

REASON, INTELLECT, AND CONSCIOUSNESS
IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Abstract: In what follows, I address the broad contours of the Islamic “intellectual tradition,” by which I mean philosophy and Sufism. Specifically, I want to suggest that the important issue for this tradition was not how the technical operation of intelligence that we call “reason” is accomplished, but how human intelligence itself can be fully actualized. Notions of reason, intelligence, and consciousness were rooted in concepts of human potentiality, and these represented versions of what can be called “spiritual anthropology.” Human nature was understood as an on-going and ever-changing manifestation of the Divine Word or the Supreme Reality, and full actualization of this nature was seen as demanding a disciplined body, mind, and heart.

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Here I will pay more attention to Sufism than to philosophy (*falsafa*), not least because it has been the focus of most of my research over the past 40 years. Definitions of Sufism are easy to come by and typically disagree. I use the word in the most general sense: to designate the tendency among Muslims to strive for a personal engagement with the Divine Reality.² This tendency, found from the beginning of Islam, led to a proliferation of individuals, movements, and institutions that can be differentiated from other individuals, movements, and institutions that were more concerned with action, morality, belief, dogma, and rational investigation. Jurists (*fuqahā*), for example, devoted their attention to right activity; they codified the Shariah (the revealed

law) and offered advice on how to apply it. Experts in Kalām (apologetic theology) focused on clarifying and systematizing right understanding and right beliefs as extracted from the Koran. Neither jurisprudence nor Kalām, however, paid attention to the nature of the knowing subject that is striving to act correctly and believe rightly.

Philosophy and Sufism placed intelligence and consciousness at the center of their concerns. Philosophers studied *nafs*, self or soul, with the aim of actualizing ‘*aql*, intellect or intelligence—though in philosophical contexts the word is more often translated as “reason” and sometimes as “mind.” They looked upon ‘*aql* as an intelligent and intelligible luminosity that is innate to the human substance and possesses unlimited potential. Precisely because they gave a high profile both to reason and to logic (*manṭiq*), the tool by which reason is gauged, and they also paid a great deal of attention to mathematics and the natural sciences, they have been looked back upon by historians as the foremost “rational thinkers” of Islam. For most if not all of them, however, philosophy was not simply a rational technique or an investigative tool; it was a spiritual discipline that aimed at illumination, awakening, and self-transformation (as was also the case, according to Pierre Hadot and others, in Greek and pre-modern, Western philosophy). As for the Sufis, characteristically they were striving to achieve full self-awareness by reintegrating the human self into its divine prototype. Unlike the philosophers, they explicitly grounded their efforts in the Sunnah (the beautiful model, *uswa ḥasana*) of Muhammad and often took on the social responsibility of guiding the masses on the path to God. Nonetheless, at least from the time of Suhrawardī (d. 1191), the founder of the Illuminationist School of philosophy, it is often difficult to distinguish the philosophical quest for wisdom from the Sufi quest for God.³

Like scholars in other fields, Sufis wrote countless treatises, usually with a practical orientation, but often containing complex theoretical discussions. Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240) was the outstanding example of an accomplished master of every dimension of Sufi theory and practice who felt compelled to offer detailed, rational explanations of the human-divine interrelationship. Hundreds of other important authors—most of them unstudied in modern times—also made significant contributions to the formulation of Sufi teachings, whether theoretical or practical.

Before trying to clarify the notion of intelligence and consciousness, it may be useful to recall that the worldview of the modern West—in the context of which all of us have been educated—is radically different from that of pre-modern civilizations generally and the Islamic tradition specifically. We moderns, for example, feel comfortable talking about “consciousness” as something to be studied and investigated, much as we might study microorganisms or the workings of the brain—and indeed, many would consider

consciousness totally explicable in terms of biological mechanisms. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the bifurcation of the human being into a clearly distinct subject and object, which we take for granted (however much we may be opposed to it philosophically), took a long time to become rooted in the Western mind, whether or not Descartes was the first to formulate it clearly.

If we want to understand the Islamic way of explicating the nature of reason and consciousness, we need to remember that the sources provide no terminology corresponding exactly with subject and object. Underlying this tradition is a nondual understanding of things that has profound similarities with schools of non-Western thought like Advaita Vedanta, which identified Brahman with Atman, that is, the Supreme Reality with the Supreme Self. For this Indian tradition, life, consciousness, awareness, and joy are infinitely present in the Self/Reality, and the universe can be nothing but its “names and forms” (*nama-rupa*). Brahman/Atman is *sat-chit-ananda*, “being-consciousness-bliss,” and everything else—Maya—is its reverberation. Where subject ends and object begins remains always a puzzle, for the two are intimately linked.

Christian theologians of Medieval times, who spoke of Being as the Beautiful, the True, and the Good, would not have found this Hindu view of things too difficult to grasp, nor would Muslim philosophers and Sufis. But over time, the Western tradition tended to drift into an interpretation of existence, and indeed of reality itself, that stripped it of all that is qualitative, good, and beautiful. Islamic thought, however, had no room for existence divorced from consciousness, nor could it ever imagine that the underlying stuff of reality is an amorphous matter/energy waiting for cosmic accidents to occur, eventually giving rise to life, awareness, self-consciousness, and reason as a series of epiphenomena. On the contrary, existence and consciousness, reality and awareness, beauty and joy, are omnipresent and permeate all that exists.

1. THE CONSCIOUS SELF

Any number of Arabic words are used in ways that overlap with the modern use of consciousness and awareness, two words that I take here as synonyms, though their meanings might usefully be distinguished. My purpose, however, is simply to suggest something of the variety of words employed by Muslim thinkers to address a general field of inquiry.⁴ These words made sense in a context that acknowledged that most of reality is unavailable to everyday perception. What we experience through our senses is simply the radiation or sedimentation of deeper or higher strata of consciousness and

awareness. In other words, “In the beginning”—whether we take this as a temporal beginning, or an atemporal, ontological beginning—“was the Word,” and the Word was and is alive, aware, and omniscient. What we perceive in our mundane reality can be nothing but what the Koran calls the “signs” (*āyāt*) of God, the markers and signifiers of the transcendent and immanent Real (*al-ḥaqq*).

Generally, Muslim thinkers spoke of the invisible something that animates living things as *rūḥ* and *nafs*. *Rūḥ*, typically translated as “spirit” and cognate with Hebrew *ruwach*, derives from the same root as *rīḥ*, “wind” (Latin *spiritus*). *Nafs*, translated as “self” or “soul” and employed in Arabic as a reflexive pronoun, is written the same way as *nafas*, breath, and is cognate with Hebrew *nephesh*; it plays a role in the conceptualization of the self and the universe analogous to that of both Sanskrit *prana* and Chinese *qi*.

Rūḥ and *nafs* are important Koranic terms and much discussed by Muslim scholars, not least philosophers. Some authors considered *rūḥ* and *nafs* synonyms, and others preferred to distinguish between the two, often following Koranic usage. Either term can designate what we mean if we talk, for example, about the awareness or consciousness of animals. Neither term has any upper limit; each designates a perceived or presumed subjectivity, whether in animals, humans, or angels (the last of which are often defined simply as “spirits,” or “spirits blown into bodies of light”). Moreover, it is not unusual for philosophers and scholars to speak of the “mineral spirit” (*rūḥ ma’danī*) or the “vegetal spirit” (*rūḥ nabātī*), and the Koran speaks of God’s *rūḥ* as well as his *nafs*. Clarifying what these terms mean in relation to the Unique, Indivisible God provided theologians, philosophers, and Sufis the opportunity to write countless chapters and volumes.

A third word that is extremely important in discussions of human consciousness is *qalb*, “heart” (Persian *dil*). The Koran situates the heart at the center of human awareness and intelligence. In contrast to modern usage, the heart is not the source of emotions and sentiments, because these are what cloud and obscure the heart. In Koranic terms, the heart becomes “blind,” “rusty,” or “ill,” and this results in ignorance and forgetfulness, which in turn lead to disobedience and sin. The Sufi tradition speaks of attaining nearness to God by means of purifying the heart to the point where only unsullied intelligence remains. Rūmī and others refer to those who achieve this goal as “the folk of the heart” (*ahl-i dil*), to whom they see a reference in an often cited *ḥadīth qudsī* (a saying of Muhammad that quotes the words of God), “My heavens and My earth do not embrace Me, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me.”⁵

A parallel discussion goes on in the philosophical tradition using the word ‘*aql*, reason or intellect, rather than *qalb*. Whichever word is used, it designates

an ideal human perfection that needs to be realized, not the faculty or organ that goes by the name in ordinary usage. When we ascribe intellect or heart to ourselves, we are speaking in metaphorical terms. The only true intellect—the “actual intellect” (*al-‘aql bi’l-fi’l*) of the philosophers—is that which has achieved conjunction (*ittiṣāl*) with the Agent Intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘‘āl*), also called the Universal Intellect (*al-‘aql al-kullī*). This is God’s first creation, the radiance of divine consciousness, none other than the Pen (*qalam*, Koran 68:1, 96:4), which writes out the universe. In a parallel way, the only true heart is that which embraces God and gazes upon him at every moment.

Sufi texts frequently discuss the soul/self as having levels of actualization. Early schemes often focus on three ascending levels, using terms derived from the Koran: *al-nafs al-ammāra (bi’l-sū)*, “the soul that commands (to the ugly)” (12:53), *al-nafs al-lawwāma*, “the soul that blames [itself for its own shortcomings]” (75:2), and *al-nafs al-muṭma’inna*, “the soul at peace [with God]” (89:27). Other levels are often added, such as *al-nafs al-mulhama*, “the inspired soul” (derived from 91:7-8).⁶ It is not uncommon for authors to speak of seven levels; those who achieve the highest level are in constant communion with God.

A similar discussion goes on using the term *laṭīfa*, “subtlety”, the invisible dimension of the human being—precisely what is called, from various standpoints, soul, spirit, heart, and intellect. This becomes a standard theme in later Sufi manuals, which instruct disciples in techniques of meditation, though the seven subtleties do not necessarily have the same names in each case, nor are they always called subtleties.⁷ A typical list gives *qālab* ([bodily] frame) or *ṭab’* (nature), *nafs* (soul), *rūḥ* (spirit), *‘aql* (intellect), *sirr* (mystery, secret heart), *khafī* (hidden), and *akhfā* (most hidden).⁸

Not surprisingly, Sufis also discuss levels of heart and intellect. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 912) talks of four stations (*maqām*) of the heart,⁹ and Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 1256) speaks of the heart’s seven stages (*ṭawr*).¹⁰ Rūmī uses poetical imagery to speak of many degrees of intelligence. As he describes it, the prophets dwell in the consciousness of the Universal Intellect, and others partake of various degrees of the partial intellect (*‘aql-i juzwī*). Thus, he writes,

The disparity among intellects—understand this well—
 extends in degree from earth to heaven.
 One intellect is like the disc of the sun,
 another less than Venus or a shooting star.
 One intellect is giddy like a lamp,
 another is like a spark of fire,
 For, when clouds rise up before the intellects,
 their God-seeing eye is obscured.
 Partial intellect has disgraced the Intellect—
 desire for this world has deprived man of his [true] desire.¹¹

2. KNOWLEDGE

If we look at consciousness as a general word for human subjectivity, one Arabic word that comes close to having the same expansive meaning is *‘ilm*, knowledge. As a verbal noun, *‘ilm* designates the act of knowing, and in early Arabic it had no plural; later, it also came to designate a branch of knowledge, or a “science,” and at that point authors employed the plural *‘ulūm*. The word can also mean a person’s knowledge, that is, what someone knows, in which case it is synonymous with *ma‘lūmāt* (“known things”) and is likely to be translated as “learning.” In Sufi writings *‘ilm* often connotes rote and bookish learning as contrasted with real understanding.

Words derived from the same root tell us something of how knowledge was conceptualized. *‘Alam* means impression, track, trace, landmark, banner; *‘alāma* means mark, sign, token. Knowledge is thus connected etymologically with distinctions, signs, and marks. Most interesting is the word *‘ālam*, world or cosmos, which the lexicographers explain as meaning “that by means of which one knows,” or “that by means of which the Creator is known.” Ibn al-‘Arabī is simply reminding us the word’s etymology when he says, “We mention the cosmos (*‘ālam*) with this word to let it be known (*‘ilm*) that by this word we mean that God has made the cosmos a mark (*‘alāma*).”¹²

When Sufis and philosophers discuss the word *‘ilm*, they typically say that it cannot be defined, because it is presupposed by every definition. Any explanation is simply the act of knowing trying to know itself, like vision trying to see itself. It follows that in order to understand knowledge, one must know the knowing self, and in order to know the knowing self, one must not only know where it is situated in all of reality, but also awaken to the full power of intelligence latent in oneself. Typically, however, the attempt to know the self remains at the level of learning (*‘ilm*), that is, studying and analyzing the manifestations of self, or discussing what others have said about the knowing self. Such an exercise, despite its usefulness and perhaps necessity, is not self-knowledge or self-consciousness. True self-knowledge can only come through knowing the conscious self directly, without the intermediary of sense perception, imagination, ratiocination, conceptualization, and theorizing.

The Safavid-period philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) calls this direct, unmediated consciousness “non-instrumental knowledge” (*‘ilm ghayr ālī*), which is to say that it is found by the knowing/known self without any intermediary whatsoever. In Ṣadrā’s terms, it is achieved when intellecter (*‘āqil*), intellected (*ma‘qūl*), and intellect (*‘aql*) are united as one.¹³ One could also say, “when reasoner, reasoned, and reason become one.” Moreover, *‘aql* is the word that was used to translate Greek *nous*, so Ṣadrā’s expression can be a translation of Aristotle’s definition of God as “thought thinking thought”

(*noêsis noêseôs noêsis*). In any case, this sort of synthetic, unified knowledge is none other than the “wisdom” (*ḥikma*) that the “lover of wisdom” was striving to achieve. The path to achieving it is identical with the quest to become fully human, or what Sufis call “the Perfect Human Being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*).

Sufi authors often refer to unmediated consciousness of self as *maʿrifā*, a word that can be used as a synonym for *ʿilm*, though it connotes recognizing rather than knowing. The secondary literature frequently translates this word as “gnosis” in the sense of direct, intuitive knowledge. Its active participle, *ʿārif*, is commonly used in Sufi texts—and by the great philosopher Avicenna (d. 1037)—to designate the “gnostics,” those who have achieved unmediated knowledge of the object of the quest.¹⁴ The most important *locus classicus* for the technical understanding of the word is the purported saying of the Prophet, “He who recognizes (*ʿarafa*) his own self (*nafs*) recognizes his Lord.” In the present context, one could equally well translate this, “He who becomes truly conscious of himself becomes truly conscious of his Lord,” which is to say that those who attain true self-consciousness simultaneously reach true God-consciousness. At that point, the knowing Self and the known Object are indistinguishable; intellecter, intellected, and intellect are one. As a scriptural basis for this sort of consciousness, Sufis cite the famous *ḥadīth qudsī* in which God says, “When I love My servant, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees, the foot with which he walks, and the hand with which he grasps,” not to mention the heart with which he is conscious.¹⁵

The mention of love (*ḥubb*) in this hadith is highly significant. It helps explain the central importance given to love in Sufi writings, not least in the works of the great Sufi poets, like Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Rūmī, and Yunus Emre. Love is considered the motive force that brings about union between lover and beloved, knower and known, intellecter and intellected. In the last analysis, man as lover of God turns out to have been God as lover of man, for man and God are lover and beloved of each other, and the culmination of their love is union. The Koran speaks of this mutual love in the verse, “He loves them, and they love Him” (5:54). At the summit of realized love, no distinctions are to be drawn between lover and beloved, subject and object.

3. THE UNITY OF THE REAL

To put Sufi discussions of transformed consciousness into a broader context, we need to have a clear sense of the underlying worldview, which is founded on the first Shahadah, the four words *lā ilāha illā Allāh*, “(There is) no god but God.” This sentence, commonly called *kalimat al-tawḥīd*, “the statement that

asserts (God's) unity," is the starting point of Muslim faith and practice. Islamic God-talk—whether in Kalām, Sufism, or philosophy—unpacks its implications, typically in terms of the many names by which God calls himself in the Koran.

The two halves of the Shahadah—"no god" and "but God"—are known as the negation (*nafy*) and the affirmation (*ithbāt*). They point to two of the Shahadah's basic senses: First, it negates all qualities designated by the divine names from "everything other than God" (*mā siwa' llāh*), which is a standard definition of the cosmos (*'ālam*), "that by means of which one knows." And second, it affirms that all positive qualities of created things, inasmuch as they are really present, can belong only to God. In other words, *tawhīd* declares God's simultaneous absence and presence, or transcendence and immanence.

The statement of *tawhīd* tells us that qualities designated by the divine names—such as life, mercy, knowledge, power, justice, and forgiveness—belong strictly to God. God alone is "Real" (*ḥaqq*), to use the Koranic term; or, he alone is Being (*wujūd*), to use the philosophical expression. It follows that everything other than God, in and of itself, is "unreal" (*bāṭil*) or "nonexistent" (*ma'dūm*). This way of looking at things underlies the famous distinction drawn by Avicenna between the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) and contingent things (*mumkināt*). Discussing God in terms of *wujūd* becomes a mainstay of Sufi theory at least from the time of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who, despite his critique of Avicenna, was thoroughly philosophical in his approach.¹⁶

While negating reality from everything other than God, the statement of *tawhīd* also affirms that things possess a certain conditional and contingent reality. "No god but God" means that everything other than God receives any semblance of reality that it may have as a merciful bestowal from the Real Being. Human consciousness, qua *human* consciousness, is essentially an illusion, because consciousness is a reality, and "There is no reality but the Real." Hence, there is no consciousness but God's consciousness, no intelligence but God's intelligence, no rationality but God's rationality. To say that human consciousness and rationality are "essentially" illusions, however, does not mean that they have no reality or existence whatsoever. It simply means that they are dependent upon and derivative from the Divine Self-Knowledge, which is the only consciousness and awareness that is fully real. Whatever consciousness, rationality, and understanding we may have—and indeed, the exact nature and extent of this is precisely the issue—depends utterly on the Real. "They encompass nothing of His knowing save as He wills" (Koran 2:255). To the extent that we do not acknowledge and experience the derivativeness and relativity of human intelligence and awareness, we fail to recognize the Real, the world, and ourselves for what they are.

4. HUMAN NATURE

In discussing God's relationship with the cosmos, Sufi authors understand implicitly or say explicitly that everything makes manifest the signs (*āyāt*) and traces (*āthār*) of the divine names, which is to say that the cosmos (*‘ālam*) and everything within it are signposts (*‘alam*) and marks (*‘alāma*) of the Real. Human beings are distinguished from other creatures by having the potential to show forth the signs and marks of the supreme name of God (that is, the name *Allāh*), or, what comes down to the same thing, the full range of the divine names. This understanding of the human role in creation explains why philosophers sometimes describe the goal of their quest as "gaining similarity to God to the extent of human capacity" (*al-tashabbuh bi'l-ilāh bi qadr tāqat al-bashar*) or simply "deiformity" (*ta'alluh*, being like unto God).¹⁷ When Sufis explicate the nature of the Perfect Human Being, they prefer the expression "becoming characterized by the character traits of God" (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*), which Ibn al-Arabī offers as a definition of Sufism.¹⁸

Sufis find the notion of deiformity implicit in God's words, "He [God] taught Adam the names, all of them" (Koran 2:31). They also find it in the Prophet's reiteration of the Biblical statement, "God created Adam in His form (*ṣūra*)." Adam was the first prophet (*nabī*) and the first perfect human being. His perfection was intimately bound up with his omniscience, the fact that God taught him *all* the names—of both created things and God himself. It is Adam's consciousness of the rightful place of things relative to God, as well as his own appropriate response to things, which gave him the quality of being God's vicegerent (*khalīfa*) in the earth. As the Koran makes clear (2:30), God created Adam and taught him the names only after voicing to the angels his decision to appoint a vicegerent.

Islam does not consider Adam (a word that is often employed as a synonym for "man" in the nongendered sense) a "sinner." Rather, Adam "disobeyed" (*‘aṣā*) after having "forgotten" (*nasiya*) the divine command not to approach the tree, and that was the end of his disobedience. When Adam and Eve remembered, they repented and were forgiven. Only then were they sent down to the earth to play their proper roles as vicegerents. Thus human beings are created in the form of God and have the potential of achieving full consciousness of all the names, but they also have the tendency to forget, and this tendency predominates in Adam's children.

In order to achieve their proper status as vicegerents, people must "remember" (*dhikr*) God—that is, become conscious of Him—and perform their duties toward him as servant (*‘abd*). All of Islamic ritual is focused on keeping God in mind, and Sufism in particular takes remembrance of God as the essential

task of human beings. Thus the word *dhikr*, which also means “mention,” designates already in the Koran and Hadith the ritual repetition of divine names or Koranic formulae. This is why scholars often translate *dhikr* in the Sufi context as “invocation” and they point out that the practice is similar to *japa* in Hinduism or the Jesus prayer in Christianity.

So, remembering God is to repeat his name and to attempt to be aware of his presence, for, as the Koran says, “He is with you wherever you are” (57:4). Remembrance is the means whereby people can recover the knowledge, consciousness, and understanding that are innate to the primordial Adamic nature (*fiṭra*). It is the process of recovering real consciousness and becoming characterized by one’s own latent divine form.

5. THE RETURN

In more theoretical discussions of the human situation, authors speak of the “origin” (*mabda’*) and the “return” (*ma’ād*), terms derived from Koranic verses like, “He originates creation, then He makes it return” (10:4). So central is this notion to Islamic thinking that theologians take the “Return” (often translated as “eschatology”) as the third of the three principles of Islamic faith (after *tawḥīd* and prophecy). In explaining Origin and Return, many Sufis speak of “the arc of descent” (*qaws al-nuzūl*) and “the arc of ascent” (*qaws al-ṣu’ūd*), identifying them with the “two arcs” mentioned in Koran 53:9. Together, the two make up “the circle of existence” (*dā’irat al-wujūd*), which begins and ends at God.

The cosmos, then, is “everything other than God,” and it consists of a descending arc leading away from God and an ascending arc leading back to God. Some parts of the arc are closer to God and others further away (ontologically and qualitatively, of course, not “spatially”), so things can be divided into three basic worlds, which the Koran calls “the heavens, the earth, and what is between the two.” These are often called the world of spirits (*arwāḥ*), the world of bodies (*aḥsām*), and the world of images (*mithāl* or *khayāl*). This last world, which Henry Corbin called *mundus imaginalis*, is an intermediary realm that allows the intrinsic consciousness of spiritual beings to interrelate with the darkness and dullness of bodily things; on the descending arc, spirits become embodied in the world of images, and on the ascending arc, bodies become spiritualized in the same realm. The three basic levels of existence are replicated in the human microcosm as spirit (*rūḥ*), soul (*nafs*) or imagination (*khayāl*), and body (*jism*). The soul functions as the microcosmic world of images, or the “isthmus” (*barzakh*), between the spirit and the body, allowing the two to interact.

God created mankind, as the Koran puts it, “to serve Me” or “to be My servants” (*li ya’budūnī*, 51:56). Ibn ‘Abbās, the well-known companion of the Prophet, already interpreted this to mean “to recognize Me” or “to become conscious of Me” (*li ya’rifūnī*), using the verbal form of *ma’rifā*. In the later tradition this verse is often explained in terms of a purported *ḥadīth qudsī*: “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I desired to be recognized (*yu’raf*), so I created the creatures that they might recognize Me.” Among all creatures, only human individuals, created in God’s form, can recognize him fully—that is, in respect of his Self and the full panoply of his names. Other creatures are imperfect images of the Divine Reality and, in fact, were created as the means to bring man into existence and as the signs and marks of the divine names in the cosmos. The diversity of creatures with their wondrous mysteries is nothing but the outward reverberation of the infinite Hidden Treasure. The fact that man is the “intended entity” (*al-‘ayn al-maqṣūda*) in the cosmos is proven precisely by his unique ability to know “all the names,” to become conscious of all that exists, to be the self whose externalized and differentiated counterpart is the cosmos in its entirety.

By meditating on the universe and the prophetic revelations that explain its nature, we can see that it has three basic sorts of creatures—spirits (such as angels), imaginal beings (such as jinn), and bodily things (such as minerals, plants, and animals). At each level, there is an indefinite diversity of kinds and sorts.¹⁹ The distinguishing quality of spirits is the intensity and unity of life, light, consciousness, power, beauty, and so on down the list of divine attributes. The distinguishing quality of bodily things is the feebleness and scatteredness of life, light, consciousness, and so on. The qualities of imaginal beings are situated between those of spirits and bodies. As for human beings, they have the peculiar status of having been created as highly focused forms of the totality. At the spiritual level they have angelic qualities, at the bodily level they possess the diverse characteristics of bodily things, and at the intermediate, psychological or “soulful” (*nafsānī*) level, they are neither spiritual nor bodily, neither knowing nor ignorant, neither awake nor asleep, neither luminous nor dark. In this way of looking at things, the situation of the human self, as contrasted with the human spirit and the human body, is always in-between; the self is an imaginal reality, at once the image of spirit and the image of body.

The vast majority of human selves are forgetful of the primordial covenant that they made with God to carry the “trust” (*amāna*, Koran 33:72), or to act as his vicegerents. The function of the prophets is to “remind” (*dhikr*) them of their own nature and their own function, and their appropriate response is to “remember” (*dhikr*) who they are and to follow prophetic guidance. The goal is to “worship” God or to be his “servant,” and that demands recognizing him, loving him, and becoming conscious of him.

Origin and Return are among the first implications of *tawḥīd*—there is no reality but God, so anything other than God is contingent on his reality, both in its coming and its going. The return is compulsory (*iḍṭirārī*), for nothing whatsoever has any say in the matter. In contrast to other creatures, human beings possess a certain degree of freedom because of their divine form and their self-awareness. They can choose whether to accept or reject the call of the prophets. Like everything else, they are compelled to return to God, but they also have the option of engaging in a return that is voluntary (*ikhtiyārī*). In other words, prophetic guidance offers the path that leads to recognizing, understanding, and becoming conscious of the Hidden Treasure and to actualizing the latent divine character traits. By this means alone can people live and act appropriately in the world, that is, in full conformity with the Divine Reality, or in full contiguity with the Agent Intellect, or in full realization of their own deiformity.

Having been created in God’s form, human beings are woven of innumerable qualities deriving from the “ninety-nine” divine names. Potentially, they can conform fully to the divine names themselves and make all of them manifest, but typically they manifest only a few, and more often than not they display them in a distorted manner. The soul is dispersed and caught up with bodily and psychical multiplicity, so it needs to be unified by strengthening its awareness of the One. Its latent spiritual and divine attributes need to be brought out, actualized, harmonized, and integrated. Every step taken toward the One intensifies the inner light and, at the same time, brings about further integration of the innate traits of character. The voluntary return, then, aims at, and simultaneously depends upon, the awakening of the human soul to its divine core. That awakening is accompanied by the intensification of the light of reason, intelligence, and consciousness—ultimately, to the point that thought thinks itself.

6. THE PATH

It is worth remembering that the mythic structure of Islamic religiosity is shaped by two events: the descent of the Koran and Muhammad’s ascent (*mi’rāj*, literally, “ladder”) to the divine presence. God revealed himself through his Word, his articulate and intelligible self-expression. His Word provides the means for human souls to awaken to their innate nature and be guided to self-realization, that is, the actualization of deiformity. The Prophet Muhammad, as the recipient of the message from Gabriel, the angel of revelation, assimilated the message into his own being and was totally assimilated by it; he was then taken by Gabriel to the fruit of that assimilation, the personal encounter with God (the *mi’rāj*, also called *isrā’*, “night journey”).

The accounts of the *mi'rāj* say that Gabriel took Muhammad on a specific route: first to Jerusalem, then stage by stage through the seven heavens (that is, seven ascending levels of being and consciousness), until he eventually reached the furthest limits of the angelic realm. At that point Gabriel told him to continue on to the Divine Presence alone, which he did. Upon his return, he instituted the daily prayers (*ṣalāt*) as the ritual means whereby believers could themselves rise up to God. As the hadith has it, "The daily prayers are the ascent of the believer" (*al-ṣalāt mi'rāj al-mu'min*).

Islamic practice is understood as a path or road that leads to God. The Fātiḥa, the opening chapter of the Koran that is recited in every cycle of the ritual prayer, circles around the verse, "Guide us on the straight path," using the word *ṣirāt*, which also designates the posthumous narrow bridge that crosses over hell on the way to paradise—the symbolic identity of the straight path and the narrow bridge is not difficult to see. The word that is generally used for the revealed law, Shari'ah (*sharī'a*), also means path, as does the word that is generally used for Sufi organizations, Tariqah (*ṭarīqa*). A whole genre of Sufi writings explains in more or less detail the stages (*maqāmāt*, *manāzil*) that travelers (*sā'ir*, *sālik*, *musāfir*) must traverse in order to enter into God's Presence. The archetype for all of this is the *mi'rāj*, the ladder to God climbed by the Prophet. Avicenna himself wrote a book explaining the *mi'rāj* as the stages of intellectual perfection leading to the fullness of consciousness.²⁰

This is not the place to go over the diverse depictions of the stages of ascent set down by numerous Sufi authors over history. There is no agreement on the number—10, 40, 100, and 300 are mentioned among others, and often no set number is given. The most famous example in the West is provided by Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's long poem, *Mantiq al-ṭayr* ("The speech of the birds"), which provides a seven-level scheme, like the Prophet's own *mi'rāj*. What the authors of these treatises hold in common is that they depict the journey as dependent on divine grace and demanding discipline and self-effacement. By following the path, seekers of God can shuck off their blameworthy character traits and become characterized by praiseworthy character traits, which are nothing but the embodiment of divine names and attributes.

Sufis sometimes sum up the path to God with two words: *fanā'*, "annihilation," and *baqā'*, "subsistence." These derive from the Koranic verse, "Everything in [the earthly realm] undergoes *annihilation*, and there *subsists* the Face (*wajh*) of thy Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving" (55:27). In the typical interpretation, the negative character traits of the soul can gradually be eliminated, and, when they are, they are replaced by the positive traits of the divine Form in which Adam was created—the divine Form that this verse calls "the Face of thy Lord." Annihilation corresponds to the Shahadah's negation ("No god"), and subsistence to its affirmation ("but God").

In short, the path to God is a process whereby the soul is absorbed back into its divine prototype. When seekers advance in nearness (*qurb*) to God, their character traits, and not least their knowledge and consciousness, are transmuted. The modalities of knowing, however, are beyond count, for, as Ibn al-ʿArabī likes to remind us, “There is no repetition in [God’s] self-disclosure” (*lā takrār fi’l-tajallī*). In the human case, this divine self-disclosure is nothing other than the Face of God manifesting itself as the spirit, soul, and body of the seeker. In becoming manifest, it constantly bestows new consciousness and new awareness, which helps explain why Ibn al-ʿArabī says, “In the view of those who know the soul, the soul is an ocean without shore, so knowledge of it has no end.”²¹

Nonetheless, the diverse modalities of knowing-cum-being that open up to the soul can be classified into sorts and types. A book like Ibn al-ʿArabī’s monumental *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, “The Meccan Openings,” records the modalities of consciousness that were disclosed to the author’s soul when the door to the invisible realm was “opened” to him. As he remarks in a poem toward the beginning of the book,

When I kept knocking at God’s door,
I waited mindfully, not distracted,
Until the glory of His Face appeared to me
and He called me, only that.
I encompassed Being (*al-wujūd*) in knowledge (*‘ilm*)—
My heart has no knowledge but of God.²²

7. SEEING BY MEANS OF GOD

Theologians and Sufis commonly divide God’s “most beautiful names” (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) into categories. For example, some speak of “the seven leaders” (*al-a’immat al-sab’a*), which are the seven principal divine names from which the others derive. Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī, (d. ca. 1296), a second generation follower of Ibn al-ʿArabī, says that the seven are Alive (*ḥayy*), Knowing (*‘alīm*), Desiring (*murīd*), Speaker (*qā’il*), Powerful (*qādir*), Generous (*jawād*), and Just (*muqsīt*).²³ The order is based on relative compass and mutual dependence. Alive is presupposed by the other attributes, given that a dead thing does not know, desire, speak, or act. In the same way, nothing speaks without desiring to do so, and nothing desires without knowing.²⁴

Each of the Seven Leaders can be understood as a general divine attribute that has many subsidiaries, and, with a little imagination and reflection, one can categorize the remaining divine names accordingly; this is what Farghānī does, using a typical list of ninety-nine names (though “ninety-nine”

is by no means a definitive number). He says that under “Knower,” we can place 15 divine names that designate various modes of awareness and consciousness: Manifest (*zāhir*), Aware (*khābīr*), Seer (*baṣīr*), Hearing, (*samīʿ*), Encompassing (*muḥīṭ*), Embracing (*wāsiʿ*), Witness (*shahīd*), Finder (*wājīd*), Subtle (*latīf*), Light (*nūr*), Watchful (*raqīb*), Wise (*ḥakīm*), Remembering (*ḥafīz*), Guarding (*muhaymin*), Believing (*muʿmin*).²⁵ Several of these names provide points of reference in Sufi discussions of transformed consciousness and the actualization of true intelligence. A few examples can illustrate the approach.

The Koran calls God “the Seer” in about 50 verses. We have already met a frequently quoted hadith that tells us that God’s love for his servants can reach the point where he becomes their hearing and their “eyesight,” *baṣar*. “Seer,” *baṣīr*, is derived from this word *baṣar*. Concerning the relationship between divine and human sight, the Koran says, “The eyesights (*abṣār*, pl. of *baṣar*) do not perceive Him, but He perceives the eyesights” (6:103). This is typical Koranic rhetoric. Yes, the verse says, human beings do have eyes with which to see, but they do not see much and their vision does not extend into the unseen realm (*ghayb*). As for the Divine Seer, he sees all things, visible or invisible, including the very act of seeing. As the Koran says repeatedly, God is “Knower of the Unseen and the Visible.”

On the human level *baṣar* usually means eyesight, but it can also designate any kind of seeing, and it is contrasted in all of its meanings with “blindness” (*amā*)—the inability to see, whether on the physical, moral, intellectual, or spiritual level. Blindness is a quality found in creation, not in the Creator. As an attribute of the human heart, it is blameworthy and needs to be remedied, for it is nothing other than the firm-rootedness of the momentary forgetfulness that overcame Adam. In criticizing a group, the Koran says, “It is not the eyesights (*abṣār*) that are blind, but blind are the hearts (*qulūb*) within the breasts” (22:46). Or again: “Deaf, dumb, blind—they do not use their intellects” (2:171). The heart, the seat of consciousness, needs to be brought back to health and to its innate vision of things. When the heart sees, it recovers its innate, Adamic intelligence and rationality.

The Koran often refers to the quality of the seeing heart as *baṣīra*, a noun derived from the adjective *baṣīr*. We can translate it as “insight” to suggest the way it is commonly contrasted with *baṣar*, “eyesight.” Insight is the transformation of seeing and consciousness that occurs for prophets and those who follow in their footsteps. The Koran addresses Muhammad with the words, “Say: ‘This is my way. I call to God upon insight—I and whosoever follows me’” (12:108). Insight is one of the many words that Sufis discuss in trying to explain the nature of true consciousness. Ibn al-ʿArabī says that it is the same as “unveiling” (*kashf*, *mukāshafa*), the generic term for a God-given vision of the

way things truly are.²⁶ In the Koran, unveiling is associated with the clarity of seeing that the soul achieves after death: “We have now *unveiled* from you your covering,” says God to the recently deceased soul, “so your eyesight today is piercing” (50:22). Sufis read this as referring not only to physical death, but also to the death of the lower soul, that is, ignorance and heedlessness, and the birth in its place of true understanding and consciousness. In other words, they take “death” as a synonym for *fanā’*, the “annihilation” of self-centeredness, and they hold that death to ignorance is rebirth in knowledge; it is *baqā’*, the “subsistence” of the Divine Face, or God-consciousness.

As Rūmī likes to explain, people should strive to put the advice of the Prophet into practice: “Die before you die!” All of us have passed through many deaths in our on-going return to God. We began at the level of the mineral soul and then developed a vegetal soul (in the womb). In infancy, our souls were lifted up to the animal level, and then gradually we began to actualize our human souls. Every time we died to a lower soul, we were reborn to a higher soul. We should be striving to die to this ignorant human nature and be resuscitated through our angelic, spiritual nature. Once we achieve that, we can die once more and be reborn into the Unimaginable. “Why should I fear?,” says Rūmī after detailing these several deaths, “When did I ever become less by dying?”²⁷

8. ILLUMINATION WITH THE DIVINE LIGHT

One of the best known verses of the Koran begins with the words, “God is the light of the heavens and the earth” (24:35), and goes on to provide an analogy (*mathal*) that numerous philosophers and Sufis have undertaken to interpret. The most famous example is probably *Mishkāt al-anwār* (“The Niche of Lights”) by al-Ghazālī. He begins the book by analyzing the meaning of the word light (*nūr*). He says that most people use the word to refer to that which is seen in itself and which allows other things to be seen, like the sun. Then he tells us that eyesight, the power of the soul that allows us to see, is more deserving of the name, because physical light would remain invisible without it. The seeing eye has many imperfections, however, and these are overcome by the eye of the heart, which is called by names like reason/intellect (*‘aql*), spirit (*rūh*), and human soul (*nafs insānī*), so this eye is even more worthy of being called light. The Koran has a still greater claim to the name, because God’s Word has the same relation to the intellect as the sun has to eyesight. Finally, God himself, the source of all light, intelligence, and being, is most deserving of the name; only in God’s case is light identical with the thing itself, that is, with God’s very Essence (*dhāt*). Every light other than God is contingent and derivative, for God is “the Furthest, Highest Light, beyond which there

is no light and from which light descends to others.”²⁸ It follows that “just as everything becomes manifest to eyesight (*baṣar*) through outward light, so also everything becomes manifest to inward insight (*baṣīra*) through God.”²⁹

Al-Ghazālī’s whole treatise is an extended meditation on the formula of *tawḥīd*, specifically the implications of the version in which he cites it: “There is no light but His light.”³⁰ He shows that the universe is a hierarchy of beings made manifest by light, and that human development toward perfection goes by way of a series of five basic levels of spirit; at each level, illumination, consciousness, and rational perspicacity become more intense. He calls these five spirits sensing (*ḥassās*), imaginal (*khayālī*), intellectual (*‘aqlī*), reflective (*fikrī*), and holy prophetic (*qudsī nabawī*). He also warns against a common stumbling block: “Do not think that utmost perfection comes to a halt at yourself!”³¹

The opposite of light is darkness (*zulma*), also an important Koranic term, though in the 23 instances in which it occurs, it is pluralized, for Light is one, and the various forms that darkness assumes are countless. The obvious sense of the word in several of these verses is ignorance and unconsciousness, or the lack of awareness of the way things are: “God is the friend of those who have faith—He brings them out of the darknesses into the light” (2:257). “Those who cry lies to His signs are deaf and dumb in the darknesses” (6:39). “Say: Are the blind and the seeing (*baṣīr*) equal, or are the darknesses and the light equal?” (13:16). “A Book that We have sent down upon you [Muhammad], so that you may bring the people forth from the darknesses into the light” (14:1).

Ibn al-‘Arabī speaks of light as knowledge and consciousness in numerous passages, as, for example, in the following, where he employs the word to show that God as Light is the root of all perception (*idrāk*):

Were it not for light, nothing whatsoever would be perceived. . . . The faculties of smell, taste, imagination, memory, reason (*‘aql*), reflection, conceptualization, and everything through which perception takes place are all light. As for the objects of perception, if they did not have the preparedness to accept the perception of the those who perceive them, they would not be perceived. Hence they first possess manifestation (*zuhūr*) to the perceiver, then they are perceived. And manifestation is light. . . . Hence every object of knowledge has a relationship to the Real, and the Real is Light. . . . So nothing is known but God (*lā ma‘lūm illā Allāh*).³²

By this final sentence, another version of the formula of *tawḥīd*, Ibn al-‘Arabī is saying that there is nothing to be known but God’s signs, or his Face, or his Self-disclosure (*tajallī*), which is the divine light that fills heaven and earth, spirit and body, and everything in between. Light in itself, however, is unknowable, for, as Ibn al-‘Arabī likes to put it, in still another variant on *tawḥīd*, “None knows God but God.” It is this divine, all-perceiving, all-knowing Light

concerning which the Koran says, “The eyesights do not perceive It, but It perceives the eyesights” (6:103). At the same time, there is no faculty of the mind and no form of awareness and consciousness that is anything other than this all-perceiving light, for “There is no light but His light.” All consciousness is the radiance of God’s consciousness, for he is “the Light of the heavens and the earth.”

9. FINDING THE TRUE SELF

Al-Ghazālī points out that the divine name “Finder” (*wājjid*) indicates that God is the opposite of “lacking” (*fāqid*). It designates God as he who lacks nothing of what is appropriate for him. “All the attributes of divinity and their perfection are ‘found’ (*mawjūd*) with God, so in this respect He is ‘the Finder.’ He is the Finder in an absolute sense, and anything else, even if it finds something of the attributes and causes of perfection, also lacks certain things, so it can only find in a relative sense.”³³ This is straightforward *tawhīd*: There is none that finds but God, so anything else that finds has received a glimmer of this divine quality.

In his discussion of the fifteen names subsidiary to the Knower, Farghānī says that the Finder appears “in respect of the Knower’s encompassing what becomes manifest from Him and what remains nonmanifest, what comes forth from Him and what belongs to Him, such that it is inconceivable that He lack any of this.”³⁴ In other words, God is conscious of all that he is in himself and all that becomes manifest from him, that is, the cosmos, “everything other than God.”

Notice that Finder is the active participle of three nouns: *wajd*, *wijdān*, and *wujūd*. All three mean “to find,” but each has different connotations and usages. *Wijdān* commonly designates the act of finding within oneself, so it can mean feeling, emotion, sentiment, awareness. *Wajd* is likely to mean an intense or overpowering form of inner finding and is commonly translated as “ecstasy.” Most interesting here, however, is the word *wujūd*, which we have already met in its meaning of existence or being. From the time of Avicenna onward, *wujūd* in the sense of being/existence is a central discussion in philosophy and soon also in Kalām and Sufism.³⁵ But, we need to remember that what “exists,” in the original sense of the Arabic word, is simply “what is found.”³⁶ Existence and finding, or being and consciousness, are inseparably linked; no object can be found/can be existent (*mawjūd*) without a finding/existing subject (*wājjid*).

Wujūd, in short, cannot be discussed as inert, passive, unconscious, chaotic, arbitrary, aimless, lacking in qualitative richness. Quite the contrary, *wujūd* in its pure form—the Necessary Being of Avicenna, the Real Being of Ibn al-‘Arabī—demands by its very essence the diverse attributes that give rise to

an ordered, wise, compassionate, and blessed universe. In one work Avicenna counts these attributes as seven (though he does not call them “the seven leaders”): unity, eternity, knowledge, desire, power, wisdom, and generosity.³⁷ This list is not quite the same as Farghānī’s, but the issue is precisely the same: We cannot understand existence, being, reality, the cosmos, things, consciousness, ourselves, without grasping the basic qualities that are innate to the Real Being and that reach their highest cosmic reverberation in human wisdom and goodness. Knowledge—that is, consciousness of the true nature of things—is inseparable from the Necessary Being, as also are wisdom, compassion, and goodness. All contingent and created forms of knowing and consciousness flow forth from the Divine.

In studying the diverse writings of the Muslim philosophers, it is sometimes easy to forget that the final object of investigation—*wujūd*, the very being and existence that is the Primal Reality—is simultaneously the Primal Consciousness and the root of awareness. For his part, Ibn al-‘Arabī frequently reminds us of the quasi-identity of *wujūd*, *wijdān*, and *wajd*, not least by defining the term *wujūd*, in keeping with a standard Sufi gloss, as “finding the Real in ecstasy” (*wijdān al-ḥaqq fi’l-wajd*).³⁸ In other words, we find the fullness of consciousness and existence when we find God by losing ourselves; annihilation of egocentric limitations brings about subsistence of the Divine Form/Face. It is at this point that God is “the hearing with which you hear, the seeing with which you see.” Or, in Mullā Ṣadrā’s terms, this transmutation occurs when intellecter, intellected, and intelligence are united as one.

In this way of looking at things, we as humans cannot claim to have “existence” simply because we are here; our true existence is our true finding and consciousness, and our true finding is finding ourselves in the Real. This can happen only when we step out of the limitations of our ignorant, dark, and obscured selfhoods. Those who achieve this goal are then, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s terms, “the folk of unveiling and finding” (*ahl al-kashf wa’l-wujūd*), the perfect human beings.

Ibn al-‘Arabī has been blamed, by Louis Massignon among others, for being an “existential monist,” when in fact the *wujūd* that plays such a central role in his vocabulary means consciousness as surely as it means existence. It is only the preconceived notion of “existence” as empty of consciousness and awareness that could have led Massignon to this sort of misinterpretation. When Ibn al-‘Arabī, for example, says that each thing is a divine word articulated by the Breath of the All-Merciful (*nafas al-rahmān*), and that this Breath is nothing but *wujūd*, he is saying that all things are specifications and limitations of the divine Word, which is the self-aware articulation of the divine consciousness, and that all things are aware in keeping with their own capacity. It is human

beings alone, however, who have the potential to expand their consciousness beyond measure and to become “oceans without shores.”

We have already met the word *kashf*, unveiling, as a synonym for insight (*baṣīra*) and as the generic term for the removal of the obscurations that block the innate human understanding of things (that is, the names as taught to Adam). Ibn al-ʿArabī also uses the word as a synonym for *tajallī* or self-disclosure, one of the most characteristic Sufi notions in discussions of existence and consciousness. The word derives from the Koranic story of how Moses asked God to show himself. God responded that Moses would not see him unless the mountain remained standing. “And when his Lord *disclosed Himself* to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down thunderstruck” (7:143). In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s terms, “everything other than God”—the cosmos through which God is known—can be nothing but God’s self-disclosure, God’s unveiling (*kashf*) of his own names and attributes. Self-disclosure designates the shining forth of *wujūd* as both the existence and the awareness of creatures; each thing receives existence and awareness in its own measure. If Moses fell down thunderstruck, it was because he was annihilated (*fanāʾ*) by the unveiling of God’s reality from his own independent consciousness.

According to another common expression, the self-disclosure of God that is known as the universe is *wujūd* “deployed” (*munbasit*). Translators normally render *wujūd* here as existence or being, but it equally means finding and consciousness. God, after all, is the Finder, and when he discloses himself, he places the traces of his finding in all things, so all things are finders, each in its own measure. In some, that finding is so attenuated that we observers find no trace of it, so we call them “inanimate.” In others, it is so intense that it blinds our perceptual faculties, so we fail to see the angels and spirits that fill the invisible cosmos, nor do we see Satan and his cohorts among the jinn: “He sees you, he and his tribe, from where you see them not” (Koran 7:27). According to authors like al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-ʿArabī, the folk of unveiling alone are able to perceive the awareness of apparently inanimate things; this often happens when they hear such things talking among themselves or singing the praises of God, who, according to the Koran, “gave rational speech to everything” (41:21). As Ibn al-ʿArabī remarks,

Each created thing has a specific speech taught to it by God. It is heard by those whose hearing God opens up to its perception. All movements and artisanries that become manifest from animals and do not become manifest save from a possessor of reason (*ʿaql*), reflection, and deliberation, along with all the measures that are seen therein, signify that they have a knowledge of all this in themselves.³⁹

Rūmī often refers to the transmuted senses of those who follow the path to God, as in the verses,

Rational speech (*nuṭq*), eyes, and ears are the radiance of the spirit,
 like the radiance of fire in boiling water. . . .
 The rational speech of water, earth, and clay—
 each is perceived by the Folk of the Heart with their senses.⁴⁰

10. WITNESSING THE REAL

Al-Ghazālī sums up the significance of the name Witness, *shahīd*, by saying that it designates the second of the two sorts of knowing that God mentions when he calls himself “Knower of the unseen [or absent, *ghayb*] and the visible [or witnessed, *shahāda*]” (e.g., Koran 6:73). The unseen is everything nonmanifest (*bāṭin*), and the visible is everything manifest (*ẓāhir*).⁴¹ Farghānī explains that the name Witness means that the Knower is present (*ḥuḍūr*) with what becomes manifest from him (i.e., everything) and that he cannot possibly be absent (*ghayba*) from anything. By talking of the two basic worlds, al-Ghazālī makes the discussion of this name pertain to cosmology, and by talking of “presence” and “absence”—standard Sufi terms designating contrasting states (*ḥāl*) of awareness—Farghānī focuses on consciousness.⁴²

The name Witness derives from the verbal noun *shuhūd*, witnessing, seeing with the eyes, being present, testifying. The word will be recognized by anyone familiar with the debates that went on in the Indian subcontinent beginning with the Naqshbandī shaykh, Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624), who famously criticized Ibn al-ʿArabī for believing in *waḥdat al-wujūd*, “the oneness of *wujūd*.” According to Sirhindī, a true understanding of *tawḥīd* demands *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, “the oneness of witnessing.” His critique, however, has little to do with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s understanding of *wujūd* and is grounded rather in one version of the received wisdom concerning Ibn al-ʿArabī current in India at the time. The gist of what Sirhindī says is that *waḥdat al-wujūd*—an expression that Ibn al-ʿArabī did not use and that gained currency two centuries after him—declares the unity of God and the world, or an ontological (*wujūdī*) continuity between the One and the many, much in the style of what we might call “pantheism.” According to Sirhindī, Ibn al-ʿArabī mistakenly believes that “All is He” (*hama ūst*), an ecstatic formula that had been used in Persian before Ibn al-ʿArabī was born. Rather, Sirhindī tells us, one must come to realize that “All is from Him” (*hama az ūst*), and, when this is truly unveiled, that is “the oneness of witnessing.”

What Sirhindī does not seem to grasp is that Ibn al-ʿArabī saw the true understanding of *wujūd* to lie in “finding” (*wujūd*) the Real within the soul and “witnessing” (*shuhūd*) that there is no finder but God and no witness but God. Like Sufis in general, Ibn al-ʿArabī employs the word *shuhūd* (and *mushāhada*, from the same root) to mean contemplation and vision of the way things are in a

supra-rational sort of way; in other words, *shuhūd* is another near equivalent of *kashf*, unveiling. In fact, Ibn al-ʿArabī often treats the three words *kashf*, *wujūd*, and *shuhūd* as synonyms, especially in expressions like “the folk of unveiling and finding,” or “the folk of unveiling and witnessing,” or “the folk of witnessing and finding.” All these phrases designate those who have achieved *maʿrifa*, true recognition and consciousness of self and Lord. None of them suggests the ontological continuity that Sirhindī perceived in the *waḥdat al-wujūd* that he ascribed to Ibn al-ʿArabī.⁴³

The *tawḥīd* that undergirds Islamic thought ultimately demands that, in each case, what is witnessed, what is found, and what is unveiled be the Divine Self-disclosure. Moreover, the one who finds and understands the disclosure is nothing but the Face of God disclosing itself as awareness and consciousness. Ibn al-ʿArabī, in particular, insists on this point, given that it is simply *tawḥīd*’s logical consequence: “There is no knower but the Real,” and “None knows God but God.” The issue that needs investigation is the modality in which the unreal is given glimpses and glimmers of what truly is. It is these glimmers and glimpses that make up the unreal’s knowledge, understanding, consciousness, intelligence, reason, and everything else making it what it is. As Ibn al-ʿArabī says in a typical reminder,

In respect to His Essence (*dhāt*) and His *Wujūd*, nothing stands up to the Real; He cannot be desired or sought in His Essence. The seeker seeks and the desirer desires only recognition (*maʿrifa*) of Him, witnessing (*mushāhada*) of Him, or vision (*ruʾya*) of Him, and all of these are *from* Him; they are not He Himself.⁴⁴

Many other terms, some of them deriving from the 16 divine names mentioned by Farghānī, some not, could be discussed in trying to flesh out the Sufi understanding of reason, intelligence, and consciousness. I do not think, however, that we would gain anything more than further proof that Sufis—who represent the tendency among Muslims to strive for a personal engagement with the Divine—look at these words as designating a spectrum of subjective possibilities that extend into the infinite, possibilities available to human souls because each is a unique, non-repeating self-disclosure of God’s own subjectivity.

The State University of New York, Stony Brook, NY, USA.

NOTES

¹ On the intellectual tradition, see Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).

² Sufism is typically defined as Islamic “mysticism” or “esotericism.” Neither of these words, however, is appropriate to its actual historical reality. See Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), [Chapter 1](#).

³ The greatest philosopher of the later period, Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), was completely explicit about the quest for illumined consciousness that inspires the philosophical quest. Or, take Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. ca. 1210), an Aristotelian whose philosophy has rightly been called an “autology,” because it focuses from beginning to end on the transformation of self-awareness. See Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ The more philosophically-minded Muslim scholars were especially concerned to differentiate among the various terms that refer to the modalities of consciousness. Mullā Ṣadrā, for example, provides a chapter at the end of the first journey of his monumental “Four Journeys” (*al-Asfār al-arbaʿa*) on 30 terms that are employed in talking about knowing, such as *idrāk* (perception), *shuʿūr* (awareness), *taṣawwur* (conceptualization), *ḥifẓ* (memory), *tadhakkur* (recall), *maʿrifa* (recognition), *fahm* (understanding), *ʿaql* (intellect, reason), *ḥikma* (wisdom), *ẓann* (opinion), and *khayāl* (imagination). This discussion follows three chapters in two hundred pages dealing respectively with the quiddity (*māhiyya*) of knowledge; the states of the “intellecter” (*ʿāqil*), i.e., the one who knows; and the realm of the known object (*maʿlūm*). Most of the terms that Ṣadrā mentions, as well as many others, are also discussed in Sufi texts.

⁵ For a good selection of texts on soul, spirit, heart, and the inner dynamics that are involved in achieving heart-consciousness, see Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), Chapters 8–10.

⁶ The widely read Persian classic *Mirṣād al-ʿibād min al-mabdaʾ ilaʾl-maʿād*, “The Path of the Servants [of God] from the Origin to the Return,” by the 13th-century Kubrawī shaykh Najm al-Dīn Rāzī, dedicates the fourth of its five parts to the differing manners in which these four souls (which embrace all of humanity) return to God after death. See the English translation by Hamid Algar, *The Path of God’s Bondsmen from the Origin to the Return* (Delmar, NY: Caravan, 1982).

⁷ For an interesting example of the use of these levels to flesh out the nature of the ascent from forgetfulness to God-consciousness, see Chittick, “On Sufi Psychology: A Debate Between the Soul and the Spirit,” in *Consciousness and Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, edited by S.J. Ashtiyani, H. Matsubara, T. Iwami, and A. Matsumoto (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998), pp. 341–366. Also published as “Abd al-Jalil of Allahabad on Psychology: A Debate Between the Soul and the Spirit,” *Islamic Heritage in South Asian Subcontinent*, edited by Nazir Ahmed and I. H. Siddiqui (Jaipur: Publication Scheme, 2000), pp. 157–185; and “A Sufi Psychological Treatise from India,” *Medieval India: Essays in Intellectual Thought and Culture*, edited by I. H. Siddiqui (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), pp. 167–190.

⁸ See, for example, Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1971), pp. 124–125; or Jalāl al-Dīn Humāʿī, in a note to his edition of ‘Izz al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. 1335), *Miṣbāḥ al-hidāya* (Tehran: Majlis, 1325/1946), p. 82.

⁹ al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Bayān al-farq bayn al-ṣadr waʾl-qalb waʾl-fuʿād waʾl-lubb*, translated by Nicholas Heer in *Three Early Sufi Texts* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), pp. 11–81.

¹⁰ Not “faces” as translated by Algar, *Path*, p. 208.

¹¹ *Mathnawī*, edited by R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1925–40), Book 5, vss. 459–462.

¹² *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), vol. 2, p. 473, line 33.

¹³ For a summary of Ṣadrā’s views, see his *Elixir of the Gnostics*, translated by Chittick (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), especially pp. xxvi–xxvii. See also, Chittick, *Heart of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 44–45, 148–149, 270.

¹⁴ Avicenna has a section on the gnostics toward the end of his *al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbīhāt*. It was translated, without sufficient attention, however, to the Sufi grounding of much of the technical terminology, by Shams Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996).

¹⁵ Taking as their starting point the complete text of this hadith as provided by authoritative sources (such as the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim), Ibn al-ʿArabī and his followers discuss two basic sorts of nearness (*qurb*) to God, in one of which God is man’s faculties, and in the other of which

man is God's faculties; along the way they express many of the mysteries and paradoxes of the divine/human Form that can only be fully realized by prophets and saints. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 325–331.

¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī sometimes cites a modified version of the Shahadah to make the point: “There is nothing in existence but God” (*laysa fi’l-wujūd illā Allāh*). See, for example, *The Niche of Lights*, text and translation by David Buchman (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), p. 16. For numerous texts from Ibn al-‘Arabī rooted in this vision of things, see Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*; idem, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

¹⁷ The final sentence of Avicenna’s famous book *al-Najāh* (“The Deliverance”) ends with the word *ta’ alluh*: “He [the Prophet] is a human being who is distinct from other people through his deformity.” The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ (fl. 10th c.), among other early philosophers, also use the word to designate the goal of philosophy (see Murata, *Tao*, p. 262). Mullā Ṣadrā is famously called Ṣadr al-Muta’ illihīn, “The Foremost of the Deiform.”

¹⁸ Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 283 ff.

¹⁹ This three-world scheme should be taken as heuristic, not definitive; as soon as authors pay attention to the fine points, they add other realms and speak of intermediary creatures that do not fall clearly into the categories. Already the soul, which corresponds to cosmic imagination, is one such intermediary, never clearly defined, precisely because, in its potentiality, it is an “ocean without shore,” and fixity would hold it back from achieving its entelechy.

²⁰ See Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), With a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

²¹ *Futūḥāt* 3:121.25; cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 345.

²² *Futūḥāt* 1:10.26; Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. xiv.

²³ Sa’īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī, *Muntaha’l-madārik* (Cairo: 1293/1876), vol. 1, pp. 19–20.

²⁴ For Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of the relative compass of the names, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 47–54. Al-Ghazālī makes the same sorts of points, mainly through analogy with the human microcosm, in *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, book 25, on *al-tawḥīd wa’l-tawakkul*. See the translation by David Burrell, *Faith in Divine Unity & Trust in Divine Providence* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2001), pp. 19 ff.

²⁵ Farghānī, *Muntaha’l-madārik*, vol. 1, pp. 31–32.

²⁶ Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 115. For many passages on insight and unveiling, see the indexes to this book and to Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*.

²⁷ *Mathnawī*, book 3, verses 3901–5. For these and similar verses, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 72–82.

²⁸ al-Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, pp. 14–15.

²⁹ *Niche*, p. 23.

³⁰ *Niche*, p. 20.

³¹ *Niche*, p. 37.

³² *Futūḥāt* 3:276.32, 277.12 (*Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 214).

³³ *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fi sharḥ ma’ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, edited by Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1971), p. 143.

³⁴ *Muntaha’l-madārik*, vol. 1, p. 32.

³⁵ It is true that the philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 1191) does not give *wujūd* the same prominence. Nonetheless, by speaking of reality primarily in terms of “light” (*nūr*), he stresses even more strongly that illuminated and illuminating consciousness lies at the pinnacle of human possibility. See, for example, Suhrawardī, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, edited and translated by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

³⁶ Some philosophers made full use of the dual meaning of the word. Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, writing in Persian, explains that *wujūd* has two senses, “being” (*hastī*) and “finding” (*yāftī*), and then proceeds to describe the entirety of *wujūd* as composed of four ascending levels extending from potential being to actual finding. The highest level of “existence,” in other words, is actualized consciousness of all that may be known. See Chittick, *Heart*, pp. 42–45.

³⁷ The work is the Persian *Dānishnāma-yi ‘Alā’ī*, which has been translated by Parviz Morewedge as *Metaphysica of Avicenna* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); see also Chittick, *Heart*, pp. 39–40. For a much more detailed exposition of the necessary attributes of the Necessary Being, see Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, edited and translated by Michael E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), Book Eight.

³⁸ *Futūḥāt* 2:538.1; *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 212.

³⁹ *Futūḥāt* 3:488.4 (*Self-Disclosure*, p. 341). For similar passages, see *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 157, 216, 403–4; *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 284–285. For a parallel discussion from al-Ghazālī, see Burrell, *Faith in Divine Unity*, pp. 18–19.

⁴⁰ *Mathnawī*, Book 1, vss. 2372, 3279.

⁴¹ *Maqṣad*, p. 137.

⁴² In later philosophy, a good deal of attention is paid to “presential knowledge” (*‘ilm ḥuḍūrī*), that is, knowledge achieved through presence with the known object, or through unification of the intellecter and the intellected; it is contrasted with “acquired knowledge” (*‘ilm ḥuṣūlī*), learning that is taken from books and teachers.

⁴³ On this debate in the context of the history of Islamic thought, see Chittick, “Rūmī and *Waḥdat al-wujūd*,” *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, edited by A. Banani, R. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 70–111; idem, “*Waḥdat al-Shuhūd*” *Encyclopaedia of Islam X*, 2000, pp. 37–39.

⁴⁴ *Futūḥāt* 2:663.9; *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 228.