

Chapter 9

Creation According to Ibn ‘Arabî

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I. The Meaning of Creation

“Creation” (*khalq*) is unquestionably one of the concepts upon which stands the Islamic world-view. It plays a prominent role in all aspects of the religious thought of Islam. In theology, for example, it constitutes the very starting-point of all discussions in the form of the opposition between the “temporality” (*hudûth*) and “eternity *a parte ante*” (*qidam*). The world is an “originated” (or “temporally produced”) thing because it is the result of Divine creation. And this conception of the world’s being “originated” (*muhdath*) forms the basis of the entire system of Islamic theology.

In the world-view of Ibn ‘Arabî, too, “creation” plays an important part as one of the key-concepts. The creative word of God, “Be!” (*kun*) has a decisive meaning in the coming-into-being of all beings. However, the most basic concept of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ontology is self-manifestation, and the world of Being is after all nothing but the self-manifestation of the Absolute, and no event whatsoever occurs in the world except self-manifestation. In this sense, “creation” which means the coming-into-being of the world is naturally identical with self-manifestation.

But we would make a gross mistake if we imagine that since the ontology of Ibn ‘Arabî is based on self-manifestation and since there is nothing but self-manifestation, “creation” is after all, for him, a metaphor. To think that Ibn ‘Arabî used the term “creation” making a concession to the established pattern of Islamic thought, and that he merely described self-manifestation in a more traditional terminology, is to overlook the multilateral nature of his thought.

One of the characteristic features of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought is its manifoldness. In the presence of one important problem, he usu-

ally develops his thought in various directions and in various forms with the help of rich imagery. This, I think, is due largely to the unusual profundity and fecundity of his experience which always underlies his thinking. The depth and richness of mystical experience demands, in his case, multiplicity of expression.

The theory of “creation” which we are going to examine is not to be considered as a mere religious metaphor, or some esoteric teaching disguised in traditional theological terminology. “Creation” is to him as real as “self-manifestation.” Or we might say that one and the same fundamental fact existing in his consciousness has two different aspects, one “creation,” and the other “self-manifestation.”

The first thing which attracts our attention about his theory of “creation” is the important part played by the concept of “triad” or “triplicity,” *thalâthîyah*. This marks it off from the theory of “self-manifestation.”

The starting-point is as usual the Absolute. The ontological ground of existence is the One-Absolute. But the One, if considered in its phenomenal aspect, presents three different aspects. They are: (1) the Essence (not *qua* Essence in its absoluteness, but in its self-revealing aspect), (2) the Will or *irâdah* (here the Absolute is a “Willer,” *murîd*), and (3) the Command or *amr*¹ (here the Absolute is a “Commander,” *âmir*).

These three aspects in the order given here represent the whole process of “creation.” The process may be briefly described as follows. First, there arises in the One-Absolute self-consciousness—or Knowledge (*‘ilm*)—and the permanent archetypes appear in the Divine Consciousness. This marks the birth of the possible Many. And thereby the Presence of the Essence (i.e., the ontological level of the Absolute *qua* Absolute) descends to the Presence of Divinity (*ilâhîyah*, “being God”).

Then, in the second place, there arises the Will based on this Knowledge to bring out the archetypes from the state of nonexistence into the state of existence. Then, on the basis of this Will, the Command—“Be!” (*kun*)—is issued, and thus the world is “created.”

Having these preliminary remarks in mind, let us read the passage in which Ibn ‘Arabî describes the process.²

1. It is also called Word (*qawl*).

2. *Fusûs al-Hikam*, pp.139-140/ 115-116. In quoting from the *Fusûs al-Hikam* (*Fus.*), I shall always give two paginations: (1) that of the Cairo edition of 1321

Know—may God assist you in doing so!—that the whole matter (i.e., “creation”) in itself has its basis in the “singleness” (*fardîyah*). But this “singleness” has a triple structure (*tathlîth*). For the “singleness” starts to appear only from “three.” In fact “three” is the first single (i.e., odd) number.

What Ibn 'Arabî wants to convey through these laconic expressions may be made clear if we explain it in the following way. He begins by saying that the very root of “creation” is the “singleness” of the Absolute. It is important to remark that he refers here to the Absolute as “single” (*fard*), not as “One.” In other words, he is not speaking of the Absolute as Absolute in its essential absoluteness. We are here at a lower stage at which the Absolute has selfconsciousness or Knowledge.

According to Ibn 'Arabî, “one” is not a number at all; it is the principle and “birth-place” of all numbers from “two” onwards, but it is not itself a number. “One” is absolutely above all relations; it is naturally above the concept itself of number.

“Single” is not like that. Outwardly it is “one,” but in its inner structure it is not “one,” because the concept of singleness contains in itself the concept of “other.” It is “one” in so far as it is other than others. In this sense, “single” is internally divisible and divided, because we cannot represent it without at the same time representing—negatively, to be sure—the idea of otherness. In this sense it is “one” composed of more than one unit. And “three” is the smallest, i.e., first, “single” number in the infinitely extending series of numbers—which makes it particularly appropriate for functioning as the starting-point of the Divine act of creation.

And from this Presence of Divinity (i.e., the ontological plane where the Absolute is no longer One but Single, endowed with an inner triplicity) the world has come into existence. To this God refers when He says: “Whenever We decide (lit. “will” the existence of) something, We only say to it, ‘Be!,’ and it comes into existence” (XVI, 40). Thus we see (the triplicity of) the Essence, the Will, and the Word.³ Anything would not come into existence if it were not for (1) the Essence and (2) its Will—the Will which is the drive with which the Essence turns towards bringing something in particular into existence—and then (3) the Word “Be!” uttered to that

A.H., containing al-Qâshânî's commentary, and (2) that of Affifi's critical edition, Cairo, 1946 (1365 A.H.).

3. Reading: *hâdhîhi dhât wa-irâdah wa-qawl*.

particular thing at the very moment when the Will turns the Essence in that direction.⁴

The passage just quoted describes the structure of the triplicity on the side of the Agent, i.e., the Absolute. But the triplicity on the part of the Creator alone does not produce any effect. In order that the creative activity of the Absolute be really effective, there must be a corresponding triplicity also on the part of the “receiver” (*qâbil*), i.e., the thing to be created. Creation is actualized only when the active triplicity perfectly coincided with the passive triplicity.

(The moment the creative Word of God is uttered) there arises in the thing to be created, too, a singleness having a triplicity. And by this triplicity alone does the thing, on its part, become capable of being produced and being qualified with existence. The triplicity in the object consists of (1) its thing-ness (*shay'yyah*), (2) its hearing (*samâ'*), and (3) its obeying (*imtithâl*) the Command of the Creator concerning its creation. So that the (creaturely) triad corresponds with the (Divine) triad.

The first (1) is the permanent archetypal essence of the thing in the state of non-existence, which corresponds to the Essence of its Creator. The second (2) is the hearing of the Command by the thing, which corresponds to the Will of its Creator. And the third (3) is its obedient acceptance of what it has been commanded concerning its coming into existence, which corresponds to the (Creator's) Word “Be!” Upon this, the thing actually comes into being.

Thus the “bringing-into-being” (*takwîn*, or “production”) is to be attributed to the thing (created). For if the thing had not in itself the power of coming into being when the Word (“Be!”) is uttered, it would never come into existence. In this sense it is the thing itself that brings it into existence from the state of non-existence.⁵

It is remarkable that a special emphasis is laid here in the process of creation on the “power” (*quwwah*) of the thing to be created. A thing is not created in a purely passive way, that is, mechanically and powerlessly, but it participates positively in its own creation.

When God decides to bring something into existence, He simply says to it “Be!” And the thing, in response, comes into existence. In this process, the coming-into-being (*takawwun*) itself is an

4. *Fus.*, pp.139-140/ 115-116.

5. *Fus.*, p.140/ 115-116.

act of that thing, not an act of God. This conception is explained by al-Qâshânî in the following terms:⁶

The coming-into-being, that is, the thing's obeying the Command, pertains to nothing else than the thing itself, for it (i.e., coming-into-being) is (as Ibn 'Arabî says) in the power of the thing; that is to say, it is contained potentially in the thing, concealed. This is why God (in the above-quoted Qoranic verse) ascribes it (i.e., coming-into-being) to the thing, by saying, "and it comes into existence."⁷ This sentence means that the thing (upon hearing the Word) immediately obeys the order and comes into existence. And the thing is capable of doing so simply because it is already existent in the Unseen (i.e., potentially), for the archetypal subsistence is nothing other than a concealed inner mode of existence. Everything that is "inward" has in itself the power to come out into "outward" existence. This is due to the fact that the Essence (designated by the) Name "Inward" (*bâtin*) is the same Essence (designated by the) Name "Outward" (*zâhir*), and because the "receiver" (*qâbil*) is (ultimately) the same as the "Agent" (*fâ'il*).

Such is the original theory of "creation" put forward by Ibn 'Arabî. He affirms very emphatically that the "production" (*takwîn*) is to be ascribed to the thing produced, not to the Absolute. Such a position will surely be criticized by ordinary believers as considering God "powerless" (*'âjiz*). But, this position is not at all blasphemous in the eyes of those who really know the structure of Ibn 'Arabî's world-view. Surely, in this world-view, the things (creatures) are described as being so positively powerful that they leave but a limited space for the direct activity of the Absolute. On a deeper level, however, those things that are provisionally considered as independently existent are nothing but so many particularized, delimited forms of the Absolute, and all are involved in an ontological drama within the Absolute itself; all are a magnificent Divina Commedia.

The idea of "production" (the last stage of the "creation") being ascribable to the things and not to the Absolute is further explained by Ibn 'Arabî in the following way:⁸

God states categorically that the "production" pertains to the (created) thing itself, and not to God. What pertains to God in

6. p.140.

7. The point is that God does not say in this verse *fa-yukawwin* ("and *He* brings it into existence") but says *fa-yakûn* ("and *it* comes into existence"), the subject of the sentence being the thing itself.

8. *Fus.*, p.140/ 115-116.

this matter is only His Command. He makes His part (in the creative process) clear by saying: "Whenever We decide (the existence of) something, We only say to it 'Be!'," and it comes into existence" (XVI, 40). Thus the "production" is ascribed to the thing though, to be sure, the latter acts only in obedience to the Command of God. And (we must accept this statement as it is because) God is truthful in whatever He says. Besides, this (i.e., the ascription of the "production" to the thing) is something quite reasonable, objectively speaking.

(This may be illustrated by an example.) Suppose a master who is feared by everybody and whom nobody dares to disobey commands his slave to stand up by saying to him, "Stand up!" (*qum*); the slave will surely stand up in obedience to the command of the master. To the master pertains in the process of the slave's standing up only his commanding him to do so, while the act of standing up itself pertains to the slave; it is not an act of the master.

Thus it is clear that the "production" stands on the basis of triplicity; in other words, three elements are involved on both sides, on the part of the Absolute as well as on the part of the creatures.

It will be evident, then, that in Ibn 'Arabî's thought, the principle of *creatio ex nihilo* holds true. But what makes his thesis fundamentally different from the ordinary Islamic *creatio ex nihilo* is that the *nihil*, for Ibn 'Arabî, is not a total unconditional "non-existence," but "non-existence" in the particular sense of something being as yet non-existent as an empirical or phenomenal thing. What he regards as *nihil* is "existence" on the level of the intelligibles, or—which comes to the same thing—in the Consciousness of God. Ontologically, his *nihil* is the "possible" (*mumkin*), i.e., something that has the power (or possibility) to exist. The ordinary view which makes "creation" a sort of Divine monodrama has its origin in the ignorance of the positive power to be attributed to the "possibles." All things, in Ibn 'Arabî's view, have enough power to come out from the concealment into the field of existence in response to the ontological Command of God. Thus the creaturely world is possessed of "efficiency" (*fâ'iliyah*). And the things that constitute this would participate actively and positively in the creation of themselves.

Looking at an artisan who is engaged in molding things out of clay, one might make a superficial observation that the clay has no positive "efficiency" of its own, and that it lets itself be molded into whatever form the artisan likes. In the view of such a man, the clay

in the hands of an artisan is sheer passivity, sheer non-action. He overlooks the important fact that, in reality, the clay, on its part, positively determines the activity of the artisan. Surely, the artisan can make quite a considerable variety of things out of clay, but whatever he may do, he cannot go beyond the narrow limits set by the very nature of the clay. Otherwise expressed, the nature of the clay itself determines the possible forms in which it may be actualized. Somewhat similar to this is the positive nature of a thing in the process of "creation."

The same observation, however, clearly shows that, although the things do possess "efficiency," the latter is after all secondary, not primary. Herein lies the fundamental difference between God and the world. "As women are by nature a degree lower than men," the creatures are a degree lower than the Absolute. The things, with all their positive powers and capacities, have no essential priority.

As women are a degree lower than men according to God's saying: "and men are a degree above them (i.e., women)" (II, 228), the things that have been created in the image (of God) are naturally a degree lower than the One who has brought them into being in His image, in spite of the fact that their forms are God's Form itself.

And by that very degree which separates God from the world, God is completely independent (i.e., has absolutely no need) of the whole world, and is the primary Agent. As for the "form," it is but a secondary agent and has no essential priority which pertains only to the Absolute.⁹

II. The Feminine Element in the Creation of the World

In the last part of the preceding section reference has incidentally been made to the idea that women are by nature a degree lower than men. This, however, should not be taken to mean that Ibn 'Arabî considers the role played by the feminine in the process of world creation quite secondary, let alone unimportant. On the contrary, the entire creative process, in his view, is governed by the principle of femininity.

The starting-point of his thinking on this problem is furnished by a famous Tradition which runs: "Of all the things of your world,

9. *Fus.*, p.273/ 219.

three things have been made particularly dear to me, women, perfumes, and the ritual prayer, this last being the ‘cooling of my eye’ (i.e., a source of my highest joy).” In this Tradition, Ibn ‘Arabî observes, the number “three”—triplicity again!—is put in the feminine form (*thalâth*), in spite of the fact that one of the three things here enumerated (*tîb*, “perfume”) is a masculine noun. Ordinarily, in Arabic grammar, the rule is that, if there happens to be even one masculine noun among the things enumerated, one treats the whole as grammatically masculine, and uses the numeral in the masculine form (*thalâthah*, for example, instead of *thalâth*, meaning “three”).

Now in this Tradition, the Prophet intentionally—so thinks Ibn ‘Arabî—uses the feminine form, *thalâth*, and this, in his view, has a very deep symbolic meaning. It suggests that all the basic factors that participate in creation are feminine, and that the whole process of creation is governed by the principle of femininity (*ta’nîth*). Ibn ‘Arabî draws attention to the process by which a man (male) comes into being:¹⁰

The man finds himself situated between an essence (i.e., the Divine Essence) which is his (ontological) source and a woman (i.e., his own mother) who is his (physical) source. Thus he is placed between two feminine nouns, that is to say, between the femininity of essence and the real (i.e., physical) femininity.

The Essence (*dhât*), which is the original ground of all Being, is a feminine noun. The immediate ontological ground of the forms of all beings, i.e., the Divine Attributes, *sifât* (sg. *sifah*), is a feminine noun. The creative power of God, *qudrah* is a feminine noun. Thus, from whatever aspect one approaches the process of creation, one runs into a feminine noun. The Philosophers (*falâsifah*) who blindly follow Greek philosophy assert that God is the “cause” (*‘illah*) of the existence of the world. This is a mistaken view, and yet it is significant, Ibn ‘Arabî adds, that even in this wrong opinion about creation, a feminine noun, *‘illah*, is used to denote the ultimate ground of the creation of the world.

The whole problem is dealt with by al-Qâshânî in a far more scholastic way as follows:¹¹

10. *Fus.*, p.274/ 220.

11. pp.274-275.

The ultimate ground (or origin) of everything is called Mother (*umm*), because the mother is the (stem) from which all branches go out. Do you not see how God describes the matter when He says: "And He created from it (i.e., the first soul, meaning Adam) its mate, and out of the two He spread innumerable men and women" (IV, 1). As you see, the "wife" (of Adam) was feminine. Moreover, the first unique "soul" from which she was created was itself feminine.¹² Just in the same way, the Origin of all origins over which there is nothing is designated by a (feminine noun), *haqîqah* or "Reality" . . . Likewise the words designating the Divine Essence, 'ayn and dhât, are feminine.

Thus his (i.e., Muhammad's) intention in making (the femininity) overcome (the masculinity)¹³ is to draw attention to the special importance of the femininity which is the very origin and source of everything that spreads out from it. And this is true not merely of the world of Nature but even of Reality itself.

In fact, Reality is the Father (*ab*) of everything in that it is the absolute Agent (i.e., the absolutely Active, *fâ'il*). But Reality is also the Mother (because of its passivity). It gathers together in itself both "activity" (*fi'l*) and "passivity" (*infi'âl*), for Reality is "passive" (*munfa'il*) in so far as it manifests itself in the form of a "passive" thing, while in the form of the "active" (Agent) it is "active." The very nature of Reality requires this unification of the "determination" (*ta'ayyun*) and "non-determination" (*lâta'ayyun*).¹⁴ Thus Reality is "determined" by all determinations, masculine and feminine, on the one hand. But on the other, it stands high above all determinations.

And Reality, when it becomes determined by the first determination,¹⁵ is One Essence requiring a perfect balance and equilibrium between "activity" and "passivity," between the exterior self-manifestation (*zuhûr*) and the interior self-concealment (*butûn*).¹⁶ And

12. Although Adam is a man, he is, as a soul (*nafs*), feminine.

13. The reference is to the above-quoted Tradition, in which the Prophet uses the feminine numeral *thalâth* in spite of the presence of a masculine noun among the three things enumerated.

14. "Determination" (or more strictly "being determined") refers to the passive side of the Absolute, i.e., the Absolute as manifesting itself in a concrete (determined) thing. "Non-determination" refers to the active side of the Absolute, i.e., the Absolute as the absolute Agent.

15. The "first determination" (*al-ta'ayyun al-awwal*) means the self-manifestation of the Absolute to itself as a unifying point of all the Divine Names. The Absolute is here the "one" (*wâhid*), and the ontological stage the *wâhidîyah*, "Oneness."

16. The Absolute *qua* One is potentially all beings but it is in actuality still one. So it is neither in the state of pure exterior self-manifestation nor in that of pure

in so far as it is the “Inward” (*bâtin*) residing in every form, it is “active,” but in so far as it is the “Outward” (*zâhir*), it is “passive” . . . The first determination, which occurs by (the Absolute’s) manifesting itself to itself, attests to the fact that the Essence is absolute and non-determined, for its self-determination (*ta’ayyun bi-dhâtihî*) must necessarily be preceded by non-determination (*lâ-ta’ayyun*). Likewise when Reality *qua* Reality is actualized in every determined (i.e., concretely delimited) existent, its determination (also) requires that it be preceded by non-determination. Nay, rather, every determined existent, considered in its reality apart from all consideration of its actual delimitations, is an absolute (i.e., every determined existent is in its ontological core an absolute—which is nothing but the Absolute itself). A determined existent, in this sense, depends upon the Absolute (which is inherent in it) and is sustained by it. So everything is “passive” in relation to that absolute (ontological) ground, and is a locus of self-manifestation for it, while that ground is “active” and remains concealed in the thing.

Thus everything is “passive” considered from the point of view of its being determined, but “active” in itself,¹⁷ considered from the point of view of its being absolute. But the thing itself is essentially one . . . So Reality, wherever it goes and in whatever way it appears, has (two different aspects; namely), “activity” and “passivity,” or “fatherhood” (*ubuwwah*) and “motherhood” (*umûmah*). And this justifies the (Prophet’s having used) the feminine form.

The Absolute, which is the ultimate and real origin of “creation,” has something feminine in it, as indicated by the feminine form of the word “Essence” (*dhât*). Furthermore, if we consider analytically the ontological structure of the creative process, we find, even at its first stage, the “first determination,” a feminine principle, the “motherhood,” co-operating with a masculine principle, the “fatherhood.” The Divine Essence, in brief, is the Mother of everything in the sense that it represents the “passive” element which is inherent in all forms of Being.

III. Perpetual Creation

We turn now to one of the most interesting features of the theory of creation peculiar to Ibn ‘Arabî. This part of his theory is histori-

interior concealment, but it keeps, so to speak, a perfect balance between these two terms.

17. I read: [*wa-fâ’il*] *min nafsi-hî*, etc.

cally of primary importance because it is a critique of the atomistic philosophy of the Ash'arite theologians.¹⁸

In Ibn 'Arabî's world-view, the self-manifestation of the Absolute is a perpetual process whose major stages—(1) the “most holy emanation,” (2) the “holy emanation,” and then (3) the appearance of concrete individual things—go on being actualized one after another like successive, recurrent waves. This ontological process repeats itself indefinitely and endlessly. At every moment, and moment after moment, the same eternal process of annihilation and re-creation is repeated. At this very moment, an infinite number of things and properties come into being, and at the next moment they are annihilated to be replaced by another infinity of things and properties.

Thus we cannot experience the same world twice at two different moments. The world we actually experience is in perpetual flow. It changes from moment to moment. But this continual and perpetual change occurs in such an orderly way according to such definite patterns that we, superficial observers, imagine that the same one world is there around us.

Describing this perpetual flow of things in terms of the concept of “creation”, Ibn 'Arabî says that the world goes on being created anew at every single moment. This he calls “new creation” (*al-khalq al-jadîd*). The expression must not be taken in the sense of a “new” creation to be contrasted with the “old,” i.e., the earlier, creation of the world. The word “new” (*jadîd*) in this context means “ever new” or “which is renewed from moment to moment.” The “new creation” means, in short, the process of everlasting and ever new act of creation.

Man, being endowed with self-consciousness, can have a real living feel of this “new creation” both inside and outside himself, i.e., both in his mind and in his body, by becoming conscious of “himself,” which goes on changing from moment to moment without ever stopping as long as he lives. However, ordinary people

18. The idea presents a very important and interesting problem from the viewpoint of comparative Oriental philosophy. See my “The Concept of Perpetual Creation in Islamic Mysticism and Zen Buddhism” (in *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr [Tehran, 1977], pp. 115-148). [This same article appears in a more recent compendium of essays by the author, entitled *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1994), pp.141-173. Ed.]

are not aware of the process of “new creation” even with regard to themselves.

Ibn ‘Arabî describes this process also as a “perpetual ascent” (*taraqî dâ'im*). This is a very important point at which we can look into the very basis of his idea of the “new creation.”

The wonder of all wonders is that man (and consequently, everything) is in a perpetual process of ascending. And yet (ordinarily) he is not aware of this because of the extreme thinness and fineness of the veil¹⁹ or because of the extreme similarity between (the successive forms).²⁰

That everything is involved in the process of the ever-new creation means primarily that the Absolute is continually manifesting itself in the infinity of “possible” things. This is done by the ontological “descent” (*nuzûl*) of the Absolute towards the lower levels of Being, first to the archetypes and then to the “possible.” But the same process of perpetual “descent” is, when it is looked at from the side of the “possible,” turns out to be a perpetual process of ontological “ascent.” Everything, in this sense, is perpetually “ascending” towards the Absolute by the very same “descending” of the latter.

The “ascent” (*taraqî*) of the things, in other words, is nothing but the reverse side of the “descent” of the Absolute towards them. The things in the state of non-existence receiving the mercy of the Absolute and obtaining thereby existence, produces, from the standpoint of these things, the image of their “ascending” toward the original source of existence. Al-Qâshânî paraphrases the above-quoted passage in the following way:²¹

One of the most miraculous things about man is that he is in a perpetual state of ascent with regard to the modes of the “preparedness” of his own archetypal essence. For all the modes of the archetypes are things that have been known to God (from eternity), permanently fixed in potentiality, and God brings them out to actuality incessantly and perpetually. And so He goes on transforming the possibilities (*isti 'dâdât*, lit. “preparednesses”) that have been there from the beginningless past and that are (there-

19. When you look at something through an extremely fine and transparent fabric you do not become aware of the existence of the veil between you and the thing. The “veil” here refers to the outward form shown by the act of “ascending.”

20. *Fus.*, p.151-152/124.

21. p.152.

fore) essentially uncreated, into infinite possibilities that are actually created.

Thus everything is in the state of ascending at this very moment because it is perpetually receiving the endlessly renewed ontological (*wujûdîyah*) Divine self-manifestations, and at every self-manifestation the thing goes on increasing in its receptivity for another (i.e., the next) self-manifestation.

Man, however, may not be conscious of this because of his eyes being veiled, or rather because of the veil being extremely thin and fine. But he may also become conscious of it when the self-manifestations take on the forms of intellectual, intuitive, imaginative, or mystical experiences.

The concept of “new creation,” thus comprising the ontological “descent” and “ascent,” is a point which discloses most clearly the dynamic nature of the world-view of Ibn 'Arabî. In this world-view, nothing remains static; the world in its entirety is in fervent movement. The world transforms itself kaleidoscopically from moment to moment, and yet all these movements of self-development are the “ascending” movements of the things toward the Absolute-One, precisely because they are the “descending” self-expressions of the Absolute-One. The One is the Manifold and the Manifold is the One. In fact the “descent” and “ascent” describe exactly the same thing.

(As a result of the “new creation,” we are constantly faced with similar forms, but of any two similar forms) one is not the same thing as the other. For in the eyes of one who recognizes them to be two similar things, they are different from one another. Thus a truly perspicacious man discerns Many in the One, while knowing at the same time that the Divine Names, in spite of their essential diversity and multiplicity, point to one single Reality, for the Names are nothing but multiplicity posited by the reason in Something which is essentially and really one.

Thus it comes about that in the process of self-manifestation the Many becomes discernible in one single Essence. This may be compared to the Prime Matter which is mentioned in the definition of every form. The forms are many and divergent, but they all go back in reality to one single substance which is their Prime Matter.²²

In this passage, Ibn 'Arabî seems to be speaking of the horizontal similarity-relationship between the concrete beings. He emphasizes

22. *Fus.*, p.152/ 124-125.

the particular aspect of the “new creation” in which the concretely existent things in the phenomenal world are after all infinitely various forms of the Divine self-manifestation, and are ultimately reducible to the One. But the same applies also to the vertical, i.e., temporal, relation between the ever new creations. In what is seemingly one and the same thing the “new creation” is taking place at every moment, so that the “one and the same thing,” considered at two successive moments, is in reality not one and the same, but two “similar” things. And yet, despite all this, the thing maintains and never loses its original unity and identity, because all the new and similar states that occur to it successively are eternally determined by its own archetype.

These two aspects of the “new creation,” horizontal and vertical, are brought to light by al-Qâshânî in his commentary on the passage just quoted.²³

A truly perspicacious man discerns a multiplicity of self-determinations in the one single Essence which appears in an infinite number of “similar” forms. All the Divine Names like the Omnipotent, the Omniscient, the Creator, the Sustainer, etc., point in reality to one single Essence, God, despite the fact that each of them has a different meaning from the rest. This shows that the divergence of the meanings of the Names is merely an intelligible and mental multiplicity existing in what is called the “essentially One,” that they are not a really and concretely existent multiplicity. Thus the self-manifestation in the forms of all the Names is but a multiplicity discernible within one single Essence. The same is true also of the events that take place successively (in “one and the same thing”). All the successive self-manifestations that are similar to each other are one in reality, but many if taken as individual self-determinations. (The Master) illustrates this with the example of the Prime Matter (*hayûlâ*). You mention the Prime Matter in defining any substantial Form. You say, for example, “Body (*jism*) is a substance having quantity,” “Plant (*nabât*) is a body that grows up,” “Stone (*hajar*) is a body, inorganic, heavy, and voiceless,” “animal (*hayawân*) is a body that grows up, has sense perception, and moves with will,” “Man (*insân*) is a rational animal.” In this way, you mention “substance” as the definition of “body,” and you mention “body”—which is “substance” (by definition)—in the definitions of all the rest. Thus all are traced back to the one single reality which is “substance.”

23. p.152-153.

This fact can be known only by mystical vision, and is never disclosed to those who understand everything through rational thinking. Thus it comes about that the majority of men, including the Philosophers, are not aware of the phenomenon of the “new creation.” They do not see the infinitely beautiful scene of this kaleidoscopic transformation of things.

How splendid are God’s words concerning the world and its perpetual renewal with each Divine breath which constitutes an “ever new creation” in one single reality. (But this is not perceived except by a few), as He says in reference to a certain group of people—indeed, this applies to the majority of men—“Nay, they are in utter confusion with regard to the new creation.” (L, 15).²⁴ These people (are in confusion with regard to it) because they do not know the (perpetual) renewal of the things with each Divine breath.²⁵

Al-Qâshânî describes the scene of this perpetual renewal of the things as he sees it in his philosophico-mystical intuition in the following terms:²⁶

The world in its entirety is perpetually changing. And every thing (in the world) is changing in itself from moment to moment. Thus every thing becomes determined at every moment with a new determination which is different from that with which it was determined a moment ago. And yet the one single reality which is attained by all these successive changes remains forever unchanged. This is due to the fact that the “one single reality” is nothing but the reality itself of the Absolute as it has taken on the “first determination,” and all the forms (i.e., the successive determinations) are accidents that occur to it successively, changing and being renewed at every moment.

But (ordinary) people do not know the reality of this phenomenon and are therefore “in utter confusion” regarding this perpetual process of transformation which is going on in the universe. Thus the Absolute reveals itself perpetually in these successive self-manifestations, while the world is perpetually being lost due to its

24. Ibn 'Arabî, as he often does, is giving quite an arbitrary meaning to the Qoranic verse. The actual context makes it clear beyond any doubt that God is here speaking of Resurrection after death, which is conceived of as a “new creation.” The “new creation” does not certainly mean in this verse the ever new process of creation which is Ibn 'Arabî's thesis.

25. *Fus.*, p.153/ 125.

26. p.153.

annihilation at every moment and its renewed birth at the next moment.

Al-Qâshânî goes a step further and asserts that this perpetual “new creation” not only governs the concrete existents of the world, but that even the permanent archetypes are under its sway. The archetypes in the Divine Consciousness appear and disappear and then appear again, repeating the same process endlessly as innumerable lamp-lights that go on being turned on and put out in every successive moment. He says:²⁷

The ontological emanation (*al-fayd al-wujûdiy*) and the Breath of the Merciful are perpetually flowing through the beings of the world as water running in a river, forever being renewed continuously. In a similar way, the determinations of the Absolute-Existence in the form of the permanent archetypes in the eternal Knowledge (i.e., Divine Consciousness) never cease to be renewed from moment to moment. (And this happens in the following way). Thus, as soon as the first ontological determination leaves an archetype in a place, at the next moment the next determination is attached to it in a different place. This is nothing other than the appearance of an archetype belonging in the sphere of Divine Knowledge in the second place following its disappearance in the first place, while that archetype itself remains forever the same in the Knowledge and in the world of the Unseen.

It is as if you saw millions of lights flickering against the background of an unfathomable darkness. If you concentrate your sight on any one of these illumined spots, you will see its light disappearing in the very next moment and appearing again in a different spot in the following moment. And the Divine Consciousness is imagined as a complicated meshwork formed by all these spots in which light goes on being turned on and extinguished at every moment endlessly. This is indeed an exceedingly beautiful and impressive image. But Ibn ‘Arabî himself in his *Fusûs* does not seem to describe the permanent archetypes in this way in terms of the “new creation.” The “new creation” he speaks of concerns the concrete things of the sensible world.

Let us return to Ibn ‘Arabî and analyze his concept of “new creation” as he develops it in relation to his atomistic philosophy. He finds in the Qoranic account of the miracle of Bilqîs, Queen of

27. pp.195-196.

Sheba, an admirable illustration of this incessant annihilation and re-creation which is going on in the world of Being. The account is found in the Qoran, XXVII, 38-40.

Once Solomon asked those who were there in his presence, jinn and human beings, whether any of them could bring him the throne of the Queen. Thereupon one of the jinn said "I will bring it to thee before thou risest from thy place!" But a man "who had knowledge of the Scripture"²⁸ said, "I will bring it to thee before thy gaze returns to thee (i.e., in the twinkling of an eye)." And he did bring the throne on the spot from the far-off country in South Arabia and set it in front of Solomon.

How could he accomplish this miracle? Ibn 'Arabî says that the man simply took advantage of the "new creation." The throne of the Queen was not transported locally from Sheba to the presence of Solomon. Nobody, in fact, can carry any material object from one place to a distant place in the twinkling of an eye. Nor did Solomon and his people see the throne in hallucination. Rather the throne which had been with Bilqîs was annihilated and, instead of being re-created in the same place, was made to appear in the presence of Solomon. This is, indeed, a miraculous event, in the sense that a thing disappeared and in the next moment appeared in a different place. From the viewpoint of the "new creation," however, such an event is not at all an impossibility. For, after all, it is nothing but a new throne being created in an entirely different place.

The superiority of the human sage over the sage of the jinn consists in the (deeper knowledge possessed by the former concerning) the secrets of the free disposal of anything at will and the particular natures of things. And this superiority can be known by the amount of time needed. For the "return of the gaze" towards the man who looks is faster than the standing up of a man who stands up from his seat . . . For the time in which the gaze moves to an object is exactly the amount of time in which the gaze gets hold of the object however great the distance may be between the man who looks and the object looked. At the very moment the eye is opened, its gaze reaches the sphere of the fixed stars. And at the very moment the perception stops, the gaze returns to the man. The standing up of a man from his seat cannot be done so quickly.

28. The Qoran does not give his name. Commentators assert that the man was a sage whose name was Âsaf b. Barakhiyâ.

Thus Āsaf b. Barakhiyā was superior to the jinn in his action. For the moment Āsaf spoke, he accomplished his work. And Solomon saw at the same moment the throne of Bilqīs. The throne was actually placed in his presence in order that no one should imagine that Solomon perceived (from afar) the throne in its original place without its being transferred.

In my opinion, however, there can be no local transference in one single moment. There occurred (in Solomon's case) simply a simultaneous annihilation and re-creation in such a manner that no one could perceive it, except those who had been given a true knowledge (of this kind of thing). This is what is meant by God's saying: "Nay, they are in utter confusion with regard to the new creation." And there never occurs even a moment in which they cease to see what they have seen (at the preceding moment).²⁹

Now if the truth of the matter is as I have just described, the moment of the disappearance of the throne from its original place coincided with the moment of its appearance in the presence of Solomon as a result of the "new creation" occurring with every Breath. Nobody, however, notices this discrepancy (between two moments of the "new creation").

Nay, the ordinary man is not aware of it (i.e., the "new creation") even with regard to himself. Man does not know that he ceases to exist and then comes to existence again with every single breath.³⁰

As we see, Ibn 'Arabī here writes that man ceases to exist at every moment and then (*thumma*) comes to existence again. But he immediately adds the remark that the particle *thumma*, meaning "then" or "after that," should not be taken as implying a lapse of time.

You must not think that by the word *thumma* I mean a temporal interval. This is not correct. The Arabs use this word in certain particular contexts to express the priority in causal relationship.³¹ . . . In the process of "the new creation with each Breath," too, the time of the non-existence (i.e., annihilation) of a thing coincides with the time of the existence (i.e., re-creation) of a thing similar to it (i.e., the thing that has just been annihilated). This view

29. This annihilation/ re-creation is done so quickly that man does not notice any discontinuum between the two units of time in his sense perception and imagines that everything continues to be as it has been.

30. *Fus.*, pp.195-196/ 155.

31. "A *thumma* B" in certain contexts means that A, as the cause of B, logically precedes the latter. It does not imply that A necessarily precedes B in terms of time; A and B may very well occur simultaneously.

resembles the Ash'arite thesis of the perpetual renewal of the accidents (*tajdîd al-a'râz*).

In fact, the problem of the transportation of the throne of Bilqîs is of the most recondite problems understandable only to those who know what I have explained above about the story. In brief, the merit of Âsaf consisted only in the fact that (thanks to him) the "re-creation" in question was actualized in the presence of Solomon. . . .

When Bilqîs (thereafter came to visit Solomon and) saw her own throne there, she said: "It is as though (*ka'anna-hu*) it were (my throne)" (XXVII, 42). (She said "as though") because she knew the existence of a long distance (between the two places) and because she was convinced of the absolute impossibility of the throne's having been locally transported in such a (short) period of time. Her answer was quite correct in view of the above-mentioned idea of the "renewal of creation" in similar forms. And in reality it was (i.e., it was the same throne of hers in terms of its permanent archetype, but not as a concrete individual thing). And all this is true, just as you remain what you were in the past moments through the process of the perpetual re-creation.³²

Quite incidentally, Ibn 'Arabî mentions in the passage just quoted the atomistic thesis of the Ash'arite theologians and points out the existence of a certain resemblance between his and their atomism. But what is more important and more interesting for our purpose is rather the difference between them which Ibn 'Arabî does not state explicitly in this passage, but which he explains in considerable detail in another part of the *Fusûs*.

The most salient feature of Ash'arite atomism is the thesis of the perpetual renewal (*tajdîd*) of accidents. According to this theory, of all the accidents of the things there is not even one that continues to exist for two units of time. Every accident comes into being at this moment and is annihilated at the very next moment to be replaced by another accident which is "similar" to it being created anew in the same locus. This is evidently the thesis of "new creation."

Now if we examine Ibn 'Arabî's thought in relation to this Ash'arite thesis, we find a striking similarity between them. Everything is, for Ibn 'Arabî, a phenomenal form of the Absolute, having no basis for independent subsistence (*qiwâm*) in itself. All are, in short, "accidents" which appear and disappear in the one eternal-

32. *Fus.*, p.197/ 156-157.

everlasting Substance (*jawhar*). Otherwise expressed, the existence itself of the Absolute comes into appearance at every moment in millions of new clothes. With every Breath of God, a new world is created.

From the point of view of Ibn 'Arabî, the atomism of the Ash'arites, though it is not a perfect description of the real structure of Being, does grasp at least an important part of the reality. Mentioning together with the Ash'arites a group of sophists known as *Hisbâniyyah* or *Husbâniyyah*, he begins to criticize them in the following manner:³³

The Ash'arites have hit upon the truth concerning some of the existents, namely, accidents, while the Hisbânites have chanced to find the truth concerning the whole of the world. The Philosophers consider these people simply ignorant. But (they are not ignorant; the truth is rather that) they both (i.e., the Ash'arites and the Hisbânites) are mistaken.

First, he criticizes the sophists of the Hisbânite school. The Hisbânites maintain that nothing remains existent for two units of time, that everything in the world, whether it be substance or accident, is changing from moment to moment. From this they conclude that there is no Reality in the objective sense. Reality or Truth exists only subjectively, for it can be nothing other than the constant flux of things as you perceive it in a fixed form at this present moment.³⁴

Though the Hisbânites are right in maintaining that the world as a whole and in its entirety is in perpetual transformation, they are mistaken in that they fail to see the real oneness of the Substance which underlies all these (changing) forms. (They thereby overlook the fact that) the Substance could not exist (in the external world) if it were not for them (i.e., these changing forms) nor would the forms be conceivable if it were not for the Substance. If the Hisbânites could see this point too (in addition to the first point), their theory would be perfect with regard to this problem.³⁵

33. *Fus.*, p.153/ 125.

34. The Name *Hisbâniyyah* is derived from the root HSB (the verb *hasiba*) meaning, "to opine," "to surmise," i.e., the subjective act of estimation. The appellation implies that Reality or Truth consists in the subjective estimation of this or that individual person, and that, consequently, there is no such thing as an objectively universal Truth (cf. Affifi, Com., p. 153).

35. *Fus.*, p.153/ 125.

Thus, for Ibn 'Arabî, the merit and demerit of the Hisbânite thesis are quite clear. They have hit upon a part of the truth in that they have seen the constant change of the world. But they overlook the most important part of the matter in that they do not know the true nature of the Reality which is the very substrate in which all these changes are happening, and consider it merely a subjective construct of each individual mind.

Concerning the Ash'arites, Ibn 'Arabî says:³⁶

As for the Ash'arites, they fail to see that the world in its entirety (including even the so-called "substances") is a sum of "accidents," and that, consequently, the whole world is changing from moment to moment since no "accident" (as they themselves hold) remains for two units of time.

And al-Qâshânî:³⁷

The Ash'arites do not know the reality of the world; namely, that the world is nothing other than the whole of all these "forms" which they call "accidents." Thus they only assert the existence of substances (i.e., atoms) which are in truth nothing, having no existence (in the real sense of the word). And they are not aware of the one Entity (*'ayn*) which manifests itself in these forms ("accidents" as they call them); nor do they know that this one Entity is the He-ness of the Absolute. This is why they assert (only) the (perpetual) change of the accidents.

According to the basic thesis of the Ash'arite ontology, the world is reduced to an infinite number of "indivisible parts," i.e., atoms. These atoms are, in themselves, unknowable. They are knowable only in terms of the "accidents" that occur to them, one accident appearing in a locus at one moment and disappearing in the next to be replaced by another.

The point Ibn 'Arabî makes against this thesis is that these "accidents" that go on being born and annihilated in infinitely variegated forms are nothing but so many self-manifestations of the Absolute. And thus behind the kaleidoscopic scene of the perpetual changes and transformations there is always a Reality which is eternally "one." And it is this one Reality itself that goes on manifesting itself perpetually in ever-new forms. The Ash'arites who overlook the existence of this one Reality that underlies all "accidents" are,

36. *Fus.*, pp.153-154/ 125-126.

37. p.154.

according to Ibn ‘Arabî, driven into the self-contradictory thesis that a collection of a number of transitory “accidents” that appear and disappear and never remain for two moments constitute “things” that subsist by themselves and continue to exist for a long time.

This (i.e., the mistake of the Ash‘arites) comes out clearly in their definitions of things. In fact, when they define anything, their definition turns the thing into (a collection of) accidents. And it is clear that it is all these accidents enumerated in the definition that constitute the very “substance” and its reality which (they consider to be) self-subsistent. However, even that substance (being a totality of the accidents) must ultimately be an accident, and as such it is not self-subsistent. Thus (in their theory) accidents which do not subsist by themselves, when put together, produce something that subsists by itself.³⁸

The passage is explicated by al-Qâshânî as follows. The Ash‘arites, whenever they define something, define it as a whole (*majmû‘*) of accidents. Defining “man,” for example, they say: “a rational animal.” The word “rational” (*nâtiq*) means “possessed of reason” (*dhû nutq*). The concept of “being possessed of” is a relation, and “relation” is evidently an accident. “Reason” (*nutq*), on the other hand, being something added to the essence of “animal,” is also an accident. Thus to say that man is “a rational animal” is to say that man is “an animal with two accidents.” Then the Ash‘arites go on to define “animal” by saying that it is a “physical body that grows, perceives, and moves by will.” The “animal” turns in this way into a whole of accidents. And the same procedure is applied to the definition of the “(physical) body” appearing in the definition of “animal.” As a result, “man” ultimately turns out to be a bundle of accidents which are by definition momentary and transitory. And yet this bundle itself is considered to be something subsistent by itself, a substance.

The Ash‘arites, Ibn ‘Arabî continues, are not aware of the fact that the very “substance,” which they consider a self-subsistent entity, is of exactly the same nature as “man,” “animal,” and other things; it is also a bundle of accidents.

Thus, in their theory, something (i.e., a bundle of *accidents*) which does not remain for two units of time remains (i.e., as a *bundle* of

38. pp.154-155/ 125-126.

accidents) for two units of time, nay, for many units of time! And something which does not subsist by itself (must be said to) subsist by itself, according to the Ash'arites! However, they do not know that they are contradicting themselves. So (I say that) these are people "who are in utter confusion with regard to the new creation."³⁹

Ibn 'Arabî brings out the contrast between the "wrong" view of the Ash'arites and the "true" thesis upheld by the people of "unveiling" by saying:⁴⁰

As to the people of "unveiling," they see God manifesting Himself with every Breath, no single self-manifestation being repeated twice. They see also by an immediate vision that every single self-manifestation gives rise to a new creation and annihilates a creation (i.e., the "creation" that has preceded), and that the disappearance of the latter at every (new) self-manifestation is "annihilation" whereas "subsistence" is caused by what is furnished (immediately) by the following self-manifestation.

Thus in Ibn 'Arabî's thought, everything in the world (and therefore the world itself) is constantly changing, but underlying this universal flux of changing things there is Something eternally unchanging. Using scholastic terminology he calls this unchanging Something the "Substance," the absolute substratum of all changes. In this particular perspective, all things—not only the "accidents" so called but the "substances" so called—are represented as "accidents" appearing and disappearing at every moment. It is interesting to observe how the theory of Divine self-manifestation becomes transformed, when translated into the language of the scholastic philosophy of "substance" and "accident."

39. Fus., p.154/ 126.

40. *ibid.*

Seeing God Everywhere

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Edited by
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Foreword by Philip Zaleski

Introduction by Satish Kumar

World Wisdom



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