

THE QUR'AN IN THE THOUGHT OF IBN 'ARABĪ

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Paul Nwyia once wrote that the early Sufis were engaged in “the Qur’anization of memory,”¹ a process that Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) seems to have taken to its logical extreme. By his time the various fields of Islamic learning had become subdivided into many specialties, some of which had little apparent connection with the founding revelation. His immense and highly sophisticated output, energized by the vision of *tawhīd*, reintegrated and harmonized these sciences – especially jurisprudence, principles of jurisprudence, Sufism, Kalam, and philosophy – by tying them back explicitly to the Qur’an, even if he did not do this in any systematic manner.² Like the Qur’an, he writes, his style does not follow standard rational procedures, deriving instead from the very roots of reality itself.³ Although he constantly interprets Qur’anic verses and terminology, he does so from a variety of shifting standpoints, so the whole range of his explications did not fit into any specific genre (such as *ishāra* as exemplified by Qushayrī’s, d. 1074, *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*, or *ta’wīl* like the commentary of ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, d. circa 1330). As for the systematic versions of his teachings that spread to every corner of the Islamic world, these were the work of his followers and tended to obscure the fact that his formulations were typically offered as explanations of the sacred text.

Perhaps the best way to grasp the manner in which Ibn ‘Arabī approaches the Qur’an is to situate the book in the framework of his thought, even though no outline can capture his intimate interweaving of thought and Qur’an or the manner in which he frequently offers original yet strikingly apropos interpretations of the book’s verses. Observers from both inside and outside the Islamic tradition have tried to encapsulate his standpoint with the phrase *wahdat al-wujūd* (“the oneness of existence”), but he himself did not use this expression, and those who did use it gave it a variety of interpretations, both pro and con, so it conveys no real sense of what he was talking about.⁴

The foundation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings in one word is *tawhīd*, the Qur’anic assertion that God alone is truly real and that all else is contingent upon Him. Everything in the universe, in other words, is a “sign” (*āya*) or a “self-disclosure” (*tajallī*) of the truly “Real” (*al-ḥaqq*), for created reality gives news of its Creator’s names and attributes. God’s absolute and infinite “Essence” (*al-dhāt*) leaves “everything other than God” (*mā siwa’llāh*) hanging in ambiguity. As signs and disclosures, all things partake of the Real, but in and of themselves they are “unreal” (*bā’i*). To express their ambiguous status, Ibn ‘Arabī often uses the phrase *huwa lā huwa* (“He/not He”), meaning that everything discloses God in one respect and veils Him in another. Everything is an “image” (*khayāl*), so in relation to God each created thing is like a dream in relation to a dreamer.⁵

Ibn ‘Arabī described the infinite variety of divine self-disclosures using the full spectrum of names and attributes employed in theology, philosophy, and Sufism. Not least among these names is *wujūd*,

which had become a standard designation for the Real since the time of Avicenna. Unlike many philosophers and theologians, however, he never forgot the Qur'anic meaning of the word's verbal form, which is to find and to perceive. For him the very mention of the word calls to mind not some abstract notion of existence and being but rather the infinite reality of the Real, whose knowledge and self-awareness embrace all things. Things in turn “find” and “are found” only because of the traces of *wujūd* within them.

Employing well-known theological expressions, Ibn 'Arabī frequently explains that God in Himself, whom he commonly calls “the Necessary Existence” (*wājib al-wujūd*) or “the Real Existence” (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*), must be understood in terms of both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. *Tanzīh* is the assertion of God's incomparability or transcendence, given that “Nothing is as His likeness” (Q 42:11). *Tashbīh* is the declaration of His similarity and immanence, for “He is with you wherever you are” (Q 57:4). In Ibn 'Arabī's way of looking at things, the rational and analytical approach to understanding *wujūd*, an approach that underlies the thought of the *mutakallimūn* and the philosophers, employs 'aql (“intellect” or “the rational faculty”) to differentiate and discern in terms of *tanzīh*, asserting that the world and all things are “not He.” The figurative and symbolic approach of Sufis and poets employs *khayāl*, imagination, to see all things in terms of *tashbīh*, thereby asserting a common rootedness in the One Real and declaring that all are “He.” Ibn 'Arabī calls intellect and imagination “the two eyes of the heart.”⁶ Neither the one nor the other, neither philosophy nor poetry, neither logos nor mythos, is fully adequate to perceiving the Real as it is. If Ibn 'Arabī does not consider himself a philosopher, a *mutakallim*, or a Sufi, it has something to do with the fact that each of these terms implies a limited, one-sided approach.

Ibn 'Arabī and his followers refer to their own position as that of “realization” or “verification” (*tahqīq*). The true “realizers” (*muḥaqqiq*) see the Real in both His absence and His presence, His transcendence and His immanence. They attain a perfect vision of He/not He – simultaneous *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* – by actualizing both eyes of the heart and acknowledging the validity of every possible perspective. They give each thing its “rightful due” (*ḥaqq*) in both theory and practice. Ibn 'Arabī calls the fullness of this realization *maqām lā maqām* (“the station of no station”) or the standpoint of no specific standpoint, for it recognizes the relative validity of all standpoints. This is why he can say, in one of many statements along these lines, that the 'uṣfā' – the gnostics or “recognizers” who have truly recognized themselves and thereby recognized God – “concur with the belief of every believer. . . . On the Day of Visitation [in paradise] these men will see their Lord with the eye of every belief.”⁷

One of the keys to Ibn 'Arabī's approach to the Qur'an is the distinction he and others drew between two divine “commands” (sing., *amr*): the “engendering” (*takwīnī*), which is the creative word “Be” (*kun*); and the “prescriptive” (*taklīfī*), which sets down the commandments and prohibitions of the prophetic messages. While most theologians stressed the Qur'an's prescriptive role, Ibn 'Arabī put an even greater stress on its depiction of the objective reality of existence and awareness. Understanding *wujūd*'s actual situation was, of course, central to the concerns of the philosophers, but Ibn 'Arabī held that their brand of rationality was too tightly bound up with intellect and *tanzīh* to see the whole picture. As for the divine Speech that appears as scripture, it provides the clearest possible explication of reality, for it exposes the Real *Wujūd* in a language that is simultaneously rational and imaginal, without the limitations inherent to either logos or mythos.

Ibn 'Arabī understood all perceivable reality, whether divine or human, natural or ethical, spiritual or corporeal, as God's speech. He saw homologies everywhere, for he traced all things back to the One Speaker. We can see his typical stress on the ontological rather than the legal and moral in a passage explaining that the divine speech becomes articulated as the universe, the human self, and the Qur'an. Yes, the prescriptive command, upon which religious knowledge and activity is based, is nothing but God's speech. But this same divine speech is the creative “Be” that brings all things into existence. This is a simple fact of *tawīd*: “There is no speaker but God.” Hence, as he puts it in a

line of poetry, “There is nothing but silence [samt], and the Real alone is speaking [nāṭiq]. // There is nothing but God, for there is no other creator.”⁸ Those who listen to the Real are His servants, that is, all of creation, given that each created thing serves God by following the engendering command in all that it does.

The Real speaks to the servants constantly while they stay silent, giving ear constantly in all of their states, whether movement or rest, whether standing or sitting, for their hearing is given over to the Real’s speech. They never cease hearing the Real’s command that engenders [takwīn] the states and guises that come to be within them. Neither the servants nor the cosmos are ever empty of the existence of engendering for one instant, so they never cease listening and never cease being silent. It is impossible for them to enter in along with Him in His speech. So, when you hear servants speaking, that is the Real’s engendering within them, while the servants remain silent in their root, standing before Him, for no one ever hears anything but the engenderings of the Real.⁹

Ibn ‘Arabī sometimes says that there are two basic sorts of divine speech, *qawl* and *kalām*. *Qawl* is the engendering speech: “His only command when He desires a thing, is to say [yaqūl] to it, ‘Be!’, and it comes to be” (Q 36:82). *Kalām* is the prescriptive speech transmitted by the prophets. “*Qawl* has an effect on the nonexistent things [ma’ dūmā], and that is existence. *Kalām* has an effect on the existent things, and that is knowledge [‘ilm].”¹⁰ As for *kalīma* (“word”) – the unit from which speech is compounded – it designates not only God’s prescriptive words but also His engendered words. Hence God’s eternal Speech is nothing but God Himself inasmuch as He makes Himself manifest, whether as created things, or as words, concepts, and awareness. All *āyāt* – “signs” or “verses” – whether present in the Qur’an, the cosmos, or the soul, are God’s words. “The cosmos is the words of God.”¹¹ “All of existence is the words of God.”¹² “There is nothing in existence but God, for the existent things are God’s words.”¹³ “There is nothing in the cosmos but – or rather, the cosmos is nothing but – the words of God. The words of God are His command, and His command is ‘but one, like a blink of the eye’” (Q 54:50).¹⁴ It follows that “Existence is all letters, words, surahs, and verses. Hence it is the Great Qur’an, ‘to which the unreal comes not from before nor from behind’” (Q 41:42).¹⁵

Ibn ‘Arabī devotes one of the longest chapters of his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings*), to the “Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-rahīmān*), explaining how all things are actually, not figuratively, God’s words. Each divine word – each existent thing – is articulated within the divine Breath from ontological letters, and each combines with others to produce sentences, chapters, and books. Just as our words are expressions of ourselves, so also God’s words disclose His Reality. Just as our words once spoken disappear, so also God’s words are gone as soon they arrive. If they seem to remain in place, this results from the renewal of creation at each instant (*tajdīd al-khalq fi l-ānāt*), for God’s engendering command is eternal, and our perceived reality is forever newly arriving (*ḥādīth*). And just as our words are never exactly the same, so also “[t]here is no repetition in the self-disclosure” (*lā takrār fi l-tajallī*) because the Real Existence is infinite and unrestricted. Our words are at once ourselves, articulated in our breath and existing as a result of our own actuality, and not ourselves for they evaporate while we remain. His words are the same: He/not He.

All-comprehensiveness

Ibn ‘Arabī reminds his readers that one literal sense of the word *qur’ān* is *jāmi’*, which means “bringing together,” “gathering,” “comprehending.” Moreover, God is *al-jāmi’*, “the All-Comprehensive.” And the name *Allāh* is *al-ism al-jāmi’*, “the all-comprehensive name,” because it embraces the meaning of every divine name and designates the single reality to which each of them refers.¹⁶ The Great

Qur'an – the cosmos – is also *jāmi'* because it embraces everything other than God. And “the perfect human being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) is *al-kaawn al-jāmi'*, “the all-comprehensive engendered thing,”¹⁷ or “the all-comprehensive, universal servant,”¹⁸ or “the all-comprehensive word and transcript of the cosmos,”¹⁹ or “the all-comprehensive book”²⁰ for, as the microcosmic fruit of the divine word *kun*, He contains within himself all the words articulated by the All-Merciful Breath.

These, then, are the essential homologies in Ibn 'Arabī's view of the divine speech, each of them possessing the attribute of all-comprehensiveness: God, the cosmos, the Qur'an, and the perfect human being. Each embraces the others in a manner appropriate to its own mode of existence. In this way of looking at things, the Real's creation of the universe and revelation of the Qur'an prepare the way for the actualization of human perfection, which is arguably the defining topic of Ibn 'Arabī's corpus. The perfect man, the supreme exemplar of whom is Muhammad, is the fully actualized microcosm, a complete form (*ṣūra*) of God, embracing all attributes and traits of God, the cosmos, and the Qur'an in an active, focused, and aware manner. The universe as a whole, the macrocosm, is also a complete form of God, but it displays the words articulated within the All-Merciful Breath passively and in indefinite diversity.²¹ As for those human beings who have not reached the Station of No Station – that is, practically everyone other than the prophets – the Qur'an offers them the means to strive toward perfection. In effect, the Qur'an is the ontological and spiritual perfection of human beings laid bare in language. As Ibn 'Arabī puts it in one passage:

In relation to the revealed books and scriptures, the Qur'an is like man in relation to the cosmos, for it is the comprehensive totality of the books [*majmū' al-kutub*], and man is the comprehensive totality of the cosmos, so the two are brothers. And by man I mean the Perfect Man, who is none other than he upon whom the Qur'an has been sent down in all its respects and relations.²²

Just as the Qur'an embraces all the wisdom of all scriptures in an all-comprehensive synthesis, so also the most perfect of perfect men, Muhammad, embraces all the virtues, perfections, and cognitive modalities of the 124,000 previous prophets. His unity encompasses the prophets' multiplicity, just as God's unity encompasses the multiplicity of His names. Ibn 'Arabī sees an explicit recognition of the Qur'an's vision of simultaneous unity and multiplicity in its two primary designations: *al-qur'ān* (that which brings together) and *al-furqān* (that which separates). As *qur'ān*, the book manifests the all-comprehensive unity of the Real Existence, and as *furqān*, it displays the multiplicity implicit in God's omniscience. The Perfect Man actualizes the same complementarity, so he is able to see things with both eyes. The eye of *qur'ān* is the eye of imagination and comprehensiveness, for it grasps *tashbīh* and the fact that the Real *Wujūd* is immanent in all things. The eye of *furqān* is the eye of intellect and discernment, for it perceives each thing as distinct from the Real and from everything else. Ibn 'Arabī writes:

He who stops with the Qur'an inasmuch as it is a *qur'ān* is a possessor of one eye that is unitary in all-comprehensiveness. When someone stops with it inasmuch as it is a comprehensive totality, for him it is a *furqān*. . . . When I tasted this latter affair . . . I said, “This is allowed, that is forbidden, and this is indifferent. The doctrines have become variegated and the schools diverse. The levels have been distinguished, the divine names and engendered traces have become manifest, and the names and gods have become many in the cosmos.”²³

The Qualifications of a Mufassir

Ibn 'Arabī often mentions that the proper way to understand the Qur'an is to seek help from God and the Prophet. One should not rely upon one's own talents and abilities. Philosophers and

theologians rely upon *‘aql*, but the proper use of *‘aql*, he tells us, is to “fetter” (*‘iqāl*) one’s *hawā* (“caprice”), the arbitrary likes and dislikes of the ego, the false god often stigmatized by the Qur’an (as in Q 43:4 and 45:23).²⁴ By misusing *‘aql*, scholars fetter their understanding rather than their personal predilections. They “tie knots” (*‘uqda*) in their hearts and come up with “creeds” (*‘aqīda*) and “beliefs” (*‘i‘iqāḍ*). They limit and bind the Real and end up with “a god of belief” (*ilāh mu‘taqad*), a notion of God tied down by their own limitations.²⁵ If these knots do not aid in achieving perfection, they need to be undone. If people attempt to undo them by the binding instrument that is *‘aql*, they will tie themselves in other knots, perhaps more adequate to the nature of things but still dominated by creaturely limitations. The Qur’an and the Sunna provide the path of undoing knots and transcending limitations. One must surrender one’s heart to God and let Him take over instruction. Ibn ‘Arabī sees this message in various Qur’anic verses, such as, “The All-Merciful: He taught the Qur’an, He created man, He taught him the explication” (Q 55:1–4). “Be wary of God and God will teach you” (Q 2:282).

Given that God is the Real *Wujūd* (true existence, finding, awareness, consciousness), it follows that understanding the Qur’an – the Real’s all-comprehensive self-disclosure in language – entails intensification of the light of *wujūd*, which is to say that existence and awareness will come to shine more brightly in the heart. The result will be some degree of movement from *bu‘d* (“distance” from the Real) to *qurb* (“nearness” to the Real). This is not a subjective movement but rather an intensification of the very fabric of reality from which the self is woven. The trajectory of the self is endless, since no matter how many veils are lifted, their number stays infinite. Given the infinity of the Real and the constriction of newly arriving things, “the veils will remain hung down forever, and nothing else is possible.”²⁶

That selves have trajectories is a constant theme of the Qur’an and is obvious to everyone. Each human being, created in the very form of the Necessary Existence, has the potential to encompass all possibilities of *wujūd*. Each stands at some point on the trajectories articulated by the Qur’an and perceptible in ourselves and the world – such as those who know and those who do not know, those who see and those who do not see, those who are wary of God and those who are not wary. It makes no sense to imagine – in the Qur’anic view of things – that any two people can have the same understanding of the Qur’an, or the same participation in the perfections of existence, or the same attainment of the all-comprehensive human form. The distinctions that the Qur’an draws among unbelievers, believers, friends, and prophets are not simply subjective or moral but rather ontological, pertaining to the objective nature of things. Moreover, they are indefinitely subdividable, for there is no repetition in the divine self-disclosure.

Ibn ‘Arabī brings out the ontological reality of the self’s inner qualities in many ways, such as his explanations of *khuluq* (“character”), a word written exactly the same as *khalq* (“creation”). Already in the hadith literature, *khalq* can designate the external human reality as contrasted with *khuluq*, the internal dimensions of the soul. A supplication of the Prophet, for example, includes the words, “O God, make my character beautiful just as You made my creation beautiful.” Man’s creation is beautiful because God created him in “the most beautiful stature” (Q 95:4). Achieving a beautiful character, however, depends upon actualizing the divine form. By discussing *khuluq* as an ontological rather than a moral issue, Ibn ‘Arabī departs from its general philosophical approach, where the plural of *khuluq*, *akhlāq*, is typically translated as “ethics.”

Ibn ‘Arabī often designates the process whereby seekers pass through the ascending stages of possibility – commonly called the “stations” on the path to God – as “becoming characterized by the character traits of God” (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*). The final stage of this ascent, the Station of No Station, is also known as the Muhammadan Station, for Muhammad embodied it in a uniquely perfect manner, allowing him to be the receptacle for the all-comprehensive Qur’an. It embraces countless degrees of perfection, which can be represented, for example, by the 124,000 prophets, in each of whose footsteps, says Ibn ‘Arabī, walks one of God’s friends in every era.²⁷ His brief *Fuṣūṣ*

al-ḥikam summarizes this approach by describing 27 perfect human exemplars, each of whom was a “word,” that is, a specific instance of the divine speech in human form colored by a specific attribute of the divine reality. Adam, the first human being and the first to achieve perfection, made manifest the all-comprehensive name *Allāh*, which created Adam in its own form. The other prophetic words disclosed this same name, but a second divine name predominated, allusions to which Ibn 'Arabī finds in the Qur'anic depictions of the prophet in question.

Ibn 'Arabī sees a reference to Muhammad's station of all-comprehensiveness in the Qur'an's use of the adjective “tremendous” (*‘aẓīm*). He writes:

God says, “Surely thou art upon a tremendous character” [Q 68:4]. . . . When 'Ā'isha was asked about the character of the Messenger of God, she answered, “His character was the Qur'an”. . . . God described that character as “tremendous,” just as He described the Qur'an in His words, “the tremendous Qur'an” [Q 15:87]. . . . If someone from the community of God's Messenger has not perceived him and desires to see him, let him gaze on the Qur'an. When he gazes on it, there will be no difference between gazing on it and gazing on God's Messenger. It is as if the Qur'an became configured in a corporeal form called Muhammad ibn 'Abdallāh ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib. And the Qur'an is God's speech and His attribute. So Muhammad in his totality is the attribute of the Real, and “Whoever obeys the Messenger has obeyed God” [Q 4:80], for “he does not speak from caprice” [Q 53:3], since he is a tongue of the Real.²⁸

In the 560 chapters of the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn 'Arabī describes an endless variety of moral, spiritual, and cognitive stations achieved by the prophets and their followers. He finds their archetypes delineated in the *Furqān* and designated by divine names, specific chapters or verses, prophetic practices, divine/human character traits, and so on. Invariably, after providing profuse details concerning the wisdom that God confers on the possessor of each of these stations, he remarks that what he has written represents but a tiny fraction of the understanding that he was given when God “opened up” (*futūḥ*) his soul to that station. It is precisely this sort of “opening” that is referred to in the title of the *Futūḥāt*. Both the content of the book and Ibn 'Arabī's constant attention to Qur'anic verses and words illustrate his contention that “[n]othing is opened up to any friend of God except the understanding of the Tremendous Book.”²⁹

Actualizing the Divine Speech

Although all things are signs of God, none are articulated manifestations of the all-comprehensive Real except the cosmos as a whole, the perfect human being, and the Qur'an. It is as if these three alone display the full spectrum of possibility – the white light of God – while other things take on specific colors. Ibn 'Arabī understands the words of the angels, “None of us there is but has a known station” (Q 37:164), as a general rule, applying in this world to all creatures other than man. Human beings alone have no known station, no fixed modality of being, no unchanging articulation in the divine speech. Only at death does their free will disappear, allowing their existence to unfold in a trajectory that has now become fixed by a lifetime of becoming characterized, whether harmoniously or disharmoniously, by the character traits of God.

Since human beings have no fixed stations in this life, they are “forced to be free” (*majbūr 'alā ikhtiyārīhim*, as both al-Ghazālī [d. 1111] and Ibn 'Arabī like to say). They must make choices on a daily basis, and these have repercussions in the manner of their becoming. Each individual starts as a potential for all-comprehensiveness, but whether or not he or she achieves the goal depends on myriad factors, not least intention and desire. In order to desire something, one must know it, and the only way to know the fullness of the divine form is through its three manifestations – the

universe, the perfected human soul, and the Qur'an. The universe is much too vast to be known as such, and the human soul has far too many mysterious depths to be plunged. "In the view of those who know the soul, the soul is an ocean without shore, so knowledge of it has no end."³⁰ Only the Qur'an and its embodiment in the Sunna can provide the balance of *tashbīh* and *tanẓīh* that allows people to escape their limitations and achieve the Station of No Station, the all-comprehensive human perfection embracing all perfections but limited and defined by none. Those who reach it are "the realizers." They alone actualize *tahqīq*, which entails among other things fulfilling the prophetic commandment to "give each thing that has a rightful due [*haqq*] its rightful due." These rightful dues are delineated by the *Furqān* and its embodiment in the Sunna. Such perfect human beings are then *ahl al-Qur'ān*, "the folk of the Qur'an," who, according to a hadith, "are the folk of *Allāh* and His elect." They are the folk of *Allāh* rather than any other divine name because of their all-comprehensiveness. And the word *ahl* means not only folk but also "worthy" (*mustahiqq*). They alone give human all-comprehensiveness its rightful due.

The Qur'an says that God sent the Qur'an and other scriptures to guide mankind and that God alone is the true guide, showing people the road to their everlasting "felicity" (*sa'āda*). It is God who must guide for the simple reason that "there is no guide but God." No one else knows Real *Wujūd* and the path to actualize its fullness. To follow the all-comprehensive articulation of guidance in the divine speech is to conform oneself to it in both theory and practice, in both knowledge of things and in activity vis-à-vis others. In one respect such conformity demands effort, which must be guided by the prescriptive command. From a God's-eye view, however, all things are the fruit of the engendering command. Given that God is both eternal and omniscient, He knows all things always and forever, which is to say that He knows every possibility, everything that may possibly exist, for all eternity. He does not interfere with things as He knows them. He simply says "Be!" to them at their appropriate moments.³¹

From the divine standpoint, all stations are fixed. Everyone has already attained what he or she will attain, for attainment is nothing but his or her eternal thingness – the beginningless possibility – to which God gives existence. From the human standpoint, however, freedom is unavoidable, so much so that we are forced to make choices and will be called to account for them. Ibn 'Arabī takes this "predestinarian" perspective as good news because it means that all things actualize their existential reality in servanthood to the All-Merciful: "None is there in heaven and earth that comes not to the All-Merciful as a servant" (Q 19:93). Even if people fail miserably to follow the prescriptive command, the mercy of the All-Merciful "embraces all things" (Q 7:156), so they will eventually (*bi l-ma'āl*) taste mercy's fruit as compensation for their compulsory servanthood.³²

When we look at Ibn 'Arabī's vast corpus as an explication of the engendering command depicted in the Qur'an, we can see it as an attempt to map out the whole panorama of human perfection and, by implication, imperfection, since – as the proverbial hemistich puts it – "Things become distinct through their opposites." We also come to understand that the prescriptive command is a codicil to the engendering command, for it opens up a vast range of existential modalities dependent on human responsibility, not least of which are paradise and hell. There can be no reward or punishment for coerced activity. Moreover, paradise and hell do not represent a simple binary opposition, for here again we are dealing with hierarchies of manifestation. When heaven and earth are turned into something else at the resurrection (Q 14:48), the apparent uniformity of the human race will become an indefinite diversity of realms of being, contingent as always on the Real Being but far more varied than was possible in the realm of corporeality. This is because "The nonmanifest dimension of the human being in this world will be his manifest dimension in the next world."³³ Bodies, which seem so substantial here, disappear; "mountains pass by like clouds" (Q 27:88). The character traits, thoughts, intentions, virtues, vices, stations, and states that are invisible in this world become the very substance of the human reality, now made manifest in "imaginal" but real form. People taste concretely everything they brought into being during a life

of forced freedom. Without that freedom, an indefinite diversity of pleasure and pain could not become manifest. Or, to speak in terms of the divine attributes, there would be no place for the manifestation of justice and wisdom, two Qur'anic divine attributes that demand putting things in their rightful places. All this Ibn 'Arabī finds detailed in the Qur'an's depiction of God and the worlds.

The Qur'an is addressed to everyone, and "God sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people, that he might make clear to them" (Q 14:4). Those who know the language of the people to whom the Qur'an was sent might think that the book will be easy to understand. But given the infinity and incomparability of the book's author, one will certainly need God's help. In terms of the engendering command, God's help has already been given: the intelligence, talents, desires, and drives necessary for some degree of understanding are present in the human substance, with the obvious caveat that each person's gifts are unique – this is the law of nonrepetition. For Ibn 'Arabī, this means, among other things, that the human soul undergoes a constant process of actualizing its all-comprehensive potentialities, *ad infinitum*. It follows that a perfect human being will see new meanings in the *āyāt* every time he reads them. As he puts it:

When meaning repeats itself for someone who is reciting the Qur'an, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance. But when someone's knowledge is increased through his recitation, and when he acquires a new judgment with each reading, he is the reciter who, in his own existence, follows God.³⁴

The meanings that readers perceive in the Qur'an will depend on a great variety of factors, not least their understanding of the Arabic language. The qualified will find that the book is "an ocean without shore, since He to whom it is ascribed intends all the meanings demanded by the speech – in contrast to the speech of created things."³⁵ Given that all the Qur'an's possible meanings are intended by God, "No one can declare a scholar wrong in an interpretation supported by the words. . . . However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation or to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and someone who follows his authority [*muqallid*]."³⁶

In terms of the prescriptive command, the degree to which one grasps the meanings of the Qur'an will have a great deal to do with intentions, for the manner in which people exercise their limited freedom has obvious repercussions in their ability to understand. For Ibn 'Arabī, it is self-evident that following the prescriptive command is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the Qur'an as it should be understood (*bi-ḥaqqih*). The all-comprehensive Book was revealed to make possible the actualization of the all-comprehensive divine form in which man was created. If readers of his corpus saw in his vision a notion of *wahdat al-wujūd*, this is no doubt because of his insistence that the Real Existence alone is real and that the realization of Its reality can be attained only by those who perceive and find Its all-comprehensiveness within their own all-comprehensive selves, the locus of finding and being found. This helps explain what he means when he describes what he found when, following in the Prophet's footsteps on a *mi'rāj*, he entered into the Divine Presence, which is the Real Existence, other than which nothing truly exists: "I gained the meanings of all the divine names. I saw that they all go back to a single Named Object and a Single Entity. That Named Object was what I was witnessing, and that Entity was my own existence."³⁷

Notes

- 1 *Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh et la naissance de la confrérie ṣāḍilīte* (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1971), 46.
- 2 As noted in the previous chapter, Michel Chodkiewicz and Abdel Baki Meftah have shown how the Qur'an plays an intimate role in Ibn 'Arabī's writings. For an orderly but far from adequate sampling of Ibn 'Arabī's commentaries on Qur'anic passages, see the four-volume work by Maḥmūd Maḥmūd al-Ghurāb, *Raḥma min al-Raḥmān fī tafsīr wa ishārāt al-Qur'ān* (Damascus: Maṭba' al-Naḍir, 1989).

- 3 See, for example, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), vol. 2, p. 548, line 15; translated in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* (hereafter SPK), xxi.
- 4 See Chittick, “A History of the Term *Wahdat al-Wujūd*” in idem, *In Search of the Lost Heart* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 71–88.
- 5 *Futūḥāt* 2:380.4 (SPK 120–121).
- 6 See SPK 361–363.
- 7 *Futūḥāt* 2:85.10 (SPK 355).
- 8 *Futūḥāt* 3:219.1 (cf. *Futūḥāt* 2:77.16).
- 9 *Futūḥāt* 3:218.31.
- 10 *Futūḥāt* 2:400.9.
- 11 *Futūḥāt* 3:413.28.
- 12 *Futūḥāt* 4:161.5.
- 13 *Futūḥāt* 2:404.6.
- 14 *Futūḥāt* 2:402.30.
- 15 *Futūḥāt* 4:167.22. For this passage in context, see Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998; hereafter SDG), 70–72. For two more long passages on the cosmos as God’s words, see SDG 192–193 (*Futūḥāt* 2:416–417) and 196–198 (*Futūḥāt* 3:283–284).
- 16 See, for example, *Futūḥāt* 1:102.4, 329.5, 428.27, 623.17, II 468.7.
- 17 *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, chapter 1.
- 18 *Futūḥāt* 1:108.25.
- 19 *Futūḥāt* 1:136.30.
- 20 *Futūḥāt* 2:67.29.
- 21 See SDG 27–29.
- 22 *Futūḥāt* 3:94.8.
- 23 *Futūḥāt* 3:94.16 (SPK 363).
- 24 SDG 340ff.
- 25 SPK, chapter 19.
- 26 *Futūḥāt* 3:276.20 (SDG 156).
- 27 *Futūḥāt* 3.208.17.
- 28 *Futūḥāt* 4:60.33 (SPK 241).
- 29 *Futūḥāt* 3:56.2.
- 30 *Futūḥāt* 3:121.25 (SPK 345).
- 31 Ibn ‘Arabī calls this fact *al-ḥujjat al-bāliḡha* (Q 6:49), God’s conclusive argument. See SPK 297–301.
- 32 See Chittick, “The Hermeneutics of Mercy,” in *Ibn Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: One World, 2005).
- 33 *Futūḥāt* 3:441.14.
- 34 *Futūḥāt* 4:367.3.
- 35 *Futūḥāt* 2:581.11 (SPK 245).
- 36 *Futūḥāt* 2:119.24.
- 37 *Futūḥāt* 3:350.30.