

THE ONTOLOGY OF THE SELF IN CLASSICAL ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

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Abstract

This essay examines the ontological status and nature of the self as understood and taught in classical Islamic mysticism on the basis of teachings from two major Islamic mystical philosophers: Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) and al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Following a short overview of mysticism in general, the arguments of these two figures are examined alongside the Islamic creed known as the Shahada, which defines the tradition’s monotheistic principle *tawhid*. It is determined during this examination that, according to classical Islamic mystics, the self as an independent entity is illusory and therefore has a negative ontological status. The nuances of this metaphysical position are carefully considered and explored, including by means of a comparative analysis with David Hume (d. 1776) at the end.

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*“Praise be to Him who made no way for His creation to know Him
save through the inability to know Him!”*

— *Abu Bakr (d. 634)*

Chapter 1

Mysticism

In its theoretical formulation, Islamic mysticism—also known as Sufism (*taṣawwuf*)—is an ethical and metaphysical philosophy situated within the broader intellectual expressions of Islam. Although there is no single, universal authority on Sufism, there is nonetheless some consensus about Sufism as a philosophy, as well as a spiritual practice or discipline, among Sufis themselves. Along with understanding this consensus, however, Annemarie Schimmel writes, “To approach [Sufism’s] partial meaning we have to ask ourselves first, what *mysticism* means.”¹ I shall therefore propose a working definition of this term. Secondly, I recommend that one ask herself how the mystical differs from, and yet may resemble, the philosophical. The reason is that while there certainly is an analytic distinction between *mysticism* and *philosophy* properly so-called, both are effectively integrated in any Sufi system of thought. So, it is important to understand exactly *how* the two differ to appreciate the ways in which they functionally converge in Sufism as one. Of course, to refer to Sufism as a system of thought and nothing more would be descriptively inadequate on my part; for Sufism is not only a system of thought but is also a practical way of living, much like what one finds espoused and advocated in the works of Saint Augustine of Hippo or Saint Thomas Aquinas. This fact already separates Sufism from pure philosophy in the sense that the mere acceptance of a philosophical

¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 3.

proposition does not *by itself* require any sort of subsequent behaviour to parallel it. Even if someone appeals to ethics, for example, and argues that people behave in accordance with the ethical systems they subscribe to (either consciously or unconsciously), I maintain that merely accepting a proposition is not the same as subscribing to it. In other words, if someone really *subscribes to* a particular ethical system, then she must *by definition* behave accordingly because it is a philosophy which relates to human behaviour. However, if someone merely *accepts* a particular ethical system as true, then she need not necessarily behave accordingly because she may not care to do what she believes to be ethical. (Hence metaethics.) In this way, then, Sufism can be partially understood as a *practical philosophy*, for it is a system of thought *and* behaviour. Indeed, these two are ideally one in Sufism as well; however, such distinctions and convergences will be further clarified later on.

According to William Stoddart, “it is generally understood that mysticism claims to be concerned with ‘Ultimate Reality.’ [Moreover, t]he relationship in question is mostly taken to be of an ‘experiential’ kind.”² The relationship to which Stoddart refers is an epistemological one and, therefore, when he asserts that it is mostly of an *experiential* kind he means to say that Ultimate Reality is primarily known by or through experience. Experiential knowledge differs from what we might call analytical knowledge in that the latter is acquired via *analysis* and, as such, is understood and communicated in terms of premises and conclusions, hypotheses and theories, and so on. The former, on the other hand, “is held to be ‘incommunicable’ and, particularly when doubt is cast on the alleged object of the experience,” as Stoddart explains, “it is often said to be, in a pejorative sense, *purely subjective*.”³ Despite such pejoratives, however, Stoddart admits, “There is . . . at

² William Stoddart, “Mysticism,” *Sacred Web 2* (1998): 65.

³ *Ibid.* (emphasis added)

least something that can be communicated . . . , and at the same time something that is ‘objective,’ for whatever can be transmitted must needs be objective, even should the object in question prove to be illusory.”⁴ Indeed, according to William James,

The words ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystical’ are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a base in either facts or logic. For some writers a ‘mystic’ is any person who believes in thought-transference, or spirit-return. Employed in this way the word has little value: there are too many less ambiguous synonyms. So, to keep it useful by restricting it, I will . . . simply propose . . . four marks which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical[.]⁵

The mystical marks described by James are (1) ineffability, (2) noetic quality, (3) transiency, and (4) passivity.⁶ In other words, mystical states are those about which (1) a person cannot adequately describe or communicate, from which (2) a person believes to gain some new knowledge or insight, but which (3) do not last long, and during which (4) a person feels much more like a participant than an agent. Dealing with its etymology, Schimmel writes, “That *mysticism* contains something mysterious . . . is understood from the root common to the words *mystic* and *mystery*, the Greek *myein*, ‘to close the eyes.’ ”⁷ This term therefore seems an apt descriptor of James’ four marks, as it still acknowledges an unavoidable degree of ambiguity. After all, Schimmel explains, “In its widest sense [mysticism] may be defined as the consciousness of One Reality—be it called Wisdom, Light, Love, or Nothing.”⁸ Or, of course, *God*.⁹ All of these terms are rather ambiguous,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1961), 299.

⁶ Ibid., 299-300.

⁷ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 3.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹ Although Schimmel goes on to write that “[s]uch definitions . . . merely point our way[.]” I nevertheless disagree with her definition in its widest sense. I contend that in the broadest sense mysticism is synonymous with experience (without the notion of an experiencer independent of the experience). In case one is unsure what I mean by ‘experience,’ I will specify—and hopefully therefore clarify—by appealing to

though not necessarily arbitrary. Regarding the ineffability of mystical experiences, James writes, “mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of the intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what way the quality or worth of it consists. . . . [For example,] one must have been in love one’s self to understand a lover’s state of mind.” Thus, while experiential—and, by extension, mystical—knowledge is ultimately private—and, in this way, ineffable—there is nonetheless enough illustrative consensus to engage in public academic discourse on the topic of mysticism, whether it be about its parts, such as in the compilation and comparison of different descriptions about particular mystical states or experiences, or as a conceptual whole, such as in the philosophical investigation of what mystical phenomena may mean or imply about the nature of reality if true.

One might object here, arguing that anything marked by ineffability cannot be communicated since the two necessarily constitute a contradiction of terms. As Stoddart writes, however,

To say: ‘I have experienced something indescribable and incommunicable’ is already a description and a communication. As such it can be considered objectively by a third party and, depending on the adequacy of the description, the sensitivity of the hearer and the reality of the object, it can even stir within him a responsive chord.¹⁰

phenomenology. In other words, it is, more or less, that which the phenomenologist is interested in studying that I call experience. And it is the unique impression(s) of experience which I argue is (are) mystical in the widest sense. *This* is not to say that in a slightly narrower sense mysticism is not definable as ‘the consciousness of One Reality,’ it is simply to state that such a definition is not the widest sense of the term. Indeed, in its widest sense, the impression of eating an orange may rightfully be considered a mystical experience insofar as this impression may be considered without reference to a separate experiencer, perceiver, etc.

¹⁰ Stoddart, “Mysticism,” 65-66.

For this reason, while mystical states are *ultimately* ineffable, they are nevertheless *relatively relatable* by means of analogy, allusion, and even paradox—just like, as we shall see, our elusive yet explicit states of love.

One might also inquire where the ‘illustrative consensus’ regarding mysticism comes from. According to F. C. Happold, “mysticism has its fount in what is the raw material of all religion and is also the inspiration of much philosophy, poetry, art, and music, a consciousness of a *beyond*, of something which, though it is interwoven with it, is not of the external world of material phenomena.”¹¹ (This *beyond* to which Happold refers is the notion of Ultimate Reality, which is, as previously mentioned by Stoddart, the primary concern of the mystic.)

In this way, then, the consensus comes from the collective human experience, especially as found in the ‘raw material’—that is, the foundational teachings—of religious tradition. As Happold himself writes,

... to know, to understand, to interpret the universe we rely on reflection on experience. But on what experience? Simply on our own individual experience? The experience of any particular individual is too limited to give more than a very partial picture. To arrive at the fullest knowledge and the deepest understanding it is necessary to take into account not our own personal experience only, not merely the experience of our own Western culture, but *the total experience of the human race, past and present*.¹²

It is for this reason that Huston Smith argues, “In envisioning the way things are, there is no better place to begin than with modern science. Equally, there is no worse place to end.”¹³ Smith expressly disfavours the exclusive adherence to the modern scientific method and model, and, as a result, advocates for a more traditional outlook and approach.

¹¹ F. C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1963), 18-19.

¹² Happold, *Mysticism*, 27. (emphasis added)

¹³ Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 1.

Smith explains his position noting that several essentials to the human experience escape the purview of scientific reductionism, namely, *values in their final and proper sense*, along with *purposes, life meanings, and quality*.¹⁴ That being said, Smith admits that he “does not foolishly argue that traditional peoples were, or are, universally wise. Their science has been superseded,” but since there is much that lies beyond the scientific scope, then “if somewhere hidden in the depths of things there are *invariants* . . . it doesn’t matter much when they are pondered.”¹⁵ The difference, according to Smith, is that the premodern world traditionally recognized and gave uptake to these invariants, whereas the modern world erroneously rejects and ignores them on the basis of science.¹⁶

It is worth clarifying Smith’s critique of science to avoid the risk of misrepresentation and therefore any misunderstanding. First, Smith is not against science *properly so-called*—that is, he is not anti-science. Indeed, Smith himself writes, “With science there can be no quarrel. Scientism is another matter.”¹⁷ Here Smith makes a subtle but significant distinction: science versus scientism. “Whereas science is positive,” he explains,

contenting itself with reporting what it discovers, scientism is negative. It goes beyond the actual findings of science to deny that other approaches to knowledge are valid and other truths true. In doing so it deserts science in favour of metaphysics—a bad metaphysics, as it happens, for as the contention that there are no truths save those of science is not itself a scientific truth, in affirming it scientism contradicts itself.¹⁸

In this way, then, Smith is against the *privileging* of science as the predominant model of knowledge, which has culminated in the prevailing modern cultural sentiments of

¹⁴ Ibid., 14-17.

¹⁵ Ibid., vii-viii. (emphasis added)

¹⁶ Ibid., vii-viii, 8, 16-17.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

scientism, but he is *not* against the appropriate application of its methods, nor does he deny its positive discoveries. It is therefore inaccurate—nay, incorrect—to regard Smith as someone holding an anti-science position, for such a descriptor carries with it the connotation of rejecting or being totally against science. Smith certainly believes that science contributes to our collective human knowledge, he simply does not believe that it is the end of all knowledge.

Second, Smith is not arguing that science is limited in ways that other modes of knowledge are not *in the sense that* science is therefore of no use or value. To be sure, Smith writes, “Since reality exceeds what science registers, we must look for other antennae to catch the wavebands it misses.”¹⁹ He does not, however, say that we must look for other antennae to *recapture* the wavebands science catches, as if there is something wrong with its discoveries.

Given the limits of scientific thought, Schimmel continues defining mysticism, writing that “the reality that is the goal of the mystic, and is ineffable, cannot be understood or explained by any normal mode of perception; neither philosophy nor reason can reveal it. Only the wisdom of the heart, *gnosis*, may give insight into some of its aspects.”²⁰ One can immediately see the similarities between Schimmel’s and James’ definitions of mysticism, for both describe a sense of ineffability and *gnosis* (or noetic quality). Where Schimmel diverges from James is in her distinction between two types of approaches to mystical experience.²¹ Without delving into this distinction in full detail, it is presently

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

sufficient for our purposes to focus on Schimmel's 'voluntaristic' and 'gnostic' approaches, since, she admits, "[it] is somewhat easier."²² She writes,

The mystic of the voluntaristic type wants to 'qualify himself with the qualities of God,' as the Prophetic tradition says, and to unite his own will with God's will, thus eventually overcoming the theoretical difficulties posed by the dilemma of predestination and free will. *This mysticism can be seen as a practical life process.* The mystic of the gnostic type strives for a deeper knowledge of God: he attempts to know the structure of His universe or to interpret the degree of His revelations—although no mystic could ever dare 'know' His Essence. . . . *In Islamic mysticism, both are equally strong, and in later periods they are intermingled.*²³

Therefore, there are those who seek primarily to overcome the *passivity* of mystical experience as described by James and these are the (i) voluntaristic types; then there are those whose primary goal is to overcome the *transiency* of James' described mysticism, especially as it relates to some noetic quality, and these are the (ii) gnostic types. And, to repeat Schimmel, both types are 'equally strong' or 'intermingled' in Sufism. Thus, the Sufi embodies—or at least represents—the goals of both.

One might object that there is a contradiction in simultaneously seeking to overcome the *passivity and transiency* of mystical experience, particularly if overcoming the former requires the self-effacement of one's own will to God's will. After all, one might rightfully inquire, how can the mystic surrender her will to God's and yet *actively* participate in His mysteries, such as what He knows? The answer to this question will not be immediate, but through the course of this essay the Sufi's response will be made clear. Indeed, *this* is because such a question is essentially a variant of the larger question surrounding this essay's thesis: who or what is the *self* according to the classical Islamic mystics?

²² Ibid., 6.

²³ Ibid. (emphasis added)

The above question is an ontological one. Although I have stated at the outset that Sufism is an ‘ethical and metaphysical philosophy,’ such a statement does not exclude the issues of ontology, epistemology, and so on, especially if, for example, ontology is considered a subset of metaphysics. In fact, it is sufficient to call Sufism a metaphysical philosophy in this respect because it addresses all of these issues from the point of view of its metaphysics, including ethics. I only add that Sufism is an *ethical* philosophy because of its own emphasis on ethics and, particularly, virtue. Furthermore, given that Sufism is the *convergence* of philosophy and mysticism, what then, as I proposed inquiring into earlier, distinguishes mysticism from pure philosophy? Put more narrowly, what distinguishes *mystical* metaphysics from *rational* metaphysics?

First, while both are concerned with the *fundamental* nature of reality, the rational metaphysician need not, and typically does not, concern herself with directly experiencing that which is fundamentally real—and indeed may not believe that such a thing is even possible—whereas the mystical metaphysician certainly does concern herself in this way and, given her aim, needs to do so. Second, the rational metaphysician is not necessarily religious, whereas the mystical metaphysician typically *is*. What I mean by ‘religious’ is one who observes specific rituals with the general aim of reinforcing and expanding her own metaphysical understandings, which are *usually* inherited or adopted from a world tradition, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and so on. (Obviously, such a definition is not exhaustive of religion as a whole.) Finally, as previously stated, the rational metaphysician need not change nor modify her attitude or behaviour in light of her metaphysical discoveries, whereas the very basis of the mystic’s *modus operandi*, metaphysician or not, is her mystical experiences. For example, Saint Paul’s attitude and behaviour—at least toward Christians—changed completely after his own experience in

Damascus. In summary, then, mysticism is an experiential science and philosophy which aims to *realize* Ultimate Reality.

The purpose of the present study is therefore threefold. First, it is to demonstrate that an analytically coherent picture of classical Islamic mysticism can be established even though “the *reality* that is the goal of the mystic . . . cannot be understood or explained by . . . philosophy nor reason[.]”²⁴ Second, it is to establish this picture while focusing exclusively on a particular philosophical issue, namely, the ontology of the self. This issue will be addressed at the exclusion of others for the sake of clarity and concision in the demonstration to follow. Finally, after having met the two aforementioned aims, the purpose is to perform a brief comparative analysis between the conclusions found therein regarding the self and the conclusions of David Hume (d. 1776) on the same topic. The reason for this comparison is due to the seeming similarity in their conclusions, which serves as a point of contact between the classical Islamic and Western analytic traditions (Hume being the epitome of the latter with respect to the issue of selfhood.)

With all this in mind, then, this thesis will begin by surveying two of the key figures in Islamic history who have contributed to the development of Islamic mystical philosophy. These are Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) and al-Ghazali (d. 1111).

Ibn ‘Arabi

Abu Muhammad ibn ‘Arabi, also known as the Greatest Master or Shaykh, was born in Mursiya, al-‘Andalus (now known as Murcia, Spain) in the year 1165 CE.²⁵ Ibn ‘Arabi’s *magnum opus* is the *Futuh al-makkiyya*, which translates into English as the

²⁴ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 3. (emphasis added)

²⁵ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), x.

Meccan Openings.²⁶ William C. Chittick explains that Ibn ‘Arabi was a prolific writer, penning over 700 complete works—only approximately 400 of which still exist to this day.²⁷ It is for this reason Chittick asserts,

One of the most daunting prospects faced by a scholar is [just] to read the whole *Futūḥāt*, not to mention the other works available in printed editions or manuscripts. The problem is not simply the sheer volume of his production. His whole corpus stands at an extremely high level of sophistication and demands familiarity with all the Islamic sciences. This helps explain why the Shaykh [], in spite of the intrinsic interest of his works and his wide-spread influence, has been relatively neglected by modern scholars.²⁸

Hence Ibn ‘Arabi will be referred to as one of the primary sources for this essay. Moreover, the main source material from him will be the *Meccan Openings*, as translated and presented in Chittick’s own book *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.²⁹ As Chittick himself writes, “Though the *Futūḥāt* is but one of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works, most of the topics about which he has written are discussed in some detail within it.”³⁰

Orientalism

One might question the current relevancy and status of Chittick’s claim—specifically that Ibn ‘Arabi’s work has been “relatively neglected by modern scholars”³¹—especially since he originally made this claim almost thirty years ago. Before addressing his claim’s *present* status, it is important to consider that a major part of the problem is what Edward Said calls *Orientalism*.³² According to Said,

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’ Thus, a very large mass of writers among whom are

²⁶ Ibid., xii.

²⁷ Ibid., xi.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., xx.

³⁰ Ibid., xii.

³¹ Ibid., xi.

³² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on.³³

A prime example of Orientalism’s academic/scholarly consequences is described by Parviz Morewedge when he writes,

Studies of Western and Islamic philosophy frequently exhibit a disturbing discrepancy. For centuries, scholars of Western philosophy have focused on the conceptual imports of Western texts—without ever claiming that the texts are products of English, German, or French minds. When these scholars study Islamic or another non-Western philosophy, however, they assume the prose of an anthropologist or a social historian searching for foreign influences. Any implicit presupposition that Near Eastern thoughts could not be original—but had to be borrowed from the Greeks or other non-Near Eastern sources—contradicts the factual history of the culture. The civilizations of the Near East developed religion, technology, philosophy, urban centers, and other facets of culture earlier than the Europeans.³⁴

Because of this distinction between the “East” and “West,” many of us in the latter category have ended up stereotypically treating those in the former as *Others*—that is, as persons that are completely different from or other than ourselves. Consequently, whenever the ideas of Others align or coincide with *our own*, we generally assume that they must be mimicking or imitating us in some way, instead of genuinely expressing ideas pertinent to their own cultures and history. Thus, we have historically either misrepresented non-Western thought when studying it or have simply ignored it. Thanks to Chittick and others, however, Ibn ‘Arabi at least is no longer neglected by modern Western scholars and today his ideas are quite well represented.³⁵ Nevertheless, despite this positive attention and

³³ Ibid., 2-3.

³⁴ Parviz Morewedge, *Essays in Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2003), xi-xiii.

³⁵ Atif Khalil, review of *Ibn ‘Arabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously*, by Peter Coates, *Journal of Religion & Society* 7 (2005): 1-3.

representation, there has been little comparative analysis between Ibn ‘Arabi and notable Western analytic thinkers³⁶—perhaps now out of fear of committing or being accused of Orientalism, or perhaps as an illustration of Orientalism itself: if, for example, it is because some believe that Ibn ‘Arabi would have nothing relevant or important to say to 21st century philosophers. So, for these reasons, I remain confident that the academy would benefit from a comparative study free from this discrepancy in approach, with adequate reference to Ibn ‘Arabi as a primary source.

Al-Ghazali

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali was born in Tus, Khorasan in 1058 CE.³⁷ Both the quantity and quality of al-Ghazali’s work place him among the highest ranks of Islamic intellectuals. His *magnum opus* is undoubtedly the *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-Din* (trans. the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* or the *Revival of Religious Learnings*),³⁸ which was originally written in Arabic and divided into four distinctive quarters or parts.³⁹ In English, these parts have themselves been divided into separate books or volumes. For the purposes of this essay, we will be focusing primarily on al-Ghazali’s books from the first and fourth parts of the *Ihya’* series and only secondarily on the second and third parts. The reason for this choice of focus is due to the fact that the first and fourth deal most directly with issues of mysticism and philosophy; however, the other two will still serve to remind us of the *practical* aspects of Islamic mystical philosophy.

³⁶ With that said, there is some comparative analytic work in the literature between al-Ghazali and David Hume; for example, see Edward Omar Moad (2017) in the bibliography.

³⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Moderation in Belief*, trans. Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), xix.

³⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Revival of Religious Learnings*, trans. Kalul Karim (Karachi, PK: Darul Ishaat, 1993), 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8. (emphasis added)

Legitimacy of the Inquiry

Returning to the ontological question of the self, what answer can we draw from the abovementioned figures in Islam? The nature of the ‘self’ is perhaps one of the most widely debated concepts in human history, one on par in popularity with other concepts such as ‘God.’ However, the concept of ‘selfhood,’ whether real or not, cannot be ignored with any intellectual integrity since it is completely tied up with the human psyche. To deny that there is a sense of identity in our experiences is futile, for, even if this sense is illusory, there is still nonetheless this *sense*. And this sense is precisely what theologians and philosophers are interested in examining when they endeavour to examine the ‘self.’ Thus, even if answering such a question seems pointless to some—and I have Western analytic philosophers in mind here, such as the logical positivists who regard all questions of metaphysics as meaningless—holding such a position is *itself* an attempt to answer the question. Love or loathe it, as long as you are living the question is unavoidable: who or what are *you*?

Before one can appreciate how the self is understood in Islam, one must first recognize (a) how God is understood. And in order to recognize the God of Islam, one must turn to (b) His divine names or attributes as found in the Qur’an. But to properly decipher God’s divine names, one needs a firm, comprehensive grasp of (c) the Islamic or, more broadly, monotheistic concept of *tawhid*—that is, the Oneness of God. And to achieve this grasp it is prudent to (d) analyse the formula of the Shahada—the Muslim declaration of faith.

Chapter 2

The Shahada, *Tawhid*, and the Names of God

As Muslims universally testify, the Shahada goes as follows: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.” What is important to note for our present purpose is the initial statement that there is no god but God, since it is without question the most concise definition of *tawhid*. One may take any of the names of God as found in the Qur’an, insert it into this formulaic statement, and thereby discover how every named attribute or quality relates to God’s ultimate Unity or Oneness. For example, one of God’s names in Islam is ‘the Merciful’ (*al-Rahim*),⁴⁰ so, according to the Shahada, there is no one merciful but the Merciful—or no one is merciful but God. Likewise, another of God’s names is ‘the Real’ (*al-Haqq*),⁴¹ so again there is nothing real but the Real—or nothing is real but God. And since the Abrahamic traditions all view God as simultaneously transcendent and immanent in relation to *ourselves* in the world, Reality *itself* must be thought of correspondingly in classical Islamic mysticism. In this way, the mercy of God transcends that which we human beings are capable of feeling/witnessing/experiencing on our own. Hence the transcendence of God’s mercy. However, almost every one of us has experienced the effects of mercy, either from being helped in some way by a sympathetic neighbour or from being inspired to help another as a neighbour. Hence the immanence of God’s mercy. As Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

Were it not for the [divine] names, we would not fear, hope, give, worship, listen, obey, or be addressed, nor would we address the Named. Were it not for the properties which they possess—that is, the effects—you would not know the names. . . . The divine name is the spirit of the effect, while its effect is its form. . . . So the effects of the divine names are the forms of the

⁴⁰ Qur’an 1:1.

⁴¹ Ibid., 23:116. (Sometimes translated as ‘the Truth.’)

names. He who witnesses the form says truly that he has witnessed the names.⁴²

Thus, when one experiences/witnesses the mercy of another she is truly experiencing/witnessing the mercy of God. As al-Ghazali writes, “Human goodness is conceivable only in a figurative sense; the true benefactor is God alone.”⁴³ Indeed, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, it is God Who acts through human beings and all of Creation in this way; otherwise, we could not experience/witness the effects of His mercy—or anything else for that matter.

That being said, al-Ghazali explains, “The truth is that the name [e.g., the Merciful] is different from both the act of naming and the thing named, and that those three terms are distinct and not synonymous.”⁴⁴ We could elaborate upon—and add interpretation to—al-Ghazali’s words, but as he says himself, “the discerning one is satisfied with a little and the dull-witted will only be confused by more.”⁴⁵ Instead, as he recommends, “let us consider whether it is [nevertheless] possible to say about [such terms] that they are the same [as] . . . one another.”⁴⁶ According to al-Ghazali, there are three ways to understand the meaning of ‘same as’ (and conversely ‘different from’ or ‘other than’).⁴⁷ These ways are as meaning (1) synonymous, (2) inter-locked, and (3) unified in plurality.⁴⁸ *Inter-locked* refers to terms that differ in their addition or subtraction, but share some common, fundamental feature or theme. For example, *sayf*, *sarim*, and *muhannad*. The first term refers generally to a sword,

⁴² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 40.

⁴³ Al-Ghazali, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment*, trans. Eric Ormsby (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 2011), 26.

⁴⁴ Al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 5-6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

the second specifically to a sword that is cutting, and the third to an Indian sword. In other words, inter-locked terms are synonymous in some general sense, but are more specifically distinct. *Unified plurality*, according to al-Ghazali,

occurs when one says ‘snow is white and cold’, [for example,] so that white and cold are one, and white is the same as cold. This is the more far-fetched way [to mean the ‘same as’], since their unity is due to the unity of the subject posited with the two predicates, meaning that one individual subject is qualified by whiteness and coldness. In short, our saying ‘it is the same as’ indicates a plurality which is one in some respect. For if there no unity, one could not say ‘it is one with’; and without a plurality there would be no ‘it is identical with’, for this expression indicates [at least] two things.⁴⁹

Although this meaning is admittedly the more ‘far-fetched’ of the three, it is the one that must be kept clearly in mind when contemplating the Qur’anic names of God.

Furthermore, according to Ibn ‘Arabi,

You should know that ‘divine names’ is an expression for a state that is bestowed by realities. So pay attention to what you will hear, and do not imagine manyness or ontological combination (*al-ijtimā‘ al-wujūdī*). What we want to explain in this section is only the hierarchy of intelligible realities, which are many in respect of relationships, but not in respect of real existence, for the Essence of the Real is One in respect of the Essence. However, we know in respect of our existence, our poverty, and our possibility that there must be a Preponderator (*murajjih*) by whom we are supported. We also know that our existence must demand from that Support diverse relationships. Hence the Lawgiver (*al-shāri‘*) alluded to these relationships as the ‘Most Beautiful Names.’⁵⁰

Therefore, the names of God in Islam are hierarchical in nature; however, counter-intuitively, this hierarchy does not imply ontological diversity.

Transcendent and Immanent Reality

Before continuing with the hierarchy of the divine names, however, let us draw out some of the implications of viewing Reality itself as simultaneously transcendent and

⁴⁹ Al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

immanent. Again, as Stoddart explains, “In all religions, the goal of mysticism is *God*, who may also be given such names as the One, the Absolute, the Infinite, the Supreme Self, the Supreme Being.”⁵¹ Hence the simultaneous marks of mysticism, ineffability *and* noetic quality, proposed by James,⁵² for these two marks render the Paradox of Monotheism into the Paradox of Mysticism as well. After all, how can Something be ineffable yet informative, inexplicable yet epistemic? How can there be multiple like you and me when there is truly only the Absolute—the One? How can there be any finite existents or things when Existence Itself is the Infinite? And so on. Either way, the question is how *transcendence* and *immanence* can co-exist. In this way, then, mysticism may be thought of as the ontological *conclusion* of monotheism. Although mysticism need not be monotheistic in its practical or “exoteric” forms,⁵³ in its utmost theoretical or “esoteric” formulations mysticism may go beyond monotheism to monism. Thus, the former paradox is subsumed by the latter. And Ultimate Reality is the Source of this subsumption, which for classical Islamic mystics, as we shall see with Ibn ‘Arabi’s hierarchy of the divine names, is the essence (*dhāt*) of existence—of Being—of God.

This simultaneity therefore means, first, that the world *as we know it* is not what is ultimately Real (hence Reality’s transcendence) while, second, we are nevertheless able to ascertain the illusory nature of our own senses and the world around us. That is, we are somehow able to know what is *not* Real even though what *is* Real transcends us and by extension transcends our own understanding and standards of comparison (hence Reality’s immanence). As Ibn ‘Arabi explains, “In [Islam’s] view, anything that the rational faculty

⁵¹ Stoddart, “Mysticism,” 67. (emphasis added)

⁵² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 287.

⁵³ Stoddart, “Mysticism,” 69.

is able to perceive on its own can be known prior to bring witnessed (*shuhūd*). But the Essence of the Real is outside this judgment, for It is witnessed before It is known. Or, rather, It is witnessed, but not known, just as the Divinity is known, but not witnessed.”⁵⁴ After all, as implied by the Shahada, there is no one knowing but the Knowing (*al-ʿAlim*)⁵⁵ and yet we seem able to know, to some degree, what is meant by this assertion.

Hierarchy of the Divine Names

Now, how is it that God’s names can be hierarchically ranked without any ontological diversity separating them? Chittick explains, “When Ibn al-ʿArabī ranks the names in degrees, most commonly he has in view the difference in scope among the names.”⁵⁶ But what is meant by ‘scope’? Ibn ʿArabi himself writes, “We know that some names—whichever they might be—are uplifted above in degrees, so that some may make use (*ittikhādh*) of others. We know that the degree of the Alive (*al-ḥayy*) is the most tremendous degree among the names, since it is the precondition (*al-sharṭ*) for the existence of the names.”⁵⁷ In other words, then, the scope of a name refers to the extent to which it encompasses the other names. And it is this encompassing nature, or lack thereof, that determines the hierarchical ranking of the divine names. For example, it is related in the *Sunnah*—that is, the sayings (*hadith*) and exemplary teachings of the Prophet Muhammad—that “[w]hen Allah [God] created the creatures, He wrote in the Book, which is with Him over His Throne: ‘Verily, My Mercy prevailed over My Wrath’.”⁵⁸ Thus, God’s mercy encompasses His wrath, but His wrath does not encompass His mercy. Furthermore,

⁵⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 59-60.

⁵⁵ Qur’an 6:115, 30:54.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Abu Zakaria al-Nawawi, *Riyad as-Salihin*, Book 1, Hadith 419. Retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/riyadussaliheen/1>

if God is the Merciful, then we are to be the grateful, and in that way the two are truly One. “Hence,” Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “there are only two [fundamental] levels [to Reality], since there are only a Lord and a servant.”⁵⁹ But, again, these levels are not separate entities, rather they are unified in a single entity. As Ibn ‘Arabi concludes, “In the case of God, there is nothing but the other, not the like, since He has no like.”⁶⁰ It is partly because of these levels that Atif Khalil writes, “[T]he foundation of gratitude [in Islamic ethics] . . . involves retracing the gift to its ontological origin.”⁶¹

One might be inclined to ask: *How is this possible? Given God’s Oneness, should not the two names encompass each other?* However, such questions misunderstand the Unity of God. After all, if God is the Merciful, then He must necessarily be the Wrathful toward those who are ungrateful, especially if in their ingratitude (*kufr*) they commit injustice against those to whom He is the Merciful. It does not conversely follow from this relationship that if God is the Wrathful then He must necessarily be the Merciful toward anyone; for God could conceivably hate everything/everyone and be the Wrathful solely for this reason. In this way, then, God’s wrath is necessitated by His mercy, but His mercy is not necessitated by His wrath. Hence God’s mercy ‘prevails over His wrath.’ Nevertheless, while God’s mercy is not necessitated by His wrath, it *is* necessitated by His justice. Therefore, God’s wrath may only be considered a blessing insofar as it is an extension of His mercy and His mercy a judgment only insofar as it is an extension of His justice.

⁵⁹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Atif Khalil, “The Embodiment of Gratitude (*Shukr*) in Sufi Ethics,” *Studia Islamica* 111 (2016): 161.

Returning to the abovementioned questions, then, it is worthwhile to consider that, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, “The relationship of Allah to all things is one relationship with no ranking in degrees. . . . The names of the Real do not become plural and multiple except within the loci of their manifestation.”⁶² So, although it is true that *ultimately* the two names are encompassed—nay, annihilated—equally in God, this does not mean that the two encompass each other at all within the ‘loci of their manifestation.’

God as Ultimate Reality

With this relation of things in mind, let us proceed by exploring the nature of God as understood and taught by Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali. According to Ibn ‘Arabi,

Once God has created the cosmos, we see that it possesses diverse levels (*marātib*) and realities (*ḥaqā’iq*). Each of these demands a specific relationship with the Real. When He sent His messengers [e.g., Jesus the Christ and the Prophet Muḥammad], one of the things He sent with them because of those relationships were the names by which He is named for the sake of His creatures. . . . The names are attributed only to God, for He is the object named by them, but He does not become multiple (*takaththur*) through them. If they were ontological qualities (*umūr wujūdiyya*) subsisting within Him, they would make Him multiple. God knows the names in respect of the fact that He knows every object of knowledge, while we know the names through the diversity of their effects within ourselves; hence the names are multiple, while God is named by them. So they are attributed to Him, but He does not become multiple in Himself through them.⁶³

As follows, there is only one, ultimate reality—the Reality of God. This Reality is Self-aware and, as a result, knows everything since *It* is all there is to know. Each one of us is a part of God, Who alone is Himself (i.e., Absolute). In this way, no one among us is completely God, even though God is completely present in all of us; for no one part makes up the whole while the whole makes up every single part. Thus, there appears to be a

⁶² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 57.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

relationship of things which exist only *in relation* to the Absolute. Ibn ‘Arabi asserts that these things include Creation, ourselves, and indeed everything *other than* God.⁶⁴ The divine names therefore “allow us[,]” as Ibn ‘Arabi says, “to understand that they denote both [God’s] Essence and an intelligible quality which has no entity in existence.”⁶⁵ It is clear from this last statement, then, that the attributes of God refer both to the ineffable and to our perceptions of the ineffable, which truly cannot be perceived by anything other than that which is ineffable. For example, Ibn ‘Arabi writes that one of the intelligible qualities of God which has no entity in existence is love.⁶⁶ Love is an intelligible feeling but an ineffable phenomenon, for, while many of us can claim some experience with it, it is nonetheless impossible to adequately describe/define. Of course, love is not an entity or thing-in-itself and thus what we experience is not, ontologically speaking, *real*. Nevertheless, love points to something that *is* real, something that is beyond what can be expressed by our experiences of love. And that which is beyond the expressions of love is *God*. But God, being transcendent and *One*, is also beyond any distinctions between love and that toward which love points. Thus, it can and must be said that God *is* love. Therefore, God is the lover, the beloved, and the love between them. The divine names or attributes of God are perhaps best thought of, then, as the revelations of the only phenomenon to the only phenomenon that can receive such revelations. In theological terms, God’s names are His own Self-revelations to an image of Himself—the reality of man.

However, as Michael A. Sells stipulates,

The basic aporia [above]—that the divine creation is the *cause* of a process of which the revealed creator-deity and its names are the *result*—is performed semantically through a fusion of antecedents in the phrase: to

⁶⁴ Ibid., 94.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

reveal to it(self) through it(self) its mystery. On first glance, the problematic phrase *wa yuzhira bihi sirrahu ilayhi* would mean ‘it reveals through it its secret to it,’ an awkward, but literally correct translation. It is awkward in English because English demands that we choose between reflexive and nonreflexive pronouns (it reveals to it, i.e. something other, or it reveals to itself). Ibn ‘Arabi does not make such a distinction; the creative ambiguity between the reflexive and non-reflexive marks the perspective shift. It becomes impossible to determine whether the antecedent of the pronoun is the divine or the human.⁶⁷

Thus, when al-Ghazali asserts that “God alone merits love[.]”⁶⁸ it is not inconsistent with the *hadith* which states, “None amongst you believes (truly) until he loves for his brother, or for his neighbour, that which he loves for himself.”⁶⁹ Indeed, these two statements are perfectly consistent because, according to al-Ghazali, the love of one’s self and others—whether brother, neighbour, etcetera—is fundamentally the love of God.⁷⁰ This fundamental interpretation of love is twofold in its meaning. First, it can be validly interpreted to mean that, as discussed previously concerning Ibn ‘Arabi, love as we feel/witness/experience *it* is in actuality God’s love for us—or through us for others. Second, however, it can be validly interpreted to mean that the love *toward* one’s self and others is in actuality a love toward God. In other words, when one loves herself or another she is really, whether she realizes it or not, expressing her love for God. Hence al-Ghazali writes, “Who loves anyone other than God, *without regard for his relationship with God*, does so out of ignorance and a flawed knowledge of God.”⁷¹ For, as related in another

⁶⁷ Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 1994), 73.

⁶⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment*, 23.

⁶⁹ Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj Nishapuri, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 1, Hadith 77. Retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1/77>

⁷⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment*, 23.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* (emphasis added)

hadith (according to Ibn ‘Arabi), “Who [truly] knows himself knows his Lord.”⁷²

Consequently, when one has regard for her relationship with God, al-Ghazali adds,

This necessitates the utmost love for God since whoever knows himself, and knows his Lord, knows absolutely that his own existence does not occur as a result of his own nature but rather, that his existence, prolonged and perfected, comes from God and goes to God and is [sustained] by God. *God is the inventor of his existence. He causes it to endure. He it is Who perfects existence by creating attributes of perfection as well as the means of obtaining them and guidance of their use. [Were God not to do this], man, as far as his own nature is concerned, would have no existence arising from himself.* Quite the opposite: he would be pure nullity and sheer non-being had God not favoured him by bringing him into existence. And he would face annihilation after coming to be had God not favoured him by causing him to continue. And he would be flawed after coming to be had God not favoured him by perfecting his inner nature. *In sum, nothing in existence possesses within itself the principle of its own existence except for the Self-Subsistent One Himself (al-Qayyūm), the Living One (al-Hayy) who subsists through His own essence while everything but Him subsists through Him.*⁷³

The Divine Conflict

Now, one will recall Ibn ‘Arabi writing that “there are only two [fundamental] levels [to Reality], since there are only a Lord and a servant.”⁷⁴ What exactly does this statement mean and imply? Moreover, if there are only ‘a Lord and a servant’ then whence cometh conflict, especially since, as we just read, everything is of God? The answer to this first question is again twofold.

First, the statement means that there is (the Lord) God and then there is everything other than God (which is a servant to God).⁷⁵ Thus, as implied by this view, all of Creation is in submission to the will of God, especially since in Reality there is nothing other than

⁷² Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press), 74. (brackets in the original)

⁷³ Al-Ghazali, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment*, 23-24. (brackets in the original; emphasis added)

⁷⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 50. (cf. p. 13 of this essay.)

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

God and therefore everything is of His own doing/Being. In this way, then, the entire cosmos may be regarded as *muslim*, for this term refers to anyone—or *anything*—that ‘submits to God.’ So, does God submit to Himself? In a sense, yes; in another sense, no. The image of God, which is the reality of man, submits to God, but God does not submit to His own image. A helpful analogy might be to imagine yourself looking into the mirror: your reflection or image responds according to your movements, but you do not move according to your reflection’s responses. Hence Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

It is impossible for the things other than God to come out of the grasp of the Real, for He brings them into existence, or rather, He is their existence and from Him they acquire (*istifāda*) existence. And existence/Being is nothing other than the Real, nor is it something outside of Him from which He gives to them. . . . On the contrary He is Being and through Him the entities become manifest.⁷⁶

Second, Schimmel explains that “each divine name is the *rabb*, the ‘Lord,’ of a created being, which is, in turn, its *marbūb* [or ‘servant’].”⁷⁷ Thus, this statement from Ibn ‘Arabi also means that, while there are only two fundamental levels to Reality, *this* is because within the multiplicity of relationships between God’s names this relational duality is likewise repeated/recreated in each and every manifestation of those names. Ibn ‘Arabi’s statement applies equally, then, to the macro as well as to all varying micro perspectives regarding the divine names.

Finally, if everything is of God and therefore in submission to Him, then again whence cometh conflict? After all, if someone disobeys the will of God, thereby causing apparent strife, then is not her disobedience still paradoxically God’s will? Chittick answers this question, writing, “The multiplicity of relationships that can be discerned in God results

⁷⁶ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁷ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 270.

in a multiplicity of relationships in the cosmos. All things in the universe manifest the effects and properties of the divine names. Even the conflict, quarrel, strife, and war that are found in created things have their roots in God.”⁷⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi refers to this conflict in created things as a manifestation of the ‘Divine Conflict.’⁷⁹ Indeed, the Shaykh writes,

[T]he divine call includes believer and unbeliever, obedient and disobedient. . . . Hence everything other than God is called by a divine name to come to an engendered state (*ḥāl kawnī*) to which that name seeks to attach to it. If the object of the call responds, he is named ‘obedient’ and becomes ‘felicitous’ (*sa’īd*). If he does not respond he is named ‘disobedient’ and becomes ‘wretched’ (*shaqī*).⁸⁰

Ibn Arabi continues,

You may object and say: ‘How can a divine name call and the engendered thing refuse to respond, given that it is weak and must accept the divine power?’ . . . It does not refuse to respond in respect of itself and its own reality, since it is constantly overpowered. But since it is under the overpowering sway of a divine name, that name does not let it respond to the name which calls to it. Hence there is conflict among the divine names.’⁸¹

Hence the reason for which Ibn Arabi refers to a ‘Divine Conflict.’ It is also my opinion that this conflict among the divine names may be theologically understood as encompassing/engendering the conflict between God’s angels and demons, both of which/whom are equally His creation. However, as Chittick reminds his readers,

When we read what Ibn al-‘Arabī has to say about the multiplicity and conflict demanded by the divine names . . . , we may forget for a moment that the names are multiple only in properties, not in existence, since each is identical in existence with the Essence. In respect of the Divine Self, the One Entity, there can be no multiplicity. But in respect of the relationships which are established with [the act of] creation because of the fact that the Self is a God, numerous names and attributes can be envisaged.⁸²

⁷⁸ William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 54-55.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 56.

The Divine Essence (1/2)

So, what can be said about that which is beyond human comprehension? If God is ultimately beyond our realm of understanding, then how can we truly say anything meaningful about Him? These questions address the central difficulty in attempting to speak or write about the Essence of God. However, lest there be any unnecessary confusion, it must be remembered that the notion of Ultimate Reality refers to “something” ultimately ineffable and thus there is only so much that can effectively be said or written about *It*. For this reason, theological thinking within the mystical traditions has oftentimes been negative or apophatic.⁸³ According to this view, God can only be truthfully described via negation—that is, by a description of what God is *not* and not of what God *is*—or alternatively, as we shall see, via contradiction. Meister Eckhart is a prime example of the embodiment of this view. “For Eckhart,” Denys Turner explains,

the rhetorical aim of this ‘art of unknowing’ is to compress within each and every utterance, both elements of this dialectic of affirmation and negation, simultaneously the saying and the unsaying. . . . Eckhart’s rhetoric is not, therefore, merely an evasive strategy: it is, rather, a deliberate strategy of evasion, a theological contrivance of deliberately only just, but still always, *missing the mark*: on the principle that if your aim is God, then anything that hits the mark has thereby missed. And, of course, by that precise degree to which he ‘misses’ God, he misses the denial of God too. The purpose is, and has to be, not to hit anything ultimately. For theological language has, and can have, no ultimacy: anything that we can know or say it not ultimate, and anything that is ultimate we cannot either know or say.⁸⁴

Although mystics would generally agree that anything we can *say* is not ultimate, or certainly not *the* Ultimate, the question of knowledge is an altogether separate issue. Otherwise James’ mystical mark of noetic quality is entirely irrelevant. Nevertheless, hence

⁸³ Denys Turner, “The Art of Unknowing: Negative Theology in Late Medieval Mysticism,” *Modern Theology* 14, no. 4 (1998): 474.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 487.

Smith's reason for distinguishing, like Eckhart,⁸⁵ between the *personal* God and the Infinite *Godhead*.⁸⁶ (The latter being equivalent to the Essence of God.) After all, as Ibn Arabi says, "The God of belief is not God."⁸⁷ The goal of the Islamic mystic, then, is to transcend mere belief with the experiential knowledge of God.

It is also important to note that while God is sometimes described as the *object* of mystical knowledge or experience, such a description is only meant or intended to convey the mystic's *point of focus*, for the notion of God presently under discussion is *not* an object. Indeed, as Rabbi Rami Shapiro explains, for example, "The Hebrew word for nothing, *ayn*, is also one of the Kabbalistic names of God, *Ayn*, the No-thing that gives rise to all things."⁸⁸ Thus, in line with the negative approaches to theology, the God of the mystics is not a *thing* at all. This conception of God—or lack thereof—is what, as we shall see, fundamentally differentiates mysticism from pantheism. In the latter, God is conceived as literally being the *sum* of everything; that is, God and the cosmos are thought to be one and the same. In the former, however, God is not the *sum* of anything; God and the cosmos are mutually exclusive categories because only one of the two is real (i.e., the Real). Moreover, according to the mystic, things *as such* do not exist, so the appearance of things is an illusion. As the Kabbalist and Hasidic would say, only the No-thing exists. Islamic mystics refer to this illusory appearance of reality as the *veil* of God. A'ishah al-Ba'undiyyah writes,

⁸⁵ Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O'C. Walshe (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, [1979/1987] 2009), 570-571.

⁸⁶ Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, 90.

⁸⁷ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 195-200.

⁸⁸ *Hasidic Tales: Annotated & Explained*, trans. Rabbi Rami Shapiro (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2004), 60.

for example, that “attention to something other than God is a veil.”⁸⁹ And since every *thing* is something other than God, everything is God’s veil.

Given these complications/nuances, Sells explains,

At least three responses to the primary dilemma of transcendence are conceivable. The first response is silence. The second response is to distinguish between ways in which the transcendent is beyond names and ways in which it is not. In the medieval context, the most common appeal is to a distinction between two kinds of naming; between God-as-he-is-in-himself and God-as-he-is-in-creatures, for example, or the incommunicable deity as it is in itself, and the deity as it is in our mind. . . . The third response begins with the refusal to solve the dilemma posed by the attempt to refer to the transcendent through a distinction between two kinds of name. The dilemma is accepted as a genuine *aporia*, that is, as unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse.

[Again, t]his discourse has been called negative theology.⁹⁰

Ibn Arabi engages this discourse—without replicating it—in a unique way, writing that “God possesses Nondelimited Being, but no delimitation prevents him from delimitation. On the contrary, He possess all delimitations. Hence He is Nondelimited Delimitation, no single delimitation rather than another exercises its property over Him.”⁹¹ “In other words,” Chittick explains, “since [God] is free from all limitations, He is also free from the limitation of being free; as a result He can delimit Himself through all constraints and limitations, without thereby becoming delimited by them.”⁹² Thus, God transcends His own transcendence. Hence His immanence. However, God is more immanent than possibly imaginable; as the Qur’an reads, “We [God] are nearer to [man] than his jugular vein.”⁹³ Hence God’s original transcendence. Likewise, Chittick comments,

⁸⁹ A’ishah al-Ba’uniyyah, *The Principles of Sufism*, trans. Th. Emil Homerin (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 13.

⁹⁰ Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 2.

⁹¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 109.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Qur’an 50:16.

Just as God is not delimited by nondelimitation, so also He is not incomparable with similarity. This is a restatement of Ibn al-‘Arabī basic objection to those who limit themselves to a rational understanding of the Divine Reality. The rational thinkers imagine that God’s incomparability means that He cannot in any way be similar. On the contrary, says Ibn al-‘Arabī, His very incomparability proves that He cannot be limited by any limitations whatsoever, including that limitation which is to declare Him incomparable and only incomparable. Hence He is also similar.⁹⁴

That nothing can be said about God as He is in Himself that does not concurrently contradict our understanding of things in this world, for many in the Sufi tradition, speaks volumes about Him. After all, as indicated by Ibn Arabi, for example, this world and the next are themselves things *other than* God;⁹⁵ but, of course, as implied by the Shahada, only God ultimately exists,⁹⁶ so there is really *nothing* other than God.

This seeming contradiction speaks volumes for Sufis because it is in this way that the world(s) and God are One. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains, according to Islamic theology, “Not only were we created by God, but we have the root of our existence here and now in Him.”⁹⁷ Thus, again, as human beings we are participants in God’s Being and our existence therefore is an extension of His. If God’s Spirit were not present in us, as we find in the Qur’an,⁹⁸ the angels would not be permitted—let alone commanded—to prostrate themselves before us. It was not *man* that the angels were commanded to bow before but God. Thus, metaphysically speaking, God and man are One, for there is no man without God; however, God’s Oneness is one-directional, since there is still God with or without man.

⁹⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 109.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55. (cf. pp. 14-15.)

⁹⁶ ‘Nothing is real but God.’ (cf. pp. 10-11.)

⁹⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 5.

⁹⁸ Qur’an 15:28-29.

Islamic Mysticism vs. Pantheism/Atheism

As alluded to earlier, one might object that the abovementioned claim about the world(s) and God is pantheism, which “may be understood positively as the view that God is identical with the cosmos . . . or else negatively as the rejection of any view that considers God as distinct from the universe.”⁹⁹ Worse yet, one might object that the claim is tantamount to atheism. For example, Paul Viminiz writes that

if God and the world are one and the same thing, then, by the Principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals, any property had by the one is had by the other. Save, apparently, that they – by which, of course, we mean *it* – has two names: ‘God’ and ‘the world’. . . . [W]hy not [therefore] just drop one of these redundant terms entirely? So, we can rightly say, all there is is the world. But that all there is is the world is atheism.¹⁰⁰

Viminiz therefore concludes that “for there to be a God He must not be the world.”¹⁰¹

The problem with this objection when applied to Islamic mysticism, however, is that the Principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals does not hold. For God is neither identical to the cosmos nor indistinct from it according to *tawhid*. Hence the one-directionality of God’s Oneness. This principle consequently “guards against the possibility of there being anything in the universe that owes its existence to other than [God],”¹⁰² while simultaneously “denying that there is any other like Him.”¹⁰³ In this manner Islamic mysticism is categorically monotheistic. As Schimmel writes,

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought . . . God is above all qualities—they are neither He nor other than He—and He manifests Himself only by means of the names, not by His essence. On the plane of essence, He is inconceivable (transcending concepts) and nonexperiential (transcending even nonrational

⁹⁹ William Mander, “Pantheism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2013 Edition). Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/pantheism/>

¹⁰⁰ Paul Viminiz, *Children of a lesser god*, Chapter V: How does God act in the world?, 3. [2014 manuscript]

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart*, trans. Walter James Skellie (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 41, footnote 18.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 39, footnote 8.

cognition). That means that in their actual existence the creatures are not identical with God, but only reflections of His attributes.

The main problem of interpretation seems to lie in the use of the term ‘transcendent,’ which in Western philosophy would scarcely be applicable when speaking of Ibn ‘Arabī’s God[.] . . .

Both Henry Corbin and Seyyed H. Nasr have repeatedly dwelt upon the nonpantheistic interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought . . . [and] the relationship between God and creatures can be condensed, very roughly, approximately this way: The Absolute yearned in His Loneliness, and according to the tradition, ‘I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known, so I created the world,’ [that is, God] produced creation as a mirror for His *tajalliyāt*, His manifestations.¹⁰⁴

To push the analogy further, then, just as a mirror image is *one* with whatever it is reflecting, it is nevertheless inverted and therefore distinct—and even if it was not inverted, it would remain distinct, even if indiscernibly so, by the simple fact that it is a reflection. The crucial difference between this analogy and the Islamic mystical view of God, however, is that according to the latter God is His own mirror. As Nasr poetically puts it, “God becomes the mirror in which the spiritual man contemplates his own reality and man in turn becomes the mirror in which God contemplates His Names and Qualities.”¹⁰⁵

The Divine Essence (2/2)

That being said, Chittick admits, “Discussion of the Oneness of Being [often] leaves us with a relatively static picture of everything that exists. Yet few concepts are as central to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings as change. ‘Everything other than God’ dwells by definition in continual flux.”¹⁰⁶ And this makes sense if it is remembered that one of the names of God in the Qur’an is ‘the Eternal’ (*al-Samad*).¹⁰⁷ Everything other than God is therefore in a

¹⁰⁴ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 267-268.

¹⁰⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1976), 116.

¹⁰⁶ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 96.

¹⁰⁷ Qur’an 112:2.

continuous state of change or mutability, whereas God Himself is immutable, for wherever one turns, “there remains the Face of thy Lord”;¹⁰⁸ for God in Himself *is* Being—that is, He is existence *Itself*. So, while everything in Reality ebbs and flows, one enduring fact remains: It is always the activity of Reality. The Divine Essence is perhaps best thought of, then, as the heart or soul of Reality. By this I mean *that which essentially ensures that everything is always (the) Real regardless of how much everything seems to change*. But nothing more can be said about the Essence of God, except what *It* is not, because what *we* know changes—including the very languages and words we acquire and choose to express ourselves.

Now that we have analysed the formula of the Shahada, established the monotheistic concept of *tawhid*, deciphered some of the Qur’anic names of God, and thereby come to a basic understanding of Him in Islam, we may now turn to and explicitly address the ontology of the self in classical Islamic mysticism. However, before doing so, a short overview and examination of the Qur’an will be helpful.

The Meaning of the Qur’an

Chittick explains that “the word Koran, Arabic *qur’ān*, derives from the root *q.r. ’.*, and is generally said to mean ‘recitation.’ But the primary significance of the root is ‘gathering’ and ‘collecting together,’ and some of the early authorities maintained that this is the significance of the name.”¹⁰⁹ He adds that

Ibn al-‘Arabī often employs the term Koran strictly in accordance with this literal meaning, which is particularly significant to him because it is synonymous with the word *jam*’, ‘bring together,’ gathering, or ‘all-comprehensiveness.’ The name Allah is the ‘all-comprehensive name’ (*al-ism al-jāmi*’) of God, since it gathers together in itself all other [divine] names. Perfect man is the ‘all-comprehensive engendered thing’ (*al-kawn*

¹⁰⁸ Qur’an 55:27.

¹⁰⁹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 239.

al-jāmi'), because he gathers within himself everything in the Divine Reality and everything in the cosmos. The Koran is 'al-Qur'ān,' because it gathers together all the revealed scriptures that were sent down before it and thereby all knowledge of God.¹¹⁰

Thus, Ibn Arabi believes that the Qur'an is much more than the mere physical book. Indeed, according to the Shaykh, the Qur'an that we read is a manifestation of a non-physical (i.e., spiritual) Book. It is for this reason Chittick above writes that the Qur'an 'gathers together all the revealed scriptures that were sent down before it,' for it follows from this point of view that God has revealed His Book—and through It *Himself*—to human beings throughout history. Nevertheless, due to our forgetfulness and fallibility, the physical manifestations of God's revelations have been lost and/or corrupted over time. Hence the spiritual significance of the Qur'an for Muslims today. In this way, then, the Book of God is ultimately—like God—a non-physical Reality which manifests Itself in the world via select worldly means.

But given its nature versus our own, how is one to interpret the message or meaning of the Qur'an? Ibn Arabi answers, writing,

Every sense (*wajh*) which is supported (*iḥtimāl*) by any verse in God's Speech (*kalām*)—whether it is the Koran, the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, or the Scripture—in view of anyone who knows that language (*lisān*) is intended (*maqṣūd*) by God in the case of that interpreter (*muta'awwil*). For His knowledge encompasses all senses. . . . Hence every interpreter correctly grasps the intention of God in that word (*kalima*). . . . Hence no man of knowledge can declare wrong an interpretation which is supported by the words (*lafẓ*). He who does so is extremely deficient in knowledge. However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation nor to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those who follow his authority.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 244.

Moreover, al-Ghazali writes that

the man who does not soundly repent and renounce the visible sins, and yet wishes to have discovered to him the secrets of religion through unveiling, is like the one who has not learnt Arabic but who nonetheless wishes to discover the secrets and the true interpretation of the Qur’ān. *For in order to interpret the obscure passages of the Book* it is incumbent first to learn its tongue, whereupon one may proceed to its secret mysteries; *likewise is it necessary to adhere in a proper fashion both at the commencement and the conclusion [of the Path] to the external forms of the Law, whereby one may be enabled to progress to its secrets and its depths.*¹¹²

Hence, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, the Qur’an is “not a place for that which is given by the proofs of the reflective powers, only for that which is given by divine unveiling.”¹¹³ These words echo some of the Shaykh’s other statements regarding the acquisition of knowledge in relation to God, such as when he writes, “The Prophets and the friends among the Folk of Allah have no knowledge of God derived from reflection. . . . Rather, they possess the ‘opening of unveiling’ through the Real.”¹¹⁴ So, what is this purported unveiling? As Chittick himself inquires, “What is the nature of this divine book whose truths cannot be grasped through rational interpretation?”¹¹⁵ Ibn ‘Arabi answers, writing,

God has commanded us to gain knowledge of the declaration of His Unity, but he has not commanded us to know His Essence. On the contrary, He forbade that with His words, ‘God warns you about His Self’ (3:28). So also the Messenger of God forbade us to reflect on the Essence of God. ‘Nothing is like Him’ (42:11), so how can one reach the knowledge of His Essence? . . . [T]here can no unveiling in the knowledge of *tawhīd*. . . . Tawhīd is not something ontological (*amr wujūdī*). It is merely a relationship, and relationships cannot be seen through unveiling. They can only be known by ways of proofs. For unveiling is vision. Vision only becomes connected to its object through the qualities (*kayfiyya*) which the object possesses. But does the Divine Side have qualities? Rational proof negates that He should have any.¹¹⁶ . . . But if God should embody these meanings in the Presence

¹¹² Al-Ghazali, *On Disciplining the Soul & on Breaking the Two Desires*, trans. T.J. Winter, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 2016), 87. (brackets in the original; emphasis added)

¹¹³ Chittick, *The Sufī Path of Knowledge*, 232.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹¹⁶ Cf. pp. 17-19.

of Imaginalization—like knowledge in the form of milk—then this knowledge can be attained through unveiling.¹¹⁷

In other words, then, ‘unveiling’ is a degree of direct knowledge given by God and received from His Presence. Thus, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, those who wish to be receptive to unveiling must first align themselves with the attributes or qualities of God—that is, they must make themselves *virtuous*—for, as he says above, ‘vision only becomes connected to its object through the qualities which the object possesses.’ It is for this reason that Chittick writes, “The ideal rational faculty is that which accepts from God the knowledge of Him that He gives to it and does not try to go beyond its own limitation by reflecting upon Him. Hence the virtue of reason is to accept and receive (*qabūl*) unveiling and revelation.”¹¹⁸ This term (unveiling) is therefore of ineludible importance to at least basically understand for anyone who aspires to construe/comprehend the meaning of the Qur’an in Islam, especially in the tradition’s mystical dimensions. For its purpose is to guide both the passive believer and active seeker along the Path to God with the instructions necessary and appropriate to each person for the attainment of either salvation or effacement within the Divine.

“Tawhid is not something ontological”

One will have noticed that Ibn ‘Arabi makes the potentially problematic claim that *tawhid* is not something ontological.¹¹⁹ I say ‘potentially problematic’ for two reasons. First, if *tawhid* is not ontological—that is, if it is not to be understood ontologically—then Ibn ‘Arabi is asserting that God’s Unity is not an ontological unity. Put negatively, Ibn ‘Arabi is denying that God’s Unity is an ontological unity. The reason *this* is potentially

¹¹⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 233-234.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

problematic is that, taken at face value, it seems to undermine our illustration of the nature of God's Being up to this point. After all, one might rightfully inquire in response: *If God's Unity is not something ontological, then is Ibn 'Arabi implying that God is not the only ontological entity?* This question dovetails into the second reason I say Ibn 'Arabi's claim is potentially problematic; for, whereas the first reason emphasizes what might be problematic about the claim, the second reason focuses upon its potential. Put simply, I say 'potentially problematic' because the claim is not actually. Ibn 'Arabi's claim only seems problematic when one focuses too narrowly on one of two concepts: unity and ontology, and specifically the latter of the two. In other words, Ibn 'Arabi's claim can be taken to mean that God's Unity is not something *ontological* **or** that God's *Unity* is not something ontological. The difference is subtle but profound. Thus, when one inquires whether Ibn 'Arabi is saying that God is not the only ontological entity, the answer is a straightforward no. *Tawhid* is not something ontological because God's *Unity* is not an ontological unity of entities. As we read from Ibn 'Arabi before with respect to the divine names, "do not imagine manyness or ontological combination (*al-ijtimā' al-wujūdī*)."¹²⁰ This subtlety demonstrates the intrinsic limitations in language when discussing God's Absoluteness/Oneness. For example, when one puts forward a term like *non-duality* it already has a notion of duality built into it, for it is being contrasted with something else—in this case with what it is not—which is precisely what the term is intending to get away from but cannot seem to do. Likewise with terms like *tawhid*, especially when translated as *unity* versus *oneness*, as the former literally means or entails some sort of unifying or unification; however, if there is only God, then with what or whom He is unified with? He

¹²⁰ Ibid., 53. (cf. p. 15.)

can only be unified with Himself. Even when translating the term as *oneness* a person can extrapolate the same problem, since it is oneness *as opposed to* manyness. “So if you examine,” Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “know whom it is that you examine. You will never leave yourself and you will never know any but your own essence, since the temporally originated thing never becomes connected to anything but that which corresponds to it (*al-munāsib*), and that is what you have of Him.”¹²¹ Moreover, Ibn ‘Arabi adds, “That is why the doctrines concerning God are diverse and the states change. One group says, ‘He is like this.’ Another group says, ‘He is not like that, He is like this.’ A third group says concerning knowledge, ‘The water takes on the color of its cup.’ The third position holds that the cup affects the proof, thus affecting Him in the view of the eye [of the beholder].”¹²² And as Chittick reminds his readers, “as soon as we speak of God’s knowledge [which includes our knowledge of Him], we have entered into a multiplicity of relationships. Though these relationships have no independent existence, they are real in some respect [since they are known by God], so we can no longer speak of Absolute Unity.”¹²³

The Ontology of the Self

Now, we may finally but comfortably state and examine the ontology of the self in classical Islamic mysticism. Given that Ultimate Reality is beyond rational human conception and expression, then how is one to personally relate to *It*? After all, if the goal of the mystic is this inconceivable, inexpressible Non-thing, then—public communication aside—in what way is *It* immanently accessible? The notion of selfhood is especially pertinent here. As an individual human being, you are a thing; however, according to

¹²¹ Ibid., 349.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 356-357.

classical Islamic mystics, like Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali, things do not exist. Therefore, *you* do not exist. But if you fail to exist, what is it that is aware of these words and the meanings behind them? Put simply, what is it that accounts for one’s *sense* of selfhood? *That*, the mystics say, is Ultimate Reality. And the way to know *It* is to surrender one’s sense of self. In this way, every mystical tradition—whether Abrahamic, Asian, or so on—represents a different way of eventually surrendering one’s sense of independent ontological individuality. As Chittick confirms, “Ibn al-‘Arabī frequently affirms the validity of religions other than Islam, and in so doing he is simply stating the clear Koranic position.”¹²⁴ Hence there is a close relationship between mysticism and the perennial philosophy, for proponents of the latter claim that there are multiple pathways which originate from and return to the same universal phenomenon or Reality.

Classic literary examples of self-surrender are Attar of Nishapur’s *Conference of the Birds*,¹²⁵ as well as the anonymously written tale *The Way of a Pilgrim*, especially since the latter’s author is unknown. In both cases, self-surrender happens as a result of a journey or *experience*, which as we discussed at the outset,¹²⁶ is the epistemic vehicle through which

¹²⁴ Ibid., 171.

¹²⁵ It is interesting to note that both Attar and Al-Ghazali spent their lives in the province of Khorasan. According to Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi, although he had lived after him, “it is likely that Attar grew up within a local intellectual aura that still venerated Ghazali’s teachings” (1984, xxii). After all, they write, “we see the same rejection of [pure philosophy] and [mystical] emphasis in Attar’s works, and it seems reasonable to consider him as a kind of lay disciple of Ghazali” (Ibid). That being said, while I do not doubt the abovementioned connection between Attar and Al-Ghazali, I am not convinced that such similarities are sufficient to call him a *disciple* of Al-Ghazali’s. I am unconvinced because the rejection of pure philosophy, along with an emphasis on mysticism, is one of the characteristic features which *defines* Islamic mystical thought. One could argue that it is possible Islamic mysticism came to be characterized by such a feature *because* of Al-Ghazali, but then one must ask herself: If Islamic mysticism was *not* the rejection of pure philosophy due to an emphasis on mystical practice and experience, then what else could it have been? Clearly, the answer is that—whatever it would have been—it would not have been Islamic *mysticism*. Practice and experience are part and parcel to every mystical tradition, so the repudiation of pure philosophy on their account is unavoidable. Therefore, it seems impossible that Al-Ghazali did anything other than plainly remind his audience of this fact, including Attar. Receiving this reminder does not make Attar a disciple of Al-Ghazali’s, but rather an informed mystic in general.

¹²⁶ Cf. p. 2.

knowledge of Ultimate Reality is realized. So, it is inadequate to simply read these stories if one has a genuine interest in comprehending the goal of mysticism; such stories must be replicated and lived. It is in this sense that mysticism is a science.¹²⁷ For mysticism has a purported ‘object’ of knowledge, namely, Ultimate Reality, along with replicable—and therefore verifiable—methods of observing *It*, at least insofar as we are able given the limitations of the human condition. The goal is to come to the complete awareness that there are no individual things, for the No-thing is indivisible. You, me, the chair, table, and so on—these are all illusions. There is only God. Indeed, as implied by the Shahada, there is no self but the Divine Self.¹²⁸

One might feel tempted to conclude on the basis of the above disposition concerning the nature and status of the individual self that the Islamic mystics are therefore asserting that ultimately *you* are God. However, classical Islamic mystics, like Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali, would promptly disagree. They would disagree because, according to them, there is no *you* to be God. Again, there is only God. Your sense of self is thus not yours—it does not belong to you or anyone else but God. Consequently, it is not a question of what accounts for *your* sense of self; it is a matter of what accounts for God’s sense of Self in Himself, which He is purposefully mistaking for another. As Chittick explains,

Few teachings are as basic to Sufism—or to Islam for that matter—as the idea that something more real stands beyond the realm of appearances. In Koranic terms, all creatures are ‘signs’ (*āyāt*) of God. Most Sufis take the position that the outward form (*ṣūra*) is a deceptive veil, even though it reveals the Divine Reality in some manner. . . . That which appears is in fact Being, the Divine Reality Itself. The phenomena are fundamentally non-existent, and even if one can refer to their ‘coming into existence,’ this is in fact a metaphor. What appears to us is the One Being, but colored by the properties of the nonexistent possible things.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Cf. p. 9.

¹²⁸ Qur’an 2:255.

¹²⁹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 89.

Moreover, what appears *to us* is an appearance *to an appearance*, since we too are an appearance; otherwise, it is that which appears to the One Being. In the view of classical Islamic mystics, then, the self has a *negative* ontological status. In other words, the self is not real because fundamentally it does not exist. Thus, in answer to the question posed earlier—that is, how can the mystic surrender her will to God’s and yet actively participate in His mysteries, such as what He knows?¹³⁰—one does so by realizing that at its deepest level her will *is* God’s and that her very existence by being illusory is a participation in His mysteries, for it is God Who knows and sustains her.

¹³⁰ Cf. p. 8.

Chapter 3

David Hume

David Hume was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1711 CE.¹³¹ As a thinker, he was influenced by the prevailing ideas which marked the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, eventually making his own foundational contributions to Western science during the Scottish Enlightenment, of which he was a pioneer. It is perhaps unsurprising for this reason that Hume’s philosophical orientation is that of an empiricist, though of the indirect influence of rationalists like René Descartes he would have been well aware. As an empiricist, Hume thought it most sound, as Ernst C. Mossner explains, “to base all reasoning concerning human nature entirely upon experience.”¹³²

This privileging of ‘experience’ as the basis of reasoning about human nature may, on the surface, seem similar to Happold’s position, particularly as outlined at the beginning of this essay.¹³³ The difference, however, is that Hume privileges *individual* human experience—that is, he appeals to the experiences presumably common between individual human beings for his arguments—whereas Happold privileges the *collective* human experience—what he calls *the total experience of the human race, past and present*¹³⁴—thus appealing to experiences not necessarily common between all or even most individuals. In this way, then, Hume’s and Happold’s positions are nevertheless dissimilar, for Hume is concerned with ‘experience’ as it is generally shared and related to between individuals while Happold is concerned with ‘experience’ as it is (more) holistically

¹³¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (London, UK: Penguin Books, [1739] 1969), 7.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³³ Cf. p. 5.

¹³⁴ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 10.

expressed across cultures and throughout history. Put simply, unlike Hume, Happold is not an empiricist; instead, Happold would more properly be described either as a traditionalist or perennialist. Therefore, when both employing the term ‘experience,’ Hume and Happold are using what al-Ghazali would call two *inter-locked* terms.¹³⁵

Hume’s *magnum opus* is *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, first published before he had reached the age of thirty.¹³⁶ As Mossner explains, “Without too much oversimplification, it may be said that Hume’s entire life centred on the *Treatise*: first to compose it, then, in turn, to explain it, to defend it, and to rewrite it.¹³⁷ For this reason, Hume’s *Treatise* will serve as our primary source material when discussing his ideas and secondary sources will serve to validate their presentation and interpretation.

Comparative Analysis with Hume

As mentioned, the conclusions of the Islamic mystics regarding the ontology of the self bear a resemblance to the conclusions of David Hume.¹³⁸ However, before we can lay out and compare them side by side, we must first establish his own view of selfhood. According to Hume,

When we talk of *self* or *substance*, we must have an idea annex’d to these terms, otherwise they are altogether unintelligible. Every idea is deriv’d from preceding impressions; and we have no impression of self and substance, as something simple and individual. We have, therefore, no idea of them in that sense. Whatever is distinct, is distinguishable; and whatever is distinguishable, is separable from the thought or imagination. All perceptions are distinct. They are, therefore, distinguishable, and separable, and may be conceiv’d as separately existent, and may exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity. . . . When I turn my reflection on

¹³⁵ Cf. p. 14.

¹³⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 15, 22.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³⁸ Cf. p. 8.

myself, I never can perceive this *self* without some one or more perceptions.
'Tis the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self.¹³⁹

Hume concludes, writing, "The annihilation, which some people suppose to follow upon death, and which entirely destroys this self, is nothing but an extinction of all particular perceptions; love and hatred, pain and pleasure, thought and sensation. These therefore must be the same with the self; since the one cannot survive the other."¹⁴⁰

The similarity then is that both Hume and classical Islamic mystics, like Ibn 'Arabi and al-Ghazali, are convinced of the ontological non-reality of the self. The difference is that Hume argues there is no justification for the belief in the ontological reality of the self from *non-theistic* premises, whereas classical Islamic mystics argue that there is no justification for believing in the self's reality from *theistic* premises. However, theism is not the only difference. There are also strong differences in their conceptions of epistemology, as well as slight(er) differences in their conceptions of ontology. Nevertheless, before we can examine these differences and their implications, we must first determine whether Hume and the Islamic mystics are even engaging in discourses about the same conceptual notion(s) of selfhood, since, as it happened with Hume and Happold in relation to the term 'experience,' it is entirely possible that they are not.

Conceptualizing the Self

According to al-Ghazali,

Ibrāhīm al-Taymī [said], 'I imagined myself in paradise eating its fruits, drinking from its streams and embracing its maidens. Then I imagined myself in the Fire, eating from its infernal tree, drinking its purulence and attending to its chains and shackles. So I said to my soul, 'soul, which do

¹³⁹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 675-676.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 676-677.

you want?’ She said, ‘I want to return to the world to do what is right.’ I said, ‘You shall have your desire, so go forth.’¹⁴¹

It is worthwhile to note that, when imagining *himself* in Heaven or Hell, al-Taymī (like most others) imagines *sense-perceptions*. For, as we have seen, Hume likewise writes that he “never can perceive this *self* without some one or more perceptions.”¹⁴² It is also worth noting that in his story al-Taymī converses with his own soul, implying a duality within his sense of individuality. For example, when Said writes, “I freely reproach myself[,]”¹⁴³ with whom is who reproachful? It seems that even during our daily life there is some division in our otherwise permanent, indivisible sense of self. Indeed, Hume himself writes,

If perceptions are distinct existences, they form a whole only by being connected together. But no connexions among distinct existences are ever discoverable by human understanding. We only *feel* a connexion or determination of the thought, to pass from one object to another. It follows, therefore, that the thought alone finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions, that compose a mind, the ideas of them are felt to be connected together, and naturally introduce each other. . . . [However,] when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness[,] I cannot discover any theory which gives me satisfaction on this head.¹⁴⁴

Whereas Hume ventures neither an explanation nor guess about *that which unites our successive perceptions in thought or consciousness*, classical Islamic mystics like Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali argue that *that which unites* is God. In this way, then, it is deducible that Hume and the Sufis are in fact engaging in discourses about the same, basic conceptual notion of selfhood, even if they disagree about its broader implications. To

¹⁴¹ Al-Ghazali, *On Vigilance & Self-Examination*, trans. Anthony F. Shaker (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 2015), 35.

¹⁴² Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 676.

¹⁴³ Said, *Orientalism*, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 677-678.

prove it, let us see how Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali both agree that the ‘self’ is intrinsically-linked to sense-perceptions.

Al-Ghazali writes that “man loves continuation of existence and loathes death . . . not merely because of what he fears after death, nor simply to avoid the agonies of death. Quite the contrary: were he to be wrested away painlessly and brought to death without either reward or punishment, even then he would not be satisfied. In fact, he would be wholly averse to that.”¹⁴⁵ The reason for this aversion, according to al-Ghazali, is because the primary object of love is the *self*.¹⁴⁶ As he writes,

Self-love signifies that there exists within one’s very nature a desire to prolong one’s being and to avoid non-being and annihilation; furthermore, there is a natural correspondence between him who loves and the object of his love. But what could be more perfectly in harmony with one’s own self than prolongation of existence, and what could be more powerfully at variance than non-existence and destruction?¹⁴⁷

Hence why, almost in answer to al-Ghazali’s rhetorical question, Hume above concludes, “The annihilation, which some people suppose to follow upon death, and which entirely destroys this self, is nothing but an extinction of all particular perceptions[.] . . . These therefore must be the same with the self; since the one cannot survive the other.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, al-Ghazali and Hume intend the same meaning when they employ the term ‘self’ in discussion of the concept of ‘selfhood.’

Likewise, Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

Were it not for [God], nothing whatsoever would be perceived, neither object of knowledge, nor sensory object, nor imaginal object. The names of [God] are diverse in keeping with the names set down for the faculties. The common people see these as names of the faculties, but the gnostics [i.e., mystics] see them as names of the [God] through which perception takes

¹⁴⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment*, 13.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 676-677.

place. When you perceive sounds, you call that light [of God] ‘hearing.’ When you perceive sights, you call that light ‘seeing.’ . . . The faculties of smell, taste, imagination, memory, reason, reflection, form-giving, and everything through which perception takes place are all [the Being of God].¹⁴⁹

In the eyes of Ibn ‘Arabi, Hume is a common person—not a mystic. Hence Hume interprets perceptions ‘as names of the faculties.’ Nevertheless, Ibn ‘Arabi and Hume are intending the same meaning for the term ‘self’ as well. The difference is that Ibn ‘Arabi considers perceptions *as names of the faculties* to be illusory, including the self (*nafs*), but perceptions *as names of the God through which perception takes place* to be real, since they are lights or manifestations of Ultimate Reality—that is, the Divine Self. Hume, on the other hand, being an empiricist, considers perceptions *as names of the faculties* to be real, but excludes the self as a knowable perceiver and thus doubts its ontological reality. Moreover, not being a theist,¹⁵⁰ Hume does not espouse a belief in a God or Divine Self. Hence why, as we read before, Hume writes, “All perceptions are distinct . . . and may be conceiv’d as separately existent, and may [therefore actually] exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity.”¹⁵¹

Ontology vs. Epistemology

One can now begin to notice the differences in Hume’s conceptions of ontology and epistemology with that of the classical Islamic mystics like Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali. First, Hume neither asserts nor denies either the positive or negative ontological status of the self, whereas both Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali assert its negative status/deny its positive status. In other words, while Hume admittedly doubts the ontological reality of the self, he does not

¹⁴⁹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 214.

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin S. Cordry, “A More Dangerous Enemy? Philo’s ‘confession’ and Hume’s Soft Atheism,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 70, no. 1 (2011): 61-62.

¹⁵¹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 676.

explicitly deny it as a possibility. Instead, Hume argues there is no *epistemic* justification for believing in the reality of the self, whereas classical Islamic mystics like Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali argue that there is no *ontic* justification for believing in the self’s reality at all. Second, Hume doubts exclusively the existence of a self while still giving positive uptake to the ontological status of the world—or, at least, to the sense-perceptions that contribute to the constructed image of a world. On the contrary, Ibn ‘Arabi’s and al-Ghazali’s denial of the self’s existence is part of a broader denial of the world’s existence—for only God exists. Third, while Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali deny the reality of the self and the world insofar as they are *everything other than God*, they nevertheless assert their reality insofar as they are *manifestations of God*. Hume, quite differently, simply doubts the reality of the self. As he writes,

I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are remov’d for any time, as by sound-sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. . . . If any one upon serious and unprejudic’d reflection, thinks that he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may perhaps, perceive something simple and continu’d, which he calls himself; tho’ I am certain there is no such principle in me.¹⁵²

Given such differences in ontology and epistemology, there are unique implications associated with the conclusion that there is no self, depending upon which set of premises one accepts to get there. If one reaches her conclusion from the Sufi’s premises, then there are ethical implications in doing so, for example. This is because, if one recalls, those who wish to be receptive of God’s revelations, such as the revelation that there is no self but the Divine Self, must first align themselves with the attributes or qualities of God, which is to

¹⁵² Ibid., 300.

say that they must make themselves virtuous,¹⁵³ especially since many of God’s Qur’anic names are ethical in nature, such as the Merciful, the Compassionate (*al-Rahman*),¹⁵⁴ the Ever-Forgiving (*al-Ghafur*),¹⁵⁵ and so on. However, if one reaches the same conclusion from Hume’s premises, then there are no ethical implications in doing so. This is because, for Hume, “mankind . . . are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”¹⁵⁶ As such, for whom is one responsible and to whom is one accountable? It would seem no one. That said, Hume is not a moral nihilist; as he says, “Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.”¹⁵⁷ Hence Hume’s advocacy for religious toleration.¹⁵⁸

Conclusion

In summary, the Islamic notion of selfhood is inseparable from its notion of God. The Shahada, which succinctly expresses the monotheistic principle of *tawhid*, and the Qur’anic names of God therefore necessarily contribute, when properly understood, to an understanding of the ontology of the self in classical Islamic mysticism. As evidenced by our examination of the Shahada and names of God, an analytically coherent picture of classical Islamic mysticism is demonstratable, whether it is agreeable aside. Classical Islamic mystics, such as Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali, regard the self—as opposed to the Divine Self—to be illusory and thus ontologically a non-entity. Hume similarly regards the

¹⁵³ Cf. p. 33.

¹⁵⁴ Qur’an 55:1.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 41:32.

¹⁵⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 300.

¹⁵⁷ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (New York: Oxford University Press Inc.), 6.

¹⁵⁸ Richard H. Dees, “The Paradoxical Principle and Salutary Practice: Hume on Toleration,” *Hume Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 145.

self to be unreal, but does not believe the sense of it is accounted for by appealing to the existence of a Divine Self. Instead, Hume believes this sense is erroneously/fictitiously generated as a result of the rapid succession of perceptions. Furthermore, whereas Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali are convinced of the self’s non-reality based on religious certainty, Hume is persuaded to the same conclusion based on a lack of empirical evidence—or rather, as a skeptic, he is *unconvinced* of the self’s reality. Finally, there are ethical implications in accepting the premises which lead to the classical Islamic mystic’s denial of the reality of the self, but a lack thereof in accepting the premises which lead to Hume’s similar disbelief. Thus, although both parties reach the same—or, if one prefers, *similar*—conclusion that there is no self, they do so, as we have seen, for very different reasons. Though not so different, as we have likewise seen, that they cannot be compared.

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