# Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology on the Perennial Issue of Microcosm and Macrocosm

Edited by

Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka
*The World Institute for Advanced Phenomenological Research and Learning*

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# The Circle of Life in Islamic Thought

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In the phenomenology of Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, life is the ultimate point of reference and the center of concern.[1] Much of what she says about life's role in the world, the emergence of variety in the living realm, and the manner in which the human condition allows for "an inventive/creative profusion of representations detached from existence"[2] would be familiar to scholars of Islamic philosophy. However, traditional Muslim philosophers, faced with her phenomenology, would find her silence on several issues rather deafening. Three of these can serve as examples: first, the real nature of the ultimate point of reference; second, the supra-human dimensions of human creative virtualities; and third, the role of death in the fulfillment of life.

The starting point of Islamic thought is not the world as it gives itself to a generic us, because most people are forgetful and negligent. Rather, the starting point is the world as it gives itself to those who have heard the reminder and have remembered. In the Islamic way of thinking, the reminder comes from the Ultimate Principle both by way of the call of the prophets and by way of the innate human condition. The proper response to the reminder begins with "the assertion of the unity of the Real"—*tawhîd* in Arabic. This assertion is the first principle of Islamic thought, and it is understood as the innate intuition of any normal soul.

In both Islamic philosophy and Sufism, *tawhîd* is largely taken for granted. The philosopher or sage does not set out to explain that reality is ultimately one, because that is obvious. Rather, he wants to bring out the implications of this oneness for our perception of the universe and our becoming. In a typical treatise, the author might explain how the unity of the ultimate Principle demands the appearance of the universe along with human beings, elaborate upon the manner in which human beings play a unique role in the overall economy of the universe, and then explain why the whole process necessarily curves back upon the point of origin.

The task of the thinker is not to declare the self-evident unity of the First Principle, but rather to throw light upon the qualities and characteristics of unity and then to explain how these give rise to the world of appearances and impinge on our human nature. The point of the exercise is to set down guidelines for discerning human priorities and living a life worthy of our true nature. Philosophers will speak in terms that recall the abstracting and relatively non-mythic tendency of the Greek tradition, using the tools of Aristotelian logic and the arguments and insights of Neoplatonism. In contrast, Sufis are likely to avoid abstract terminology and discuss the Ultimate Principle in terms of the mythic language of the *Koran*

and the imagery and symbols of the poetic tradition, all the while stressing the centrality of experiential knowledge. Philosophers and, with even more reason, Sufis will speak not as theoreticians but as physicians of the soul. It is not without reason that Avicenna called his grand summa of logic, psychology, and metaphysics *al-Shifâ'*, "The Healing."

In both philosophy and Sufism, human perfection is envisaged as the full actualization of the potentialities that are present because human beings were created as complete and total images of the Real.[3] The Sufis often discuss the achievement of perfection in terms of "union" with God, which is the discovery of one's identity with the divine image and the fulfillment of the proper human role in both the cosmos and society. The philosophers stress the attainment of connection with the Universal Intellect and the actualization of the virtues latent in the soul. The language and methodologies of the two perspectives differ, but both presuppose that human beings alone, among all finite things, have the possibility of achieving a mysterious oneness with the Infinite Source of all being and a perfect congruence with the Absolute Origin of the universe.

In both Sufism and philosophy, the Ultimate Principle is commonly called *wujûd*, a word that is typically translated as "being" or "existence." Such translations, however, obscure a point that is obvious in the original Arabic. The literal meaning of the word is to find, uncover, perceive, sense, and be aware. Only gradually did it come to the preferred term to designate the ultimate Reality and to provide a means of conceptualizing existence vis-à-vis quiddity or essence. When *wujûd* is translated as "being" or "existence," we are likely to forget that it implies not only the fact of being there, but also the effulgence of life and consciousness.

In the Sufi tradition as represented by its greatest theoretical exponent, Ibn 'Arabî (d 1240), *wujûd* certainly means "to exist," but it also means "to find" the Ultimate Principle within oneself and in all things. As ascribed to the Real, *wujûd* designates both absolute existence and absolute consciousness. For the aspiring seeker, truly to find the goal of the quest is truly to *be*, and truly to be is to see with God's eyes, hear with God's ears, and speak with God's tongue. It was not only the Sufis, however, who stressed this experiential dimension of *wujûd*. Several of the philosophers also asserted that true knowing is nothing but *wujûd*, that is, a being-cum-awareness that finds the known object present in the self that knows. The ultimate goal of the philosophical quest was commonly known as "conjunction" (*ittisâl*) with the Intellect, and it was understood to mean that the seeker finds the source of all wisdom and all reality within himself. The discussion of "presential knowledge" (*'ilm hudûrî*), associated with the names of Suhrawardî and Mullâ Sadrâ, is closely tied up with the understanding that the "presence" (*hudûr*) of the known thing in the awareness of the knower is nothing but the *wujûd* of the thing. When a thing is known, it is "found" by the soul and it "exists" for the soul and in the soul.

Afdal al-Dîn Kâshânî, a twelfth century Neo-Aristotelian and a contemporary of Averroes, Ibn 'Arabî, and Suhrawardi, elaborates on the two-sided meaning of the word *wujûd* in order to explain the manner in which reality as we experience it unfolds in ascending stages. Writing in Persian, he points out that the Arabic word



existence, exemplified by the material prerequisites of specific corporeal things, *wujûd* means potential being. At the next level, in corporeal things qua specific bodies, *wujûd* means actual being. At a still higher level, in the various degrees of life found in the plant, animal, and human domains, *wujûd* means not only the thing's being, but also its potential to perceive and find other things. Only when the word is ascribed to the complete human being (*mardum-i tamâm*) does it denote the fullness of its own meaning, that is, actual being and actual finding. *Wujûd* at its highest stage is for the human self to find in itself that it is identical with all things and with the finder that finds all things.[4]

## Life and Death

*Tawhîd*—the assertion of unity that is the axiom of Islamic thought—demands that all reality be rooted in the Ultimately Real. The moment we speak of "life," we need to recognize that it can only be grounded in the Real. Not only that, but real, permanent, actual, and stable life can belong only to the Real, because the Real alone is alive by its nature. Any other sort of life—such as the life that we experience as our own—will be unstable, impermanent, and unreliable. In other words, any life other than the Real's own life must be understood along with its opposite, which is death.

The *Koran* already clarifies the ambiguity of cosmic life in three names by which it calls God—Alive (*hayy*), Life-giver (*muhyî*), and Death-giver (*mumît*). In himself God can only be alive, but when we speak of the life that he bestows upon things in the cosmos, we need to speak in terms of duality and opposition. The correlative names, Life-giver and Death-giver, express the fact that it is the Alive who bestows life and then takes it away. To say that God is "Alive" means that God alone is truly alive, and other things, to the extent that they can be considered alive, must have derived their life from him. And, in giving life, God also gives death.

In discussing the divine attributes that allow for the appearance of the universe, Ibn 'Arabî points out that each of them depends upon life. To speak of God as merciful, or forgiving, or creating—as the *Koran* often does—only makes sense if God is first alive. As Ibn 'Arabî writes,

> The attribution of life to the Divine Essence is a precondition for the correct attribution of every relation that is attributed to God, such as knowledge, desire, power, speech, hearing, seeing, and perception. If the relation of life were eliminated from Him, all those relations would also be eliminated.[5]

If "life" is an attribute of the very Essence of the Real, and if all divine attributes depend upon it, then the whole universe depends upon life, because the universe derives its being and attributes from the being and attributes of God. This is so much so, says Ibn 'Arabî, that life is inseparable from the essence and existence of each thing, just as it is inseparable from the Essence and Reality of the Real. He writes

The name Alive is an essential name of the Real—glory be to Him! Therefore, nothing can emerge from Him but living things. Hence, all the cosmos is alive, for indeed the nonexistence of life, or the existence in the cosmos of an existent thing that is not alive, has no divine support, whereas every contingent thing must have a support. So, what you consider to be inanimate is in fact alive.[6]

Ibn 'Arabî is not denying the existence of inanimate things. Rather, he wants to point out that such talk is true only from a certain point of view. Inasmuch as things and objects "exist"—that is, inasmuch as they have *wujûd*, which is being along with life and consciousness—they are in fact alive. However, inasmuch as they do not exist, they are dead. Given that, in themselves, they have no claim upon *wujûd*, they are dead in themselves. However, their cosmic situation is contingent upon participation in *wujûd*, so, to the extent that they are present in the cosmos, they are alive. Some, however, are more alive than others, and our understanding of the meaning of life determines where we draw the line between life and death. Such lines always have something of the arbitrary about them.

We can also say that everything other than the Real is woven of *wujûd* and nonexistence, so everything other than the Real is relatively alive and relatively dead. We experience life only in relation to death, so every experience of life is also an experience of death, and every experience of death is also the experience of life. Discerning the nature of the diverse appearances of life and death becomes the task of discerning the intensity of *wujûd* in contingent things. This is Mullâ Sadrâ's project when he speaks of *tashkîk*, the "gradation" or "systematic ambiguity" of existence.

In talking of omnipresent life, Ibn 'Arabî explains that "life" is another name for the divine mercy, which gives rise to the universe and which, according to the *Koran*, "embraces everything" (6:156). In many passages, he speaks of the genesis of the universe in terms of the "Breath of the All-merciful" (*nafas al-rahmân*). "All-merciful" is one of the chief divine names in the *Koran*. Ibn 'Arabî points out that mercy is in fact the Koranic, and hence mythic, designation for what the philosophical tradition calls *wujûd*. As for "breath," it is universally recognized as the necessary concomitant of life. The symbolic resonance of the term breath, however, gives it the ability to convey (more directly than the word life) the concrete, embodied reality that is at issue.[7]

In describing the Breath of the All-Merciful, Ibn 'Arabî says that God breathes living and compassionate *wujûd* into the virtualities of all things, which are latent in the divine omniscience, thereby giving birth to the cosmos. This inbreathing is accompanied by the traces of specific divine attributes that determine the nature of each creature. Hence the *Koran* speaks of the divine inbreathing in terms of speech, which is articulated breath. For example, "Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it 'Be!', so it comes to be" (16:40). God articulates each creature as a "word" in his own breath, so the underlying substance of each thing is breath. This breath is simply the divine life, or the universal spirit, or the overflowing mercy of omniscient and omnipresent *wujûd*. As Ibn 'Arabî writes, "Through life He has mercy upon the cosmos, for life is the sphere of the 'mercy' that 'embraces everything' [*Koran* 6:156]".[8]



## Traversing the Circle

In both Islamic philosophy and Sufism, the cosmos is seen as the delimitation, concretization, and sedimentation of *wujûd*, which is infinite mercy and absolute life. When God speaks, the cosmos moves from the undifferentiation of the All-Merciful Breath to embodied discourse, becoming manifest as a never-ending tale, fraught with meaning. Like words emerging from a human speaker, beings and objects become articulated and then disappear, only to be renewed in the next Breath, which is the next instant. The cosmos undergoes constant transmutation, eternally emerging from the Breath and eternally disappearing back from whence it came.

If we think of the cosmos—that is, "everything other than God"—as the divine breath within which words are constantly appearing and disappearing, we can also think of the great chain of being that structures the cosmos as a hierarchy of meaning and awareness. But there are two endless movements in the chain. In one respect, there is an emergence, beginning with words whose meanings are universal and all-comprehensive and ending with words whose meanings are particular and specific. In another respect, there is a submergence, beginning from specific and particular words and ending with the comprehensive and universal.

The emerging movement is the descent from the Origin, or the centrifugal flight from the Center. The submerging movement is the ascent back to the Origin, or the centripetal flow to the Center. This process of flight and return is not understood in temporal terms. Rather, it is seen as an ever-present, on-going, moment by moment occurrence. At every time and in every place, wujûd is simultaneously descending and ascending, appearing and disappearing, emerging and submerging. In the midst of all this, it is the task of the philosopher to discern the relevant modality in any given situation. Typically, he discusses the two grand movements under the rubric "Origin and Return" (*al-mabda' wa'l-ma'âd*)—a phrase that Avicenna and Mullâ Sadrâ both employed as titles of books.

In describing the trajectory of the originating and centrifugal movement, the Muslim thinkers insist that the manifestation of life begins in the fullness of unified awareness and consciousness. They call this fullness by a variety of names, such as "divine light," "divine spirit," "first intellect," "supreme pen," and, as we have seen, "breath of the All-Merciful." As this living and aware light emerges from its source, its blinding radiance is diminished and diversified. When it becomes sufficiently dim, it appears as realms that allow for various sorts of perception. The lower reaches of the descent are commonly called "heaven," "earth," and the "elements." At the lowest point, the flow of life and light reverses direction.

In the descending movement from the Origin, life remains invisible and traceless, first in the spiritual realm, then in the imaginal or celestial realm, and then in the four, elements, which do not exist as such in time and space. In the returning movement, the combination of the four elements gives rise to the visible and temporal realm of inanimate things, plants, and animals, and the traces of life begin to appear in the indefinite diversity of perceptible forms. The apparently inanimate world turns out to be a seedbed where the outward forms of life sprout and grow.

Mullâ Sadrâ, having described the several stages through which *wujûd* diminishes in intensity during its descent, writes as follows concerning the lowest point on the circle:

> So it continues, until it comes to an end at a common matter in which there is no good save the potency and preparedness to receive things. You will come to know that, although this matter reaches the utmost meanness and evil in its essence, it is the means for the approach to all good things, and, because of it, *wujûd* goes back and returns to perfection after deficiency, nobility after meanness, and ascension after fall.[9]

*Wujûd*, then, is nothing but the effulgent and merciful life-force that animates the cosmos. Having completed its descent, it turns back toward the Origin, making itself apparent in the three kingdoms. In the inanimate realm, the infinite potentialities of life are constrained and obscured by physical conditions. If life is to show the vast range of its virtualities, it must turn back to the invisible realm. Having exhausted the possibilities of sensory manifestation through the diversity of minerals, it begins to give intimations of its true, invisible nature through the qualities and characteristics that become manifest in plants and animals. It reaches its first culmination in the human condition. At this point it turns fully inward.

In the ascending levels that lead up to the human condition, life displays its virtualities only through the limited possibilities represented by the species and forms of the natural world. It cannot actualize the infinite potentialities of its own flowering in these confined and constricted realms, only in its original domain, which is internal and invisible. Nothing in the external realm has the capacity to act as a vehicle for all of its potentialities, save only the human form, made in the divine image.

At the surface of the human condition relative uniformity is the rule, because all human beings belong to the same species. Life's richest and most authentic possibilities unfold not in outward human differences, activities, and productions, but in the invisible depths of human souls. Alike on the surface, people are profoundly diversified by the unseen ramifications of the infinite modalities of conscious life. It is this inner wealth that overflows into activities, arts, artifacts, and cultural productions. The outward variety of human fabrication mirrors the inner diversity of internalizing *wujûd*, moving back toward its source.

The mineral, plant, and animal species are passive participants in the play of life, with relatively little access to the infinite resources of awareness and consciousness. In contrast, human beings present a radical *novum*, because they are fully open to the divine image and have no choice but to be active partners in shaping the invisible realms of true existence and real awareness. For both philosophy and Sufism, the domain of outward activity is simply the beginning of specifically human concerns. By its very nature, the returning upsurge of life moves from outwardness to inwardness, from unconsciousness to awareness, from the obscurity of death to the radiance of life, from practice to contemplation. We conform to the nature of things only by turning our attention and efforts toward the inner, invisible realm of understanding, awareness, and consciousness.

Despite the indefinite range of life and awareness that is accessible to the human species during life in this world, an even more radical *novum* stands beyond



corporeal embodiment, and that is the domain of life and awareness that is commonly called "death." In death the infinitely diverse realm of the human soul achieves an "invisible visibility" through spiritual corporealization. The increasing internalization of life that had reached its peak in the human species undergoes a profound intensification. The realm of inner experiences that had only been dimly available to the embodied soul is brought into focus as the real, concrete realm of conscious life. Death is inextricably bound up with the opening up of consciousness and awareness.

Ibn ' Arabîand others tell us that at the point of death, what had been outward, visible, and corporeal in our individual human condition is suddenly internalized to become the stable ground of our inner being, and what had been inward and hidden is suddenly externalized to become the defining landscape of our new world. As Ibn ' Arabîwrites in one of many passages describing this reversal,

> The next world is a domain that is quickly and immediately receptive to activity, just like the inwardness of the configuration of this world at the level of thoughts. Hence, in the next world the human being is reversed in configuration, since his inwardness will be fixed in a single form, like his outwardness here, but his outwardness will undergo quick transmutation in forms, like his inwardness here.[10]

From the time of Suhrawardi and Ibn'Arabî, numerous Muslim thinkers analyzed the nature of after-death experience in terms of the intermediate realm of human consciousness known as "imagination" (*khayâl*), which brings together the luminosity of pure awareness and the dimness and veiling of sense-perception. Our everyday awareness is open toward this *mundus imaginalis*, but we gain a better sense of its nature through dreams. When death removes the material embodiment that obscured the imaginal realm during life, it comes into stark focus. The senses continue to function, but they are no longer hindered by bodily objects and corporeal forms, so perceptions are determined as much by the nature of the perceiver as by the imaginal objects perceived.

According to the detailed eschatology worked out by Mullâ Sadrâ, the potential infinity of the human soul blossoms only after death. In our present human condition, embodiment prevents the *Imaginatio Creatrix* from unfolding its wings, but in the new human condition of death, creative possibilities are fully unleashed. This is not because the body was a negative factor in the development of creativity. Quite the contrary, Sadrâ and others insist that embodiment alone makes possible the full unfolding of the soul's potential. But, given that the body is nothing but a densification, sedimentation, and exteriorization of the spiritual realm, it must gradually be subtilized and interiorized. Indeed, so vast is the soul's potential for embodiment that every human being, whether of the blessed or the damned, will create an entire, independent world in its posthumous becoming. Sadrâ writes,

> The bodies and orbs of the next world are infinite in keeping with the number of conceptions and perceptions of souls. This is because the proofs that establish the finitude of the dimensions do not apply to the next world, but only to material directions and spatial

confines. In the next world there is no crowding or interference, and nothing there is located inside or outside anything else. Rather, every human being, whether felicitous or wretched, will have a world complete in itself, greater than this world, and not strung on the same string as any other world. Every one of the folk of felicity will have the kingdom that he desires, however vast he may desire it to be.[11]

## Notes

[1] "Differentiation and Unity: The Self-Individuating Life Process," in *Life: Differentiation and Harmony . . . Vegetal, Animal, Human*, Analecta Husserliana LVII (1998), p 9.

[2] *Ibid*, p 28.

[3] This is not to suggest that either the Sufis or the philosophers think that the mere fact of being human provides the necessary discernment to experience and understand the embodied image. The *Koran* differentiates clearly between those who know and those who do not know. The philosophers call those who know "philosophers" and those who do not know "the common people." For Ibn 'Arabî, those who have achieved the fullness of human reality are the "perfect human beings," and those who remain heedless are "animal human beings." In one passage he writes, "When it falls to the ears of the human being that he is created in the image [*sûra*] of the Real, and when he does not differentiate between perfect human beings and animal human beings, he imagines that the human being is in the image of God simply because he is human, but this is not so. Rather, because he is human, he is receptive to the divine image. This means that when it is bestowed, he is not prevented from receiving it. But, only when it is bestowed is he in God's image and counted among the vicegerents of God. Such a person acts in accordance with the activity of the Real" (*al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*, Cairo: 1911, volume 4, p 85, line 22).

[4] See Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of* Afdal al-Dîn Kâshânî (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp 41-45.

[5] *Futûhât*, vol 2, p 107.26.

[6] *Futûhât*, vol 3, p 324.20. In the continuation of this passage, Ibn 'Arabî explains that when something "dies," this does not mean that the body is really dead, because, like all other things, it is inherently alive. Rather, God has disconnected one living thing from another living thing. What we call the "life" of an animal is the fact that an invisible, spiritual being, commonly known as a "soul" or a "spirit," has been given control over another living thing, commonly known as an "inanimate body." Ibn 'Arabî writes, "As for death, it is the separation of a living, governing thing from a living, governed thing, for both the governor and the governed are alive. The separation is a relation of nonexistence, not of existence. It is merely dismissal from rulership."

[7] One of the best known uses of the word "breath" with the same sort of symbolic resonance is found in the Upanishads (*praña*). Ibn 'Arabî's arguments about the primacy of life among the divine attributes has striking analogies with the explications of the primacy of breath among the divinities in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.1-18, 6.1) and the *Chandogya Upanishad* (5.1-2).

[8] *Futûhât*, vol 2, p 107.25.



[9] *Asfâr*, vol 7, pp 72-73; quoted in Chittick, *Elixir of the Gnostics* (Provo UT: Brigham Young University Text, 2003), p xxiv.

[10] *Futûhât*, vol 3, p 223.31. Quoted, along with several other relevant passages, in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1994), chapter 7.

[11] *'Arshiyya*, edited by Gh. Âhanî (Isfahan, 1341/1962), p 252. For this passage in context, see James Morris's translation of this work: *The Wisdom of the Throne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p 165.