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THE PERFECT MAN AND TIME

Obviously, the problem of time is one of those important philosophical problems, the treatment of which by different philosophers and mystics differ greatly. Some thinkers hold time to be a purely illusory affair (*amr mawhūm*), while some others deny time any sort of existence, including an illusory one. Some believe time to be unbounded (absolute; *muṭlaq*) motion. It is also often said that time consists in the motion of the sphere of spheres (*falak al-aflāk*). The verifiers among philosophers hold that time is the measure of motion, a non-stable (*ghayr qārr*) existent, an existent, whose quiddity is constituted by motion and whose subject is motion.

Furthermore, some believe time to consist of a series of instants (*ānāt*) that follow each other without interruption. Another opinion is that time is the measure of existence. Some have even asserted that time constitutes the essence of the Necessarily Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*). Another group defines time as the relation of one changing entity to another one. A number of philosophers regard time as an eternal substance that is necessary through its essence. (As for those who hold that time consists of a series of subsequent instants, their point is that, in the same way as a point creates a line through its motion, an instant brings into existence time through its motion.)

Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (Mulla Sadra) says: “A point is the originator or the actor of distance, and the intermediate motion is the originator or the actor of the final motion, and a flowing instant (*ān sayāl*) is the originator and the actor of time.”¹

In turn, ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani in his “Glossary of the Sufi Terms” (*Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*) gives the following definition of the perpetual instant (*ān dā’im*): “In respect of the perpetual instant, which is the continuity of the presence of Divinity, the eternity-without-beginning (*azal*) is encompassed within the eternity-without-end (*abad*), and both of them — in the present moment (*waqt*), due to manifestation of what is in the eternity-without-beginning upon

¹ *Sadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā)*. *Risāla fī-’l-ḥudūth*. Ed. M. Khājavi. Tehrān: Mawlā, 1371 S.H. P. 67.

the moments of the eternity-without-end, and the engendered existence of each of these moments brings together the eternity-without-beginning and the eternity-without-end, and through it (the moment. — *M.Kh.*) the eternity-without-beginning, the eternity-without-end, and the present moment are brought together. And, for this reason, the hidden core of time and its principle is called ‘the everlasting’ (*sarmad*), because the instances of time are like patterns on it and changes, through which its properties and forms become manifest, while it (the core and principle. — *M.Kh.*) remains fixed in its state, perpetually and for ever; and it (the perpetual instant. — *M.Kh.*) is also related to the presence of witness (*‘indiyya*), according to the Prophet’s word: ‘There is no morning with your Lord and no evening.’”²

In his book “The Problems” (*Al-Masā’l*) Ibn al-‘Arabi says: “The eternity (*qidam*) which is attributed to the Author (*bāri*) is stripped of firstness (*awwaliyya*) – the one, whose fixedness results from non-existence, not the one in which He names Himself in His word: ‘He is the First.’”³

In turn, Jalal al-Din Rumi says in his “Mathnawi”:

The no-place (*lā-makān*), in which is God’s light —
Where is its past, and future, and present?
Its past and present [appear as such] in respect to you.
They are both one thing, but you see them as two.⁴

That is to say, in the no-place in which God’s light manifests itself, there is no difference between the past, the future and the present, they are all one thing, namely, the present moment.

Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi says: “The root of time is the name ‘aeon’ (*dahr*), which is an intelligible relation, like other relations between names and universal realities, and it belongs to the ‘mothers’ (*ummahāt*) of names. Its properties entify themselves in every world in accordance with the prescribed suppositions, entified through the states of contingent entities and their properties. And the entification of moments, days, months, years, periods and eras depends on the properties of names... The universal and all-encompassing properties of names become manifest through periods (*adwār*), while their essential properties, in the aspect of their showing a proof of the named one, and their being not different from it, become manifest through the instants. What is situated between these two levels (period and instant. — *M.Kh.*), namely, days, hours, months and years, is entified owing to what is actualized between these two principles — that is, the interpenetrating properties and what is entified between them (inter-

² *‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī. Iṣṭilāḥāt al-sūfiyya. Ed. M. Hādizāde. Tehran: Hikmat, 1381 S.H. P. 12–13.*

³ *Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī. Kitāb al-Masā’l. Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 2002. P. 18.*

⁴ *Jalalu’d-din Rumi. The Mathnawi. Ed. R.A. Nicholson. 2nd ed. Volume 5. London: Lusac and Co., 1971. P. 382.*

penetrating properties. — *M.Kh.*), namely, relations and tenuities. And the situation is like that with oneness, which is an attribute of pure existence, and manyness, which is a concomitant of contingency, and the existents, which are manifested between them and result from them.

It is the instant — the one, which is the indivisible solitary time (*zamān fard*), — which can be described as true existence, while what is other than it is a non-existent affair, regardless whether it is considered as past or as future. Consequently, the instant is ascribed to pure existence, whereas the properties of manyness and contingency are attributed to the period, while, in turn, the connection between them (the instant and the period. — *M.Kh.*) is ascribed to the intelligibility of motion — the one, which is established between the real existence and the entities.

What is realized through the essential witnessing, is transferred from the property of instant to the periods. God says (about Himself. — *M.Kh.*): ‘Each day He is upon some task’ (55:29).⁵ And when the day becomes related to Him, then it is known through witnessing and reporting that [in the actual fact] it is the indivisible instant. And at this station the servant turns his look at the mystery of His words: ‘Our command is but one, like a glance of the eyesight’ (54:50)⁶ ‘or even quicker’ (16:79).”⁷⁸

And the totality of time (*zamān*) and temporary existents (*zamāniyyāt*) exist in the aeon (*dahr*) — I mean that their totality is non-existent in the aeon, because every part exists at a [certain] moment, or rather at all moments in their entirety, while the whole does not exist at any particular moment. As for the innovation (*ibdāʾ*), which is a concomitant of the universal innovator, it does not have any entified beginning apart from the beginning possessed by the Universal Innovator, due to the former’s existing through the existence of the latter and subsisting through its subsistence.

It must be kept in mind that every universal level of existence serves as a vessel and receptacle for the realization of every reality.

The first one of these degrees is the receptacle of time and it consists of measurable engendered existence (*kawn miqdārī*), and in it the possibility of the occurrence of motion and transmutation is present, except the measures of bodies and their limits (because motion and transmutation are never stable, but the measures and limits of bodies are stable), and it (time. — *M.Kh.*) is the measure of a non-stable affair, that is, motion, which is temporally originated (*ḥādīth*) in its essence, by which I mean that its very quiddity is temporary origination

⁵ *The Holy Qurʾan*. Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. London: Wordsworth Editions, 2000. P. 461.

⁶ *The Holy Qurʾan*. P. 454.

⁷ *The Holy Qurʾan*. P. 162.

⁸ *Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī. Iʿjāz al-bayān fī tafsīr umm al-Kitāb*. Ed. S.J. Ashtiyānī. Qum: Būstān-e Kitāb, 1381 S.H. P. 184–185.

(*ḥudūth*) and self-renewal (*tajaddud*). To sum up, the existence of every existent has a receptacle. The receptacle of the flowing (or: fluid) (*sayāl*) ones, like motions and moving existents, is time (*zamān*), either itself or its vessels, namely, the hypothetical instants, which serve as vessels for instantaneous existents.

The second level is that of the receptacle of aeon (*dahr*), and it is the receptacle of the fixed existents (*thābitāt*), because the existents which follow one after another in the chain of time, join each other in the receptacle of aeon. That is to say, each finite temporary existent passes and ceases to exist in the receptacle of time, while it subsists in the receptacle of aeon, that is, in the world of fixed existents, because time consists of the relation of one changing entity to another one. What serves as the receptacle for the luminous changing entities is the aeon — and it is like their non-compound soul, void of any quantity, continuity, flux etc., and it (the aeon. — *M.Kh.*) relates to time (*zamān*) as spirit to body — or rather as the spirit of the spirit, because the spirit of time is the flowing instant. In turn, the everlasting (*sarmad*) relates to time as the spirit of the spirit of the spirit to the body.

The third level is that of the receptacle of the everlasting — and it is the relation of one fixed entity to another one (whereas the aeon is the relation of a fixed entity to a changing one). The term “everlasting” (*sarmad*) is employed to describe the relation of God’s essence to His attributes, names and knowledges (while *dahr* describes the relation of His fixed knowledges to the self-renewing entities (i.e., the existents of the corporeal world) which are the objects of His knowledge).

The fourth level is that of the receptacle of the eternity without beginning (*azal*), and it is the level of the oneness of bringing together (*aḥadiyyat al-jam’*), by which the first entification of the essence and the first of its ranks (that in which nothing except the essence is taken into consideration) are meant, as the Prophet indicated in his saying: “God was, and nothing was with Him.”

The fifth level — that of eternities without beginning (*āzāl*) — is the receptacle of the essence and of nothing else. It is the station of the Unseen of the Unseen (*ghayb al-ghuyūb*) — that which is referred to as the *hāhūt*, which is the name of the essence in respect of the falling away of all respects, and the negation of all entifications — whereas oneness (*aḥadiyya*) is the aspect of the essence, in which there is no relation whatsoever between it and anything else. In turn, *lāhūt* is the all-encompassing existence that encompasses all God’s beautiful names and lofty attributes, the concomitants of which are the fixed entities of the engendered existents, and *jabarūt* (“invincibility”) — the world of universal intellects.

The world of *malakūt* (“dominion”) is divided into two parts — the higher and the lower. The higher one consists of the universal souls, but the lower one — of suspended images (or: likenesses) (*al-muthul al-mu’allaqa*). The world of *nāsūt* (“humanity”) is the world of the witnessed, its highs and its lows.

There are people who deny the existence of time altogether and say: "Time is nothing else except the past, the future and the present. But the future is non-existent and the past does not continue to exist." And, in the common usage, the present instant is defined either as the end of the past or as the beginning of the future — but the truth is not such as they suppose, because the time, in the sense of the continuous motion (*al-ḥaraka al-qaṭ'īyya*) also exists, because the term "existent" (*mawjūd*) can be applied both to "existence" (*wujūd*), in the sense of the source of its abstraction (*mansha' intizā'ah*) and to "existent" (*mawjūd*), in the sense of what is realized through its referent.

In chapter 390 of the *Futūḥāt*, "On the true knowledge of the mutual waystations of 'The time of a thing is its existence, except for Me, since I have no time, hence you are My time, and I am your time,'" Ibn al-'Arabi says: "God says, narrating the words of a people who are the speakers, 'Nothing makes us perish save the aeon' (45:24).⁹ They speak the truth, because it has been affirmed that God's Messenger said: 'God is the aeon.' Hence nothing makes them perish save God, and this is the actual situation.

Know that time is a relation that has no existence in its entity. People have spoken at length about its whatness. The gist of their words is what we have mentioned — that time is a relation and that it arrives newly at the question 'When?' Various names arrive newly for it through the new arrival of the question, such as *hīn*, *idh*, and *idhā*. All the conditional particles [in grammar] are names of time, but the named thing is an affair of non-existence. These particles are like the word 'non-existence' (*'adam*), which is a name that names no object that has an entity, even though its property is rationally understood."¹⁰

"In respect to newly arrived things, this is time (*zamān*), but in respect to the Eternal (*qadīm*), it is eternity-without-beginning (*azal*). What the rational faculty understands by time is something imagined, extended and lacking the two sides. We judge that what has passed away within it is the past, we judge that what will come in it is the future, and we judge that what is within it is the present state (*hāl*). This last is called "the instant" (*al-ān*). Although the instant is a time, it is a limit for what is past in time and what is future. It is like a point that we suppose upon the circumference of a circle. Wherever we suppose the point to be, the origin and the end are designated for the circumference.

Eternity-without-beginning and eternity-without-end are the non-existence of time's two sides, for it has no first and no last. Rather, it has perpetuity (*dawām*), and perpetuity is the time of the present state, while the state possesses perpetuity. Hence the cosmos never ceases to be under the ruling property of the time of the present state, and God's ruling property in the cosmos never ceases to be in

⁹ *The Holy Qur'an*. P. 396.

¹⁰ *Chittick W.C. The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology*. New York: SUNY Press, 1997. P. 128. The Arabic text: *Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī. Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*. Beirut: Dār al-Šādir. Vol. 3. P. 546–547.

the ruling property of time. That of it which is past and future never ceases to be in the ruling property of the present state.

Do you not see that the Speech of God reports to us concerning affairs that have come to an end with the expression of past time, concerning affairs that are coming — with the expression of future time, and concerning affairs that are being engendered — with the expression of the present state? As for the present state, He says: “Each day He is upon some task” (55:29); as for the past, “I created you aforetime, when you were not a thing” (19:9); and as for the future, “[Our only word to a thing,] when We desire it, is to say to it: ‘Be!’, so it comes to be” (16:40); “I shall turn away from My signs those who claim greatness” (7:146); and “I shall show you My signs, so do not hurry Me” (21:37).

At all of this, we seek an entity of existence within which all of it would be, an entity that would be like its container. We do not find such an entity in reason or sensation, but rather in a containing imagination. This container is itself the contents of an infinite, imagined container that is judged to be so only by imagination. Hence — if you have understood — nothing is understood by imagination, reason, or sensation save the Real Existence that supports us in our existence.

Because of this relation, God named Himself for us “the aeon.” He did so in order that the ruling property would belong only to Him, not to the property of time that is imagined, for there is none that displays properties save God. In Him the entities of things become manifest through their properties.

He is perpetual existence, and the entities of the possible things become manifest through their properties from behind the veil of His existence, because of its subtlety. We see the entities of the possible things — which are our entities — from behind the veil of His existence.”¹¹

After that, the Greatest Shaykh explains how the principle of time can be applied to “Lord-servant” relationship: “The Lord’s time is the vassal, and the vassal’s time is the Lord.”¹² However, neither of them is the time for the other in the aspect of God’s incomparability (*tanzīh*) — but this perspective only opens to us if we consider God and the world in the aspect of their entities, regardless of their properties — “when you shift to considering the property, for which the Real depends upon the cosmos and the cosmos depends upon the Real, then it is correct that the property of each is a time for the other, as in the case of two correlatives.”¹³

The spirituality of the Perfect Man is the Universal Intellect, upon whom the actuality of all things depend. The station of the Perfect Man in respect to the

¹¹ *Chittick*. The Self-Disclosure of God. P. 129. The Arabic text: *Ibn al-‘Arabī*. Futūḥāt. Vol. 3. P. 547.

¹² *Chittick*. The Self-Disclosure of God. P. 131. The Arabic text: *Ibn al-‘Arabī*. Futūḥāt. Vol. 3. P. 547.

¹³ *Chittick*. The Self-Disclosure of God. P. 131. The Arabic text: *Ibn al-‘Arabī*. Futūḥāt. Vol. 3. P. 547.

quiddities of all other things is that of manyness in oneness and differentiation in non-differentiation (while in respect to the **existences** of things it possesses the station of oneness in manyness and non-differentiation in differentiation). He is “the Book, whose signs are made firm” (11:1)¹⁴ and God’s greatest name — the one which is all things and every thing, in which is every thing, and it is the simple reality — the one which is all existent things (while nothing is it), and the temple of unification, and the species of the species, and the manifestation of the Real, and all existences and lights, because, should it lack one of the levels of existence, it would consist of finding and missing, and would not be complete in respect to all ages. And it is the intellect, and all things are present in the intellect, and the intellect is all things, because of its possessing all attributes of things.

Whatever exists in the great world (the cosmos) in a differentiated way is contained in the configuration of the Perfect Man in a non-differentiated manner, as far as the form is considered. However, from the point of view of the meaning, the Perfect Man is the Great World and the world is the Small Man, because the Perfect Man is God’s vicegerent and the vicegerent surpasses that over which he exercises his vicegerency. ‘Ali said:

Do you consider yourself to be a small body,
While you contain in yourself the greatest world?¹⁵

Since the status of the Divinity, in which all perfections are brought together, requires the spreading of the realm of bringing into existence and unfolding the banner of power and wisdom, while the exaltation of eternity is not closely related to the abasement of temporal creation, God decreed that the vicegerency of His deputy must be established and appointed a vicegerent, one of whose faces is turned towards eternity, so that by means of it he can receive support from the Real, and another one — towards the temporal creation, and by means of it he, in turn, supports the creation. And God endowed him with the knowledge of all His names, and blessed him with the most precious of His bounties, and seated him on the seat of vicegerency through casting the measures of the affairs on him, and transferring to him the property of totality. And through the properties of His names “the Manifest” (*ẓāhir*) and “the Non-manifest” (*bāṭin*) He made the non-manifest reality of the Perfect Man the Universal Intellect, which is also named “the Highest Pen,” “the Greatest Spirit” and “the Muhammadan Reality,” and his manifest form — the world, which is the Great Man. And the Perfect Man is God’s vicegerent on the earth, which is the small world, while he contains in himself the Great World. And the world relates to the Perfect Man as the full text relates to its selection and the child to the parent, but their quiddity is one, because the spirit, which is blown into it, comes from that spirit and the door of the

¹⁴ *The Holy Qur’an*. P. 107.

¹⁵ *‘Alī b. Abū Ṭālib*. *Dīwān*. Damascus: Nūr, 1407 L.H. P. 29.

abode of the Perfect Man opens towards the world (the cosmos). And the Perfect Man is the spirit of Prophet Muhammad. And this spirit is one in its reality, and the spirits of all people, in the aspect of their being parts of the world, come into existence as its concomitants. Each of these spirits has a particular vicegerency, in accordance with its proper connection, measure and level. The number of its attributions increases through the lights, which it effuses upon the bodies and the temporal creation of multiple souls from it in the instances of human being.

In his treatise “The Problems” (*Al-Masāʾil*) Ibn al-ʿArabi says: “The Perfect Man is the centre of the circle and of its circumference, and the mirror of the Real, around which the world revolves. It has tenuities (*raqāʾiq*), which spread to the hearts of all creatures, and his way-station is the level of bringing into existence. He is God’s vicegerent, and his station is that of carrying out the command and putting into effect the ruling. The Treasuries of Munificence (*jūd*) are in his hand and the Real discloses Himself to him perpetually. The Perfect Man is God’s all-comprehensive servant — the one to whom all God’s names are ascribed through creation and realization. He is the mirror of the Real and the loci of the self-disclosure of the holy attributes and divine manifestations, the possessor of the present moment, and the entity of time, and the mystery of measuring out. He possesses the knowledge of the aeon of aeons, which is dominated by the hiddenness.”¹⁶

He also says: “The Perfect Man possesses time, not vice versa, while God alone — not anyone else — possesses the Perfect Man. To him correspond the spirits in the most beautiful forms. His spirituality is veiled from the sensory perceived human being by the veils of the Witnessed and the Unseen.”¹⁷

What is at issue in the above quoted passages, is the reality of the Perfect Man — the one, which was addressed by his creator with the words: “If you did not exist, I would not have created the celestial spheres.” And this reality — or the Perfect Man — is the locus of manifestation of all God’s names — those, which were learnt by the first and true Adam — the one, who could act freely in the entire world of existence.

This Perfect Man, in the aspect of his existence, stands above time and dominates the present moment. For this reason, he is called “the possessor of time” and “the father of the present moment.” And these are the names of the Seal of the Unbounded Muhammadan Sainthood, because he subjects the world to himself, being its spirit. He is the shadow of God and the deputy of the Real.

This Perfect Man has different loci of manifestation in different periods of time and in different places. During the era of prophethood he manifested himself as the Prophet. After the cessation of prophethood, the Perfect Man manifested himself as the Inheritor (*wārith*). Whatever is other than the Perfect Man counts as creation, but he is both the Real and the creation, because the world has

¹⁶ *Ibn al-ʿArabi*. Kitāb al-Masāʾil. P. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibn al-ʿArabi*. Kitāb al-Masāʾil. P. 15.

the form of the Real and the Perfect Man has the form of the world and that of the Real. The existence of a more excellent and more perfect world than this one is impossible. The Perfect Man is related with the entirety of the realities of the world, which simultaneously are the realities of the Real. In this way, the vicegerency is established. Nothing can prevent God from bringing together the world in one entity. The Perfect Man is the pillar of the heaven, through which God supports the existence of the heaven, preventing it from falling upon the earth. When the Perfect Man will leave the sensory world, being transferred to the isthmus, nothing will prevent the heaven from falling on the earth. Supporting the heaven is one of the properties of the Seal of the Sainthood, about whom it was said: “The provision of humankind is in his hand. Through his existence the earth and the heaven exist; through his subsistence the world subsists.”

The Perfect Man is the ruler and the commander of the worlds of existence, whereas he himself obeys the commands of his Lord and Creator. His station is best described as that of God’s vicegerency in the worlds of existence. The Perfect Man is in an unceasing companionship with time, aeon, perpetuity and eternity-without-beginning. His ruling permeates the worlds, whose receptacles are time, aeon and perpetuity, but his proper receptacle is that of eternity-without-beginning (while the eternity of eternities is the receptacle of the Unseen of the Unseen (*ghayb al-ghuyūb*)). His unbounded he-ness is referred to as “the Phoenix, [which dwells] on the holy mountain of Qaf” (*‘Anqā’ al-mughrib ‘alā-l-jabal al-Qāf al-quddūsī*), and its proper world is that of *hāhūt*. The Perfect Man has his loci of manifestation in every world. These loci are called in different names, such as “angel,” “jinn” and “human being.” His loci of manifestation in the world of engendered existence and corruption are known as God’s friends (*awliyā’ Allāh*), but in the higher worlds — as “Gabriel” (*Jabrā’īl*) and other angels — those brought near to God and the rest of them, including Iblis, who is one of the loci of manifestation of his majesty (*jalāl*).

Translated into English by Yanis Eshots