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Contemplating the One in Two: Witnessing the Divine in Marriage¹ and Prayer

Introduction

Duality has always inhered in our daily perceptions of the phenomenal realm. We employ conceptual and physical duality on daily basis to teach and learn about a notion through identifying its opposite. In the metaphysical sphere, the distinction between God, *Allah*, and everything other than God, *ma siwa Allah*, designates the duality of the Divine and non-Divine realms. In the writings of Ibn 'Arabi, whose works will be the central focus of this thesis, the reign of duality within the physical realm is a direct consequence of the duality of the metaphysical realm, he says:

Nothing makes one thing two other than itself, whether in the sensory or intelligible realms. As for the sensory realm, Adam was made two by that which was opened up out of his short left rib, that is, the form of Eve. He was one in his entity, then he became a pair through her, though she was none other than himself. When she was in him, it was said that he was one. As for the intelligible realm, the Divinity is nothing other than God's Essence, but what is intelligible from "Divinity" is different from what is intelligible from the fact that He is an "Essence." So the Essence of God made the Divinity two, though each is identical with the other. [...] The whole of the cosmos is body and spirit, and through the two of these, existence is configured. The cosmos is to the Real as the body is to the spirit. Just as the spirit is not known except through the body [so also the Real is not known except through the cosmos]²

In the preceding quote Ibn 'Arabi makes a number of interesting points. First, that the dissection of oneness into a binary is through itself, whether it is on the physical or metaphysical spheres. This description would entail similarity and difference. The similarity is due to the fact that duality emanated from an originary oneness that encompassed it; hence each part would be a signifier of the other. The difference resides in dividing totality into parts. Second, Ibn 'Arabi considered the metaphysical and

¹ Marriage is to denote sexual union between a man and a woman who are married

² Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat III* 314.22. CF. Sufi Path of Knowledge, P.358-359

physical as a duality in his proclamation “The cosmos is to the Real as the body is to the spirit”, this was alluded to in the distinction of God and everything other than God, namely the cosmos. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Arabi emphasized the similarity between God and cosmos through using the metaphor of body and spirit. In this sense, the cosmos would effectively be the vehicle of attaining knowledge of Him. It is what offers itself to human beings to be able to know Him. In utilizing the metaphor of the body again, Ibn ‘Arabi discusses the function of duality in creation attributing its existence to God’s two feet which are placed on the footstool on His throne.

Through the two feet God gives wealth and poverty, through them, “He makes to die and makes to live” (53:44), through them He fills with inhabitants or depopulates, through them “He creates the two kinds male and female” (53:45), through them He abases and exalts, gives and withholds, harms and benefits. Were it not for these two, nothing would happen in the cosmos.³

The cosmos, which should be understood as a duality since the concept encompasses macro and microcosms, tells of its Creator who combines within Himself attributes of contradiction, is suffused with dualities. It can be argued that the dualities which pervade the cosmos are a direct consequence of the dualities which describe the Divine, for His Names include; First and Last, Manifest and Hidden. Consequently He endowed human beings with the ability to see duality through the granting of two eyes.

Hence we come to know that there are two eyes, as God said “Have We not appointed for him two eyes?” (90:8). One eye is that through which he who undergoes transmutation is perceived, while the other eye is that through which the transmutation itself is perceived. These are two different paths which God has made clear to the Possessor of Two Eyes, as He said “And

³ *Ibid.* III 462.11, 463.12,27, P.361

guided him on the two highways” (90:10) that is, made clear for him the two Paths...”⁴

The possessor of two eyes is the one who is able not to merely see the duality that inheres within the physical and metaphysical realms, rather he/she is able to validate that the transmutation that a creature experiences is change that impacts it, i.e. that the being of this particular creature changes while maintaining a sense of identity. The other eye, however, sees the transmutation and change as impacting everything to the extent that no creature is the same from one moment to the other, so the plastic hold of ontology would be considered unreal. This could mean that this person would accept causality on the one hand, while also accepting the absolute reign of Divine Command without one concept negating the other. In the same instant, seeing the same object, he/she perceives it in those ways. This person would have the ability to see the Divine as both transcendent and immanent and giving Him His due right in both states. This is why when God appointed a vicegerent (*khalifa*) on earth He chose the human being, because he/she bears the similarity that is the result of being created in His form.

When someone makes something upon his own form, that thing is identical to the form, so it is it/not it.⁵

The *khalifa* is the one who rules in the name of another. In this case human beings were chosen by God to fulfill this role and be *kholafāa*. The choice was made based on His love for what He has created in His own form, His love for human beings. This Divine love is reciprocated by human beings.

Love cannot absorb the whole of the lover unless his beloved is God or one of his own kind, a man or a woman. No other love can absorb a human being totally. We say this because in his essence a human being coincides with nothing but the one who is upon his own form. [...] His outward dimension is enraptured by his beloved’s outward dimension, and his inward dimension by his beloved’s inward dimension. Have you not noticed that God is named “the

⁴ *Ibid.* III 470.26, 471.12, P.362

⁵ *Ibid.*

Outward and the Inward” [57:3]. So the human being’s love for God and for his fellow human beings absorbs him totally, whereas no love for anything else in the cosmos can do that. When a person loves one of the forms found in the cosmos, he turns to it with the corresponding part of himself; the rest of his essence remains sober in its occupation.⁶

Ibn ‘Arabi identifies that either another human being or God can completely consume the human being in love. Two activities unite the human being with those who consume him/her; marriage and prayer. The vastness of the concept of marriage which encompasses various constituents such as; social, economic...etc. is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, the only aspect that will be addressed in marriage will be sexual union. Thence, the focus of this research is to study the relational dynamic of correlative meaning existent in the lover/beloved relationship in the particular modes of sexual intercourse and prayer as recurring physical and metaphysical activities pertinent to human existence which could allow human beings to rise to the proximity of the Divine presence and fulfill their role as vicegerents.

The choice of those two specific examples of duality is inspired by two main sources; firstly, Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussion of them in his book *Fusus al-Hikam*, specifically in the chapter that carries the title “The wisdom of singularity in the word of Muhammad” where he analyzes the prophetic saying: “Three things were made beloved to me in this world of yours: women, perfume and the solace of my eye was made in prayer” , and the Quranic Verse that says: “We will show them Our signs upon the horizons and within their souls, until it’s clear that He is the Real [41:53].” Even though, a lot of scholarship has been dedicated to investigating Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine regarding intercourse and prayer the novelty of this pursuit is in presenting them as a complimentary duality that serves in actualizing the above mentioned verse, i.e. that intercourse would allow us to see His signs within ourselves and prayer would allow us to see His signs upon the horizon. The three chapters that comprise this thesis will investigate, with the

⁶ *Ibid.* II 32.25, P.2285-286

guidance of the verse and the prophetic saying, the possibility of fulfilling the role of vicegerent through sexual union and prayer.

1. The Nature of Love

“Love is closer to the lover than is his jugular vein”⁷

a. Love as a Cosmological Principle of Creation:

To try to glimpse an intimation of the meaning of love in Ibn 'Arabi's thought one needs to go back to the very beginning, to the origination of love that was described as the main impetus for creation.

His saying to some of His prophets when He was asked: ((Why did You create creation? He said: I was a hidden treasure that wasn't known and I loved to be known, so I created creation and I got to know them so they knew Me))

وكذلك قوله تعالى لبعض أنبيائه و قد سأله: ((لم خلقت الخلق؟ فقال: كنت كنزاً مخفياً لم أعرف فأحببت أن أعرف، فخلقت الخلق و تعرفت عليهم فعرّفوني))

The above quoted rendition is of a well-known Divine saying that is quite prevalent in Sufi literature. In this account God is answering to a question posed by some of His prophets. It is interesting since it alludes to God's immanence and the intimacy that could be established between God and His creatures to the extent that He would answer to a question investigating His motive to create. It depicts the Divine as an interlocutor engaged in discourse with His creatures. Moreover, the answer itself adds a myriad of meanings to the various forms of Divine immanence where He describes Himself as a “hidden treasure” that loved to be known, so He “created creation”. Thence, Divine love was the prime reason for there to be something rather than nothing. In other words, the primary reason for the initial diremption of the Divine unity⁹ was His love to be known by another. Second, this love and maybe all forms of love have an inherent affinity with knowledge. Moreover, that this love qua knowledge necessitated the creation of the cosmos that could reciprocate love and move to know. Consequently, one could

⁷ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhāt II* 339, CF. Creative Imagination, P.156

⁸ Ibn 'Arabi, *'Uqlat al-Mustawfiz*, P.78

⁹ This statement isn't meant to allude to a pantheistic understanding, but rather to signify the primordial existence of God and nothing with Him.

deduce that the interrelationship between the duality of God and the cosmos, or God and everything other than Him can be described as a lover/beloved relationship. Moreover, in this depiction Ibn 'Arabi emphasizes the Divine taking the first step and approaching creation, as a lover approaching his/her beloved, to know and love Him. This love, however, should not be misconstrued as a lack or need in the Divine. On the contrary, Ibn 'Arabi clarifies this through expounding upon the underlying motive of human love as Divinely inspired:

And if you love a being for his beauty, you love none other than God, for He is the beautiful being. Thus in all its aspects the object of love is God alone. Moreover, since God Knows Himself and He came to know the world [by knowing Himself], He produced it *ad extra* of His image. Thus the world is for Him a mirror in which He sees His own image, and that is why God loves only Himself, so that if He declares: God will love you (Quran 3:31), it is in reality Himself that He loves.¹⁰

In the preceding quote Ibn 'Arabi asserted that any feeling of love toward any being is actually love for God, because the only being that can be qualified with "real" existence is the Real, other beings do not truly exist. The Divine only created the cosmos so He can see Himself and love Himself. Thus, whenever a creature loves another it actually is God loving Himself, since nothing exists except Him. In this complete obliteration of the need for another, or existence of another for that matter, Ibn 'Arabi articulates God's absolute independence and richness beyond need, in other words, His absolute transcendence.

Yet, Ibn 'Arabi, like other Sufi masters, doesn't merely accentuate God's absolute transcendence but also His immanence to have a true understanding of Him. In fact, Ibn 'Arabi criticizes philosophy and intellectual knowledge because it only presents a transcendent God, by saying:

¹⁰ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat II* 326, CF. Creative Imagination, P.330

I call God to witness that if we confined ourselves to the rational arguments of philosophy, which, though they enable us to know the divine Essence, do so in a negative way, no creature would ever have experienced love of God [...] Positive religion teaches us that He is this and that; the exoteric appearances of these attributes are absurd to philosophical reason, and yet it is because of these positive attributes that we love Him.¹¹

The absolute transcendence of the Divine which is epitomized in His saying “There is nothing like unto Him” (Quran 42:11) does not conflict with the immanence and similarity presented in the rest of the verse in describing Himself as “He is the Hearing, the Seeing” (Quran 42:11). For Ibn ‘Arabi, if human beings were only given the transcendent negative description “There is nothing like unto Him”, which is congruent with what logic attains of the understanding of the Divine, no creature would love Him. Consequently, if love was unattainable, positive knowledge would be unattainable and His initial motive of creation out of love would be thwarted. Hence, He provided immanent positive descriptions which bear a similarity to His creation with the potential to be known, the intent to be loved.

b. The Need for Separation (Duality):

In the primordial setup before creation, there was nothing other than God. Yet, out of love, He created the cosmos to witness/love Himself in it, this motive to love necessitated a “need” for the split of the comprehensive unity into a duality; the dualities of God (*Allah*) and everything other than God (*ma siwa Allah*). With the birth of the cosmos human beings find themselves in a very peculiar place, a place in-between a number of dichotomies; existence and nonexistence, nearness and distance, transcendence and immanence, and with the expectation that they should find Him and know Him. If one were to try to traverse the path to finding Him and further investigate Divine unity, His intention to be loved by another, i.e. to create and see Himself in another, one needs to revisit the Divine saying once again:

¹¹ *Ibid*, P.146

According to a hadith, which is sound on the basis of unveiling but not established by way of transmission (*naql*), God said something like this: “I was a Treasure but was not known. So I loved to be known, and I created the creatures and made Myself known to them. Then they came to know Me.” ... We have explained elsewhere that love attaches itself only to something that is nonexistent. The thing that may come into existence, but it is nonexistent at the moment. The cosmos is a temporally originated thing, while “God is, and nothing is with Him” He knew the cosmos through His knowledge of Himself. Hence He made manifest in engendered existence nothing other than what the engendered thing was in itself. It was as if the engendered thing was nonmanifest and became manifest through the cosmos. The Breath of the All-merciful made the cosmos manifest in order to release the property of love and relieve what the Lover found in Himself. So He knew Himself through witnessing in the Manifest, and He mentioned Himself on the basis of knowledge in terms of that which He made manifest: This is His mention of the Cloud which is attributed to the Lord before He created the creatures. This is a mention of that which is all-inclusive (*‘āmm*) and undifferentiated (*mujmal*). All the “words” of the cosmos are undifferentiated within this All-merciful Breath, while their differentiations (*tafāṣīl*) are infinite.¹²

As discussed in the previous section, the Divine saying is of paramount importance to get a glimpse of the originary intention for creation. In the above quoted text, Ibn ‘Arabi provides a different formulation of the saying. First, it is not articulated as an answer to a question. Second, it doesn’t present God approaching His creation in the same manner that was presented earlier, i.e. in the first rendition “and I got to know them so they knew Me”, in the second one “made Myself known to them. Then they came to know Me”. Both differences in the second articulation of the Divine saying are coherent with Ibn ‘Arabi’s attempt to establish independence from engendered things, i.e. God doesn’t need the world yet He created it for Himself. Ibn ‘Arabi explicates the Divine intention to create after iterating God’s absolute Self-sufficiency.

¹² Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhat II* 399.28, CF. The Sufi Path of Knowledge, P.131

According to Ibn 'Arabi, "love attaches itself only to something that is nonexistent", this means that love and yearning that is associated with love can only be experienced in the event of potentiality when a lover cannot behold his/her beloved, thus the object of love is nonexistent. Therefore, the Lover, in this case God, manifested what was potentially implicit within Him so He can behold His beloved and witness it through the Breath of the All-merciful. In this breathing the cosmos is created, the potential anguish is released, and God witnesses Himself in the various articulations of the Divine word "Be!"

The paradox persists though; if God is beyond any need for the world, who experiences the anguish of the lover who cannot behold his beloved? To attempt to resolve this paradox one needs to highlight the difference between the Divine Essence and Divine Names.

Whoever wishes to know the divine Breath, then let him [first] know the cosmos, for "who knows himself, knows his Lord," Who is manifest in him. In other words, the cosmos is manifested in the divine Breath by which God relieved the divine Names from the distress they experienced by the nonmanifestation of their effects. Thus He bestows favor on Himself by what He creates in His breath.¹³

The anguish that was felt is one caused by the Names not manifesting their authority on engendered things. The Names that were given to creation to call upon their Lord were "distressed" for not being called, for possessing potentialities which need another to be present. They needed to marvel upon the forms under their sovereignty and this could only come about in the event of creating the cosmos. Thus the Breath of the All-merciful blew out what was captivated within the Names, namely their potential. In this breathing they found release. The Names, however, do not acquire any ontological reality which is separate from the Divine Essence. Al Sheikh Al-Akbar vehemently refutes the claim that the Names could have a differential reality away from the Essence by saying:

¹³ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.181

Indeed, the states (of the Names and attributes) cannot be said to be existent or nonexistent. In other words they are simply relationships having no true existence.¹⁴

He also further explains the true nature of the Names:

The [Divine] attributes have no essential reality other than that of Him to Whom they are attributed. They are merely relationships and ascriptions relating the One to Whom they are ascribed with their intelligible essences.¹⁵

The Names are relationships that link between Him and creation. And so it follows that in the sheer absence of created things the Divine Names main purpose will be inhibited and it would be in a state of anguish, desiring full actualization of its effects. Given that the Names link the One to His creation, one finds a number of enunciations of the permutation of the Divine in contingent things in Akbarian writings, such as:

Now God has shown that He is [in reality] the identity of each of the members, so that He is the only true agent, the form alone belonging to the servant. This identity is implicit in him, that is in his name [of servant] alone, since God is the essence of what is manifest and what is called creature, by which the names the Outer and the Last may accrue to the servant, seeing that he was not and then existed. Similarly, the names, the Inner and the First are His because his being manifest and his acting are dependent on Him. Thus, when you see a creature, you are seeing the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner.¹⁶

The cosmological reality, according to Ibn 'Arabi, is infused with the Divine where it is excruciatingly difficult to separate eternal from transient. He actually asserts that within the naiveté of perceived created forms one could witness four of the Divine Names that God has instructed humanity to call upon

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, P.225

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, P.226

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, P.189

Him with. The chapter about prayer will expound upon the dynamics of the Name the Last in the event of Divine-human discourse. However, what can be deduced from the previous text is that in the mere vision of any created thing one is presented with a seamless tapestry that interweaves eternal and transient in unison that defies separation, yet that did come about because of the original separation of creation. It is an enigma that Ibn 'Arabi presents which allows one to wonder about the boundary of Divinity and ephemeral things, and also allows for a certain level of sanctity that is given to engendered creation. Moreover, Ibn 'Arabi further compounds the logical dilemma of God's absolute Self-sufficiency and what can be interpreted as "need" for creation by saying;

Certain sages, among them Abu Hāmid al-Ghazālī, have asserted that God can be known without any reference to the created cosmos, but this is mistaken. It is true that some primordial essence can be known, but it cannot be known a divinity unless knowledge of that to which it can be related to is assumed, for it is the dependent who confirm the independence of the independent.¹⁷

For Ibn 'Arabi to understand Divine transcendence separate from immanence which pervades created things is a privation of knowledge. Therefore, he criticizes scholars, like he criticized philosophy, for only accentuating transcendence at the expense of immanence. He further claims that knowledge of God can never be completed without knowing Him and witnessing Him in the cosmos, the cosmos being the main signifier to His Lordship over it, and consequently to Him. The main motive for scholars, such as al-Ghazālī in that case, is to attest to God's absolute independence which for them could be jeopardized if they admitted to the veracity of His manifestation in the cosmos because it is perplexing and incongruent. For Ibn 'Arabi, this conception is shackled by logical thinking, i.e. by the mind, so for him to have an unshackled conception one must be overcome with love because it is the state that escapes reason's tyranny by accepting logical contradiction.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.93

This can be explained by the fact that love has many diverse and mutually opposed properties. Hence nothing receives these properties except that which has the capacity (*quwwa*) to fluctuate along with love in those properties. This belongs only to the heart. In order to ascribe something like this to God, look at His words, “I respond to the call of the caller when he calls Me” (Quran 2:186); “God does not become bored that you should be bored”; “when someone remembers (*dhikr*) Me in himself, I remember him in Myself.” All the revealed Law (*al-shar’*), or most of it, is of this type.¹⁸

Love is the only state that can harbor an understanding that is logically incoherent, since love’s very nature continuously tries to supersede its lovers. Love is a state that encompasses the vacillations of its lovers while trying to overcome their finitude through the mirage of infinity. Those characteristics permit love to be the most perfect state for seeking knowledge of the Divine. Furthermore, the Divine Himself has associated love to His very being in the initial creation and in continuously responding to the calls of His servants. Ibn ‘Arabi gives some examples from the Quran and from Divine sayings that exemplify the reciprocity that God exhibits whenever one of His servants tries to approach Him. Ibn ‘Arabi further claims that some of the revealed Divine Law was actually in response to servants who tried to approach Him and in His mercy He revealed for them guidelines that would allow them to achieve felicity. The assertion that love is the state that could help one understand Divine transcendence and immanence reminds one of a well known Divine saying (*hadith qudsi*) “My heaven and earth could not contain Me, but the heart of My believing servant did.” Accordingly, Ibn ‘Arabi declared the heart as the most adept organ to comprehend Divine attributes and this is due to its unique qualities;

“Surely in that, “that is in the constant change of the cosmos, “there is a reminder” of the constant change of the Root, “for him who has a heart” (Quran 50:37), since the heart possesses fluctuation (*taqlib*) from one state to another. That is why it is called “heart” (*qalb*). He who explains “heart” as meaning “reason” has no knowledge of the realities, for “reason” is

¹⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhat II* 133.33, CF. The Sufi Path of Knowledge, P.109

a “delimitation” (*taqyid*), the word ‘*aql*’ being derived from “fetter.” But if he means by “reason’ what we mean by it, that is, that which is delimited by fluctuation so that it never ceases undergoing transformation, then he is correct.....¹⁹

The heart, since it is the organ that is most associated with love, has the ability to morph into different forms and can relinquish intellectual considerations. The heart is the abode of love and, as mentioned in the Divine saying, is the abode of the Lord. Ibn ‘Arabi adds that, unlike the mind, the unique transformative capabilities of the heart enable it to mirror the Divine’s numerous states and fluctuations without impediments. The mind only accepts Divine Self-disclosures consistent with His transcendence. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Arabi uses a grammatical analysis, a tool that he is fond of, to shed light on the specific abilities of the heart and mind, where the word ‘*aql*’, comes from binding, while *qalb*, comes from fluctuation. Hence, the characteristics of each organ are described within its etymological root. Therefore, the believer whose heart is an abode for the Lord that can reflect the Divine fluctuations is one who has the most perfect knowledge, since he knows Him in every state.

He who is more perfect than the perfect is he who believes every belief concerning Him. He recognizes Him in faith, in proofs and in heresy (*ilhād*), since *ilhād* is to deviate from one belief to another specific belief. So if you want your eye to hit every mark, witness Him with every eye, for He pervades all things through self-disclosure. In every form He has a face and in every knower a state. So examine if you will, or do not examine.²⁰

In the previous quote, Ibn ‘Arabi makes a controversial claim regarding the perfection of knowledge, that is striking and quite at odds with orthodox Islam. He discerns that Divine theophanies are so diverse that even heresy counts as one. From this discernment one could deduce two things. First, that even in adopting a belief that is deviant from Islamic orthodoxy, God’s will and His being is manifest, even

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 198.33, P.107

²⁰ *Ibid.* 211.29, P.349

though heresy is an attempt to counter God. Second, this proclamation epitomizes the pluralistic Sufi paradigm which Al-Sheikh is famous for. This proclamation enfolds logical inconsistency and fragmented opinions that are at odds, to unfold the multiplicity of Divine manifestations. Thus, the responsibility falls upon the lover who has a heart capable of sailing through and mirroring all the Divine fluctuations to recognize Him in every form, to move to Him, to approach Him as a lover perseveres to meet His beloved.

c. The Paradoxical Nature of Love:

“O people, you are the poor toward God, and God, He is the Wealthy, the Praiseworthy”

(Quran 35:15)

The struggle which inheres within the very nature of love; that is especially evident in the constant pursuit and need for the beloved is the reason for love’s notorious reputation. The notions that love is associated with a need and poverty for the beloved has been discussed in the two previous sections of this chapter while accentuating Divine Self-sufficiency. Those opposing binaries of absolute independence and absolute dependence have structured an unsolvable parable that is symptomatic of the logical incoherence that plagues love. On the one hand, love conquers anyone who approaches its realm to bow into submission. On the other hand, the Divine who qualified His relationship with the cosmos as one of love is beyond need for it. Thus, the question remains how can both aspects coexist without one eradicating the other?

If one were to look for a conception of love that falls beyond the Akbaraian intellectual cosmos to try to solve the paradox and look for a logically sound explanation, one could review Plato’s words regarding the behavior of those who are enchanted by love.

**A man should allow himself to behave as lovers commonly do to their favorites
– pressing their suit with supplications and entreaties, binding themselves**

with vows, sleeping on doorsteps, and submitting to such slavery as no slave would ever endure.²¹

Plato bemoans the oppressing influence of love that a lover endures for his/her beloved. In the state of love; a lover finds him/herself bewitched by his/her beloved to the extent of losing dignity and pride. The wretchedness that overcomes the lover signifies the need that overwhelms him/her for the object of his/her love. This sorry state that engulfs the lover gets him/her to the point that he/she would accept “slavery no slave would ever endure.” Reviewing stories of lovers in any cultural and historical context one would find them replete with anecdotal experiences extreme degrees of servitude and humility.

While still outside the Akbarian realm, one tries to escape the aporetic ambush constructed by love; if love oppresses, conquers and compels the lover to accept “slavery no slave would ever endure,” why do people yearn for the intimate inferno of love? In search for an answer I resort to Julius Evola²².

In its most profound aspect, eros embodies an impulse to overcome the consequences of the Fall, to leave the restrictive world of duality, to restore the primordial state, to surmount the condition of dual existentiality broken and conditioned by the “other.”²³

In this quote Evola makes the claim that love, “in its most profound aspect”, is an attempt to overcome the dichotomy that denotes human existence as one of separation from the “other.” In this statement he doesn’t specify the identity of the other, yet later in his book he pays particular attention to heterosexual relations which will be of great value in our next chapter when tackling masculine/feminine relational dynamics. Still, here he didn’t specify who is this other. Thus for our purposes the other could designate any being that separates the primordial unity that Evola, or Ibn ‘Arabi, is referring to. In the case of

²¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 183a-b

²² Evola’s book will only be used as a secondary source in this research to aid and not detract from the Akbarian concepts.

²³ Evola, *Metaphysics of Sex*, P.44

anonymity of the other, Evola's statement could be used to interpret human relations with other human beings and human relations with the Divine. However, once we revolve the situation and the Divine becomes the lover, Evola's elucidation fails. In the first section of this chapter the Divine saying that was quoted assigned love as the main motivator for the separation, i.e. the creation of the cosmos was a necessary consequence of the actualization of Divine love. God wanted to see Himself in another and so He created everything other. In a sense, one could deduce that Evola's explication of the underlying reason for love as achieving unity is a derivative that only comes after Divine love which necessitated separation. In other words, human love would be an endeavor to return to a pre-creation stage, which means an attempt at self negation and obliteration, or as it is put in Sufi terminology of *Fanā'*. To shed more light on the intrinsic need to overcome duality and separation, we return to the Akbarian space.

Since the root is One and nothing made Him two except Himself, and since manyness only became manifest from His entity, everything in the cosmos possesses a sign denoting the fact that He is One.²⁴

If one were to apply the dictum provided by Ibn 'Arabi regarding the unity that substantiates duality and multiplicity to what Evola has said about love, one would construe that human/cosmological love as an attempt to surmount the individual's solipsistic existence. It is inherently caused by an originary oneness that has traces in the pervasive duality of everyday life. It can be said that the cosmos is in need or in a state of alienation and hence love would be the only valid means to try to bridge the primordial gap caused by separation. Ibn 'Arabi further emphasized the cosmological dependence on the Divine with regards to his doctrine of perpetual creation.

**God has decreed for each thing a term and a given affair which it reaches.
Then the thing passes to another state in which it also runs to a stated term.
And God creates perpetually at each instant (*ma'a'l-anfās*). So among the things, some remain for the length of the moment of their existence and reach**

²⁴ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat II* 314.22, CF. The Sufi Path of Knowledge, P.359

their term in the second moment of the time of their existence. This is the smallest duration (*mudda*) in the cosmos. God does this so that entities will be poor and needy toward God at each instant. For if they were to remain [in existence] for two moments or more, they would be qualified by independence (*ghinā*) from God in that duration.²⁵

The doctrine of perpetual creation has been, and still is, problematic for many scholars to fathom. A perplexity that is even noted in the Quran in Sura 50, verse 15, which says: “they are in confusion as to a new creation.” Ibn ‘Arabi affirms that perpetual creation is a ceaseless process that occurs *ma’a’l-anfās*, which literally means with breaths, referring to the Breath of the All-Merciful that released the anguish and distress of the Divine Names through creating the cosmos to manifest their authority. In this passage Ibn ‘Arabi stipulates that perpetual creation refutes any independence that could be attributed to engendered existence, since with every breath God eradicates and then creates anew. If it were the case that contingent things wouldn’t go through this influx of *maḥw* and *ithbat*, or eradication and creation, they would be independent, when God is the only independent, Self-sufficient being.

The two following chapters will tackle the communal Divine-human space that is maintained through perpetual creation, where human participation is imperative through sexual union and prayer.

For now, let us stop and contemplate the various functions of the breath. It has been discussed before that the breath releases the anguish of the Divine Names by manifesting implicit qualities that were captivated in a state of nonmanifestation. This release allows them to gaze upon themselves in the mirror of engendered existence. To understand the release that the Names experience, we resort to investigate the connection between breathing and loving.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 639.6, P.98

The root of the Breath is the property of love. Love has a movement (*ḥaraka*) within the lover, while “breath” is a movement of yearning (*shawq*) toward the object of love, and through that breathing enjoyment is experienced.²⁶

Breathing is the movement of yearning. The breath blows away not just the distress of the Names, but also the created things and replaces them with new creation. The breath is the emissary of a lover to his/her beloved. One can blow a kiss to his/her beloved in the intimacy of the breath. One can aim to remove the constriction that one feels in moments of depression only through breathing out, releasing the contents of one’s chest. In the creative action of breathing; the entire cosmos regenerates to manifest the one who caused it to exist through His Divine Breath. Since, the Breath is the movement of the Lover to meet His beloved; this movement is reciprocated by the beloved.

The origin of [all motivation] is the movement of the cosmos out of its state of non-existence, it being, so to speak, a stirring from immobility [rest]. The movement that is coming into existence of the cosmos is a movement of love [...] So it is confirmed that movement is for love, there being no movement in existence except for love.²⁷

Love causes the lover to move so he/she, or the entire cosmos, encounters the beloved, this fleeting encounter where lover and beloved intermingle to triumph over the alienation of duality, and of finitude.

d. The Need for Union:

As it has been established previously that the primordial unity had to be broken to actualize Divine love, it also became evident that this separation carried remnants of unity and thus the spiritual endeavor of

²⁶ *Ibid.* 310.17, P.126

²⁷ Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.257-258

ascent tries to recapture this unity. Ibn 'Arabi, however, proposes that the relation between Divine and cosmos is one of interpenetration, thus the link was never actually broken.

**The Real is perpetually in a state of "union" (*waṣl*) with engendered existence.
Through this He is a God."²⁸**

The union that is being referred to is manifest in the process of perpetual creation, where Divine theophanies exist through the existence of engendered creation. In having each name exercise its authority over creation, it becomes a god, since it governs over this particular thing. This multiplicity of Divine attributes shouldn't be misinterpreted to imagine a multiplicity in Divine beings. Rather, the Divine diversity, and sometimes even opposition, since some of the names are opposed to one another, is a sign of His impeccable unity, a unity that embraces multiplicity without annulling variation or being consumed by it.

God has described them, that is the heavenly host, as being in conflict, Nature itself being self-contradictory. Indeed it is the Breath that has brought about the mutual conflict among the divine Names, which are relationships. Consider, however, how the divine Essence, which is beyond this regime [of conflict], is characterized by [utter] Self-sufficiency, beyond all need of the Cosmos. Because of this the Cosmos has been set forth in the form of its Creator, which is nothing other than the divine Breath.²⁹

Ibn 'Arabi, in the above quotation that describes the heavenly conflict, makes a clear conceptual segregation between Divine Essence and Divine Names. Both share, however, the same ontological reality. Thence, the Names are in opposition but the Essence's integrity is unscathed by its condition. Al Sheikh further explains the nature of the Names by saying;

²⁸ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat II* 480.12, CF. The Sufi Path of Knowledge, P.365

²⁹ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.180

They [Divine Names] are essentially present in everything they qualify, as humanity is present in every human being, while not being particularized or divided according to the number of individual beings [in which they are manifested], remaining [purely] intelligible.³⁰

The Names are not consumed by the multitude of manifestations, since they do not have an ontological reality which can be divided in their manifestations, since their nature is “intelligible.” Even though the Names allow the Divine to be a God through connecting Him to His creation, their multiplicity doesn’t jeopardize His unity, as His love, which unites Him to the cosmos, doesn’t jeopardize His independence.

This creates a continuous state of union through creation, where the Divine continuously descends in created forms. Ibn ‘Arabi delineates the creature’s ascending movement.

What takes place for the people of solicitude, the Folk of Allah, is that God gives them vision and unveils their insights until they witness this witness. This – that is the gnostic’s witnessing- is what is called “union.” So, the Gnostic has become joined (*ittiṣāl*) to witnessing the actual situation. Then this union cannot turn into separation (*faṣl*), just as knowledge cannot turn into ignorance.³¹

If God is in a state of “perpetual union” with His creation, it would follow that there are some of his creatures who would be able to recognize Him in every state and every created thing. Those Ibn ‘Arabi called “the Folk of Allah.” This recognition, or “witnessing”, allows them to be in a constant state of union with the Divine. Al Sheikh also claims that this state cannot be interrupted and relapse into separation “just as knowledge cannot turn into ignorance.” To understand the nature of this witnessing and knowledge, we resort again to Ibn ‘Arabi to recount the movement taken by the Folk of Allah to attain this vision.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, P.54

³¹ Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhat II 480.12*, CF. The Sufi Path of Knowledge, P.365

Passing from station to station doesn't mean that you abandon a station. On the contrary, you acquire that which is higher than it without departing from the station within which you dwell. It is a passage to the second station, but not *from* the first; or rather, it is a passing *with* the latter. Such is the passage (*intiḳāl*) of the Folk of Allah. And such is also the passage within meanings. When someone passes from one knowledge to another knowledge this does not imply that one becomes ignorant of first knowledge. On the contrary, it never leaves him.³²

The Folk of Allah are those people who are allowed to have a penetrating gaze through the veils of the forms to be able to witness Him. The knowledge that they attain is a knowledge that is not a product of minds captivated by the gaze of reflection, rather it is one that is attained through the fluctuating fickleness of the heart. This knowledge is one that doesn't leave them, just as their witnessing of Him is constant, so they don't depart from Him. In one way one could say that their continuous witnessing of Him is a way of trying to perfect their knowledge of Him endowed with a need to see Him in every state.

Perfection is loved for itself, so that God's knowledge of Himself, as being beyond all need of the worlds, is for Himself [alone]. There remains only the completion of the degree of Self-knowledge through the knowledge of what is ephemeral, which stems from the essences of the Cosmos when they come into existence. The image of perfection is complete only with the knowledge of both the ephemeral and the eternal, the rank of knowledge being perfected only by both aspects. [...] Eternal Being is God's being for Himself, while non-eternal being is the being of God in the forms of the latent cosmos.³³

For someone to arrive at a perfect knowledge of God, one needs to unite the dyad of eternal and ephemeral knowledge. The yoking of both knowing Him as transcendent and immanent requires certain qualities. Some of the qualities that are concomitant to acquiring this knowledge were not even given to some of His prophets, such as His prophet Elias;

³² *Ibid.* III 225.20, P.280

³³ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.257

Elias, who was Idris, had a vision in which he saw Mount Lebanon, which is from *lubanah*, meaning a need, splitting open to reveal a fiery horse with trappings of fire. When he saw it he mounted it and felt all his lusts fall away from him. Thus he became an intellect without any lust, retaining no link with the strivings of the [lower] soul. In him God was transcendent, so he had half the gnosis of God. This is because the intellect, by itself, absorbing knowledge in its own way, knows only according to the transcendental and nothing of the immanent. It is only when God acquaints it with His Self-manifestation that its knowledge of God becomes complete, seeing Him as transcendent when appropriate, and perceiving the diffusion of God in natural and elemental forms.³⁴

Through recounting the story of Elias and his vision on Mount Lebanon; Ibn 'Arabi ascertains the imperative of lust in acquiring a perfected understanding of God as an utterly transcendent Being who is beyond any need for the world, while being immanent in every created thing that exists. The story of Elias is a signifier of the catastrophe that could overcome humanity if we forsook the natural desires and lusts that are usually associated with animality. In this story Ibn 'Arabi is making a clear statement that lust and its pursuit of fleeting hedonistic pleasures, even though it is considered futile by the intellect, is the more authentic expression of humanity. Furthermore, lust is the vehicle par excellence that could allow human beings access to the Divine realm that inheres within this world. The creation of a dynamic seamless transition from intellect to desire is what allows one to be able to have a perfected knowledge of God. Lust moves us, human beings into action, into achieving absolute unity with our object of desire. It is one of the crucial elements within the human sphere that allows human beings to escape their individual alienation. Ibn 'Arabi provides another example of the crucial role of lust in the story of Mary, the holiest of women.

When the trusty spirit, which was Gabriel, presented itself to Mary as a perfectly formed human, she imagined that he was some ordinary man who

³⁴ *Ibid.*, P.230

desired to lie with her. Accordingly, she sought refuge from him in God, totally, so that He might rid her of his attentions, knowing that to be forbidden. Thus she attained to perfect presence with God, which is the [pervasion of] the unseen spirit. Had he blown [his] spirit into her at that moment, Jesus would have turned out too surly to bear, because of his mother's state. When he said to her, *I am only the messenger of your Lord, come to give you a pure boy* (Quran 19:19), her anxiety subsided and she relaxed. It was at that moment that he blew Jesus into her. [...] Thus did desire pervade Mary. The body of Jesus was created from the actual water of Mary and the notional water [seed] of Gabriel inherent in the moisture of that blowing, since the breath from the vital body is moist owing to the element of water in it. In this way the body of Jesus was brought into being from a notional and an actual water, appearing in mortal form because of his mother's [being human] and the appearance of Gabriel in human form, since all creation in this human species occurs in the usual way.³⁵

Before one tries to penetrate this tightly knit and perilous intellectual cosmos, where the story of Mary is reconstructed and reinterpreted in a way that breaches the normality of orthodox Christianity and Islam, it is interesting to note one observation that intrigued this researcher. Despite the fact that in the original Arabic text of *Fusus*, when telling the story of Mary and Elias Ibn 'Arabi used the word *shahwa* in both contexts that is a word which could be translated as either desire or lust, the translation opted for using "lust" in association with Elias and "desire" in relation to Mary. The discrepancy in the different translations of the same term is quite telling of the enormity of the project Ibn 'Arabi undertook in trying to counter the orthodox narrative related to Mary, the holiest of women. The intricacy of this narrative, and in my opinion the richness of its approach, emanates from removing the stigma of profanity from women who engage in sexual union by having the holiest of women be engaged in a sexual encounter that produced the word of God. It is an attempt to abolish the idea that one needs to be absolved from his/her sexual identity to be pious, which in return eliminates the imaginary dividing line, drawn by

³⁵ *Ibid.*, P.175-6

religious orthodoxy, to separate religion from human sexuality as two mutually exclusive spheres that can only meet to collide.

To return to the details of the narrative regarding Mary, one notices that when she first found Gabriel in her room she thought that he was a man who desired her sexually and so she sought refuge in God from his desires. In seeking refuge in God, she elevated her human nature to be in complete union with Him in a state that is above mortal desire, i.e. she was in the same state as Elias who lost his lust and could only have knowledge of transcendence. This is why Ibn 'Arabi said "Had he blown [his] spirit into her at that moment, Jesus would have turned out too surly to bear, because of his mother's state", because in attaining union with the transcendent attributes, she became transcendent and if Jesus would've come about in this moment he would have attained the attribute of transcendence, while to achieve his function as a prophet to his people he had to carry transcendence in immanence, i.e. to be from their midst and merciful upon them, to be the word of God incarnate in flesh. So, when Gabriel informed her that he was sent by God to give her a "pure boy", noting that he didn't deny that they will have a sexual encounter, she descended from the station of transcendence to the station of immanence and she was "pervaded by desire." The lust that pervaded Mary allowed her to be a messenger that carried God's word physically. This type of lust is different from the one she thought Gabriel had in the beginning of their encounter, it allowed her to contemplate God, and behold the physicality of His word in the form of a procreation of a human being, in the intimacy of her sexual union rather than shield her from Him. The lust that she was apprehensive of in the beginning of her meeting with Gabriel, is a lust that is embedded in animality, that is functional in nature, i.e. that aims at the momentary fulfillment of physical desire paying no heed to intercourse being a medium for witnessing the Divine. In this way, it is revealed that Virgin Mary, within the Akbarian realm, is a saint who was only able to fulfill her destiny to be a carrier of God's word through releasing her hold on transcendent abstinence and embracing her own femininity in the occasion of intercourse, i.e. in absolute union with the Other.

2. Intercourse

The end of our first chapter tried to abolish the perceived rift between holiness and human sexuality through narrating the story of Virgin Mary, a hallowed figure in both Christianity and Islam. In the Akbarian depiction of the story of Mary, she became a locus for the manifestation of the word of God not through a denial of her sexual identity as a female, rather through embracing her femininity within the sexual encounter with a male, the Archangel Gabriel who is beyond both male and female identities

was manifested in this particular occasion as a male to fulfill his role. To investigate the actual occurrence of this encounter whether it was on the physical realm or on an imaginal realm is futile, since in Ibn 'Arabi's thought the realms are interconnected. Consequently, what happens within the realm of imagination inevitably affects the physical and metaphysical realms. Ibn 'Arabi's theory of imagination, which was analyzed in detail by the French writer Henri Corbin, will be developed in detail in the chapter regarding prayer since it will be pertinent when expounding on the relationship between Lord and vassal. For this chapter, it suffices to note that the realm of imagination allows human beings access to the Divine within the confinement of the physical realm. This chapter will mainly examine the importance of sexual union in fulfilling the role assigned to the human being as a vicegerent (*khalifa*). For this, we will pay particular attention to the Prophetic saying: "Three things were made beloved to me in this world of yours: women, perfume and the solace of my eye was made in prayer" and to Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation of it in the chapter about Muhammad (PBUH) in his book *Fusus al-Hikam*. This claim of the importance of sexual union in fulfilling the human being's role as a vicegerent (*khalifa*), aims to display that the action which is sometimes referred to as profane love, which is almost always associated with animality is misjudged. The human being has the opportunity within sexual union to transcend his/her finitude and gaze upon God, the infinite being. Hence, this encounter, according to the argument, would partially actualize the Quranic verse "We will show them Our signs on the horizon and within their souls, until it is clear that He is the Real [41:53]". To investigate the veracity of this statement, one needs to first understand the particularities of the feminine/masculine dynamics and their interrelationship within Ibn 'Arabi's thought.

a. The Feminine/Masculine Dichotomy as Cosmological and Ontological Principles:

Before one embarks upon this Akbarian intellectual cosmos, one must stress the fact that for Ibn 'Arabi, "feminine" doesn't simply denote a biological and sexual truth, it rather refers to an ontological being, a cosmological principle and an epistemological state of receptivity, of being a locus for truth. Sometimes,

the word “feminine” refers to one of those meanings and sometimes the three concepts become intertwined and it becomes excruciatingly difficult to discern which notion is being utilized. In elucidating the story of Mary, Ibn ‘Arabi alludes to an instance of congruence between Mary and Nature, by saying:

A corroboration of what we have said regarding the coming together of the spiritual blowing with the elemental mortal form is that the Reality describes Himself as the Merciful Breath, and all that attaches to an attribute, in the case of something described, should adhere to that attribute. You know that the breath in one breathing is all that needs to be. Therefore, the Divine Breath is receptive to cosmic forms, in relation to which it is like the Primordial Substance, being very Nature Herself.³⁶

In this quote Ibn ‘Arabi draws parallels between the blowing of the spirit of Jesus into Mary’s womb and the blowing of the Divine Breath into Nature. In both instances, whether the feminine is an ontological being called Mary or a cosmological principle, called Nature, the crucial character of femininity is receptivity. Ibn ‘Arabi counters the association of receptivity with passivity through attributing a great influence to the locus over its manifesting object.

The humility of Jesus was such that his community was commanded *that they should pay the poll-tax completely, humbling themselves (Quran 9:29)*, that if anyone of them were struck on one cheek, he should offer also the other, and that he should not hit back or seek retribution. This aspect [of his teaching] derives from his mother, since woman is lowly and humble, being under the man, both theoretically and physically.³⁷

In this sense, the attributes of the locus of manifestation, namely Mary, didn’t merely affect the constitution of Jesus, but also the character of the Christian rhetoric, or at least a part of it. The humility that is a signifying characteristic of Christian ethics, according to this analysis was imbued by its locus of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, P. 179-180

³⁷ *Ibid.*, P. 177

manifestation, i.e. Mary, the woman who carried physically the word of God and consequently impressed its own traits upon the character of its rhetoric.

To further demonstrate the parallelism between the cosmological and ontological in feminine/masculine relations away from the particularity of the conception of Jesus that was a singular occurrence, i.e. being born without a mortal father, Ibn 'Arabi says:

A woman in relation to man is like Nature in relation to the Divine Command, since the woman is the locus for existence of the entities for children, just as Nature in relation to the Divine Command is the locus of manifestation for the entities of the corporeal bodies. Through Nature they are engendered and from it they become manifest. There can be no Command without Nature and no Nature without Command.³⁸

The interdependence between masculine and feminine exists not only on the ontological realm, where they both need each other for the purposes of procreation, but also on the cosmological realm, where the Divine Command is being likened to the masculine and Nature to the feminine. The codependence of masculine and feminine elements for reproductive purposes, i.e. to bring a new creation, signifies a need for the inhering difference between the sexes as well as their utter need to unite because of, not despite of, their difference. It isn't the case that each sex coexists alongside the other, tolerating the other's existence. It is the case that each sex's existence depends on the other, whether it is on the ontological or cosmological spheres. Ibn 'Arabi towards the end of the quote enunciates this necessity. Moreover, it is worthy to note that when Ibn 'Arabi made the analogy between women and Nature or men and Divine Command, he was accentuating a particular aspect of femininity or masculinity, namely for him femininity is correlated with receptivity while masculinity is related to agency. However, as pointed out earlier, receptivity isn't equated with passivity, rather, as demonstrated in the story of Mary, the locus imprints its effects upon the thing it manifests and in this sense it has an active role as well.

³⁸ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat III 90.18*, CF. The Sufi Path of Knowledge, P.141

The higher degree and active agency which are attributed to masculinity are due to a temporal priority of masculinity over femininity, i.e. simply because masculinity precedes femininity in existence. The Divine Command is prior to the engenderment of things in Nature, *Be and it is* (Quran 36:82). Likewise, Adam was created before Eve. Thence, one could say that the hierarchical structure of the masculine being placed above the feminine is one that holds temporal value rather than ontological or cosmological value. To allocate differential ontological or cosmological value to either is to misunderstand Ibn 'Arabi's writings. The belated arrival of the feminine, whether cosmologically or ontologically, was to create an impenetrable circle of life through complimenting masculinity with its complete other, which it contained in the most primordial set up. The relationship between masculine and feminine isn't one of utility, rather it is one of unison, where each is drawn to the other because of the apparition of a memory of prior unity that undermines this duality.

Accordingly, in the chapter about Muhammad (PBUH) of his concise and enigmatic book *Fusus al-Ḥikam*, Ibn 'Arabi interprets the Prophetic saying: "Three things were made beloved to me in this world of yours: women, perfume and the solace of my eye was made in prayer". Of the three things the two that will be investigated in the scope of this research are feminine:

He [the Prophet] begins with "women" and ends with "prayer," both of which are feminine nouns, [the masculine noun] perfume coming in between them, as is the case with its existential being, since man is placed between the Essence [a feminine noun] from which he is manifested, and woman who is manifested from him. Thus he is between two feminine entities, the one substantively feminine, the other feminine in reality, women being feminine in reality, while prayer is not.³⁹

As indicated in the quote, Ibn 'Arabi's notion of the feminine doesn't carry the stigma of inferiority, since the Divine Essence is being described as feminine, and her interrelationship with the masculine, as

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.277

stated before, is one of ontological complementarity and unity rather than one of instrumentality. As a result, he insists on calling people to follow the prophet's example and love women. He reasons:

Another path in love for women is as follows: they are loci for receiving activity and engendering in order that every kind may become manifest. There is no doubt that God loves the entities in the cosmos in the state of nonexistence of the cosmos only because these entities are loci for receiving activity. When He turns toward them in respect of the fact that He is Desiring, He says to them "Be!" and they come to be. Hence His kingdom becomes manifest through these entities. These entities give to God His right in His Divinity; hence He is a god. They worship Him in all His names through their states, whether or not they know these names.⁴⁰

It can be said that in trying to remove love for women from the grasp of triviality, Ibn 'Arabi has unveiled a crucial role that the feminine plays in maintaining the lordship of God, namely the feminine allows God to display His lordship because it allows for the creation of engendered existence. The orientation of movement of God to substantiate something into existence is one of "Desire". This desire is both motive and movement that allows for the yoking of the feminine and masculine to bring about a new creation. Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabi states that the feminine/masculine binary exists within each and every individual.

When a natural form that has the receptivity to be governed becomes manifest and when a particular soul governs it, the form is like the female, while the governing spirit is like the male. Hence the form is the wife, while the spirit is the husband.⁴¹

Whenever in modern terms one speaks of a fragmentation of a self between two poles, what is intended almost always is a depiction of the tension that exists because of the existence of this duality. However, in the above quote one is presented by a binary that exists within every individual, a binary that doesn't

⁴⁰ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat II* 325.25, CF. The Sufi Path of Knowledge, P. 285-286

⁴¹ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat III* 99.7, CF. The Tao of Islam, P. 211

jeopardize the unity of the self. The self is the child that comes from the coupling of the father and mother who nourish and maintain their offspring in a state of harmony rather than discord. The coupling of spirit and form, which exist in every individual, represents the consistency of creation and recreation of the self, and hence provide a model of a dynamic self which is reconstituted every second due to the union of its father and mother within it.

Moreover, in reflecting upon the various excerpts quoted in this section from Ibn 'Arabi's writings, one could deduce that the feminine/masculine duality suffuses various spheres of existence, ontological, cosmological, and epistemological. Consequently, it would be safe to claim that the sheer permeation of this dichotomy indicates that feminine/masculine could be considered as modes of being rather than static archetypes for gender relation, which means that a being could interchangeably navigate from one mode to the other irrespective of the "actual" sex he/she identifies with. In that sense, Ibn 'Arabi would be presenting his readers with a fluid concept of gender that doesn't hinge on biological difference; it actually unshackles gender from cultural and biological particularities that could stifle it and affect its interaction with its other. The freedom to flow from one sex to the other does not mean that one isn't grounded in an originary sexual identity, whether male or female, because if this were the case each individual being would be independent from need to the other, and hence the hermetic circle of creation would be broken. The need and desire which signify the economy of exchange between feminine and masculine exist because this exchange occurs through the vehicle of love. Thence, we move to further explore the intricate space of yearning between feminine and masculine. The motivation to come together in the organic unity of this primordial existence is attained through sexual intercourse.

b. Yearning to Unite on the Ephemeral Sphere that Alludes to the Eternal Sphere:

Within the expansiveness of the space of yearning the feminine and masculine seek each other out to unite in every possible way so that they can reverse the feeling of alienation that overcome them. To

fathom the underlying reasons for this feeling of alienation and separation one must go to the very beginning, to the origination of man and woman, to witness the birth of desire in their story.

Then God drew forth from him [man] a being in his own image, called woman, and because she appears in his own image, the man feels a deep longing for her, as something yearns for itself, while she feels longing for him as one longs for that place to which one belongs. Thus, women were made beloved to him [Prophet Muhammad], for God loves that which He created in His own image and to which He made His angels prostrate, in spite of their great power, rank and lofty nature. From that stemmed the affinity [between God and man], and the [divine] image is the greatest, most glorious and perfect [example of] affinity. That is because it is a syzygy that polarizes the being of Reality, just as woman, by her coming into being, polarizes humanity, making of it a syzygy.⁴²

In this description one finds remnants of the same reciprocity that was described in the first chapter in relation to the Divine and the cosmos as archetypes for lover and beloved. Man and woman both yearn, move towards each other, recollecting the androgynous prototype of the human being they once were. The feeling that man has towards woman is one of lack, where the whole yearns for its part, while woman's feeling is that of a being severed from her origin, her home. Man signifying home for a woman marks a reversal from the western philosophical depiction, where women were associated with home ever since the Aristotelian segregation between the public and private realms, where man belonged to the public space and women belonged to the private, to home⁴³. Later on Levinas capitalized on the foundational difference constituted by Aristotle of the place each sex occupies, i.e. feminine belonging to the private realm while masculine belonging to the public realm, to encapsulate the role of the feminine

⁴² Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.274

⁴³ For a fuller understanding of the particularities of the segregation of public and private realms in Aristotle's thought, one can resort to his *Nicomachean Ethics* for reference.

in creating the abode of the self, where she is instrumental in affecting an opening and preparing the subject to respond to the call of the face of the other⁴⁴.

And the other whose presence is discretely an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.⁴⁵

The feminine allows the self to see the other, since it breaks the solipsistic carapace of the hedonistic self. Even though, the feminine alters the perception of subject by introducing the notion of alterity which she embodies, she doesn't belong to the public realm, she creates the abode, the home, the private sphere. Although, western culture is usually correlated with the emancipation of women, one could argue that some remnants of the Aristotelian distinction about the place of women survived through expressions of modern thought. Furthermore, it can be argued that women in western culture were emancipated from the physical, architectural construct of the home, yet her presence within the public realm is still met with a sense of subdued hostility due to the classical association of her belongingness to the private realm. This stands at complete odds with the Akbarian reversal of the situation, where man is associated with the home. Though, Ibn 'Arabi's associations emanate from the "archaic" Theo-mythical story of creation, he presents the feminine and masculine as an organic dual who desire each other with the same intensity. Women, in Ibn 'Arabi's reading of this story, do not reach out to men due to society's patriarchal structures that inform her that her public presence isn't welcomed. Women and men both seek with vehemence a unity that fulfills their original teleology.

Man loves and moves in desire to approach a woman because she was created in his own image, so he moves towards himself, to know and love himself. This, as Ibn 'Arabi explains, is the same movement of

⁴⁴ Levinas' philosophy regarding the feminine is dispersed in many of his writings. Yet, one can review *Totality and Infinity* for reference.

⁴⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, P.171

desire that God has towards man, who was created in His own image. Man's coming to existence dissected the originary unity of God and nothing with Him, to God and everything other than Him. Likewise, the creation of a woman has marked a dissection in the unity that existed when it was only man. For this reason, God's love for humanity is parallel to man's love to a woman. It is the love, desire and yearning to achieve total union with the self as reflected in the mirror of its complete other. The motivation to come together out of love in the organic unity of this primordial existence is attained in the physical realm through sexual intercourse. Julius Evola tries to analyze the need for sexual union by saying:

In its most profound aspect, eros embodies an impulse to overcome the consequences of the Fall, to leave the restrictive world of duality, to restore the primordial state, to surmount the condition of dual existentiality broken and conditioned by the "other" [...] Sexual love is the most universal form of man's obscure search to eliminate duality for a short while, to existentially overcome the boundary between ego and not ego, between self and not-self. Flesh and sex are the tools for an ecstatic approximation of the achievement of unity.⁴⁶

Evola in drawing upon the Theo-mythical story of Adam and Eve, has understood sexual union as an attempt to overcome human descent from the metaphysical to the physical realm. Therefore, sexual union would serve as a nostalgic act whereby human beings aim to captivate the exultation they once enjoyed away from the mundane reality of earthly existence. Moreover, in the human escape from the mediocrity of the earthly sphere through the vehicle of eros which is actualized in Evola's understanding through sex, one overcomes the dual nature of existence by uniting with the other in the sexual act. However, in trying to prevail over the fragmentation of duality through sex, Evola cages it in the confines of the fleeting orgasmic pleasure that is experienced by the lovers. Thus, he reduces the communal horizon that is created in the sexual activity to a limited exchange that alludes to but does not presence a

⁴⁶ Evola, *The Metaphysics of Sex*, P.44

metaphysical reality that underlies the physical. This deduction is based on his association between sex and flesh. This analysis is different from the Akbarian understanding of the various intrinsic allusions of sexual union.

The greatest union is that between man and woman, corresponding as it does to the turning of God toward the one He has created in His own image, to make him His vicegerent, so that He might behold Himself in him.⁴⁷

This condensed statement unveils a doctrinal conception of sexual union in Ibn 'Arabi's thought. He claims that the complete union of man isn't merely a tool to triumph over the alienation of each sex, rather the approach itself presences, since it is parallel to the initial act of creation of the human being. Thus, it can be claimed that sex and flesh aren't mere tools to overcoming the fall, but that sexual union would be the moment par excellence of recreating the initial moment of human creation. Ibn 'Arabi further annotates the effects of this union by saying:

When a man loves a woman, he seeks union with her, that is to say the most complete union possible in love, and there is in the elemental sphere no greater union than that between the sexes. It is [precisely] because such desire pervades all his parts that man is commanded to perform major ablution. Thus the purification is total, just as his annihilation in her was total in the moment of consummation. God is jealous of his servant that he should find pleasure in any but Him, so He purifies him by the ablution, so that he might once again behold Him in the one he was annihilated, since it is none other than He whom he sees in her.⁴⁸

The act of consummation as it is described by Ibn 'Arabi entails the complete relinquishing of the self and giving it over to the other not as a gift given willingly but in the yoking of the masculine/feminine divide within the milieu of absolute union. In the height of the orgasmic frenzy, the self sheds away its pretense of purity and solitude to be annihilated in the sexual act. It is made conscious of the lack that is innate

⁴⁷ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.275

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, P.274

and demands union with its partner. Within the union of feminine and masculine an intimate space opens up that is both creative and interpretive. Creative because it is productive, i.e. in procreation and interpretive because in this communal horizon of intermingling feminine and masculine identities are constantly reinterpreted rather than abolished. The interaction between them can be described as dialogical rather than dialectical, since within their yoking there is no hegemony of one certain sex over the other. The interaction can be qualified as complimentary rather than one that eliminates the difference. Being enmeshed in the fleeting orgasmic pleasure compels one to come to him/herself as a self-interpreting being, i.e. it brings focus and centrality to the question of “who I am?” within the bewilderment of sexual ecstasy. Ibn ‘Arabi explicates that the pleasure one experiences is the pleasure of encountering the Divine. Yet, since it is God’s nature to be jealous, He instructs human beings to perform major ablution, meaning that we are being instructed to gather ourselves from the devastating and ecstatic activity to resort back to Him, within whom we were made to feel this pleasure.

This is a moment of convergence between the physical and metaphysical spheres described by Ibn ‘Arabi, where the physical union between a man and a woman alludes to a higher union allows for a new creation and signifies the direct connection between humanity and Divinity. Within sexual union, occurs an intimation of transient eternity in the moment of orgasm, i.e. sex tries to approximate an experience of eternity through superseding its finitude, and this isn’t accomplished through the obliteration of the sexual difference. Contrarily, the experience presences the androgynous being that is constituted through this union and echoes of the originary anthropos that once dwelled in the infinity of the metaphysical sphere, which is necessarily constituted through both sexes. Moreover, the union Ibn ‘Arabi is referring to differs from what Evola described earlier. The action itself might be the same and some of the inhering pleasures of sexual interaction are similar, yet the communal space that opens up due to this interaction is different. The space that Ibn ‘Arabi is talking about is one that doesn’t just serve as temporary triumph over each sex’s alienation, it is a space that surmounts human alienation in general

through allowing human beings to contemplate the Divine within the human form as it is drawn on the spiritual canvas created in this moment.

Contemplation of the Reality without formal support is not possible, since God, in His Essence, is far beyond any need of the cosmos. Since, therefore, some form of support is necessary, the best and most perfect kind of contemplation of God in women.⁴⁹

The opening permits human beings to recognize the embedded and continuous link between the physical and the metaphysical, between the human and the Divine. Women are the best loci for manifestation of the image of God since they are the perfect receivers. Thus, especially in the setup of intercourse where the female is made conscious of her femininity and thus embraces the receiving activity, is she able to bear the image of God. Ibn 'Arabi further explicates the reason for love and desire being oriented towards a certain person.

As for the fact that in this love the man is attached to a specific woman and no other, even though the realities we mentioned permeate every woman, this is because of a spiritual affinity between these two individuals at the root of their configuration, natural constitution, and the gazing of their spirits. Sometimes this affinity goes on until a fixed date, and sometimes there is no fixed date, or rather the final date is death, and the devotion doesn't disappear.⁵⁰

This idea would provide the necessary basis for any attempt at a monogamous relationship. Since, Ibn 'Arabi's writings fall within the framework of Islam, he laid the foundation for restricting sexual union to marriage with the help of this notion, i.e. that love and delimitation of the beloved in a certain person occurs due to a metaphysical gazing of spirits that necessitated this connection. Yet the love which is a necessary prerequisite for attaining the vision of God during sexual interaction between married people

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, P.275

⁵⁰ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat IV 453.34*, CF. *The Tao of Islam*, P.201

is of a special type, one that emulates the example of the prophet in his love and approach towards women. Ibn 'Arabi articulates this by saying:

God made the prophet love women and gave him the strength for marriage. He praised the state of being a husband and blamed abstaining from sexual intercourse. The prophet was made to love women because they are the locus that receives the activity of engendering the most perfect form, that is, the human form, more perfect than which there is no form. Not every locus of receiving has this specific perfection. Hence, love for women is one of the things through which God favored His Messenger, for He made him love them in spite of the fact that he had few children. Hence the desired goal was nothing but the marriage act itself, like the marriage act of the people of the Garden, which is strictly for pleasure, not for producing offspring... And this [pleasure in the marriage act] is an affair outside the requirement of the love for the locus that receives the activity of engendering [children].⁵¹

Ibn 'Arabi clarifies that the prophet's love for women was due to the fact that they are the locus of receptivity. Nevertheless, he denied that the role of this locus is the mere engendering of children, since in the prophet's case he had few children and quite a number of wives. That led Ibn 'Arabi to deduce that the prophet's enjoyment of marriage was one of pure sexual pleasure, rather than the belated and extraneous pleasure of having children. One could ask, if the prophet loved women for being a locus for receiving, but his love didn't merely revolve around the locus' ability to produce children, then what else did this locus manifest to gain the love of the prophet? Also, what did the prophet gain through his love for women, so that others may follow his path in love? In an attempt to answer those questions we move to investigate the effects of sexual union on human beings.

c. Oppressiveness of Sexual Pleasure and Attaining Servitude:

⁵¹ *Ibid.* IV 243.8, P.184

Like many other serious thinkers, Ibn 'Arabi in the beginning of his life disliked the baseness and animality which are attributed to sexual needs dismissing them in favor of higher intellectual pursuits. He says:

I used to dislike women and sexual intercourse as much as anyone when I first entered this Path. I stayed that way for about eighteen years until I witnessed this station. Before that, I had feared the divine displeasure because of this, since I had come across the prophetic report that God made women lovable to His Prophet. For he did not love them because of nature. He loved them because God made them lovable to him. When I was sincere toward God in turning my attentiveness toward Him in that, because of my fear of His displeasure – since, I disliked what God made lovable to His Prophet – that dislike disappeared from me. Praise belongs to God! He made them lovable to me. I am the greatest of creatures in care for them and the most observant of their rights. For in this I am “upon insight” (Quran 12: 108). This derives from my being made to love. This is not a love deriving from Nature.⁵²

In this anecdote Ibn 'Arabi recounts the feeling of being torn between two fears. The first was his fear of being utterly consumed in the haze of sexual pleasure and the distraction of women which could detract him from his path towards attaining knowledge of God. The second was his fear that in disliking something made lovable to the prophet has been made by God, his path would not be modeled upon the prophet's and thus would not lead him to knowledge of God. This admission of Ibn 'Arabi acknowledges the pervasiveness of the perception that the desire of women and sex are lower, animalistic desires which should be conquered and tamed to achieve a higher level of intellectual rigor, i.e. to be more human. This viewpoint echoes in ancient western philosophy, in the works of Plato and Aristotle, where any preoccupation with bodily pleasures marked a degradation of the human being. However, Ibn 'Arabi revises his former position by saying that in overcoming his bias against women and sexual union, they were made lovable to him, too. This could be interpreted to mean that in allowing

⁵² *Ibid.* IV 84.22, P.186

himself to perceive women and sexual union as they are, opportunities for openness, the Divine revealed Himself through them. Not only that but also in amending his perception of sexual experience with women, Ibn 'Arabi doesn't deny that sexual desire is animalistic. He simply understands animality in a different way, he says:

People have remained oblivious of this nobility, making the marriage act an “animal appetite.” Thereby they declare themselves beyond it, even though they name it with the noblest names, that is, “animal” [*ḥayawānī*]. In other words, it is one of the characteristics of the living being [*ḥayawān*]. What is more noble than life? What they believe to be an ugliness in their eyes is identical with words of praise in the view of the perfected gnostic.⁵³

In rectifying the conceptual paradigm of animality in which sexual pleasure is situated, Ibn 'Arabi uses one of his favorite tools of interpretation, namely using etymology to reach core concepts which otherwise remain buried due to the familiarity of certain words or concepts. In this instance, he analyses the word animality which in Arabic means *ḥayawānī*, the usual stigma which is attributed to bodily desires, which is derived from the word *ḥaya*, which means life. Thus, for him what people shun as beneath humanity is that which is pervaded by life and life giving. The nobility of life and of animality derives from the nobility of one of God's most beautiful names *Al- Ḥay*, the Living One. Thus, those who know, the gnostics, will recognize the dignity of animality and give it its due course of respect. Actually Ibn 'Arabi recounts the story of Idris, the prophet who lost his lust, claiming that God reconstituted him to perfect his knowledge. He says:

Whoever wishes to discover this wisdom of Elias and Idris, which God established twice, then let him know that Idris was a prophet before Noah, and was raised up and sent down again [as Elias]. Thus, God gave him two missions. He lets him descend from the realm of his intellect to that of his lust

⁵³ *Ibid.* II 574.1, P. 188

**until he becomes a pure animal, experiencing what every beast experiences,
apart from the *two heavy ones* [man and jinn] (Quran 55:31)⁵⁴**

In the story of Idris, which was discussed in the first chapter, the dissipation of lust from his constitution hindered him from acquiring any knowledge of God as immanent. Thus, the continuation of his mission as a prophet was fulfilled through him being Elias, and through his forsaking of the transcendent intellectual realm to descend to the depths of animality to reclaim his lust and know God as immanent. As a result, the coming together of the duality of Idris and Elias would comprise a perfected knowledge of the Divine, since it fuses humanity and animality; or rather it repossesses the animality which is an integral constituent of humanity.

Since animality is revered in Ibn 'Arabi's thought to the extent that he would associate it with one of the prophets, the pole (*al-quṭb*), who is the highest of gnostics in the Akbarian cosmos, is one who privileges sexual union over all animalistic desires. He says:

Through God's self-disclosure in marriage, the Pole knows what encourages him to seek marriage and become completely enamored of it. For neither he nor any other gnostic realizes his servanthood more thoroughly than in what he realizes in the marriage act – not in eating, or drinking or putting on clothes to ward off harm. But he does not desire marriage for offspring, but strictly for the sake of appetite [*shahwa*]. He makes procreation present in himself because of a command of the Sharia, while procreation in this is an affair of nature, for the sake of the preservation of the species in this abode.⁵⁵

In enumerating all the activities that human beings perform to sustain the livelihood of our bodies, those activities associated with animality, the pole realizes that sexual union between married people is the highest amongst them. Furthermore, the pole's desire for union isn't caused by a pleasure that lies outside of it, namely in children who are produced as the fruit of this union, his desire is in the innate

⁵⁴ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.235

⁵⁵ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat II 574.1*, CF. *The Tao of Islam*, P. 188

pleasure of consummation. Thus, the pole's enjoyment of sexual union is like that of the prophet and the people of the Garden. Reproduction for the pole is a byproduct of the intense pleasure that he yearns for since in Ibn 'Arabi's words it helps him to actualize his servanthood. To focus in on the concept of servanthood and its interrelationship with sexual pleasure, we delve deeper into Ibn 'Arabi's thoughts on the matter:

The marriage act of the possessor of this station is like the marriage act of the people of the Garden, strictly for appetite, since it is the greatest self-disclosure of God. However, it is hidden from mankind and jinn except in the case of those of God's servants whom He singles out. In the same way as the marriage act of the beasts is strictly for appetite. Many of the gnostics have remained oblivious of this reality, since it is one of the mysteries grasped only by a few of God's people of Solicitude. Within marriage is found complete nobility denoting the weakness [*da'f*] that is worthy of servanthood. There is something of the severity of enjoyment [*qahr al-ladhdha*] that annihilates the person from his strength and his claims. It is a delicious severity. For severity precludes taking enjoyment in it for the one who is overcome by it, since enjoyment of severity is one of the specific characteristics of the one who is severe. Its enjoyment is not a characteristic of the one who is overcome by it, with the single exception of this act.⁵⁶

To reflect on this very unusual passage is to marvel upon a picture that draws with painstaking details the authenticity of the human condition. In this passage Ibn 'Arabi narrates the conflicting forces which are at work within every human being; the need to have control, to lose control, to attain pleasure, to conquer one's desires, and to be in a state of utter confusion. The complexity of human beings when placed in the milieu of sexual union produces the spiritual canvas that Ibn 'Arabi drew on. In inspecting this canvas, we move closer to inspect its composite elements. He begins with an acknowledgement of the ignorance of some of the most knowledgeable, i.e. the gnostics, of the sublime beauty of sexual intercourse as a vehicle of openness, that allows the perceiver to completely indulge in the orgasmic

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

ecstasy offered by this union without heed of procreation. Then he further dives into human psychology by admitting that the state of oppressiveness that human beings encounter is a state that usually brings feelings of dismay and desperation, since it prevents them from claiming the plastic control over their own lives. Oppressiveness or severity is disliked, to say the least, since it presences feelings of futility and somber rejection of helplessness, that is, except in sexual intercourse. The severity felt in intercourse conjures feelings of weakness, but also the sweetness and joy of pleasure that alleviates the sadness that can overwhelm a person when he/she feels weak. Thus the disparity of the two intense colliding feelings blends in harmony to actualize an originary servanthood that is authentic towards the lordship of something much more potent than our usual fake hold over our lives. Consequently, sheer sexual pleasure permits true servanthood to push itself to the foreground of human minds and usher the way to contemplating the Divine. Yet, after the drained devastation of sexual pleasure human beings are commanded to perform ablution, i.e. to wash themselves from the traces of this experience. To understand the underlying reasons for such a command, we resort to Sharaf al-Dīn al-Qayṣarī's interpretation.

The gnostic in taking enjoyment, believes that he is taking enjoyment in the Real, who becomes manifest in the form. Hence, he is busy with the Real not with the other. So in this case there is no jealousy. However, that form is entified and distinct from the station of the perfect Divine All-comprehensiveness. Hence it is stained with the stain of having been originated in time. It is sullied by imperfections and impurities. Hence God made the major ablution incumbent upon him, that he may become pure of the imperfections he gained by turning his attention toward the form and busying himself with it. The shaykh [Ibn 'Arabi] alludes to this with his next words;

Hence He purifies him through the major ablution, so that he will return to looking upon Him in the one whom he is annihilated, since there is none other than He.⁵⁷

Even though the gnostics know that sexual union is a method that allows them to witness God, and accordingly the form of the other person who experiences this pleasure doesn't become a veil that could hide the intrinsic Divine reality, still they are commanded to perform ablution. Qayṣarī' explains this by resorting to the fact that the form, no matter how clearly it reflects the Divine, is temporally originated, so it cannot exhibit the vastness of the eternal Divine reality, i.e. it is limited. The other person in this sexual encounter becomes a locus for manifesting God, yet the locus only accepts the image of the Divine according to its preparedness and disposition. Therefore, even the most knowledgeable are instructed to gather themselves from the devastating and ecstatic activity to resort back to Him, within whom they were made to feel this pleasure.

d. The Creative Nature of Sex:

“And Zakariah had cried to his Lord [saying]: My Lord! Do not leave me alone [with no heir]. And you are the best of inheritors.” (Quran 21:89)

Although it has been vehemently ascertained by Ibn 'Arabi that the fruit of sexual union, i.e. witnessing the Divine, is reaped within the act itself rather than later, i.e. in having children, the prayer quoted above reverberates a fundamental human need to leave behind a trace. In this prayer the prophet Zakariah, in the wisdom of his old age, cries and shouts to his lord to hear his plea and provide him with an heir, a child who carries on his legacy. Zakariah's supplication was not unheard, but was met with the merciful granting of a son, Yaḥyā, who came to Zakariah as a gift despite his and his wife's old age. I would like to reserve the right to return to their story later in this chapter. For now, I would like to investigate the underlying motive for Zakariah's request for a child.

⁵⁷ Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ fusus al-ḥikam* 475.76, CF. The Tao of Islam, P.191

The creation of a communal and interpretive horizon in the yoking of sexual union, a space which is creative in nature, has been discussed earlier in this chapter, particularly in the second section. The space summons the varied forces at work in the moment of orgasmic pleasure to allow a convergence between the physical and metaphysical spheres. Moreover, it harnesses the ontological need to unite between a man and a woman to the epistemological need to know oneself to produce the cosmological union between heavens and earth. It can be deduced that sexual union is creative in a myriad of ways that allow human beings to prevail over their finitude. Nevertheless in the resounding call of Zakariah to his lord, there is an implicit grief that characterizes human fear of perishing, epitomized in his appeal for a child, a need for leaving behind an incarnate trace of who he is, who he was, and an heir for the people of Jacob. A child signifies an endeavor to overcome finitude, to overcome death.

It can be argued that human beings aim to surmount the hindrance of finitude within the sexual milieu. This is attempted in two ways. First, it can be countered by leaving a viable trace, namely in procreation. Second, human beings can relive the originary orgasmic experience that temporarily alludes to infinity, i.e. have more sexual encounters. In those two ways human beings try to defeat their inborn finitude through grasping an intimation of fleeting infinity.

To investigate the compulsion for Zakariah's appeal to God, who couldn't satisfy himself with contemplating the Divine within sexual union and waited till old age to ask for a child, we try to perceive it through the Akbarian lens. Ibn 'Arabi says:

This is the wisdom of precedence with respect to names, since God names Yaḥyā [John], which is to say that the memory of Zakariah lives [Yaḥyā] on through him; *And We did not name anyone before him with that name* (Quran 19:7). He combined in himself both the attribute [of prophecy] inherent in all those that have passed on, but whose memory lives on in a son, and the distinction of being named in that way.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P. 219

In responding to Zakariah's plea, God provides him with the repose of a child, the heir he requested to receive his ancestors' heritage and present it to others. Thus, it can be said that Yaḥyā brought forth Zakariah himself. Actually Ibn 'Arabi says that parents' memories live on through their children, that parents live vicariously through their children. In Zakariah's case, God provided his son with a name that corresponds to the effect of having children, since Yaḥyā is derived from the word ḥayā which means life. Thus, Yaḥyā was the first son to be named after the greatest gift that children provide their parents, namely the continuation and extension of their lives, the transient triumph over human finitude.

Furthermore, to consider the Arabic word *khalaf*, which means to have children or to come after –which is their temporal arrangement after their parents-, one notices a resemblance between it and the word *khalifa* (vicegerent), which is the Divinely given role of human beings on earth. This linguistic similarity makes one ponder whether in the act of procreation, in bringing a child to the world, a new microcosm, human beings are able to partially fulfill one of the obligations of being a *khalifa*. That, however, doesn't mean that having children in general is the absolute fulfillment of vicegerency, or that any child is able to be an inheritor for his/her parents legacy. The Quran is filled with verses that warn believers from their next of kin, such as “your wealth and your children are only a temptation, whereas Allah, with Him is the highest reward” (64:15), or the story of al-Khidr and his journey with Moses, where he killed the young boy because he feared that he will inflict suffering on his believing parents. Thus, the child who is able to be an heir must have specific characteristics that would enable his/her parent to be a *khalifa*. In revisiting Zakariah's request, one notices that even though he asked God to provide him with an heir, he acknowledged that God is the best inheritor because of the inherent deficiency of human beings to project the Divine comprehensiveness. Furthermore, love for children can, much like love for a partner, completely consume a person and veil the face of God that can shine through the human form. Ibn 'Arabi articulates the all consuming power of love for another by saying:

Love cannot absorb the whole of the lover unless his beloved is God or one of his own kind, a man or a woman. No other love can absorb a human being totally. We say this because in his essence a human being coincides with nothing but the one who is upon his own form. [...] His outward dimension is enraptured by his beloved's outward dimension, and his inward dimension by his beloved's inward dimension. Have you not noticed that God is named "the Outward and the Inward" [57:3]. So the human being's love for God and for his fellow human beings absorbs him totally, whereas no love for anything else in the cosmos can do that. When a person loves one of the forms found in the cosmos, he turns to it with the corresponding part of himself; the rest of his essence remains sober in its occupation.⁵⁹

In this quote Ibn 'Arabi asserts that the complete dissolving of the human being in love can only happen when he/she is consumed in a relationship with either God or another human being. This idea was previously presented in his discussion regarding the annihilating effect of the sexual union and the creation of a spiritual canvas that allows for the revealing of God. The question that could be asked is, if one is made to see the Divine in the creativity of sexual intercourse, i.e. in sexual pleasure and in having children, then why are human beings warned against their loved ones, and instructed to wash themselves from the traces of their beloved? An answer that could be provided is twofold. First, the nature of intercourse itself is an isolating one. It is a private matter that removes a person from everything other than him/herself. Thus, ablution would signify the washing away of the trace of otherness that could occupy and veil one from beholding the Divine. Secondly, human beings are Divinely assigned vicegerents, who are and have the possibility to carry within themselves other microcosms. Hence, they have the duty to actualize the synchrony between the various constituents of macro and microcosms. In other words, the human being should, as Ibn 'Arabi described, love different parts of the cosmos and "turn to it with the corresponding part of himself", to see Him who is revealed in everything, "We will show them Our signs upon the horizon and within their souls, until it is clear the He is the Real [41:53]." Thus, it follows from the role of human beings that they should witness His signs,

⁵⁹ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat II* 32.25. Cf. Sufi Path of Knowledge, P.2285-286

not just in themselves as epitomized in sexual intercourse, but also outside. In this movement from the intimate set up of sexual union, one could find another activity that encompasses the various cosmological elements, namely prayer, Ibn 'Arabi's concept of prayer will be explicated in the following chapter. However, it is unique, in the sense that it involves numerous elements worth investigating. What is worth mentioning here is though prayer is a manifestation of the lover/beloved duality which is particularized in the lord/vassal relationship, the actual movements performed encompass the multiplicity of the cosmological elements. Thus, unlike sexual union that completely absorbs human form and spirit, prayer absorbs form and spirit while opening one's being to coincide with its corresponding constituents, i.e. to witness Him on the horizon.

3. Prayer

“It is He who prays over you and His angels that He may bring you from darkness into the light and He is Merciful to the believers” (Quran 33:43)

After a person washes away, in major ablution, the traces of otherness that could cling to him/herself through the intimate experience of sexual union, he/she is instructed to reorient his/her attentiveness towards the act that puts him/her in direct relation to God, namely to pray. As was pointed out in the previous chapter prayer encompasses the movement of the various cosmological elements. Moreover, unlike the private nature of sexual intercourse, it is performed in public and it is preferable to pray within a community than individually. Thus, even initially we can glimpse the vast difference between the parameters of the spiritual canvas created by sexual union and prayer. This chapter will aim to prove that prayer, like sexual union, is an obligation that is crucial to fulfilling the human role as vicegerent. This will be accomplished with the guidance of the Prophetic saying: “Three things were made beloved to me in this world of yours: women, perfume and the solace of my eye was made in prayer”, and the verse: “We will show them Our signs upon the horizon and within their souls, until it’s clear the He is the Real [41:53].”

To understand the dynamics of prayer and how it can allow human beings the opportunity to actualize their role as vicegerents, one must first begin with understanding the setup of prayer, i.e. to understand it as a “place” that puts the vassal in direct contact with his/her Lord. This necessitates understanding firstly the separation of Lord and vassal.

a. The Lord/Vassal Dichotomy:

To try to make sense of the necessity of the Lord/vassal duality one must return to the very beginning, to the origination and creation of the first vassal, first vicegerent, and first human being, to retrace our steps all the way back to the creation of the father of humanity, to Adam. Ibn 'Arabi reiterates the initial motive in the story of genesis by saying:

The Reality wanted to see the essences of His Most Beautiful Names or, to put it another way, to see His own Essence, in an all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [Divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery. For the seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror [...] Thus the [Divine] Command required [by its very nature] the reflective characteristic of the mirror of the Cosmos, and Adam was the very principle of reflection for that mirror and the spirit of that form [...] For the Reality, he [Adam] is the pupil for the eye through which the act of seeing takes place. Thus he is called *insān* [meaning both man and pupil], for it is by him that the Reality looks on His creation and bestows the Mercy [of existence] on them. He is Man, the transient [in his form], the eternal [in his essence]; he is the perpetual, the everlasting, the [at once] discriminating and unifying Word. It is by his existence that the Cosmos subsists, and he is, in relation to the Cosmos, as the seal is to the ring, the seal being that place whereon is engraved the token with which the King seals his treasure.⁶⁰

In this narrative of genesis, Ibn 'Arabi emphasizes the central role the human being plays in fulfilling the Divine motive for creation, namely to know and see Himself. Before one embarks on analyzing the intricate details that are recounted above, one should substantiate the reason for Ibn 'Arabi's blatant anthropocentric cosmological setup. Without aiming to refute or undermine the privileged place that Ibn 'Arabi allows human beings, one should first try to understand his rationale from two vantage points; the religious and the philosophical. The religious perspective grants Adam, and some human beings, an

⁶⁰ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P. 50-51

esteemed position in the cosmological setup, for if we were to continue the story of Adam in the Quranic context, we would find that God kneaded the clay from which Adam was made from with His own hands and after blowing from His spirit into him, He taught Him all the Names and commanded the angels to prostrate themselves to him (Quran 2:30-34). Ibn 'Arabi's writings and thought being embedded within the Islamic context mandated to allow some human beings the esteemed position awarded by God. If we were to investigate Ibn 'Arabi's anthropocentrism from a philosophical standpoint, it would be revealed that rhetoric necessitates by its very nature human participation and thence the structure of any discourse is anthropocentric. Therefore, one could say that Ibn 'Arabi's admission of the centrality of the human being in the cosmos doesn't emanate from an egoistic tendency but rather it emanates as an authentic expression which is in congruence with theological doctrine and philosophical considerations.

To return to the details of the quote, we find that Ibn 'Arabi in discussing the story of creation of Adam alludes to the initial motive of creation that was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, namely His love to be known which is epitomized in the Divine saying of the Hidden Treasure. Yet here he doesn't merely describe the process of creation as that which fulfills the Divine desire of being known, but he differentiates between the cosmos and the human being as two objects that manifest the Divine Names and hence release their anguish by making their authority manifest. His differentiation is based on the criterion that God wanted "an all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [Divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery." The ability of an object to encompass the variation of Divine manifestations, i.e. variations of the Divine Names, is the characteristic distinguishing between cosmos and Adam that permit Ibn 'Arabi to explain human primacy over the cosmos. The cosmos, or the macrocosm, embodies the various Divine manifestations since it comes about through theophany. However, the manifestations in the macrocosm are dispersed in the various creatures that constitute it, i.e. no single creature of the cosmos, except for the human being, can claim to be the full articulation of the Divine command "Be!" Adam, nevertheless, is a microcosm, containing within himself all the various articulations of the command "Be!" This can be corroborated through returning to the

Quran Surah 2, verses 30-34, where God informs the angels that He will make Adam a vicegerent (*khalifa*), and they object and God proves to them Adam's superior knowledge because He taught him all the Names. If one were to join those two points, that Adam is a microcosm and that he embodies all the Divine Names, it would be evident why Ibn 'Arabi presented such an anthropocentric cosmological scheme.

Furthermore, it could be argued that Ibn 'Arabi's cosmological depiction isn't solely anthropocentric but also anthropocosmic. This means that Ibn 'Arabi didn't just place the human being at the top of the hierarchy separated from the rest of the cosmos; he emphasized the connection between human being and world, between the microcosm and macrocosm. The establishing of a connection is done through placing Adam as "the very principle of reflection for that mirror [of the cosmos] and the spirit of that form." Adam is the spirit that animates the form of the cosmos, since he is the creature into whom God blew from His own spirit. Thence, Adam became the spirit of the world. Moreover, when God created both micro and macrocosms to witness Himself in them, He appointed Adam, and his children after him, as vicegerent. The vicegerency given to Adam entailed that God see through him and governs through him. Thus, Adam became "[for the Real] the pupil for the eye through which the act of seeing takes place." When Ibn 'Arabi analyzed the place of Adam (or human beings in general) in the cosmos he accentuated the relation between him and the cosmos. It is Adam who acts on behalf of the Divine to preserve the cosmos. From this point we take our departure to investigate the human gaze through which God looks upon His creation.

b. The Vassal's Unswerving Gaze:

The quotation in the previous section describes Adam as the pupil of God's eye, the one who enables the Divine to look upon Himself and His creation. The faculty of sight which is given to Adam and his children is a tool that allows them, allows us, to gain access to the cosmos, to witness it, to understand it, and, according to Ibn 'Arabi, to preserve it. Nevertheless, if we were to analyze the nature of sight, we would

find that sight captures and captivates. It holds the object in its nakedness to dissect and analyze it, and in this holding the object escapes the grasp of sight. Moreover, sight wanders to be able to attain a full view. Hans Jonas in his beautiful article “The Nobility of Sight” describes it as follows:

Sight is par excellence the sense of the simultaneous or the coordinated, and thereby the extensive. A view comprehends many things juxtaposed as co-existent parts of one field of vision. It does so in an instant: as in a flash, one glance, an opening of the eyes discloses the world of co-present qualities spread out in space, ranged in depth, continuing in the indefinite distance, suggesting, if any direction in their static order, then by their perspective a direction away from the subject rather than towards it.⁶¹

Jonas describes the rush of stimuli that is experienced in the moment of sight. It allows access to the world, to the myriad of things that offer themselves to sight. In the abundance of objects requiring attention, requiring to be seen, along with sight’s insatiability and tendency to jump from one object to the other, sight defeats its own purpose in failing to “view” things. This vacillation of sight thwarts the human role as vicegerent, as the pupil of God’s eye. To be able to fulfill the role of the vicegerent, as the one who preserves the cosmos through his/her look, one needs a faculty of sight that is different from what was described earlier. To understand the characteristics of this faculty, we return to Ibn ‘Arabi’s explanation of the prophetic saying: “Three things were made beloved to me....”

He [the prophet] said, “and my solace was made to be in prayer,” which means seeing the Beloved, which brings solace to the eye of the lover. This is because the word *qurrah* [solace] comes from the word *istiqrar* [fixing], so that the lover’s eye might be fixed [on the Beloved] to the exclusion of all else.⁶²

This description of the fixing of sight doesn’t negate the properties of sight that were described earlier by Jonas, it rather stipulates that the fixation is due to a yearning that is experienced by the vassal.

⁶¹ Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight”, P.507

⁶² Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.282

Prayer is the occasion par excellence that allows for this vision. Ibn 'Arabi here clarifies that love isn't only imparted from the Divine towards the cosmos, it is also reciprocated by the vassal in prayer. He adds that any worshiper is actually a lover.

Thus He sees that the worshipper worships only his passion because he is driven to obey its urge to worship whatever he worships... Indeed, even his worship of God is motivated by passion, since, had he no passion for the Divine Holiness, which is the will to love, he would not worship God or prefer Him to another. The same is the case with everyone who worships some cosmic form and adopts it as a god, since it is only by passion that he can regard it in this way. Every worshiper is under the rule of passion.⁶³

In obeying and refraining from certain actions, i.e. in veering away from the egoistic urges, one cannot be in a state except that of love and desire of another, whom one places before oneself. Love is the state that can overpower human beings to do certain actions which are against their initial inclination, since it is a state of continuous yearning for beholding the beloved, for uniting with the beloved. This is why Ibn 'Arabi says the following:

If God were indeed the Beloved of the one who is [always] looking around him, he would look, in his prayer, only toward the *qiblah*. [...] Indeed, each man knows the false in himself from the true, since no one is (truly) ignorant of his own state, it being a matter of self-experience.⁶⁴

The solace in prayer which prophet Muhammad (PBUH) described in his saying is an experience that every vassal can be in, since prayer harnesses the occasion for the vision of God. The solace being the result of witnessing God, every human being has access to the same solace that the prophet described. Ibn 'Arabi actually admonishes against the claim that prayer as an obligatory act of worship doesn't allow this opportunity of vision:

⁶³ *Ibid.*, P.247

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, P.282

However, the one who does not attain to contemplative vision in prayer has not reached its summit and cannot find [true] solace in it, since he cannot see Him with whom he has discourse. If also he cannot hear the Reality's response, he cannot be listening carefully enough. Indeed, he who is not present with his Lord in prayer, neither hearing Him nor seeing Him, is not really praying at all, since he does not listen and watch [for God].⁶⁵

The "contemplative vision in prayer" is not a gift that is reserved for the elite. Ibn 'Arabi makes a clear statement that the vision of Him who reveals Himself is an actualization of the aim of any prayer. He is adamant that those who pray without receiving any vision or hearing God in reply to their pleas are not really praying since prayer by its very nature requires the reciprocity of the Divine. To understand the paradox that is presented here by Ibn 'Arabi, namely that God is unlike any other and yet He can be gazed upon or heard in prayer, we move to our next section.

c. Creating the Lord in the *Qiblah*:

To begin deciphering the paradox that is presented by Ibn 'Arabi in his claim that the vassal is able to see God, that is the being who is beyond formal representation, we resort to Henri Corbin's analysis of the concept of prayer and the role of imagination that is the realm in which this vision occurs. First Corbin describes the "partnership" which is created between Lord and vassal in prayer.

The role of prayer is shared between God and man, because creation like theophany is shared between Him who shows Himself (*mutajallī*) and him to whom it is shown (*mutajalla lahu*); prayer itself is a moment in, a recurrence par excellence of, creation (*tajdīd al-khalq*).⁶⁶

The uniting of God and the human being in prayer is a moment of creation, according to Corbin, because the vassal who presences his/her Lord in the intimacy of the qiblah actually creates the form through

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, P.281

⁶⁶ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, P.249

which he/she sees this Lord. The creation of this God is not a creation that shields the vassal from seeing the “true” God. It is His God, the God of faith who is created and recreated in every prayer. This is validated by Ibn ‘Arabi’s words:

When it is God who prays, He does so in His name the Last, as coming after the creation of the servant, being, indeed, the God the servant creates in himself (in his heart), whether by his reason or through traditional learning. This is the “God of Belief,” which is various according to the predisposition inherent in that particular person.⁶⁷

What might sound like an anthropomorphic fabrication of God to suit human understanding actually requires a very delicate approach to one of the most controversial areas in Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought. First, if God placed His abode in the heart of his believer, then it would follow that the heart which harbors the Lord would be able to tell of the characteristics of its Lord. Second, if God’s manifestations are numerous in accordance to the diversity of the Divine Names which imprint their effects on the locus of the cosmos, each would be considered a Lord to the cosmological forms which fall under each name. Hence, it would follow that each human being would be capable of creating his/her Lord, since each human being has a heart and thereby falls under the authority of a particular Name. This is why Ibn ‘Arabi says:

The God who is in faith is the God whose form the heart contains, who discloses Himself to the heart in such a way that the heart recognizes Him. Thus the eye sees only the God of faith.⁶⁸

The ability to see God is preconditioned by the ability to imagine Him in one’s *qiblah* during prayer. Corbin further reiterates the necessity for contemplative vision that could be attained in prayer, as it was previously iterated by Ibn ‘Arabi.

⁶⁷ Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P. 282

⁶⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ I 121 & II 146-147*, CF. *Creative Imagination*, P.197

For prayer is not a request for something: it is the expression of a mode of being, a means of causing the God who reveals Himself to appear, of “seeing” Him, not to be sure in His essence, but in the *form* which precisely He reveals by revealing Himself by and to that form. This view of Prayer takes ground from under the feet of those who utterly ignorant of the nature of the theophanic Imagination as Creation, argue that a God who is the “creation” of our Imagination can only be “unreal” and that there can be no purpose in praying to such a God. For it is precisely because He *is* a creation of the imagination that we pray to Him and that He exists.⁶⁹

The moment of unhiddenness that occurs within the heart of the servant in the moment of witnessing his/her lord is a moment that happens when the heart of the servant is sincere in its yearning towards its Lord. The sincerity of the heart is translated in its arduous attempt to “create” its God in the *qiblah*. Hence, Corbin describes prayer not as an obligatory act, or a venue to impart requests to God but *as a mode of being* that defines the existence of the servant. Imagination, in Corbin’s analysis, would be the primary tool that would enable a servant to persevere on this journey towards attaining unity with God. We shall return to the specifics of the imagination Corbin describes. Yet for now we return to Ibn ‘Arabi’s own words regarding the validity of the God of faith, by juxtaposing two passages from The Bezels.

Thus, whatever deeds he [the servant] performs return to himself. Indeed, he is only [in reality] praising himself since, without doubt, in praising the product, one is praising its producer, its satisfactoriness, or otherwise rebounding on the one who made it. Similarly, the God of Belief is made for the one who has regard for it, being his own production, so that his praise for that which he believes in is self-praise.⁷⁰

It does not follow, however, that because a created being is well pleasing to his Lord he is equally so to the Lord of some other servant, since he has Lordship

⁶⁹ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, P.248

⁷⁰ Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P. 283

from a source embracing many, not only one. Thus, from the totality [of Divine aspects] each being is assigned one particularly suited to it to be its Lord.⁷¹

In the first quote, Ibn 'Arabi explicates that whenever a person is attributing a quality to God, this quality is actually attributable to him/herself, since the servant is the one who “creates” God within him/herself. This would mean that human perceptions of the Divine emanate from self-perceptions which are then projected upon a higher being. Ibn 'Arabi adds, however, that the “production” of this higher being is done by each individual. In the second quote, Ibn 'Arabi reverses the creative dynamics, meaning that he presents the more familiar picture of the Lord being responsible for certain creatures, unlike in the first quote where the servant was responsible for the creation of the Lord. Yet, he also accentuates the plurality of Lordship which would allow for the diversity in creation. The reversal that is exemplified in the two preceding quotes signifies the interchangeability of roles between Lord and vassal. This does not denote a lack on the Divine part; rather it shows the creative powers which a servant is endowed with in his/her approach to witness his/her God. Furthermore, it alludes to the mercy of God who reveals Himself to those who seek Him.

The ability to witness the immanent God without discounting His absolute transcendence is in accordance to the receptivity of the locus of manifestation.

He who manifests Himself in a form does so only according to the degree of receptivity of that form, so that what is attributed to Him [by that form] is only such as its reality and inherent qualities dictate. Such is the case with someone who has a vision of God in his sleep and accepts it as being God Himself without reservation. In this case, the realities and inherent qualities of the form in which He is manifest in sleep pertain to the sleeper. After sleep what was seen while sleeping might be expressed in terms of something other, which will compel the intellect to recognize God's transcendence [beyond that form]. If the one who interprets it is a man of insight and faith, then it need

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, P.107

not be necessarily dismissed in favor of transcendence, since such a man can accord what was seen its due share of transcendence and of that in which He was manifest, since [the name] God is, in reality, but a [verbal] expression, for one who understands what I'm talking about.⁷²

The attainment of a vision of God, i.e. for God to manifest Himself in a particular form, is possible in dreaming, just as it is possible in prayer. In dreaming, the recipient of the vision might accept the truth that is embedded in seeing God in a particular form, but when that person wakes up he/she could dismiss the vision due to God's utter transcendence. This, Ibn 'Arabi claims, doesn't need to happen if the interpreter of the vision is a "man of insight and faith" he would be able to validate that the dreamer witnessed God, because that man's insight would enable him to recognize God as immanent and transcendent at the same time. Dreaming, which happens in the realm of imagination where, as Ibn 'Arabi says, concepts take form and forms become concepts, is an activity that grants human beings, like prayer, access to the vision of God. Ibn 'Arabi goes even further to claim that not only in sleep do human beings participate in the imaginal realm but that life in general can be akin to sleep.

When Muhammad said, "All men are asleep and when they die they will awake," he meant that everything a man sees in this life is of the same kind as that which one sleeping sees; in other words an apparition that requires interpretation.

**All becoming is an imagination,
And in truth also a reality
Who truly comprehends this,
Has attained the mysteries of the Way⁷³**

Through Corbin's concept of imagination we understand Ibn 'Arabi's statement of the pervasiveness of the realm of imagination.

⁷² *Ibid.*, P.231

⁷³ *Ibid.*, P.197

This imagination is subject to two possibilities, since it can reveal the hidden by continuing to veil it. It is a veil; this veil can become so opaque as to imprison us and catch us in a trap of idolatry. But it can also become increasingly transparent, for its sole purpose is to enable the mystic to gain knowledge of being as it is, because it is the gnosis of salvation.⁷⁴

Corbin says that the realm of imagination presents veils, since on it subtle realities take on manifest form to be viewed. Thus, the manifestation of meanings can deceive the perceiver into believing that the physical manifestation of the hidden meaning exhausts all its subtleties. Therefore, imagination itself can be considered a temptation and a veil. This veil has the potentiality to both shield the meaning that it encompasses, and become a tomb for the reality it contains, i.e. make the inner hidden meaning inaccessible to anyone, or it can “become increasingly transparent” to allow the subtle reality to shine through the physical manifestation. This knowledge, Corbin claims, is the “gnosis of salvation”, in other words the opportunity and possibility of freedom through knowledge. The realm of imagination entails the possibility of liberation of the concepts and of the person experiencing this vision. That is why Corbin associated this knowledge with the mystic who would be able to attune his/her vision and thus impact the veil’s transparency. The ability to do so was described earlier by Ibn ‘Arabi with regards to the interpreter of a vision who has “insight and faith” which would enable him to see God as transcendent and immanent in the same instance without being caught “in a trap of idolatry”. Corbin describes the ability of this person as follows:

To perceive all *forms (mazāhir)*, that is, to perceive through the figures which they manifest and which are external hexeities, that they are other than the Creator and nevertheless that they are He, is precisely to effect the encounter, the coincidence between God’s descent toward the creature and the creature’s ascent toward the Creator. The “place” of this encounter is not outside the Creator-creature totality, but is the area within it which corresponds

⁷⁴ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, P.187

specifically to the Active Imagination, in the manner of a “bridge joining two banks of a river” (*Futuḥāt II*, 379).⁷⁵

The synchrony that Corbin is describing between God and His servant is placed within the realm of imagination. I would add that one of the most evident examples of this synchrony exists in prayer. We move to the next section to investigate the details of this synchrony.

d. Coincidence of Lord and Vassal:

The union between God and human beings is continuous according to everything that was discussed so far. However prayer is a very particular example of the link and union which could be established between the Divine and human beings. It was actually described as the believer’s ascent (*mi’raj al-muimin*), with reference to the prophet’s nocturnal ascent, i.e. as the venue that allows the believer to ascend to his/her Lord. It could be argued that prayer as a milieu that unites Lord and vassal encompasses two types of synchrony: rhetorical and physical. First, the rhetorical coincidence is exemplified through expounding on *Al-Fātiḥah*, the opening verses of the Quran which is recited in every prayer.

[God says:] “I have divided prayer equally between Me and My servant, a half for Me and a half for My servant who may also have whatever he asks.” Thus when the servant says [in reciting *Al-Fātiḥah*], *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*, God is saying, “My servant is remembering Me.” When the servant says, *Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds*, God says, “My servant is praising Me.” When the servant says, *The Compassionate, the Merciful*, God says, “My servant is lauding Me.” When the servant says, *King on the Day of Judgment*, God says, “My servant is glorifying Me and has yielded all to Me.” Thus the whole of the first half [of *Al-Fātiḥah*] belongs to God. Then the servant says, *Thee do we worship and Thee do we ask for help*, and God says, “This is shared between Me and My servant; and for him is whatever he asks,” thus introducing an element of participation into this verse. When the

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.189

servant says, *Guide us on the right path, the path of whom you have favored, and not the path of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray*, God says, “These [verses] are reserved for My servant who may have whatever he asks.” Thus these last verses are for the servant alone, just as the first ones belong only to God. From this we may realize the necessity of reciting [the verse], *Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds*, since whoever omits it has not performed the prayer [properly], which is shared between God and His servant.⁷⁶

The intimacy of the dialogical experience between Lord and vassal is evident in the recitation of *Al-Fātiḥah*. Moreover, *Al-Fātiḥah* itself can be considered as a major paradox. Its peculiar nature is in its combination of duality and unity, i.e. as a dialogue its prerequisite is the presence of a dichotomy, God/servant, but it unites the rhetoric that is reserved for each party. Thus, it harnesses the disparity between Lord and vassal through the means of Divine speech that allows for the participation of the servant, establishing a perennial connection between God and humanity. *Al-Fātiḥah* could be considered as a miniature prayer that allows for a hearing of the Divine which precedes seeing Him. *Al-Fātiḥah* literally means opening, it opens up the horizon for the vassal to ascend and meet his/her Lord in prayer, opens up his/her vision to be able to gaze upon God, it ushers the path for the interconnectedness of Divinity and humanity. The preparation effected by *Al-Fātiḥah* is noted by Ibn ‘Arabi as that which presents the servant to his/her Lord.

Being a discourse, it is also a remembrance, since whoever remembers God sits with God and God with him, as mentioned in the tradition, “I am the companion of him who remembers Me.” Now whoever, being perceptive, is in the presence of the one he is remembering, he sees his companion. In such a case there is contemplation and vision, otherwise he does not see Him. From this the one praying will be able to ascertain his degree [of gnosis], that is to say whether he is able to see, in the prayer, in this way or not. If he cannot see Him, let him worship Him as if he saw Him, imagining Him to be in the *quiblah*

⁷⁶ Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.280

during his discourse, and let him listen most carefully to what God might say to him in response [to his prayer].⁷⁷

The opening affected in the beginning of prayer through *Al-Fātiḥah* creates the opportunity for yoking the lover who approaches his/her beloved through the intimacy of a shared discourse that they both participate in. Whenever, the servant/lover hears his/her Beloved answer back, he/she knows that they have come in the presence of their beloved, since one needs to be present to answer. Accordingly, Ibn 'Arabi informs his readers that hearing precedes seeing. If the servant is able to hear his/her Lord then he/she will be able to see Him. If one is unable to see God, Ibn 'Arabi instructs, based on the prophetic tradition, "let him worship Him as if he saw Him [...]and let him listen most carefully to what God might say to him in response [to his prayer]", since hearing is a precondition to seeing.

In this way one could observe that prayer allows for the occasion of engaging in dialogue between Lord and vassal, and hence necessitates a rhetorical coincidence or a recurring moment of union. To establish this dialogical concord, there needs to be movement on the part of God and servant to be able to meet in the intermediary realm of prayer. Hence, we move to the second form of coincidence, physical, to observe the dynamics of movement that coordinates and allows for this meeting.

A movement of pure thought (*harakat ma'qula*) transfers the universe of beings from its state of occultation or potentiality to the manifest state of concrete existence which constitutes theophany in the visible world (*'alam al-shahada*). In this visible and sensible world, the movements of natural beings can be reduced to three categories (that is three dimensions). And the ritual of prayer embraces all these movements:

(a) There is the ascending, vertical movement which corresponds to the faithful's erect stance. This is the movement of the growth of man, whose head rises towards the heavens.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

(b) There is the horizontal movement, which corresponds to the orant's state of the profound inclination. This is the direction in which animal's grow.

(c) There is the inverse, descending movement, corresponding to the prostration. This is the movement of the plant, sinking its roots in depth.

Thus prayer reproduces the movements of the creatural universe; it is itself recurrence of creation and new creation.⁷⁸

This human prayer, which mimics the movements of the cosmos, is met by and reciprocated by the Lord in His prayer. To understand this statement one has to put the prayer of man in contradistinction with the prayer of God:

As for the movement of pure thought which is the aspiration of the Deus absconditus to theophany giving rise to the genesis of the cosmos, the same homologations are revealed.

(a) There is the intentional movement (*harakat iradiya*) of the Divine Being, His "conversion" (*tawajjuh*) toward the lower world in order to existentiate it, that is, manifest it, bring it to light: this is a movement descending in depth (corresponding to prostration, to the movement of the roots of the plant)

(b) There is the Divine "conversion" toward the higher world, that of the divine Names, the eternal hexeities and the relations between them. This is the pleromatic creation (*ibda'*) by an ascending movement epiphanizing the spirits and souls (corresponding to the erect stance, the movement of man's growth).

(c) There is finally divine conversion toward the celestial bodies intermediate between the two worlds, from one horizon to the other (corresponding to the profound inclination, the horizontal movement of animal growth).

And all this constitutes the prayer of God (*salat al-Haqq*) as His existentiating theophany (*tajalli ijadi*).⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibn 'Arabi, *Fusus I*, CF. Creative Imagination, P.260&261

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

In highlighting the difference between prayers performed by lord and vassal, one finds parallelism existing between them. The correlation that is presented between lord and vassal, where each mirrors the actions of the other presents an example of the interrelation dynamics between lover and beloved. Furthermore, the conclusion can be drawn that this congruence between the metaphysical and physical realms is a convergence that is creative in nature, in the sense that the human being is directly involved in the process of continuous creation through his/her participation in the act of prayer.

e. Creative Nature of Prayer:

The creativity of prayer has been discussed in various parts of this chapter. To sum up the various manifestations caused by the creativity of prayer, one could say that prayer is creative in three ways: in creating the God of faith, in recreating the cosmos through the various movements that are encompassed in prayer, and finally in the servant requesting something from God and His granting it to the servant. This last way was discussed by Ibn 'Arabi in relation to two Divine Names: the Hidden and the Manifest.

The cosmos is never empty of these two relations [Hidden and Manifest] in this world and the last world. When increase occurs in the cosmos to the cosmos, this derives from the hidden. Increase never ceases, for the cosmos is an increase, emerging from hiddenness to disclosure never-endingly. The Real hears the disclosed as king of the askers by way of the name Manifest, and He hears their hidden asking by way of the name Nonmanifest. When He bestows upon the asker what he asks for, the name Nonmanifest bestows it upon the Manifest, and the Manifest bestows it upon the asker. Hence the Manifest is the veil-keeper of the Hidden, just as awareness is the veil-keeper of knowledge.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuḥāt II*, CF. The Self Disclosure of God, P.206 & 207

According to Ibn 'Arabi's description the cosmos as it is presented to our eyes is a continuous emanation from primordial hiddenness to manifestness. The manifest as the veil-keeper of the hidden always shields the hidden in the process of creation. Therefore, creation of the cosmos can be understood as a cycle through which the manifest is constantly renewed from the hidden and the hidden is revived from the infinite subtleties of the Divine Names. God hears the hidden plea of the soul of His servant through the name Hidden and He listens to what is asked vocally through the name Manifest. The dynamics of these two attributes as illustrated by al-Sheikh al-Akbar reflect the essential synchrony between cosmos and Lord which leads to continuous creation.

The human being is at the center when it comes to the renewal of creation through prayer. He/she is the being who is instructed to pray and within the esoteric meanings of this duty, he/she fulfills the role of vicegerent. The reason for this is highlighted by Ibn 'Arabi:

Surely, God created Adam in His own image, His image being nothing other than the Divine Presence. In this noble epitome, which is the Perfect Man, He created all the Divine Names and realities, which issue forth from him into the macrocosm outside him.⁸¹

The placing of the human being at the center of the cosmological scheme was necessitated by his/her being created in the form of God and being endowed with all the variations of the Divine Names. This formulation made the human being potentially capable of maintaining the cosmos through the process of continuous creation. Prayer is a creative and contemplative activity that allows for an ontological, not just cosmological, recreation.

Thus the "life of prayer" practiced in the spirit and according to the indications of Ibn 'Arabi represents the authentic form of a "process of individuation"

⁸¹ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.55

**releasing the spiritual person from collective norms and ready-made evidences
and enabling him to live as a unique individual for and with his Unique God.⁸²**

It can be construed that the creation of the God of faith, which emerges as maybe the most important creation of prayer, is an ontological process whereby God reflects the uniqueness of each servant, i.e. reflecting the diversity of God's Self manifestations. Ibn 'Arabi repeats this by saying:

**In your seeing your true self, He is your mirror and you are His mirror in which
He sees His Names and their determinations, which are nothing other than
Himself.⁸³**

God sees Himself in the mirror of creation, which is why He created the cosmos in the first place, and in this gaze we, human beings, sometimes become cognizant of the privilege and obligation that was endowed to the children of Adam, to become vicegerents.

⁸² Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, P.268

⁸³ Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, P.65

Conclusion

If we would return to the story of the creation of Adam, when God informed the angels that He will place the human being on earth as a *khalifa* they objected saying: “will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare your praise and sanctify you?” (Quran 2:30), it will be obvious to recognize that the angels’ prophecy regarding the actions of human beings came true. However, if we would continue listening to the Divine reply in the verse we would hear “Indeed, I know that which you do not know” (Quran 2:30). Islam places the human being in an esteemed position and Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings place him/her at the very center of the cosmological set up. If God’s intention in creating the cosmos is to see Himself in another, then the human being would be the object that mostly fulfills its function, since Adam was created in the form of his Lord. Thus, it can be said that the privilege imparted upon humanity came with the ontological and cosmological duty of being a mirror to reflect the face of God, to know God through knowing ourselves.

When we know our souls, we know our Lord, like two exactly similar things. That is why the Prophet reported in the revelation through his words, “He who knows his soul knows his Lord,” and why God sent down the report, “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that He is the Real” (41:53), for the cosmos became manifest from God only in the form of the actual situation.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhat III* 314.22, CF. The Sufi Path of Knowledge, P. 359

The congruence that exists between Divinity and humanity is one that could be submerged under the avalanche of day-to-day life. Nevertheless, humanity is being given various opportunities to discover the connection to a Divine who interpenetrates the physical realm in its specific manifestations. Two of these opportunities are; sexual union and prayer. Both activities were expounded upon in this research to substantiate that they unveil the knowledge of who we are, which, according to the Prophet, can lead us to know who God is. In the moment of yoking that is present in sexual union and in prayer, the self sheds its exterior carapace to merge with her beloved. The unity that this self experiences allows her to gaze upon the Divine and in the contemplation of the radiation of His face, He gazes back.

The significance of sexual union and prayer as interconnected activities that allow contemplation of the face of the Divine and fulfillment of the role of the vicegerent was alluded to through the Prophetic saying: "Three things were made beloved to me in this world of yours: women, perfume and the solace of my eye was made in prayer." The prophet's description for his favorite things is that they belong to this world. Yet the belongingness to this world allows for an intimation of the other world, i.e. they open up the horizon between the physical and the metaphysical.

If one were to compare both activities, sexual intercourse and prayer, they would appear as completely different in nature and even in orthodox understanding. One is associated with sanctity while the other is associated with profanity. However, if one were to see them both as movements of love, one would realize that despite their differences they aim to accomplish the same end, i.e. unity with the beloved. Sexual union is a movement of frenzy to quench the desire to fuse with the beloved in an orgasmic union on a physical level which opens up the metaphysical realm. While prayer is also movement, but it is one that is orchestrated and mandated by the Divine. Prayer is an ascent of the lover to meet with his/her Beloved who descends so that they can both unite in prayer. Nevertheless, unlike sexual union, the path to the Beloved in prayer is carefully drawn and the words of intimacy spoken in it are rehearsed. This doesn't discount the fact that sexual union allows access to the Divine, for Ibn 'Arabi says:

Marriage is the best of supererogatory good deeds. It has a root, and that is the obligatory marriage. [...] When marriage occurs because of love for reproduction and procreation, then it joins the Divine love when there was no cosmos. He “loved to be known.” Hence He turned His desire toward this love of things while they were in the state of their nonexistence.⁸⁵

Supererogatory acts are accomplished on the part of the servant to come closer to the Divine. In the above quotation Ibn ‘Arabi qualifies marriage as the best of those actions, i.e. the best deed that can grant the servant proximity to God. Even though marriage entails so much more than merely sexual union, but in this quote the desire to procreate which only comes as a result of sexual union is linked to God’s intention and attentiveness that resulted in the creation of the cosmos. This means that the human being who desires to have children emulates the Divine desire; this Divine/human desire would actualize God’s purpose to be known. Hence, this human being would be acting on behalf of God, this human being would be a *khalifa*. The creativity of both prayer and sexual union, which were dealt with in the scope of this thesis, allows for the maintenance and the increase of the cosmos. They allow us to continuously connect to the cosmos we inhabit and that inhabits us. They allow for the realization of the human role of *khalifa*, i.e. allow for God to witness Himself in the cosmos.

⁸⁵ Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhat II 167.10*, CF. The Tao of Islam, P. 184

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