

Ebno'l-'Arabi's Doctrine of the Oneness of Being

by William C. Chittick

Ebnó'l-'Arabi, known as the 'Greatest Master', was the most influential of all those Sufis who employed the language of philosophy to express the teachings of Islam. Born in Murcia in Muslim Spain in 560/1165, he exhibited his outstanding spiritual gifts at an early age. In a frequently quoted passage, he recalls his meeting with the famous philosopher Averroes when the latter was an old man. Averroes perceived in Ebno'l-'Arabi, a youth with only fuzz for a beard, the wisdom for which he had been searching all his life. The meeting is highly symbolic in that the works of Averroes – which were largely forgotten in the Islamic world itself – became one of the major factors influencing the West to move in the direction of a rationalism closed to the intermediate realms of existence, while Ebno'l-'Arabi's writings harmonized the rational and spiritual modes of perception and helped keep the minds of Muslim intellectuals open to the luminous presence of the angels and spirits.

In the year 597/1200, Ebno'l-'Arabi was told in a vision to go to the East. In 599/1202 he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, and from then on he traveled from city to city in the central Islamic lands, eventually settling in Damascus, where he died in 638/1240. He left behind some 500 works, including the enormous *Fotuhāt al-makkiya* ('The Meccan Openings') and a short summary of his teachings which became

the most famous of his books, the *Foşuş al-ḥekam* ('The Bezels of Wisdom'). His numerous students spread his doctrines throughout the Islamic world; within two centuries, there was no expression of Islamic intellectuality untouched by his genius. He has continued to influence Muslim intellectuals down to the present century, and even today many Muslims consider him the most important thinker ever produced by Islam.

The Oneness of Being

In the later literature, Ebno'l-'Arabi is most often characterized as the founder of the doctrine of *waḥdato'l-wojud*, the 'Oneness of Being' or the 'Oneness of Existence'. This doctrine expresses Islam's basic teaching, *tawḥid* or the 'affirmation of God's Unity', in the ontological language of philosophy. Ebno'l-'Arabi himself never employs the expression *waḥdato'l-wojud*, and it was singled out as typifying his point of view not so much because of the content of his writings, but because of the concerns of his followers and the direction in which Islamic thought developed after him. Many important students of Ebno'l-'Arabi, beginning with his most influential disciple, Şadro'd-Din Qonawi (d. 673/1274), tried to bring the intellectual expression of Sufism into harmony with Peripatetic philosophy, and *wojud* or 'existence'² was the primary concern of the philosophers. Thus the very term *waḥdato'l-wojud* – built from the word

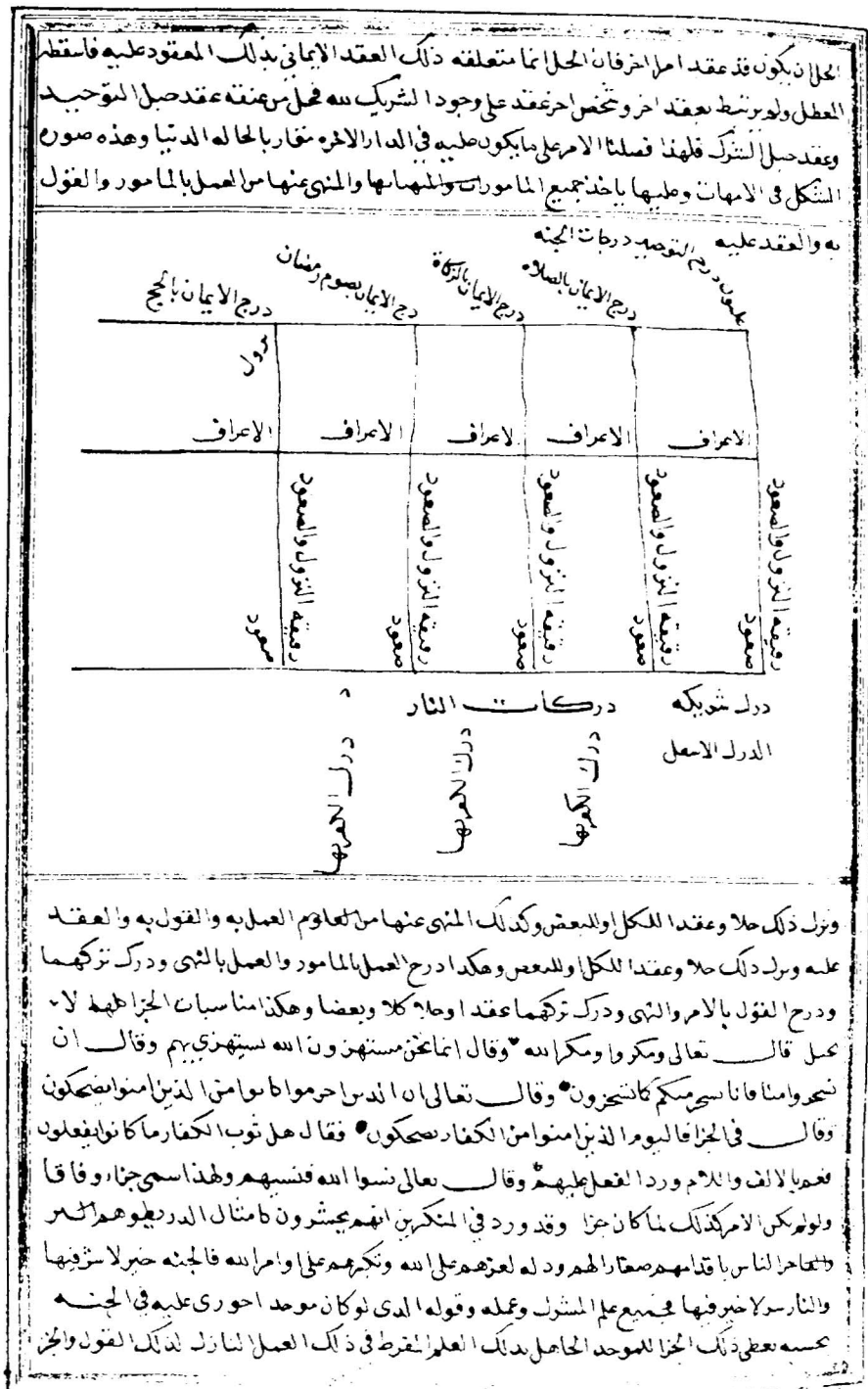
waḥda (derived from the same root as *tawḥid*) and from a second word which delineates the central concern of philosophy – should alert us to the fact that we are dealing with a synthesis of the religious and the philosophical traditions. But in Ebno'l-'Arabi's own works, passages dealing with *wojud* – a term which is not found in the Koran – play a relatively small role. Like most earlier Sufis and in contrast to the philosophers and theologians, he derives the greater part of his key terminology from the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet (*ḥadith*), and he constantly shows how these sources of Islam are the fountainhead of the established sciences, such as jurisprudence, *kalām* or scholastic theology, philosophy, and grammar.

The history of the term *waḥdato'l-wojud* has only recently been investigated. Preliminary research has shown that Ebno'l-'Arabi's disciple Qonawi uses the term on at least two occasions in his works, while Qonawi's disciple Sa'ido'd-Din Farghāni (d. 695/1296) employs it many times in his two influential commentaries on the *Tā'yyya* of the Arabic poet Ebno'l-Fāreḍh. But neither Qonawi nor Farghāni uses the term *waḥdato'l-wojud* in the technical sense which it gained in later centuries. For them, the expression does not connote a whole perspective on the nature of things but refers instead to the self-evident fact that *wojud* is a single reality. At the same time, certain figures peripheral to Ebno'l-'Arabi's

school, such as Ebn Sab'in (d. 669/1270) in Arabic and 'Azizo'd-Din Nasafi (d. before 700/1300) in Persian, were employing the term to allude to the world view of the sages and the Sufis. Then the Hanbalite jurist Ebn Taymiya (d. 728/1328), famous for his attacks on all schools of Islamic intellectuality, seized upon the term *waḥdato'l-wojud* as a synonym for the well-known heresies of *etteḥād* ('unificationism') and *ḥolul* ('incarnationism'). From Ebn Taymiya's time onward, *waḥdato'l-wojud* was used more and more commonly to refer to the whole doctrine taught by Ebno'l-'Arabi and his followers. For jurists like Ebn Taymiya the expression was a term of blame, synonymous with 'unbelief' and 'heresy', but most Muslim intellectuals accepted *waḥdato'l-wojud* as a synonym for *tawḥid* in a philosophical and mystical mode.³

Though Ebno'l-'Arabi never employs the expression *waḥdato'l-wojud* itself, he frequently makes statements which approximate it, and we are certainly justified in claiming that he supported *waḥdato'l-wojud* in the literal sense of the term. However, we cannot claim that 'Oneness of Being' is itself a sufficient description of his ontology, since he affirms the 'manyness of reality' with equal vigor. Hence, we find that in many passages he refers to *wojud* in its fullness as the One/Many (*al-wāḥedo'l-kathir*).

Ebno'l-'Arabi employs the term *wojud* with a variety of meanings in different contexts; simply put, *wojud* is a single reality which can be perceived on many different levels, like its near synonym, 'light' (*nur*), which is a Koranic name of God. On the highest level, *wojud* is the absolute and nondelimited reality of God, the 'Necessary Being' (*wājibo'l-wojud*) which cannot not exist. On lower levels, *wojud* is the underlying substance of 'everything other than God' (*mā sawā' Allāh*) – which is how Muslim thinkers define the 'cosmos' or 'universe' (*al-'ālam*). Ebno'l-'Arabi does not attempt to



A diagram of Ebno'l-'Arabi's theory of ethical and spiritual development, found in the second volume of the *Fotuhato'l-makkiya*, 16th century. Courtesy of the British Library (Arabic manuscript, OR 132).

define *wojud* itself, since in itself it is indefinable and unknowable. But he does provide many analogies through which we can grasp the nature of *wojud*. For example, light is in itself a single, invisible reality, but through it, all colors, shapes, and objects are perceived; in the same way *wojud* is a single reality through

which all things come into existence and are found in the universe, though in itself it remains invisible and beyond reach.

In short, if we say that Ebno'l-'Arabi believed in *waḥdato'l-wojud*, this is correct, since he affirms that *wojud* is a single reality and that there cannot be two *wojuds*. Like

others before him, he frequently glosses the Islamic declaration of *tawhīd* – the statement, 'There is no god but God' – to mean, 'There is nothing in *wojud* but God.' Nevertheless, Ebno'l-'Arabi devotes most of his writings to explaining the reality of manyness or multiplicity (*kathra*) within the context of the Divine Unity. It would be a great error to suppose – as some short-sighted critics have supposed – that he simply affirms that *wojud* is one and attributes the manyness we perceive in the world to illusion or human ignorance. Multiplicity is almost as 'real' as unity. However, by affirming the 'reality' (*ḥaqīqa*) of multiplicity, Ebno'l-'Arabi does not mean to imply that multiplicity exists in the same sense that God exists, since there is only one *wojud*. To return to the analogy of light, we can affirm the reality of colors without claiming that each color is an independently existing thing. Red and green exist only through light; so they are one in their luminous substance and two in their specific realities.

If on the one hand, the universe exists through God's *wojud*, on the other hand, the 'things' (*shay*) or 'entities' (*'ayn*) found within the universe possess their own specific properties. These things are 'other than God', and, as we have seen, God is *wojud*. It follows that in themselves the things do not exist. Ebno'l-'Arabi maintains that everything we perceive in the cosmos is nonexistent in itself, but existent in some sense through the *wojud* of God. In the same way, every color we perceive is nonexistent in itself, but existent through the existence of light.

If we ignore the existence of the things for a moment, we can ask about the things 'in themselves'. What is an entity – a rock, a tree, a human being, a sun, a world – in itself, without reference to its existence? Ebno'l-'Arabi tells us that no entity possesses real existence, so the reality of the entity stays exactly the same, whether or not it is found in the

cosmos, since existence does not belong to it. But each entity has two states or situations. When an entity is found within the phenomenal world, it displays a certain borrowed existence, which it gives back to God when it disappears, as when a man dies, or a stone turns to dust. Nevertheless, the reality of the entity never changes through its apparent existence; it did not exist in the first place – it only borrowed existence from God for a moment – so it does not cease to exist in the second place. It stays in its original state of 'permanence' or 'immutability' (*thobut*).

But how can we speak of the immutability of an entity that does not exist? Briefly stated, Ebno'l-'Arabi explains these 'immutable entities' (*al-'ayāno'th-thābeta*) as follows: The 'existence' and 'nonexistence' of the entities about which we have been speaking pertain to the cosmos, the phenomenal world. But the phenomenal world is the manifestation of the non-phenomenal world, which is ultimately *wojud* itself. In Koranic terms, God 'creates' the universe and each thing within it. And God is not only infinite *wojud*; He is also infinite and eternal knowledge. He knows all things forever, even before He creates them, and He knows them in all the details which they will manifest during their sojourn in the cosmos. God's knowledge of the things corresponds precisely to the things as they are in themselves. The 'thing in itself' is known as the 'reality' (*ḥaqīqa*) of the existent thing or its 'immutable entity'. Hence the entities remain forever immutable in the knowledge of God, which never changes, while in relation to the cosmos they may be either existent or nonexistent. The things within God's knowledge are sometimes called the 'nonexistent objects of knowledge' (*al-ma'lumāt al-ma'duma*); their plurality cannot bring about plurality in *wojud* any more than the plurality of our own ideas causes our minds to have many parts.

Ebno'l-'Arabi explains the mysterious relationship between cosmic ex-

istence and the nonexistent things in a wide variety of contexts. Here we can look briefly at two of these explanations, the first metaphysical and the second more cosmological. The Koran (57:3) affirms that God is the Manifest (*az-zāher*) and the Nonmanifest (*al-bāten*). This means that what we see manifest before us is God or *wojud*. We know that *wojud* is one, but in fact we see a cosmos of infinite multiplicity, not one God. How then do we account for the manyness which we see? Ebno'l-'Arabi explains that when *wojud* becomes manifest in the cosmos, it displays itself to us within a 'locus of manifestation' (*mazhar*), which is the cosmos itself; it does not display itself as the Nonmanifest, since by definition *wojud* as the Nonmanifest is inconceivable and unknowable. Moreover, within this one locus of manifestation known as the cosmos, there are many lesser loci of manifestation, known as the things or entities found within the cosmos. These loci of manifestation are nonexistent in themselves, since only God has *wojud*. So what we perceive is *wojud* permeated by the properties of the entities, which themselves remain immutable in nonexistence. The situation is analogous to what happens when light passes through a prism: We perceive many different colors, but the only thing that exists is the one light. Hence, says Ebno'l-'Arabi, in respect to Himself God is Nonmanifest, but in respect to His loci of manifestation He is Manifest. The loci are plural in themselves, but not in respect to the *wojud* which is Manifest within them. Unity lies in their manifestation – which is *wojud* – while multiplicity lies in their entities, which do not exist in themselves. Hence, God is identical with the existence of the things, but He is not identical with the things.

In a context which pays more attention to the structure of the cosmos, Ebno'l-'Arabi explains the relationship between *wojud* and the entities in terms of the Breath of the All-

merciful (*nafaso'r-Rahmān*). In Koranic language, God is the All-merciful, and His mercy 'embraces all things' (7:156). Ebno'l-'Arabi points out that the only reality which embraces each and every thing in the cosmos is existence, so existence is God's mercy, since through it He brings all things from the state of nonexistence within His knowledge – where they enjoy no bounties whatsoever – to a state of existence within the world, where they are able to perceive, enjoy, and experience their own realities. Building on *hadiths* in which the Prophet refers to the 'breath' of the All-merciful and Koranic verses in which God's 'breathing' is mentioned, Ebno'l-'Arabi compares the process of creation to the breathing of a breather. The breath itself is like the underlying substance within which all things assume their specific characteristics; through it the 'immutable entities' (*al-a'yāno'th-thābeta*) become 'existent entities' (*al-a'yāno'l-mawjuda*) (without losing their immutability in God's knowledge and without gaining true existence). In the same context Ebno'l-'Arabi also refers to many Koranic verses which mention the creative act of God in terms of His speech and allude to the infinite 'words of God'. These words of God, says Ebno'l-'Arabi, are the individual entities or creatures. When God exhales the Breath of the All-merciful, He also speaks. Within the Breath the whole cosmos takes specific form. Since the words of God are individual and distinct realities, multiplicity is real; but since the Breath of God is the reality of existence, all things share in that reality inasmuch as they exist within the cosmos. Words depend absolutely upon the Breath, but the Breath has no need for the words; God speaks not because some external factor forces Him to speak, but because He is merciful and generous by nature and wills to bring creatures into existence. Hence, absolute *wojud* displays its innate qualities of mercy and compassion through overflowing and

bringing the 'other' into existence.

If we pursue the analogy of the divine Breath with the human breath a little further, we come across another primary teaching of Ebno'l-'Arabi, concerning which we will have more to say in what follows. Is the breath of a human being the same as himself? One cannot answer this question simply by saying 'yes' or 'no'. In one respect, the person's breath is not the same as himself, since he is a human being and his breath is a breath. But a human being without breath is a corpse, and breath without a human being is moist air. So, in fact, the two terms, human being and breath, are somehow inseparable. In the same way, the Breath of the All-merciful is the same as God; yet it is different from God. Likewise, the words which become articulated within the Breath are the same as the Breath, yet different. Hence, there is no absolute identity between an existent entity and God, nor is there an absolute difference. The exact relationship always remains a mystery, even though we can gain a certain grasp of it through investigation and God's help.

Perfect Man: The Ontology of the Divine Names

What do we know about *wojud* as such? First, we know nothing; or rather, we know that *wojud* is indefinable and inconceivable, since we can only know of it what we have of it in our hands, yet, strictly speaking, we have nothing, since we are nonexistent. Put otherwise, how can the words encompass the speaker? How can a visible color comprehend the reality of invisible light? Yet, in spite of this, we can, indeed, know something of *wojud*, precisely because we have a certain knowledge of ourselves and the cosmos around us, and all these realities give us intimations of the Absolute Reality from which they have issued forth.

Analyzing the qualities of *wojud* within the cosmos to grasp the nature

of *wojud* in itself corresponds to a certain type of philosophical approach, and although Ebno'l-'Arabi does not neglect this approach, he is far more concerned with investigating the self-revelation of *wojud* in human language, that is, the holy scriptures. In practice, the 'holy scriptures' are the Koran and the Hadith (though not in theory, since Ebno'l-'Arabi acknowledges the validity of the scriptures of other religions). Through scripture *wojud* – God Himself – reveals itself to man in a linguistic mode in order to inform him of its nature. This 'information' concerning God which we receive through the scriptures is summarized in terms of the names of God, traditionally said to number ninety-nine. Each name of God mentioned in the Koran and the Hadith tells us something of the ultimate reality of *wojud*, though that ultimate reality in itself can never be known. Most of Ebno'l-'Arabi's writings deal with the explication of the Koran and Hadith, since he is constantly concerned to find the 'divine roots' (*al-oşulo'l-elāhiya*) or 'divine supports' (*al-mostanadāto'l-elāhiya*) of all phenomena in the universe through the help of scripture. God in Himself – often called the 'Essence' (*adh-dhāt*) – transcends phenomena absolutely, but there is something about the way in which God brings the existent things into the cosmos which tells us about God and makes clear for us the nature of *wojud*. On the one hand, this something is expressed linguistically by the Koran; on the other, it is expressed ontologically and epistemologically through the universe and our own self-knowledge. Ebno'l-'Arabi frequently quotes the Koranic verse which tells us to gaze upon the cosmos and within ourselves in order to perceive the 'signs' (*āyāt*) of God's Reality (41:53).

What, then, do we know about *wojud*? We know what the Koran has told us. Hence we know, for example, that *wojud* is Alive, Knowing, Willing, Powerful, Speaking, Generous and Just. These seven Koranic



The opening page from the second volume of the *Fatḥar-Raḥīm*, by Ebno'l-'Arabi, 16th century. Courtesy of the British Library (Arabic manuscript, Or 132).

then, refer to God on the one hand; but they also refer to the things or entities, since, in order to come into the world, the things must reflect *wojud* in some manner, or else they could not exist in any sense.

For Ebno'l-'Arabi, the divine names are the bridge between the Non-phenomenal and the phenomenal, both epistemologically and ontologically. In other words, without the divine names and attributes as revealed in scripture, we could have no certain knowledge of the nature of *wojud*. At the same time, these names denote the actual reality of *wojud*, and hence, they delineate the modes in which *wojud* comes to manifest itself through its 'signs,' the things of the cosmos. On the one hand, only God possesses true life, true knowledge, true will, true power, and so on. On the other hand, each thing in the cosmos manifests certain aspects of God's life, knowledge, will and power by the very fact that it manifests *wojud*. The life which we possess is not true life, since true life belongs only to God. But at the same time, our life does possess a certain reality, or else we would neither know nor perceive.

When God grants existence to the entities, they come into existence according to their own realities. This means, for example, that God gives existence to a particular tree, and it enters into the cosmos exactly as He has known it for all eternity, with all the specific qualities relating to that particular tree in that particular time and place. The immutable entities cannot be compared to the Platonic ideas, because the ideas are universals rather than particulars. But we can compare the divine names to the Platonic ideas, since each Koranic name of God denotes a specific ontological attribute in which the entities share to some degree. Sometimes, however, Ebno'l-'Arabi declares that God's names are infinite, for each entity displays a property of *wojud*, thereby signifying *wojud* and 'naming' it; in this sense each thing

names of God are frequently cited as the key attributes upon which all the other divine names depend. Through these and other divine names, we can grasp many of the characteristics

which flow forth from *wojud* and which belong to *wojud*, but we can never grasp *wojud* itself, which transcends all its attributes while possessing each of them fully. These names,

is a name of God; so the names are particulars. These two views of the divine names led some of Ebno'l-'Arabi's followers to distinguish between the ninety-nine names of God and the immutable entities by calling the first the 'universal names of God' and the second the 'particular names of God.'

According to Ebno'l-'Arabi, each existent entity shares in all divine attributes, since each displays existence, and existence is God, the Essence named by all the names. But every entity does not manifest all attributes, and hence the whole cosmos is ranked in degrees of excellence (*tafāḍhol*) in accordance with the extent to which the existent entities display the attributes of God within the universe. Some creatures have a greater life, some a lesser life, and some seem to have no life whatsoever – though the Sufis can perceive an invisible life even in stones, through the eye of mystical 'unveiling' (*kashf*). So also each and every attribute of God manifests itself in varying intensities – knowledge, will, power, speech, generosity, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and so on. Each entity has a specific 'preparedness' (*este'dād*) which allows it to manifest the attributes of *wojud* to a greater or lesser degree. A stone manifests power in a certain passive way. A plant manifests traces of life, knowledge, will, and active power. An animal manifests all these attributes with much greater intensity. At the top of the visible hierarchy of existence, human beings have the potential to manifest every divine name.

A famous *ḥadīth* tells us that God created Adam upon His own form, and Ebno'l-'Arabi makes much of the fact that here the name 'Allāh' is employed, since Allāh is the 'all-comprehensive name of God' (*al-esmo'l-jāme'*), to which all the other names refer. Hence human beings were created with the potentiality of displaying *all* names of God, while other creatures in the cosmos can only manifest *some* names of God. Though all creatures are loci of

manifestation for *wojud*, *wojud* can manifest itself in its full splendor only in a human being. This can easily be seen if we look again at the seven primary names of God referred to above. Humans share with animals the fact that they manifest life, knowledge, will and power. But human beings can manifest these attributes with much greater intensity than animals. Who would compare the power of an elephant to that of a Genghis Khan? Or the knowledge of a bee to that of Buddha? Moreover, only humans can manifest the remaining three attributes within the sensory world. 'Speech' is a specifically human quality, while 'generosity' and 'justice' cannot be applied to animals except metaphorically.

But not all human beings employ their speech in a manner appropriate to the full perfection of *wojud*, and few people are generous and just. Nor do men possess knowledge, will, power, or any other divine attribute in equal measure. Since people actualize the divine attributes and manifest them in their lives in varying manners, Ebno'l-'Arabi distinguishes five basic categories of human beings: unbeliever (*kāfer*), person of faith (*mo'men*), friend of God (*wali*), prophet (*nabi*), and messenger (*rasul*). He devotes hundreds of pages to explaining how different kinds of people manifest the divine names in different degrees. Thus, his anthropology is in fact an ontology, firmly based on the Koranic doctrine of God's names and attributes.

It is worth stressing that for Ebno'l-'Arabi, as for most other Muslim thinkers, morality and ethics, like anthropology, are rooted in ontology. In other words, a human being who wants to actualize his full humanity must bring out the divine qualities which are latent within himself. The qualities of a true human being are God's qualities, which is to say that they belong to *wojud* itself. These divine qualities are moral qualities in that they provide the model for every proper, compassionate and humane

act. The Koran tells us that God is Generous, Just, Forgiving, Kind, Patient, Clement, and so on, and these are precisely the attributes which a human being must gain in order to reach moral and spiritual perfection. Hence, Ebno'l-'Arabi identifies the Sufi path with the 'assumption of the character traits of God' (*at-takhalloq be akhlāqē'llāh*), and he identifies these character traits with the divine names. In other words, there are absolute standards for ethics and social behavior grounded in the same principles which govern the natural world. As a result, *wojud* can find its full manifestation only in a proper moral order established among human beings.

Ebno'l-'Arabi connects the full manifestation of *wojud* to human beings most clearly in his famous doctrine of 'perfect man' (*al-ensāno'l-kāmel*). In one respect, perfect man (who is contrasted with 'animal man', *al-ensāno'l-ḥayawān*) is the embodiment of every praiseworthy human quality; he is the exemplar of human wisdom, compassion, and all moral and spiritual good. He guides individuals and society to an ideal equilibrium with the ultimate Good. He represents God among human beings, leading them to their supreme happiness in the next world. In his human manifestation he is found in the form of the prophets and the great friends of God (*akābero'l-awliā'*).

In another respect, perfect man is the goal of the cosmos, since God manifests all His attributes only through perfect man; in him alone does *wojud* come to a full flowering. No creature other than perfect man possesses the requisite preparedness (*este'dād*) to manifest all God's moral traits within the cosmos. If *wojud* in itself is the absolutely non-phenomenal, it only attains to its full manifestation within the phenomenal world through perfect man, who displays every name of God in perfect harmony and equilibrium. This is why Ebno'l-'Arabi says that the 'Mohammadan' friends of God – that is, those

who have inherited the sciences and moral traits of Mohammad, the most perfect of perfect men – possess 'the station of no station' (*maqām lā maqām*). In other words, they have actualized every perfection found in existence, so they cannot be identified in a limiting sense with any specific perfection. Other friends of God are dominated by specific divine names, or specific perfections of *wojud*, such as knowledge, speech, generosity, justice, compassion, love, patience, perseverance, and so on. But the Muhammadan friends of God actualize every name and every perfection; hence, they are dominated by no name, no perfection, 'no station'. On the contrary, they act in perfect accordance with the necessities of every situation, since they manifest the ultimate reality of *wojud* itself. Like the divine Essence, they are unknowable and ungraspable, yet they overflow with every imaginable good.

Incomparability and Similarity

On the one hand *wojud* in itself is unknowable and transcends absolutely the existent and nonexistent things, which are infinite in number. On the other hand, *wojud* shows itself through the existent entities and through the revealed scriptures, so human beings can acquire knowledge of its qualities. In the terminology developed by Islamic scholastic theology, *kalām*, God's unknowability and transcendence are referred to as *tanzih*, or 'incomparability'. In other words, God cannot be compared with anything; no existent thing stands on a par with *wojud* in itself. Our only knowledge about God is that we do not truly know anything about Him. This position was affirmed by theologians long before Ebno'l-'Arabi, and he accepts it as true. However, he points out that this description of the divine Reality does not provide us with a full picture of *wojud*, since it does not account satisfactorily for the

'signs' of God which appear in the cosmos. In fact, says Ebno'l-'Arabi, the theologians based their analysis of the divine nature on reason (*al-'aql*), and reason functions such that it can understand only what God is not. On its own, reason can gain no positive knowledge of God's attributes. Hence, the scriptures provide us with this positive knowledge, and reason will not go astray if it follows the scriptures. But most rational thinkers – theologians in particular – insist upon interpreting (*ta'wil*) scripture in accordance with their own rational perception of what can be attributed appropriately to God. As a result, they refuse to accept the face value of any description of God which suggests that He is similar to the things of the cosmos.

If reason by its very nature wants to negate attributes from God and affirm His incomparability, 'imagination' (*khayāl*) has the power to grasp God's similarity (*tashbih*). Here we cannot begin to describe Ebno'l-'Arabi's extremely detailed comparison of the two kinds of knowledge acquired through reason and imagination, but we can summarize his conclusions: Perfect knowledge of God must declare God both incomparable and similar. God in Himself – absolute *wojud* – is incomparable with all existent things, but God also manifests the properties of *wojud* in the cosmos, and in this respect we have to say that God is somehow similar to the created things.

What, then, is the cosmos? It is the 'other', since it is defined as everything other than the Essence of God. But it is not other in every respect, since it is all the words articulated within the Breath of the All-merciful, and the Breath is somehow identical with the Breather. Again, the cosmos is God's self-disclosure (*tajalli*) within His loci of manifestation. Through the cosmos, *wojud* displays its characteristics and properties, that is, its universal and particular names, both the ninety-nine names of God and the immutable

entities. Hence, the Breath of the All-merciful brings the invisible realities out to the visible plane. In one sense, the universe is other than God, since the Essence lies infinitely beyond it. In another sense, the universe is identical with God, since nothing is found within it which does not name Him. The inexhaustible words spoken by God are the same as the Breath, and the Breath is the same as the All-merciful; so, the words are the same as the All-merciful. Ebno'l-'Arabi constantly moves back and forth between these two points of view, that of identity and difference. He sums up his position with the deceptively simple statement: 'He/not He' (*howa lā howa*). Each entity in the cosmos is identical with *wojud* and other than *wojud* at one and the same time.

The reality of 'He/not He' can be perceived most clearly through imagination. Ebno'l-'Arabi discusses imagination on many levels, and it plays such an important role in his teachings that he claims no one can gain any true knowledge without understanding it. An imaginal (not 'imaginary') reality is one which dwells in an intermediate domain between two other realities, so that we must affirm and deny it at the same time. One of the most common examples is a mirror image. Your reflection in a mirror acts as a kind of bridge between yourself and the mirror; you have to affirm that the image is both yourself and the mirror, and that it is neither yourself nor the mirror. Likewise, dreams are imaginal realities. If you see your father in a dream, you have seen your father and not your mother or brother; at the same time, what you have seen is nothing but your own self. So the imaginal reality you have perceived is a bridge or 'isthmus' (*barzakh*) between yourself and your father. The most succinct statement you can make about the dream image is 'he/not he'.

Ebno'l-'Arabi perceives imagination on three different cosmic levels. On the human level, man's world of

inner experience is imagination. This is the 'soul' (*nafs*), which dwells at an intermediate stage, or 'isthmus', between the spirit, which according to the Koran (32:9) derives from God's Breath, and the body, which God kneaded from clay. The spirit is one reality composed of pure light, life, knowledge and the other divine attributes, while the body is a multiplicity of parts, overcome by darkness, inanimate matter, ignorance, and the lack of divine attributes. The soul is a mixture of the two sides. It is neither pure light nor pure darkness, but an intermediate stage between light and darkness. It possesses every divine attribute to a certain ambiguous degree. Each human soul represents a unique mixture of qualities and a unique possibility of ascension toward the perfection of 'no station', where all the divine attributes are possessed in the fullest possible measure. But each human being may also descend toward multiplicity and darkness, thus becoming lost in dispersion and passing into an infrahuman state. The whole intermediate domain of the soul is one of imagination and ambiguity, mixture and perplexity. The only path of safety within this maze of affirmation and denial is the route set down by the prophets.

On a second level, Ebno'l-'Arabi perceives imagination in the macrocosm, the world outside of man. There are two fundamental created worlds, the invisible world of spirits and the visible world of bodies, corresponding to spirit and body in the microcosm. The world of spirits is inhabited by angels, who are said, in the traditional symbolism, to be created from 'light', while the world of bodies is inhabited by animals and humans, whose visible parts are made of 'clay'. Between these two worlds stand many other worlds which combine the qualities of the two basic worlds and which are known collectively as the 'World of Imagination'. For example, the 'jinn' are said to inhabit some of these intermediary worlds. They are

made of 'fire', which is clearly a bridge between light and clay. Fire is luminous like light, yet it cannot do without fuel from the world of clay. It tries to ascend to light; yet it is attached by its root to the world of darkness. Angelic beings descend from the world of light into the world of imagination and are perceived in visions by the prophets and the friends of God. Here also the prophets receive the scriptures, which bring together the cognitive luminosity of the upper world with a linguistic crystallization through which human beings dominated by dispersion and darkness can perceive the light of the spirit.

In a third sense, 'imagination' refers to the greatest of all intermediate realities, which is the whole cosmos, or the Breath of the All-merciful. The cosmos stands halfway between absolute *wojud* and absolute nothingness. Everything that 'exists' in the universe is He/not He, itself/not itself. Moreover, this description applies to the cosmos not only as a static reality but also as a dynamic reality. In other words, each moment is both identical and not identical with the preceding and following moments. Ebno'l-'Arabi points to the infinity of *wojud* and cites the axiom, 'Self-disclosure never repeats itself,' since God in His infinite effusion is under no constraints; hence, no two things and no two instants are exactly the same. This is Ebno'l-'Arabi's famous doctrine of the 'renewal of creation at each instant'. As Ebno'l-'Arabi writes concerning the cosmos,

Everything other than the Essence of God stands at the station of transmutation, speedy and slow. Everything other than the Essence of God is intervening imagination and vanishing shadow...undergoing transformation from form to form constantly and forever. And imagination is nothing but this.... So the cosmos becomes manifest only within imagination. (*Fotuhāt*, Vol II, n.d., p. 313)

Wojud is one in its Essence and

many through its names and self-disclosures; it is both incomparable with all the entities and similar to every created thing. *Wojud* finds its most complete outward expression in perfect man, who manifests all the names of God in their fullness. Just as God has two perfections, that of the Essence and that of the names, so also perfect man has two perfections, that of his essential reality as the form of God Himself and that of his accidental manifestations, through which he displays God's names in particular contexts. In respect of the first perfection, all perfect men are essentially one, and one might speak of 'the perfect man' as a unique reality or as the 'logos'. In respect of the second perfection, each perfect man has a specific function to play within the cosmos; so there are many perfect men fulfilling the roles God has given to them. In respect of the essential perfection of the perfect men, the Koran says that there is no distinction among God's messengers (2:285), but in respect of their accidental perfection, it declares that God has ranked them in degrees of excellence (2:253). In short, the perfect men are fixed in their essences, which are not other than the essence of *wojud* itself; at the same time, they undergo constant transformation and transmutation by participating in the ceaseless self-disclosure of God and manifesting the properties of the divine names in a never-ending variety of cosmic situations. The heart (*qalb*) of perfect man experiences endless fluctuation (*taqallob*), since it is the locus within which he perceives God's self-disclosures, which never repeat themselves.

God created the universe to manifest the fullness of His own nature. As the famous *hadith qodsi* expresses it, God says, 'I was a hidden treasure; so I wanted to be known; hence, I created the creatures, in order that I might be known.' In other words, through the cosmos, *wojud* discloses the infinite possibilities latent within itself. Yet it manifests itself in its fullness only through perfect man.

since he alone actualizes every ontological quality – every name and attribute of God. Perfect man alone has reached the goal of human life, which is to manifest the divine form in which man was created.

Ebno'l-'Arabi devotes most of his attention not to ontology but to 'anthropology', that is, describing the nature of perfect man and the manner in which human beings can reach perfection. The practical sides of Ebno'l-'Arabi's teaching – which are far more detailed than the theoretical side which we have been discussing – describe how a human being can discipline the intellect and the imagination in order to combine the vision of incomparability with that of similarity. A mere rational understanding of the reality of He/not He will not aid a person to ascend to the world of light. The inward world of imagination cannot be transformed into a place of the self-disclosure of *wojud* unless we follow the guidance of those human beings who have reached perfection before us – the messengers, prophets, and friends of God.

In short, the ultimate reality of *wojud* is both infinitely beyond us and ever-present with us. In its incomparability *wojud* is one with an absolute oneness, but in its similarity it manifests itself through the real plurality which we perceive in the cosmos. The Non-phenomenal remains forever incomparable, just as light remains forever light; but the Non-phenomenal brings the phenomenal into existence through mercy and compassion toward everything that has the potential to exist. The cosmos in turn displays all the properties of *wojud* in a differentiated manner. Human beings are able to return by way of their own selves to the Non-phenomenal, thereby realizing their original state as nonexistent immutable entities; but, by the same token, the perfect men come to manifest the fullness of *wojud*, since their nonexistent entities were made in the divine form, which is the form of *wojud*.

'No station' is at once every station. Not He is He. Oneness becomes manifest in the plurality of man's perfections.

Notes

1. For detailed explanations of the ideas discussed in this paper, see W.C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

2. Translating the term *wojud* as 'existence' rather than 'Being' or 'finding' (its literal sense) in the context of Ebno'l-'Arabi's writings raises a number of problems, which are discussed in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

3. On the history of the term, see Chittick, "Rumi and *Wahdat al-wujud*", in *The Heritage of Rumi*, edited by Amin Banani and Georges Sabagh, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

If You Wish

by Alex Cowie

If you wish

*I will be the voiceless cry
in Your green house of falling stars*

*I will be the cave
where Your wounded leopard sleeps*

*I will be the light of peace
upon all Your broken fences &
the dancing fish in Your warm rivers*

*I will be the softest pillow
in Your sweet bed of night*

*& You
shall be*

my only love
