

CREATIVITY AND THE MICROCOSM

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Muhyil-Din Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. ‘Ali b. Muhammad b. al-‘Arabi al-Hatimi al-Ta’i, known as al-Sheikh al-Akbar, is described in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* as, ‘one of the greatest Sufis of Islam.’¹²³ The importance of his thought lies in the fact that his metaphysical, cosmological and psychological formulations went a long way in articulating the vast body of knowledge that had accumulated in the tradition of Sufism since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Whereas, before Ibn al-‘Arabi’s time, the theoretical exposition of metaphysical, cosmological and psychological realities was found in the sayings of different saints, Ibn al-‘Arabi was the first Sufi to formulate these realities in a complete and comprehensive multifaceted doctrine.¹²⁴ In the words of Nasr, ‘He thus became the expositor *par excellence* of gnosis in Islam.’¹²⁵ One of the most renowned students of Ibn al-‘Arabi in the West, Michel Chodkiewicz, has described Ibn al-‘Arabi and his philosophy as being an ‘ocean without shore.’¹²⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabi synthesized many of the doctrines that were prevalent in his times via his own unique

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹²³ A. Ates, “Ibn al’Arabi” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM, Edition v. 1.0. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 1999.

¹²⁴ Mention can be made of Sufi saints such as Hakim al-Tirmidhi and Bayazid al-Bastami, who deal with metaphysical themes, and Farid ud-din Attar and Ibn Masarra, who deal with cosmological doctrines. For more details, see Seyyed H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Subramardi, Ibn ‘Arabi* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1999), 90.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ For details regarding Ibn al-‘Arabi’s influence in both the Eastern and Western lands of Islam, see Michel Chodkiewicz, “Introduction,” in *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabi, The Book and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 1-18.

way of perceiving and experiencing reality. The importance of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy for the contemporary world is explained by Chodkiewicz:

He who claimed the function of “seal of the Muhammadan sainthood,” according to all the evidence, deliberately assumed the title; he tirelessly enclosed in his work, for the use of those who would live in ages darker than his own, the *amana* [trust], the sacred repository of which he considered himself the guardian.¹²⁷

Ibn al-‘Arabi is able to express the esoteric dimension of Islam in such a way that seekers can gain insight into the metaphysical dimension of the path that they are following. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s formulations regarding the concept of God’s unity (*al-tawhid*), God’s names and attributes, the perfect human being, the theory of creation and cosmology, the role of the creative Imagination, and the creativity inherent in the interaction of the masculine principle of the spirit and the feminine principle of the soul, are a treasure house of knowledge for gaining an in depth understanding of divine and human creativity. Getting a glimpse into Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy is like viewing reality in the form of a multidimensional hologram. The sight of even one aspect of the hologram is enough to grasp the unity that Ibn al-‘Arabi focuses on, and which is the basis of the correspondence between various realms of reality.

One of the most important contributions of Ibn al-‘Arabi in the field of Islamic thought has been his belief in the unity, correspondence and interconnection between the macrocosmic and microcosmic realms of reality.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁸ For further details regarding the unity and correspondence between various realms of reality, see Ibn ‘Arabi, “The Wisdom of the Heart in the Word of Shu‘aib,” in Ibn al-Arabi. *The Bezeils of Wisdom: Fusus al-Hikam*. Translated by Ralph W. J. Austin. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1999,145.

This great Muslim thinker believed that God's attributes are reflected in both the macrocosm and the microcosm.¹²⁹ The human body (*al-jism*), soul (*al-nafs*) and spirit (*al-rub*) reflect the three basic realms of the macrocosm; i.e. the physical, the imaginal and the spiritual. One of the verses of the Qur'an, which Ibn al-'Arabi quotes to support his view, is 'We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that it/He is the Real' (Qur'an, 41:53).¹³⁰ *Hu* can be translated as both, 'it' or 'He,' as the pronoun's use is ambiguous. It can be a reference to everything in the cosmos or it can be referring to God, who is the ultimate reality behind all things. Ibn al-'Arabi interprets this pronoun both ways, depending on the context of what he is explaining.¹³¹ He understands this verse as referring to how God's signs become intelligible for the people of insight, both within the macrocosm and the inner human microcosm, where God chooses to manifest Himself in new self-disclosures: "Your signifier of the Real is yourself and the cosmos."¹³²

In this way, the 'self' and 'horizons' stand for the 'microcosm' and the 'macrocosm' respectively. These two terms are also interpreted as *al-'alam al-saghir* (the microcosm: the small world) and *al-'alam al-kebir* (macrocosm: the great world) and the correspondence between these two realms is clearly elucidated in the following:

The Lawgiver turned you over to knowledge of yourself in knowledge of God through His words, *We shall show them Our signs*, which are the signifiers, *upon the horizons and in themselves*. Hence He did not leave aside anything of the cosmos, for everything of the cosmos that is outside of you is identical with

¹²⁹ For an introduction to Ibn al-'Arabi's life and works see: William C. Chittick, "The School of Ibn 'Arabi," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*. Edited by Seyyed H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman, 115-48. London: Routledge, 1996 and the article on "Ibn 'Arabi." in the same book by the same author, 497-509.

¹³⁰ Ibn al-'Arabi, *Futubat*, III 275.32, quoted in William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-Arabi's Cosmology*. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000., 6.

¹³¹ Chittick, *ibid*, 6.

¹³² Ibn al-'Arabi, *Futubat*, IV 307.1, quoted in Chittick, *ibid*.

the *horizons*, which are the regions around you. *Until it is clear to them that it is the Real, nothing else*, because there is nothing else.¹³³

For Ibn al-‘Arabi, those who practice spiritual retreat or ‘seclusion’ are able to discern the signs of the cosmos first, and the signs within themselves are made manifest afterwards.

God says, *We shall show them our signs upon the horizons and in themselves* so that they will know that the human being is the microcosm of the cosmos containing the signs that are within the cosmos.¹³⁴

The belief that God created human beings in His form signifies that the microcosm and the macrocosm reflect both all the attributes of God in a correspondence, which can be viewed as a circle.

I saw in [this way station] the knowledge of mutual interpenetration and the vicious circle. In His acts the Real can only be in the form of creation and in its acts creation can only be in the form of the Real. Hence we have a vicious circle, but this does not give rise to the impossibility of occurrence. On the contrary, this is what occurs in the actual situation.¹³⁵

God is the Origin of all the attributes in existence, even though those whom he calls the ‘considerative thinkers’ declare Him incomparable with many of the attributes. This knowledge that God is the source and origin of all attributes points to the fact that the attributes manifested in human existence are corresponding reflections of the attributes of God. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s asserted that all attributes, such as laughter, thirst, hunger, illness, wrath, anger, joy, wonder, are in fact attributes of God and not of creation because the reports of these attributes have been brought down through the scriptures and on the tongues of the messengers.¹³⁶

¹³³ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futubat*, III 275.32, quoted in Chittick, *ibid*.

¹³⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futubat*, II 150.33, quoted in Chittick, *ibid*.

¹³⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futubat*, III 352.11, quoted in Chittick, *ibid.*, 28.

¹³⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futubat*, III 538.9, quoted in Chittick, *ibid*.

However, He created the cosmos in His form, so it accepts to be named by His names. What is ascribed to the Real-in respect of what the Real has ascribed to Himself - is ascribed to the cosmos. Thus we know that He is the root in His names, not we. He has not taken anything that belongs to us, nor are we worthy of anything. On the contrary, all of it belongs to Him.¹³⁷

Another method that Ibn al-‘Arabi uses to explain this correspondence between God’s form and the macrocosm is through God’s name ‘the Beautiful.’ The saying of the Prophet, ‘God is beautiful and He loves Beauty,’¹³⁸ means that, in reality, everything that God created is a reflection of God’s beauty for He created everything in His own form. ‘There is nothing but beauty, for God created the cosmos only in His form, and He is beautiful. Hence all the cosmos is beautiful.’¹³⁹

The macrocosm and the microcosm are the two forms that manifest God. Ibn al-‘Arabi emphasizes the Qur’anic doctrine of the duality (*zawjan*) found in creation. This duality is better translated as coupleness.¹⁴⁰ Of everything in existence, there is a couple, and their relationship depends on activity and receptivity, one displaying masculine, and the other feminine characteristics.

Of everything in *wujud* there is a couple, for the perfect human being, and the cosmos through the perfect human being, are in the form of the Real. The couples are the male and the female, hence an actor and the one acted upon.¹⁴¹

Although both the macrocosm and the microcosm are made in the form of God, the macrocosm was created to serve the microcosm. All that are in the ‘horizons’ are created specifically for the human ‘selves’ mentioned in the above quoted Qur’anic verse. God created the universe, the totality of the divine names, the totality of the wisdom, all revelations; in fact, all the blessings of heaven and earth are especially for the human microcosm.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futubat*, III 538.9, quoted in Chittick, *ibid.*, 29.

¹³⁸ Muslim, *Iman* 147; Ibn Maja, *Du‘a* 10.

¹³⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futubat*, II 542.19, quoted in Chittick, *ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴⁰ Chittick, *ibid.*, 175.

¹⁴¹ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futubat*, IV 132.17, quoted in Chittick, *ibid.*

¹⁴² Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futubat*, IV 132.17, quoted in Chittick, *ibid.*, 189.

Human beings have been assigned all the qualities by which they can choose to follow God's Law or by which they are compelled in their choice. The roots of all the qualities in human beings are divine.

The eminence of the human state is proven by the fact that, out of the whole cosmos, it is the human being that is chosen by God for His self-disclosures in the most comprehensive manner. Ibn al-ʿArabi explains the significance of the microcosmic human state explicitly, as follows:

To him the Real discloses Himself through judgement, decree, and decision. Around him the whole cosmos revolves, for his sake the resurrection occurs, through him the jinn are called to account, and for him is 'subjected what is in the heavens and what is in the earth' [Qur'an 31:20]. The whole cosmos moves out of need for him, in both the high and the low realms, in this world and the last.¹⁴³

The correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm is obvious through the inter-relationship between the spirit and the body in the human realm and the cosmic realm. The spirit is the origin, the source, the very being and life, of the human body. Similarly, the Universal Spirit permeates the body of the universe. This relationship between the spirit and the body in turn reflects the relationship between God and everything He has created, or between the Speaker and the words that are articulated through the breath of the All-Merciful One.¹⁴⁴ God governs everything in the universe due to the fact that 'creativity belongs to the Essence of the Creator.'¹⁴⁵ There is an essential connection between God, the macrocosm and the microcosm through God's Essence and His Spirit.

God blew His own spirit into the model of clay so that the human being came into existence containing the spirit, the soul and the body. The spirit within the human being is connected to the Spirit of God, the body is connected to the corporeal world, and the soul is connected to the imaginal realm, which lies as an intermediate realm between the spirit and the body.

¹⁴³ Ibn al-ʿArabi, *Futubat*, III 417.24, quoted in Chittick, *ibid*.

¹⁴⁴ Chittick, *ibid*, 274.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

The realm of the soul also corresponds to the realm of Nature in the macrocosm. The spirit is light, the body dark, and the soul or nature is the shadowy world of creative Imagination where both light and darkness play an essentially creative role. If the attributes of God were manifested in their purity they would be blinding in their intensity. The cosmos is unable to sustain such purity; therefore the attributes are manifested in the realm of the soul as 'corporeous qualities and forces.'¹⁴⁶ The spirit pulls the soul upwards, towards the realms of unity and light, while the body pulls the soul downwards, towards the realms of darkness and dispersion.

Another proof of the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm is found in God's knowledge of His own Essence through the cosmos. In knowing Himself God knows all the marks ('*alama*) of existence (*wujud*) in all their various manifestations. Through His breath, God articulates the word 'Be!' and brings into creation that which was only a hidden possibility. God has knowledge of all the hidden possibilities. It is through this knowledge and the desire to manifest and bring into existence these hidden possibilities that He creates the macrocosm and the microcosm. Therefore, to know God, human beings have been exhorted to know themselves. They are one of the hidden possibilities in the knowledge of God that were made manifest by His creative Command.

This is indicated by the Prophet's words, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." Hence He made you your signifier of Him, and you come to know Him. Likewise His Essence is His signifier of you, so He knew you and then brought you into existence.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 339.

¹⁴⁷ Ibn al-'Arabi, *Futubat* II 479.3, Chittick, *ibid.*, 20-1.

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To know God, human beings need to know themselves, and in order to know themselves they need to know the spirit, the heart, the intellect and the soul that make up their inner beings. Moreover, for the purpose of realizing their true potentiality, human beings need to understand how they are 'marked' by God and how they themselves are a 'mark' of God while they exist on this earthly plane. As the Qur'an mentions, one of the ways to achieve this end is to become aware of how the attributes of God are manifested within the 'horizons' and within their inner 'selves.'

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