

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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"<sup>2</sup> 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” (*ḥaḍrat*). 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-ʿArabī’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*).<sup>3</sup>

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-ʿArabī defines it as the Essence, Attributes, and Acts of Allah (II 114.14). Allah is known as the “all-comprehensive” (*jāmiʿ*) 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 (*asmāʾ*), which are the relationships that can be discerned between the Essence and everything other than He; and the acts (*afʿāl*), 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-ʿArabī 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-ʿArabī’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-ʿayān 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-‘Arabī’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).<sup>4</sup> And it asks, “Are they equal—those who know and those who know not?” (39:9).

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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, Pardon, 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

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.<sup>5</sup> 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 support" (*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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> If it were, the *Futūhāt* 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*, *makhliqāt*) demands that the acts be the result of the activity of the divine name “Creator” (*khāliq*), 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” (*mawjūdāt*) 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” II

(*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” (*mumkināt*), 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-'Arabī speaks about the "hierarchy of the cosmos" (*tartīb al-'ālam*), 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 (*'ulwī*) and low (*sufī*). 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

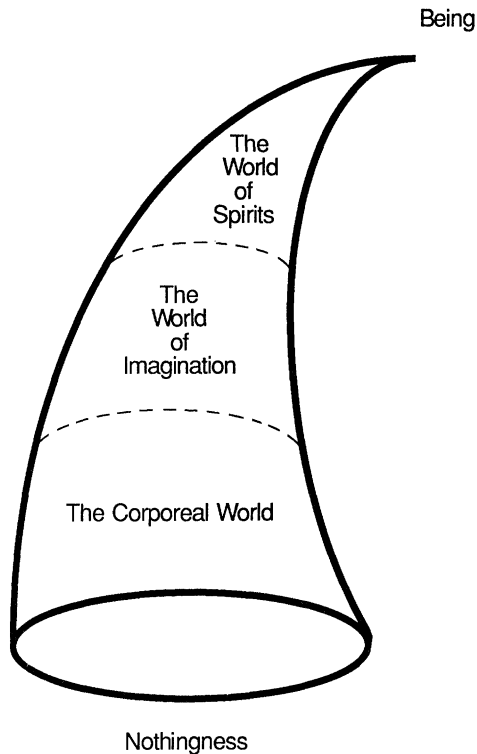
The most specific characteristic of the things found within the domain of imagination, on whatever level it is considered, is their intermediary and ambiguous status. When we understand the pairs of terms mentioned above as extreme "poles" or as relatively absolute ontological situations, then we can 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 show—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-‘Arabī 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 (*zuhūr*) 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-‘Arabī, 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*),<sup>10</sup> while man is a “small universe” (*‘ālam 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-'Arabi'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 (*rūḥ*), 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-rūḥ 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 (*muǰmal*). The growth of the human soul, the process whereby it moves from darkness to light, is also a growth from death to life (*hayāt*), 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 fi'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 fi'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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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-‘Arabī and others call the “compulsory return” (*rujū‘ 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,” *rujū‘ 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-mun‘im*), but He is also the Avenger (*al-muntaqim*) and the Terrible in Punishment (*shadīd al-‘iqāb*). 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-‘Arabī, 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-‘Arabī 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 (*ma‘nā*) 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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-kārim*), justice (*al-ʿadl*, *al-muqṣit*), forgiveness (*al-ghaffār*, *al-ghaffūr*), 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 asmaʾ 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 intelligence<sup>14</sup>) 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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 (*lutf*) 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-ghani*), 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.<sup>17</sup> 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-‘Arabī 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 (*tafṣīl*) 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-shaytān*), 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-‘Arabī employs in referring to revelation in both a general sense and the specific sense of the Koran and the Sunna is *shar‘*, which will be translated as “Law” and from which the well-known term Shari‘a, 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. Secondarily 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-‘Arabī 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-‘Arabī, the Law is the scale (*al-mīzān*) 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-‘Arabī would say, is a station of great danger (*khaṭar*). 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-‘Arabī’s technical terms.

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

lah, which is the “meaning” (*maʿnā*) or innermost reality of every human form. But each human being is different, which is to say that “the divine self-disclosure never repeats itself.” The Divine Presence never manifests itself in different modes to each individual. Some of these modes are designated by names close to Unity, others by names that relate to dispersion, and most to names that are outside the scope of the ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names. The prophets and great friends of God, as human beings, manifest the name Allah in its relative fullness. Then, in their specific functions, they display one or more of the Most Beautiful Names. They are exemplars who disclose the possibilities of the human theomorphic state. Each is a model of perfection.

The connection between the divine names and the prophets can be seen clearly in the structure of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, where each of the twenty-seven chapters is dedicated to a single prophet and a corresponding divine attribute.<sup>18</sup> The first chapter is dedicated to “the wisdom of the Divine Presence as embodied in Adam,” by whom, Ibn al-ʿArabī makes clear, he means the human being as such. Then the succeeding chapters are dedicated to various prophets and their attributes, it being understood that each of the prophets, as a human being, also manifests the name Allah. By dealing with the prophets as human individuals, Ibn al-ʿArabī is able to investigate the properties of the divine attributes when manifested in the cosmos in specific cases. Each prophet himself becomes a kind of divine name, manifesting the Divine Presence through his earthly career. This is one reason that Ibn al-ʿArabī makes extensive reference in the *Futūḥāt* to the “presences” of the prophets in exactly the same sense that he talks about the “presences” of the names. If the Presence of Power embraces everything in existence wherein the name Powerful exercises its effects and displays its properties, so also the “Presence of Moses” (*al-ḥaḍrat al-mūsawiyya*) embraces everything

on the path of achieving human theomorphism that manifests the qualities of Moses. Dozens of chapters in the *Futūḥāt* dealing with the visions of the lights of Being and interpretations of the nature of the realities that fill the cosmos are labelled by the expressions “From the Presence of Muḥammad,” “From the Presence of Moses,” and “From the Presence of Jesus” to indicate the particular cognitive and revelational perspective that is being taken into account.

### *Seeing Things as They Are*

Perfect man alone is able to see all things in their proper places. He is the divine sage who has so thoroughly assimilated the Scale of the Law that he witnesses through his very nature the correct relationships among things. This discernment of relationships is the most difficult of all human tasks, because of the intrinsic ambiguity of existence. There is no absolute point of reference to which man can cling, since “None knows God but God.” Instead there are numerous “relatively absolute” standpoints in respect of which knowledge can be acquired. But some of these may lead to felicity, and some may not. Ibn al-ʿArabī’s deconstruction of all doctrinal absolutes must be grasped from the outset, or one will constantly be tempted to provide a definitive statement of “what Ibn al-ʿArabī believes” without defining his standpoint on the question at issue.

The Shaykh accepts no absolutes other than the Essence of the Real—Being in Itself—on the one hand and pure and simple nothingness on the other. None knows the Essence of the Real but the Real, which is to say that there is no point of view within the contingent universe which allows us to speak for the Essence Itself. In other words, there are no absolutes in the cosmos or in the universe of discourse. Every formulation

which attempts to describe the real must assume a delimited, defined, and relative standpoint. What is accepted from one point of view may have to be denied from a second point of view. The Essence alone is absolutely Real, but the Essence is forever beyond our grasp and understanding. Each standpoint in respect of which God and the cosmos are perceived becomes a “relative absolute” or a “presence” (*ḥaḍra*) from which certain conclusions can be drawn, conclusions which will be valid for that point of view. But Ibn al-ʿArabī is constantly changing his points of view, as is clearly indicated by the structure of many of his works, the *Fuṣūṣ* in particular. Each of the divine wisdoms incarnated in each of twenty-seven prophets speaks in a unique language, thus throwing new light on the self-revelation of the Unknown. Each revelation provides a unique way of looking upon God and the cosmos. So also, the spiritual “stations” (*maqāmāt*) themselves, like the “waystations” and similar concepts, all go back, in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s way of seeing things, to unique perceptions of reality, delimited and defined by certain relationships and constraints. But none of these is absolute, so each can be contradicted by other points of view. The human response to these constant shifts in perspective may well be “bewilderment,” which, Ibn al-ʿArabī tells us, is the station of the great friends of God. The Absolute allows for no absolutizing of anything other than Itself, which is to say that everything other than God is imagination.

This having been said, it is still fair to maintain that perfect man’s vision combines the two basic points of view of incomparability and similarity, while he vacillates between them in expressing his perception of reality. The first represents the point of view of the rational faculty, which declares God’s Unity (*tawḥīd*) and is perfectly able to grasp that the cosmos is ruled by a God who must be One. The second represents the point of view of the imagination, which perceives God’s the-

ophany or self-disclosure in all that exists.

The rational faculty cannot perceive how God can disclose Himself in the cosmos, since, if He were similar to His acts, He would have to assume attributes which can only be applied to created things. But a healthy and sound rational faculty will grasp its own limitations and accept the truth of revelation. It will realize that God knows perfectly well what He is talking about, even if it cannot fathom what He means. Hence it will accept the literal significance of the revealed texts. It will say: “Yes, God has hands, eyes, and feet, just as the Koran and the Hadith have reported. He laughs, rejoices, forgets, and sits down. The revealed texts have said this and God speaks in accordance with the tongue of the people, so God no doubt means what He says. If He did not mean this, He could have said something else. I accept it as true, but I do not ask ‘how’ (*kayf*) it is true.” This is the limit of the knowledge reason can attain—and only with the help of revelation.

Imagination understands in modes foreign to reason. As an intermediate reality standing between spirit and body, it perceives abstract ideas and spiritual beings in embodied form. Since in itself it is neither the one nor the other, it is intrinsically ambiguous and multivalent, and it can grasp the self-disclosure of God, which is He/not He. Reason demands to know the exact relationships in the context of either/or. But imagination perceives that self-disclosure can never be known with precision, since it manifests the Unknown Essence.

In the case of perfect man, spiritual realization has opened up the imagination to the actual vision of the embodiment of God when He discloses Himself in theophany. He does not know “how” God discloses Himself, but he sees Him doing so. He understands the truth of God’s similarity with all things through a God-given vision, seeing clearly that all things are neither/nor, both/and, but never either/or.

Perfect man has submitted to the literal sense and the legal injunctions of the Divine Book. He has taken God's command, "Be godfearing and God will teach you" (2:282), literally, and he has been taught the meaning of the text, the meaning of the cosmos, and the meaning of his own soul. Hermeneutics is not a rational process, but an encounter with the divine self-disclosure, an opening of the heart toward infinite wisdom.

### *Human Perfection*

Nondelimited Being is one in Its Essence and many through Its self-disclosures. It is both incomparable with all existent things and similar to every creature. It finds its fullest outward expression in perfect man, who manifests God's names in their total deployment. Just as God is perfect in His Essence and perfect through His names, so also perfect man displays human perfection through his essential reality, as the form of the name Allah, and through his accidental manifestations, as the outward display of all the individual divine names in the appropriate circumstances. The perfect men are fixed in their essences, which are not other than the Being of God. But they undergo constant transformations and transmutations by participating in God's ceaseless and never-repeating self-disclosure.

God created the universe to manifest the fullness of His generosity and mercy. Through the cosmos, Being displays the infinite possibilities latent within Itself. But It only manifests Itself in Its fullness through perfect man, since he alone actualizes every divine character trait, or every quality of Being. He is the human individual who has attained to the total actualization of his theomorphism, such that the name Allah shines forth in him in infinite splendor.

30 On the level of the outward, corporeal

world, perfect man may not appear different from other human beings, certainly not in the eyes of the deniers and misbelievers. The Koran reports the words of some of Muḥammad's contemporaries as, "What ails this Messenger that he eats food and goes into the markets?" (25:7). But the corporeal world is but the distant Sun reflected in dust. The real fullness of perfect man's existence must be sought in the inward domains, the innumerable intermediate worlds that lie between his sensory shell and his divine kernel. He is in fact the "Barzakh of barzakhs" (*barzakh al-barāzikh*), the interworld who encompasses all interworlds, the intermediary who fills the gap between Absolute Being and absolute nothingness. His cosmic function is everything, because he is in effect identical with the cosmos. In perfect man the microcosm and the macrocosm have become one through an inner unity. In other terms, the macrocosm is the body, perfect man the heart. In him all things are brought together, whether divine or cosmic. Just as Allah is the "all-comprehensive name" (*al-ism al-jāmi'*), so perfect man is the "all-comprehensive engendered thing" (*al-kawn al-jāmi'*) in which the divine names receive their full manifestation on every level of the cosmos.

In perfect man can be seen the unity of the dynamic and static dimensions of Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmology. As an existent thing who lives at once on every level of the cosmos, perfect man embraces in himself every hierarchy. But as a human individual who has come into existence and then returned to his Creator, he has tied together the Origin and the Return. He lives fully and consciously on all the levels of the descent through which light becomes separate from Light and on all the levels of the ascent through which light retraces its steps and human intelligence rejoins divine knowledge. He is the part and the Whole, the many and the One, the small and the Great, everything and All. Just as he turns round about God, so the cosmos turns round about him.