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Seeing Past the Shadows: Ibn ‘Arabi’s “Divine Comedy”

James Winston Morris

It would be difficult to exaggerate the centrality of the eschatological dimension of human being in the thought and writings of Ibn ‘Arabi. The completely human being (*al-insân al-kâmil*), for the Shaykh al-Akbar – as for his own master and the Qur’an they share – can only be understood in terms of a wider universe, and an ongoing process of spiritual perfection, that stretch far beyond what we ordinarily take to be the normal temporal and ontological boundaries of human existence. And the greater part of his *magnum opus*, “The Meccan Openings” (*al-Futûhât al-Makkîya*), seems to be devoted in particular to opening up a deeper awareness and realization of those dimensions of the “other world” (*al-âkhira*) and its realities underlying the complex symbols and allusions of the Qur’an and *hadîth*.

The depth and detail of Ibn ‘Arabi’s explorations in that area, and of his efforts at communicating them, are certainly unmatched in Islamic tradition: while he built on the insights of many generations of earlier saints and religious scholars, his own teachings and formulations, especially in the *Futûhât*, became a standard reference for virtually all later Muslim authors, whether Sunni or Shiite, who were to write about eschatology in such fields as mysticism, philosophy, and even the more traditional religious sciences – as well as the favorite target for a sometimes vociferous chorus of enemies and critics. To suggest an appropriate analogy among more familiar Western authors, one could say that Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussion of these problems in the *Futûhât* combines something of Plato’s intellectual complexity, mythic imagination and creative sensitivity; Dante’s religious depth and systematic coherence, and his poetic richness of familiar human reference-points; and the direct “eyewitness reporting” of a Swedenborg. And even those comparisons

would not do justice to the highly developed interplay of metaphysical and soteriological dimensions that can only be paralleled in certain branches of Buddhist tradition.

But having said all this, how can we begin to explain the surprising, but undeniable neglect of these fundamental aspects in most Western-language studies of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings? One obvious explanation is the reliance of most such studies, until very recently, primarily on the *Fusûs al-Hikam* and the more abstract philosophic approach of a few influential later commentators on that work.¹ A second cumbersome obstacle – although one by no means limited to Ibn ‘Arabi – is the relative unfamiliarity and complexity for almost all modern readers (including Muslims) of some of the underlying symbol-systems referring to eschatological questions (drawn from the Qur’an, *hadîth*, Sufi tradition, and other “scientific” cosmologies of the time) which the Shaykh drew upon and shared with his original learned audiences. And in the academic world, at least, there is also a certain philosophic and theological unfashionability, a peculiarly modern embarrassment at even posing such fundamental metaphysical questions – an unspoken cultural taboo that often reflects a simplistic and misleading conception both of Ibn ‘Arabi’s own eschatological references and of the actual meaning and aims of their Islamic scriptural sources.

Finally, even for the growing community of scholars who have begun to explore the *Futûhât* and are attempting to open up its treasures to a much wider audience, there is the growing awareness of another, more unavoidable problem. For Ibn ‘Arabi’s treatment of the eschatological dimension of human existence (and of many integrally connected cosmological questions) is a perfect illustration of a peculiar writing technique whose grounds and essential features are carefully outlined in his own Introduction to the *Futûhât*. There he explains that he has – in imitation of the rhetoric of the Qur’an and *hadîth* – *intentionally scattered* the very essence of his discoveries and teachings, recognizable solely by the “élite of the spiritual élite”, throughout all the chapters of his masterwork, because those expressions would inevitably be misunderstood by most people (and thus might even bring death or persecution to those who tried to state them more openly).² The challenge posed by his thoroughgoing application of that particular rhetorical technique is like trying to reassemble an immense puzzle, or a shattered work of art, without knowing which of several possible outcomes is in fact the “right” one. And the practical result – as Ibn ‘Arabi

surely intended – is that any serious attempt to give a coherent account of the intellectual framework and spiritual intentions of his eschatological teachings inevitably becomes quite personally revealing, given this intentionally allusive, mirroring quality of the Shaykh's writing in the *Futûhât*. The rest of this essay provides a few representative examples of such “mirrors” from key chapters of that immense work, beginning with one of his most comprehensive images, the shadow-theater of existence.

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Chapter 317 of the *Futûhât* contains some of the most succinct and vivid allusions to Ibn ‘Arabi’s own understanding of the universal “Divine Comedy” and its ultimate significance for each human being. Like most of the Shaykh’s chapters, it is a sort of extended commentary on a single brief Quranic passage (67:1–2): “*Blessed be the One in Whose Hand is the Dominion, and Hû is Capable of every thing! Who created death and life in order to test you-all, which of you is finest in acting . . .*” That chapter is entitled “On Understanding the Waystation of Testing (or of Tribulation: *ibtilâ*’) and Its Blessings, which is the Waystation of the Imam Who is at the left of the Spiritual Pole”.³ That Imam – as we learn elsewhere – is Jesus, and his appearance here alludes not only to the central question of spiritual testing and tribulation (*ibtilâ*’) as a fundamental expression of God’s universal Creative-Love, *rahma*, but also to Jesus’ recurrent role throughout Ibn ‘Arabi’s works, and to some extent even in the Qur’an, as a preminent prophetic symbol and manifestation of the divine Spirit, *Rûh Allâh*.

The chapter opens with the rapid poetic enumeration of the perennial metaphysical and theological questions raised by all the repeated Quranic allusions to God’s omnipotence and “testing” of human beings. As is often the case with the Shaykh’s poetry in the *Futûhât*, each line of that poem can be read simultaneously on two very different levels, as a reference to the whole manifest universe (the “Abode”) or to the particular situation of each individual human being. On the first level, his rhetorical dilemmas seem to call for a purely abstract theodicy, a theological or philosophic “solution”. But as those issues actually arise in each person’s life, they raise the more unavoidable and pressing question of the ultimate ends and meaning of our very existence. The same constant ambiguous interplay between macrocosm and microcosm, between

the universal realization of the Perfect Human Being and the difficult path of each imperfect soul, underlies all the fundamental interpretive issues we alluded to earlier:

I was astonished at the Abode that He had *built and formed*:⁴
He housed a noble Spirit there and then He tested it.

Then He destroyed it like someone who doesn't sustain it.
So who can put it all together for me? Who can make it last?

From the start He knew quite well what He had established.
Would that *I* knew now what He knew then!

Why didn't He build it and sustain it from the first
in a permanent way, forever its Source of Life?

What did it do? What made it deserving of ruin?
What had exalted it? And what made it forsaken?

The Hand of tribulation toyed with us and with it;
and after a time restored it, then raised it high.

And restored that Spirit to it, then *mounted*
on its *Throne*⁵ as King, and immortalized its inhabitants,

bequeathing them (the gardens of) Eden and Eternity,
lodging them in Firdaws and Ma'wa,⁶ out of His loving concern.

The outlines of Ibn 'Arabi's own answers to these primordial metaphysical questions are suggested in the concluding section of that same chapter (III, 68:18–27), in the archetypal image of this world as a children's shadow-theater:

Whoever wants to know the inner reality of what we have alluded to concerning this question (i.e., of the deeper reasons for death and human suffering, ignorance and sin in this world) should reflect on the image-illusion⁷ of the screen and the forms (of the shadow-play). Who is the speaker, for the little children who are far from the veil of the screen set up between them and the person playing with those characters and speaking through them?

Now that is how it is with the forms of the world: the majority of people *are* those little children we just mentioned – so you should know how it is that happened to them. The little ones at that show are happily playing and having great fun; (and likewise) *the heedless ones consider* (this world only) *an amusement and pastime*.⁸ But those who truly

know reflect and see more deeply, and they realize that God has only established this as a likeness (or symbol: *mathal*).

That is why at the beginning of the show a person comes out who is called the “Describer” (*al-wassâf*). He delivers a speech in which he glorifies God and praises Him. Then he talks in turn about every sort of form that will emerge behind that screen after him, and he informs the audience that God has established all this as a likeness for His servants, so that they can reflect on it and come to know that the world, in relation to God, is like these shadow-forms with the person who is moving them, and that this veil is the mystery of Destiny (*sirr al-qadar*) governing the creatures. Yet despite all this the heedless take it to be an amusement and pastime, as in God’s saying (concerning): “. . . those who have taken their religion to be an amusement and pastime [and have been deluded by the life of this world . . . they forgot the meeting (with God) this Day and denied Our Signs]” (7:51).

Then the Describer disappears. And he is like the first of us to exist, Adam: when he vanished, his absence from us was with his Lord, behind the veil of God’s Unseen (*ghayb*). *And God speaks the Truth, and He shows the right way* (33:4).

For Ibn ‘Arabi that master “Describer” is above all Muhammad, through his constant references in both the Qur’an and *hadîth* to that divinely orchestrated Reality lying behind this life’s distracting appearances – and through his concrete practical indications as to how we can begin to “see through” those veiled images (the “Signs” of the Qur’an) to their Source. In consequence the Shaykh’s own sometimes puzzling treatments of the symbols of Islamic eschatology are not really yet another new description (since there is no need for that), but rather an attempt to get his readers actually to *see* those earlier descriptions as just that, to “see through” the incidents of their own human shadow-play to its perennial divine ground and aim. The practical alternatives to that rare clear seeing – the perennial gamut of arbitrary political and mundane purposes to which those prophetic “Descriptions” have so often been put – were not something he needed to underline.

The centrality of this eschatological perspective for our life here and now is perhaps most clearly summarized in the following key passage from one of his most accessible short treatises, the *Treatise of Lights* . . . ,⁹ in which the Shaykh outlines the fundamental “realms of being” or spiritual and ontological “homelands” (*mawâtin*) that together constitute the total field of being and experience of the Perfect Human Being:

Now these realms, although they are numerous, come down to six: the first is the realm of “*Am I not your Lord?*” (7:172), and we have already become separated from it; the second is the realm of the “lower world” (*al-dunyâ*) in which we are (physically) right now; the third is the realm of the *barzakh* (23:100) to which we go after the lesser and greater deaths;¹⁰ the fourth is the realm of the Raising (of the dead) on the “Earth of the *Awakening*” (cf. 79:14) and “the return to the *Original State*” (cf. 79:10); the fifth is the realm of the Garden (of Paradise) and the Fire (of Hell); and the sixth is the realm of the Dune [of the “Visit” and beatific vision of God], outside the Garden.

In fact these last four “eschatological” realms, for Ibn ‘Arabi, constitute by far the greater part of manifest reality and potential experience. And for him, their full spiritual apprehension – not as a theory or system of concepts, but through the profound inner realization of their living presence accomplished by those rare saints and prophets who have followed the path of Perfection through to its end – is the most essential part of any true, comprehensive understanding of the nature and aim of human being, including the dramas of the terrestrial shadow-play. Thus his initial systematic treatment of the scriptural descriptions of those realms (in Chapters 61–5 of the *Futûhât*) introduces a host of symbols whose deeper, more immediate meaning only gradually becomes clearer in subsequent chapters. Here we can only cite a few examples of the many passages alluding to the “keys” to each of these four higher spiritual dimensions of human being.

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One of those passages is the following section from Chapter 302 (III, 12.26–13.23), in which Ibn ‘Arabi points out the illusions involved in misconceiving the descriptions of either Paradise or Hell as simply another physical “place”, of the same spatio-temporal order as this material world:

Know, my brother – may God guide and protect you with His lovingmercy – that the Garden which is attained by those who are among its people in the other world is visible to you *today* with respect to its place, though not its form. So you are *in* the Garden, transformed, in whatever state you happen to be, but you don’t *know* you are in it, because you are veiled from it by the form in which it manifests itself to you!

Now the people of unveiling, who perceive what is unseen by ordinary men, *do* see that place. If it is the Garden (of paradise), then they see a green meadow; or if it is Gehenna, then they see it according to the traits of its bitter cold, burning winds, and the other things God has prepared in it. And most of the people of unveiling see this at the beginning of the (spiritual) path.

Now the Revelation (*sharʿ*) alluded to is that in (Muhammad's) saying: "Between my grave and this pulpit is one of the meadows of the Garden."¹¹ So the people of unveiling see it as a meadow, just as he said; and they see the Nile, Euphrates, Sayhan and Jayhan as the rivers of honey, water, wine and milk in the Garden (cf. 47:15), as (Muhammad) said, since the Prophet reported that these rivers are part of the Garden.¹² But the person whose vision has not been unveiled by God, who remains blinded by the veil, cannot perceive that. Such a person is like a blind man in a park: he is not at all absent from it, yet he doesn't see it. But the fact that he doesn't see it doesn't mean that he isn't in it. On the contrary, he really *is* in it!"

* * *

A second key passage, from Chapter 351 (III, 223.8–10, 18–33), alludes to the "Voluntary Return" of the saint or accomplished mystic, the spiritual "adult" who has responded to the famous Prophetic injunction to "Die before you die!", and has thereby grown to recognize the one real Player/Author behind the distracting voices and images of the childrens' shadow-play:

The voluntary return to God is something for which the servant is most thankful. God said: "*The whole affair is returned to Him*" (11:123). So since you know that, return to Him willingly and you will not be returned to Him by compulsion. For there is no escaping your return to Him, and you will surely have to meet Him, either willingly or against your will. For He meets you in (the form of) your own attributes, nothing else but that – so examine your self, my friend! (The Prophet) said: "Whoever loves to meet God, God loves to meet him; and whoever is averse to meeting God, God is averse to meeting him."¹³

Now since we knew that our meeting with God can only be through death,¹⁴ and because we knew the inner meaning of death, we sought to bring it about sooner, in the life of this world. Hence we died, in the very Source/Water of our life,¹⁵ to all of our concerns and activities and desires, so that when death overcame us in the midst of that Life which never passes from us – inasmuch as we *are* that (Life) with which our selves and our limbs and every part of us glorifies and praises (God)¹⁶ –

we met God and He met us. And ours was the case (in the above-mentioned *hadīth*) of “those who meet Him while loving to meet Him”.

Thus when there comes what is commonly known as “death”, and *the veil of this body is removed from us* (50:22), our state will not change and our certainty will not be any greater than what we already experience now. For (like those in paradise) *we tasted no death but the first death*, which we already died during our life in this world, because our Lord *protected us from the torment of hellfire as a bounty from your Lord; That is the Supreme Achievement* (44:56–7). As ‘Ali said: “Even if the veil were removed, I would not be any more certain!”

So the person who returns to God in this way is among the blessed and does not even feel the inevitable, compulsory return (of bodily death), because it only comes to them when they are already there with God. The most that what is (commonly) known as “death” can mean for them is that their soul, which is with God, is kept from governing this body that it used to govern, so that the soul remains with God, in its same condition, while that body reverts to its origin, *the dust* from which it was formed (3:59, etc.). For it was a house whose occupant has traveled away; then *the King* established that person *with Him in a firm position* (54:55) *until the Day they are raised* (23:100, etc.). And their condition when they are raised up will be just like that: it will not change in so far as their being with God is concerned, nor with regard to what God gives them at every instant.

The following passage, still from Chapter 351, discusses one of the basic features of the psychic dimensions of the “next world”, the ontological *reversal* of the currently veiled order of things, so that psychic and moral realities become fixed, while outward, sensible forms can change as rapidly and incessantly as our imagination does here below:

It is also like this in . . . the Gardens (of Paradise) which are this person’s residence and dwelling place, and in the realm (of being, *nash’a*) which they inhabit. For there they see a realm created without any (fixed) pattern, a realm that provides them in its outward manifestation with what the realm of this world provides in its inner (psychic and spiritual) dimension and its imagination. So this is the way such a person freely controls the outward dimension of the realm of the other world. They enjoy all that they possess in a single instant. Nothing that belongs to them . . . is ever separated from them, nor are they ever separated from those things: that person is among them (simply) through his being desired, and those things are in them through their being desired.¹⁷

For the other world is an abode of swift reaction, without any delay (where external appearances constantly change), just as is the case with our passing thoughts in the inner dimension of the realm of this world. Except that for the human being the planes are reversed in the other world, so that the person's inward dimension permanently maintains a single form – just as their outward dimension does here – while the forms of their outward dimension undergo rapid transformations like those of their inner dimension here. (God) said: “. . . *by what a reversal they will be transformed!*” (26:227), yet when we have undergone our transformation, nothing will have been added to the way we were. So understand!

* * * *

The next selections, from Chapter 369 (III, 388.33–389.16, and 389.34–390.5), begin to develop the dynamic dimension of this spiritual death and resurrection, alluding more openly to the essential reasons for our “visit” to the “graves” of existence in this material world. The whole passage is thus an extended commentary on the famous verses of *Sûrah* 102 (“*The proliferation of things (al-takâthur) was distracting you-all, until you visited the graves . . .*”). And the particular kind of “death” that primarily interests Ibn ‘Arabi here is again the “lesser Resurrection” (*al-qiyâmat al-sughrâ*), the individual soul's transformed awareness and immediate vision (*ru'ya*) of the true reality of the Self – summed up here in the famous *hadîth* “Whoever knows their soul/self, knows their Lord” – and its undying Life. But here this reawakened recognition of the full spiritual and imaginal dimensions of our being and relation to God does not at all lead to some “gnostic” rejection of the world and the complexities of this life, to an illusory escape into the bliss of *fanâ*?. Instead it is precisely the spiritual travelers' *return* to those bodily “graves” – and the concomitant awareness that our passage through this world is indeed only a brief visit – that completes and perfects their state of spiritual knowledge and certainty, while at the same time fully revealing our unique position and responsibility as the divine “trustee” or “steward” (*khalîfa*) with regard to all these realms of being. The necessary fulfilment of that ontological “comprehensiveness” – with all the perplexing suffering, sin and distraction (the full range of *takâthur*) that situation implies – is precisely what distinguishes the unique and unavoidable role of the completely human being (*al-insân al-kâmil*) in Ibn ‘Arabi's understanding of this divine comedy. Nowhere is that comprehensive

vision of the ultimate destiny and true stature of human being more succinctly and strikingly stated than at the end of this section, in his transformed interpretation of the ancient gnostic symbol of the Pearl of the soul.

The final outcome of the affair is the return from the many to the One, for both the person of faith and the polytheist (*mushrik*). This is because the person of faith who is granted the unveiling of “things as they really are”¹⁸ is granted (the immediate vision of) this, as He said: “*Now We have removed from you your veil, so your vision Today is keen*” (50:22). And this is *before* that person leaves this world.

For everyone who is taken (by physical death) is in (a state of spiritual) “unveiling” at the moment they are taken, so that at that point they incline toward God (*al-Haqq*) and toward true faith in Him and (the true awareness of) divine Unity. Hence the person who attains this certainty *before* being brought into the presence (of God at the time of physical death) is absolutely sure of their felicity and their conjunction with (that spiritual state of blessedness). For the certainty which comes from sound inquiry and unambiguous (experiential) unveiling prevents such a person from straying from the Truly Real, since they have “*a clear proof*”¹⁹ (6:57, 47:14, etc.) in the matter and “*discerning inner vision*” (12:108).

But the person who attains this certainty (only) when they are brought into the presence (of bodily death) is subject to the (ineluctable) divine Will. And although the final outcome is felicity,²⁰ however that is only *after* the imposition of torments and afflictions with respect to the person who is punished for their sins. For one is only “brought into the presence (of God)” after having witnessed that to which the creatures are transferred (after death). So long as a person has not witnessed that, *death has not come near them* (4:18, etc.), nor have they been “brought into (its) presence . . .”²¹

So know that these bodies are the coffins of the spirits and what beclouds them; they are what veil them so that they do not witness (the spiritual world) and are not witnessed. So the spirits do not see, nor are they seen, except through being parted from these (bodily) *tombs* (see 102:2) – by becoming oblivious to them (in their absorption in spiritual things), not through (physical) separation. Therefore since they have inner vision, when they become oblivious to witnessing the bodies then they witness the One Who gives them Being in the very act of witnessing themselves.²²

So “whoever knows their soul/self knows their Lord.”²³ Likewise whoever witnesses their self witnesses their Lord, and thereby moves from the *certainty of knowledge* (102:5) to the *certainty of direct-seeing* (102:7). Then when they are returned to their (bodily) *tombs* (102:2) they are

returned to (the highest spiritual stage of) “True Certainty” (*yaqîn haqq*), not to the “certainty of knowledge”. This is how a human being learns the (inner) differentiation of the Truly Real (*al-Haqq*), through His informing (us) of the true saying concerning *the true reality of certainty* (56:95), *the seeing of certainty* and *the knowing of certainty* (102:3–7). So for (one who reaches this stage) every property (of reality) becomes firmly established in its proper rank, and things are not confused for them (cf. 2:42, 3:71). And they know that the (prophetic) announcements did not mislead them (cf. 6:5, etc.).

Therefore whoever knows God in this way has truly known and understood the wisdom (underlying) the formation of the pearl in its shell from *fresh sweet (water)*, in *salty bitter (water)* (25:53):²⁴ the shell is its body and its saltiness is its (physical) nature. So the influence of nature predominates in its shell, but the salt is (also) the whiteness (of the pearl) – and that is like the Light which is revealed through it. So realize (what is meant by) this Sign!

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For Ibn ‘Arabi, the essential underpinning of all the eschatological dimensions of being lies in the full reality of the divine “Imagination” (*khiyâl*) – which in fact constitutes the ongoing shadow-theater of manifest existence. (This is precisely where the Shaykh’s discussions of cosmology and eschatology, of ontology and soteriology, always become inseparable.) The fascinating anecdote which follows, from Chapter 73 of the *Futûhât* (II, 82.16–32), is a particularly striking illustration of the transformed meanings of “time” and “space” in those higher realms of being. It is Ibn ‘Arabi’s explanation of the Quranic statement that “*The affair of the Hour (of Resurrection) is (only) like a twinkling of the eye or It is even nearer*” (16:77).

The Hour (of Resurrection) is called an “hour” (*sâ‘a*) because it “hastens” toward us (*tas‘a*) by passing through these moments of time and breaths, not by traversing distances. So (in the words of the *hadîth*) “when someone dies” their Hour has reached them and their “Resurrection has already begun” . . . So *the affair of the Hour* and its role in the world is *closer than the twinkling of an eye* (16:77). For its arrival is itself identical with its judgment, its judgment is the same as its execution in the one who is judged, its execution is the same as its coming to pass, and its coming to pass is precisely the peopling of the two Abodes, *a group in the Garden and a group in the Flame* (42:7).

Now no one is truly aware of this “nearness” but the person who is aware of God’s power (as manifested) in the existence of the Imagination

in the natural world, who is aware of the vast extent of the matters that are found, in a single breath or blink of the eye, by someone who knows the (divine) Imagination. Then (such a person actually) *sees* the effect of that in sense perception, with the eye of the Imagination, so that they are truly aware of this nearness and the “folding up” of years into the smallest instant of the time of the life of this world. Whoever has come across the story of Jawhari has seen a marvelous thing that illustrates this sort (of phenomenon).

Now if you should ask “But what is the story of Jawhari?”, we may say that he mentioned that he left his house (one day) with some dough to take to the baker’s oven, while he happened to be in a state of ritual impurity. So (after dropping off the dough at the baker’s) he came to the bank of the Nile to do his ablutions, and there, while he was standing in the water, he saw himself, in the way a dreamer sees things, as though he were in Baghdad. He had married, lived with the woman for six years and had had several children – I forget the exact number – with her there. Then he was returned to himself (i.e., in his ordinary consciousness), while he was still standing in the water, so he finished his ablutions, got out of the water and put on his clothes, went off to the baker’s oven, picked up his bread, came back to his house and told his family about what he had seen during that vision. However after several months had passed, the woman (from Baghdad) with whom he had seen himself married during that experience actually came (to Jawhari’s town in Egypt) and asked directions to his house. So when she met him, he recognized her and the children, and he did not deny that they were his. And when she was asked “When did you get married?”, she replied “Six years ago, and these are his children with me.” Thus what happened in the Imagination emerged (concretely) in sense-perception. This is one of the six topics (mentioned by) Dhu al-Nun al-Misri²⁵ which (ordinary) intellects consider to be impossible.

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One of the central features of Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of the eschatological symbols in the Qur’an and *hadūth*, in which he generally follows the approach of earlier Sufis, is his consistent distinction between, on the one hand, those Gardens (and levels of the “Hellfire” or Gehenna) corresponding to the recompense of people’s *actions* in this world and, on the other hand, certain symbols – largely drawn from various *hadūth* concerning the posthumous vision of God – that he takes to refer to individuals’ differing degrees of spiritual realization or inner *awareness* (“knowledge”) of God. These distinctions are developed in their full

complexity in his integral accounts of the eschatological events and locations in Chapters 61–5 and 371 of the *Futūhāt*, but the most essential points are summarized in the following much shorter section from Chapter 73 (III, 85.1–22, answering the question “How are the saints and the prophets ranked on the Day of the Visit?”). The Shaykh’s discussion of the beatific vision of the elect here presupposes the symbolism of humankind’s “Visit” to God and beatific vision of the divine Face presented in the famous “*hadūth* of the Dune”, in which Muhammad is asked to describe the mysterious “Market of Paradise”:²⁶

“When the people of the Garden (of Paradise) enter it they settle down in it according to the excellence of their *actions*. After that, during the period (corresponding to) the Day of Reunion among the days of this world, they are called (to prayer) and they visit their Lord: He shows them His Throne, and He manifests Himself to them in one of the meadows of the Garden. Then there are set up for them platforms of Light . . . , while the lower ones of them and those among them who are ignoble take their seats on dunes of musk and camphor. And (those sitting down) do not see that those who are on the pedestals have more excellent seats than them.”²⁷

I asked the Messenger of God: “Do we see our Lord?”

And he replied: “Yes indeed! Do you-all have any doubt about seeing the sun, or the moon when it is full?”

“No”, I said.

“So likewise you-all do not have any doubt about seeing your Lord!”

“And there does not remain a single person in that gathering but that God is present and conversing with them so intimately that He will say to (each) one of you ‘*Don’t you remember so-and-so to whom you did such and such?*’” – and He reminds that person of some of their treachery and deceit in this world.

“Then that person says: ‘O Lord, didn’t You forgive me?’”

“And he says: ‘*Indeed it was through the vastness of My Forgiveness that you have reached your station here.*’” And while they are together like that clouds will form above them and perfume will rain down upon them, sweeter and more fragrant than anything they have ever experienced.

“Then He says: ‘*Rise up, all of you, to that which I have readied for you from My Grace, and take what you desired.*’”

[Muhammad] continued: “So we are brought a Market that has been enclosed and surrounded by the angels, containing that whose like ‘no eyes have seen, ears have not heard, and has not occurred to the hearts’.”²⁸

He said: “Then whatever we desired is brought to us. There is no selling in it, nor any buying there. And in that Market the people of the

Garden encounter one another. So if a person who has a higher station meets someone who is below them – yet there is no lowly place there – and that (second) person is delighted with the garment (the first one) is wearing, even before he has finished speaking a garment even more beautiful than that appears to them upon that person. And that is because there must not be any sorrow there.

“Then we return to our stations and meet our spouses,²⁹ who say: ‘Welcome back! But now that you’ve come back your beauty and your fragrance are much finer than when you left us!’”

“And we answer: ‘This Day we gathered in the company of our Lord, and He gave us the right to come back transformed³⁰ the way we are.’”

The second *hadīth* being commented upon in the following passage is the famous “*hadīth* of the transformations”, perhaps the most frequently cited *hadīth* in all of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work, which describes the testing of mankind with regard to their objects of devotion (*ma‘būdât*) on the Day of the Gathering. According to this account, God will present Himself to this community “in a form other than what they know, and will say to them: ‘I am your Lord!’” But the “hypocrites” among them – who, for Ibn ‘Arabi, are ultimately all of mankind with the exception of the handful of saints and “true servants of God” described in the following selection – will fail to recognize Him until He appears in the specific forms they already knew and expected, according to their innermost beliefs and images of the divine in this world.

Here is Ibn ‘Arabi’s explanation of that *hadīth*:

Now the full explanation of this matter is that the vision (of God) on the Day of the Visit is according to the beliefs (people held) in this world. Thus the person who believes concerning his Lord what was given to him by intellectual reflection, and by immediate unveiling, and by imitating his Messenger sees his Lord in the form of the aspect of each belief he held concerning Him – except that in his imitation (*taqlīd*) of his prophet he sees his Lord in the form of his prophet, with regard to what that Messenger taught him from what was revealed to that Messenger in his inner knowledge of his Lord. So such a person receives three theophanies, with three (different) “eyes”, at the same instant. And similarly with the condition of the person (whose belief is based) solely on intellectual inquiry, or the person (who follows) only immediate unveiling, or the person (who accepts) only imitation. (That is, their vision of God is limited *exclusively* to that particular form of theophany.)

... But the two levels who are not prophets (with a Sharia) or followers (of only one particular prophet) are *the close Friends of God*

(cf. 10:62–4), *who are not governed by any* (particular spiritual) *station* (cf. 33:13). They are distinguished from all of those (ordinary believers below them) by their integral relationship to their Lord.

However, the people of intellectual reasoning among the close Friends of God are in a rank lower than the people of immediate unveiling, because in their vision the veil of their thinking still stands between them and God. Whenever they want to lift that veil they are unable to do so. And likewise the followers of the prophets (i.e., simply by way of outward imitation, *taqlid*), however much they may desire to raise the veils of the prophets from themselves so that they can see God without that intermediary, are still unable to do so. Therefore absolutely pure and flawless (spiritual) vision belongs in particular only to the Messengers among the prophets, those who bring the divinely prescribed Paths, *and* to the people of immediate unveiling (among the Friends of God). And whoever happens to attain this station, whether they be a follower (of a particular prophet) or of intellectual reflection, still participates in this to the extent of what they have realized – even if they be on (any of) a thousand paths!

But as for those true human beings³¹ who concur with the belief held by each individual with regard to (their inner awareness of) what led them to that belief, taught it to them and confirmed them in it, on the Day of the Visit such people see their Lord with the eye of *every* belief. Hence the person who means to do well by their soul must necessarily seek out, during their (life in) this world, *all* the things that are professed³² concerning that (i.e., the ultimate divine Reality), and they must come to know why each individual professing a position affirms what they profess. So when (one of these fully human beings) has realized in themselves the particular aspect of that profession which gives it its validity for the person holding it and because of which that person professes it with regard to what they believe, so that they do not deny or reject it – (only) then will they reap the fruit of that profession on the Day of the Visit, whatever that belief may be. For this is the “*All-encompassing*” divine Knowledge.³³

Thus the gaze of the person who looks never leaves God, nor is it even possible for it to do so.³⁴ It is only that most people are veiled from the Truly Real by the Truly Real, because of the (omnipresent) clarity of the Truly Real.

But this group (i.e., the true “Friends of God”), who have this special kind of (comprehensive) knowledge of God, are in a separate row on the Day of the Visit. So when they (i.e., the ordinary believers in the other Gardens of Paradise) return from the Visit, every one of them who holds a (particular) belief imagines that (the Friend of God) belongs to them, because they see that the (Friend’s) form of belief during the Visit is like their own form (of belief).³⁵ So the person who is like this (i.e., who fully realizes the underlying experiential truth

expressed in every individual's inner form of "belief") is beloved by *all* the groups – and it was already that way in this world!

Now what we have just mentioned is only truly understood by the most outstanding and accomplished representatives of the people of spiritual unveiling and (true) being/finding (of God). But as for the people of intellectual reasoning and inquiry, they have not caught even a whiff of its fragrance. So pay heed to what we have just mentioned and act accordingly: give the Divinity its rightful due, so that you may be among those who treat their Lord equitably in their knowledge of Him. For *God is far too exalted* (6:100, etc.) to be bound by any sort of delimitation or to be restricted to one form to the exclusion of others. In this way you may come to know for yourself the universality of the felicity of *all* God's creation and the vast extent of that *Lovingmercy which encompasses every thing* (40:7).

Notes

1. This key aspect of modern scholarship and its Islamic antecedents are discussed in detail in our study of "Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters", in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 106 (1986), pp. 539–51 and pp. 733–56, and 107 (1987), pp. 101–19.
2. These key introductory passages on the structure and aims of his written work are translated in full in our article "How to Study the *Futûhât*: Ibn 'Arabi's own Advice", in *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi*, a commemorative volume compiled by the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan, (Shaftesbury, Element Books, 1993). Their wider significance is discussed in our study of "Ibn 'Arabi's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority", in *Studia Islamica* LXXI (1990), pp. 37–64.
3. III, 65:9–17; the full title of this section in the opening *Fihrist* adds that the human, earthly representative (*nâ'ib*) of this Imam is Abu Madyan, the famous North African Sufi saint. For additional details on the identity of this celestial Imam (as Jesus) and related aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's complex understanding of the spiritual hierarchy of the prophets and saints, see M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabî* (Paris, Gallimard, 1986).
4. The term *sawwâ* used here refers in several key Quranic passages to the central role of the divine Spirit (*Rûh*) in the creation both of the primordial human being (*insân/Adam*) and of the "heavens" (*samâ*) encompassing the whole manifest "world". The "abode" (*dâr*)

throughout this poem clearly refers to both of those ultimate realities at the same time.

5. Cf. Qur'an 7:54, etc: 7 references in the Qur'an to this controversial "sitting" on the "Throne" – which a number of famous *hadîth* also identify with the "heart of the person of true faith".
6. This phrase is a highly ambiguous allusion to Ibn 'Arabi's own complex understanding of Quranic eschatology: although *Ma'wa*, like *Firdaws* ("Paradise"), is one of the seven names of the Gardens of the blessed mentioned in the Qur'an, it is also applied more broadly to the places/states of Gehenna and the "Fire" (*al-nâr*).
7. Or phantasm, shadow, "imagination": *khiyâl* – alluding to Ibn 'Arabi's detailed elaboration (most notably in the famous chapter on Joseph in the *Fusûs*) of the manifest world as a *divine* "dream within a dream".
- 8 Cf. Qur'an 30:7 (for the *ghâfilûn*, or "unconscious" ones); and 6:70 and 7:51, on "those who consider their Religion (*dîn*) an amusement and pastime, having been deluded by the life of this world . . ."
- 9 *Risâlat al-Anwâr*, in *Rasâ'il Ibn 'Arabî* (Hyderabad edn, 1948), I, no. 12, pp. 2–3. This treatise, which is remarkable for its relatively straightforward and concise presentation of practically crucial spiritual questions, has been translated by M. Asin Palacios (abridged and without any annotation), in *El islam cristianizado*, Madrid, 1931, pp. 433–49; by R. T. Harris, *Journey to the Lord of Power*, NY, 1981, pp. 25–64; and in part (but with the most helpful and complete commentary and annotation) by M. Chodkiewicz, in *Le Sceau des saints*, Chapter 10.
10. The complex eschatological role of this intermediate spiritual realm of the *barzakh* and its ontological and epistemological underpinnings in Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of the "imaginal" plane of being and experience (*khiyâl*) are discussed in detail in Chapter 63 of the *Futûhât* (I, 304–7; Osman Yahia edn, IV, 416–25).
11. For the canonical sources of this saying (and a number of closely related *hadîth* frequently cited in Sufi discussions of eschatological questions), see Wensinck's *Concordance*, II, 319.
12. The reference is to an incident described in several *hadîth* (including Bukhari, *bad' al-khalq*, no. 6) about the Prophet's nocturnal Ascension, in which it is Gabriel who explains to the Prophet that these particular rivers are also "in the Garden".
13. See Muslim (*dhikr*, no. 14, 16–18); Bukhari (*riqâq*, no. 41); and the additional citations of this *hadîth* from Tirmidhi, Nisa'i, Ibn Maja, Darimi, and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal in Wensinck, *Concordance*, VI, 140.
14. Referring to the famous *hadîth* "Not one of you-all will see his Lord until he dies", recorded by Muslim (*fitan*, no. 95) and Tirmidhi (*fitan*, no. 56). The same idea is conveyed in another famous *hadîth* recorded several times by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (*Musnad*, VI, 44, 55, 207, 232): "Death is before the meeting (with God)" (see Wensinck, *Concordance*, VI, 140).

15. *‘ayn hayâtinâ*: this expression, which could also be understood more literally simply as “in the midst of our life”, clearly alludes in this context to the symbolic “fountain of life” (*‘ayn al-hayât*) mentioned in the popular stories of al-Khadir, Dhu-l-Qarnayn, etc.
16. This phrase echoes the famous Quranic verse 17:44: “. . . there is not a thing that does not glorify Him with praise – and yet you do not understand their glorification . . .” For Ibn ‘Arabi, such scriptural references all refer to the universal reality of Life (and corresponding modes of praise) pervading all things, a reality which is directly perceived only by the true spiritual “Knowers” (the *‘arifûn*).
17. This description of the “inversion” of the *bâtin* and *zâhir* of human beings in the “realm of the other world”, here and in the following paragraph from Chapter 351, is further elaborated in Chapter 65 on the Gardens and beatific vision in Paradise (Osman Yahia edn, V, 86–8). There Ibn ‘Arabi again insists (at V, 67–8) that he has personally “tasted” or experienced this particular eschatological realm of being.
18. This is an allusion to a famous prayer of the Prophet frequently cited in Sufi literature: “O my God, cause me to see things as they really are.”
19. The Quranic phrase here, *‘alâ bayyina*, is frequently used by Ibn ‘Arabi as a sort of shorthand reference to the special conditions of divine guidance and inspiration realized by the fully accomplished saints (the *awliyâ’*, *muhaqqiqûn*, etc.).
20. Albeit of a very different sort: this is an allusion to Ibn ‘Arabi’s controversial suggestion – best known from the allusions at the end of Chapter 7 in the *Fusûs al-Hikam* (*fass Isma‘îl*: I, 94) – that even for the “people of Gehenna who remain there eternally” (i.e., who are not ultimately redeemed through the intercession of their prophets), their “torment” (*adhâb*) will eventually be made “sweet” (*‘idhâb*). For the development of similar conceptions in the *Futûhât*, see the more detailed explanations in Chapter 371 (III, 435–6), as well as I, 656; III, 673; and IV, 248, 408.
21. This whole passage involves a complex interplay between allusions to the Quranic passages concerning the “presence of death” (4:18, etc.) and the literal meaning of the words *uhtudira* or *ihtidâr*, which would ordinarily be translated simply as “dying” or “death”. Ibn ‘Arabi’s essential point is that the true reality of individual death (and rebirth), the “lesser Resurrection”, is the profound theophanic awareness of God’s spiritual Presence at once within oneself and pervading all being.
22. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s autobiographical account of his own realization of this culminating experience later in Chapter 367 (III, 350), he sums up this central insight – and at the same time, its metaphysical presuppositions – in the following dense formula: “Then I saw all (the divine Names) returning to One Subject and One Essence (or ‘Eye’: *‘ayn wâhida*), so that that Subject was what I witnessed (*mashhûdî*) and that Essence (Eye, Source, etc.) was my Being/Finding (*wujûdî*).”

23. For detailed references to Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctive understanding of this famous Sufi saying and controversial *hadīth* (not included in the canonical collections), see M. Chodkiewicz’s Introduction to his translation of A. Balyani’s *Épître sur l’Unicité Absolue*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, pp. 27–30.
24. Here the familiar spiritual symbol of the “pearl” (*al-jawhar*: literally, “gem” or “essential substance”) of the angelic soul and its Source in the divine “spirit” (*rūh*) is combined with a subtle interpretation of the Quranic verse 25:53, understood in this case as a reference to the unique metaphysical comprehensiveness of the Perfect Human Being, who alone encompasses the full reality of being – the spiritual and material realms, and the *barzakh* (the imaginal world) that lies between them: “*And Hū it is who mixed the two seas; this one sweet, fresh; and this one salty, bitter. And He put between them a barzakh and a restricting barrier.*” The allusion no doubt also extends to the occurrence of the same two terms in verse 35:12, which immediately follows an account of humanity’s physical creation; “*And the two seas are not alike: this one is sweet, fresh, pleasing to drink; and this one is salty, bitter. But you eat from both of them . . . and extract from them ornaments which you wear . . .*” (The Quranic term “ornaments”, in Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding, typically refers to the different kinds of spiritual knowledge.)
25. For Dhu al-Nun (d. ca. 246/861), one of the most famous and most influential early Sufi shaykhs, see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, II, 242, and above all the recent French translation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s own immense hagiographical collection devoted to him, *La vie merveilleuse de Dhū–l–Nūn l’Égyptien*, tr. Roger Deladrière, Paris, Sindbad, 1988.
26. *Sūq al-janna*. This particular *hadīth* is recorded in essentially the same version by Tirmidhi (*sifāt al-janna*, no. 15, 25; *birr*, no. 54) and Ibn Maja (*Zuhd*, no. 39) – from which the quotations are taken here – as well as by Darimi (*riqāq*, no. 116) and in a number of places by Ahmad ibn Hanbal; see the full references in Wensinck, *Concordance*, V, 542–3.
27. Cf. Ibn ‘Arabi’s similar insistence, at the end of the passage translated below, that each soul “returning” from the Day of the Visit thinks that it is among the saints and prophets – because that person only sees God in the form they already expected and held in their innermost “belief”.
28. This same divine description of “what God has prepared” in the Garden occurs in almost the same words (adding “of mortals” at the end) in an even more famous *hadīth* included in all the canonical collections – and echoing I Corinthians 2:9, Isaiah 64:4, and even more literally the *Gospel of Thomas*, saying no. 17 (tr. T. Lamdin, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. Robinson, p. 128).
29. Or “our spiritual twins”: the “celestial counterparts” or companions mentioned in many Quranic verses concerning the Gardens.

30. For this transformation (*inqilâb/taqallub*) or “turning inside-out” in the resurrected state, see the Qur’an 84:9; 7:165; 26:50 and 227; 43:14.
31. Literally, “real men” (*al-rijâl*); here, as often with Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufi authors, this term of praise refers not to a particular gender but to a select group of truly realized human beings (*insân*), the spiritually accomplished individuals he goes on to describe in this section, roughly corresponding to those he calls the spiritual “elect” (*al-khâssa*). Among his more explicit statements in this regard, from this same chapter 73 of the *Futûhât*, are the following:

... and everything we mention concerning those men (i.e., the highest representatives of the spiritual hierarchy) is about the “spiritual men” (*al-rijâl*), so they may also be women (II, 7.7).

... likewise in each group of the saints we have mentioned there are men and women (II, 26.6); and there is no attribute which the (spiritual) men have but that women also share in it (II, 35.1).

32. *Maqâla*: often translated as “doctrine”, but literally “what is said” concerning the issue in question. In this context the expression must be taken in an extremely broad sense, since Ibn ‘Arabi is referring here – as whenever he deals with questions of “belief” – primarily to the (often only partially conscious) inner beliefs, assumptions and spiritual orientations of every individual, not simply to the intellectually elaborated theses or religious teachings propounded by official theologians.
33. The Quranic allusion here is to the entire following verse: “*And the East and the West are God’s; Wherever you-all may turn, there is the face of God – surely God is the All-encompassing, the All-knowing*” (2:115).
34. In his longer discussion of these questions in chapter 371 (III, 443), Ibn ‘Arabi much more explicitly underlines the deeper metaphysical underpinnings and implications of this spiritual insight:

... Now the Truly Real (*al-Haqq*) is the Vision (*basar*) of the world, and He is the Seer (*al-Râ’î*) (in the “mirror” of all created things) ... and everything that appears is a sign pointing to the Seer, Who is the Truly Real; so reflect – and know who you really are!

35. That is, the ordinary believer is aware that the “Friend of God” shares his or her own belief or perspective on reality – but is unaware that the saint likewise realizes the truth underlying all the *other* human beliefs and points of view as well.