

Salman H. Bashier. Ibn al-'Arabī's *Barzakh*. The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World. Albany: SUNY Press, 2004

In the last decades, an increasing number of studies dedicated to Ibn 'Arabī were published, not to mention those which make this or that reference to his name and ideas. Salman Bashier's volume is not just another book in a row. After a series of excellent expositions of Ibn 'Arabī's ideas by distinguished William Chittick, which seem to have nearly exhausted this inexhaustible source of mystical attitude and spiritual depth, Salman Bashier succeeded in finding a completely new approach to the Greatest Shaykh.

However, this is not a novelty for the sake of novelty. In this book, the reader will find a deep philosophical treatment of Ibn 'Arabī. This was no doubt needed for a long time, and we cannot but welcome this effort. Salman Bashier only makes justice to the Ṣūfī thinker by discussing his *philosophical* views. And not simply within the context of the Ṣūfī thought; neither does he confine himself to the domain of Islamic philosophical tradition. The author of 'Ibn al-'Arabī's *Barzakh*' makes a daring attempt to place the celebrated Ṣūfī thinker within the context of the fundamental philosophical problems as such. And Ibn 'Arabī's voice, transmitted to us through Salman Bashier's discussion and discourse, sounds very loud aside the voices of Plato, Aristotle, Cusanus or Rorty.

It is very encouraging that the philosophical choir which Salman Bashier is directing was not selected for an unsystematic exposition without beginning or end. On the contrary. In the final pages of the book the author argues that the classical Arabic philosophy, and Ibn 'Arabī's thought in particular, was not appreciated as it should in philosophical discussions. To his mind, it is not just a legacy, something good only for a historian of ideas. Salman Bashier makes a claim that this is a living philosophy, that is, a philosophy which can and should stay alive in the thoughts and discussions of the today philosopher. And this claim is fully justified by his own philosophical quest.

Out of a wide range of philosophical topics Salman Bashier picks up the most fundamental one. The basic question he addresses is the question which gave rise to and shaped the Greek philosophy: how is it possible to put a limit to the unlimited? to make the infinite finite? Without finding an answer to that question we cannot proceed with any epistemological strategy, because every piece of knowledge is an attempt to fulfill exactly that task, i.e., to present in a fixed and finalized shape what exists in an endless variety of forms. Our knowledge will remain totally unrelated to the real world outside our minds until we grasp ‘The Secret of the Limit’. And though this is not an expression Salman Bashier uses, that secret is exactly what he aims at unveiling.

One could wonder if there is any good at all in bringing up this topic today, after Platonic and Aristotelic solutions to it were put forward, after they laid a foundation for the Western philosophical and scientific thought, and after they were scrutinized and criticized by many a post-Kantian philosopher. Yes, we know that the principle of the unlimited was called ‘matter’ by the Greeks, and that the limit was perceived as imposed on it through the ‘form’ which the matter receives. The ‘formed matter’ is a limited unlimitedness, a finite infinitude, an existence granted to the inexistent, stability in the endlessness change, a possibility of knowledge acquired and put to use. What a new word can be uttered after twenty five centuries of elaboration of those concepts? Why should we get back to all of this after hundreds years of criticism?

Salman Bashier explains us why. Because not all the possibilities to conceive a limit to the unlimited had been explored, because something was left untouched by the Western philosophical thought. This is exactly the concept of the Limit developed by Ibn ‘Arabī. This source suggests a totally new perspective and therefore should no longer remain neglected.

Now, how is the limit related to the concept of the *barzakh*? *Barzakh* means ‘isthmus’, a dividing zone between the two areas about which we usually think as of the two opposites: the salted and the sweet seas, this world and the hereafter, the finite and the infinite. Discussing those cases of Quranic, doctrinal, and philosophical origin, Salman Bashier makes a very deep observation: the *barzakh* not only divides the two, it also brings them together and provides for their unity. And the thing that unites the two opposites is their limit, because any unifying principle puts a limit to the controversy of the two juxtaposed.

It is this argument lying at the core of Salman Bashier's discourse that lets him bring to light and discuss Ibn 'Arabī's *barzakh* as the concept of the limit. The author is fully aware that this concept has no parallel in the Western philosophical thought. Unlike Aristotle's, this limit does not contain within itself every part of the two united things. On the contrary, they are left *outside* the limit, i.e., outside its boundaries, just like the two seas are outside, and not inside, the isthmus; nor do they 'partake' of the isthmus, as Platonic or Neo-Platonic readings of the limit would suggest. Making a long story short, it is this peculiar, or, to use Salman Bashier's expression, paradoxical character of the *barzakh*-limit that makes it possible to unite in Ibn 'Arabī's thought the unlimited and the limited, the God and the world. Had the limit been conceived along Aristotelian lines, it would have had to accomplish something impossible and 'contain' *within* itself the unlimited and infinite God. The *barzakh*-limit which unites and limits *not* by interiorizing is free from that restriction, and therefore can do what the Aristotelian limit is unable to achieve.

It looks like we have come across two, and not one, meanings of the 'limit' and the 'limited' in Salman Bashier's book. On the one hand, we have the *barzakh*-limit that unites the two and serves as a limit for them after they have been unified. On the other hand, we have the 'limited' (finite, i.e. the world, *al-Khalq*) as one of the two opposites with its 'unlimited' (infinite, i.e. the God, *al-Haqq*) counterpart, and the *barzakh* serves as a limit for the two of them providing for their unity. The interplay of the two meanings, which are quite different, calls for clarification to make Salman Bashier's excellent argument more transparent.

Elaborating this limit concept, Salman Bashier sets out to find parallels and precedents in the history of Islamic ontology. Doing so, he pinpoints the notions that are no doubt related to the *barzakh*-limit concept of Ibn 'Arabī: the *ma'dūm* ('non-existent') of the Mu'tazila and Ibn Sīnā's *mumkin* ('possible'). His choice of quotations, both from Ibn 'Arabī and from other thinkers, is perfect and always to the point. There is a vast amount of intellectual resource lying in store for a patient reader.

However good the book is, there are instants that call for critical remarks or require further elaboration. I find not really convincing those passages where Salman Bashier tries to equalize Plato's forms and Ibn 'Arabī's 'fixed entities' (*a'yān thābita*): Plato's forms are to be called limits while the fixed entities are not the limits of the existent things (*a'yān mawjūda*), — not unless they are conceived as *ḥaqīqat al-haqā'iq* ('reality of the realities'), or *al-shay' al-thāliṭh* ('the third thing'), because it is the 'third

thing' that serves as the *barzakh*-limit for the infinite and the finite, the God and the world. This 'third thing' concept is introduced in Ibn 'Arabī's *Inshā' al-dawā'ir* ('Construction of the Circles'), and Salman Bashier is more than justified in discussing it. However, he equalizes the 'Third Thing' with Plato's receptacle and not with his forms, which makes the correspondence between the two thinkers' concepts more than problematic.

As for elaboration, it concerns the applicability of the *barzakh*-limit concept to a wider range of phenomena than suggested in the book. I think the area of this applicability will be much broadened, to say the least, once we think about the *barzakh* not only as a limit between the finite and the infinite, but as a unifying principle for *any* pair of opposites. The most striking conclusion of the book, though not voiced by its author, could be the following: the unity of the opposites is *always* conceived in Islamic thought along the lines which Salman Bashier brings to light when discussing the *barzakh*. Not only within the sphere of imagination (*khayāl*) where he places it, but also in a highly sophisticated *rational* discourse, be it by Ibn 'Arabī himself, or by Ibn Sīnā (his concept of *mumkin*, i.e. possible, as a limit between the *necessary*, i.e. existent, and the *impossible*, i.e. non-existent), or by Mu'tazila (their concept of *thābit*, i.e. fixed, as a limit between *ma'dūm*, i.e. non-existent, and *mawjūd*, i.e. existent), we find the same logic of unifying the two opposites by leaving them outside the absolutely simple *third* entity which nevertheless unites and limits them. And it is not by chance that Salman Bashier opens his book with the passage that deals with Islamic principles of music: not only in theoretical discourse but in other spheres as well, in the domain of aesthetics, this procedure of unifying the opposites seems to be quite relevant. Ibn 'Arabī's *barzakh* appears to be only a prototype (logically, not chronologically speaking) of building up an opposition and finding a unifying principle for it, both within the domain of the rational and outside it. This is why I think that the implications of Salman Bashier's study are far from being limited by the conception of the Limit.

This provides but an outline for the central theme of the book. It is very rich in ideas and topics which revolve around this unifying pole in what resembles sometimes a *ḥayra*-like movement. Though some issues seem to be dropped halfway, like the paradox of the liar or a possibility to build a new epistemology immune to Rorty's criticism, they all in fact contribute to the solution of the main problem on which Salman Bashier's (and his reader's) attention is focused.

The title of the volume brings this focus to light, yet it is less informative than it should be to reveal the book's genuine value. And even the rather lengthy subtitle is not enough to disclose its philosophical significance. The reader has to be prepared to find much more under the cover of the book than the words printed on it suggest.

This is not a book for fast reading, nor is it an easily digested book. Yet it is a must for every student of Ibn 'Arabī, as well as for those whose minds are still open to discover new horizons in philosophy where all the perspectives seem to have been explored and rejected. Salman Bashier does not bring the reader to a full stop and a final conclusion. Rather, he finishes his book with an invitation for more discussion and further investigation. The door is open for us to follow.

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