

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF HEART-MIND IN THE SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS OF MUHYIDDIN IBN 'ARABI

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Abstrak: Ibn 'Arabi menawarkan kerangka pikir yang unik dalam menjelaskan struktur ilmu. Epistemologinya bersandar pada prinsip kesatuan wujud, dan bahwa semua pengetahuan adalah berasal dari Wujud yang dimiliki oleh Wujud melalui penampakan Dirinya. Manusia merupakan cermin dari penampakan Diri tersebut, yang didalamnya terdapat satu fakultas sebagai pusat pengalaman manusia, yaitu hati (*qalb*). Melalui interaksi dengan pikiran, refleksi dan imajinasi, Ibn 'Arabi menawarkan model epistmeologi yang kokoh yang menjelaskan kerja pikiran dalam menciptakan keyakinan terhadap Tuhan. Ia (The Real) hadir dalam tataran potensi tertinggi manusia, sebagaimana Ia hadir setiap saat dalam hati, pada kondisi yang disebut sebagai maqam yang tak bermaqam. Jika pendekatan post-modern sangat menekankan epistemologi yang memperkuat status multiplisitas ontologis mereka, ada paradigma yang berkembang yang mengusung visi kemanusiaan yang utuh melibatkan kesatuan tubuh, pikiran dan ruh. Epistemolgi Ibn 'Arabi lah yang sanggup mewakili perkembangan ini dan merumuskan struktur yang abadi dan proses yang mencakup kecakapan manusia untuk sadar dan merasakan.

Kata-kata Kunci: Kehadiran, hati, kesatuan wujud

Abstrack: Ibn 'Arabi offers a unique framework for explaining the structures of knowledge. His epistemology is referenced within the Oneness of Being (*wahdāt al-wujūd*), and all knowledge is ultimately the knowledge that the Being has of Itself through Its own self-disclosure. The human form mirrors this self-disclosure, and within this form he situates the center of the human experience in the faculty of the heart (*qalb*). Through interactions with the faculties of mind, reflection and imagination, he provides a robust model for an epistemology that explains

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the workings of mind and the creation of the many beliefs about God. He intimates at the highest human potential which is the immediate perception of the Real as It appears to the heart in every moment, a condition of complete union known as the 'Station of No Station'. The demands of post-modern thought insist on epistemologies that honor relativism by granting the multiplicity their ontological status. Additionally, the emergent paradigm suggested by integral studies suggests a holistic view of human development that builds on a vision of integrated body, mind and spirit. Ibn 'Arabi's epistemology is singularly capable of addressing these issues as he outlines the timeless structures and processes that comprise human sentience.

Keywords: Presence, heart, oneness of being

Introduction

The integration of heart and mind has become a centerpiece for many contemporary discussions of spiritual psychology.² Our modern mindset is increasingly dominated by a new paradigm, one that calls for a fresh understanding for a more fully integrated worldview, where the oneness of body, mind and spirit is seen as an emerging structure for a new epistemology of wholeness. The aim of this paper is to review some of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas on heart and mind, particularly his teachings on the true place of the heart as the center of the divine creative act, and as the sole faculty that has the capacity to embrace the limitless forms and possibilities of God's self-disclosure.

In Ibn 'Arabi we find a truly remarkable man whose stature in the Sufi and Islamic world is such that he is known by the title of *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, or the Greatest Master, and who is by now acknowledged to have had significant influence on the teachings of many of the subsequent Sufi schools and teachers that followed him.³ His teachings on the divine oneness, human individuation, personal transformation and the perfection of the human soul have inspired many people, including teachers and seekers alike, both within and beyond the Islamic tradition, and when viewed within his framework of Oneness (*tawhid*), provides a truly magnificent

2 First presented at the Sufism Symposium, Dominican College, San Rafael, California, June 2011: "Heart and mind: a Sufi perspective"

3 Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Diffusion of Ibn 'Arabi's Doctrine* (Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, 1991, Vol. 9)

vision for human potential. The resurgence of interest in his ideas and the growing body of translations of his work are a testament to his contemporary relevance to the present era.

The term Oneness of Being, or *wahdāt al-wujūd*, has become synonymous with Ibn 'Arabi's thought. God's manifestation is described as a Self-disclosure, in which the Real discloses Itself to Itself, in an act of love in order to witness Its own beauty in the diversity of Its infinite forms.⁴ It is also described as the disclosure of the One to Itself in the form of a singular Other, and this Other reflects God's beauty and grandeur in what we call the perfect Human, the *insān i-kamīl*. Ibn 'Arabi explains that this essential Human form, expressed as man and woman, contains the totality of God's self-revelation. The Being witnesses Its own self and beauty in the mirror of divine consciousness, the mirror in this case being the heart of this Human form. The largeness of the heart of the *insān i-kamīl* is indicated in this *hadith* of the Prophet:

My earth and My heavens embrace me not, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me.

Heart and Mind

How are we to understand the magnitude of this heart, and what is its relationship to mind? The epistemology of the heart is the science of what we might call spiritual intelligence, in which the heart is said to be the only faculty capable of comprehending the One Real Being as It really is. The heart is thus the source of all real knowledge, and the repository of all meanings. Ibn 'Arabi, in a well-known poem, captures the majesty and beauty of the heart's capacity to contain and embrace all forms. He says:

O Marvel! a garden amidst the flames.
My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles
and a convent for Christian monks
And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba, and the tables of the
Torah and the book of the Quran.

⁴ As noted in the *hadith qudsi*, 'I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world so that I might be known.'

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.⁵

Ibn 'Arabi explains that the word for heart in Arabic is *qalb*, which in its root form also contains the meanings of variation, adaptability, and turning. The heart, therefore, is characterized by its ability to adapt to the manifestation of the Spirit in whatever form it appears, expanding or contracting or 'turning over' as it conforms to the endless variation of the modalities of the divine self-manifestation. Since in every instant God's Being is created anew, the perfected heart is witness to the constant changing from state to state as the Real appears to it. Because of this endless variation and shifting of states, we see that the heart possesses a very special capacity to 'turn' with the moment-to-moment succession of manifestations or states. Only the heart can comprehend and encompass appearances that might appear to the unaided intellect as contradictory, implausible or incomprehensible. According to Oneness, every manifestation is the appearance of God, but only the heart can discern the true meaning of these manifestations.

Another meaning found in the word for heart is *qalaba*, which is that the heart is the reverse of the Divine Being, and as a mirror image reverses the object and returns the reflection to its source, so it is in the nature of the heart to keep re-turning to its divine origin. As a mirror image of the Real, the realities of existence are reflected in it, fluctuating between the Real and the creation. This power of switching between states is beyond the intellect. For this reason, the person who does not witness with his heart may deny the manifestations that appear in it, even though it is God manifesting in that form.⁶

Hence knowledge of the Real from the Real comes only through the heart, not through reason. The rational faculty can only comprehend God's incomparability and transcendence, but not His self-disclosures in the world. Once again, Ibn 'Arabi reaches back into the root meanings of words in order to draw out the nuances of what he would like to explain. In Arabic, the word for intellect is *'aql*, which also contains the meaning of 'fetter' or 'shackle', therefore to the extent that a person follows the way of his or her reason, he or she will remain in constant constriction and binding.⁷

5 Reynold Nicholson, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, p.67 (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978)

6 Mohammad Haj Yusuf, *The Cosmic Heart: the heart of the Perfect Human: Ibn 'Arabi Society UK Symposium*, Oxford, May 2009 [podcast, www.ibnarabisociety.org/podcasts]

7 William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p.107 (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989)

Ibn 'Arabi draws a fascinating picture of the relationship of heart to intellect in this following quote:

The heart possesses alteration ('turning', or *taqlib*) from state to state, because of which it is named 'heart' (*qalb*). Someone who interprets the heart as 'mind' (*aql*), has no knowledge of realities, for the mind is bound by shackles (*uqūl*). But if he means by 'mind', which is binding, what we mean by it, which is that it is bound by alteration, so that it is constantly turning, then he is correct – this is the same as our saying 'being established in variegation', for there is always diversity, but not everyone is aware of that.⁸

From this relationship, we discern a deeper meaning for the binding of the intellect, and its proper relationship to the heart. When in separation from the heart, the intellect is shackled by its own limitations, but to be 'bound by alteration' according to Ibn 'Arabi's explanation is not a negation or limitation of the intellect – when married to, and in service of, the heart, it is in fact capable of infinite change and adaptability if it can follow the turning of the heart. The mind is then free flowing, acting in complete harmony and reciprocity with the heart, and can act as a transmuter of spiritual light into knowledge.⁹ The mind is a gift, a faculty that is part of the constitution of the self and not to be neglected or dishonored, and when it is aligned in this way to the heart its true value becomes evident.

The person of spiritual insight who witnesses with his or her heart is therefore capable of comprehending and inhabiting every reality and every form without limiting the divine Being by virtue of misguided intellectual activity or wrong beliefs. The things appear in the heart, and therefore to the mind, as they really are, without the person becoming confounded or confused by the diversity of the forms. The mind may indeed experience a kind of 'perplexity' (*hayrah*) due to the constant changing of states, but this is different from confusion, and may be better understood as a kind of wonder, in which the witness is awestruck by the constant flux between the two divine aspects of spirit and form, which are only apparently contradictory.¹⁰ In the poem quoted earlier, Ibn 'Arabi affirms that all beliefs and religions can be

8 Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat III* 198-199, *ibid*, p.107

9 Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Mystic's Ka'ba* (Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, 2010, Vol. 48)

10 Ralph Austin, "*Ibn Al 'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom*", *Classics of Western Spirituality*, p.254 (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980)

contained in the heart, and that the magnificent diversity and infinitude of forms is none other than the appearance of God in those forms.

Imagination

Ibn 'Arabi is well known for his teaching on the creative imagination, and to round out the relationship of heart to mind, it is not really possible to leave out what he says about the imagination. The imagination, according to him, is the faculty that allows the heart to actually witness God's self-disclosures. Phenomenologically speaking, the experience of witnessing the forms of the world that appear in the heart is a function of the imagination, which is described as the faculty that actually 'sees' the forms in the engendering of God's Being. While the intellect emphasizes God's aspect of incomparability and transcendence, the imagination on the other hand has the power to grasp His similarity and immanence.¹¹ The imagination therefore straddles spirit and form, and acts as a mediating or bridging capacity to unite the high and the low. Through the imagination, the luminous and the dark interpenetrate, and spirit takes on body and the body becomes spiritual.¹²

This place of connectivity between the manifest and the un-manifest is known as the *barzakh*, or isthmus, something that both separates and joins, and this is also known as the Imaginal Realm. It connects the non-manifest with the manifest, and is the true place of the one who has come to self-knowledge. In the presence of the Imagination, the person of vision sees the formless takes on form, and sees the spirit participate in form. By the faculty of the imagination, the self apprehends the divine Being in a way that the intellect cannot grasp nor comprehend, since the intellect cannot comprehend how the One could possibly be conceived or given any form. The imagination, however, is able to 'see' how the form and its essence are actually one, and it is able to make the leap to see beyond the form of a thing to the meaning or the reality that it represents.

Now, the faculty of the intellect is said to work by a process of stringing together concepts and drawing conclusions – Ibn 'Arabi calls this reflection (*fikr*). He describes reflection as the power of thought or cogitation, the ability of the soul to gather up impressions from the senses, or acquired

11 William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994)

12 Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969)

from imagination in order to reach rational conclusions.¹³ Here we see the connection between the intellect and imagination, and how the imagination can in fact influence or determine intellectual conclusions or judgments. Even though reflection is called the assistant of reason, it nevertheless informs reason in such a way that reason becomes its follower, a kind of inversion of the way we normally consider the independence of rational thought.

So what Ibn 'Arabi shows is that our judgments of things may be unconsciously colored by the impressions gathered by the soul through imagination, and his explanation of its relationship to reflection and to the intellect gives us a better understanding of the innate human activity of creating beliefs according to our individual predispositions. Ibn 'Arabi quotes the Sufi Junayd, who famously said, "the color of water is the color of the vessel that contains it,"¹⁴ which illustrates the natural human activity of creating beliefs according to our predispositions, and this structure of the relationships of heart, mind and imagination, as challenging as it may seem at first, are valuable principles to understand and to apply to the spiritual path.

To sum up this brief discussion about these relationships, Ibn 'Arabi says the following:

Fluctuation in the heart is equivalent to the divine self-transmutation in forms. Hence knowledge of the Real from the Real comes only through the heart, not reason. Then the rational faculty receives knowledge from the heart, just as it receives from reflection.¹⁵

Again, the heart is at the center, and when it is aligned to the Real, all the other faculties follow it in its turning.

Two Eyes

Another way to think about how we witness the Real is that we are given two eyes – one eye sees through the faculty of reason and the other eye sees through the faculty of imagination, and thus the illumined self is able to comprehend both aspects of Gods' self-disclosure—mind sees God's incomparability or transcendence, on the one hand, and imagination sees God's similarity or immanence, on the other. Left to its own devices, the

13 Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds.*, p.160

14 Austin, *Ibn Al 'Arabi.*, p.282

15 Ibn 'Arabi, Futuhat I.289.20, in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge.*, p. 112

mind is incapable of seeing things as they really are, and is unconsciously conditioned by the subjective impressions delivered to it by the imagination through reflection. This points to the way that we form beliefs about God, and what Ibn 'Arabi calls the 'God as created in the beliefs.'¹⁶ Our natural inclination is to follow the limited beliefs that we create in our subjectivity, according to color of our container, to use Junayd's metaphor, but the true potential for human individuation is to acknowledge and recognize God in every belief, and to remain unattached to any one particular form of belief.

Ibn 'Arabi constantly reminds us that every human being is possessed of the potential for a complete heart. The heart is at the center and is the only faculty that possesses the unifying and integrating power to follow the incessant succession of states and disclosures that descend upon it. When the heart has been opened, then all our faculties becomes aligned to it and follow its every turning in complete conformity to the way that the Real shows Itself to it.

The Heart of Adam

Having briefly reviewed some of the structures and the phenomenology of the heart, we turn now to the topic of the unlimited potential that exists in each person to have a big heart. As Ibn 'Arabi's poem states, the heart is capable of all forms. The other important teaching that arises is that nothing separates us from this heart other than the illusion of duality, the fact that we create or hold beliefs that the station of complete Unity is a distant thing, separate from us, and perhaps unattainable. Ibn 'Arabi says this about that which separates us from a complete heart:

The greatest sin is that which kills the heart, and it is not killed by anything except lack of knowledge of God, which is called ignorance, because it [the heart] is the 'house' (or 'temple') which God has chosen from this human formation for Himself. However, it has been misappropriated by this usurper who intervenes between it and Its Owner. It is the greatest oppressor of his soul, because it prevents her from [receiving] the goodness which would [otherwise] accrue to her from the Owner of this house, had it but left it [the heart] to Him. Such is the deprivation of ignorance.¹⁷

16 Austin, *Ibn Al 'Arabi.*, p.282

17 Fut. III 179, Hirtenstein, *The Mystic's Ka'ba.*, p.8

This usurper that oppresses the heart is not a thing in itself, but simply a lack of knowledge, an ignorance of the real situation. It might also be called the ego, that aspect of the self whose intellect is perhaps misinformed by the reflections that feed it beliefs that are colored and restricted. But what is the potential for a heart that is uncolored by conjecture and limitation? How can we understand the question of what human potential truly is?

Perhaps no better picture has been painted in this matter than Ibn 'Arabi's explanation of the *insān i-kamīl*, the perfected Human Being, as described in the creation of Adam. In his major work the *Fusūs al-Hikam*, the opening line is a classic statement of the archetypal human form, which serves as a prototype for all of humanity, in which Adam is described as the only being created in the image of God and capable of manifesting God's own self-disclosure. What is truly striking about the emergence of the Adamic form is that it appears consequent not only to the divine intention of God's loving desire to know His own Self, but also the infinity of His selves, and thus for the plurality of God's most beautiful Names to be revealed. Plurality appears co-emergent with the appearance of the singular form of Adam, and we are told that these are the two possible ways to view God's creative act, which are simultaneously the singular event of self-disclosure *and* an event containing the implicit plurality of multiple self-disclosures. Thus is diversity accommodated and verified as oneness in multiplicity. Ibn 'Arabi says:

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.¹⁸

It is explained to us that Adam is this object of the divine love, and as the prototype of the human form is the one being capable of summarizing the creative act of God's self-disclosure, in both its aspects of plurality and oneness. The constitution of this archetypal Human structure gives us a glimpse of what Ibn 'Arabi means by human potential, which is a vastly expanded idea of what is possible for human knowledge and personal transformation, in that the heart of this form contains the entire cosmos with all of its possible universes and beings.

18 Austin, *Ibn Al 'Arabi.*, p.50

So the human constitution is already possessed of the potential for a complete heart, but we have to realize this potential in the unfoldment of our own individuation. From what has been said so far, we can point to at least two keys to opening the heart to a more complete vision – the removal of ignorance, and refraining from limiting God to any one belief or perspective.

The Station of No Station

What, then, is the potential for a heart that is uncolored by conjecture and limitation? We have seen that the opened heart is capable of all forms, and able to integrate all the forms, beliefs and manifestations that appear to it. For this heart, union is not a transcendent state of bliss, removed from plurality and the forms of the world; rather it is a union in which oneness and diversity are both present, as a Unity of many-ness, and where both eyes are opened to witness God's Oneness. The language of the heart is Love, and let us recall that in his poem Ibn 'Arabi calls *love* his religion, the one religion that can encompass all beliefs.

Ibn 'Arabi describes a mode of being, a way of complete Union that synthesizes and integrates every possible belief and is the highest degree of union with the Beloved. This degree of knowledge is known as the Station of No Station, and it is the actualization of the most complete kind of realization granted to the Muhammadan friends of God. Every form, every belief, is seen for what it is in its reality and it is ascribed to its place. This person is fluid with the ongoing and eternal self-disclosure, recognizing the Real in every form and at every moment. Ibn 'Arabi, referring to these people as Muhammadans since they embody the perfect wisdom revealed to the Prophet, says:

So the Muhammadan is only distinguished by the fact that he has no station specifically. His station is that of no station... He does not become designated by a station which is attributed to him. On the contrary, in every breath, in every moment, and in every state he takes the form which is required by that breath, moment, and state. Hence his delimitation does not last. For the divine properties are diverse at every moment, and he is diverse in accordance with their diversity. God is 'each day upon some task' (55:29), and so also is the Muhammadan.¹⁹

19 Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds.*, p.377

Conclusion

This unlimited condition of the heart of the awakened human is each person's potential and birthright. A very special relationship with the Beloved awaits those friends of God who are granted a heart that can turn and flow with every appearance of their Beloved, and who thus know the Real in every face that It appears in. Ibn 'Arabi's epistemology of the heart contextualizes the principal relationship of the self to the Real, as well as addressing many questions that include knowledge, ontology, pluralism and the structures of the self in a manner that can continue to inspire and serve the cause of building a greater contemporary epistemological framework based on his understanding of *wahdāt al-wujūd*.

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