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## IBN AL-‘ARABĪ’S CONCEPT OF TIME

### 1. Ibn al-‘Arabī and his writings on time

In many of her broad-ranging works on Sufism, Annemarie Schimmel returns to the concept of time that permeates the poetry of Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī (d. 672/1273) and other Persian mystics.<sup>1</sup> One principal image of time that catches her eye is portrayed by the various renderings of a non-canonical tradition, the *ḥadīth nabawī*, “I have a time (*waqt*) with God,” in which Persian mystic poets perceive Muḥammad’s privilege of intimate communion with the Eternal.<sup>2</sup> While Rūmī was inspired by this tradition focusing on the Prophet’s *waqt*, Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), a roughly contemporary mystic and an important philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> *Schimmel A.* *Mystical Dimensions of Islam.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975. P. 220; *The Triumphal Sun.* London: East-West Publications, 1978. P. 285–286; *And Muhammad is His Messenger.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985. P. 169. In this century Iqbāl (d. 1938) took up the theme forcefully in his poetry and prose — see *Schimmel A.* *Gabriel’s Wing.* Leiden: Brill, 1963 and *Böwering G.* “Iqbal — Poet between India and Europe,” *Islam and the Modern Age*, 9 (1978). P. 57–70.

<sup>2</sup> *Badī‘ az-Zamān Furūzānfar.* *Aḥādīth-i mathnavī.* Tehrān: Amīr Kabīr 1334, S.H. P. 39 (nr. 100). The *ḥadīth* is not cited in the canonical Ḥadīth literature and thus absent from Wensinck’s *Concordance*, but it is frequently quoted in Sufi literature in its early form, “I have a moment with God (*lī ma’a Allāh waqt*) in which no angel drawn near (*malak muqarrab*) or prophet sent (*nabī mursal*) rivals me.” The earliest references in Persian Sufi literature are found in the commentary on Kalābādhi’s *Ta’arruf* by Mustamlī (d. 434/1042), Ismā’il b. Muḥammad, *Nūr al-murīdīn wa fadīḥat al-mudda’in*, ed. M. Rawshan, Tehrān, 1368 S.H. PP. 613, 767, 777, 879, 887, 902, 906, 1329, 1423; then also in Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī (d. 465/1072 — 469/1077), *Kashf al-mahjūb*, ed. V. Zukowsky, photo-reprint Tehrān 1399/1979, P. 480; R.A. Nicholson, *The Kashf al-mahjūb*, reprint London: Luzac, 1976, P. 368; ‘Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131), *Tamhīdāt*, ed. ‘A. ‘Usayrān, Tehrān, 1341/1962. PP. 79; 123; 131, 203, 317. Rashīd al-Dīn Abū’l-Faḍl Sa’īd Maybudī (d. 530/1135), *Kashf al-asrār wa ‘iddat al-abrār*, ed. M.Gh. Sharī‘at, 10 vols., Tehrān, 1363 S.H. Vol. I. PP. 269, 683; Vol. II. P. 328; Vol. III. P. 187; Vol. VI. P. 460; Vol. VII. P. 172–173; Vol. IX. P. 238; Vol. X. P. 432; Maybudī also records another significant variant, Vol. I. P. 614. If Ibn Sīnā’s (d. 428/1037) *Mi’rajnāma* is authentic, then its quotation of the *ḥadīth* would be the earliest found in *mi’raj* literature, see Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Abdallāh Ibn Sīnā, *Mi’rajnāma*, ed. N.M. Hirawī, Tehrān, 1365 S.H. P. 92.

writing in Arabic, was captivated by the canonical tradition of a *ḥadīth qudsī*, “I am time (*dahr*),” a majestic utterance of the Eternal calling Himself *dahr*. Whith this tradition and its variant, “God is time (*dahr*),”<sup>3</sup> as the starting point, Ibn al-‘Arabī developed a vision of time that is unique in medieval Islam.

Ibn al-‘Arabī spent the years of his youth, education and early work in Spain and the Magrib, the Muslim lands of the sunset. From his birth at Murcia in 560/1165 until his second travel to Tunis in 598/1201, his life was shaped decisively in such cities as Seville and Fez, both cradles of Muslim culture in the West. Permanently abandoning his native region to travel against the course of the sun towards the *Mashriq*, where the sun rises, he journeyed to Muslim centers of learning in the East. His travels led him via Tunis and Cairo to Mecca and then, in 601/1204, via Mosul to Konya. After crisscrossing and zigzagging through Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Arabia and Iraq, he first found a home at Malatya in Anatolia in 613/1216 before finally settling at Damascus in Syria from 620/1223 until his death.<sup>4</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī lived in turbulent times when populations were dispersed over vast territories and the world of Islam locked horns in war with Christianity. During his lifetime the Fatimid caliphate of Cairo came to an end, the Almohads ascended to power in the West, the Castillian *reconquista* took Cordova, and the Mongols made their incursions into Iran. Jerusalem was captured by Saladin in 583/1187 and returned to Frankish control in 626/1229 during the sixth Crusade. Major figures of the medieval world of learning and religion met their deaths: Averroes in 595/1198, Maimonides in 601/1204 and Francis of Assisi in 623/1226.

With such upheaval in the world around him, Ibn al-‘Arabī set out for his journey to the East. It was a *riḥla*, a journey from the periphery to the central lands of Islam in search of knowledge, a *hijra*, an emigration from his native land to which he was never to return, and a *ḥajj*, a pilgrimage to the holy places

<sup>3</sup> For *anā d-dahr*, see A.J. Wansinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, 8 vols., Leiden, 1936–1988, I, pp. 50, 101; II, p. 155 (Bukhārī, *Tafsīr*, 45:1, Tawḥīd, p. 35; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Alfāz, pp. 2, 3; Dārimī, *Adab*, p. 169; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, II, pp. 238, 272). This tradition is very old and exemplifies the merger of the Qur’ānic with the *jāhiliyya* world-view in ḥadīth, cf. Abū Bakr ‘Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr Ḥumaydī (d. 219/834), *al-Musnad*, ed. Ḥabīb ar-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī, Beirut 1409/1988, nr. 1096; see also R.A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Poetry*, Cambridge, 1921, p. 155.

For *fa-inna llāha huwa d-dahr*, see Wansinck, *Concordance*, II, pp. 92, 155 (Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Adab*, p. 101; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Alfāz, p. 4; Mālik b. Anas, *Muwatta’*, Kalām, p. 3; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, II, pp. 259, 272, 275, 318, 934); Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn b. Mas‘ūd, Bajāwī, *Miṣbāḥ as-sunna*, 4 vols., Beirut, 1407/1987, III, p. 305 (nr. 3700); J. Robson, *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ*, Lahore, 1975, p. 996; the variant, “time itself is God” (*fa-inna d-dahra huwa Al-lāh*) is also quoted by Abū Ḥayyān Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā’ir wa-adh-dhakhā’ir*, 4 vols., ed. W. Qādī, Beirut, 1408/1988, V, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed biography of Ibn al-‘Arabī see, C. Addas, *Ibn Arabī ou la quête du Soufre Rouge*, Paris, 1989; a succinct study of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s life and thought is found in: R.W. J. Austin, *Ibn al-‘Arabī: The Bezels of Wisdom*, New York, 1980.

in and around Mecca. The seats of learning he visited on his actual itinerary were transformed in his consciousness into theaters of mystical visions that marked the map of his own religious geography. These visions set the cornerstone of his spiritual identity, providing him with insight and understanding that decisively shaped his life and teaching.<sup>5</sup> In his age, the apocalyptic awareness of the *mahdī*, the restorer of religion at the end of time, became a vivid expectation through the appearance of Ibn Tūmart (d. 524/1130) in North Africa and the activities of the Sufis, Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141) and Ibn Qasī (d. 546/1151), in Spain.<sup>6</sup>

In the innermost recesses of Ibn al-'Arabi's soul this expectation was transformed by the idea of the seal of the saints (*khatm al-awliyā'*), who brings the prophetic wisdom of divine revelation to its manifest conclusion.<sup>7</sup> Inspired by Jesus, understood as the prototypical universal seal of the saints, and spiritually invested by Kḥiḍr with the Sufi mantle (*khirqā*), he found his religious fulfillment in mystical Islam and came to see himself, then and there, as the seal of the saints and heir to the prophets.<sup>8</sup> Likening himself to a religious reformer at the climax of time, Ibn al-'Arabi strove to emulate, in his influential "Meccan Revelations" (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*), Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī's (d. 505/1111) work of revival. This profound work took a lifetime to complete.<sup>9</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabi was an original thinker who broke with the tradition of scholarship current in medieval Islam, a tradition that valued commentary over creativity. Formulating his insights on the nature of being, he taught that all existence is one and that the existence of created things is nothing but a reflection of the Creator's existence. God and creation are two aspects of one reality, reflecting each other and depending on each other. In His eternal loneliness, the Absolute longed for manifestation and brought forth the universe by emanation of His very being that crystallized, through the medium of archetypes, to form the ma-

<sup>5</sup> Some of these aspects of Ibn al-'Arabi's life and teaching are examined in the Ph.D. dissertation that is presently being prepared by Gerald Elmore: "The Fabulous Gryphon: Ibn al-'Arabi's 'Anqā' mughrib" (Yale University). See also: G.T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, Leiden: Brill, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> See P. Nwyia, "Note sur quelques fragments inédits," *Hesperis* 43 (1956), pp. 217–221; Ibn Qasī, J. Dreher, *Das Imamāt des Ibn Qasī*, Bonn, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> M. Chodkiewicz, *Le sceau des saints: prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabi*, Paris, 1986, offers a different perspective on this theme.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn al-'Arabi sees himself as heir to a line of prophets beginning with Adam and ending with Khālid b. Sinān (see, C. Pellat, *EI*, new edition, IV, p. 928) and Muḥammad; cf. the order of the prophets in Ibn al-'Arabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. A. 'Afiḥ, Beirut, 1946 and *FM* III, p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, 4 vols., Būlāq, 1293/1876; I use the reprint published by Dār Ṣādir, Beirut, 1968, abbreviated in the notes as *FM*; "OY" refers to 'Uthman Yahyā's ongoing critical edition of the work (with paragraphs in square brackets), Cairo, 1972—. An excellent English anthology of the work is W.C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, New York, 1989. For a detailed study of Ibn al-'Arabi's vocabulary, see S. Ḥakīm, *al-Mu'jam aṣ-ṣūfī*, Beirut, 1401/1981. For the comparison with Ghazzālī see, F. Rosental, "Ibn 'Arabi between philosophy and mysticism," *Oriens* 31 (1988), p. 35.

nifold world of creation. All things emanate from God, in whose mind they are preexistent as ideas, and evolve in stages to form the world of multiplicity. From this world of multiplicity the human souls ascend to God, are reunited with the divine world and then are again sent forth to the lower world with newly obtained divine knowledge. God and world are two opposing mirror images beholding each other.

The light of Muḥammad, a type of *logos*, is the point where the two opposites touch each other to form the universal man. This ontological figure is represented by the perfect man on earth, himself an outward manifestation of the image of man conceived in the divine mind. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theory transformed the early Sufis’ psychological experience of mystical union into an ontological speculation on the unity of being, propelling the idea of *tawḥīd* to a dynamic conclusion. In this vital monism Ibn al-‘Arabī’s vision of time appears as a strand of thought that binds God and man together and provides a key to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s apocalyptic self-image.<sup>10</sup>

The beginnings of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s systematic reflections on time go back to the days that preceded his final departure from the Magrib when he wrote a work entitled “The Book of Time” (*Kitāb az-zamān*).<sup>11</sup> Although no longer extant, it was in part incorporated into the “Meccan Revelations,” where it is cited by title.<sup>12</sup> In unconnected sections of his monumental “Meccan Revelations,”<sup>13</sup> Ibn al-

<sup>10</sup> F. Rosenthal, “The Time of Muslim Historians and Muslim Mystics,” in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, forthcoming. I would like to thank Professor Rosenthal for lending me his typescript to read as I prepared this article.

<sup>11</sup> O. Yahya, *Histoire et classification de l’œuvre d’Ibn Arabi*, Damascus 1–2, 1964, pp. 530–531 [nr. 838], cf. also pp. 76 and 103.

<sup>12</sup> *FM I*, p. 141 = OY II, p. 320 [497]; *FM I*, p. 490 = OY VII, 261 [332].

<sup>13</sup> Chapter 11: *FM I*, pp. 140–141 = OY II, pp. 317–321 [493–498]; chapter 59: *FM I*, pp. 290–292 = OY IV, pp. 330–340 [452–468]; chapter 72: *FM I*, p. 677 = OY X, pp. 129–132 [106–109]; chapter 238: *FM II*, pp. 538–540; chapter 291: *FM II*, pp. 652–655; chapter 348: *FM III*, pp. 197–206; and chapter 390: *FM III*, pp. 546–549. The major chapters on time are each introduced by a few lines of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s poetry, cf. *FM I*, p. 291; II, p. 538; II, 652; III, p. 546. As is well known, the author uses poetry as a preferred method of exposition. He captures the gist of his thought in the beauty of poetic form frequently for the pedagogic purpose of memorization. I translate the poetry as follows:

*FM I*, p. 291 (meter: *al-basīṭ*):

“If you have fully understood the fruits of time,  
time is clearly recognized, known to be the child of imagination.  
Similar to the natural world, its power lies in its effect;  
in itself, however, time, just as nature, is a non-entity.  
All things receive their particularity through time,  
although it itself has not being (*‘ayn*) through which to rule.  
Human intelligence cannot grasp its form,  
wherefore we say, time (*dahr*) is imaginary.  
Had it not honored His transcendence, God would not have called His  
existence by time’s name; thus in man’s heart it is glorified.

ʿArabī created a vision of time that links three principal notions which had been current in Islam for centuries: *dahr*, *zamān* and *waqt*.<sup>14</sup> His method of exposition is highly eductive. The examples he uses illustrate *a priori* reasoning; they are not the basis for *a posteriori* inferences. Nevertheless, his thought is original in the way it combines an atomistic notion of time as *waqt* and a theological vision of time as *dahr* with a partly cosmological, partly relative understanding of time as *zamān*. The following analysis follows the current order of the major chapters on time in the “Meccan Revelations,” supplemented, where appropriate, by other passages of the work.

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Strictly speaking, time takes its origin from eternity (*azal*),  
 even while ruled over, its own rule is eternal.  
 Like the depths of space, it is a limitless extension,  
 possessed of no physical shape; imagination alone gives it body.”

FM II, p. 53 (meter: *al-basīṭ*):

“You are always qualified by the ‘moment in time’ (*waqt*),  
 always witnessed by the rule of the moment.  
 It is God who makes my moment the place to witness Him,  
 for included in the moment are good and evil deeds.  
 Each moment is infused with significance by the Merciful One,  
 who rules us through law, faith and the experience of divine oneness.”

FM II, p. 652 (meter: *al-basīṭ*):

“I took an oath by time (*dahr*) that time has no being of its own,  
 nevertheless it is grasped by intelligence.  
 Had I sworn by time, I would have sworn by non-existence,  
 doing it unwittingly, nay perjury is plundering (God).  
 Know, one acknowledged by neither mother nor father  
 resembles the one cut off from the divine decrees.  
 Only one in whom the divine gifts of knowledge mount up,  
 is accepted by God and belongs to Him.  
 He is like one lost in an ocean without a beacon,  
 in waves of whim and fancy he is tossed.  
 Without wealth you are handed over to poverty,  
 only to be guided by the guide of the mind.”

FM III, p. 546 (meter: *al-wāfir*):

“If we were to say that quality is itself an entity  
 then where is the one who is qualified by it?  
 The true divine summons was addressed to us,  
 we took it because it was issued by Him;  
 For God has neither partner nor simile,  
 and no substance does reveal Him.  
 If you realize the secrets of your roots in Him,  
 then gain and save knowledge because of Him!  
 Whenever you say, I did not come to be without Him,  
 then the reversal of this word and fact is His too.  
 When you understood my words, my friend, you are certain,  
 therefore you would not ask, Who are you? and, Who is He?”

<sup>14</sup> Cf. G. Böwering, “Ideas of Time in Persian Mysticism,” *Iran* 30 (1992), pp. 77–89.

## 2. The cosmology of time

In chapter 11 of the “Meccan Revelations”<sup>15</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī combines a rudimentary understanding of the Ptolemaic framework of the universe with a myth of cosmological origins. He links these two ideas with a notion of time (*zamān*) inspired by the Qur’ānic depiction of God’s six-day work of creation: “It is God who created the heavens and the earth, [and what is between them,] in six days” (7:54; 10:3; 11:7; 57:4; cf. 25:59; 32:4; 50:38). Having begun His work of creation with the divine command, “Be!” (*kun*), God set creation into motion with the revolution of the spheres, bringing the days (*ayyām*) into being in the first sphere of the mansions of the zodiac, and giving them visible existence in the second sphere of the fixed stars. Then God created the four elements, earth, water, air and fire; fashioned the seven storeys of heaven and earth, each with seven celestial and terrestrial layers; and placed one of the five planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn), the moon and the sun in one heaven each. Through the creation of the sun, what we call “day” (*yawm*), the 24-hour period of an alternating night (*layl*) and day (*nahār*), defined from sunset to sunrise and again to sunset, came into being. The days in general were created with the revolution of the first sphere. As a sequence of night and day, however, they came into being only with the creation of the sun.<sup>16</sup>

Within this cosmological perspective, a succinct definition of time is offered: “Time is the day” (*az-zamān huwa l-yawm*). In the *yawm*, both night and day exist and join in the embrace of generative union, inspired by the Qur’ānic verses, “He makes the night to enter (*yūlijū*) into the day and He makes the day to enter into the night” (22:61; 31:29; 35:13; 57:6), or, “He covers the day with night” (7:54; 13:3), or, in reference to Adam and Eve, “when he covered her, she bore a light burden” (7:189). Night is the father and day the mother. Both male and female can be neither active nor passive in this union. When day is covered by night, the individual things generated during daytime are the father’s progeny, i.e. male offspring. When night is overcome by day, the individual things born during nighttime are the mother’s children, i.e. female offspring. In this way human beings of either sex come into being.<sup>17</sup> In another image of procreation, inspired by the Qur’ānic verse, “a sign for them is the night; We strip the day from it” (36:37), night is the mother, from which day is born like a child from the mother’s womb or a snake shedding its skin. This day just born is father to the offspring of the next night, giving birth to its progeny in a new world. Day and night are thus fathers in one sense and mothers in another. In either case — night and day representing male and female in the embrace of union, or day born of

<sup>15</sup> *FMI*, pp. 138–143 = OY II, pp. 308–329 [477–513].

<sup>16</sup> *FMI*, pp. 140–141 = OY II, pp. 317–319 [493–495].

<sup>17</sup> *FMI*, pp. 141 = OY II, pp. 319–320 [496–497].

the womb of night — whatever God brings forth as their progeny in the world of the four elements is the offspring of night and day.<sup>18</sup>

Ibn al-ʿArabi returns to the idea of time as the days (*ayyām*), consisting of night and daytime, in chapter 390.<sup>19</sup> God, in His divine foreknowledge, made night enter, cover, or envelop day. We humans are the children of night and day’s procreative union. Offspring that come into being in daytime have day as mother and night as father, while those born during night have night as mother and day as father. This process continues in this world as long as night and day follow upon each other. While the night and day, from which we were born, have already vanished, the progeny of the next day and night, though similar to us, are not our siblings, because they are the fruit of a new day and night (*jadīdān*). In the world to come, however, the full day (*yawm*) is divided into the totally separate darkness of night and the light of day, night belonging to hell and day to paradise. Thus the generation that comes about in hell and paradise, respectively, is not due to a marriage union (*nikāḥ zamānī*) of night and day but resembles the generation of Eve from Adam or Jesus from the Virgin Mary.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The atomism of time

Having explained the cosmogonic origins of time, Ibn al-ʿArabi examines in chapter 238 the atomistic aspect of time, understood as “moment” (*waqt*).<sup>21</sup> In his view, *waqt* is “the time of the present state (*zamān al-ḥāl*) that is neither tied to the past nor linked to the future.”<sup>22</sup> This “moment in time” is a thought moment between two moments that are non-existent, the preceding one that has ceased to be and the one following which has not yet come. In apparently contradictory wording, *waqt* is “a non-existent thing that has no being” (*amrun ʿadamiyyun lā wujūda lahu*)<sup>23</sup> or, “a thing between two non-existent things that has being” (*amrun wujūdiyyun bayna ʿadamayn*).<sup>24</sup> Succinctly, *waqt* is “that in which you are” (*mā anta bihi*),<sup>25</sup> “that in which and upon which you are” (*mā anta bihi wa-ʿalayhi*)<sup>26</sup> or, “that in which you are without respect to past and future.”<sup>27</sup>

This momentary condition in which one happens to be, is described in another passage as the instant that “rules you” (*al ḥākīm ʿalayka*) or “takes charge of

<sup>18</sup> *FM I*, pp. 141 = OY II, p. 320 [497].

<sup>19</sup> *FM III*, pp. 546–549.

<sup>20</sup> *FM III*, p. 548.

<sup>21</sup> *FM II*, p. 538–540.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabi, *al-Iṣṭilāḥāt*, Beirut, 1969, p. 285, quoted by S. Ḥakīm, *al-Muʿjam*, p. 1226.

<sup>23</sup> *FM I*, p. 490 = OY VII, p. 261 [332].

<sup>24</sup> *FM II*, p. 538.

<sup>25</sup> *FM II*, p. 539.

<sup>26</sup> *FM II*, p. 538.

<sup>27</sup> *FM II*, p. 133.

you” (*al-qā’im bika*) and the moment in which you are witnessed (*mashhūduka*) by God. Seen from God’s vantage point, *waqt* is the very entity of the divine name (‘*ayn al-ism al-ilāhī*) in which a human being subsists in the present moment; but it holds no sway over the preceding or the following moment.<sup>28</sup> In this precise *waqt* “the divine law summons you to moral action in the present condition” (‘*ayn mā khātabaka bihi ash-shar‘ bi’l-ḥāl*).<sup>29</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of *waqt* is based on Sufi definitions quoted anonymously: “The moment is a file that abrades you without erasing you”,<sup>30</sup> “the moment comprises the gifts of God’s providence which humans meet unexpectedly and without any choice of their own”; “the moment is what God exacts from you and effects in you”; and, “the moment is everything that holds sway over you and in so doing is the pivot of everything.”<sup>31</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī is most inspired, however, by the Qur’ānic phrase “every day He is upon some task” (*kulla yawmin huwa fī sha’nin*, 55:29), which he renders as, every *moment* God is engaged in some important task. By substituting *waqt* for the Qur’ānic day (*yawm*), Ibn al-‘Arabī shifts into his ontology and advances an atomistic theory of time. *Waqt* has its root (*aṣl*) in divine nature (*ilāhīyya*) and its branches (*far‘*) in the manifest existence (*wujūd*) of the created world (*kawn*). The tasks (*shu’ūn*) God is concerned with at every moment become manifest in the potentialities of the possible beings (*a’yān al-mumkināt*) that are thought contents of the divine mind, while the moment, defined as “that in which you are” (*mā anta bihi*), can be said to denote the preparedness (*isti’dād*) of the human being to actualize them.

The possible beings pass from the realm of potentiality to the world of actual existence through the act of divine foreordination, yet only those possibilities are actualized, for which the human being possesses the *dispositio*. Thus the existence of the created world includes the actual existence of a person’s preparedness, i.e. the coming to pass of the “moment.” In this sense, it may be said that “the origin of *waqt* derives from the created world and not from God” (*aṣl al-waqt min al-kawn lā min al-ḥaqq*) and that “the author of the moment is the created world” (*fa ṣāhib al-waqt huwa l-kawn*).<sup>32</sup> And the most perfect human being, the pole (*quṭb*) and mirror of God (*mir’āt al-ḥaqq*), may be defined as “the possessor of the moment (*ṣāhib al-waqt*), the eye of time (‘*ayn az-zamān*) and the mystery of destiny (*sirr al-qadar*).”<sup>33</sup> In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, there is an

<sup>28</sup> FM II, p. 486.

<sup>29</sup> FM II, p. 539.

<sup>30</sup> A definition cited on the authority of Abū ‘Alī ad-Daqqāq (d. 405/1015), cf. Abū ‘l-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī, *ar-Risāla al-qushayriyya*, eds. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. ash-Sharīf, 1–2, Cairo 1385/1966, p. 190; tr. R. Gramlich, *Das Send-schreiben al-Quṣayrīs über das Sufitum*, Wiesbaden, 1989, p. 108.

<sup>31</sup> FM II, p. 539.

<sup>32</sup> FM II, p. 539.

<sup>33</sup> FM II, p. 573.

infinite cluster of moments, conceived as time atoms without duration, but they are mere instances of preparedness in which are actualized those possibilities that God has ordained to be effected in a human being. A man of mystic insight realizes that he is the son of his moment (*ibn waqtihi*), as expressed in the old Sufi saying.

#### 4. The dynamic nature of God's time

Ibn al-'Arabī reflects on the time (*dahr*) possessed by God in the short chapter 72 that deals with the times of prayer (*mīqāt az-zamān*) observed during the Muslim pilgrimage (*ḥajj*).<sup>34</sup> Time may be understood as merely denoting the relation between the subject (*fā'il*) and object (*maf'ūl*) in the moment of the action (*fi'l*). The action itself, namely the act of creation — the Creator creating the created world — neither unites nor separates subject and object; it simply denotes the fact of their reciprocal relatedness. God has two relations to all things, time and space. Time denotes the relation in answer to the question, “when?”, while space denotes the relation in answer to the question, “where?”.

This relation “time” corresponds in God to the divine name *dahr* meaning “time.” It can be understood in two ways, above nature (*fawqa ṭ-ṭabī'a*) and below nature (*taḥta ṭ-ṭabī'a*). Time below is a reflection (*mazḥar*) of time above. Time below becomes distinct and discernible with the revolution of the spheres. The temporal course one supposes them to follow is an imaginary one because time is an unreal, imaginary expanse (*imtidād mutawahham*), like empty space that has neither extension nor volume. In this sense, time is non-existence (*'adam*), possessed of no being (*lā wujūd*). Time that is above nature, however, becomes distinct and discernible through the present states (*aḥwāl*) occurring in a thing possessing existence (*amr wujūdī*), which the name, *dahr*, calls forth in the mind.<sup>35</sup>

In a long passage of chapter 291, purporting to deal with the origin of time (*ṣadr az-zamān*),<sup>36</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī envisions the universe as having been fashioned in the image of the human being, the crown of creation. Everything has its origin (*ṣadr*). Time, too, has its precise point of beginning. With *dahr* the origin lies at the divide between eternity *a parte ante* and *a parte post*, while *zamān* originates in the moment when primordial matter receives form, just as the beginning of night is the extinction of the last evening glow and the beginning of day is the first ray of the rising sun.<sup>37</sup> Making a fast switch from the cosmic realm to personal experience, Ibn al-'Arabī anchors the origin of motion and rest in day and night. Night is the time of rest (*zamān as-sukūn*) which one likes to spend in

<sup>34</sup> *FMI*, p. 677 = OY X, pp. 129–132 [106–109].

<sup>35</sup> *FMI*, p. 677 = OY X, pp. 129–132 [106–109].

<sup>36</sup> *FMI*, p. 652–655; in fact, only a small portion of the chapter treats time.

<sup>37</sup> *FMI*, 652.

conversation (*musāmara*) with a trusted friend, for night is the source of love and mercy contrary to the day, the locus of motion and activity (*maḥall al-ḥaraka*).<sup>38</sup>

In chapter 348, Ibn al-‘Arabī further develops his dynamic understanding of God as time (*dahr*) by comparing the nature of *dahr* with that of the human heart (*qalb*). In a familiar Arabic pun, the heart is so called because God makes it fluctuate from one mood to another (*taqlīb*), i.e., the heart changes. The nature of time (*dahr*) also includes change; its inherent quality is transition (*taḥawwul*) and alteration (*qalb*). God is time. He undergoes transition in fashioning the forms (*ṣuwar*) of creation and “every day (*yawm*) He is upon some task,” as stated in the Qur’ān (55:29). The day is the measure of the divine life-breath (*naḥas*) that ensouls all living beings by virtue of this particular divine name, *dahr*. Observing his heart, man perceives that its moods do not remain steady and unchanged and concludes that there would be no basis for this constant change of the heart, were the divine root, in which it has its origin, immutable rather than capable of change. This can be illustrated by the image of man’s heart held between two fingers of the Creator. It is the Merciful (*ar-raḥmān*) who infuses life into the soul, turning the heart in His hand as He pleases. This insight into the presence of changing time in God, moreover, is rooted in the old Sufi maxim, “he who knows his own self, knows his Lord (*man ‘arafa naḥsahu ‘arafa rabbahu*).”<sup>39</sup> It may also be confirmed by another line of argument: God’s time (*dahr*) knows no cessation because “there is no leisure for the rule of this time” (*lā farāgha li-ḥukmi hādḥā d-dahr*) in either the upper or lower world.<sup>40</sup>

In the same chapter,<sup>41</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī’s description of God as time moves to a definition of *dahr* as a single day (*yawm wāḥid*) without night or daytime. This beginningless and endless day is divided into many days, the “Days of God,” by the properties of the divine names and attributes.<sup>42</sup> In a crucial passage he argues:

God apprised us that He is time (*dahr*) and possesses days. These are the days of God (*ayyām Allāh*), which receive their particular being in the world as properties of the divine names. Each name has days, which are the time (*zamān*) of the ruling property of that name. But all are God’s days and all are the differentiations of time (*dahr*) in the world by virtue of the ruling property. These days penetrate, enter and cover each other. This is the diversity of properties that is seen in the world at a single time (*zamān wāḥid*). It derives from the commingling, covering, resumption and repetition of the days. Each of these divine days has a night and a daytime.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> FM II, 652.

<sup>39</sup> FM II, 199.

<sup>40</sup> FM II, 199.

<sup>41</sup> FM III, pp. 197–202.

<sup>42</sup> FM III, pp. 202.

<sup>43</sup> FM III, pp. 201; for a somewhat different translation of this passage see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 395.

The night of these divine days is the “unseen,” the upper world that is invisible, while their daytime is the visible lower world, from the bodies down to their elements. In other words, each divine name, whether known to us or not, has a “day in time” (*yawm fī d-dahr*), and thus all things are really divine days. All human beings take their ultimate origin from God in a cosmic descent from the level of the divine names, passing through the day of the First Intellect (*yawm al-ʿaql al-awwal*) to the level of the Universal Soul (*an-naḥs al-kullīyya*), where they divide into night and daytime, i.e. the invisible and visible worlds. The pattern of a corresponding night and day marks all following levels of cosmic descent, from the sphere of the constellations and the sphere of the fixed stars down to the corporeal world, as explained in a lengthy repetitive section.<sup>44</sup>

### 5. The relative nature of time

The theological implications of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s concept of time (*zamān*) are crystalized squarely in chapter 59.<sup>45</sup> He interprets the Qur’ānic passage, “Say: He is God, One, God the Everlasting, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not anyone” (112:1–4) as meaning that God is the First, prior to whom there was nothing, and the One, with or next to whom there is no other thing (*amr zāʿid*). God is the necessary being (*wājib al-wujūd*) who is self-subsistent in His essence, absolutely independent of everything else. The existence of the world (*wujūd al-ʿālam*) can only be explained with respect to God, and it is necessary that He has a relation to the created world, a *nisba*, designated by such terms as the divine will (*irāda*, *mashīʿa*), knowledge (*ʿilm*), power (*qudra*) or others. These attributes are eternal and inseparably one with God. They denote, however, nothing but God’s relation to the world, also called time (*zamān*). Though a mere relation, time in this sense is real, having neither beginning nor end. But “real” time has no separate existence from which anything that possesses being could originate, for such time is a mere relation, not being.

In its other sense, understood in the temporal world here and now, time (*zamān*) is an imaginary notion that has no existence *per se*, as explained in a crucial passage:

Know that the relationship of eternity (*azal*) to God is the same as the relationship of time (*zamān*) to us. The relationship of eternity is a negative quality (*naʿt salbī*) that has no entity (*ʿayn*), and thus no existence can derive from this reality. In the case of the possible thing, however, time is a nonexistent relationship of imaginary existence (*nisbatun mutawahhamatu l-wujūd*). This is why we can meet each thing we posit with the appropriate question ‘when?’ (*matā*) — ‘when?’ being the question that relates to time. It neces-

<sup>44</sup> *FM* III, pp. 202–203.

<sup>45</sup> *FMI*, pp. 290–292 = *OY* IV, pp. 330–340 [452–468].

sarily follows that time is an imaginary thing (*amr mutawahham*) that is not possessed of existence.<sup>46</sup>

Then Ibn al-‘Arabī turns to God’s “time” and states,

The reason why God predicated time of Himself is stated in the Qur’ān which says, ‘and God has knowledge of everything’ (48:26) and, ‘to God belongs the command before and after’ (30:4). The Sunna confirms the same point in answer to the question, ‘where was your Lord before He created the world?’ If time were a thing possessing existence in itself, God’s transcendence (*tanzīh al-ḥaqq*) above contingency (*taqyīd*) would not hold, since the rule of time (*ḥukm az-zamān*) would put limits on Him, and since, as we have realized already, the forms of contingency and what follows from them are a thing possessing existence.<sup>47</sup>

Following this crucial passage, Ibn al-‘Arabī quotes definitions of time then current in Muslim thought. The philosophers define it, he notes, as “an imaginary duration (*mudda*) measured by the motions of the spheres,” while the theologians describe it as “the continuum that links one event to the other (*muqārana ḥādith li-ḥādith*), answering to the question ‘when?’” The definition Ibn al-‘Arabī finds best links his theology of time with his cosmology is the traditional Arab understanding of night and daytime constituting the full day (*yawm*) as measured from sunset to sunset.<sup>48</sup>

Now night and day originate in the well-established constancy of the great motion (*al-ḥaraka al-kubrā*), the revolution of all the spheres, including the sun. All things that exist, however, belong to existence that is subject to motion. Since time pertains to motion itself, time cannot be possessed of existence, and thus the argument concludes that time is an imaginary thing (*amr mutawahham*). While in common experience this imaginary time is measured by days, weeks, months, years and eras, in the future age of the Antichrist (*dajjāl*), Islamic tradition states that individual days may have the length of a year, a month or a week. Such differences in the measure of time, when predicated upon our present temporal world and the future days of the Antichrist, again proves the imaginary nature of time.<sup>49</sup>

As he systematically reflects on temporal measurement in yet another passage,<sup>50</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī distinguishes “great time” (*az-zamān al-kabīr*) of the upper world from “lesser time” (*az-zamān aṣ-ṣaghīr*) of the lower world. Great time has a fourfold measure, into years, months, weeks and days. It reflects the four seasons of cosmic nature (*tabī‘a*, which is prior to its infusion with the life of the

<sup>46</sup> *FM I*, p. 291 = OY IV, p. 335 [461].

<sup>47</sup> *FM I*, p. 291 = OY IV, p. 335 [461].

<sup>48</sup> *FM I*, p. 291 = OY IV, pp. 335–336 [462].

<sup>49</sup> *FM I*, p. 292 = OY IV, pp. 336–338 [462–466].

<sup>50</sup> *FM III*, p. 548–549.

Universal Soul and above the “dust” of prime matter) that mirror the four divine properties (*aḥkām*) of life, knowledge, power and will. The year is divided into four seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter, indicated by the passage of the sun through its heavenly mansions (*burūj*). The four elements, fire, air, water and earth, and the four humors of the body, gall, blood, phlegm and bile, are rooted in the four quarters of a mansion. Most humans calculate lesser time by the solar year according to months, weeks and days, on the basis of the sun’s passage through its twelve mansions. The Arabs, however, follow the divine division of the year according to the moon’s passage through its mansions in months of 28 days each. The day in lesser time, measured from sunrise to sunrise for instance, reflects a complete revolution of the outer sphere as we perceive it. In fact, however, there is only one limitless, infinite revolution of the outer sphere. We humans impose upon it the periodic breaks of beginning, end, resumption and repetition, and thus calculate our lesser time on the basis of days.<sup>51</sup>

Using examples from Scripture, science and mystical experience, Ibn al-ʿArabi illustrates the limitations of the way in which time is commonly measured. First, the divine measure of days follows a different order, for the Qurʾān holds, “surely a day with your Lord is as a thousand years of your counting” (22:47) and, “a day whereof the measure is fifty thousand years” (70:4). Furthermore, in the days of the Antichrist, one day may be like a year, a month or a week while others are like normal days. Second, astronomical calculations are based on the revolution of the outer sphere and the position of the fixed stars in comparison with the lower sphere of Atlas that has no asterism but is measured by 360 degrees, each degree accounting for 100 years. According to historical works, however, the pyramids of Egypt were built when the star “Vulture” (*nasr*) stood in Leo; today, it stands in Capricorn! Third, Ibn al-ʿArabi describes walking around the Kaʿba in mystical trance and meeting a man who claimed to be his ancestor of some 40,000 years ago, a time span which would place the ancestor before Adam. Confronted with this antinomy, the man replies, “Which Adam are you talking about, the one closest to you or another?” Recalling a tradition of the Prophet that God had created a 100,000 Adams, Ibn al-ʿArabi awoke and realized that time is both relative and limitless.<sup>52</sup>

For Ibn al-ʿArabi, the measurement of time can also be taken as an argument for its infinite nature, because measured time (*az-zamān al-fard*) can be divided into ever smaller segments, such as hours, minutes, seconds, and so on *ad infinitum*. Time, like number, is therefore infinite. While what is counted in measuring time is finite, and hence possessed of individual existence, the process of measuring time is an infinite series of atoms (*al-jawhar al-fard*) just as space is.<sup>53</sup> In this sense it can be said, as stated in another passage, that time (*zamān*) is one of

<sup>51</sup> *FM* III, p. 548.

<sup>52</sup> *FM* III, pp. 548–549.

<sup>53</sup> *FMI*, p. 292 = *OY* IV, p. 338 [467].

the original irreducible elements of existence (*ummahāt al-wujūd*), along with substance, accident and space.<sup>54</sup>

## 6. The reciprocal nature of time

Finally, in chapter 390<sup>55</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī focuses on the reciprocal nature of time (*zamān*). “I,” man, and “You,” God, do not have time separately on our own; rather “You are my time and I am Yours.”<sup>56</sup> This equation is rooted in the Prophet’s tradition that “God is time” (*Allāh huwa d-dahr*), repeating the term found in the Qur’ān, “and nothing but time (*dahr*) destroys us” (45:24). *Dahr*’s destructiveness, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding, is actually God’s, since God has always known that time (*zamān*) is a relation having no being *per se*. The manifold human depictions of time notwithstanding, it is a mere relation originating whenever “when?” is asked. All the various particles of grammar denoting temporality are attributes of time, but the object “time” is itself a nonentity. Time is an imaginary continuum that has no limit at either end. Humans call it past when something has gone by, future when something is expected to happen, and present when something occurs here and now. The sense humans possess of time can be illustrated in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view by mental experiments, such as the relative nature of the answer, “at sunrise!”, to the question, “when did Zayd come?”, or the limit (*ḥadd*) of time marked by a point on the circumference of a circle that can be imagined either as the end of time passed or the beginning of time to come.<sup>57</sup>

Since the beginning can be the end and the end the beginning, the very non-existence of either terminus of time (‘*adam tarafay az-zamān*) is equal to “pre-ternity” (*azal*) and “eternity” (*abad*). The only permanence is the time of the present state (*zamān al-hāl*) of the “now” (*al-ān*) which, when posited, affirms the reciprocal nature of time between God and the world. In the “now,” neither God’s eternity nor man’s moment cease to be. On the contrary, they both exist. We seek to contain the cluster of “nows,” imagined in a continuum from past to future, in a vessel (*zarf*) that imagination alone conceives as an infinite receptacle.

The insight you gained through the power of imagination — an insight that is neither perceived by intellect nor sense perception — is that of the true existence (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*), to which we are related in our existence; and so, this relation is called time, *dahr*. It alone rules everything that may be imagined to be under the sway of time (*zamān*) for there is no ruler but God alone.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> FMIV, p. 404.

<sup>55</sup> FMIII, pp. 546–549.

<sup>56</sup> FMIII, p. 546.

<sup>57</sup> FMIII, p. 546.

<sup>58</sup> FMIII, p. 547.

Such is the paradox that ultimately captures the relativity of time with regard to Creator and creature: “The time (*zamān*) of the Lord is the one who is ‘lorded over’ (*marbūb*), while the time of the one ‘lorded over’ is the Lord (*rabb*).”<sup>59</sup> God and world are relative in time to each other, as illustrated by Ibn al-ʿArabī’s examples, such as Zayd’s fatherhood of ʿAmr implying ʿAmr’s sonhood of Zayd, the reciprocal relationship of king and kingdom or owner and property, and the subject-object relation of the act of knowledge or will.<sup>60</sup> God alone, everlasting existence, is time, *dahr*, ruling everything, not some imaginary flux of time, *zamān*, though imagination captures a trace of that *dahr* in the time of the present moment.

## 7. Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing analysis of the concept of time in the “Meccan Revelations,” a work with which Ibn al-ʿArabī tinkered for thirty years? It is known on the basis of the Prophet’s tradition, argues Ibn al-ʿArabī, that God is time (*dahr*). His time is everlasting, it is eternity, beginningless and endless (*azal* and *abad*). Man, too, may be understood as being, not having, time (*waqt*), for he is called in Sufi language ‘the son of his moment’ (*ibn waqtihī*). Man’s time is momentary. It is the present state (*hāl*), a moment as real as God’s everlasting time. This moment is the reflection (*mazhar*) of God’s eternity, here and now, in man’s mere receptivity or preparedness for God’s action to occur at each and every instant of human life. Seen in this way, there are two levels of time: that of God and that of man. Yet both levels transcend what we ordinarily call time because God’s time stretches out to eternity while man’s time shrinks to the mere instant, a dot without duration. Caught between these two modes, the divine everlastingness and the human momentariness, we humans entertain a notion of time, *zamān*, that is imaginary and subjective, though inspired by the real and objective time of *dahr* and *waqt*.

The imaginary *zamān* can be understood through two principal models: that of cosmology and that of relativity. The cosmological model is based on an image of the universe that is largely derived from the Ptolemaic system of the spheres and the myth of creation known from Scripture. Its central notion is the idea of the complete day, *yawm*, a sequence of night and day that complement each other like male and female or like activity and passivity. Night and day come into being with the revolution of the spheres setting the universe in motion, but become discernible only through the creation of the sun and its course. Through the subsequent generative union of night and day, representing reciprocally matter and form, human beings of either sex come into being.

<sup>59</sup> FM III, p. 547.

<sup>60</sup> FM III, pp. 547–548.

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In the model of relativity, however, God and the world are seen as the two terms of a relation between the Creator and the creatures. Time viewed from the side of God, above nature as it were, is real but has no existence apart from Him. Perceived from the vantage of humans, i.e. “below” and within nature, time is imaginary and lacks any existence of its own. Whether conceived from the human or the divine side, time is a mere relation. Yet this mere relation is infinite just like empty space. It can be divided into ever smaller or larger time segments in a duration that has neither beginning nor end. Such limitless duration of past and future is a creature of our imagination, devoid of real existence. There is, however, an implicit link between our imaginary time and real time which can be aptly described by an image Ibn al-‘Arabī resorts to: the point along a circle may be seen as the separating point (*ḥadd*) between past and future. While having no extension whatsoever, this point of the “now” is still part of the actual extent of the circular line. In other words, although a product of our imagination, time is, in each moment, the virtual and actual object of interaction with eternity. Eternity belongs to God alone, but God’s creature has the present moment.