# Ibn al-ʿArabī's Liminal (*Barzakhī*) Theory of Representation: An Outlook from the Present Situation

### Presentation and Representation:
### Complementary Elements in the Mystical Experience

The barzakh is an Arabized form of the Persian *pardah*.[1] It signifies a (hidden) barrier between two things. Such are, for examples, the barrier between this life and the life of the hereafter and the barrier of belief between doubt and certainty. Barzakh appears in three places in the Qurʾān, in all of which it signifies a limit or a barrier that separates two things, preventing them from mixing with each other. Q 25: 53, for instance, reads, "It is He Who has let the two bodies of flowing water: One palpable and sweet, and the other salt and bitter. Yet has He made a barrier (barzakh) between them, a partition that is forbidden to be passed."[2] The emphasis in the verse is on the role of the barzakh as a differentiator between two entities possessing opposite properties. The barzakh differentiates between the two bodies of water, the palpable and sweet and the salty and bitter. At the same time, by preventing the two entities from mixing with each other, the barzakh also provides for their unity. This synthetic activity that the barzakh performs is of a paradoxical nature. For, as a differentiator between two entities, the barzakh must be a *third thing,* separated from both, whereas as a provider for their unity, it must be related to both entities. Henry Corbin considers the paradoxicality involved in the notion of the barzakh as a mark that distinguishes Islamic theosophists and Ṣūfīs from Islamic philosophers and scholastic theologians. The theosophists and the Ṣūfīs, according to him, defended the notion of the World of the Barzakh, which designates an intermediate entity that relates God with the world, while the philosophers and the theologians rejected this notion on the

grounds that it did not accord with the requirements of rational theory and logical argument.[3]

In this work, I present the controversy between Islamic philosophers and Islamic scholastic theologians over the problem of the origination of the world, or the problem of the relationship between God and the world. I also provide Ibn al-ʿArabī's solution to the controversy, which introduces the notion of the World of the Barzakh as an imaginal mirror that represents the eternal God as eternal and the temporally originated world as temporally originated, although in itself, it is neither eternal nor temporally originated.[4] The barzakh differentiates between God and the world. In virtue of this differentiating activity, God may be represented to our knowledge as eternal and the world as temporally originated. But the barzakh plays also the complementary role of a provider for the context of unity, in which context both God and the world can be represented as both eternal and temporally originated.

A considerable part of the treatment of Ibn al-ʿArabī's barzakh in this work will be conducted on the basis of examining the manner in which his reflections on the relationship between God and the world differed from those of the philosophers and the theologians. In following this perspective of difference, I will be conducting the discussion in accordance with Corbin's aforementioned statement. However, the work will also account for the element of continuity between the thoughts of the rationalistic thinkers and Ibn al-ʿArabī's mystical thought. The development of rational thought will be presented as culminating in Ibn Rushd's complementarity thesis, according to which two different theses or accounts of the same substance matter may both be true even if their logical conjunction leads to a flat contradiction.[5] In my view, this development provided a suitable background for the emergence of Ibn al-ʿArabī's mystical notion of the Limit, and enhanced his attempt at rationalizing this notion. In following this perspective of continuity, I will be working in accordance with Whitehead's statement that "the purpose of philosophy is to rationalize mysticism."[6] Thus, in examining the emergence of Ibn al-ʿArabī's notion of the Limit in the context of Islamic medieval thought, I will be combining two modes of reflection, as the one emphasizes separation and discontinuity and the other connection and continuity. This attempt at combining two contradictory yet complementary modes of reflection is largely inspired by the manner in which Plato describes the philosophical activity as consisting of the process of arrival of the rational thinker at the limits of rationality and the act of transcending these limits: "Hardly after practicing detailed comparisons of names and definitions and visual and other sense perceptions, after scrutinizing them in benevolent disputation by the use of question and answer without jealousy, at last in a flash understanding of each blazes up, and the mind, as it exerts all its powers to the limit of human capacity, is flooded with light."[7] In this passage there is a description of (a) an

activity that practices setting limits, drawing comparisons, and creating concepts, which is characteristic of the rationalistic mode of reflection; and (b) an activity that transcends these limits and processes of concept formation, which is characteristic of the mystical mode of reflection. The question is what happens after achieving illumination, that is, after transcending the limits of rationality. One might consider that when that happens the mystical experience will have exhausted itself, leaving behind but immediate flashes of sudden apprehensions that cease to exist the moment they are perceived. Although not totally incorrect, this characterization is still incomplete, being responsible for the narrow-sighted depiction of the mystical experience as consisting of a sort of uncontrolled excursion into that which is not rational, and as a behavior that is based on feelings and instincts divorced from the good reasoning. Huntington Cairns, for example, makes the double mistake of identifying the mystical experience as a series of irrational apprehensions, and rejecting any identification between the mystical experience and what he considers as the purely rational Platonic procedure for acquiring knowledge:

> But the difference between Plato and the mysticism that has attached itself to his philosophy is essential. Plato's aim is to take the reader by steps, with as severe a logic as the conversational method permits, to an insight into the ultimate necessity of Reason. And he never hesitates to submit his own ideas to the harshest critical scrutiny; he carried this procedure so far in the *Parmenides* that some commentators have held that his own doubts in this dialogue prevail over his affirmations. But the beliefs of mystics are not products of critical examination and logical clarification; they are, on the contrary, a series of apprehensions, flashes, based on feeling, denying the rational order.[8]

In such characterizations of the mystical experience, as devoid of critical examination and logical clarification, an important element seems to be missing. This is the element of *representation* through which the mystic attempts, upon arriving at the limits of rational thought, to accomplish the (seemingly impossible) task of representing what has been presented to him.[9] In order to illustrate my meaning I will first cite an example of an experience of mystical presentation and then elaborate:

> All at once I *felt someone near me*, a Presence entered this little room of which I became immediately conscious. . . . Dazed, I knelt by the nearest chair and here is the physical phenomenon that has recurred many times since. Into my heart there came a great *warmth*. The only way I can describe it is in the words of disciples on their way to Emmaus: "our hearts burned within us." My hand raised in

prayer also glowed from tips to wrist with a blessed warmth, never before experienced.[10]

William P. Alston relies on such reports of the experience of presentation, which reflect immediacy and sudden, overwhelming feelings of joy and warmth, in building a model of mystical awareness that is parallel to the model of sense perception in epistemology. Alston describes his model as follows: "The awareness is *experiential* in the way it contrasts with thinking about God, calling up mental images, entertaining propositions, reasoning, engaging in overt or covert conversation, remembering. Our sources take it that something, namely, God, has been *presented* or *given* to their consciousness, in generically the same way as that in which objects in the environment are (apparently) *presented* to one's consciousness in sense perception."[11]

First I would like to repeat a point that Sara Sviri thinks is worth highlighting, "since it is frequently overlooked by adepts and scholars of mysticism: essentially, according to the Ṣūfī outlook, it is not the mystical experiences which are of the highest importance, but *transcending* them."[12] Second it should be noted that, in contrast to Alston's model, the mystical experience consists not only of the moment of immediacy, and the joy that is joined to it, but also of the complementary moment of mediation, which is characterized by the mystic's constant attempt to represent the moment of presentation. This is an attempt that brings suffering rather than joy, due to the accumulating recognition in the mind of the mystic that the moment of representation can never bring the process of presentation to a closure. Consequently, the mystic becomes the locus of a constant shift between closure (attempted representation) and disclosure (renewed presentation).[13] The moments of closure and disclosure are complementary aspects of every genuine mystical experience. Each of the moments becomes a limiting case for the other moment, while the experience as a whole becomes an experience of Disclosure that contains closure and disclosure as *transcended* moments. Ibn al-ʿArabī's work, as characterized in Chittick's following words, might be an excellent exemplification of this experience of Disclosure: "To get to the point is to bring about closure, but there is no closure, only *dis*closure. Ibn al-ʿArabī has no specific point to which he wants to get. He is simply flowing with the infinitely diverse self-disclosures of God, and he is suggesting to us that we leave aside our artificialities and recognize that we are flowing along with him. There is no 'point', because there is no end."[14]

There seems to be some inconsistency in defining the task of philosophy as rationalizing (setting rational limits to) mysticism on the one hand, and, on the other hand, presenting the mystical knowledge as knowledge of disclosure. The apparent inconsistency, however, is nothing but the expression of a deeper tension that is the outcome of attempting to represent the moment of

presentation, which is identified with unlimited Truth, through the (limited) discursive or linguistic medium. In the Islamic tradition, this tension was expressed explicitly in the literature of poets and mystics and implicitly in the works of theologians and philosophers. In order to elaborate on this point, I will make a somewhat extensive but, I hope, worthy reference to Michael G. Carter's "Infinity and Lies in Medieval Islam."

### Carter's View

Carter opens his article by saying that there was a strong relationship between infinity, truth, and lies in medieval Islam and that measures were taken to restrict the role of infinity, since the existence of various kinds of infinity was recognized as a threat to the Islamic doctrine.[15] Carter mentions various dimensions of the Islamic cultural tradition in which the threat of infinity creates a reality of limitation. In Islamic theology, for example, the notion of the spatial or temporal extension of the universe infinitely posed a threat to God's standing as the First Cause. Although the philosophers were aware that exploring the nature of infinity was unavoidable for examining the notion of creation, they were also aware that orthodox Muslims considered the assertion of infinity in the created world heretical. Ibn Rushd, for example, attempts to solve the problem of the eternity of the world by arguing that it is a problem that originated in terminological ambiguity. Carter writes:

> We should perhaps take this more seriously than simply regarding it as proof of his commitment to Aristotle even at the risk of appearing heterodox: as a Muslim who believed in the reality of the Arabic revelation it may have struck him that since all truth and all reality were contained within Arabic by virtue of the Qurʾān, then the ultimate nature of infinity was no more accessible through human language than the ultimate nature of God. From this perspective Ibn Rushd remains closer to the style of the *mutakallimūn* that he is refuting than to a pure philosopher or scientist.[16]

According to Carter, Muslims distinguished between the divine language of the Qurʾān, through which absolute truth is revealed, and the human language, through which relative truth is conveyed. He insists that Ibn Rushd, who shared this understanding with the rest of the Muslims, was convinced that the human language is limited and that the nature of infinity, like the nature of God, can never be revealed through it.[17] He holds that this feature of limitation seems to have pervaded all the dimensions of the Islamic culture, with the exception of poetry, through which "an elegant compromise has been

reached between the constraining requirements of a finite religion and the irresistible human urge for the infinite exercise of the imagination."[18] The assumption was that by means of poetry anything could be said, since by virtue of the very definition of its poetic form of expression none of it was to be taken seriously. While the Qur'ān was considered of divine origin and thus being necessarily true, poetry was considered fallible and never necessarily true.[19]

Carter does not think that Islam is unique in attempting to reach a compromise between divine truth and the human drive for creative imagination, a drive that Muslims satisfied through the creative activity of lying. He insists, however, that "given its logocentric nature and consequent vulnerability to linguistic corruption," Islam seems to be especially conscious of the problem and determined to eliminate it.[20] In addition to poetry, there were other literary devices by means of which Muslims could satisfy their need for creative activity. One of these devices was the mystical literary form of expression, which could be excluded from the reality of religious truth, "either because it deliberately excludes itself or because by definition it is unislamic."[21] Carter states that the parallelism between the divine Qur'ānic discourse and the poetic and mystical discourses reflects his main premise concerning infinity and truth as the relationship between these is conceived of in the Islamic tradition in the following manner: "Absolute truth is not in this world but is glimpsed through the *finite* text of the Qur'ān, while relative truth is found in all other human language, of which poetry represents the highest aesthetic form, and in which an *infinite* variety of untruth is possible."[22]

In order to properly evaluate Carter's view I will say first a few words about the paradox of the Liar. Carter does not mention the paradox in his article but it seems clear from his discussion that he has it in mind.[23] In its simplest form, the paradox can be stated in the form of a declaration of a person that he is saying something false: If it turns out that the person who is making the declaration is telling the truth, then he must be lying, since that is what he is declaring. If the person is lying, then he must be telling the truth. Muslims might be understood to have employed the paradox as a sort of protective means, in the sense that they allowed for the existence of some groups (poets, mystics, and so forth) activating certain language games declared as such. When the participants in these language games make a controversial declaration, they are often protected through their declaration that it is merely within the boundaries of their specific language game that relative truth is issued and that this truth possesses no validity outside the boundaries of *this* language game. According to Carter, Islamic tradition made use of certain contexts of discourse (poetic, mystic) in order to avoid the threat of the notion of infinity. When poets and mystics say something that is considered a lie, according to orthodox religious truth, they are protected by their own declaration that they

are only dealing with relative truth, as it is determined in the relative context of their own form of discourse. This is how, Carter thinks, a compromise was made in the Islamic tradition between the requirement of the absolute religious Truth, which was revealed through the Qur'ān, and the needs of the human creative imagination that Muslims satisfied through the use of a contextual conception of truth justification.

Carter's view has a certain undeniable appeal due to the fact that it addresses a real problem (the problem of the limitation that characterizes the Islamic tradition), and provides an ingenious explanation for it. Nevertheless, this view fails to do justice to the relevant parties whose positions it seeks to explain. This is so not only in relation to mystics, like Ibn al-'Arabī, who made explicit use of the paradox of the liar, but even in relation to philosophers, like Ibn Rushd, who made implicit use of the paradox. For, to say that Ibn Rushd remains closer to a scholastic theologian than to a philosopher or to a scientist because he resolved the problem of the origination of the world by declaring the limitations of human language is to overlook the real impact of his solution to the problem. As I am going to show in this work, although it is true that Ibn Rushd was reluctant to write down philosophical solutions to problems that pertain to religious truths, he made it very clear that such solutions could be provided in a philosophy book.[24] The fact that he was not just a follower of Aristotle does not mean that he was closer to a scholastic theologian than to a philosopher or scientist. This work will attempt to show that Ibn Rushd's declaration of the limitation of language was an indication of the limitation of the rational thought of theologians and philosophers alike and that it can be considered the outcome of the critical attitude of an original thinker, rather than that of a dogmatic theologian or a rational philosopher.

Few would disagree with the view that the notion of infinity posed a threat to the Islamic tradition, and that Muslim thinkers sought ways to cope with this threat. However, it is highly questionable whether the solution that they had elaborated for the problem, which consisted of declaring the limitation of certain linguistic forms, was merely a protective means for safeguarding them against the threat of infinity and the criticism of their critics. As I will make explicit in several places in this work, Ibn al-'Arabī made extensive use of the Liar, or the declaration of the limitation of language. He did so especially in those places where he provided an examination of the liminal (barzakhī) nature of things. The following passage is one such example in which he introduces his paradoxical representation of the nature of reality:

> The barzakh is nothing but Imagination. If you possess the power of reasoning and you perceive the image you realize that you have perceived an affair of existence, on which your sight has fallen. But you immediately know, with manifest certainty, that originally there was

nothing there to be witnessed. Then what is the thing for which you have affirmed *entified* existence, and that you negated even in the very state of affirming it? Imagination is neither existent nor nonexistent, neither known nor unknown, neither affirmed nor negated. A person who sees his image in the mirror knows decisively that he has perceived his form in some respect and that he has not perceived his form in some other respect. Then if he says: "I saw my form I did not see my form," he will be neither a truth teller nor a liar. What is then the truth of the perceived form? The form is negated and affirmed, existent and nonexistent, known and unknown. God manifested this truth to the servant as a sign so that he realizes that once he has become incapable of recognizing the truth of [the liminal nature of the image], although it is an affair of this world, then he knows that he is even more incapable in relation to the knowledge of its Creator.[25]

Our representation of the image in the mirror is paradoxical. For in a certain respect, we know that it *is* our image that we perceive in the mirror and, in another respect, we know that it *is not* our image. If our representation of the image, which is an affair of the world, is paradoxical, our representation of the Maker of the world must be even more so. Still, it will be a mistake to think, following the general thrust of Carter's argument, that Ibn al-ʿArabī employed the consideration of this paradoxical representation for merely distinguishing our knowledge of God (Absolute Truth) from our knowledge of the world. On the contrary, our incapacity to set a rational limit (definition) for the liminal cases that make their appearance in the world should be considered an indicator for our incapacity to set limits for the Truth of the appearances of the world. The paradoxical representation of liminal cases provides for the unity of our knowledge, even as the reality that is represented by this knowledge possesses paradoxical characteristics.[26] The consideration of the paradoxical representation of liminal cases represents a threshold over which the reality of the divine and the reality of the world, or the Truth and its appearances interact and, through that very interaction, restore the unity of the human knowledge, not for the sake of perpetuating the split in the human consciousness.[27]

The unity of the human knowledge is based, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī, on a liminal conception of representation, which depicts reality in terms of difference through unity rather than mere separation or empty unification. Ibn al-ʿArabī's representational theory is similar to the classical representational theory of knowledge in some respects and is different from it in some other respects. In order to introduce Ibn al-ʿArabī's representational theory of knowledge, and explain its difference from the classical theory of representation, I will make a digression to one of the most serious recent criticisms of the representational theory of knowledge made by Richard Rorty. The rationale

for making such a rather lengthy digression will become clear in the process of the discussion. Here it suffices to note that in recent years philosophical investigation (especially but not only in the field of the theory of knowledge) seems to have arrived at the limits of (rational) thought. Some thinkers have declared that philosophical thought has come to its end, and that philosophy has to give up searching for Truth and satisfy itself with a social or pragmatic conception of epistemic justification.[28] Others have gone, in my opinion, a little farther by recognizing the paradoxical nature of the limits of thought,[29] although they seem to have been incapable of drawing the full implications from this recognition. The spirit so to speak of these philosophical reflections was not foreign to Ibn al-ʿArabī, whose focus on the notion of the limits of thought has, in my opinion, very few parallels in human intellectual history. Like many modern thinkers, Ibn al-ʿArabī emphasizes the significance of knowing the limits of human thought. Unlike most of them, however, he does not understand this in terms of rationally reflecting on the limits of thought or staying within these limits. For him, to know the limits of thought is to realize them and to realize the limits of thought is to transcend them. Hence, representation must be transcendent even as the thing that is represented is. It is this feature of transcendence that distinguishes Ibn al-ʿArabī's theory from the classical theory of representation.

## Rorty's Antirepresentational Stand

The representational theory of knowledge states that knowledge is a true representation in the mind of the external reality if there is a correspondence between the mind-independent objects and their representations. Closely related to the representational theory of knowledge is the correspondence theory of truth, according to which a statement is considered true if it corresponds to the mind-independent facts. As Hilary Putnam points out, most philosophers hold some version of the correspondence theory of truth, as they believe that abandoning it amounts to the denial of the objectivity of truth and the adherence to hopelessly subjective points of view.[30] Putnam identifies the correspondence theory of truth with the externalist approach in epistemology, which holds that the world consists of fixed, mind-independent objects and that there is exactly one true description of objects, which is determined through the correspondence between words and things. Although Putnam finds a close connection between the notions of truth and rationality,[31] he does not think that rational representation is to be determined by means of fixed methodological verification principles, as the analytic tradition in philosophy and especially the Logical Positivists, who worked within the context of this tradition, had surmised. Like other scholars, he emphasizes that the principle

of verification is self-refuting, since it is neither analytic nor empirically testable.[32] Despite his explicit rejection of the Logical Positivists' rational principle of verification, Putnam expresses his awareness of the risk of adopting the other extreme alternative of the rational model, which is relativism. On the basis of this view, Putnam launched his criticism against Rorty's antirepresentationalism, regarding it as a gesture of skeptical despair.[33] The following is a concise statement of Rorty's argument against epistemological representationalism: "(a) The very notion of representation—the idea that our thought is representational—is historically linked to the idea that it can represent what is *outside* our language and thought. But (b) since the idea of such representation is incoherent, we can either embrace idealism or simply give up on the idea that thought and language are representational at all. Since classical idealism is presumably not an option for Rorty, he concludes that the pluralist must abandon the notion of representation itself."[34]

Rorty holds that no real or ideal correspondence can be found between the words of language and the things that the words describe. Rather, what determines the truth of the use of words (or sentences) is the social context, or the language game, in which they are used. In his criticism to Rorty's view, Putnam applies a skeptical argument as old as skepticism itself: "How can Rorty so much as use *words* to tell us that kicking a rock involves a particular rock if those very words do not relate particularly to kicks and rocks?"[35] Putnam's argument, it should be indicated, is but another modern version of the argument leveled against a skeptic believing in a Heraclitean world in which nothing is fixed and everything is in constant flux. For, how can the skeptic hold a thought and build a skeptical argument in such a constantly fluctuating world? It must be clear that both arguments rest on rational assumptions to the effect that a rational order in the world is a necessary condition for (explaining) the very possibility of the (corresponding) rational activity that occurs in the mind reflecting on such a world. It should be clear, however, that such arguments have no power over the skeptic who does not share these rational assumptions with his critic. In my opinion Rorty represents this sort of skepticism. In what follows, I will elaborate on his antirepresentational position regarding epistemological representation. I will then compare it with that of Ibn al-ʿArabī. In the attempt, I will bring the considerations that led me to believe that employing Ibn al-ʿArabī's conception of representation can assist us in (a) avoiding Rorty's extreme antirepresentational view, which denies that truth is correspondence to reality or that reality possesses an intrinsic or essential nature,[36] and (b) relaxing the rather extreme rational demands that modern epistemology imposes on representational theories of knowledge or correspondence theories of truth.

The assumption underlying my discussion is that the modern epistemological characterization of the rational as what corresponds to a given or

fixed reality makes Rorty's skepticism about all representational theories of knowledge unavoidable. In order to escape the Rortian predicament, we must introduce, or rather reintroduce, a more adequate conception of rational representation, a conception that has, in my view, preserved its original meaning in Ibn al-ʿArabī's mystical thought. Jürgen Habermas provides an excellent account of Rorty's "narrative of maturation," or the account of his arrival at his antirepresentational stand:

> The existential background to Rorty's neopragmatism is his rebellion against the false promises of philosophy: a philosophy that pretends to satisfy aesthetic and moral needs in satisfying theoretical ones. Once upon a time, metaphysics wanted to instruct its pupils in spiritual exercises involving a purifying contemplation of the good in the beautiful. But the youthful Rorty, who had allowed himself to be filled with enthusiasm with Plato . . . painfully comes to realize that the prospect of contact with the reality of the extraordinary . . . although possibly attainable in the more definite forms of prayer, cannot be achieved along the path of philosophy. . . . The realization that everyday reality conceals no higher reality, no realm of being-in-itself to be disclosed ecstatically, and that everyday practices have no room for a redemptory vision, cures the sobered Rorty of his Platonic sickness.[37]

In 1967 Rorty edited *The Linguistic Turn*, a reader that summed up the triumphant progression of analytic philosophy and, at the same time, marked a break in its history.[38] Rorty considered analytic (or linguistic) philosophy as signifying one of the greatest stages in the history of philosophy.[39] He came to realize, however, that analytic philosophy shared the fundamental (false) premise with the metaphysical tradition that "there are philosophical truths still to be discovered." Hence, the only remaining option for him was to bed farewell to all philosophy.[40] Rorty made full use of the new ideas that had been developed in the philosophy of language. He adopted Wittgenstein's view that what determines the truth of language is the context of communication, or the language game that relates speaker, interpreter, and the world.[41] He also made use of Peirce's replacement of the two-place relation between the object that is represented and the subject that performs the representation with a three-place relation that is a "symbolic expression, which accords validity to a state of affairs, for an interpretive community." The world became, for Rorty, a symbolic point of reference rather than something to reflect, as the communicated facts were not separated from the process of communication or interpretation.[42]

Rorty's next important work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), aimed to complete the linguistic turn by showing the futility of the adherence

to the *pathos of distance*, "the sense of something non-human toward which we reach but which we may never grasp." The pathos of distance, which was created by Plato's attempt at representing what is most universal and least material, was given a new turn in the seventeenth century when philosophers began to look for the foundations of human knowledge not in higher Platonic truths but rather in what underlies the human knowledge:[43]

> One of the big questions I was trying to answer for myself when I wrote *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was: how did philosophy survive the New Science? Why didn't the success of corpuscularian physics make philosophy obsolete? How did philosophy extricate itself from what the eighteenth century called "natural philosophy," and set up in business on its own? My answer ("because they invented the veil of ideas, and thereby produced a new field of inquiry to replace the one that physics had taken over") had some merit, but it dodged around an important topic. That was the topic of how philosophy managed, among the educated classes, to take over some of the functions of religion.[44]

According to Rorty, the emergence of epistemology (the theory that searches for the foundations of knowledge) as first philosophy should be seen as a new attempt to cross the abyss that perpetuated the pathos of distance by promoting the conception of mental representation as a new "veil of ideas."[45] Since he wrote *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty has persevered in his attempt to dissolve all representational theories of knowledge and correspondence theories of truth and provide further supporting demonstrations for his anti-representational stand.

### Ibn al-ʿArabī's Stand

Like the younger Rorty Ibn al-ʿArabī was filled with enthusiasm for Plato's thought. However, he never ceased to draw inspiration from Plato, insisting that he was perhaps the only philosopher who deserved the title "lover of wisdom."[46] Ibn al-ʿArabī was among the very few exceptions to a long Islamic philosophical tradition that regarded Aristotle rather than Plato as the authority in philosophical inquiries. Paul Walker ascribes the difficulty of Muslim scholars in dealing with the Platonic writings to the symbolic form of his language, which added obscurity to his dialectical method.[47] I think, following Walker's view, that the symbolic form of Plato's language, which signified a certain tendency to transcend the limits of the rational, was mainly responsible for the fact that Muslim scholars did not receive his works with the same enthusiasm

that they received the works of Aristotle. In later stages, when Islamic philosophical thought arrived at maturity and as rationalism began to exhaust itself, some thinkers, such as Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d.1191) and Ibn al-ʿArabī, began to search for philosophical truth in Plato rather than in Aristotle.

Like Rorty, Ibn al-ʿArabī regards the words of language as symbolic expressions, subject to the interpretive effort. However, what the two thinkers understand by *symbolic expression* and *interpretive effort* differs considerably. According to Rorty, the validity of the interpretive effort requires an interpretive community and a certain social context of discourse, which alone may provide justification for the use of language and the interpretive effort that is attached to it. Rorty dismisses the talk about the truth or the reality that corresponds to the knowledge of the communicated symbolic expressions, admitting only the contextualist justification of *this* knowledge. Since the only ideal of discourse for Rorty is "to justify your beliefs to a competent audience," it follows that "if you can get agreement from other members of such an audience . . . you do not have to worry about your relation to reality."[48] For Ibn al-ʿArabī, interpretation (*taʿbīr*) is what the term signifies in Arabic: the act of crossing over. The truth of the interpretive effort presents itself in the act of crossing over from one state to another. Hence, any adequate representation of this truth must also be carried out through a corresponding act of crossing over.[49] Moreover, true knowledge about the nature of the symbolic expression can be considered an adequate representation of all existent beings (words, ideas, things), since all existent beings are words that signify a state of crossing between affirmation (of existence) and denial (of existence).[50] Under this interpretation, difference becomes the root of all things,[51] since for the thing to be in a constant state of crossing is for it to be constantly differentiated not only from other things, but also from itself. Ibn al-ʿArabī shows awareness of the use that skeptics make of the view that difference is the root of all things to argue that things do not possess any kind of reality and that, consequently, the truth about the nature of things must remain unknown.[52] Although he admits the skeptics' depiction of the nature of things as abiding in constant fluctuation, he refuses to accept their conclusion that things do not possess any sort of reality. Things do possess reality but theirs is a symbolic, or, imaginal reality. It is not the reality of the affirmation of reality or the reality of the denial of reality, but rather a liminal reality, characteristic of liminal objects. Nor does he accept the skeptics' conclusion that the truth about the nature of things must remain unknown, a conclusion that is based on the realization that things do not posses fixed realities:

> If the faulty nature of this knowledge is revealed to them, they say that there could be no knowledge altogether to rely on. If they were told, however, that their statement is based on the knowledge that there could be no knowledge and that their statement, therefore, could

not be supported because of their denial of the very possibility of knowledge, they would say: "And that is exactly what we say, namely, that our statement is not based on knowledge and that it is erroneous." Then, it must be said to them: "You *knew*, then, that your statement was not based on knowledge and that it was erroneous. Hence, you affirmed what you denied."[53]

Following Ibn al-ʿArabī's paradoxical conception of representation, we can argue that Rorty failed to see how philosophy could be the mirror of nature, that is, provide a representation of reality, because he failed to see the true nature of mirroring. Under this interpretation, Rorty's failure stems from the dogmatic assumption that representation must be of a given reality, an assumption that he seems to have in common with the analytic tradition of which he is critical. It should be remembered that Rorty criticized analytic thought for sharing with the metaphysical tradition, which it devalued, the assumption that there are given truths waiting to be discovered.[54] Once he realized that the arguments of analytic philosophers had resulted in analyzing the idea of the given to death, he thought that the notion of representation must give way as well. It can be said, therefore, that Rorty was, after all, still reacting to and working within the context of the tradition of analytic philosophy, a tradition that was incapable of realizing that a conception of representation that does not account for the paradoxical element of reality must be dismissed as inadequate. In the following passage, which brings us back to the paradox of the liar, Ibn al-ʿArabī explicates on the aspect of paradoxicality involved in knowing reality:

Realize the Gnosis of the Attributes which has arisen in you, and take heed: You have never at any time discovered any Attribute [as it is] in accordance with the Reality of your Lord, but, rather, you have come to know the Qualities which you infer from the primary elements of your [own] being. You have not ceased being yourself, nor have you gone out of yourself, while [God's] Attributes closely adhere to His Essence, transcending any connection with your [discursive] knowledge of their essential quiddity—although, regarding this, they *are* connected to your Gnosis of their Essence. But you are quite unable to attain unto them—standing in the Way of Realization you do not know your Lord by every means—while, at the same time, [it can be said that] you know nothing *except* Him—and deem no Being transcendent besides Him. For if you say that you know Him, you have spoken the actual truth, and have "succeeded"; and if you say that you have not known Him, [again] you have told the sincere truth, and "preceded"! So choose [either] negation for yourself or affirmation—the Attributes [of God]

are far beyond connection with accidental knowledge of them, even as [His] Essence is.[55]

According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, to know something is to find it and to find something is to set conceptual limits to it. Reality is unlimited and, therefore, it cannot be found. If it cannot be found, then it cannot be known. One who thinks that he knows Reality is veiled and his veil is nothing other than his own thought. "Standing in the Way of Realization," one can never know except one's own reality. Thus, if he says that he does not know Reality, he will be telling the truth. But then, Ibn al-ʿArabī states that one who says that he knows Reality, that is, that he has found Reality, is also telling the truth. Actually, he says more than just that. He says that one knows nothing *except* Reality. Ibn al-ʿArabī thinks that Truth is transcendent. However, he thinks that the transcendence of Truth implies transcending not only the limitation of the language that represents it, but also transcending the limitation of its non-limitation. Having clarified this point, I will now turn to Steven Wasserstrom's criticism of Henry Corbin's study of the history of religion and Ibn al-ʿArabī's mystical thought. The reader will soon realize that there are several parallels between Wasserstrom's attack on Corbin's study of mysticism and Rorty's attack on philosophy.

### Wasserstrom's Criticism of Mystrocentrism

Wasserstrom understands Corbin's hermeneutics of Islam as constituting a religion after religion. According to him, Corbin's depreciation of society and social theory demands myth and symbol. Hence, in his reflections on history as the unfolding of a great myth and in his attempt to tell a unified symbolic story, Corbin tends to diminish the little differences among the participants of the religious community and close up the gap of contradictions in the society of believers.[56] Corbin must be brought back to the challenge of difference and living otherness. It is this very challenge that must be met when dealing with Ibn al-ʿArabī:

> If History of Religions is to remain a broadly communicable intellectual operation, we teachers should resist mystocentrism. . . . The historiography made conventional by Corbin, which accepts Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophical break-through as a great step forward, tacitly privileges "Akbarian" gnosis as pinnacle, or quintessence, of the entirety of Islam as a religion. The essence of religion thus is assumed to be found in religious experience; by a process of concentric essences, the essential kind of religious experience in turn is seen to be mystical experience.

This is, in effect, an inheritance from Ibn al-ʿArabī himself. The problem is not that, in this way, we take the tradition as a guide; the problem is that we do so uncritically. . . . In the case of Ibn al-ʿArabī, it seems altogether plausible, if not imperative, to study him in all possible contexts. Following the model of a pioneer like Michel de Certeau, one can hope for a History of Religions inquiry into mysticism that is integrated with all kinds of inquiries—sociological, psychological, historical, theological. Ibn al-ʿArabī is too important to be left to a scholasticism.[57]

Wasserstrom's talk about "all possible contexts" and "all kinds of inquiries" and his emphasis on the importance of social differences and on staying "within the limits of human knowledge"[58] is a striking reminder of Rorty's contextualism and the latter's rejection of anything that transcends socially contextualized knowledge. Wasserstrom thinks that Corbin's representation of Ibn al-ʿArabī's mystical thought precludes the sort of rational communication that takes into consideration the socially differential context in which communication takes place. This is, again, a striking reminder of Rorty's emphasis on the signifi-cance of considering different justifications of meanings of sentences for different audiences, instead of attempting one universal conception of justification that cuts across all social settings.[59]

     Wasserstrom seems to be aware that it might be hard, if not impossible, to study Ibn al-ʿArabī in the socially contextualized manner that he is suggesting. Perhaps this awareness explains his rather apologetic statement that although Corbin's study of Ibn al-ʿArabī implies certain rejection to the notion of being a historian, "we historians are entitled (if not obliged) of assess him in historical terms."[60] Wasserstrom, it seems, has failed to take Claude Addas' following words into account:

In a sense his entire work is nothing but the record of his inner experience: visions, dialogues with the dead, ascensions, mysterious encounters in the "Imaginal World" (*ʿālam al-khayāl*), miraculous journeys in the celestial spheres. Whether they are a psychopath's fan-tasies, as Asin believed, or genuine spiritual perceptions as Corbin claimed, the fact is that for Ibn ʿArabī they were not only as real but much more real than the Andalusian earth on which he walked as a child. Everyone who devotes himself to studying the Shaikh al-Akbar— whether as a biographer or as a historian of ideas—must take this into account.[61]

Wasserstrom blames Corbin for being a prophetic philosopher who set forth a visionary history of the world[62] that was the projection of his own symbolic

imagination rather than the true reflection of the reality of the world, which is a reality of difference. He complains that the history of the religion of Islam suffers from mystocentrism, which explains the frustration of scholars who seek to establish a communicative history of religion of "believers, in the public life of believers." [63] In my view, studying Ibn al-ʿArabī in the manner suggested by Wasserstrom might do to mysticism what the analytic philosophers have done to philosophy. To stay within the limits of the human rationality, that was the great achievement of Kant that was responsible for creating the analytic tradition and eventually bringing about the sort of Rortian contextualism in philosophy.[64] "To stay within the limits of human knowledge,"[65] that is what Wasserstrom wishes to begin in the study of mysticism, and by doing so commit mystical thought to the same destiny as philosophical thought.

Wasserstrom claims that the antisocial or antihistorical study of Ibn al-ʿArabī creates a religion after religion [66] exactly as Rorty claims that the emergence of epistemology as the core of philosophy serves to take over the role of religion in preserving the pathos of distance.[67] But, while Rorty's claim seems to make some sense, Wasserstrom's does not seem to make any. Rorty is criticizing a philosophy (analytic philosophy) that took upon itself the task of ridding us of all metaphysical or religious notions of transcendence, but found itself sharing with metaphysics and religion the effort of creating veils of ideas and preserving the pathos of distance. Hence, Rorty seems to make some sense in accusing analytic philosophy of defeating its own principles. Mystical thought, however, is innocent of the crime that Wasserstrom tries to frame it with. Mystical thought never aspired to ridding itself of the belief in higher truths. On the contrary, mystics, and Ibn al-ʿArabī in particular, have always declared that their thought is at the heart of the religious. If they are using their declaration in the special context of the mystical language game in order to hide a big lie, as Carter's view presumes, this must be left for careful examination. But one cannot blame the mystics for contradicting a principle that was never part of their declaration.