

# The Dialectic of Gratitude (*Shukr*) in the Non-dualism of Ibn al-‘Arabī<sup>1</sup>

*Atif Khalil*

If a man had no more to do with God than to be thankful,  
That would suffice.

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The eye with which I see God  
is the eye with which He sees me.

Meister Eckhart

The role and function of gratitude or *shukr* in Islam has been a topic that, until recently, has been the subject of little extensive analysis.<sup>2</sup> This is despite the central place of gratitude within the

1. An article on gratitude would be remiss without appropriate expressions of thanks. I am indebted to Eric Winkel, with whom I read chapters 120 and 121 of the *Futūḥāt* during his visit to the University of Lethbridge in the spring of 2013, as well as for his generous help in deciphering some of the trickier passages of the text. I would also like to thank W. Chittick, S. Hirtenstein, H. Ibrahim and M. Rustom for their help at different stages of the writing process. The article is dedicated to Professor Todd Lawson.

2. For a broad overview of gratitude in Islam, the reader is directed to Ida Zilio-Grandi’s well-researched piece which reflects an excellent command of the Arabic sources, ‘The Gratitude of Man and the Gratitude of God: Notes on *Ṣukr* in Traditional Islamic Thought,’ *Islamochristiana* 38 (2012): 45–62. The *EQ* (Brill) article, ‘Gratitude and Ingratitude,’ is useful for its conciseness. On gratitude in Sufism, see Atif Khalil, ‘On Cultivating Gratitude in Sufi Virtue Ethics,’ *Journal of Sufi Studies* 4 (2015): 1–26; *Ibid.* ‘On the Embodiment of Gratitude in Sufi Ethics,’ *Studia Islamica* 111 (2016): 159–78. Ghazālī’s *Book of Patience and Gratitude of the Iḥyā’* was recently translated by H.T. Littlejohn (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011). I have compared the translation with the Arabic and find it to be a fine rendition of the original, supplemented with very useful notes. Mention should also be made of Simon van den Bergh’s ‘Ghazālī on “Gratitude Towards God” and its Greek Sources,’ *Studia Islamica* no. 7 (1957): 77–98. Despite its strengths, the article is marred by van den Bergh’s attempt to retrace Ghazālī’s ideas almost entirely to Greek philosophy, particularly Stoicism, overlooking the Qur’anic and *ḥadīth*-based foundations of the

faith. As Toshihiko Izutsu astutely observed, 'Islam as a religion is ... an exhortation to gratitude towards God.'<sup>3</sup> The present essay aims to contribute to our knowledge of *shukr* within the realm of Islamic ethics by taking as its focal point Ibn al-ʿArabī's treatment of the virtue as it appears principally in Chapters 120 and 121 of the *Meccan Revelations*, with a particular focus on the relation between divine and human gratitude, or rather, the 'interplay' or even 'dialectic' of gratitude between God and what the Andalusian mystic believed to be His theophanic self-revelation in the human being. The essay begins with an overview of the semantics of *shukr* within the Arabic language and the use of the term in the Qur'an, and then proceeds to a treatment of the levels of this *maqām* or station in Ibn al-ʿArabī. While the mystic deals with a cluster of broadly related themes in the two chapters, constraints of space limit the present analysis to what we might designate the levels of human gratitude, and the particular manner in which these levels relate to divine *shukr*. In the process of our inquiry, the essay will also demonstrate the manner in which Ibn al-ʿArabī's treatment of this virtue reflects an extensive engagement with and development of the broader mystical tradition to which he was heir.

### SHUKR IN ARABIC AND THE QUR'AN

The Arabic word *shukr* derives from the trilateral root *sh-k-r*, which means to thank, commend, praise or eulogize someone

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medieval thinker's analysis. On gratitude in Western moral philosophy, see Terrance McConnell, *Gratitude* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), and n.29 below. On some recent developments in psychology on the study of gratitude as a human emotion, see Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (eds.), *The Psychology of Gratitude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). While the focus in the volume is on the psychology of gratitude, some of the contributors also explore the subject from anthropological, biological and even theological vantage points. Unfortunately, the essay on 'Gratitude in the History of Ideas' (19–36) entirely skips the Islamic tradition.

3. Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran*, 2nd edn. (1964; repr. Kuala Lumpur: Kazi Publications, 2003), 15.

for a service, benefit or act of devotion.<sup>4</sup> The more concrete meaning of the root is closely bound to the idea of ‘revealing’ or ‘unconcealing.’ This is why it has been suggested that the root is a transposition, through a shifting of radicals, of *k-sh-r*,<sup>5</sup> which refers to an ‘act of uncovering, or exposing to view.’<sup>6</sup> Hence Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s (d.996ce) statement in the earliest sustained treatment of the subject in Sufi literature, that ‘the meaning of *shukr* in the (Arabic) language is to unveil (*kashf*) and make manifest (*izhār*).’<sup>7</sup> In relation to the act of gratitude, *shukr* therefore involves revealing and disclosing an act of benefaction by acknowledging and recognizing it, both to oneself and the benefactor. Its opposite is *kufr*, which entails a concealing of that very gesture in a display of ingratitude. Aside from the notion of unveiling or revealing, *shukr* may also signify, within the constellation of its more concrete root imagery, the idea of ‘being full.’<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the subject of *sh-k-r* is one who is ‘full of praise’ for his benefactor. Closely

4. Lane, s.v. ‘*sh-k-r.*’ See also Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 2:202 (henceforth, e.g., *Fut.*2:202); the edition is a reprint of the four-volume 1911 Cairo edition. I have also been able to consult the more recent Yemeni edition of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Sulṭān al-Manṣūb, courtesy of Eric Winkel.

5. *maqūb ‘an al-kashr.* Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt alfāz al-qur’ān*, ed. Najīb al-Mājidī (Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-‘Aṣriyya, 2006), 283.

6. Lane, s.v. ‘*sh-k-r.*’ Hence the expression *kashara ‘an asnānihi*, which is to say, ‘*He displayed his teeth, or grinned.*’ See Lane, s.v. ‘*k-sh-r.*’ Cf. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Sa‘īd Nasīb Makārim (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 1995), 1:414; Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, ‘*Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, eds. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. al-Sharīf (Cairo: Maktabat al-Īmān, 2005), 477; al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, ‘*Ilm al-awliyā*’, ed. Sāmī Naṣr (Cairo: ‘Ain Shams University, 1981), 157; *ibid.* *al-Furūq wa man‘ al-tarāduf*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Juyūshī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Īmān, 2005), 117.

7. Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:414. Suhrawardī provides a virtually identical definition in the ‘*Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, 477; see also Tirmidhī, ‘*Ilm al-awliyā*’, 156–7.

8. Lane, s.v. ‘*sh-k-r.*’ See also Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārij al-sālikīn* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyya), 2:253; Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt*, 283; and Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 493.

related to this idea is also the notion of *ziyāda*, that is to say, an ‘increase.’<sup>9</sup> The importance attached to this particular notion in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s conceptualization of gratitude will become clear shortly.

The root *sh-k-r* is deployed in the Qur’an on 75 occasions, and like many laudable qualities in Scripture, is used of both God and the human being. In reference to the former the root appears eight times. God is described both by the active participle, *shākir* (‘the Grateful’), and the intensive active participle, *shakūr* (‘The All-Grateful’ or ‘Oft-Grateful One’), both of which are also standard divine names. Of these two, the more commonly used is *shakūr*, a name that highlights, when we consider the term’s etymology, God’s absolute, omniscient awareness of what the human being offers Him. The divinity is never ‘veiled’ from the realm of human piety and goodness, and praises virtuous deeds accordingly. In addition, a key feature of God as *shakūr* pertains to the extent to which He generously rewards humans for their devotion. Indeed, in two of the four instances where *shakūr* appears, it is preceded by mention of divine *faḍl*, that is to say, His overwhelming grace and favor (as opposed to His ‘*adl* or justice).<sup>10</sup>

*Sh-k-r* is used in the remaining 67 instances to describe the human being. A number of verses tie in human *shukr* to divine *faḍl*, specifically as a response to it in this world.<sup>11</sup> Not only is God’s *shukr* an act of *faḍl*, the latter must also evoke human *shukr*. At the heart of the latter there lies a recognition of divine benefaction and a corresponding praise of God. It is important to note that even though *sh-k-r* is used much less frequently

9. Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d.1077), *Salwat al-‘arīfīn wa uns al-mushtāqīn*, eds. Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 164. For more on the little-known author of this work, see the fine editorial introduction.

10. Q.35:30 and 42:22–23.

11. Q.10:60, 16:14, 27:40, 28:73, 35:12, 40:61, 45:12. There are numerous other instances where the use of *shukr* is immediately preceded by examples of God’s many bounties, both spiritual and worldly. See Q.2:52, 2:172, 2:185, 5:6, 5:89, 8:26, 14:37, 16:78, 16:114, 22:36, 23:78, 25:62; 29:17, 31:14, 32:9, 34:15; 36:35, 36:73, 54:35, 56:70 and 67:23.

in reference to God, this should not suggest that the quality is somehow more befitting of the human being, or that it is more congruous with her nature. On the contrary, the Qur’an constantly reminds its reader of the human being’s propensity towards *ingratitude*. This is a theme which occurs so often that it would not be mistaken to identify it within the sacred text’s broader ethical *Weltanschauung* as one of the central moral weaknesses of the human being – his cardinal vice, one might say, and perhaps also the Islamic analogue to the primary failing of *tanha* or ‘desire’ within Buddhist anthropology and original sin in Christianity. ‘Most people are not grateful,’<sup>12</sup> states the Qur’an on multiple occasions, and ‘little gratitude do you show.’<sup>13</sup> And in Q.100:6 we read, ‘verily the human being is terribly ungrateful towards his Lord.’<sup>14</sup>

A comparison of the manner in which the Qur’an addresses divine and human *shukr* reveals that, whereas the human being is deeply susceptible to ingratitude, to *kufr al-ni‘ma*, the quality of *shukr* is most perfectly ‘embodied’ in God. It should come as no surprise that in half of the instances in which *sh-k-r* is used of God, He is described by the intensive active participle (*shakūr*). Of the human being, however, the Qur’an states, ‘and few...are

12. Q.2:243, 12:38, 40:61; see also Q.10:60, 27:73.

13. Q.23:78, 32:9, 67:23.

14. The Arabic term used here to describe this extreme form of unthankfulness is the quasi-intensive active participle, *kanūd*, employed only once in the entire text, and defined within the exegetical literature as *kafūr* (from *k-f-r*), an ‘obstinate ingrate.’ See Qushayrī, *Laṭā‘if al-ishārāt* (ed. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2000), 3:443; Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, tafsir.com; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1990), 32:63–4; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Tha‘ālabī, *al-Jawāhir al-ḥisān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1996), 3:514. One of the underlying imageries conveyed by the root *k-n-d* is that of barren or infertile land. As Rāzī notes, *kanūd* earth refers to land ‘on which nothing grows.’ It is as if no matter how much rain or sunlight it receives, it has nothing to return or show. See *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 32:64; cf. Lane. s.v. ‘*k-n-d*.’ This may be contrasted with *shakīr*, a derivative of *sh-k-r*, which refers to the shoots, herbage and leaves that grow around the base of a tree from its abundance. See Lane, s.v. ‘*sh-k-r*’; cf. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 7:172.

*shakūr*.<sup>15</sup> In so far as the cultivation of gratitude is concerned in the Qur'an, the teleological aim of the human being can be conceived of as a movement away from one's natural inclination towards *kufr al-ni'ma* (ingratitude for blessings), to a fuller, more continuous, and even divine-like realization of the virtue. If the stages of the development of this virtue were to be grafted on to a vertical spectrum, drawing from the ethical paradigm of Scripture, we would ascend from human *kufr* to human *shukr*, and within the parameters of human *shukr*, from the level of the *shākir* to that of the *shakūr*, until we reached at the very summit, gratitude *in divinis* or divine *shukr*. This basic Qur'anic model, in which the virtues within the sphere of human ethics stand, in Izutsu's words, as a 'pale reflection – or a very imperfect imitation of the divine nature itself,'<sup>16</sup> that is to say, in which the divinity functions as a sort of prototype of human virtue, is, as we shall see, also a basic feature of the structure of Ibn al-'Arabī's moral theology. This is so much the case that in the Andalusian mystic's writings we find an argument for the literal – as opposed to simply symbolic or metaphorical – culmination of virtue *in divinis*. This is a culmination, however, which only takes place at the highest level of 'abandoning gratitude,' or *tark al-shukr*, at which point the human being foregoes all claims to virtue and realizes God as the supreme subject. To this theme we shall return shortly.

The brief synopsis of *shukr* in the Qur'an should now enable us to more fully appreciate Ibn al-'Arabī's treatment of this virtue, particularly in light of the extent to which revelation infuses his writings. '[E]verything of which we speak in our meetings and in our writings,' as he states, 'comes from the Qur'an and its treasures.'<sup>17</sup> What Ibn al-'Arabī offers in his brief discussion of gratitude is therefore (from his point of view, and of those who have taken his claims seriously within later

15. Q.34:13.

16. Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān*, 2nd edn. (Montreal: McGill-Queen University Press, 2002), 18.

17. Cited in Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn al-'Arabī, the Book and the Law*, trans. David Streight (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 20.

tradition), little more than an illumination of Scripture’s hidden treasures, exegetically unearthed through gifts for which providence singled him out.<sup>18</sup>

### THE INTERPLAY OF PRAISE AND SEEKING AN INCREASE (ZIYĀDA)

Ibn al-‘Arabī opens Chapter 120 by declaring that human gratitude entails praising (*thanā’*) God for benefactions.<sup>19</sup> Implicit in the claim is the idea of a mutual relation of praise which characterizes the divine/human dialectic. Just as God’s gratitude involves praising the human being for what he offers Him by way of pious devotion, human gratitude involves lauding God for what he receives from heaven. This circular, heliotropic relation is highlighted by Qushayrī (d.1074) in his treatment of *shukr* in the *Treatise*, a work to which we know Ibn al-‘Arabī was highly indebted.<sup>20</sup> The author of the *Risāla* draws attention to this feature when he observes that ‘the *shukr* of the servant towards God most High is to praise Him by recalling His goodness towards him. And the *shukr* of the Real, may He be praised, towards the servant is His praise of him by recalling his (acts of)

18. For Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reception in later tradition, see Chodkiewicz’s introduction in *Ibid.* For the controversies which surrounded him, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn al-‘Arabī in the Later Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image* (Albany: SUNY, 1999).

19. *Fut.*2:202.

20. As Chodkiewicz has shown, the 2nd *faṣl* of the *Futūḥāt*, where we encounter Ibn al-‘Arabī’s treatment of the various *maqāms*, is roughly structured according to the sequence of chapters found in Qushayrī’s *Risāla*, with the noticeable addition of a chapter following his treatment of each of the 34 stations on its abandonment or *tark*. This number does not, however, include those chapters the contents of which reflect the same pattern. His treatment of ‘speech,’ for example, is followed by a chapter on ‘silence,’ and the one on ‘poverty’ is likewise followed by one on ‘wealth.’ See Chodkiewicz, ‘*Mi’rāj al-kalima: from the Risāla Qushayriyya to the Futūḥāt Makkiyya,*’ *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* (henceforth *JMIAS*) 45 (2009): 1–20. For more on the *Risāla*’s influence on Ibn al-‘Arabī, see Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Peter Kingsley (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 102–3.

goodness towards Him.<sup>21</sup> While Ibn al-‘Arabī does not pursue or develop this point in reference to praise, it is nevertheless contained within the overall logic of his treatment.

The Andalusian mystic then turns to Q.14:7, with which, incidentally, Qushayrī also opens his treatment of *shukr*. In this verse the Qur’an has God declare, ‘if you are grateful, I will surely give you more (*la azīdannakum*)’. The emphasis here is through the intensifying particle, the affirmative *la* or *lām al-tawkīd*,<sup>22</sup> through which the Qur’an establishes an inextricable link between human gratitude and the divine response that follows in the form of an increase or *ziyāda*. The causal chain of events set in motion by human *shukr*, according to the verse, leads Ibn al-‘Arabī to state that ‘gratitude is a quality that necessitates an increase from the one thanked to the one thanking (*min al-mashkūr li al-shākir*).’ While the unique power of human gratitude is also noted by earlier authors,<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī goes further by declaring that the increase or *ziyāda* that must appear in the wake of gratitude should also, by analogy, govern the human response to divine gratitude. In other words, just as God promises to give more to the human being for his *shukr*, the human being should also give God more for His gratitude. This

21. Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 333. My use of the *Risāla* in this article has been aided by the translations of Rabia T. Harris and Alexander Knysh.

22. Also known as *lām al-ta’kīd*.

23. Makkī highlights the unique power of gratitude by noting that God does not make an unqualified promise to respond to petitions for (1) forgiveness (*maghfira*) (Q.5:40), (2) an increase in wealth or prosperity (Q.9:28), (3) sustenance (*rizq*) (Q.2:212), (4) an acceptance of the human’s being *tawba* (Q.9:27), or (5) the removal of an ill (Q.6:41). For each of these the divine gift is qualified by ‘if He wills’ or ‘on whom He wills.’ But this is not so with gratitude, since He promises, without qualification, to give the *shākir* a *ziyāda* or *mazīd*. See *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:411–2. Ghazālī, clearly under the influence of Makkī, also draws attention to this unique feature of the virtue in his treatment of the subject. See *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Aleppo: Dār al-Wa’ī, 1998), 4:125. Along similar lines, Muḥāsibī states that the mark of being genuinely grateful to God is that one receives more from God in its wake. See *Kitāb al-qaṣd wa al-rujū’*, in *al-Waṣāyā aw al-naṣā’ih al-dīniyya wa nafaḥāt al-quḍsiyya*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad ‘Aṭā’ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2003), 170.



symmetrical, reciprocal obligation, applicable to both parties, is necessitated by the sharing of names.

God – glorified and exalted be He – did not describe Himself as ‘Grateful’ (*shākir*) to us except that we might give Him more of that for which He was grateful to us. This is so that we too might give Him more, just as He gives us more of a blessing if we are grateful to Him for His blessings and good favor.<sup>24</sup>

What can the human being possibly give God? The answer, as the passage makes clear, is simply a *ziyāda* of that which elicited divine *shukr* to begin with, that is to say, more of virtue, goodness and piety in conformity to the dictates of prophecy. At the heart of this idea, as we have already seen, lies the Qur’anic model in which human ethics (to return again to Izutsu) stands as a ‘pale reflection...of the divine nature itself.’ We learn how to express gratitude to God by observing how it is that He expresses gratitude towards us. Since He gives us more of what we are thankful for, we too are obliged to give Him more of that for which He is thankful to us.

But there is more to the emphasis Ibn al-‘Arabī places on the necessity of giving more to God in response to His gratitude than simply a theological anthropology centered on the notion of the human being as an *imago dei*. The idea, as we saw earlier, is also found in at least one of the meanings of *shukr*. Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d.1077) considers the particular semantic relation between ‘gratitude’ and ‘increase’ to be of such consequence that he opens his chapter on the subject in the *Comfort of the Enlightened Ones* by drawing attention to it. ‘The meaning of gratitude in the (Arabic) language,’ he writes, ‘is *ziyāda*.’<sup>25</sup> When we call to mind the extent to which the unique features of the Arabic language determine the contours of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own line of thinking<sup>26</sup> we can see why he considers the two

24. *Fut.2:202*.

25. *ma’nā al-shukr fī al-luġha al-ziyāda*. Ṭabarī, *Salwat al-‘ārifīn*, 164.

26. Chodkiewicz’s *Ocean without Shore* offers an unsurpassed analysis of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the relation between language and revelation.

notions so closely intertwined. After all, Arabic is not, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, simply the vehicle of Islamic revelation, but a revelation in its own right, having its origin, like the Qur’an, in God. The intricacy of the language’s structure and the conventions of its use among the ancient Arabs, far from being arbitrary, provide the exegetical keys through which the meanings of the Qur’an may be unlocked.<sup>27</sup> In this light we can understand why he feels that ‘gratitude seeks an increase.’<sup>28</sup> This relation is not just established through a particular reading of Scripture, but also by a close attentiveness to its language. That this relation is primarily linguistic and Scriptural is evidenced by the general absence of the association in Western philosophical treatments of the virtue.<sup>29</sup>

27. As a case in point, we may consider Ibn al-‘Arabī’s criticism of the Mu‘tazilite doctrine according to which God is bound by necessity to punish the unrepentant. As defenders of divine justice, the Mu‘tazilites hold this position at least partly because God promises in Scripture to punish evildoers for their wrongs. Their position is a well-known one in the history of Islamic theology, part and parcel of their doctrine of the Promise and the Threat, *al-wa‘d wa al-wa‘d*. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s criticism of this doctrine, specifically in relation to God’s supposed obligation to take the sinner to account for his sin, is not based on philosophical or theological but linguistic grounds. The conventions of the pre-Islamic Arabs, argues Ibn al-‘Arabī, allowed them to make threats without having to carry them out if they were later overcome by feelings of magnanimity, clemency and benevolence. Such acts of forgiveness, despite previous promises to the contrary, were not considered breaches of an oath. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, the divine promise of punishment within Scripture must be understood along similar lines. God is not obliged to punish the unrepentant sinner, contrary to the conclusion that might be drawn by one who knows Arabic but remains ignorant of the nuances of its pre-Islamic usage. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s position is dealt with tersely in Sha‘rānī’s *al-Kibrīt al-aḥmar fī bayān ‘ulūm al-shaykh al-akbar*, ed. Nawāf al-Jarrāh (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2003).

28. *Fut.*2:188. The same expression also occurs in chap. 178 on *maḥabba*.

29. In my overview of treatments of gratitude in Western philosophical writings, I have not come across an analogous point. In addition to McConnell’s work on this virtue (see #2), the reader is directed to the following excellent treatments, most of which focus on interpersonal obligations of gratitude: Fred Berger, ‘Gratitude,’ *Ethics* 85, no. 4 (1975): 298–309;

THE *SHĀKIR*/*SHAKŪR* DISTINCTION

Following his brief remarks about the increase which the thankful one is entitled to receive from the one thanked, Ibn al-‘Arabī turns to explain the difference between the *shākir* and the *shakūr*. While his focus this time around is on the human being, it is clear that he does not want the reader to lose sight of *shukr* as ultimately a divine quality. We have already seen that the Qur’an ascribes both names to God. The difference of usage in the text (about which, incidentally, Ibn al-‘Arabī remains silent, at least in the two chapters under consideration), appears to center around the circumstances in which each of these names are used. The elative form *al-shakūr* is in three of its four instances coupled with the divine name *al-ghafūr* (The ‘All-Forgiving One,’ also in intensive active participle form), and in the context of describing God’s generous bounties and immense forgiveness in the afterlife.<sup>30</sup> Since it is only then the full scale of divine gratitude will become known,<sup>31</sup> it is fitting for the Qur’an to employ the *lafẓ mubālagha* to illustrate

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Patrick Fitzgerald, ‘Gratitude and Justice,’ *Ethics* 109, no. 1 (1998): 119–53; and A.D.M. Walker, ‘Gratefulness and Gratitude,’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series 81 (1980–81): 39–55. For a more theological reflection, see Joseph Lombardi, ‘Filial Gratitude and God’s Right to Command,’ *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 19, no. 1 (1991): 93–118. On gratitude in Buddhist philosophy, see Malcolm D. Eckel, ‘Gratitude to an Empty Savior: A Study of the Concept of Gratitude in Mahāyāna Buddhist Philosophy,’ *History of Religions*, 25, no. 1 (1985): 57–75, although very little of the article is devoted to gratitude per se.

30. Q.35:30; 35:34; 42:23. Curiously, even in the one instance where *shakūr* does not appear alongside *ghafūr* (Q.64:17), the verse is still preceded by mention of divine *maghfira*, as if to reiterate the close Qur’anic relation between divine gratitude and forgiveness. The relation is itself quite a logical one considering that through the former God rewards human piety and through the latter He forgives human wrongdoing.

31. Bayhaqī (d.1066), for example, notes that when *shākir* is used of God it refers to His praise and reward for human devotion, and when *shakūr* is used it refers to the continuation and perpetuity of that *shukr*. See *Kitāb al-asmā’ wa al-ṣifāt*, ed. ‘Imād al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḥaydar (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 2002), 1:128.

the breadth and range of divine mercy which, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interpretation of Scriptural soteriology, will envelope *all* souls in the next world.<sup>32</sup>

As for the difference that the Qur’an establishes between the human *shākir* and *shakūr*, it appears to rest simply on the degree to which one might be marked by the virtue. In agreement with the earlier Sufi tradition, Ibn al-‘Arabī affirms that the distinction centers on the extent of one’s own gratitude. The *shākir* is grateful for those gifts which are considered blessings by convention or custom (*‘urf*). These may include the blessings of sound health, the companionship of family and friends, the comfort afforded by wealth, not to mention subtler spiritual gifts. But while the *shākir*’s gratitude is meritorious in its own right, and met with divine approval, it remains, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, deficient to the extent that it is not an all-pervading quality. The *shakūr* on the other hand is of the ‘elect of God.’ He stands among the ranks of those ‘who see everything which comes from God, with respect to them and His servants, as a divine blessing, regardless of whether it causes them joy or grief, for they are grateful in every state.’<sup>33</sup> Their rarity, attested to both by *wujūd* and divine report (Q.34:13), leads Ibn al-‘Arabī to pray, ‘May we be counted among their few! (*īyyānā bi qillatīhim*).’<sup>34</sup>

32. As Ibn al-‘Arabī states in his two chapters on the station of *riḍā* (128–9), everyone will eventually experience the mercy of God after death because of an essential servitude to which each soul is bound and which it cannot, through its own will, escape. Divine mercy, and by extension divine *shukr*, will respond to the soul’s essential servitude by granting it everlasting felicity; see *Fut.2*:212–3. For a general treatment of the role of mercy in Akbarian soteriology, see William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 97–119. See also Mohammed Rustom’s discussion of Mullā Ṣadrā’s views on this subject in *The Triumph of Mercy* (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 99–116.

33. *Fut.2*:202.

34. *Ibid.* We are reminded of an episode from the life of the caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who once heard a man pray, ‘My Lord, make me of the “few!”’. The supplication led the caliph to retort, ‘What kind of prayer is this?’ to which he replied, ‘I heard the words of God, “and few of My bondsmen are *shakūr*.” This is why I now pray that He include me among those “few.”’ Zamakhsharī,

Lest Ibn al-‘Arabī’s actual position on this question, however, be misunderstood as a simplistic exhortation to be thankful for absolutely everything in life, without qualification, some clarification is in order. This is because Ibn al-‘Arabī states that ‘gratitude is not sound *except* for blessings.’<sup>35</sup> And in Chapter 178 on love he clarifies the matter further: ‘gratitude is not for any other than blessings (*ni‘am*). It is not for afflictions (*balā‘*), as claimed by one of them who had no knowledge of realities (*lā ‘ilm lahu bi al-ḥaqqā’iq*); he imagined that he should be grateful for afflictions. This however is not sound.’<sup>36</sup> It is clear therefore that for our mystic one need not be thankful for all experiences of distress, hardship, suffering and trial. While Ibn al-‘Arabī does not identify the individual in the passage above, numerous proponents of this view could be cited from the earlier tradition. We find in Qushayrī, for example, the statement, ‘it is said that the *shākīr* is one who is grateful for the gift (*‘aṭā‘*), and the *shakūr* is the one who is grateful for affliction (*balā‘*).’<sup>37</sup> Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī offers a variant: ‘it is said that the *shākīr* is the one who is grateful for ease (*rakhā‘*), and the *shakūr* is the one who is grateful for affliction (*balā‘*).’<sup>38</sup> While the identity of the individual with whom Ibn al-‘Arabī voices his disagreement remains of secondary importance, considering the wide range of figures who may have held this view, what is of significance here is his own position, that gratitude should be restricted for blessings alone. Trials and afflictions (*ibtilā‘āt*), on the other hand, should be met with by patience – the proper course under such circumstances. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective was not a new one, nor does he suggest so anywhere. Indeed we have a saying of Yaḥyā b. Mu‘ādh al-Rāzī (d.872), where he encourages the *sālik* or spiritual wayfarer to ‘respond to blessings with gratitude,

*al-Kashshāf* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-‘Abīkān, 1998), 5:112 (Q.34:13).

35. *Fut.*2:202.

36. *Fut.*2:343.

37. The ‘it is said’ which precedes the citation of course implies that Qushayrī does not himself necessarily hold this position. *Risāla*, 334.

38. Ṭabarī, *Salwat al-‘arīfīn*, 166–7. See also Abū I-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī (d.1077), *Kitāb al-bay‘ad wa al-sawād*, eds. Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 301–2.

to adversity with patience, and to sins with repentance.<sup>39</sup> And in *The Knowledge of the Friends of God* by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d.905–10), we read that ‘gratitude is a response to well-being (*‘āfiya*) while patience is a response to tribulation (*balā*)’.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, this view seems to be in closer conformity to the Qur’an, which in more than one instance couples human patience and gratitude together as twin virtues.<sup>41</sup>

Despite our preceding clarification, however, one might argue that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s position as articulated in Chapter 178 still seems to conflict with his claim in Chapter 120, that the *shakūr* is ‘grateful in every state (*fī kullī ḥāl*).’ Is there not a tension, the argument might go, when we consider that life is a mixture of both uplifting and debilitating experiences, of sorrows and joys, of trials and blessings? – as Ibn al-‘Arabī would surely concede. The seeming contradiction can be resolved when we realize that for our mystic the *shakūr* is not just grateful in every state because he is thankful for both blessings and afflictions, but because he sees the blessings in the afflictions. In other words, the gratitude of the *shakūr* is not directed towards suffering, but to the gift which lies within it. The suffering, affliction and distress are in a sense simply the layers of wrapping which enclose the *ni‘ma*. To illustrate his point, Ibn al-‘Arabī draws from the example of medicine. A sick patient who is administered a bitter, pungent remedy by a physician for an illness is grateful – not for the foul taste which makes it all the more difficult for him to ingest the drug – but for its healing property. He endures its unpleasantness with patience while at the same time feeling gratitude for its healing power. This all occurs, moreover, in

39. Ṭabarī, *Salwat al-‘arīfīn*, 167.

40. The remainder of Tirmidhī’s passage, which is instructive, would be echoed in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmology: ‘well-being (*‘āfiya*) is from His Favor (*fadl*) while His Favor is from His Beauty (*jamāl*). Tribulation on the other hand is from His Might (*sulṭān*) while His Might is from His Power (*mulk*). In the next world, tomorrow, His Beauty will be presented to the Inhabitants of Paradise (*ahl al-janna*) and His Dominion will be presented to the Inhabitants of the Fire (*ahl al-nār*). Observe then from where well-being and tribulation emerge!’ Tirmidhī, *‘Ilm al-awliyā*’, 55.

41. See Q.14:5, 31:31, 34:19.

one state. Gratitude, therefore, as Ibn al-‘Arabī clarifies, must always be directed towards the blessing, even though it might lie concealed within a trial which could be quite painful, and for which, with regard to its painfulness, one must be patient. But it would make little sense – in fact, it would be counter-intuitive and perhaps even reflect an unhealthy state of mind – to be thankful for suffering *qua* suffering. To advocate this type of gratitude as an ideal reveals for our mystic an ignorance of ‘the reality of affairs.’<sup>42</sup>

The notion of seeing the blessing within the trial is once again not a new one. Ibn al-‘Arabī makes no suggestion that he is being innovative, or introducing a perspective unknown to his predecessors. Indeed, we find in the earlier tradition a saying attributed to Junayd (d.910), that ‘satisfaction (*riḍā*) is to see the affliction (*balā’*) as a blessing (*ni‘ma*).’<sup>43</sup> Makkī is even more explicit when he writes of the *shakūr*, that he ‘is grateful for adversities (*makārih*), afflictions (*balā’*), hardships (*shadā’id*), and agonies (*la’wā’*). But *this is not possible until he sees them as blessings (ni‘am)* which require of him gratitude through the truth of his certainty and reality of his detachment. This is a station of satisfaction and a state of love.’<sup>44</sup> What Ibn al-‘Arabī does, however, is to clarify, and in a way that the earlier tradition may not sufficiently have done (with the exception perhaps of

42. *Fut.*2:343.

43. Kharkūshī (also = Khargūshī, d.1015 or 1016), *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, ed. Syed Muhammad ‘Alī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya), 108. Arberry’s assessment of this little-known work was that while it should not be assigned the same degree of importance as the better-known contributions of Sarrāj, Makkī, Kalābādhī and Qushayrī, ‘it is a source by no means to be disregarded; and no complete history of Ṣūfism will ever be written that does not take [it] into account...’ See ‘Khargūshī’s Manual of Sufism,’ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, 9, no. 2 (1938): 349. For more on Khargūshī, see Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 65; Hassan Ansari and Sabine Schmidtke, ‘Abū Sa’d al-Khargūshī and his *Kitāb al-Lawāmi‘*: A Sufi Guide Book for Preachers from 4th/10th century Nīshāpūr,’ *Arabica* 58 (2011): 503–6. See also Christopher Melchert, ‘Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*,’ *Bulletin of the SOAS* 73, no. 1 (2010): 29–44.

44. Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:416–7.

Ghazālī), the *adab* of gratitude, that is to say, its proper mode of comportment, including the pitfalls one must avoid to realize the virtue in its fullness. This clarification is all the more valuable in light of the dizzying array of terse, sometimes ambiguous and seemingly conflicting aphorisms found in much of the earlier literature.<sup>45</sup>

Before proceeding, we should perhaps note one final point with regard to the distinction Ibn al-‘Arabī makes between the *shākīr* and the *shakūr*. When he states that the *shakūr* is grateful for the *ni‘ma* which resides within the *balā’*, it is significant that he stresses that one must *see* the blessing therein. In other words, one cannot artificially imitate this level of gratitude. While it is certainly difficult to be thankful for everything – both for ease and hardship, blessing and affliction – it seems that it would be more challenging, in so far as it would require the cultivation of a subtle and refined sense of discernment, to be able to recognize blessings which may lie hidden within trials. The kind of awareness of which Ibn al-‘Arabī speaks so highly cannot be easily feigned, and requires seeing life’s afflictions through the eyes of real insight, or *baṣīra*. In this respect, we can see why, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, the gratitude of the *shakūr* is not the consequence of a mindless, Herculean (and perhaps ascetic), feat of psychological will, but a meditative, introspective and enlightened penetration into the deeper wisdom behind the human experience of suffering. What makes the *shakūr* so special in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s eyes then is not just that he is in a constant state of gratitude, but rather his knowledge of what it is that he is being grateful for. This may better explain not only why our mystic considers the *shakūr* to be from ‘the elect of God,’ but also why he abruptly interrupts his discussion with a sincere prayer that both he and the reader be included

45. Even though Makkī, as we have just seen, states rather explicitly that one must see the blessing within the trial, he does not develop the idea in the *Nourishment* in a way that would make it clear to the reader that thankfulness must be directed only towards the good within the affliction. On the pedagogical use of aphorisms in early Sufi literature, see Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (Albany: SUNY, 2018), 83–5.



among those who occupy such a lofty rank, since ‘few,’ after all, ‘are *shakūr*.’

### THE LOGIC OF ABANDONING GRATITUDE

In Chapter 121 our mystic turns to the theme of *tark al-shukr* or ‘abandoning gratitude.’ It is in this chapter that Ibn al-‘Arabī explains how it is that the perfection of the given virtue necessitates leaving it altogether, at least in the conventional sense. On the surface, the idea seems to mark a significant departure from the orientation one encounters in the previous chapter, particularly in light of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s high estimation of the *shakūr*, characterized as he is by the continuity of his gratitude *fī kullī ḥāl*, and his profound awareness of both open and hidden blessings. The logic of the following chapter, however, can only be appreciated when we consider that for Ibn al-‘Arabī the virtues reach their completion when they are relinquished of all traces of the ego or self. Gratitude in this light is only perfected when the human subject withdraws all claims to it, thereby allowing God, the only real actor in existence, to enter into a dialectical relationship with Himself. ‘Far from representing a blameworthy attitude,’ as Chodkiewicz accurately points out, ‘this abandonment must be interpreted each time as a moving beyond the preceding *maqām*, a purification aimed at liberating the *sālik* of what remains of duality in the station he has attained,’ adding that it is through this *tark* that the philosophy of the unity of being, ‘which constitutes the keystone of this complex architecture, is envisaged in itself or in its doctrinal consequences.’<sup>46</sup>

46. Chodkiewicz, ‘*Mi‘rāj al-kalima*,’ *JMIAS* 45, 10. See also Binyamin Abrahamov, ‘Abandoning the Station (*tark al-maqām*) as Reflecting Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Principle of Relativity,’ *JMIAS* 47 (2010): 23–46. Abrahamov’s article is useful because he provides a terse synopsis of the manner in which many of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s stations are to be abandoned. What Abrahamov, in view of this author, does not sufficiently recognize is that there is a ‘principle of relativity’ present in any ethical system, and in this respect, such a principle is not unique to Ibn al-‘Arabī. The examples below illustrate this point.

But it should be noted that even outside of formal considerations of the ultimate goal of the mystic, realized in its fullness through the abandonment of gratitude and the transcendence of an illusory ontological dichotomy which separates the human subject from the divine object, there is also a purely ethical and juridical basis for the idea that certain kinds of activities which may otherwise be virtuous must be left within specific contexts. That is to say, even if we move outside of the framework of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, there are situations in which the proper course of action would require of one to refrain from an activity, which might, in a general sense, and within a different set of circumstances, be considered praiseworthy. In this light, sometimes the virtuous thing to do is to ‘abandon’ a virtue, and this abandonment forms a necessary part of the embodiment of virtue as a whole. Ibn al-‘Arabī explains how this is so through the example of *ṣidq*:

(God) has made truthfulness (*ṣidq*) an act of worship, but He did not assign praise to it in every circumstance. Backbiting (*ghība*) is an act of truthfulness, but it is a blameworthy form of truthfulness; and tale-bearing of offense (*namīma bi al-sū’*) is an act of truthfulness, and it too is blameworthy. There are many circumstances in which truthfulness is blameworthy, even though truthfulness is absolutely (*ma‘a al-iftlāq*) a praised quality.<sup>47</sup>

There are numerous other examples that could be given to illustrate what Ibn al-‘Arabī has in mind. We may note the case of satisfaction or good-pleasure (*riḍā*), which although a central virtue within Islamic piety, is not applicable in every circumstance. Although the Qur’ān ascribes the quality to God, it also makes it clear, for example, that ‘He does not have *riḍā* with the ingratitude (*kufī*) of His servants.’<sup>48</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī uses this line of reasoning in Chapter 129 on ‘abandoning satisfaction

47. *Fut.2:203*. For our mystic’s use of Makkī, see Saeko Yazaki, *Islamic Mysticism and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī: The Role of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 2013), 99–100; William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY, 1989), 103.

48. Q.39:7.

(*tark al-riḍā*)’ to explain that the human being should not be pleased with everything, in all circumstances, because God Himself does not have *riḍā* with everything. Moreover, satisfaction with one’s own state cuts off spiritual aspirations (*himmā*) and a desire for greater knowledge, without which any real development on the Way is not possible.<sup>49</sup>

We may also consider the example of humility (*tawāḍu‘* / *khushū‘*). Understood in the conventional sense as a kind of lowliness, the very opposite of pride, it need not be exercised before everyone and in every circumstance, since ‘to be proud before the rich...is part of humility.’<sup>50</sup> Only an ethically unsophisticated and counterproductive view of *tawāḍu‘* and *khushū‘* would demand a continuous state of abasement before all people, thereby preventing one, when necessary, from standing up to falsehood, injustice and tyranny. One may recall here the famous episode from the life of Christ, who, despite his words, ‘blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,’ and his exhortation to ‘turn to them the other cheek,’ did not restrain himself from turning over the tables of the moneylenders in the Temple in an act of holy violence.<sup>51</sup> Many other examples could be given. At risk of redundancy, it is sufficient to note that the idea of abandoning a virtue is not so radical to begin with, and need not be grounded in the presuppositions of a non-dual mystical framework, even though its full logic is only obtained, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, when the Absolute is existentially realized as the supreme agent.

## THE LEVELS OF ABANDONING GRATITUDE

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s example of *ṣiḍq* sets the stage for his discussion of *tark al-shukr* which follows, beginning with its lower levels. The example he gives of an acceptable form of abandonment

49. *Fut.*2:213. For more on *riḍā*, see Atif Khalil, ‘Contentment, Satisfaction, and Good-Pleasure (*Riḍā*) in Early Sufi Moral Psychology,’ *Studies in Religion* 43, no. 3 (2014): 1–19.

50. The saying is attributed to Ibn Mubārak (Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 292), but also has its basis in a prophetic tradition.

51. Matthew 5:5, 5:39, 21:12.

is the case of one who does not witness the divinity within the means through which he receives the gift. It is permissible for him not to express gratitude to God, because such *shukr*, after all, requires a cognizance or awareness of divine benefaction. 'Abandoning gratitude,' he states, 'because of seeing the act of benefaction from the human being alone is a sound abandonment (*tark ṣaḥīḥ*). This is the station of the common folk (*maqām al-ʿumūm*). It is a sound abandonment for the common folk from among the people of God.'<sup>52</sup> While imperfect, this *tark* is nevertheless acceptable for our mystic considering the abandoner's state. While Ibn al-ʿArabī does not address whether or not such a one thanks the human means through whom he receives the gift, there is no reason to presume he does not when we recall that he is of 'the folk of God.' It is unlikely anyone who stands in this rank would, in our mystic's eyes, fail to fulfill so basic a moral obligation as thanking others according to the measure of their right. As he states in the previous chapter, 'gratitude towards the benefactor is obligatory on the basis of both rational proofs and revelation (*ʿaqlan wa sharʿan*).'<sup>53</sup> The inability of the recipient of the gift to recognize the divine self-disclosure or *tajallī*, however, is another matter, and one that is excusable since he is of the *ʿumūm*, and not of the elect.

The mystic then proceeds to describe the gratitude of the perfect ones (*al-kummāl min al-nās* [sing. *kāmil*]). Their perfection with respect to *shukr* is the result of the two-pronged or dual nature of their gratitude, which leads them to thank both God and people, or in more theological terms, both the Causer of causes (*musabbib al-asbāb*) and the secondary causes (*asbāb*). Unlike those who stand at the level below them, they are not veiled by the means through which divine gifts come their way, and therefore fulfill – as far as the obligations of gratitude are concerned – both the rights of God and His servants. They are thankful to God because they see Him as the Ultimate Benefactor, thereby fulfilling the 'right of gratitude' (*ḥaqq al-shukr*) which, as Ibn al-ʿArabī makes clear in the previous chapter,

52. *Fut.2:203.*

53. *Fut.2:202.*

necessitates recognizing the principle origin of all benefactions.<sup>54</sup> And they are thankful to others out of their desire to live up to the Qur’anic commandment, ‘Be grateful to Me and to your parents,’<sup>55</sup> and the words of the Prophet, ‘He who has not shown gratitude to people has not shown gratitude to God.’<sup>56</sup> Since the divinity is not concealed for them by the world of relativity, nor does the divinity, inversely, conceal them from such a world – in which case they would show gratitude to God but not people<sup>57</sup> – they are grateful to both.

But what does this level of gratitude, despite its completeness, have to do with *tark al-shukr*? After all, what exactly have

54. It has at least part of its basis in a famous *ḥadīth* in which God says to Moses, ‘Be grateful to Me with true gratitude (*ḥaqq al-shukr*).’ On hearing this the Israelite prophet asks, ‘O Lord, and who is capable of such a thing?’ to which God replies, ‘if you see that the blessing is from Me, then you have shown gratitude to Me with true gratitude.’ *Fut.*2:202; cf. Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:413; Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 335; Sīrjānī, *Bayāḍ*, 302.

55. Q.31:14.

56. *Fut.*2:204.

57. This possibility is embodied in the person who, through his absorption in the contemplation of the One, becomes unconsciousness of the world of multiplicity, and therefore witnesses and thanks none but the divinity alone. The idea is reflected in a saying attributed to Shiblī, that ‘gratitude is the vision of the Benefactor, not the gift (*al-shukr ru‘yat al-mun‘im lā al-ni‘ma*).’ Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 335. The idea of thanking God but not the means also appears within formulations of gratitude that reflect lower stages of the path, and which encourage the wayfarer to turn away from the world altogether, along with the conventional responsibilities that accompany it, so as to fix one’s attention entirely on the Absolute. An example of this may be found in a saying ascribed to Abū ‘Uthmān al-Ḥīrī, that ‘the truthfulness of gratitude is that you do not praise anyone other than the Benefactor (*ghayr al-mun‘im*), and the reality of gratitude is that you do not show gratitude for the gift because it is a veil over the Gift-giver.’ Ṭabarī, *Salwat al-‘arīfīn*, 165. For a similar saying attributed to Dhū al-Nūn, see Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 341 (chap. on *yaqīn*), and Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 71. See also Helmut Ritter, *Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār*, trans. John O’Kane with the editorial assistance of Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 219. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, naturally, both of these perspectives remain, at face value, deficient for reasons already explained.

the perfect ones abandoned? For Ibn al-‘Arabī, they have abandoned what he calls, somewhat provocatively, the *tawḥīd* of gratitude – the reason being their introduction of a partner in their gratitude to God. But since this association is itself the result of a divine commandment, it is a praiseworthy form of ‘sharing’ or ‘co-partnering,’ without which the obligations of *shukr* imposed on them would remain unrealized.<sup>58</sup> In the words of our mystic, ‘this is the station of abandoning gratitude, that is, abandoning the *tawḥīd* of gratitude towards the root Benefactor, for he has made his gratitude to Him share (cf. *shirk*) between the Benefactor at root and the secondary cause, out of the command of God.’<sup>59</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of language here should not be glossed over, since by transforming the *shirk* of gratitude into the ideal (because it involves introducing a partner in one’s gratitude to God), and relegating the *tawḥīd* of gratitude to a lower level (because it entails an infringement of an explicit divine command), he overturns the usual associations of these terms (where *tawḥīd* is praiseworthy and *shirk* blameworthy). The provocatory nature of his language, it seems, is not just for the sake of provocation, but to loosen, instead, our rigid, formulaic and reifying ways of thinking about God – a hallmark not just of Ibn al-‘Arabī, but of mystics across traditions (as Sells has so ably shown<sup>60</sup>). In a strange way, the strategy is also more faithful to those aspects of the Qur’anic text that emphasize the total otherness of God, along with the inability of the human mind to enclose Him, than approaches typically found in rational theology and philosophy.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s description of the *tark al-shukr* of the *kummal* does not end here. He goes on to explain how the full perfection of their gratitude is only obtained when God is realized as the supreme agent. This in turn can be viewed from two perspectives. (1) The servant may be marked by gratitude to the extent

58. *Fut.2:204*.

59. *Fut.2:204*. Translated differently it may also read, ‘he partnered in his gratitude (*sharraka fī shukrihi*) the Benefactor at root with the secondary cause, out of the command of God.’

60. See Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), particularly his introduction and epilogue.

that gratitude occurs through him. However, to the extent the gratitude is that of the Real, he relinquishes all claims to it. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes of such a one that he is ‘an abandoner of gratitude from one perspective, and characterized by it from another.’<sup>61</sup> (2) From another point of view, which is that of God *qua* His absoluteness – or as Ghazālī says in his own treatment of *shukr* in the *Iḥyā’*, from the view of pure *tawḥīd*<sup>62</sup> – He is the *shākir* absolutely (*shākiran muṭlaqan*),<sup>63</sup> which is another way of saying there is no *shākir* except God. The servant’s perception of his own gratitude is, from this vantage point, false and illusory, since the Real is the only actor in existence.

But the matter, as we would expect, does not end there either. Just as God is the only true *shākir*, He is also the only One to whom gratitude can be shown. In other words, there is no *mashkūr* but Him. While this is to state the obvious in so far as thanking God directly is concerned, it is no doubt perplexing and counter-intuitive when we consider human objects of gratitude, or the secondary causes through which gifts come our way. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, the matter is only beguiling for those who are not in a continuous state of witnessing God, and who fail to recognize the tapestry of divine self-disclosures that give the cosmos its very fabric of existence. For those who do know, however, and live in this reality – the *kummal* in our mystic’s eyes – the entire dialectical relationship is one the Real has with Himself within Himself, and forms part of an interplay that occurs *in divinis*. Ibn al-‘Arabī explains this relationship in Chapter 558, entitled the ‘Presence of Gratitude (*Ḥaḍrat al-shukr*),’ through the example of charity and gift-giving. He begins with a basic premise of his ontology:

The divine state is like the state of existence, because He is its very being. There is none other than Him. Thus, He did not express gratitude to anyone except Himself, since He did not confer a gift except upon Himself. No one received and accepted it except

61. *Fut.*2:204.

62. Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, 4:133; cf. the saying attributed to Ibrāhīm al-Khawwās in *Sīrjānī*, *Bayāḍ*, 302.

63. *Fut.*2:204.

Himself. Therefore God is the Gift-giver (*mu'tī*) and the Receiver (*ākhiḏh*). It is just as he (the Messenger) said, 'charity falls into the hands of the all-Merciful,' because He receives the charity. The hand of the beggar is a form that veils the hand of the all-Merciful, and so the charity comes into the hand of the all-Merciful before it even arrives into the hand of the beggar. Or if you like, you may say 'the hand of the beggar is the very hand of the Gift-giver,' and that the Real thanks His servant for the gift, so that he may give Him more of it (cf. *ziyāda*).<sup>64</sup>

He then goes on to explain the true nature of this relationship between God and the human being by turning to a well-known, oft-cited *ḥadīth*:

God – glorified and exalted be He – said, 'I was hungry but you did not feed Me.' He (the servant) then sought from Him an explanation of the context, and asked, 'and how can You be fed when You are the Lord of the Worlds?' He – exalted be He – said, 'When so-and-so was hungry and asked you for food, and you did not feed him, had you fed him you would have found that person by My side (*la wajaḏta dhālika 'indī*).' And the story is told in the same way about the sick person, and the one who brings water (to the thirsty person), that is, 'it is I who would have received it, not him.' The *ḥadīth* is in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim. With these words we see that the Real is a veiled form (*ṣūra ḥijābiyya*) over the servant, and with respect to the receiving and giving, that the servant is a veiled form (*ṣūra ḥijābiyya*) over the Real.<sup>65</sup>

And so the circle of gratitude completes itself, beginning and ending with the Real. The relationship of *shukr* between God and the human being turns out, in the final order of things, to form part of an interplay that occurs within God Himself. To think that the human being can express gratitude to God is to fail to recognize that the servant is a 'veiled form over the Real.'

64. *Fut.4:242-3*. Note the end of the passage, where God seeks an increase from the servant for His own gratitude to him.

65. *Fut.4:242-3*.



And to think that one can thank any other than God is to fail to realize that ‘the Real is a veiled form over the servant.’

Earlier we saw how for Izutsu human ethics in the Qur’an stands as a pale reflection of divine ethics. From our treatment of the subject, we now see how Ibn al-‘Arabī carries out this Scriptural model to its end. The *paradox of monotheism* – alluded to by the contrasting quotations drawn from the medieval Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart with which we opened the essay – is resolved in a non-dual ontology that leaves room for none other than God.

