is determined by the sum total of the divine presences that are actualized and synthesized within a self at any given moment. The human stations are ranked in degrees of excellence (*tafāḍul*) in keeping with the relative scope of the specific self-disclosures that govern them.

As in the case of the divine attributes, the human attribute of life has a broader scope than knowledge, knowledge a broader scope than desire, and desire a broader scope than power. When we speak of these four attributes, however, we have in view a soul inasmuch as it pertains to the “natural” realm. The moment we start looking at the various divine presences that do not clearly display their properties outside the human microcosm (such as compassion, generosity, and justice), the discussion turns to the modalities of moral and spiritual perfection.

Simply by existing, human beings are in the process of becoming characterized by the character traits of God. Scholars usually translate the word character traits

329 (*akhlāq*) as “ethics.” In the philosophical tradition, the science of ethics—i.e., “the  
 330 science of character traits” (*‘ilm al-akhlāq*)—was a major discussion, though phi-  
 331 losophers followed in the tracks of Aristotle, even if others based their ethical dis-  
 332 cussions on the Qur’ān. Among God’s “ninety-nine” names, many are immediately  
 333 recognizable as ethical principles or traits of character, and these also can be ranked  
 334 in degrees of excellence (*tafāḍul*). Ibn ‘Arabī points out that this ranking, like the  
 335 ranking of the ontological names, is rooted in the nature of things, that is, in the  
 336 principles and archetypes that govern the self-disclosure of the Real *Wujūd*. For  
 337 example, the famous saying of the Prophet, “God’s mercy takes precedence over  
 338 His wrath,” means that the Real Being/Consciousness predominates over nonexist-  
 339 ence and unawareness. God’s forgiveness and pardon are more real than his wrath  
 340 and anger, for forgiveness and pardon pertain to his mercy, that is, the Real *Wujūd*  
 341 in its self-disclosing mode. In contrast, wrath and anger are directed at nonexistence  
 342 (*‘adam*), which is the most basic meaning of the word “evil” (*sharr*), as Avicenna  
 343 had also pointed out.<sup>16</sup>

344 In human terms, the principle that God’s mercy takes precedence over his wrath  
 345 provides an overarching scheme for the path of achieving deiformity. Virtuous  
 346 human activity must be rooted in compassion, love, care, and forgiveness. Attributes  
 347 like wrath, severity, and justice must remain subservient to mercy, compassion, and  
 348 love, just as they are in the Divine Presence itself. The common observation that  
 349 these merciful qualities play but a minor role in human dealings simply highlights  
 350 the depth of the human predicament, out of kilter with the nature of things.  
 351 Nonetheless, it is precisely the innate human sense of imperfection, imbalance, and  
 352 disharmony that drives the universal quest for meaning, equilibrium, wholeness,  
 353 and peace, a quest that demands actively striving to put oneself into accord with the  
 354 ascending arc of intensifying light.

## 355 **The Unfolding of the Self**

356 In Ibn ‘Arabī’s way of looking at things, every human soul perceives itself and the  
 357 cosmos in ever-changing terms defined by each soul’s specific station, which is the  
 358 unique and non-repeating self-disclosure of the Real *Wujūd* that it represents at any  
 359 given moment. In speaking of the cognitive implications of these stations, Ibn ‘Arabī  
 360 often talks about “the god of belief” (*al-ilāh al-mu‘taqad*). Each person’s god or  
 361 gods—that is, each person’s point or points of orientation—is shaped and molded  
 362 by his or her finding of the Real *Wujūd*’s self-disclosure. Referring to the etymology  
 363 of the word “belief” (*‘aqīda*), Ibn ‘Arabī remarks that every belief is a “knot” (*‘uqda*)  
 364 that ties down the Real, and that “People are bound to worship only what they  
 365 *believe* about the Real, so they worship nothing but a created thing.” As a result,

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<sup>16</sup> For Ibn ‘Arabī’s analysis of the five basic senses in which people use the word *evil*, see Chittick (1989, pp. 290–292).

“There are none but idol-worshippers.”<sup>17</sup> Human beings, however, were created in the all-comprehensive image of the unknotted Divine Presence, so they should be striving to undo the knots that define their beliefs, break their idols, and to focus on the Nondelimited Real itself. A god of belief, a doctrine, or a model that would be adequate to the Nondelimited Real is a contradiction in terms, which helps explain why Ibn ‘Arabī writes,

The possible thing looks only at itself, so it looks only at the veil. Were the veils to be lifted from the possible thing, possibility would be lifted, and the Necessary and the impossible would be lifted through the lifting of possibility. So the veils will remain hung down forever, and nothing else is possible.... Nor will the veils be lifted in the beatific vision, for vision will be through the veil, and inescapably so.<sup>18</sup>

At any given point in the unfolding of their selves, people stand in specific stations that determine their beliefs, outlooks, understandings, and desires. Here Ibn ‘Arabī likes to quote a saying of the early Sufi Junayd (d. 910): “The water takes on the color of the cup.” Every human cup is a microcosmic delimitation of the Nondelimited Water colored by specific beliefs and character traits. Moreover, says Ibn ‘Arabī, the Qur’ān set down a universal principle when it put these words into the mouth of an angel: “None of us there is but has a known station” (37:164). The only partial exception to the rule of the known station” is human beings, who have no fixed identity before death.

[AU1]

The word “station” (*maqām*) literally means a standing place or a standpoint. To speak of diverse human stations is to speak of the differentiation of human finding in terms of patterns implicit in the Real Being/Consciousness. The broadest and most general of these patterns are designated by the divine names, that is, the presences that differentiate the attributes and qualities of the unique and all-comprehensive Divine Presence. Since human beings are images of the Divine Presence per se, their essential nature (*fiṭra*) cannot be designated by any specific attributes or character traits. Rather, they have the potential to actualize and realize every attribute that becomes manifest in cosmos. Their relative freedom allows them to participate actively in the unfolding of their own possibility, to shape and mold their own becoming, to accept responsibility for their own final stations by making day-by-day choices in life.

The possibilities of human unfolding are endless, including those that lead to imbalance, deviation, disequilibrium, disharmony, and suffering. The ultimate model of a balanced human microcosm is provided by the Divine Presence, and the way to achieve conformity with that Presence goes back to the third global self-disclosure of the Real, scripture. Nonetheless, people will always interpret scripture in terms of their own gods of belief, so they also need the help of living human models of deiformity to assist them in the undoing of knots. The original human models were provided by the prophets, each of whom represented a full participation in the Divine Presence along with the predominance of a specific divine attribute appropriate to his (or her, according to some theologians) historical context.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 4:386.17).

<sup>18</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 3:276.19). On the complex relationship between veil (*ḥijāb*) and face (*wajh*), see Chittick (1998, Chapters 3–4).

407 In standard Islamic lore the prophets numbered 124,000 individuals, beginning with  
 408 Adam and ending with Muhammad. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s reading, each represented a  
 409 specific station of perfection (*kamāl*), and each embodied the One, Nameless *Wujūd*  
 410 in a manner appropriate to the needs of the people to whom he was sent.

411 Here Ibn ‘Arabī’s well-known discussion of “perfect human beings” (*insān*  
 412 *kāmil*) enters the picture. The prophets actualized the Divine Presence, but each in a  
 413 specific modality of perfection. Those who have successfully followed in their foot-  
 414 steps are called the saints (*awliyā*’, literally “friends,” i.e., of God). They have  
 415 achieved some or many of the prophets’ stations, though never the station of proph-  
 416 ecy itself. This theme permeates Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings and is especially prominent  
 417 in *The Ringstones of Wisdom*. Each of the book’s 27 chapters is dedicated to one  
 418 prophetic model, called a “word” (*kalima*) and associated with one divine attribute.  
 419 The imagery of the book’s title and chapter headings suggests that each prophetic  
 420 word is like a seal-ring constructed of the same precious stone—the human image  
 421 of the Divine Presence. Each is then differentiated from the others by a specific form  
 422 of wisdom associated with one divine attribute and engraved on the stone.

## 423 **Beyond Models**

424 What then is the model of Ultimate Reality, if any, that Ibn ‘Arabī is offering? His basic  
 425 position is that a “model” can be nothing but a human construction, a god of belief, and  
 426 that it cannot avoid displaying the station of the modeler. Any attempt to represent the  
 427 Real *Wujūd* in human language will be colored by the specific, human disclosure of the  
 428 Real that is articulating the language. Nonetheless, people should strive to approximate  
 429 the nondelimited knowledge and consciousness that is Being itself while recognizing  
 430 that “None knows God but God,” which is to say that complete and absolute knowl-  
 431 edge, awareness, and consciousness is simply the Real *Wujūd* in itself, and that remains  
 432 forever inaccessible. “The veils will be hung down forever.”

433 To strive for the best model is to attempt to bring oneself into harmony with one’s own  
 434 deiformity, or to become fully characterized by the divine character traits. These character  
 435 traits are revealed in the three books: cosmos, self, scripture. The prophets represent the  
 436 archetypal human embodiments of these traits, the models of perfection that are available  
 437 to human souls. The saints, who always live among us, are those who follow in the foot-  
 438 steps of the prophets, each saint actualizing the station of one specific prophet and wor-  
 439 shipping God in terms of the god of belief expressed by that prophet’s specific wisdom. Ibn  
 440 ‘Arabī even claims that at any given moment in the historical process, there are at least  
 441 124,000 saints, each embodying the wisdom of one of the 124,000 prophets.<sup>19</sup>

442 Ibn ‘Arabī devotes many chapters of his magnum opus, *The Meccan Openings*  
 443 (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*), to stations of wisdom that he ascribes to various prophets, espe-  
 444 cially Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Among these stations, he considers those pertaining  
 445 exclusively to Muhammad the highest of all human possibilities. He explains that as the

<sup>19</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 3:208.13).

last prophet Muhammad received a message that corresponded exactly with the perfection of his own soul, his “character” (*khuluq*), and that both his message (the third self-disclosure) and his own self (the second self-disclosure) were perfect mirrors of the cosmos as a whole (the first self-disclosure). His message was the all-comprehensive Qur’ān, the all-differentiating Furqān, because his soul was the perfect receptacle for the message that includes every message, the station that embraces all stations, and the wisdom that encompasses all wisdom. Since every message was present within his soul, he acknowledged the appropriateness of each in its own context. Hence the specific nature of the station to which his followers should aspire is that it embraces all stations, without being defined by any specific station. Whatever stations they achieve will pertain to one or more of the prophets, all of whose stations are embraced by Muhammad’s station. Those who actually achieve the station of Muhammad himself are then called “Muhammadans,” and their station is in effect “the Station of No Station” (*maqām lā maqām*).

The highest of all human beings are those who have no station. The reason for this is that the stations determine the properties of those who stand within them, but, without doubt, the highest of all groups themselves determine the properties. . . . Their vastness is the vastness of the Real, and the Real has no goal in Itself that Its *Wujūd* might ultimately reach. The Real is witnessed by the Muhammadan, so he has no ultimate goal in his witnessing. But everyone other than the Muhammadan witnesses his own possibility.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, all those who have not realized the Station of No Station, which is perfect deformity and total characterization by all divine character traits, will be constrained by their own entities, their own thingnesses. Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274), Ibn ‘Arabī’s foremost disciple, made this point by saying that the person who reaches the Station of No Station has no quiddity, for he has transcended every specific thing. In effect, his “whatness” is pure “that-it-is-ness,” the Real *Wujūd* itself.<sup>21</sup> Standing in no station, such a person has realized every station and then passed beyond. He recognizes the relative validity of every station and the truth of every belief. This is why Ibn ‘Arabī advises his readers as follows:

He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his lifetime in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who holds it, he should support it in the case of him who believes in it.<sup>22</sup>

## The Model of No Model

Ibn ‘Arabī was an extremely prolific author who wrote at an exceptionally high level of discourse. Throughout his books and treatises, he speaks from diverse standpoints, typically identifying each standpoint with a specific divine name or a specific prophetic

<sup>20</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, 3:506.30.

<sup>21</sup> Qūnawī (1996, p. 266). For more on Qūnawī and the station of no station, see Chittick (2004, pp. 25–45); also <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/centralpoint.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 2:85.11).

482 lens. He sees the prophets as full realizations of the Divine Presence, though each was  
 483 dominated by attributes and character traits appropriate to his context. Each was the  
 484 embodiment of a perfect model of Ultimate Reality, with the understanding that no  
 485 model can be adequate to that Reality, so its perfect embodiments will necessarily be  
 486 diverse. The most adequate linguistic models of Ultimate Reality are then represented  
 487 by scripture, and the most perfect and all-encompassing scripture is the Qur'ān.

488 To summarize, then, Ultimate Reality in itself is unknowable, unspeakable, inef-  
 489 fable. The entire universe, everything other than the Ultimate Reality, is its self-disclo-  
 490 sure, its self-utterance. Human beings are its all-comprehensive, microcosmic  
 491 self-disclosures, a characteristic that bestows upon them consciousness, awareness,  
 492 and the quest to realize their own potential. Scripture is the Ultimate Reality's most  
 493 adequate linguistic self-disclosure, and the individual prophets are the perfect models  
 494 of its microcosmic embodiment, offering keys to the human situation. Any model of  
 495 Ultimate Reality offered by a human individual will inevitably be a depiction of his or  
 496 her own self-awareness, for "When a person sees something of the Real, he never sees  
 497 anything but himself."<sup>23</sup> Every depiction will necessarily be a constriction, a knotting,  
 498 a binding, a colored lens, incapable of representing the Ultimate Reality in itself.

499 As existent things (*mawjūd*) human beings find themselves finding (*wujūd*), and  
 500 they have no choice but to live in terms of what they find. When they do act upon their  
 501 finding, they are following the god of their belief. If they reflect upon their finding,  
 502 they will find that their god is inadequate to the Ultimate Reality that lies beyond all  
 503 reality. The only model that can approach adequacy is the surrender of all limitation  
 504 and constriction, all specific beliefs and stations, and the simultaneous acknowledge-  
 505 ment of the role that each belief and station plays in the total self-disclosure of the  
 506 Real *Wujūd*. This is precisely what Ibn 'Arabī tried to do in his works—to offer the  
 507 model of all models, a model that is simultaneously no model whatsoever.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 2:667.13).

<sup>24</sup> Part of the controversy that has surrounded Ibn 'Arabī's name can be traced back to the fact that for many scholars, his claim to provide the model of all models seemed like enormous arrogance, even if many other scholars accepted that he was indeed "The Seal of the Muhammadan Saints" (*khātam al-awliyā' al-Muḥammadiyya*). Notice here that "the Muhammadan Saints" are those friends of God who achieved the Muhammadan Station, which is precisely the station that encompasses the stations of all saints; to be the "seal" of this station is to be its last historical embodiment, not the seal of sanctity per se, which continues until the end of time. See Chodkiewicz (1993). For a few of the controversies surrounding Ibn 'Arabī's name, see Knysh (1999).

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# Author Query

Chapter No.: 76      0001635471

Query	Details Required	Author's Response
AU1	Please provide opening quote for the sentence (...the rule of the known station").	

Uncorrected Proof