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ИСЛАМСКИЙ МИСТИЦИЗМ

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ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

Mohamed Mesbahi (*Mohammed V University, Morocco*)

THE UNITY OF EXISTENCE: BETWEEN THE ONTOLOGICAL AND ‘HENOLOGICAL’ IN IBN ‘ARABI

Introduction

I hope there will be no exaggeration if I say that Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought, like Existence itself, can not be completely comprehended. It is similar to a forest full of all kinds of trees and flowers, whose paths, according to Heideggerian phrase, lead nowhere. Akbarian thought is like a quicksand, a thought open to permanent transformations, so we can’t decide if it is exactly a thought of Existence or Essence, of Unity or Multiplicity, of Identity or Difference, of Transcendence or Immanence...as “each part of the Universe contains all the Universe”¹. I can also say that his great work *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* is like *A Thousand and One Nights*: it is said that something extraordinary might happen to anyone who reads the whole book. In addition, we believe that the structure of these two books is similar. Like the first story in the first night of *A Thousand and One Nights*, which contains potentially all the other thousand stories and nights, the first doctrine that embraces all the doctrines of *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, is the ‘Unity of Existence’. All Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrines begin with the Unity of existence and end with it.

This multifaceted Akbarian thought makes it necessary for us first of all to get rid of habits and prejudices held by demonstrative reason. This is due to the fact that we consider that the Akbarian works were elaborated, particularly from the dialectic point of view, close to Heraclitean thought, even though Ibn Arabi is known as a thinker of the ‘Unity of Existence’, which has a Parmenidean resonance.

In fact, all philosophers have dealt with the ‘Unity of Existence’. For example, Aristotle has thoroughly studied the Unity of Existence from two points of view.

¹ *Ibn ‘Arabī. Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam / Ed. Abū ’l-‘Alā’ ‘Afifī. Beirūt, 1980. P. 156; cf.: At-Tajalliyāt al-’ilāhiya // Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī. Beirūt, n.d. P. 32.*

First, he considers that the One is synonymous to Being, i. e. One and Being are coexistent and interchangeable. And second, he is interested in Unity not as Unity of Being, but as Unity of ‘science’ of Being. For Aristotle, the science of Existence, that is to say Ontology, is governed by a mode of Unity, which is almost a Unity but not a true one, that is to say, it is ‘an analogical Unity’. Aristotle has chosen this Unity to gather different categories of Being around substance. He has essentially opted for this Unity for the sake of securing a base for the *knowledge* of Existence, and not in order to achieve a *union* with it. From this ontological perspective, Being takes an abstract and general meaning and not an existential one.

Another example is that of Plotinus, who is known as the founder of the philosophy of the One. He put the One outside the scope of Existence and Intellect in order to go beyond Platonic and Aristotelian Metaphysics. Thus, there is neither synonymy nor convertibility between Being, Intellect and One. In this way, the One becomes a non-being, which we can neither know, nor grasp, nor describe. However, this emptiness of the One is precisely the source of all Existence. For Plotinus and Neoplatonism, what is a principle of Existence, can’t have any trace of Existence and what is a source of substance can’t be a substance. In other words, this is not because the principle is full of Existence with which it provides Existence to the other, but it is the very fact of its being void of Existence which means that it can offer Existence. Therefore, the One in this ‘henological’ vision is an absolute negation.

As for Ibn ‘Arabi, the problem isn’t one of synonymy, convertibility or transcendence, but it is a problem of identity between Being, the One and God. Ibn ‘Arabi wouldn’t come within the scope of the convertibility between the One and Being as it is in Aristotle’s thought, nor would he go beyond Existence to reach the One, as in the Plotinian and Neoplatonic perspective, nor would he submit God to Existence, as is the case of some Muslim philosophers. Rather he would, in some way, only equate Being with God, because “there is nothing but God in Existence”². Consequently, we can’t conceive Existence and Unity without divinity, and vice versa.

Yet, this notion of the ‘Unity of Existence’ has taken several forms in Ibn Arabi’s thought. It signifies, firstly, the coincidence of Reality and Existence³; secondly, the diffusion of the divine reality in the world⁴; thirdly, the Unity of the divine Essence through the diversity of its manifestations; fourthly, “the validity of all beliefs”⁵. Finally, we can say that one of the meanings of the ‘Unity of Existence’ is the Unity

² Risālat al-anwār // Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī. P. 1. Cf.: “There is in the Universe only one existence, it is the Existence itself // *Ibn ‘Arabī. Al-Futūhāt al-makkiya*. Beirūt: Dār al-fikr. Vol. 2. P. 212.

³ «But I say that Reality is the Existence itself» (*Futūhāt*. vol. 4. P. 429); «Reality is all entities themselves» (*ibid.* vol. 4. P. 8).

⁴ Kitāb al-Alif // *Rasā’il*. P. 3, lines 15—16; cf.: The Book of Alif or the Book of Unity / Trans. A. Abadi. JMIAS. II (1984). P.17.

⁵ «La sagesse des prophètes» (French translation of the «Fuṣūṣ» by T. Burckhardt). Paris, 1974. P. 221.

of human essence through the diversity of its manifestations⁶. We can also state that one of the meanings of the ‘Unity of Existence’ in Ibn ‘Arabi’s works is the Unity of the discourse about Being. The Murcian thinker didn’t prevent himself from using different types of discourse. He used all methods and approaches which could serve the subject of his research. Thus we can consider that the thesis of the ‘Unity of Existence’ is a means to show that man has an ability or inclination to have access to divine Presence. In other words, the aim of the doctrine of the ‘Unity of Existence’ is to give man the aspiration to draw closer to God.

The Objective Aspect of the Unity of Existence

The doctrine of the ‘Unity of Existence’ aims at determining that Existence is one, i. e. there is only one Existence, because “the One gets into and includes all the ranks and categories”⁷ of Existence, and “the Universal Nature is nothing... but the Breath of the All-merciful” (*nafas al-rahmān*)⁸. At first sight, the doctrine of ‘the Unity of Existence’ seems to be denying any duality between God and the Universe, and between the principle and its effects. However, the expression of ‘Unity of Existence’ itself involves multiplicity. Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabi never denied duality, he even declared that there is a radical difference between the two poles of Existence: God and the Universe. Thus, God is at the same time both transcendent to and immanent in the world.

This ambivalence between God and the Universe has a reflection upon the nature of the things of the physical Universe. According to Ibn ‘Arabi, entities are sometimes mere appearances void of any particular subsistence⁹, and at other times they are self-divine manifestations. In other words, natural entities appear to be at the same time empty and full of meaning.

We are, thus, facing two questions in relation to this ambivalence of Ibn ‘Arabi’s attitude. The first question is, how can we explain the multiplicity of things? and the second one is, to know whether this plurality is reflected in God or not? In relation to these two questions, we might ask ourselves which metaphorical paradigms Ibn Arabi is using in order to shed more light on this Unity of duality?

Essence and Accidents

Although the expression ‘Unity of Existence’ is not apparently expressed in Ibn ‘Arabi’s works, as indicated by W.C. Chittick¹⁰, we may, however, come across

⁶ Cf.: ibid. P. 185—186.

⁷ *Kitāb al-Alif*. P. 6:19.

⁸ La sagesse. P. 205.

⁹ «As for our doctrine, the possible entity (*al-‘ayn*) is possible to appearance, not to accept to be qualified by Existence, and this one becomes itself» (*Futūhāt*. vol. 4. P. 18); «Existence is not, in the possible, the existent itself, but it is a state (*hāl*) of the possible, by which it is named existing thing in the metaphoric way, and not in the true way, since Reality rejects that the possible is existent» (*Futūhāt*. Vol. 4. P. 18; cf.: *Fuṣūs*. P. 103).

¹⁰ Cf.: *Chittick W. C. The Sufi path of Knowledge*. New York: SUNY Press, 1989. P. 79.

expressions which indicate such a doctrine, like ‘the union of Existence’ (*tawḥīd al-wujūd*), ‘the Unicity of Essence’ (*ahadiyat al-dhāt*), ‘the unity or oneness of Reality’ (*wahdaniyat al-haqqa*) etc.

We consider that the three terms which derive from the One or the Unique (union, Unity and oneness), and the three terms referring to Being or Existence (Existence, Essence and Reality), in the previous three expressions, are almost synonymous. Without taking into consideration the nuances of their significations, we believe that Existence, Essence and Reality have the same meaning, especially with regard to God. The same can be said concerning the derivations of the One: union, Unity and oneness. Even if the three terms refer to three different fields of Unity and three different kinds of mystical experiences, which ‘Abd al-Salam ben Mashish has distinguished very aptly in his prayer¹¹, we consider that the three terms indicate virtually the same meaning, i. e. no entity other than God could exist. Therefore, the three expressions mentioned above, ‘the Union of Existence’, ‘the Unicity of Essence’ and ‘the unity or oneness of Reality’, are nearly synonymous.

In the light of this, things that we perceive become only forms and manifestations of the unique Essence, Existence or Reality. For this reason we must overlook the abstract or attributive signification. The Existence, being synonymous to God, can not be a general attribution, or a predication, but a particular Existence.

We will notice at this stage that there is a radical difference when comparing the status of Being in Ontology and the ‘doctrine of the Unity of Existence’. Being in Ontology is hidden behind substance and essence, whereas in the ‘doctrine of Unity of Existence’, Being unveils itself through things and events. However, if we pay more attention to the doctrine of ‘unveiled Existence’, we will notice that divine manifestations are nothing but veils which hide God: “in the density of presence, He is hidden”¹². The relationship of Reality with the Universe is a relationship of appearance and hiddenness (*khafā*): the One hides behind His appearance, as if His appearance were veils¹³.

Ibn Arabi, on the one hand, describes appearance or disclosure as being only a nominal *substitution* (*ināba*): “numbers are substitutes [of the one] as names, and not as meanings”¹⁴. And, on the other hand, he describes the relationship between God and his manifestations by using the idea of *diffusion*, through the metaphor of water. Considering the Koranic Verse “and We made from water every living thing” (21: 30)¹⁵, Ibn Arabi states that “there is nothing in Existence but living things, be-

¹¹ «O My God...throw me in oceans of Unicity (*ahadiyya*), draw me from unity (*tawḥīd*), and drown me in the Essence of the sea of unity (*wahda*), in order not to see, nor to hear, not to find, not to feel except by it». Cf.: *Zakia Zouanat*. Ibn Mashīsh: Maître d’al-Shādhilī. Casablanca: Najah El Jadida, 1998. P. 76.

¹² *Risālat al-anwār*. P. 2.

¹³ *Kitāb al-Alif*. P. 10; cf.: *The Book of Alif*. P. 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* P. 10, line 6; cf.: *The Book of Alif*. P. 31.

¹⁵ *Qur‘an* / Tr. Abdalhaqq, A. Bewley. Dubay, 1999.

cause all things are devoted to God... The secret of life is diffused in all existing things, just as the One is diffused in all things”¹⁶.

In Aristotelian ontology, Existence is shaped in substance, substance in essence, and essence in form, whereas, for Ibn ‘Arabi, Existence is shaped particularly in form, not that form perceived by reason, but by the totality of human Existence (senses, imagination, reason, heart...). Hence, in this metaphysics, importance is given to ‘presence’ and not to ‘essence’, to ‘form’ and ‘relationship’, and not to ‘substance’. We assume that the reason behind this inversion between essence and presence lies in the fact that God in Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought takes the place of Essence. God, as Reality, is the unique Essence¹⁷. This is the meaning of the often repeated sentence by Ibn ‘Arabi that ‘the Universe is nothing but manifestations of the Absolute Reality’.

Attribution and manifestation:

If “nothing exists but God”¹⁸, there must be a way to explain this relationship between God and the Universe, from which two questions arise. The first question is in terms of attribution while the second one is in terms on synonymy and homonymy. The first question tries to understand whether ‘Existence’ in the phrase ‘God is existent’, is a subject or a universal predicate; or it is an accident, an essential attribute or rather a divine disclosure. In other words, does God include Existence or does Existence contain God? The second question is about whether the two sentences: ‘Existence is one’ and ‘Existence is multiple’ are contradictory or complementary. If the answer is that they are complementary, we will ask whether the second phrase controls the first or is it the first which interprets the second, or do we have to combine the two sentences in one: ‘Existence is one and multiple’?

The doctrine of the Unity of Existence tries to answer these two questions by using theoretical means offered by the Aristotelian Philosophy of Being and Neoplatonists’ Teaching of the One, in addition to the instruments that Ibn ‘Arabi proposes and that are based on Koranic and mystical language.

Concerning the first question, we think that Being in Ibn ‘Arabi is at the same time universal and particular. In this way its universality is not abstract and attributive, but existential. Indeed, Being draws its universality from its transcendent singularity and not from an attributive generality. God is not simply one existent among many existent entities; He isn’t a ‘necessary entity’ as Avicenna said, but He is Existence itself. In other words, the Existence isn’t the first entity, nor an aggregation of entities, but it is simply all entities.

However, if we say that God is the one and the unique Existence, and if we deny its abstract and general character, we cannot say that Existence has a synony-

¹⁶ Kitāb al-Alif. P. 10; cf.: The Book of Alif. P. 31.

¹⁷ However, God takes the role of Essence only when He is named Reality, and not as pure Existence.

¹⁸ Risālat al-anwār. P. 1.

mous meaning to all entities, but that it has an equivocal meaning, on the one hand, and a homonymous meaning on the other¹⁹. The notion of difference doesn’t lose its importance in the doctrine of the Unity of Existence²⁰. In his paradoxical language, Ibn ‘Arabi states that God is the world and is not the world at the same time, i. e. the Unity and transcendence of Existence *vis-à-vis* the Universe, don’t deny the diffusion and implication of Existence in its appearances²¹.

The theory of veils is one of the instruments for preserving unity, although it is diffused through multiplicity. Thus, Unicity (*ahadiya*) is preserved by the veil of Unity (*wāḥidiyya*)²², and the Unity by the veil of Being (*al-wujūd*). This relationship between presence and hiddenness is also expressed by the term ‘Unseen’ (*ghayb*). Ibn ‘Arabi distinguishes between two kinds of the unseen; ‘the Absolute Unseen’ (*ghayb al-mutlaq*), which is Unicity, and ‘the Relative Unseen’ (*ghayb al-idāfī*), which expresses the Unity. The ‘Relative Unseen’ veils the absolute one, so the latter doesn’t contain any multiplicity or any relationship, while the ‘Relative Unseen’ is the place of multiplicity of divine attributes and names and has a mental relationship with the absolute unseen and the visible world.²³ The third level of unity is the diffusion of Reality in the Universe. These three presences of Existence are also expressed by Ibn ‘Arabi by three names of God: the sensible Universe veils Lordship (*Rubūbiya*), and this veils the Divinity (*Ulūhiya*), which, in turn, veils the Self (*Dhāt*).

Substance and Relation:

We have noted that after Aristotle it was impossible to go back to the Parmenidean thesis, which states that Being is One. Indeed, thanks to the theory of categories, which divides Being into substance and accident, and also the theory of potentiality and actuality, philosophical thought has succeeded in overcoming the dilemma between Being and Non-Being, between One and many. This overcoming of the Parmenidean theory of Being is an effort to submit Being to reason. Among the consequences of this ontological vision of the world is the conclusion that physical substances are self-sufficient, because their principle of Existence, that is the Essence, is within themselves.

As for the Akbarian theory of Unity of Existence’, categories lose much of their importance. For example, concerning God, Ibn ‘Arabi preserves only two cate-

¹⁹ About homonymy, see: *Futūhāt*. Vol. 2. P. 291.

²⁰ «Coincidence between a form and God doesn’t prevent diversity» (La sagesse, P. 204).

²¹ Ibn ‘Arabi talks about science of diffusion of Reality in the world. Cf.: *Futūhāt*. Vol. 3. P. 164.

²² «The Unicity is the home of the Unique; He is veiled by the veil of pride that is never removed. And no one can see Him in His Unicity but him» (*Kitāb al-Alif*. P. 3) (our translation; cf.: *The Book of Alif*. P. 16).

²³ *Futūhāt*. vol. 2. P. 128. Ibn ‘Arabi uses ‘the absolute unseen’ (*al-ghayb al-mutlaq*) (*ibid.* vol. 2. P. 579, 648), ‘the possible unseen’ (*al-ghayb al-imkānī*) (*ibid.* vol. 3. P. 78), ‘the impossible unseen’ (*al-ghayb al-muḥālī*) and ‘the relative unseen’ (*ghayb al-idāfī*) (*ibid.* vol. 3. P. 256).

gories: actuality and passivity (*fi'l* and *infi'āl*),²⁴ but in his analysis of the physical world, he uses the ten categories. The ontological categories are completed, in Ibn 'Arabi's work, by other kinds of 'categories', like divine attributes, divine names, immutable entities, stations (*maqāmāt*) and states (*ahwāl*) etc. In the physical world, existing things and manifestations aren't substances but are only appearances of the divine Essence. This means that what is predominant in the physical world is the category of Relation and not the category of substance. Everything in the world is relative compared to the divine Existence. God then is the Essence of every existing thing, or He is the unique Self, while the others are only His appearances. In other words, there are no essences and selves except the divine Essence and self. The metaphorical alphabet illustrates this relation very well: "alif is the ipseity and subsistence of all the letters (*qayyūm al-huriūf*)"²⁵.

Unity and Multiplicity

Regarding our second question about the relationship between Unity and Multiplicity, Ibn 'Arabi sometimes explains it by the desire of God to be known by man, sometimes by the paradigm of relationship of One with numbers; sometimes by the image of revelation, and sometimes by the relationship between the exterior (*zāhir*) and the interior (*bātin*) etc.

If we briefly compare the Akbarian doctrine of Unity with the Plotinian one, we will find, at first sight, that they resemble each other. In this way, we can say that there is a 'henological' side to Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine, not only because he says that "every thing that exists is one"²⁶, or "it is nothing but the One"²⁷, but also because when he speaks about the absolute One, he declares that it is inaccessible, imperceptible and ineffable. It hasn't any kind of relationship, either mental or existential with others. It's the One according to the first Parmenidean hypothesis, i. e. the One that is nothing but One. In the 'henological' phase of the Unity of Existence, the One is an absolute negation, that goes beyond Being: there are neither categories, principles, relationships, nor oppositions, etc.

For Ibn 'Arabi there are at least two sorts of One: the Unique (*ahad*), which is similar to the Plotinian One, and the Oneness (*wahdāniya*), which is related to the world. For Plotinus, it is impossible to know the One from physical entities; for Ibn 'Arabi it is possible, because natural entities take part, in some way, in the One.

For Ibn 'Arabi the "verification that doesn't prove the Unity of multiplicity, is unreliable"²⁸. But, if Ibn 'Arabi has accepted some coincidence between Unity and Multiplicity, he wouldn't admit that they have the same status, because Multiplicity

²⁴ «Hence there is no quality, location, time, position, accident, substance or quantity. There is nothing of the ten categories, except for a verified passivity (*infi'āl*) and a definite activity» (Futūhāt. Vol. 2. P. 211; cf.: Chittick. Op. cit. P. 349).

²⁵ The Book of Alif. P. 36.

²⁶ Ibid. P. 4, lines 7—8.

²⁷ Ibid. P. 5, line 7.

²⁸ Risāla lā yu'awwalu 'alayhi // Rasā'il, P. 12.

is accidental, whereas Unity is essential. In other words, Unity is real, while plurality is illusory and imaginary. Then, there is no real convertibility between One and Multiplicity, God and the Universe. The One appears in numbers, without being a number²⁹. In fact, “we exist by the Existence of Oneness of Reality (*wahdāniyyat al-Haqq*). Thus, if Reality does not exist, we can not exist. But, if we don’t exist, this does not imply necessarily that Reality will not exist”³⁰.

Ibn ‘Arabi also uses the relationship between Essence and names to clarify the connection between God and the world. He thinks that “the divine names are the light of the Essence (of God)”³¹. But sometimes Ibn ‘Arabi presents the relationship between Essence and names as being oppositional: when the One “manifests in His name, He does not manifest in His Essence”³². In another context, Ibn ‘Arabi relates names to the Breath of ‘the All-Merciful’ and the world in an affective language: Universe “proceeds from ‘the Breath of the All-Merciful’, because the latter, through the Universe, has relieved (*naffasa*) the names, from their worries about their incapacity to produce effects”³³. When the ‘Breath of the All-Merciful’ transforms Names into images of the world, the “divine lineage of the Universe” turns out to be true. In fact, we can’t get in touch with God without having any affinity with Him.

Subjective Aspect of the Unity of Existence

We can thus conclude from the first part of our paper that God is our Essence. Unfortunately we are not aware of this. But the theoretical aspect of the Unity of Existence isn’t the goal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s intellectual experience — it is the subjective side, that is, man’s union with Existence. Thus he called mystics “the People of Unveiling and Existence” (*ahl-al-kashf wa ’l-wujūd*)³⁴. The theory of the Unity of Existence teaches us that we perceive only God, but only his forms, manifestations, revelations, and acts, not his Essence. This “affinity between God and man”³⁵

²⁹ *Futūhāt*. Vol. 1. P. 253, 307; Vol. 2. P. 215. About the appearance of one in numbers, cf.: *ibid*. Vol. 2. P. 519, 581; Vol. 3. P. 127.

³⁰ The Book of Alif. P. 21 (*Kitāb al-Alif*. P. 5, lines 14—15). «It is [*al-alif*] to whom the transcendence in the Anteriority (*qabliya*) and the Union in the Posteriority (*ba’diya*) belong. Everything depends on it, but it is not the Alif that depend on anything» (The Book of Alif. P. 36—37 (modified by myself); cf.: *Kitāb al-Alif*. P. 12). Ibn ‘Arabi also says: «Thus [for example], though five is an entity, once the one is eliminated from it, it becomes non-existent; however, once number one appears, five re-appears. It is the same with regard to everything» (The Book of Alif. P. 21, cf.: *Kitāb al-Alif*. P. 5, lines 7—8).

³¹ *Futūhāt*. Vol. 2. P. 107.

³² The Book of Annihilation in the Contemplation / Trans. S. Hirtenstein, L. Sahmash. *JMIAS*. IX (1991). P. 6; cf.: *Kitāb al-fanā’ fi ’l-mushāhada* // *Rasā’il*. P. 3, lines 1—2.

³³ *Futūhāt*. Vol. 2. P. 123. Ibn ‘Arabi also says: «Names are thirsty to show their effects in the Existence» (*Anqā’ mughrīb*. Cairo: ‘Ālam Fikr, n.d. P. 33). About names and the Breath of the All-Merciful, cf.: *Fuṣūṣ*. P. 119, 145.

³⁴ *Futūhāt*. Vol. 2. P. 100. Cf. *Chittick*. Op. cit. P. 3.

³⁵ La sagesse. P. 200.

offers man a longed-for opportunity to perceive God. However, man can achieve this Unitarian vision only with love, taste and other affective categories. This love to identify with God is moved by the desire to get to the true Existence, i. e. crossing over the illusionary Existence to the authentic one.

However, “it is impossible to see God if you are not similar to the One Who is not similar to anything”³⁶, i. e. Unity of Existence requires that the individual must be one. If we want to unify with the principle of Being, we have to be as simple as it is. The task of Unity demands an opening of the self in favour of the Other. This is what Ibn ‘Arabi refers to as *al-fanā*: to release the self from its individuality and its physical states. The more the self decreases, the more the possibility to reach ‘another self’ increases. Hence, union with God is not a quantitative procedure, but a qualitative and spiritual one. This union is not a consequence of the accumulation of sensory, imaginative and intellectual perceptions, but the result of the annihilation of these perceptions and knowledge, in order to reach the core of Being. It is because this union is not a cognitive approach, but a spiritual one, which implies that we have to annihilate all traces of our human subjectivity: “His vision does not occur except through your extinction from yourself”³⁷. The way to the unity is to go beyond the physical categories to reach their opposites: to replace time by eternity, movement by immutability, relative by absolute, discontinuity by continuity, multiplicity by Unity. To go beyond the limits of the self, in order to get another vision of the universe, and to have other dimensions of Existence: these are the most important expressions of the doctrine of Unity of Existence. In one word, the aim of mystical experience is the achievement of a moment of the Unity of Existence within the self.

Existence, Reason and Heart

In this case, correlation between Existence and Intellect is put into question by Ibn ‘Arabi in favour of a correlation between Existence and heart and imagination. He tries to separate Existence from intelligibility to allow more movement to Existence. For Ibn ‘Arabi, the Universe emanates from Divine love, which is known as being synonymous with metamorphosis and mutation.

Of course, Ibn ‘Arabi isn’t interested in the physical aspect of Existence; he does not explore natural laws, or abstract categories of Being, but wants to see Existence in its divine aspect. He wants to approach it, not to know it through demonstrative means³⁸.

³⁶ *Futūhāt*. Vol. 3. P. 214. «The Unity of the Essence in itself has no known quiddity. Hence we cannot ascribe properties to It, since It is not similar to anything in the cosmos, nor is anything in the cosmos similar to It» (*Chittick*. Op. cit. P. 81; cf.: *Futūhāt*. Vol. 2. P. 289).

³⁷ *The Book of Annihilation*. P. 14; cf.: *Kitāb al-fanā*. P. 3, lines 1—2.

³⁸ «The intelligent nature, that deals within categories, is one of the major obstacles to attainment of... divine science» (*Futūhāt*. Vol. 2. P. 99). About the reason binding defect see: Sells M. A. *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. Chicago, 1994. P. 78—79; Coates P. *Ibn ‘Arabi and Modern Thought*. Oxford: Anqa, 2002. P. 40—41.

When man considers existing things as aspects and revelations of God, he becomes aware of his ontological responsibility. And this awareness urges him to improve his physical side in order to approach his divine side. When Existence becomes presence, light and revelation, we can contact it. This contact can be made only by contemplation and vision. This, of course, is one of the meanings of the Unity of Existence.

Self and Other

This affinity between God and the Universe allows man to communicate with God and get closer to Him. Unity of Existence in Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought is the affirmation that every existing thing contains some aspects of divinity. When man knows himself, he knows God: “the human interior is God”³⁹. Thanks to this inwardness, “in praying to what he believes, the believer prays to his own soul”⁴⁰.

However, it isn’t man who causes this self-knowledge, but God: “the divine revelation (to man) is an act of God, not an act of the one who prays”⁴¹. It is God who initiates the act of knowing inside man, so that God may be known, because He doesn’t like to be alone. Thus we know God by means of God, for it is He who lights up our senses, our imagination, our intellect and our heart. In every perception, every act, every affection He is there as an agent and a form, i. e. as a subject and object of our knowledge. He is in human knowledge as Himself and Other. When we know ourselves and others, we do not only know God: “He who knows Himself knows his God”. In short, the same movement that brings us to self-knowledge leads us to God.

The problem is that we aren’t aware of knowing God when we know ourselves and the Universe. We are like the birds in Farid ad-Din al-‘Attar’s poem: we aren’t aware of this beautiful discovery till after a long and painful journey. It’s true that when we have the eyes to see, we meet God. But this is only the first degree of union, which is a potential union. We must make numerous journeys, and take several paths to reach union in act, i. e. a union which we will be aware of. This act isn’t a cognitive one, but an existential one. To achieve this we practice this act by means of our whole existence, with all our sensitive, imaginative, intellectual and affective powers.

Conclusion

The Unity of Existence in Ibn ‘Arabi isn’t based on the principles of logical reason, identity and non-contradiction, but on the principle of heart. The

³⁹ La sagesse. P. 202.

⁴⁰ Ibid. P. 220. «Whoever sees you, has seen Me» (*Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries (Kitab mashahid al-asrar)*) / Transl. C. Twinch and P. Beneito. Oxford: Anqa, 2001. P. 62).

⁴¹ La sagesse. P. 217. Ibn ‘Arabi says: «The One himself isn’t one because you have proved that He is One. In fact, you haven’t proved His Unity. He is proved by Himself, and you only have known that He is One» (*Futūhāt*. Vol. 2. P. 290) and also «if Reality didn’t exist, the minds couldn’t communicate with essences of existing things» (Ibid. Vol. 1. P. 195).

Akbarian Unity of existence isn't a rational unity, it is not a kind of Parmenidean or Neoplatonic or Spinosian unity, but an affective one. According to Ibn 'Arabi, the Existence is one but it accepts multiplicity, opposition, contrariety and change in forms and manifestations, without its Unity being affected.

For Ibn 'Arabi, the Unity of existence isn't a theoretical concern, he didn't use it to solve an intellectual problem — rather, he wanted to create a new power in man, to develop in him a new ability to achieve an effective Unity of Existence. In order to accomplish this, man has to give up his identity, his essence and his individuality, to become transparent, to become a translucent being in which all things appear. The Unity of Existence offers to man a new citizenship: to become a universal citizen, a citizen living in a spiritual city where Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Hallaj, Bistami, Saint Teresa, Ibn Arabi, Ibn Sab'in... can be met, without the fetters of beliefs or doctrines. In this state of Unity, God addresses man saying: "You are my names and the indication of My Essence, for your essence is My Essence and your attributes are My Attributes"⁴². In this way, we have widened the definition of man so as to make room for the reception of the True Existence. Man then isn't only an animal who can think, but he is also a being who has a heart.

⁴² Contemplation. P. 62. Cf.: *Futūhāt*. Vol. 2. P. 230. It is evident that we have to understand this affirmation in a metaphorical sense, otherwise there is no analogy between divine Essence and human 'essence'. But, in the Akbarian perspective, metaphor is not less true than reality.