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## Oneness of Being

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Ibn al-‘Arabī is most often characterized in Islamic texts as the originator of the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the “Oneness of Being” or “Unity of Existence.” However, this expression is not found in his works. It was singled out to represent his point of view not so much because of the contents of his writings, but because of the concerns of his followers and the direction in which Islamic thought developed after him.<sup>1</sup> But even if the Shaykh al-Akbar never employs the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he frequently makes statements that approximate it, and we are certainly justified in claiming that he supported *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the literal sense of the term. However, we cannot claim that “Oneness of Being” is a sufficient description of his ontology, since he affirms the “many-ness of reality” with equal vigor. Hence we find that he often refers to *wujūd* in its fullness as the One/Many (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*).

The term *wujūd* has typically been translated into English as “being” or “existence,” and this often does justice to the way it is employed in Islamic philosophy and Kalām (dogmatic theology). However, the primary sense of the term is “finding” or “to be found,” and Ibn al-‘Arabī never forgets this. The difficulty of providing an appropriate translation in English is compounded by the fact that terms such as *being* and *existence* have been understood by Western thinkers in a variety of ways. Because of these difficulties, I will usually refrain from translating *wujūd* in this book.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Shaykh employs the word *wujūd* in a variety of meanings, he understands the term in one fundamental sense, given the fact that *wujūd* is one. The different senses in which the term is employed have to do with the different modalities in which the single reality of *wujūd* manifests itself. On the highest level, *wujūd* is the absolute and nondelimited reality of God, the “Necessary Being” (*wājib al-wujūd*) that cannot not exist. In this sense, *wujūd*

designates the Essence of God or of the Real (*dhāt al-ḥaqq*), the only reality that is real in every respect. On lower levels, *wujūd* is the underlying substance of “everything other than God” (*mā siwā Allāh*)—which is how Ibn al-‘Arabī and others define the “cosmos” or “universe” (*al-‘ālam*). Hence, in a secondary meaning, the term *wujūd* is used as shorthand to refer to the whole cosmos, to everything that exists. It can also be employed to refer to the existence of each and every thing that is found in the universe.

As the Essence of the Real, *wujūd* is the indefinable and unknowable ground of everything that is found in whatever mode it may be found. In this sense, the term is often employed more or less synonymously with “light” (*nūr*), a Koranic name of God. As the divine light, *wujūd* has certain characteristics in common with physical light, which is a single, invisible reality through which all colors, shapes, and objects are perceived. To the objection that light is not invisible but visible, one can reply that light in itself is invisible. Only when it is mixed with darkness can it be seen. Pure, unmixed light would annihilate the universe, just as the light of the sun would instantly blind us if we looked at it without the veil of the atmosphere, not to mention the veil of distance. In the same way, *wujūd* is invisible in itself, but nothing can be seen without *wujūd*; or rather, we see nothing but *wujūd*, made diffuse and visible by the veils that are the created things.

In short, the later Islamic tradition is correct to ascribe the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* to Ibn al-‘Arabī, because he affirms that *wujūd* in its truest sense is a single reality and that there cannot be two *wujūds*. Here he is following in the footsteps of a number of earlier thinkers, like the famous Ghazālī, who glossed the declaration of God’s unity (*tawḥīd*)—the statement, “There is no god but God”—to mean, “There is nothing in *wujūd* but God.” Nevertheless, Ibn al-‘Arabī devotes most of his writings to explaining the reality of manyness (*kathra*) within the context of the divine oneness. It would be a great error to suppose—as some shortsighted critics have supposed—that he simply affirms the oneness of *wujūd* while ascribing the manyness of the cosmos to illusion or human ignorance.

In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, multiplicity is almost as real as unity, since it also has its roots in God, the Real. However, by affirming the reality of multiplicity, the Shaykh does not mean to imply that multiplicity “exists” in the same sense that God “exists,” since there is only one *wujūd*, one true existence. To return to the example of light, we can affirm the reality of colors without claiming that each color is an independently existing thing. Red and green exist only through light; they are one in their luminous substance, but two in their specific realities.

If, on the one hand, the universe exists through God’s *wujūd*, on the other hand the “things” (*shay*) or “entities” (*‘ayn*) that are found in the universe possess their own specific properties. These things are “other than God,” and, as we have seen, God is *wujūd*. It follows that in themselves—without God—the things do not exist and cannot be found. The Shaykh maintains that every-

thing we perceive in the cosmos is nonexistent in itself, but existent in some sense through the Real's *wujūd*. In the same way, every color we perceive is nonexistent in itself, but existent through the existence of light.

If we ignore the *wujūd* of the things for a moment, we can ask about the things "in themselves." What is an entity—a rock, a tree, a human being, a sun, a world—in itself, without reference to *wujūd*? The Shaykh tells us that no entity possesses real *wujūd*. Whether or not an entity is found in the cosmos, its reality or essence stays exactly the same. However, each entity has two states or situations. When an entity is found in the phenomenal world, it displays a certain borrowed existence, which it gives back to God when it disappears, as when a man dies or a stone turns to dust. Nevertheless, the reality of the entity never changes through its apparent existence. It did not possess existence in the first place—it only borrowed *wujūd* from God for a moment—so it does not cease to exist in the second place. It stays in its original state of "fixity" or "immutability" (*thubūt*) in nonexistence (*'adam*).

But what does it mean to say that a nonexistent entity is immutable? Briefly stated, Ibn al-'Arabī explains the "immutable entities" (*al-a'yān al-thābita*) as follows: God is not only infinite *wujūd*; He is also infinite and eternal knowledge. *God encompasses all things in knowledge* (65:12),<sup>3</sup> and it makes no difference whether or not the things that He knows are found in the cosmos. God knows all things forever, even before He creates them, and He knows them in all the characteristics that they will display during their sojourn in the universe. His knowledge of the things corresponds precisely to the nonexistent things in themselves. The "thing in itself" is called the "reality" (*ḥaqīqa*) or "immutable entity" of the thing, and these realities or immutable entities remain forever fixed in God's knowledge. The Shaykh sometimes calls them the "nonexistent objects of knowledge" (*al-ma'lūmāt al-ma'dūma*). Their plurality does not bring about plurality in *wujūd* any more than the plurality of our ideas causes our minds to have many parts.

No doubt the most puzzling aspect of this discussion is the nature of the "existent entities" (*al-a'yān al-mawjūda*). If the entities are nonexistent in their own essences, how is it that we see them in the cosmos and refer to them as "existent"? Ibn al-'Arabī answers this question in many ways. He tells us, for example, that we do not in fact see the things existing in the cosmos. The expression *existent entities* is employed conventionally. *Wujūd* is ascribed to the cosmos in a metaphorical sense (*majāz*), not in reality (*ḥaqīqa*). What we see is not the cosmos, but *wujūd* itself, the Real, since nothing else has existence to allow it to be seen. However, we see the Real only inasmuch as It is manifest (*zāhir*), not inasmuch as It is nonmanifest (*bā'in*). Here the Shaykh typically cites the Koranic verse, *He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Nonmanifest* (57:3).

Ibn al-'Arabī explains that *wujūd* becomes manifest because God as Manifest displays Himself in a "locus of manifestation" (*maẓhar*), which is

the cosmos itself. God cannot display Himself as the Nonmanifest, because, by definition, God as Nonmanifest is inaccessible and unknowable. Within the cosmos, many lesser loci of manifestation also appear, and these are known as “things” or “entities.” These loci of manifestation are nonexistent in themselves, because only God has *wujūd*. Hence we do not perceive the entities themselves, but rather *wujūd* permeated by the “properties” (*aḥkām*) or “effects” (*āthār*) of the entities, while the entities remain immutably nonexistent.

Our perception of things in *wujūd* is analogous to what we perceive when light is passed through a prism: Although there are many different colors, we perceive only light, because only light exists. Hence, the Shaykh says, God’s loci of manifestation are plural because of the multiplicity of properties and effects that they display, but they are one because of the oneness of the *wujūd* that is manifest within them. Unity lies in the things’ manifestation—a manifestation that is *wujūd*—while multiplicity lies in their entities, which have no self-existence. Hence God in His oneness is identical with the *wujūd* of the things, but He is not identical with the things.

In several of the numerous passages in which he explains the relationship between *wujūd* and the entities, the Shaykh employs the example of colored light. For example, in describing the manner in which *wujūd* becomes manifest as the loci of manifestation without becoming sullied by the limitations of the possible things, he writes,

The Real is identical with the locus of manifestation. That which is manifest is the properties of the possible entities, which are immutably fixed from eternity without beginning. *Wujūd* cannot belong to them. Thus the Real is declared too holy to be sullied by the changing properties of the possible things within the entity of the Real *Wujūd*. In other words, the Real in Himself is too holy and too sacred to change in Himself because of the changing of these properties.

We say something similar in the case of a piece of glass colored by many colors when light is shone through it. The ray of light spreads out as diverse colors because of the properties of the glass’s coloration. But we know that the light itself has not become colored by anything of those colors, even though sense perception witnesses the coloration of light in diverse colors. Hence that light is too holy in itself to accept coloration in its own essence. On the contrary, we bear witness that it is free of that. But we also know that it cannot be perceived in any other way. (IV 202.6)

Although all things are nonexistent in respect of themselves, they can be found in the cosmos inasmuch as they are given *wujūd* by the Real, or inasmuch as the Real is found through and in them. If, from one point of view, Ibn

al-'Arabī insists that all things are nonexistent, from another point of view he affirms that they do indeed possess a certain mode of existence that allows us to speak appropriately of their being found. In this second perspective, he often explains the relationship between *wujūd* and the things in terms of the "Breath of the All-merciful" (*nafas al-rahmān*). In Koranic language, God is the All-merciful, and His mercy *embraces all things* (7:156). This is the mercy that takes precedence over His wrath, so much so that wrath itself cannot exist without it.

The Shaykh points out that the only reality that embraces *all things* in the cosmos is *wujūd*. Hence *wujūd* is God's mercy. Through it He brings all things from the state of nonexistence within His knowledge, where they enjoy no bounties, to a state of existence in the cosmos, where they are able to perceive, enjoy, and experience their own specific realities. Building on hadiths in which the Prophet refers to the "breath" of the All-merciful and Koranic verses in which God's "breathing" is mentioned, the Shaykh compares the process of God's giving existence to the cosmos to the breathing of a breather. The All-merciful Breath is the substance underlying all things. Within it they assume their specific characteristics. Through it the "immutable entities" become "existent entities" (without losing their immutability in God's knowledge and without gaining true *wujūd*).

In the context of the All-merciful Breath, the Shaykh refers to many Koranic verses that mention the creative act of God in terms of His speech or that allude to the infinite "words of God." These infinite words are the individual entities or creatures. When the All-merciful exhales, He speaks, and within His Breath the whole cosmos takes form. Since God's words are individual and distinct realities, multiplicity is real. However, the Breath of God is the single reality of cosmic *wujūd*. All things share in this reality inasmuch as they are found within the cosmos. Words depend absolutely upon the Breath, but the Breath has no need for the words. God speaks not because some external factor forces Him to speak, but because He is merciful and generous by nature and wills to bring creatures into existence. Hence absolute and nondelimited *wujūd* displays God's innate qualities of mercy and compassion through overflowing and bringing the "other" (*ghayr*) into existence.

If we pursue the similarity of God's Breath with human breath a little further, we come across another primary teaching of Ibn al-'Arabī. Is breath the same as the human being or different? This question cannot be answered unequivocally. In one respect, a person's breath is not himself, since he is he and his breath is his breath. But a human being without breath is a corpse, and breath without a human being is moist air. So in fact, the two terms, *human being* and *breath*, are somehow inseparable. In the same way, the Breath of the All-merciful is the same as God, yet it is different from God. And the words that become articulated within the Breath are the same as the Breath, yet they are different. Hence there is no absolute identity between an existent entity and God, nor is

there absolute difference. The exact relationship remains a mystery, even though we can understand something of it through rational investigation and God's help.

### Divine Names and Human Perfection

What do we know about *wujūd* as *wujūd*? First, we know nothing. Or rather, we know that *wujūd* is indefinable and inaccessible, because we can know it only to the extent that we have it. But strictly speaking, we have nothing of *wujūd*, because we are nonexistent entities. Put otherwise, how can words encompass the speaker? How can a visible color comprehend the reality of invisible light? Or, as the Arabic proverb expresses it, "What does dust have to do with the Lord of lords?" Nevertheless, despite *wujūd*'s inaccessibility, we know something about it because we have a certain knowledge of ourselves and the cosmos around us, and this knowledge provides intimations of the Absolute Reality from which all things spring forth.

Analyzing the things of the cosmos in order to grasp the qualities and characteristics of *wujūd* corresponds to a certain methodological approach typically found among the Islamic philosophers. Although the Shaykh does not neglect this approach, he is far more concerned with investigating *wujūd*'s self-revelation through the prophets, that is, scripture. In practice, "scripture" is the Koran and the Hadith (though not in theory, since, like other Muslims, the Shaykh acknowledges the validity of the scriptures of other religions). Through scripture, *wujūd*—God Himself—reveals itself to human beings in a linguistic mode in order to inform them of its nature.

The message received through the scriptures is summarized in terms of the names of God, traditionally said to number ninety-nine. Each name of God mentioned in the Koran and the Hadith tells us something about the reality of *wujūd*, even if *wujūd*'s ultimate reality can never be known. Most of the Shaykh's writings deal with the explication of the Koran and Hadith. He is constantly concerned to find the "divine roots" or "divine supports" of all phenomena in the universe through scriptural help.<sup>4</sup>

God in Himself—the Essence of the Real—transcends phenomena absolutely, but the manner in which existent things are found in the cosmos tells us something about the Real and gives intimations of *wujūd*'s qualities. On the one hand, this something is expressed linguistically by the Koran through its verses, which are called "signs" (*āyāt*). On the other, it is expressed ontologically and epistemologically through the universe and our own self-knowledge. The Shaykh likes to quote the Koranic verse (41:53) that tells people to gaze upon the cosmos and within themselves in order to perceive the "signs" (*āyāt*) of God's Reality.

What then do human beings know about *wujūd*? They know what the Koran has told them, and they also know what they perceive in the cosmos and in themselves. Hence they know, for example, that *wujūd*—which is the Real—

is Alive, Knowing, Desiring, Powerful, Speaking, Generous, and Just. These seven Koranic names of God are frequently cited as the key attributes upon which all the other divine names and the cosmos depend. Through perceiving these and other divine names, people can grasp many of the characteristics that flow forth from *wujūd* and belong to *wujūd*, but they can never grasp *wujūd* itself, which transcends all its attributes while possessing each of them fully. These names and attributes, then, refer to God. But they also refer to the things or entities, since, in order to come into the world, the things must reflect *wujūd* in some manner, or else they could not be found.

For Ibn al-‘Arabī, the divine names and attributes are the bridge between the nonphenomenal and the phenomenal, both epistemologically and ontologically. In other words, without the divine names revealed in scripture, no one could gain full knowledge of *wujūd*’s modalities. The names denote the actual reality of *wujūd*, and hence they delineate the modes in which *wujūd* comes to manifest itself through its “signs,” the things of the cosmos.

Only God possesses the attributes fully and truly. True life, knowledge, desire, and power belong to Him alone. But all things manifest certain aspects of God’s life, knowledge, desire, and power by the fact of being found in the cosmos. However, their life is not true life, because true life belongs to God alone. Nevertheless, if their life were totally unreal, they would neither know nor perceive.

When God grants existence to the entities, they come into existence in keeping with what their realities demand. This means, for example, that God gives existence to a particular tree, and it enters into the cosmos exactly as He has known it for all eternity, with all the specific qualities of that particular tree in that time and place. This should make it clear that the immutable entities should not be referred to as “archetypes,” since this term implies that a single reality gives rise to many things. But in the case of the immutable entities, each is utterly identical with its own, single, specific, existent entity, which, however, has been made manifest by the shining of *wujūd*’s light.

Although the Shaykh often refers to God’s ninety-nine names and stresses the importance of having a scriptural basis for ascribing attributes to *wujūd*, he also declares that God’s names cannot be enumerated, for each entity displays a property of *wujūd*, thereby signifying *wujūd* and “naming” it. Hence, each thing can be considered a name of God. Just as the things known by God are infinite, so also are the divine names.

These two views of the divine names led some of the Shaykh’s followers to distinguish God’s ninety-nine names from the immutable entities by calling the first God’s “universal names” and the second His “particular names.”

According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, each existent entity shares in all divine attributes, because each displays *wujūd*, and *wujūd* is God, the Essence named by all the names. But all entities do not *manifest* all attributes. Hence the whole cosmos is ranked in degrees of excellence (*tafāḍul*) depending on the degree to

which the existent entities display the attributes of God. Some creatures possess life with a greater intensity and some with a lesser intensity, and some appear to have no life whatsoever—though the friends of God can perceive an invisible life even in stones, through the eye of unveiling.

Each and every attribute of God—knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and so on—manifests itself in varying intensities within the things of the cosmos. Each entity has a specific “preparedness” (*isti’dād*) that allows it to display the attributes of *wujūd* to a greater or lesser degree. A stone manifests power in a certain passive way. A plant shows traces of life, knowledge, desire, and active power. An animal displays all these attributes with much greater intensity. At the top of the visible hierarchy of *wujūd*, human beings have the potential to manifest every divine name.

All creatures are loci of manifestation for *wujūd*. As such, each is a “form” (*ṣūra*) of *wujūd*. “Nothing of the cosmos can have a *wujūd* that is not the form of the Real” (III 409.32). A famous hadith that echoes the Hebrew Bible tells us that God created Adam in His own “form.” The Shaykh makes much of the fact that the hadith employs the name *God* (*Allāh*), which is the “all-comprehensive name” (*al-ism al-jāmi*) to which all other divine names refer. Hence human beings were created with the potential of displaying God as God, that is, God as named by all His names, while other creatures in the cosmos are able to manifest only certain specific names of God, or certain specific and limited qualities of *wujūd*.

That human beings have a unique capacity to display the full range of divine names can easily be understood if we look again at the seven primary names of God mentioned above. Humans share with animals in possessing the attributes of life, knowledge, desire, and power. But these attributes can be found in human beings with much greater intensity than in animals. Who would compare the power of an elephant with that of a Genghis Khan, or the knowledge of a bee with that of the Buddha? Moreover, only humans can manifest the remaining three attributes within the sensory world. “Speech” is a specifically human quality, while “generosity” and “justice” cannot be ascribed to animals except metaphorically.

However, not all human beings employ their speech in a manner appropriate to the full perfection of *wujūd*. And few people are generous and just. Nor do they possess knowledge, desire, power, or any other divine attribute in equal measure. For the Shaykh—as for most other Muslim thinkers—fullness of humanity is rooted in the very nature of *wujūd*. In other words, human beings who want to actualize their true nature must bring out the divine qualities latent in themselves. The qualities of true humanity are God’s qualities, which is to say that they belong to the Essence of the Real, *wujūd* itself. These divine qualities are in turn moral and ethical qualities, because they provide the model for every proper, compassionate, and humane act.

The Koran tells us that God is Generous, Just, Forgiving, Kind, Patient, Clement, and so on, and these are precisely the attributes that people must



make manifest in order to reach moral and spiritual perfection. Hence the Shaykh refers to the Sufi path as the “assumption of the character traits of God” (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*) and he identifies these character traits with God’s names. Thus he grounds ethics and social behavior in the same principles that govern the natural world.

Ibn al-‘Arabī makes the clearest connection between the full manifestation of *wujūd* and the human role in the cosmos in his famous doctrine of the “perfect man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), the complete and total human being who has actualized all the potentialities latent in the form of God. In one respect, perfect human beings—who are contrasted with “animal human beings” (*al-insān al-ḥayawān*)—embody every praiseworthy human quality. They are exemplars of human wisdom, compassion, and all moral and spiritual good. They guide individuals and society to optimum equilibrium with the ultimate Good. They act as the Real’s representatives in society, leading people to supreme happiness in the next world. In their human manifestations they are found as the prophets and the great friends of God.

In another respect, perfect human beings are God’s goal in creating the cosmos, since only through them does He manifest the totality of His attributes—in them alone does *wujūd* reach its full unfoldment. No creature other than a perfect human being possesses the requisite preparedness to display all God’s attributes. If *wujūd* in its nonmanifest Essence is absolutely nonphenomenal, it attains to its full phenomenal manifestation only in perfect human beings, who display every name of God in complete harmony and equilibrium.

The Shaykh calls the most perfect of perfect human beings the “Muhammadan” friends of God. They have inherited the sciences and character traits of Muhammad and dwell in the highest of all human situations, the Station of No Station. This is to say that they have actualized all perfections of *wujūd*. As a result, no specific perfection dominates over them. Other friends of God are governed by specific divine names, or particular perfections of *wujūd*, such as knowledge, speech, generosity, justice, compassion, love, patience, gratitude, perseverance, and so on. But the Muhammadan friends of God actualize every divine name in perfect fullness and in keeping with a balance established by the unknowable Essence of *wujūd* itself. Hence no name, no perfection, “no station,” determines their nature. On the contrary, they respond to every situation perfectly, because they manifest *wujūd*’s ultimate reality. Like God’s Essence, they are unknowable and inaccessible in their innermost selves, yet they overflow with every imaginable good.

### Incomparability and Similarity

*Wujūd* in itself is unknowable and transcends the entities absolutely. But *wujūd* shows itself through the things of the cosmos and scripture, and this self-show-

ing allows human beings to acquire knowledge of its qualities. In the terminology of Kalām, God's unknowability and transcendence are referred to as *tanzīh*, or "incomparability." This is to say that God cannot be compared with anything. No existent thing stands on a par with *wujūd*. The only fully adequate knowledge of the Real is admission of ignorance.

The position of incomparability was affirmed by theologians long before Ibn al-'Arabī, and he accepts it as true. However, he points out that this description of the divine Reality does not provide a full picture of *wujūd*, because it does not account satisfactorily for the "signs" of God that appear in the cosmos and in scripture. In fact, says the Shaykh, the theologians based their analysis of the divine nature on rational analysis, and reason (*'aql*) understands only what God is not. Standing on its own legs, reason can acquire no positive knowledge of God's attributes. Hence it must seek help from scripture to gain knowledge of what God is. But most rational thinkers—the Kalām authorities in particular—insist upon interpreting (*ta'wīl*) scripture in accordance with their own understanding of what can properly be attributed to God. As a result, they refuse to accept any description of God that suggests that He is somehow similar to the things in the cosmos. Hence they follow their own rational faculties, not the prophets.

If rational thought tends to negate attributes from God and affirm His incomparability, "imagination" (*khayāl*) has the power to grasp God's similarity (*tashbīh*). The Shaykh devotes hundreds of pages to contrasting these two ways of gaining knowledge. His constant theme is that perfect knowledge of God demands that He be recognized as both incomparable and similar: God in Himself—absolute *wujūd*—is incomparable with all existent things, but *wujūd* makes its properties manifest in the cosmos, and in this respect God is somehow similar to the created things.<sup>5</sup>

What then is the cosmos? It is the "other" (*ghayr*), since it is defined as "everything other than God." But it is not other in every respect, because it is the sum total of the words articulated in the Breath of the All-merciful, and the Breath is not completely different from the Breather. Or, the cosmos is God's "self-disclosure" (*tajallī*) within His loci of manifestation. Through the cosmos, *wujūd* displays its characteristics and properties, that is, its universal and particular names, both the ninety-nine names of God and the immutable entities. Hence the Breath of the All-merciful brings the invisible and nonexistent realities out to the visible and existent plane.

In one sense the universe is other than God, because God's Essence lies infinitely beyond it. In another sense the universe is identical with God, because nothing is found within it that does not name Him. The inexhaustible words spoken by God are the same as the Breath, and the Breath is the same as the All-merciful. Hence the words are the same as the All-merciful. The Shaykh constantly moves back and forth between the two points of view of identity and difference. He sums up his position with the deceptively simple statement

“He/not He” (*huwa lā huwa*). Each entity in the cosmos is identical with *wujūd* and different from *wujūd* at one and the same time.

The reality of He/not He can best be understood through the Shaykh’s concept of imagination. An imaginal—not “imaginary”—reality is one that dwells in an intermediate domain between two other realities and shares in the attributes of both sides. An imaginal thing is both the same as and different from each of the two sides that define it. Hence we need to affirm both its identity with other things and its difference from them.

A commonly given example of an imaginal reality is a mirror image, which acts as a bridge or “isthmus” (*barzakh*) between the reflected object and the mirror. We have to affirm that the image is both the same as the mirror and different from it, or that it is identical neither with the object nor with the mirror. In a similar way, dreams are imaginal realities. If someone sees his father in a dream, he has seen his father and not his mother or his brother; at the same time, what he has seen is nothing but himself. The perceived imaginal reality is an isthmus between himself and his father. The most succinct statement that can be made about the dream image is “he/not he.”

The Shaykh finds the properties of imagination on three basic levels within the cosmos. On the human level, imagination gives substance to inner experience. It is the domain of the “soul” (*nafs*), which dwells in an intermediate realm between the spirit and the body. “Imagination has no locus except the soul” (IV 393.11). The spirit, which according to Koran 32:9 derives from God’s Breath, is a simple, noncompound reality that possesses innately all the divine attributes. Hence it is inherently luminous, alive, knowing, powerful, desiring, and so on. It represents a direct manifestation of God. In contrast, the body came to exist when God “kneaded it from clay.” It has many parts and is overcome by darkness, inanimate matter, ignorance, and the lack of divine attributes. The soul is a mixture of the two sides. It is neither pure light nor pure darkness, but rather an intermediate stage between light and darkness. It possesses every divine attribute to a certain ambiguous degree.

For the Shaykh, as well as for many other Muslim sages, the terms *spirit* and *body* designate qualitative distinctions, not discrete entities. To speak of the “spirit” is to speak of a dimension of the human microcosm that is inherently luminous, alive, knowing, aware, and subtle, while to speak of the body is to refer to a dimension that is almost totally lacking in these same qualities. Hence in itself—without its connection to the spirit—the body is for all intents and purposes dark, dense, ignorant, unconscious, and dead. *Soul* or *imagination*, then, refers to an intermediate realm that is neither luminous nor dark, neither alive nor dead, neither subtle nor dense, neither conscious nor unconscious, but always somewhere between the two extremes. Through imagination, the high and the low interpenetrate, the bright and the dark unite. Imagination is neither high nor low, luminous nor dark, spirit nor body. It is defined by its in-betweenness. Each soul represents a unique mixture of qualities and a unique possibil-

ity of ascent toward the perfection of No Station, where all the divine attributes are made manifest in the fullest possible measure. But each soul may also descend toward multiplicity and darkness, thus becoming lost in dispersion and passing into an infrahuman state. The soul, then, is an intermediate realm of imagination and ambiguity, mixture and perplexity.

On a second level, the Shaykh employs the term *imagination* to refer to a semi-independent domain of the cosmos. Within the outside world or “macrocosm”—which is the mirror image of the human microcosm—there are two fundamental created worlds: the invisible world of spirits and the visible world of bodies, corresponding to spirit and body in the microcosm. The world of spirits is inhabited by angels, who are said in the traditional symbolism to be created from light, while the world of bodies is inhabited by the three kingdoms, whose visible parts are made of clay. Between these two worlds stand many other worlds that combine the qualities of spirit and body and are known collectively as the “World of Imagination.” For example, the “jinn” are said to inhabit some of these intermediary worlds. They are made of “fire,” which is a bridge between light and clay. Fire is luminous like light, yet it cannot dispense with fuel from the world of clay. It tries to ascend to light, yet it is attached by its root to the world of darkness. It illustrates its freedom from clay in the way it shoots up toward the sky, but it is bound to clay by the substance that burns. The Shaykh finds one proof for the existence of this macrocosmic World of Imagination in the correspondence between the microcosm and macrocosm. “Presence” (*ḥaḍra*) in his terminology refers to the world or realm wherein a reality—such as imagination—exercises its effects: “God placed sleep in the animate world only so that everyone might witness the Presence of Imagination and know that there is another world similar to the sensory world” (III 198.23).

In a third basic sense, the term *imagination* refers to the greatest of all intermediate realities, which is the whole cosmos, or the Breath of the All-merciful. The cosmos stands halfway between absolute *wujūd* and absolute nothingness. From one point of view it is identical with *wujūd*, from another it is identical with nonexistence. If its own immutable entity is taken into account, the cosmos has no *wujūd*. However, since the cosmos is found, it is a locus of manifestation for *wujūd*. The cosmos and everything within it are He/not He, themselves/not themselves, *wujūd*/not *wujūd*. Ibn al-‘Arabī finds a Koranic precedent for using the word *imagination* in this sense in a verse concerning Moses and the sorcerers. When the sorcerers threw down their staffs, Moses *was made to imagine, by their sorcery, that their ropes and their staffs were sliding* (20:66). So also, people are as if ensorcelled, for they see the cosmos as existing independent of God.

The cosmos stands between nature and the Real and between *wujūd* and nonexistence. It is neither pure *wujūd* nor pure nonexistence. Hence

the cosmos is all sorcery, and you are made to imagine that it is the Real, but it is not the Real. And you are made to imagine that it is creation, but it is not creation. For the cosmos is not creation in every respect, nor is it the Real in every respect. . . . Hence it is known for certain that were creation to be disengaged from the Real, it would not be, and were it identical to the Real, it would not be creation. (IV 151.14)

The most common traditional text to which the Shaykh has recourse in order to support his contention that the cosmos is imagination is the saying attributed to the Prophet, "People are asleep, but when they die, they wake up." Thus, in the chapter on Joseph of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, which begins with a citation of this hadith, the Shaykh explains the relationship between *wujūd* and the entities with reference to light and shadow. Then he identifies the domain of shadow with that of imagination, since the shadow is defined by the two sides—light and the immutable entities.

Hence everything that we perceive is the *wujūd* of the Real within the entities of the possible things. In respect of the He-ness of the Real, it is His *wujūd*, but in respect of the diversity of the forms within it, it is the entities of the possible things. . . . Since the situation is as we have mentioned to you, the cosmos is imaginal. It has no true *wujūd*, which is the meaning of "imagination." That is, you have been made to imagine that it is something extra, subsisting in itself outside of the Real, but in fact, it is not so. . . .

Since the situation is as we have described, you should know that you are imagination, and that everything which you perceive and concerning which you say, "This is not I," is imagination, for *wujūd* is all imagination within imagination. (*Fuṣūṣ*, 103-4)

In other passages, the Shaykh stresses the fact that calling this world "dreamlike" can only mean that, like a dream, the world and everything within it need interpretation. It is utter folly to think that what we perceive, whether outside or inside ourselves, is anything but an image that reflects something else. These images, like dream-images, cannot be taken at face value.

In this world, the human being dwells in a dream. That is why he has been commanded to interpret.<sup>6</sup> For the dream may be interpreted within sleep itself. "People are asleep, but when they die, they wake up." Since, according to this truthful tongue, both sense perception and sensory things are imagination, how can you have complete confidence in anything? You speak, but the intelligent and knowing person is confident that you, in your state of wakefulness, are the possessor of sense perception and sensory objects. And when you are asleep, you are the possessor

of imagination and imaginalization. But the Prophet, from whom you have taken the route of your felicity, has made you a dreamer in the state in which you believe that you are the possessor of wakefulness and awareness. Hence, since you dwell in a dream in your wakefulness in this world, everything within which you dwell is an imaginal affair and is sought for the sake of something else. That something else is not itself found in what you see. (IV 434.24)

Ambiguity and intermediateness are properties of cosmic things, which are nothing but imagination, not only in their present situation, but also in their temporal unfolding. Just as each thing is both identical with and different from *wujūd*, so also each moment of each thing is both identical with and different from the preceding and following moments. The Shaykh points to the infinity of *wujūd* and cites the axiom, "Self-disclosure never repeats itself." God in His infinite effusion is under no constraints. Hence no two things and no two instants are exactly the same. This is the Shaykh's famous doctrine of "the renewal of creation at each instant." As he writes concerning the cosmos, "Everything other than the Essence of God stands in the station of transmutation, speedy and slow. Everything other than the Essence of God is intervening imagination and vanishing shadow, . . . undergoing transformation from form to form constantly and forever. And imagination is nothing but this. . . . So the cosmos only becomes manifest within imagination" (II 313.17).<sup>7</sup>

The cosmos, then, is He/not He. It is both identical with *wujūd* and different from *wujūd*. Inasmuch as it is identical with *wujūd*, it manifests the oneness of *wujūd*'s Essence. Inasmuch as it is different, it manifests the multiple properties designated by *wujūd*'s names. As Ibn al-'Arabī often says, *wujūd* is one in its Essence and many through its self-disclosures. It is both incomparable with all entities and similar to every created thing. And the reality of *wujūd*, its simultaneous oneness and manyness, finds its most complete outward expression in perfect human beings, who manifest all the names of God in their fullness.

In its simultaneous oneness and manyness, *wujūd* can be said to have two perfections. The first is represented by the incomparability of the divine Essence, and the second by the similarity of the divine names. In the same way, perfect human beings have two perfections. The first is their essential reality as the form of God; the second, their accidental manifestations through which they display God's names in specific historical contexts. In respect of the first perfection, all perfect human beings are essentially one, and it is possible to speak of "the perfect human being" as a unique reality or as "the logos." In respect of the second perfection, each perfect human being has a specific role to play within the cosmos. Hence there are many such beings fulfilling the functions that God has given them. In respect of the essential perfection of perfect human beings, the Koran says that there is no distinction among God's messengers (2:285). In respect of their accidental perfection, it declares that God

has ranked His messengers in degrees of excellence (2:253).

In short, perfect human beings are fixed in their essences, which are not other than the essence of *wujūd* itself. At the same time, they undergo constant transformation and transmutation by participating in the ceaseless self-disclosure of God and manifesting the properties of the divine names in a never-ending variety of cosmic situations. The heart (*qalb*) of perfect human beings experiences endless fluctuations (*qalb, taqallub*), since it is the locus within which they perceive God's self-disclosures, which never repeat themselves.

God created the universe to manifest the fullness of His own nature. As the famous *ḥadīth qudsī* expresses it, God says, "I was a hidden treasure, so I wanted to be known; hence I created the creatures in order that I might be known." In other words, through the cosmos, *wujūd* discloses the infinite possibilities latent within itself. Yet it reaches the fullness of its self-manifestation only through perfect human beings, since they alone actualize every ontological quality—every name and attribute of God. None other than perfect human beings have reached the goal for which people were created: to manifest the form of God Himself.

The Shaykh devotes most of his attention not to ontology but to anthropology, that is, to describing the nature of perfect human beings and the manner in which perfection can be achieved. The practical sides of his teachings—which are far more detailed than the theoretical side that we have been discussing—describe how people can discipline reason and imagination in order to combine the visions of incomparability and similarity. A mere rational understanding of the reality of He/not He will not help them ascend to the world of light. The inward world of imagination cannot be transformed into a place for witnessing the self-disclosures of *wujūd* without following the guidance of those human beings who have already reached perfection—the messengers, prophets, and friends of God.

In short, the ultimate reality of *wujūd* is both infinitely beyond and ever-present within. In its incomparability *wujūd* is one with an absolute oneness, but in its similarity it manifests itself through the real plurality perceived in the cosmos. The nonphenomenal remains forever incomparable, but it brings the phenomenal into existence through a mercy that is directed toward everything with the potential to exist. Perfect human beings return by way of their own selves to the nonphenomenal, thereby realizing their original state as nonexistent immutable entities. But, by realizing their essential nonexistence, they come to display the fullness of *wujūd*, since their nonexistent entities were made in the divine form, which is the form of *wujūd*. "No station" is at once every station. Not He is He. Oneness displays its infinity in the manyness of human perfections.