



‘Shining of the Lights and the Veil of the Sights in the Secrets Bright’

(إشراق الأنوار و نقاب الأبصار في براق الأسرار)

An Akbarī Approach to the Problem
of Pure Consciousness

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Consciousness is perhaps the most basic, and therefore impossible to describe or define, reality – a conception, which in most schemas, is presupposed by all conceptions (there must be a consciousness conceiving of these conceptions). Numerous scientists have called consciousness the ‘final frontier’ of their discipline, but those of us who study religion (and poetry, music, and other forms of art for that matter) have been privy to traditions that have been exploring consciousness in profound, and profoundly different ways for millennia. One of the more interesting conversations about consciousness to take place in the modern academic discipline of religious studies has become known as the ‘Katz–Forman debate’, and has generated a slew of articles, conference panels, and edited volumes and monographs.¹

1. Forman, R. (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Katz, S. (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Forman, R., *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999).

In response to a certain kind of 'perennialism' that posited that all religious traditions had at their core a common, esoteric, unmediated, mystical experience of the same reality or pure consciousness,² Steven Katz's 1978 article, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', argued that 'there is a clear causal connection between the religious and social structure one brings to experience and the nature of one's actual religious experience'.³ That is, there is no such thing as pure or unmediated experience, mystical or otherwise, and all seemingly transcendent mystical experiences are necessarily constructed and shaped by their socio-linguistic contexts. Robert Forman responded to Katz's 'contextualist' or 'constructivist' interpretation of mystical experience by positing the existence of a 'Pure Consciousness Event' (PCE), an experience of 'forgetting' all contexts, of content-free consciousness, which he identified with the supreme mystical experiences described by mystics of diverse traditions in their own diverse ways.⁴

2. Huxley describes this perennial philosophy or *philosophia perennis* as 'the metaphysic which recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.' Huxley, A., 'Introduction', in *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Harper & Row, 1944), vii.

3. Katz, S.T. (ed.), 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London, Sheldon Press, 1978), 25. Katz goes on to write, 'There are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing that they are unmediated.... The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty. This epistemological fact seems to me to be true, because of the sorts of beings we are, even with regard to the experiences of those ultimate objects of concern with which mystics have had intercourse, i.e. God, Being, nirvana, etc.' (Ibid. 26).

4. Forman also identifies this 'Pure Consciousness Event' with an experience he himself had during a meditation retreat. He writes that when he heard a knock at the door, 'I knew that ... before hearing the knock, for some indeterminable length of time prior to the knocking I had been awake but with no content for my consciousness. ... the experience was so unremarkable, as it was utterly without content, that I simply would have

Numerous scholars of mysticism and religion have added their voices to one side of the debate or the other, and more recently, scholars have begun to point out that the limited and limiting assumptions that have framed this debate are thoroughly modern and Eurocentric, and are not shared by the traditions of the mystics they purport to describe.⁵ Since these debates rarely engaged with the theories and categories of the mystics and their traditions, instead subjecting them to totalizing neo-Kantian epistemologies (Katz and the constructivists) or New-Age/Jamesian notions of a private 'mysticism' focused on 'experiences' (Forman and the PCE crew), certain scholars have explored the various and sophisticated ways in which various Buddhist and Hindu philosophical traditions have addressed similar questions.⁶ But such work is fraught, as one scholar notes:

... we confront some of the fundamental issues that divide us, as contemporary Euro-Americans, from the worldview in which it was conceived. How are we to understand a literature whose fundamental theses are anathema to most contemporary Western intellectual traditions? For example, both dGe-lugs-pa and Rnying-ma, and Buddhism generally, claim that one can become a knower or self whose agency is free from the constraints of language (compare Lacan), who gains some form of unmediated knowledge (compare Kant), and – most antithetical of all – that this knowledge and its object are unconditioned by particularities of history and thus accessible in the same form, albeit

begun at some point to recommence thinking and probably would never have taken note of my conscious persistence devoid of mental content.' (Forman, R., 'Introduction: mysticism, constructivism and forgetting', in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 28).

5. See King, R., *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999), Chap. 8; and Rizvi, S., 'Communicating Pure Consciousness Events', in Thoha, Anis Malik (ed.), *Japanese Contribution to Islamic Studies: The Legacy of Toshihiko Izutsu Interpreted* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2010), 157–70.

6. See King, *Religion and Orientalism*, Chap. 8; and Shah-Kazemi, R., *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), Appendix I.

through different means, to all persons regardless of cultural or psychological particularity (compare Foucault).⁷

But what of those of us who are not Euro-American, or at least, not entirely so?...

Here I stopped typing, sighed, and pulled at my hair in frustration. Of all the books, articles, and treatises I had read dealing with these issues of consciousness and context, experience and interpretation, unity and multiplicity, I had come across none more subtle and inspiring than those of Ibn 'Arabi. I stared out of the window of our living room at the descending sun, wishing that I could just ask him what he thought of these debates. I was sure that his perspectives on these topics (like virtually everything else he wrote) would be profound, fresh and transformative. Just as this wish crossed my mind, I heard a deep, melodious voice say, '*As-salāmu 'alaykum Sīdī.*'

I nearly dropped my laptop as I stared up at a man in a burnous and turban so white they almost shone silver. The white caftan underneath his burnous had beautiful golden embroidery in the Moroccan style. His skin was a deep and shining black, like ink, and he reminded me of some of the Senegalese and Nigerian shaykhs I have met. I immediately recognized him, without having any idea how I knew him.

Me: '*Wa 'alaykum as-salām yā Abā 'Abdallāh Muḥyī-dīn!* Welcome! Please sit down! I was just thinking of you, welcome! Can I get you something to drink? Or eat?'

IA: 'Thank you, God bless you. Yes, if you have any orange juice I'd be happy to share it with you.'

I ran to the kitchen to get cups and a pitcher of OJ, and one of water. When I returned, I saw Ibn 'Arabi sitting on a pouf on the floor of our living room. As I handed him the pitcher and he poured it into cups for both of us, I tried not to stare at his

7. Klein, Anne C., 'Mental concentration and the unconditioned: a Buddhist case of unmediated experience', in Buswell Jr., Robert E., and Gimello, Robert M. (eds.), *Paths to Liberation: The Marga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu, Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 7, University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 270.

face, but couldn't help myself. He handed me a cup, took the other, whispered '*Bismillāh*', and began to drink. I had always thought Ibn 'Arabi would look Spanish or Moroccan, but here he was looking like he came straight from Kano or Dakar. Noticing my searching stare, and as if reading my mind, he said:

IA: Don't you remember the tradition, 'poverty is blackness of face in both worlds'?⁸ If you like, you could say that my skin has been tanned by the rays of the Real, or as I am sure you remember from my *Fuṣūṣ*, you could say that the presence in which a reality manifests itself colours that reality, the way a reflection is coloured by the copper plate in which it appears. So if I were to appear in a different presence, or to someone else, I would appear in a different form.

Me: That makes sense, my apologies for staring. If you don't mind me asking, would you mind having a look at this article I am trying to write? I could really use your help and benefit from your perspective.

IA: *Bismillāh*, I would be happy to assist and attempt to translate what I have learned from the Book of God and the Seal of His Messengers. May God bestow favour upon what my tongue says, and upon what your fingers write.⁹

8. Ibn 'Arabi describes a category of saints called the *Afrād* in the following manner: 'All of their moments, both in this world and in the other, are completely absorbed in (contemplating) God's Self-manifestations to them. For in our view a human being sees in the mirror of the Truly Real, when He manifests Himself to that person, nothing but his own soul/self and his spiritual station, which is one of the existing (created) things (*akwān*). And an existent thing (*kawn*), in the Light of the Truly Real, is darkness (or "shadow", *ḡulma*): therefore that person witnesses nothing but their own "blackness".' *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya Li Shaykh al-imām mukhātīm al-awliyā* 'Abī Bakr Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-ma'rūf bi Ibn 'Arabī, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2006), 9 vols. (henceforth *Fut.*), Chap. 23, quoted in Morris, J.W., 'Seeking God's Face: Ibn 'Arabi on Right Action and Theophanic Vision: Part 2', *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* (henceforth *JMIAS*), vol. 17, 1995, 11.

9. From the *khuṭba* of *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam Li Shaykh al-Akbar Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī*, ed. Abū al-'Ala Affīfī (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'Arabī, 2002?), 48.

With that, he took the computer from me and began to read, nodding in places and frowning in others. When he had finished the three paragraphs above, he handed the computer back to me while shaking his head and said:

IA: It's amazing how things never really change, *You will never find any change in the habit of God* (35:43). The people of reasoning and masters of thinking, the ancients and the theologians in their theological discussions concerning the soul and its nature – none have ever discovered its reality, and mental reasoning will never grant it. Whoever seeks knowledge of it by way of mental reasoning does so in vain. They are certainly among those *whose efforts lead them astray in the life of this lower world, thinking they are doing something good* (18:104). Whoever seeks this matter through other than its proper way will not obtain it.¹⁰ Mere speculation and thinking can only take one so far in this matter, but much good – nay, the knowledge of the reality of the matter *as it is* will escape you¹¹ if you do not go beyond this.

Me: What then is the proper way to obtain knowledge of consciousness? Of the Self? Of the true nature of mystical experience?

IA: Know, may God help you, the way is thus: *Say Allah! Then leave them to their vain prattle!* (6:91) *If you love God, follow me, and God will love you* (3:31). 'When I love him, I am his hearing, his seeing, his hand, his foot...'. Then will you come to recognize and possess the realities of the soul and its Lord, or rather they will possess you. He who knows or recognizes himself, knows his Lord, and vice-versa. Anything else is like children arguing about the act of conception. One of them heard and believed stories about a stork, another heard and believed stories about babies growing in a garden, another about angels bringing them down from heaven, and all of them argue from the bases of these mistaken beliefs. Grow up, be a man, find and win a maiden, pay your dowry and conceive a child yourself! Everything else is but *fancies and hearsay* (2:78)!

10. *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Shu'ayb*, 125.

11. *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Hūd*, 113.

Me: Thank you, I agree. But in the meantime, there *are* manuals that describe and illustrate how conception is achieved.... Can you help me by describing these realities of the self for me in greater detail? Can you tell me what you think of this debate? Who is right? Who is wrong? And why?

IA: God willing, I will advise you and help clarify these questions for you. First, let us look into the two sides of this debate to discover where each hits the target and where each goes wide of the mark, and then let us reflect on the verses of God's Book, *God, there is no God but He, the Living, the Self-Subsistent...* (2:255) and *Sights encompass Him not...* (6:103). For the categories and terms of these debates as you've described them are *but names which you have coined for which God has sent down no power. They follow but conjecture and what their souls desire* (53:23) and *conjecture can never take the place of the truth* (53:28). But so that I may remind you of the *guidance from their Lord that has come to them* (53:23) and to you, God willing, I will try to clarify this matter for you in this way.

Me: Thank you! Do you mind if I write down what you say?

IA: Not at all, go ahead. First, from one perspective, Katz is right. The human self or 'consciousness' as he calls it, is necessarily individual and delimited, by virtue of being one individual and not another. Now, the Real knows Itself in a unique and unlimited fashion – It is identical to Itself. But the 'unlimited' is not truly unlimited as long as it can be limited by the notion of being 'not-limited'. In order to be truly unlimited, the Real's knowledge of Itself must include both unlimited and limited knowledge. So when the Real wished to know or 'see' Himself in a delimited manner – for the vision one has in and of oneself in itself is not like the vision one has of oneself in another thing like a mirror – He made the cosmos and mankind to be found as a mirror in which to contemplate His Names and Qualities, or if you like, to view the forms of His own reflection. Or rather, the cosmos and mankind are the reflection of the Real in the mirror of their non-existent essential realities.¹²

12. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Adam*, 47–8.

Now, in order to look at your reflection, you first need a reflective surface which can receive your image and reflect it back to you, and then you need to stand before this surface and cast your reflection and perceive it. The reflection is creation, everything that exists, and the mirror is the totality of the pre-existent realities of everything in God's knowledge.¹³ A poet has summarized this nicely:

Not-Being is the mirror, the world the reflection, and man
Is as the reflected eye of the unseen person.
You are that reflected eye, and He the light of the eye,
In that eye, His eye sees His own eye.¹⁴

In relation to the Real, man is what the pupil (remember *insān* means both 'pupil' and 'man' in Arabic) is in relation to the eye, through which vision occurs.¹⁵ When the Real gazes at Itself in the mirror of non-existent things, man is like the reflected eye, or rather, like the pupil of that eye – the point that contains everything else in the mirror. It is the source of vision, and thus, of the reflection itself. Now, in one sense, a reflection is identical to what it reflects, and in another sense it is other than it, a representation of it limited to and by the surface in which it appears. So of man, you can say that he is the Real/not the Real, He/not He.

Me: That's beautiful, but what does that have to do with Katz and the constructivist view of consciousness?

IA: *Endure patiently, with a beautiful patience* (70:5), my friend, I am getting there. Remember the story of Moses and Khidr and what came of Moses' questioning. Had he, upon him be peace, been able to endure further without asking, we would have learned so much more.¹⁶ Remember the angels when God commanded them to prostrate to Adam? They protested because

13. See *ibid.*, 48–9.

14. Shabistari, Mahmud, *Gulshan I Raz*, ed. and trans. by E.H. Whinfield (London: Trübner, 1880), 15.

15. *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Adam*, 50.

16. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Mūsā*, 205–6.

they were not aware of the special and comprehensive position of the pupil/man in relation to the rest of the reflection, of creation. For no one knows anything of God except what is accorded to him by his own essence – their essence was not like Adam's: it did not comprehend his whereas his encompassed theirs, as the pupil encompasses the whole reflection, and so they behaved with poor *adab* towards Adam and towards the Real. God only mentions such stories as a warning and a lesson to you so take heed and learn *adab* towards others and the Real from this example!¹⁷

Me: I think I see where you're going with this...

IA: Good! Now pay attention, this is the crucial point. You may have noticed that mirrors can shape their reflections. Some mirrors make you look fat, some slim, etc. The shape of the mirror determines the shape of the reflection, which is limited to and by the mirror in which it appears. This is the case for the limited and limiting essential realities of people and all things. Their knowledge of the Real is limited and shaped by their own constitutions. *They do not encompass any thing of His knowledge except what He wills (2:255). 'What He wills' is identical to the 'thing of His knowledge encompassed', which is what 'they' themselves are. What they are, their consciousness, is limited by the Divinely-willed forms of their mirrors, their essential identities in His knowledge.*

Simply put, the Real's vision of Itself in a mirror is shaped by the form of that mirror, and is thus different from the Real's vision in and of Itself. Without the mirror, and the Real's appearance in it, He could not gaze at His reflection.¹⁸

Me: Whoa... I think I'm starting to get it, but I'm still kind of confused by all of this mirror talk.

IA: Then let's look at this another way... The water you have in that cup over there, what shape and colour is it?

17. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Adam*, 50–1.

18. See *ibid.*, 48–9.

Me: It has no colour, or I guess it has the shape and colour of the cup that holds it.

IA: Exactly, the essential identities are like cups and their existence/consciousness/knowledge of the Real is like the water that is poured into the cups. *He grants every thing its creation, then guides* (20:50). These cups are nothing other than Him, so they are like cups of ice he casts from the Cloud of His breath, and then into which He pours the water of knowledge and finding/existence (*wujūd*). For this reason, their knowledge of the Real is limited by their own forms; in fact, like the water in the cup, it is nothing other than this form! The water takes the form of the cup, so the form of the Real they see and recognize is just their own form: red, blue, round, square, etc. These are the ‘gods created in beliefs’ that people worship and praise and argue about – but they are really just praising themselves! Neither the heart nor the eye ever witnesses anything but the form of what one believes concerning the Real. The Real of what is believed is that whose form is encompassed by the heart; the form encompassed by the heart is nothing other than the form of the heart itself.¹⁹

Me: I think I see. So Katz is right in that the content of individual human consciousness, of the heart, is always limited by that individual’s particular make-up. The context is like the cup, like the heart, and so the content of their experiences of the Real are formed and informed by their context.

IA: Yes, this is what the Folk say, that ‘the Real becomes manifest in the measure of the preparedness of the servant’. But this is not so; rather, the servant becomes manifest to the Real in the form within which the Real appears to him.²⁰

Me: Wait, but I just thought you said the opposite...

IA: Yes, but this is just one side of the story. You’re married, right?

Me: Yes...

19. See *Fuṣūṣ*, *Faṣṣ Shu‘ayb*, 121, and *Faṣṣ Muḥammad*, 226.

20. See *Fuṣūṣ*, *Faṣṣ Shu‘ayb*, 120–1.

IA: And you bought your wife a ring, with gemstones, correct?

Me: Yes.

IA: When you bought it, did the jewellers cut the gemstones to fit the ring, or the ring to fit the gemstones?

Me: The latter, it's much easier to change a ring setting than to cut a gemstone.

IA: Precisely. The receptivity of the heart, the form of the cup, is like the setting of the ring, made to fit a particular gemstone. These forms are His forms; they come from Him and are for Him, which is why I called them 'cups of ice'. Going back to the mirrors for a second, have you ever noticed that no one has ever seen a mirror? Think about it, you only see what is reflected in the mirror, no one has ever seen the surface of a mirror.²¹

Me: Huh, you're right...

IA: The object of the Real's self-disclosure, this 'reflected eye', once it appears, only ever sees itself in the mirror of the Real. It is not possible for this creation to see the Real, although he knows that it is only in Him that he sees his own form. There is no symbol which comes closer to this vision. He is your mirror for your vision of yourself, and you are His mirror for His vision of His Names – which are none other than Himself – and the manifestation of their determinations.²²

Me: Wow... that reminds me of when I was a kid, I used to love to point mirrors at each other and stare into the infinite tunnel of reflected mirrors they created.

IA: That's right, the matter is infinite on both sides. The identity of the form that discloses itself is the identity of the form that receives the disclosure. He is the mirror and He is the one reflected in the mirror. The forms of His differentiated qualities only appear in His delimited reflection – just as your two eyes only appear when you look at a mirror – so His Names,

21. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Shīth*, 61.

22. *Ibid.*, 62.

the relationships between Him and this reflection, only become manifest with this reflection....²³

Me: Hold on, you're starting to lose me again, what does this all have to do with constructivism?

IA: These 'people of context and construction' are right in that you never see the Real, you never experience 'pure consciousness', just as you never see the surface of a mirror, but rather your own reflection; you never see the colour of the water, but rather the colour of its container. But they are wrong in that they do not see that this container is not other than the Real. The 'god of belief', the water in the cup, is subject to limits, and this is the divinity encompassed by the heart of its servant. But the Absolute Divinity is not encompassed because it is identical with things and with Itself. You don't say that a thing encompasses itself or doesn't encompass itself, so understand!²⁴ God is their limited conceptions of Him (the water in the cup, the 'god of belief'), their limitations (the cup), and what is beyond these; *He knows what is between their hands*, the beliefs their hearts contain about the Real, *and what is behind them* (2:255), what lies outside or beyond these beliefs, outside of their awareness.

Because of this shortcoming, the people of context and construction also do not understand the potentially infinite receptivity of the heart, the ability for the cup to become clear, for the ice cup to melt and take on any form in which the Real appears.²⁵ Some polished surfaces like table tops, metal plates, etc. can only reflect certain colours, but a perfectly polished mirror can reflect all colours. But this takes much polishing! 'Indeed the hearts rust just like iron...' and 'everything has a polish, and the polish of the hearts of remembrance of God'.

Me: Is this *fanā'* (annihilation)? Does one experience pure consciousness then?

IA: Yes and no. *Fanā'* is the stripping away and veiling of the layers of the self, until all that remains is the particular Divine

23. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Shu'ayb*, 120–1.

24. *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Muḥammad*, 226.

25. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Shu'ayb* and *Faṣṣ Hūd*.

secret which is the particular face of God in that particular person. It is as if you were to stand before a mirror wearing several veils, and were to take them off and cast them behind you so that you cannot see them. When you have cast off the last veil, you will see your true face in the mirror of the Real.²⁶ Here the 'people of context and construction' fall short of the knowledge of the people of taste and unveiling, for the former only know the context of the veils: location, time, language, culture, etc., whereas the people of unveiling go beyond these to discover the 'context of the specific Divine face'.

This face you turn towards God is the face God turns towards you, and *wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God* (2:115). All of existence, everything you see is just the mirror of the Real in which you see your own face. But do you recognize yourself? You are like a man who looks into a mirror and does not recognize his own reflection, who does not even recognize that he is looking at a mirror! The verse came down, *We will show them Our signs within themselves and on the horizons so that it becomes clear that it is the Real* (41:53). You are His mirror, and He is your mirror.

Try to touch your reflection in a mirror. The finger meets the reflected finger, the reflected eye looks back at the eye. If you look closely into the reflected eye, you will see yourself reflected in there as well, and if you look even closer, you will see yourself reflected again in the eye of that reflection, and so on.... If you bring your eye close enough to the mirror, all you will see is this reflected eye, and the reflections of eyes within it. If you try to bring your eye closer, you will blink, but if you can force your eye open and prevent your sight from *swerving or going astray* (53:17), you will see only the darkness of the pupil – you will see nothing at all. But this darkness of 'nothing' of extreme proximity is the source of the whole vision from both sides. As the poet said, 'This blackness if you know it, is the very light of Being... a light night in a dark day.'²⁷ Moreover, there is still a distinction between the pupil and its reflection, only the former really sees itself. None sees God but God.

26. *Fut.* VI, 73–4, Chap. 367.

27. Shabistari, *Gulshan I Raz*, 13–14.

When my beloved appears
 With what eye do I see Him?
 With His eye, not with mine
 For none sees Him but Him²⁸

To pass beyond this, you must continue, but not as you, but rather as Him. 'Leave yourself and come.' Jump through the mirror, come out and see!

In *fanā'*, the servant is veiled from the veils, and so this is not complete. He must continue to journey in Him and come to recognize Him in the veils and the veils in Him. This is *baqā'* (subsistence), and it is more perfect and encompassing.²⁹

Me: So before *fanā'*, I'm veiled from God by things. During *fanā'* I'm veiled from things by God, or more precisely the face of God particular to me, my Divine secret. And after *fanā'* I'm neither veiled from things or God, but see God in things and things in God?

IA: Well said. So now I think you can see what Katz and the people of context and construction like him have grasped of this matter, and what has remained beyond their reach, accessible only to those of taste and unveiling. So if you want, you can say that he is right, and the Real takes on the form of the delimitations of the servant, and the servant sees nothing but his own form in the mirror of the Real. But from another perspective, he has missed the mark because these limited forms are not other than the Real. Like all people of rational speculation, he has made the Real transcendent and bound it by declaring it unbindable.³⁰ But they have only bound themselves, *and they did not wrong Us, but themselves they wronged* (2:57). If only they would free themselves from these restrictions, they would come to recognize that the Real is *near*, that He is not just beyond likeness, but that He is *Hearing, Seeing* (42:11), nay He is the hearing with which they hear, and the seeing with which they see. *We*

28. Affīfī, Abū al-'Ala, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muḥyid'Dīn Ibnul-'Arabī* (Cambridge, 1936), 172.

29. *Fut.* VI, 74–5, Chap. 367.

30. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Nūḥ*.

are closer to him than you, but you do not see (56:85), for only the person of taste whose sight is piercing (50:22) sees, and every soul will taste death (3:185). So know this!³¹

Me: But it still seems to me that Katz contradicts himself. If we take his assertion seriously, that all positions are constructed from context, then his own position must be bound and constructed by context as well. But he seems to treat this assertion of his as if it were some kind of universal truth beyond context, which applies to all contexts and other perspectives except his own.

IA: Your statement reminds me of my friend Abū Farāsha al-Ṣīnī, one of the greatest of the knowers among the ancients of the land of China. He has a similar story about fish: do you know it?

Me: I think so, do you mean Zhuangzi? I think I have it in a book somewhere here...here it is:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the bridge over the Hao River. Zhuangzi said, 'The minnows swim about so freely, following the openings wherever they take them. Such is the happiness of fish.' Huizi said, 'You are not a fish, so from where do you know the happiness of fish?'

Zhuangzi said, 'You are not I, so from where do you know I don't know the happiness of fish?'

IA: You forgot the end of the story, keep reading...

Me: Oh yes, you're right:

Huizi said, 'I am not you, to be sure, so I don't know what it is to be you. But by the same token, since you are certainly not a fish, my point about your inability to know the happiness of fish stands intact.'

Zhuangzi said, 'Let's go back to the starting point. You said, "From where do you know the happiness of fish?" Since your question was premised on your knowing that I know it, I must have known it from here, up above the Hao River.'³²

31. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Hūd*, 108.

32. Ziporyn, Brook. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2009), 76.

IA: The end is the key to the story. In it, Abū Farāsha is alluding to the reality we began to discuss above. He is pointing Huizi to the fact that he already knows the answer to his question, he is pointing to the origin of the question and its answer. He *was* your hearing, seeing, foot that walks, hand that grasps and the heart that knows and is conscious *all along*. You already know, you must recognize His knowing through you as your knowing through Him. That is the way of the ‘*Ārif billāh*, the knower by God.

Me: Huh, I never thought of the story in that way. Thank you. But what do you make of Forman and the other side of the debate? What do you make of this Pure Consciousness Experience?

IA: First of all, you know the meaning of the verse, *Your Lord has decreed that you worship only Him* (17:23). There is no contravening this decree, for what is there that is other than He? Naught but God is worshipped in any object of worship, but people differ in their levels of understanding and being unbound. So the ones they call the ‘perennialists’ are correct from this perspective. As for Huxley’s statement,³³ it hits the mark, but it may be that he is merely parroting the words of others without it having been unveiled to him. As for Forman’s *ḥāl* (state), this is like the state of Abū ‘Alī (Ibn Sīnā)’s flying man. Aspirants at the beginning of the path often experience states (*aḥwāl*) like this in *khalwa* (seclusion). We call it the ‘drowsiness of the heart’ (*nawmat al-qalb*).³⁴ What is needed is an aspiration to rise above such states to the presence of the One who bestows and varies the states.

33. ‘...the metaphysic which recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being’ (see note 2 above).

34. See Chodkiewicz, M., ‘The Vision of God’, in Hirtenstein, S. (ed.), *Prayer and Contemplation* (Oxford & San Francisco: Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, 1993). www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/visionofgod.html Accessed 28 Sept. 2016.

This reminds me of a man I knew once who worked in the tanneries in Fes. He had a certain imbalance of his constitution, such that the fumes of the tanner's pits would sometimes put him into a sort of trance: he was awake, but absent from himself, as if he were asleep. I actually suspect that he was simply daydreaming or hallucinating, but on returning to his senses, he forgot his daydreams, as the waker from sleep often forgets his dreams, and says, 'I did not dream anything last night.' But God knows best. In any event, the state Forman described sounds more like that of the poor tanner than that of the annihilated ones. 'How different in generosity are the two Yazīds!'

Me: Yeah, Forman's description has no joy, no ecstasy, no knowledge, but these are present in annihilation, right?

IA: Not really, as the awareness of such states would imply a duality, an awareness of the psychological states of the annihilated one, and the veiling of such states from him is precisely what makes him annihilated. However, the annihilation leaves a trace on the heart, so that when he returns to himself he finds joy and knowledge and ecstasy from that trace. 'No one sees his Lord before he dies', so 'die before you die.' Like Moses, demand vision and do not be afraid of being struck down!³⁵ The blow that strikes you down raises you up, for this death brings new life at every moment. The blindness of annihilation is due to the overwhelming intensity of light and closeness and is different from the blindness which is due to a defect of the eye.

Me: So is Forman wrong about pure consciousness? Is there no such thing as a 'Pure Consciousness Experience' since it is not 'experienced'?

IA: Yes and no, for the Real experiences it through you, and you experience it through Him! But this can only be known through tasting. As for His words, *sights perceive Him not, but He perceives the sights* (6:103), sight has come only to perceive, not to be perceived. Moreover, in the words '*perceive Him not*', He is indicated

35. From the *Kitāb al-tajalliyāt*, quoted in Chodkiewicz, 'The Vision of God'.

by the pronoun of the absent one [that is, the third person]. The absent is not perceived by sight and witnessing. It is the Non-manifest. After all, if it were perceived, it would not be absent or nonmanifest. Nonetheless, *He perceives the sights*, for absence is not necessary from both sides. If someone is absent from you, it is not necessary that you be absent from him. It may be so, and it may not be.

But in this verse there is another affair: God says, *Sights do not perceive Him, but He perceives the sights, and He is the Subtle, the Experienced* (6:103). He perceives Himself through Himself because He is the sight of the servant through His very selfhood. Visual perception occurs only through sight, and He is identical with the sight ascribed to the servant. He says, *He perceives the sights*, while He is identical with the sights. Hence He has perceived Himself. This is why we say that He is manifest to Himself, but He is not nonmanifest to Himself.

Then He completed the verse by saying, *And He is the Subtle*, in respect of the fact that *sights perceive Him not*. The meaning of the Subtle in respect to the fact that *He perceives the sights* is that His perception of the sights is His perception of Himself, because He is identical with them. This is the furthest limit of subtlety and fineness.

Then He says *the Experienced*. Here He alludes to the knowledge of tasting. In other words, this is not known except through tasting. In this there is no benefit in setting up proofs, unless the proof of it be within the self of the one who proves and is none other than his tasting. Then this servant whose eyesight is the Real sees himself through the Real, and he sees the Real through his sight, since He is identical with his sight. Thus he perceives both affairs.³⁶

Me: So '*sights perceive Him not*' is the Real's incomparability: He is too subtle for creatures to perceive Him, while '*He perceives the sights*' is His similarity or identity to these sights. I understand how He is the Subtle, but how is He the Experienced? He experiences through us? Through our sights?

36. *Fut.* Chap. 558, quoted in Chittick, W., *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 211.

IA: This is knowledge by taste. God made Himself, although He knows the affair *as it is*, to be as one who acquires knowledge. The Real distinguished between knowledge by taste and absolute knowledge. Knowledge by taste is qualified by the faculties. So as I mentioned in the beginning, He knows Himself absolutely in Himself, and He knows Himself by taste, in a qualified way through your faculties. But He Himself has said that He is identical with these faculties and even their body parts,³⁷ so He experiences Himself through our faculties, which are none other than Him. He is the One who sees, the One who is seen, and that by which He is seen.

Me: So everything is pure consciousness? All consciousness is only conscious of pure consciousness itself?

IA: Yes and no. The Real knows Itself with a pure knowing without any intermediary. How could it not? The Real knows Itself indirectly through an intermediary, which is man, which is you and your faculties. But since even this intermediary is nothing but the Real, there is nothing but pure knowing. So if you like, you can say that the Real is only conscious of the Real, that you are only conscious of the Real, because there is nothing else to be conscious of but pure, unlimited consciousness itself.

God – there is nothing Apparent but He in every
similar and every contrary
In every kind and every species, in all union
and all separation
In everything that the senses or the intellect perceive
In every body and every form.³⁸

Contemplate His saying, 'I was sick and you did not visit me...'. The Real descends into the consciousness, the very sickness of the sick, the hunger of the hungry, or rather He is them and their hunger. Or His saying, '*I was* your hearing, your seeing, your foot, your hand...'. There is no closeness greater than His selfhood being the very bodily parts and faculties of the

37. *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Hūd*, 108.

38. Quoted in Chodkiewicz, 'The Vision of God', from *Fut*, IV, 591.

servant. The servant is none other than these body parts and faculties.³⁹

The like of this is witnessed in the presence of imagination in dreams. In a dream you witness yourself, other people, landscapes, countries, marvels, etc. But all that is seen is not other than the dreamer, it is not even other than the dreamer inside the dream, the one through whom the dreamer witnesses the dream, since that one is but a summary representation (*nuskha*) of the other. In the dream, the sleeping dreamer witnesses nothing but himself, and the characters in the dream witness nothing but him, in fact they themselves are nothing but him. So know that all the worlds are the imagination, the dream, of the Real, and that nothing but He is witnessed, and no one but He witnesses.⁴⁰

But if you like, you can also say that the dream is not the dreamer, that the characters in the dream are distinct and differentiated from the dreamer, and that what is seen in the dream is different from what is seen when awake. This is also true. *Sights perceive Him not*, 'People are asleep and when they die they awaken'. So 'die before you die', cross over to *He perceives the sights* and realize the truth of both sides, see with two eyes and understand that everything you witness, that you yourself, are He/not He.

God there is no god but He, the Living, the Self-Subsistent, neither fatigue nor sleep overtake Him (2:255). When will you wake up? You are already awake since He who never slumbers nor sleeps is your hearing and seeing, but you do not recognize this.

Me: Since we're discussing *Ayat al-Kursī* now, would you mind explaining it further?

IA: I am glad you asked, because the meaning of terms such as 'pure consciousness' can be imprecise and lack the power and connections and connotations of the words of the Book of God and those of His Messenger. As he said, 'I cannot fully praise You, for You are as You have praised Yourself.' Thus the best

39. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Hūd*, 108.

40. See *Fuṣūṣ, Faṣṣ Yūsuf*.

terms to describe the Real are those the Real has singled out and designated to describe Himself with.

Me: So what term would you use for consciousness? *Wujūd* (finding), *wijdān* (consciousness), *'ilm* (knowledge), *ma'rifa* (recognition), *idrāk* (perception), *mushāhada* (witnessing)?

IA: All of these are good names, and all of them, indeed all names, go back to what is meant by 'consciousness'. But let us start with the 'Verse of the Pedestal' and the Names *al-Ḥayy*, *al-Qayyūm*.

Me: The Living, the Self-Subsistent?

IA: Yes, *al-Ḥayy* (The Living) is the Name that enables the other six 'Mothers of the Names' (The Knowing, the Hearing, the Seeing, the Speaking, the Willer, the Powerful) to subsist. The degree of *al-Ḥayy* is the most tremendous degree among the Names, since it is the precondition for the other Names. You cannot say of a dead thing that it is Knowing, Seeing, or Willing.⁴¹ The meaning of *al-Ḥayy* is 'the one who is aware of himself', for the dead person is one who has no awareness of himself. *Al-Qayyūm* is the Self-Subsistent, that which subsists only in itself, not through another, and through which all others subsist. Just as the Names all subsist through *al-Ḥayy*, everything subsists through *al-Qayyūm*, the Self-Subsistent. So we have the Self-Subsistent Life, the Self-Subsistent awareness, which is what your 'pure consciousness' is getting at, Self-Subsistent consciousness. The consciousness or awareness in which all awareness subsists, is like the awareness of the dreamer in which the entire dream subsists. And this is why some say that *al-Ḥayy al-Qayyūm* is connected with or is the Greatest Name and contains a most subtle mystery: that all consciousness subsists through these Names.

Me: I see, I never thought of those names like that. So how do they fit into *Ayat al-Kursī*, and what can it tell us about consciousness?

41. See *Fut.* Chap. 228, quoted in Chittick, W., *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 48.

IA: *God*, this is the all-comprehensive Name that contains all other Names. *There is no god but He*, 'He' here is not the third-person pronoun which is related to the first and second pronouns, but rather it names the Divine Ipseity or Selfhood which is beyond such divisions. But it is also the pronoun of absence, because 'He' cannot be seen, just as the dreamer cannot be seen inside the dream, although from another point of view, everything that is seen is 'He'. So we see and say 'He/not He'. *The Living, the Self-Subsistent*, this clarifies the nature of the Divine Self; it is alive/conscious with a consciousness that subsists in and through Itself and in whom all 'others' subsist. *Slumber does not seize Him, nor sleep*. This clarifies the self-subsistent nature of the Divine Self/Consciousness further: it does not change or diminish or cease, although all change and diminishment and ceasing, indeed everything, occurs in it. *All that is in the Heavens and All that is in the Earth is His*. All that is in the unseen worlds and the manifest world belong to Him, subsist in Him, are not other than Him.

Who can intercede with Him except by His permission? Intercession is to go from creation to the Real and return to creation with mercy, and the leader in this affair is the Seal of the Messengers, followed by the complete knowers *with whom He is pleased* (21:28). Remember, man in relation to the Real is like the pupil in relation to the eye through which vision occurs. For this reason he was called Man, and through Him the Real looks upon His creation and has mercy upon them. Those through whose eyes the Real decides to look, who journey from creation to the Real, from the dream to the Dreamer, and back again – their very glance is mercy and intercession. *You did not throw when you threw, but God threw* (8:17).

He knows what is in front of them, and what is behind them, and they do not encompass anything of His knowledge except what He wills. We have commented upon this earlier, but know that 'what is in front of them' is what they witness, 'what is behind them' is what they do not witness, and 'what they encompass of His knowledge' is what they are in their essential identities, what they are in His knowledge, as determined by His will. Or, from another perspective, His will conforms to what they

encompass of His knowledge, for His knowledge is prior to His will, and His will follows His knowledge, even as it does in the verse. And knowledge, as you know, follows and is determined by the object of knowledge (*ma'lūm*), so you could also say that He only wills what they encompass of His knowledge, what they are in their essential identities.⁴² But He, Most High, conditioned 'what they encompass of His knowledge' by '*His permission/will*', and not the other way around, to indicate His priority of determination over them.

His pedestal encompasses the Heavens and the Earth, and He never wearies of preserving the two of them, and He is the Exalted, the Magnificent. 'His pedestal' is His knowledge, which encompasses the heavens and the earth (and there is nothing other than the heavens and the earth),⁴³ the high and the low, the subtle and the tangible, the preservation of neither of which tires Him since neither mode of knowledge, neither heavenly/subtle nor earthly/tasting, affects the purity of His awareness, since both only subsist in and through It. '*The Exalted*' refers to the elevation or purity of this awareness, and '*The Magnificent*' refers to its all-encompassing nature. So all awareness is really only His awareness, and is only aware of Itself. All knowledge is derived from His knowledge, and only knows Him. Our consciousness subsists in and through His. His awareness is pure and elevated, and all-encompassing and magnificent, and is not sullied or limited by our awareness in any way. Or if you like, you can say that our awareness is the limitation of His awareness, but you must also affirm our awareness, subsistence in and identity with His divine self-subsisting awareness, of which there is no other.

Me: Whoa, now I know why this is called the greatest verse in the Qur'an. It's all there...

IA: There are many more mysteries in this verse, young man. I would advise you to continue reciting it and *Sights perceive*

42. See *Fuṣūṣ*, *Faṣṣ Ibrāhīm*, 82–3; *Faṣṣ 'Uzayr*, 108.

43. See *Fut.* Chap. 558, quoted in Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 256.

Him not... (6:103), and the verses immediately before and after them carefully with contemplation. Light (*Al-Nūr*) also names the reality you call 'consciousness'. This is why God says, *sights perceive Him not*, because He is light, and light can only be perceived through light, so He is perceived only through Him. But He perceives the sights, because He is light; and *He is the Subtle*, because He is subtle and hidden in His very manifestation, so He is not known and not witnessed as He knows and witnesses Himself; and He is *the Experienced* through a knowledge of tasting,⁴⁴ through the delimited light which constitutes our sight.

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 one [those] who perceives 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.⁴⁵ There is no light but His light, the light of the heavens and the earth. All consciousness is just the radiance of His consciousness. One of the Folk of the Real of your time has said:

There is a perfect continuity between this gleam and the Great Light of the Infinite World, and once this continuity has been grasped, our consciousness can go forth and spread out as it were into the Infinite and become one with It, so that man comes to realize that the Infinite alone is, and that he, the humanly conscious, exists only as a veil. Once this state has been realized, all the Lights of Infinite Life may penetrate the soul of the Sufi, and make him participate in the Divine Life, so that he has a right to exclaim 'I am God.'⁴⁶

44. *Fut.* Chap. 369, quoted in *ibid.*, 38.

45. *Fut.* Chaps. 276 and 277, quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 214.

46. Quoted in Lings, M., *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 136.

But do not be confused or misled by this. As long as the 'I' is yours, there is no identity and you are on the side of *sights do not perceive Him*. From this side, the servant is the servant, and the Lord is the Lord. *He perceives the sights* is on the other side of the mirror, beyond all such dualities, but it is He, not you, who perceives. 'If you are not, then you see Him, and He sees you.'⁴⁷ *And God speaks the truth and guides along the way* (33:4). Praise belongs to God, the One, the Witness, the Living, the Self-Subsistent, and blessings and peace upon our Lord and Master Muhammad, his Family, and Companions and grant them peace in abundance. Amen.⁴⁸



As Ibn 'Arabi finished his discourse, I sat there dumbfounded with my glass of water trembling in my right hand. This was certainly not the direction in which I was expecting my paper on pure consciousness to go. I felt as if I had just fallen into whitewater rapids, been spun and carried inexorably, this way and that, by the force of my guest's genius, and was just now tossed back onto solid ground. I scrolled back up the page to look at what I had written. 'What should I do with this, what should I even call this...?', I muttered to myself.

Ibn 'Arabi responded, 'Call it "Shining of the Lights and the Veil of the Sights in the Secrets Bright" (*ishrāq al-anwār wa niqāb al-abṣār fī birāq al-asrār*)'. 'Thank you, I will', I replied. 'Do you have any more advice for me?' I asked hopefully. 'You are some kind of scholar, yes?', he asked, and I nodded. 'Take frequent *khalwas*,⁴⁹ contemplate the signs in Nature, learn to cultivate the presence of your heart, and do not rely exclusively on rational speculation – but do not throw it away either', he said quickly.

'Thank you for the orange juice, and your hospitality, but I must be going now. *As-salāmu 'alaykum wa raḥma.*' As he was leaving, I heard him mutter under his breath, 'I promised

47. Hadith Gabriel.

48. See *Fuṣūṣ*, *Faṣṣ Muḥammad*, 226.

49. See *Fut.* Chap. 177.

that rascal ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt I would go see *The Magnificent Seven* with him this evening. I hope he doesn’t shout at the screen again...’. And with that, he was gone, leaving me deeply and happily bewildered as to what had just happened, but grateful that I had written most of it down.

Winner of the 2016 Young Writer Award