

Running Head: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Oneness of Being

Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Oneness of Being
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It seems to happen that once in a great while a figure of profound depth and purity blossoms within a major religion, summarizing, expanding, and living through example its most cherished aspects. Ibn al-‘Arabī, known as al-Shaykh al-akbar, “The Greatest Master”, born in Murcia, Spain in 1165, is arguably such a figure for Sufism. An extremely prolific figure, Ibn al-‘Arabī wrote hundreds of works (estimates range from 250 to over 800!), some of which are still today widely considered to be classics. His thinking ranged from the practical to the scientific, to the metaphysical and to the sublimely spiritual, and his ability to weave together and expound upon all of these aspects is unparalleled, prompting a prominent scholar of Sufism and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s work, William Chittick, to declare him “the most influential thinker in the second half of Islamic history” (Chittick, 1994). Running through most of his works, in some explicitly and others only implicitly, is his “most famous idea” (Chittick, 2007): *wahdat al-wujūd*, or “The Oneness of Being”. Trying to come to terms with this concept is essential for an understanding of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s contribution to Sufism; this essay is an attempt to briefly explore this concept and its implications for Sufism.

Ibn al-‘Arabī never explicitly used the term *wahdat al-wujūd* in his writings, although he did use a variety of similar terms (Chittick, 1994), such as *‘ain al-wujūd*, the essence of existence (Neusser, 2005). The word *wujūd* is translated both as ‘being’ or ‘existence’ and as ‘finding’ or ‘to be found’. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use is complex enough to encompass both of these meanings, and more besides. Yet the primary aspect of *wujūd*, for Ibn al-‘Arabī is always its absolute unity. In this sense, Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to be in agreement with the Vedic sentiments of the Upanishads, wherein the oneness of existence takes primacy over any multiplicity.

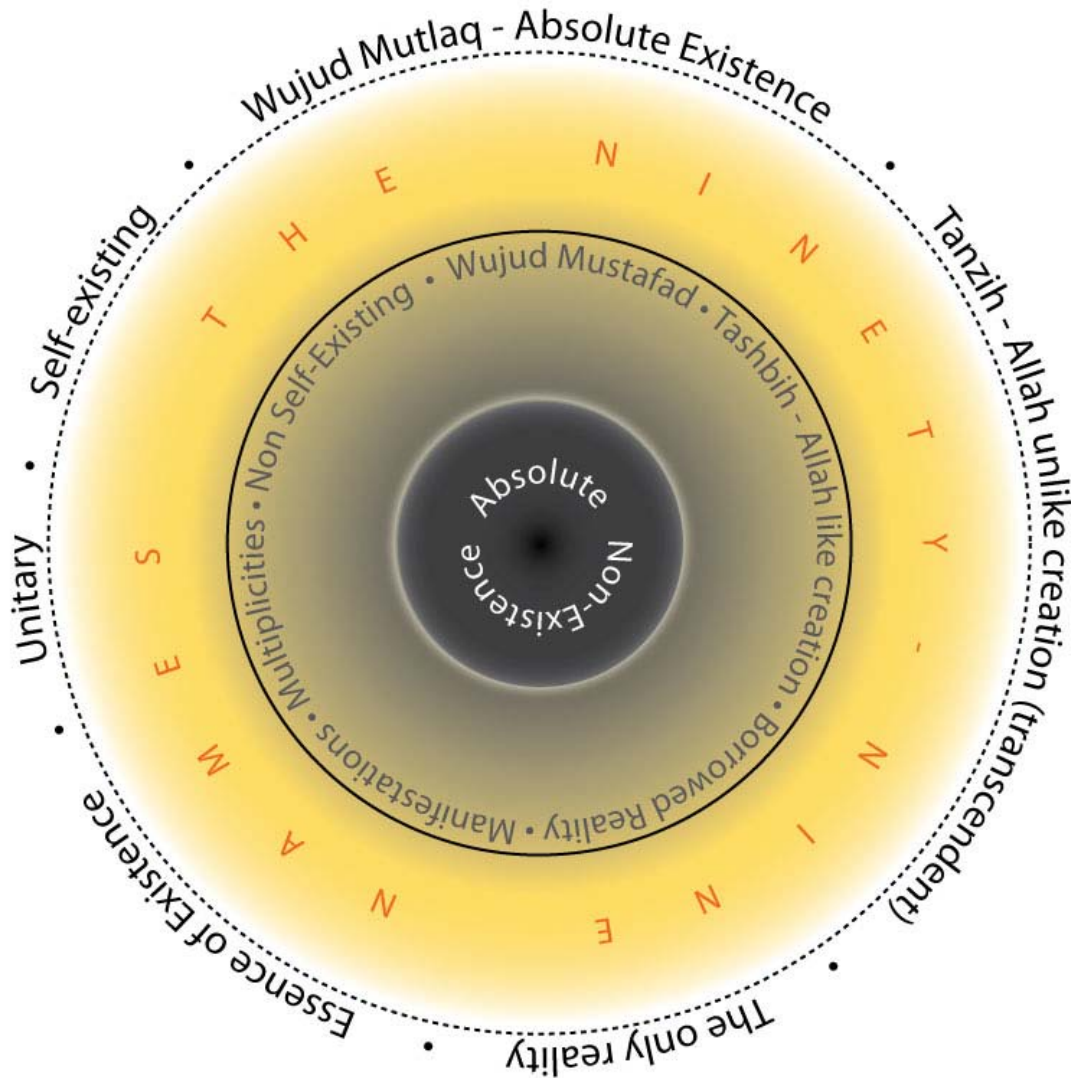
However, whereas the working out of this concept in Hinduism finds its ultimate expression in Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism), where the world and all its seeming multiplicities are taken to be the equivalent of empty illusions, Ibn al-‘Arabī takes a different tack, affirming also the many-ness of reality along with its oneness (Chittick, 1994). So in speaking of *wujūd* (existence), it is possible for Ibn al-‘Arabī to see it from multiple viewpoints.

The primary aspect of *wujūd*, as already indicated, is its absolute oneness. This can be called *wujūd mutlaq*, absolute existence, in contrast to the *wujūd* of the manifest, contingent world, which can be called *wujūd mustafad*, or borrowed existence. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, in the most ultimate sense, there is only the oneness of Allah, but this does not mean that the manifest multiplicity of the created things of the universe, including human beings, is an existence-less illusion. Rather, the beingness of the manifest world is, as it were, borrowed from the only true existence – that of Allah. Thus we have, from our human perspective, the *tanzih* nature of God, in which Allah is absolutely unlike any particular part of manifest creation. On the other hand, we have the *tashbih* nature of God, in which Allah *is* like the manifest creation.

Self-existence and reality can only be attributed to the transcendent nature of God, which is necessary and cannot *not* exist. Allah is without parts, and is a singularity of nondelimited perfection – there is only a single *wujūd*. This transcendent nature is unknowable, for to know it would be to have a knower and a known, but no such separation can exist within *wujūd*, understood in this higher sense.

Ibn al-‘Arabī is not simply a transcendent mystic, content to leave the manifest world behind. Rather, he appeals strongly to reason, and takes pains to clarify as best he

can the way in which the manifest world relates to the unmanifest, transcendent reality of *wujūd*. This is a complicated but central aspect to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thinking; in fact the bulk of his works deal less with God’s transcendence than with his manifestation.



How then, if the *only* thing that has any real existence to it is the unity of God, can we explain the apparent multiplicity of the created world? What must be the nature of creation such that it can actually appear to us while not either making God dissectible into separate parts or taking the ground of being out from underneath the cosmos? Ibn al-

‘Arabī answers that the things of perception have no separate existence apart from the ultimate *wujūd* of God. They cannot exist without ‘borrowing’ their *wujūd* from the only possible source: God. In this way, the *wujūd* of the manifest world is actually more of a metaphor than a reality; separate existent entities seem to have their own *wujūd* but do not – they exist by the continual creating will of Allah, and have no self-existence without Allah.

The metaphor that Ibn al-‘Arabī uses to describe this situation identifies God with Light, as stated in the Koran (24:35). The only thing that exists is Light – but this light becomes reflected and refracted into an infinite number of seemingly independent rays. Just as an individual ray of light may seem obviously separate from another: “this ray is red; that one is blue”, objects appear to us to have separate existence. But in pointing out the separateness of the objects we are not seeing their reality. In fact, the objects qua objectivity have no reality, and in this sense are described as nonexistent (*‘adam*). The nonexistence of the objects is precisely their nature. This is like the separate ray of red or blue light, which in fact cannot have any existence apart from the original Light itself, which is in fact the only thing which has existence in the first (and last) place. Every reflected or refracted ray is another veil through which the manifestation of God appears – but none of these manifestations themselves partake of their own existence, which is the sole domain of Allah. Ibn al’Arabī does distinguish between absolute nonexistence, which is nothingness in the most direct sense of the term, and relative nonexistence, which describes all that is approached as not God – i.e. the universe and its constituents. In this way, the manifest universe can be understood as an intermediary realm between absolute existence (*wujūd mutlaq*) and absolute nonexistence. It is the gray area that Ibn

al-‘Arabī describes as “He/not He”, as it partakes of both ultimate existence and nonexistence simultaneously.

Therefore, in one sense when we see the things of the world, we are in fact seeing only the *wujūd* of God. Additionally, God, who “encompasses all things in knowledge” (65:12), has ‘in mind’ as it were, even all the *potential* objects of the cosmos. God’s knowledge of these things is immutable, fixed, and absolute; this knowledge corresponds to the object’s entire reality. But neither the manifest nor the unmanifest plurality of objects requires God Himself to be of a plural nature – just as all of the colors of light are contained in the primal Light of God as a singular unity, upon which they depend for their entire existence.

Apart from the ultimacy of *wujūd*, the relative nonexistence of the manifest world occurs as a continuum, stretching away from God towards ultimate nonexistence. Each “thing” is, as described by Ibn al-‘Arabī, a “locus of manifestation” of God. Each locus of manifestation is nonexistent in itself, but contains rather the properties or effects of the object, which ultimately derive from God. Thus, when we encounter the things of the universe, we are in actuality finding only God’s *wujūd*. Just as a single breath may contain many words, the “Breath of the All-merciful” may give rise to many objects – but some of these objects partake of a greater part of *wujūd* than others.

Even though God’s breath doesn’t need to contain words, He speaks in His overflowing generosity, and all the world is created. Multiplicity is real because God speaks many words – an infinite number of them, in fact, corresponding to the infinity of manifested objects. What characteristics the objects have depends upon the words God speaks. Thus there are ninety-nine different names of God (The Merciful, The Abaser,

The Guarantor, etc.) which act as intermediaries between existence and nonexistence. Things of the manifest world are formed out of the conflation of any number of these names with any amount of purity. These ninety-nine names are all aspects of the one name: Allah, which encompasses all possible names in every possible way, both manifest and non-manifest.

Within this situation, the human being also exists as a relatively non-existent entity, described by a concatenation (with relative purity) of the names. In some people and at some times, one or another of the names becomes more manifested and understood than the other names. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the goal of a spiritual seeker is to manifest all of the ninety-nine names with equal perfection and harmony, thus becoming “the Perfect Man”. Humans are unique among beings of the world because they have the potential to comprehend and manifest all of the names, because God taught Adam *all the names* (2:30); all other things (minerals, plants, animals, angels) are created within known and fixed stations. If this perfection is achieved, the human would be a manifestation of what Ibn al-‘Arabī calls the “Muhammadan Reality” (Chittick, 1994), where instead of being stationed within any one or combination of names, the human stands equally within all the names at once: the “Station of No Station”. In order to achieve this state, rather than try to manifest all the divine names, which can lead to an arrogance of assuming that “I am like God”, it is better to try to get rid of all the particularly *human* attributes, so that what is left is the *wujūd* of God alone. The path of this struggle is one of surrendering oneself to God, of submission (*islam*) to God.

As we can see, the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* is a central aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought. Although he did not initially conceive of the idea, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s

portrayal and discussion of the oneness of being clarified and brought to new light one of the most foundational aspects of Islam. According to Chittick, *wahdat al-wujūd* “is the most famous single theoretical issue in Sufi works of the later period, especially in the area under Persian influence.” (Chittick 2007). The concept was not universally accepted however, and was attacked by scholars such as Ibn Taymiya (d. 1328 C.E.), who actually did much to associate the concept with Ibn al-‘Arabī (Chittick 2007).

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