

The Unity of Being



The Unity of Being: Neo-Platonic Conceptions and Interpretations of Early Islamic Cosmogony and Cosmology as Evidenced in the Writings of Ibn Arabi

By special request, I have posted my M.A. Dissertation here. It is written in academic language and a very long read. A fully referenced copy is available on request.

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1. Introduction

When Arab conquerors captured Alexandria in 641, they came into contact with the centre of Greek and religious thought. There the Arabs witnessed how classical philosophical texts were being utilized and interpreted in consideration of the religious diversity and mystical thoughts of the time. One look through the small booklet "Mystical Astrology According to Ibn Arabi" by Titus Burkhardt may be intriguing for some. Translating the twelfth century work of Sufi Master Arabi, Burkhardt articulates an Islamic mystical cosmogony and cosmology. The image in the centre of the small booklet is a captivatingly original perspective on the zodiac, in an Islamic esoteric expression, not largely known in the west today.

This dissertation will explore the Neo-Platonic origins of this specific mystical, Islamic cosmogony and cosmology. The dissertation presented here will not be a re-articulation of Bruckhardt's work. It is important to make this distinction because the work of translation and significance has already been accomplished very successfully. Though a short synopsis of Arabi's articulations of the origins of the cosmos, the spheres of the reality, and the beginnings of the zodiac will be presented, these concepts are articulated for the purpose of finding correlations with Neo-Platonic thought and to glimpse Arabi's significance and depth of thought than as a re-articulation of the details of his zodiac. Any information presented regarding Arabi's cosmogony and cosmology is done for illustrative purposes only and to exemplify the philosophical foundation.

Majid Fakhry identifies the beginning of the Islamic mysticism movement as coinciding with the earliest Muslim devotees. Later described as Sufi's, named as such for the simple woollen cloth they

would wear, these ascetics devoted themselves to an existence of piety and believed that submission and contemplation would lead one to realize an intimate relationship with the transcendent Source. While some branches believed that shunning the material world was the path to accomplishing a realized state of union with God, other early mystics took a more measured approach and asserted that with the recognition of the material realm as the final manifestation of the Source, and with a constant willingness to look through the material and witness the transcendent within the mundane, one could experience the sought after mystical union with the Divine. Submission to Islamic law and etiquette was always a prerequisite, though the interpretation of those laws leaned in the direction of individual realization.

Focusing on the transcendence and unity of God, Fakhry further maintains that it was widely accepted among mystics that individual deliberation and surrender to God, without attachment to what was material, was the pathway to union. One of the earliest and most persistent metaphors for the Divine is of the "Beloved". One must desire and seek union with God as one would a lover, making God the ultimate lover. Articulations of self-obliteration or eradication were clear influences of Hindu Ascetic assertions of annihilating one's self in order to find the true self, which existed not in the material or physical dimensions, but rather the spiritual area of human life.

As the political importance and population of Islam grew, these mystical articulations were questionable to theologians who held more dogmatic leanings. Fakhry documents that one of the more notable Sufi's of the tenth century, al-Husayn Ibn Mansur al-Hallaq, who preached this notion of self-annihilation through union with the divine, was convicted and executed on charges of blasphemy. This changed later Sufi articulations, and likely influenced those of Arabi, who turned their mysticism away from notions of Union, and instead began to

explore and articulate ideas of Unity. Though the shift was slight, this movement alone may have prevented the full extent of self-obliteration from being explored, and may have led Arabi to articulate the transcendent in unity with the external environment as a more subtle way of exterminating the illusion of the material world. By focusing on Unity within his cosmogony and cosmology, Arabi was better able to present his ideas of the transparency of the material realm, thereby presenting a way to encourage people to see past it.

Keith Critchlow asserts that Arabi's cosmology is undoubtedly influenced by Platonic thought, but how did Neo-Platonic ideas merge with Muslim mysticism in the early development of Islam? Who were those who influenced Arabi's ideas, who allowed a Neo-Platonic rendering of the cosmos to occur, in a culture that asserted a unique revelation as its centre? Exactly how does Arabi's cosmogony and cosmology correspond to a Neo-Platonic understanding of the origins of creation and the sky? Is it indeed Platonic? What were the intellectual and historical influences that contributed to Islamic hermeticists incorporating Platonic ideas, thus allowing Arabi's cosmology to emerge?

These are some of the questions that will guide and focus the exploration presented here. My thesis is that although the sacred text of Islam, the Qu'ran itself, is understood as unique in its revelatory nature, its interpretations by the mystically inclined and understandings of the Gnostics of the past, are decidedly Neo-Platonic, thereby representing a continuation of human intellectual thought from the early interpreters presented here. Though outside the scope of this work, by examining this short period in history, perhaps further research may indicate, by inference, how Islamic ideas and interpretations have continued to develop through the course of history to the present day.

The methodology will involve considering early Islamic cosmogonical and cosmological articulations, historical philosophical influences on Islamic Gnostics known as Sufis, and most significantly the examination of Platonic and Neo-Platonic writers and comparisons with Arabi's cosmogonical and cosmological articulations. This paper will begin by clarifying some key Islamic conceptions, including notions of nature, reason, intuition, and unity that differ from Christian counterparts. Then some key passages of Plato's *Timaeus* and Plotinus' *Enneads* will be expressed. We will then move on to Islamic thinkers and philosophers, interested and influenced by Neo-Platonic ideas, and carefully expose the development of early Islamic thought, particularly where it concerns cosmogony and cosmology, leading up to Arabi's own articulations, thereby drawing a historical intellectual line of thought. Conclusions will follow.

2. Early Islamic Philosophical Developments and Distinctions of Thought From Western Conceptions

In order to appreciate the distinctions from western world views of the time, it would be imperative at this time to classify intellectual dimensions within the early Islamic period, and in particular the development of thought that would allow a hermetic understanding of the cosmos to take place. By making distinctions on key notions of Nature, Reason, and Intuition, especially in consideration of the study of cosmogony and cosmology, we are better able to understand the intellectual basis that would allow Arabi's cosmogony and cosmology to occur.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr asserts that the most significant apportionment within Islam is the "vertical hierarchy of the Sacred Law, the Way, and the Truth." The first represents the external reality that operates independent from personal experience. Sacred law represents the exoteric element of revelation, and are usually interpreted by the Sunni

and Shi'ite sects of the Islamic community. The later two are considered to be esoteric expressions of Islamic revelation and are a particular area of interpretive interest to the Sufi sect. Nasr draws an analogous illustration using a circle. Truth representing the centre, the Way expressed through the radii, and the Sacred Law being the circumference, which encompasses the entirety of the religion.

There are still more distinctions, classified by Nasr, that divided the early Muslim intellectuals. Based on scholarly influences and preferences, the seekers of knowledge at this time would have found themselves as among one of several groups, divided by scientific inclination or philosophical school, the most notable for our purposes here would have been the Peripatetic, the Neo-Platonists, the Neo-Pythagoreans and Hermeticists. In the following centuries the different classes of seekers became definitive, with different schools of thought becoming more clearly outlined and distinguished. The Gnostic and hermetic elements of interpretation and revelation became associated with the Sufis.

2.1. Nature

The Qu'ran makes multiple mentions throughout the text to the importance of contemplating the external world and, more specifically, the natural world. It is the environment that is continually stressed for it is expressed that it is in contemplation of nature and the planets that one would find evidence of the monotheistic God of Islam. This idea is expressed in the Qu'ranic verse:

Verily in the heavens and the earth are signs for those who believe. And in the creation of yourselves, and the fact that animals are scattered (through the earth), are signs for those of assured faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and that fact that Allah sends down

sustenance from the sky, and revives therewith the earth after its death, and in the change of the winds, are signs for those who are wise.

The unity of existence that would be revealed on contemplation of a plant, a crystal, or a planet is that same unity that one would find within one's self. Scientific enquiry in the early centuries of Islam was thus not simply a technical pursuit. Rather, it was undertaken with the understanding that by understanding the external environment one would be lead to a deeper understanding of the Unity of all existence and to the true nature of God, which is ultimately the true nature of the self. Scientific pursuits not only intermingled with spiritual pursuits, but could be thought of as spiritual explorations in and of themselves, for the end was always to glimpse the Source just slightly more closely than humanity had in previous generations.

The Qu'ran, in its revelation, was believed by its followers to be a return to a singular truth, as opposed to the beginning of a new faith as the foundation of other religions. Since Islam was founded on the foundation of a return to a singular monotheistic vision, it was further asserted that in the exploration of nature and the planets, one would also find a similar return. The idea of return further asserted the spirit of scientific enquiry in the formative years of Islam.

Though Nasr acknowledges the various motivations for studying nature, he points to Sufis, and Arabi specifically, as being part of a larger Islamic movement, which sought to study nature as symbols or icons for the purpose deliberation and introspection. Different aspects of nature were to be considered at different stages of one's spiritual progression. As one moved closer to experiencing a divine revelation of one's own, more truths would be revealed through the symbol. This cultural belief is further asserted in the Qu'ranic Verse:

What is the matter with you, that you are not conscious of Allah's majesty, seeing that it is He Who has created you in diverse stages? See you not how Allah has created the seven heavens one above another, and made the moon a light in their midst, and made the sun as a (glorious) lamp? And Allah has produced you from the earth, growing (gradually) ...The heavens, We have built them with power. And verily, We are expanding it.

These passages from The Qu'ran support the belief in the gradual development that can occur with continuous contemplation of the external environment. It was through reflection and contemplation of nature that one would reach greater stages of illumination and liberation. Liberation from what would be considered veils that keep the truth of the unity of all existence apparent. In fact, Islam, considering the sacred scripture a book of symbols to be forever contemplated, also called nature itself a book, which had to be studied and understood. As William Chittick notes of Arabi's perspective on how nature constantly refers to the divine:

More commonly than either sign or mark, Ibn al- Arabi employs the term *dalil* to refer to the fact that the cosmos points to God. The term means guide, directive, pointer, indication, signifier, evidence, proof, denotation. Although found only once in the Koran, it becomes an important term in the Islamic sciences, where it is used to refer to the proofs and demonstrations that scholars marshal to argue their cases.

2.2 Reason

There is a distinction in how Reason is identified and understood within an Islamic framework, for it is distinct from the understanding found within a Christian worldview that predominates the western world. The western worldview, Nasr argues, understands reason as a faculty that would lead one away from faith. The west has understood reason to be

that which creates greater impartiality towards spiritual understanding and an over valuation of that which can be understood solely through the five senses. The Christian faith is that which is a path of compassion and could be interpreted as strengthening faith without evidence.

Reason, in the Islamic worldview, could be properly maintained and focused towards one's own personal realization. Nasr identifies that the Qu'ran, the sacred scripture of Islam, continually speaks of reason as the faculty of the intellect utilized for the purpose of reflection. When this is done in a manner that is moderate and stable, it can lead one towards a greater understanding of the unity of all existence, that is, the unity that is within a person, as reflected in nature. It was the passions that had to be understood in order to keep them under control so that they would not interfere with the faculty of reason, for it was through a healthy reason that one would be led through the heart to the creative source, the experience of which was the ultimate realization. In this perspective the intellect is a tool through which spiritual understanding and the seeker could realize Unity with one's creator. The aim of one's reason is ultimately a Gnostic one. Nasr believes that the core of Islam is essentially Gnostic, in that it serves in the attainment of a spiritual vision, helping one to move beyond the five senses.

For some sects of early Muslims, like the Shi'ites, who later influenced the Sufis, this conception of reason was only the first step towards the attainment of knowledge. There was credence to hermeticism, and hermetic symbolic understanding and symbolic perception, which in time became staples of many Islamic esoteric schools. This was represented in a form of wisdom called "hikmah". Illuminist and Gnostic principles play an essential role. Reason is only the beginning and should be considered as a first step, the next being the deliberation of lucid actualities.

2.3 Intuition

Nasr asserts that there is a “deep intuition in Islam”, similar to other cultures of the Orient, that is distinctive in its understanding of the purpose and advantage of cultivating knowledge. It is not, as a western worldview would hold, the discovery of the as yet unknown. Rather, the purpose of inquiry is to lead the seeker back to the source, back towards the divine unity that exists. Through exploration, scientific and philosophical, the aim is such that the exploration would reveal the inherent unity of all that exists. Through exploration one would be returned to God, not moved further away from. This intuition guides all articulations made by Muslims, particularly in its formative years. Gnostic knowledge thus complements this intuition, because it allowed for amalgamation of intellectual knowledge with the experiential.

2.4 Studying Cosmology

Nasr asserts that when studying the cosmology of any people, one must incorporate both a historical perspective, and also the perspective of the relationship between the revelation of those people, and the symbolic understanding of nature. These two, the revelation and the symbol, are intimately connected in assisting one in understanding how the phenomenon of a cosmological interpretation came to be. It is in understanding the relationship between the revelation and the symbol that one is better able to grasp and appreciate how a specific cosmology was formulated as a reflection of that society’s reality to the omission of other potentials.

Nasr further makes a distinction between two different types of symbols. There is the symbol inherent in nature and then the symbol as expressed in the revelation. The symbols of nature must be made distinct because the symbols expressed therein hold sacred worth simply through the fact that they have been drawn attention to through the revelation. Nature has been singled out, through scripture, to be a representative, or archetype, of the Source manifesting within the

environment. The revelation itself holds a symbol, as an expression of a people, whereas nature, and the cosmology which is an outflow of a symbolic understanding of nature, holds symbols that can be more readily realized through personal contemplation, becomes the way that the revelation is experienced by a civilization.

2.5 The "Unity of Being" as Central Doctrine

Nasr asserts, perhaps controversially, that every cosmological doctrine, and the Islamic doctrine holding true to this principal as well, is created to express a great unicity. The unicity of the external environment rises out of a fundamental belief that holds throughout the history of all civilizations, which is in the "Unity of the Divine Principal". This fundamental hold on humanity is the belief in an all encompassing unifying principle. This metaphysical understanding is what Nasr believes formulates the foundation of the "Greater Mysteries", whereas the cosmology of a civilization can be characterized as the "Lesser Mysteries". This is true across historical periods and cultural mores. Regardless of how polytheistic the understanding of the sacred was to a civilization, at the heart of every ancient cosmology lay a science that attempted to prove that everything in nature, on some level, operated under one unifying principal. Nasr believes that though the Alexandrian and Hermetic cosmological studies would have been considered in their respective time frame to represent Lesser Mysteries, within the revelation of Islam it was their elements that became engrossed within the Greater Mysteries, for the unifying principle represents the highest mystery of the truth of life.

The assertion of the "Unity of the Divine Principle", especially in consideration of how it is expressed in nature, of which cosmology is incorporated, is especially relevant when considering Islamic cosmological doctrine. In Islam, the concept of Unity is the most important doctrine, by far exceeding any other principal. Everything in

the Universe, everything that the sciences seek to explore, was all guided by this notion of Unity, so important to the revelation. In fact, the assertion within the revelation that there is no reality outside of the Divine, that the Divine is the Absolute Reality, forms the essence of the Sufi Doctrine in the Unity of Being. All Islamic sciences, art, and intellectual expressions are, at their foundation, representative and guided by this Unity of Being. Nasr further explains that this elemental canon of Islam is called "Et-Tawhid". All conditions and approaches are valid as long as they deduce to this foundational doctrine.

3. Development and Influences of Neo-Platonism on Early Islamic Philosophy, Cosmogony, Cosmology

This chapter focuses on the development and influence of Neo-Platonic thought in early Islamic cosmogony and cosmology. It is here that we trace a historical intellectual line of thought, beginning with Plato, and leading through the early Muslims who utilized Platonic thought, setting the foundation for Arabi's cosmos.

John Gregory describes Neo-Platonists as those philosophers who, in addition to creating original philosophical distinction of their own, were most noted for fusing the ideas of Plato with other Greek philosophical schools. The reason that their work held significance was due largely to the spiritual and moral idealism that was much of the focus of the ideas they expressed. It was this concern with religiosity, and in particular, the relationship of material reality to its spiritual assent, that had made it most intriguing to religious communities, who were able to take these ideas and use them as interpretive tools to their previous religious understandings.

The pre-Socratic philosophers, when considering cosmogony, sought to express order and reason of the origins of the world through consideration of a single, unifying principal. It was Neo-Platonism that

achieved this articulation in a more sophisticated and elaborate manner. Neo-Platonists held that the “theory of Mind/ Nous” was the active origin of the physical universe. Here God becomes the universal mover, the principle moving actively outwards, revealing and exposing Himself within the material world.

Neo-Platonists consider Plato’s ideas as a consistent and unified totality. Plato’s assertion of a single transcending principle and his articulations on the conception and formation of the universe were to be most significant in Neo-Platonist articulations of cosmogony and cosmology.

3.1 Plato

This section addresses relevant passages of Plato’s *Timæus*, written in 360 BC, relevant to cosmogony and cosmology. Plato’s articulations set the foundation for later Neo-Platonists, and in particular, early Islamic thinkers influenced by these conceptions. When considering the motivation to create the world, and the assertion of an ordered principle, Plato states:

Let me tell you then why the creator made this world of generation. He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be. This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world, as we shall do well in believing on the testimony of wise men: God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable.

Wherefore also finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion, out of disorder he brought order, considering that this was in every way better than the other.

For Plato, nature acts under a single, unifying principle. Nature becomes the reflection of that principle, revealing the One-principal behind it and permeating it:

This being supposed, let us proceed to the next stage: In the likeness of what animal did the Creator make the world? It would be an unworthy thing to liken it to any nature which exists as a part only; for nothing can be beautiful which is like any imperfect thing; but let us suppose the world to be the very image of that whole of which all other animals both individually and in their tribes are portions. For the original of the universe contains in itself all intelligible beings, just as this world comprehends us and all other visible creatures. For the Deity, intending to make this world like the fairest and most perfect of intelligible beings, framed one visible animal comprehending within itself all other animals of a kindred nature.

Plato goes on to affirm the world is permeated with God, supporting the monotheistic Moslems belief that all philosophies can speak to the truth of their revelatory text, when Plato says:

And the creator, reflecting on the things which are by nature visible, found that no unintelligent creature taken as a whole was fairer than the intelligent taken as a whole; and that intelligence could not be present in anything which was devoid of soul. For which reason, when he was framing the universe, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best. Wherefore, using the language of probability, we may say that the world became a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence by the providence of God.

Plato lays the foundation for later considerations of the planets, and the zodiac, when he articulates his conception of the motion of the planets. The planets represent deep connections to "mind and intelligence", and speak to the sacred that guides them. The spheres of the world, important to Neo-Platonic cosmology as we shall see later in this chapter, are seen as reflections of the divine:

Now the creation took up the whole of each of the four elements; for the Creator compounded the world out of all the fire and all the water

and all the air and all the earth, leaving no part of any of them
nor any power of them outside....Wherefore he made the world in the
form
of a globe, round as from a lathe, having its extremes in every direction
equidistant from the centre, the most perfect and the most like itself
of all figures; for he considered that the like is infinitely fairer than the
unlike. This he finished off, making the surface smooth all around for
many reasons; in the first place, because the living being had no need
of eyes when there was nothing remaining outside him to be seen; nor
of ears when there was nothing to be heard; and there was no
surrounding atmosphere to be breathed; nor would there have been
any
use of organs by the help of which he might receive his food or get
rid of what he had already digested, since there was nothing which
went from him or came into him: for there was nothing beside him....
being of all the seven that which is most appropriate to mind and
intelligence;
and he was made to move in the same manner and on the same spot,
within his own limits revolving in a circle. All the other six motions

were taken away from him, and he was made not to partake of their deviations. And as this circular movement required no feet, the universe was created without legs and without feet.

Plato's Soul, as representing the eminent transcending principle, is infused in the entirety of the cosmos. There is soul even in the motions of the planets:

The soul, interfused everywhere from the centre to the circumference of heaven,

of which also she is the external envelopment, herself turning in herself,

began a divine beginning of never ceasing and rational life enduring throughout all time.

The body of heaven is visible, but the soul is

invisible, and partakes of reason and harmony, and being made by the

best of intellectual and everlasting natures, is the best of things

created. And because she is composed of the same and of the other

and of the essence, these three, and is divided and united in due

proportion, and in her revolutions returns upon herself, the soul,

when touching anything which has essence, whether dispersed in parts

or undivided, is stirred through all her powers, to declare the

sameness or difference of that thing and some other; and to what

individuals are related, and by what affected, and in what way and how and when, both in the world of generation and in the world of immutable being.

And when reason, which works with equal truth, whether she be in the circle of the diverse or of the same—in voiceless silence holding her onward course in the sphere of the self-moved—when reason, I say, is hovering around the sensible world and when the circle of the diverse also moving truly imparts the intimations of sense to the whole soul, then arise opinions and beliefs sure and certain. But when reason is concerned with the rational, and the circle of the same moving smoothly declares it, then intelligence and knowledge are necessarily perfected. And if any one affirms that in which these two are found to be other than the soul, he will say the very opposite of the truth.

Plato goes on to articulate his assertion of how the planets comprise us, laying the philosophical foundation for later Islamic astrologers influenced by his thought:

Having given all these laws to his creatures, that he might be guiltless of future evil in any of them, the creator sowed some

of them in the earth, and some in the moon, and some in the other instruments of time; and when he had sown them he committed to the younger Gods the fashioning of their mortal bodies, and desired them to furnish what was still lacking to the human soul, and having made all the suitable additions, to rule over them, and to pilot the mortal animal in the best and wisest manner which they could, and avert from him all but self-inflicted evils.

As we saw in the last chapter, the Qu'ran speaks of a Universe expanding and growing gradually over a period of time, forever evolving and shifting. Early Islamic philosophers would have read Plato's following passage to further elucidate this perceived Qu'ranic truth:

Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity; and this image we call time. For there were no days and nights and months and years before the heaven was created, but when he constructed the heaven he created them also. They are all parts of time, and the past and future are created species of time, which we unconsciously but wrongly transfer to the eternal essence;

3.2 Plotinus

Fakhry identifies Plotinus, who was born in 204-205 AD, as the most influential Greek philosopher on early Islamic thought. It was primarily Plotinus' repeated articulations on the subject of unity and transcendence of a singular supreme being that most captured the early Islamic imagination, perhaps because it was consistent with their monotheistic revelatory text. It was the religious and mystical aspect of this Neo-Platonic cosmology, especially in consideration of absolute transcendence of a supreme being and the predestined place for the soul reserved in a higher world that was of particular interest. It was for this reason that the earliest developments in Islamic philosophy was Neo-Platonic.

Fakhry asserts that the first major philosophical text to be translated from Syrian into Arabic was a book that had been circulating under the name "Theology". This book had been attributed to Aristotle by the first translator and held in high regard for its authority and authorship. It wasn't until much later in history that the text was revealed to be Plotinus' *Enneads*, a book that synthesised and displayed Plotinus' key thoughts, compiled by his disciple Porphyry.

It was Plotinus' *Enneads* that laid the foundations for an Arab-Islamic Neo-Platonism to emerge. His work was to become influential in the development of Al-Farabi's own emanations theories, which influenced his student Al-Sina. Elsewhere it will be shown how Al-Sina thus influenced the cosmology of Ibn Arabi. It is perhaps Plotinus' Emanation theory that reveals itself as a consistent influence to early Islamic philosophers and cosmologists. These would have been the exact writings that early Muslims were considering in support of their revelation. Here, elucidating his emanation principle, Plotinus says:

Then is there is a supremely good being, transcending all beings, which does not direct its activity towards another, but all others towards it, evidently this will be the Good by which all other things are enabled to participate in the good; and they that attain to the good in this way will do so both by becoming like the good and by directing their activity towards it. If good, then, is activity which has the highest good as its aim, it follows that Good itself does not look towards another or aspire to another, but is the still "source and principle" of natural activities, and creates all other things in the form is the good, and that not by directing its activity towards them but as the goal to which they tend; and it is not by virtue of activity or thought that it is the Good, but by its very remaining in itself. Because it is 'beyond being', it is beyond activity and beyond Mind and thought. And again, it must be supposed that the Good is that on which all things depend, while it depends on nothing; for only so is it true that the Good is 'that to which all things aspire'. It must be, then, that the Good remains at rest, while all things turn towards it, as a circle turns towards the centre from which all its radii are drawn. We might compare it also to the sun, which is like a centre in relations to its own light, that depends on it and everywhere linked to it and not severed; so that, even is you wish to part them, the lights always stays with the sun.

Plotinus' cosmogony stays true to his foundation of emanation. Plotinus' points to the intellect as divine, like early Islamic thinkers as mentioned in the last chapter. The creative source stays true to what it pervades, stays within the thing with which it hold sympathy. In this way, using the analogy of a plant, Plotinus points to the fact that God is evident and inherent within all that is perceived in the natural world:

The One is all things and yet no one of them. It is the source of all things, not itself all things but their transcendent principle; for in a way they move within the One- or rather, thought not yet there, that is their

destiny. How, then, do they derive from a single One, with no diversity apparent in it, no duality whatsoever? It is surely just because there is nothing in the One that all things proceed from it, and so that Being may exist the One is not Being, built the begetter of Being. This is the first act of generation: the One, perfect in seeking nothing, possessing nothing and needing nothing, overflows and creates a new reality by its superabundance; and its offspring turns to the One and is filled, and in contemplating the One becomes Intellect. Its stance towards the One gives it Being, which its contemplation of the One makes it the Intellect; so in standing towards its source in contemplation it becomes at once Intellect and Being.

And being akin to the One, Intellect repeats the creative act, pouring forth power in abundance, in its own likeness, as its own which remains unchanged, there issues the active power of the Soul, as also Intellect issued from an unchanging One. But Soul is not changeless when it creates, but begets its image in movement; it becomes filled by contemplation of its source, but begets its image by a contrary, downward movement, and this image is sensation and the growth principle in plants.

Nothing is detached or severed from its prior, so that the higher soul seems to extend as far as plants; and in a way it does so extend, because the life in plants beings to it. Not that soul is whole within plants, but only to the extent that they are the lower limit of its advance, another level of existence created by its decline towards the worse. Its higher part is attached to Intellect, and allows Intellect to remain undisturbed.

Plotinus' articulations of sympathy are congruent with his theory of unity, which happens through emanation. This is an imperative distinction to make. Things and nature are not sympathetic in and of themselves, but are a plausible extension of emanation, originating

from the source. His ideas of sympathy can be seen as an extension of emanation, though emanation remains a distinct conception.

If we cannot attribute to physical causes to deliberate acts those external influences that reach to us from heaven, and to all living creatures and the whole earth, what reasonable explanation remains?

Firstly, we must affirm that this universe is 'a single living being embracing all living things within it', and possessing a single Soul that permeates all its parts to the degree of their participation in it; and that every part of this sensible universe is fully participant in its material aspect, and in respect of soul, in the degree to which it shares in the World Soul. Further, the parts informed by the World Soul alone are fully integrated in the whole, while those that participate also in another Soul have partial membership, yet all parts experience influence from the others, to the extent of their integration and in correspondence to their constituent elements.

A sympathy pervades this single universe, like a single living creature, and the distant is near; just as an individual animal the nail, horn, finger, or other limb are not contiguous, yet sensation occurs in the remoter part, leaving the intervening body unaffected. Like parts lie not in contact but separated with other parts between, yet by their likeness they feel sympathy, and the action of the distant member is necessarily felt far off; and in a living and unified being there is no part so remote as not to be near, through the very nature that binds the living unity in sympathy.

3.3 Al-Kindi

A continuum can be seen between the thoughts of Ibn Arabi, back to the ninth century Muslim philosopher Al-Kindi, who lived in the first part of the ninth century. Fakhry states Al-Kindi was distinct in that he was

one of the first philosophers to use Qu'ranic verses to justify his philosophical explorations. Al-Kindi believed that in order to understand the intent behind the revelatory transmission, it was necessary to ponder and explore passages in the sacred text in a methodological manner. He is noted for taking Qu'ranic passages such as the verse 55, 6 "and the stars and trees prostrate themselves to God" can be interpreted to understand how nature and the cosmos is evidence of their submission to a beneficent all mighty.

Though the full details of al-Kindi's cosmology and cosmogony fall outside the scope of the research presented here, a brief summary may perhaps provide an essential reflection of the development of Islamic cosmology is embodied in his work. What is important to our discussion here is that al-Kindi did have a specific cosmogony and cosmological understanding of his own that may have influenced Arabi. Fakhry articulates al-Kindi's cosmology as a theology of one. He uses distinctly Plotinian language when articulating the One as source and prime mover and first cause of origin, as the creator who exists within a transcendental understanding of the unity of being.

Though the first cause of creation is the One, al-Kindi identifies the Proximate cause as well, as corresponding to the outer sphere, which he calls the heavenly body, manifesting to what we see in the cosmos. The outmost sphere has distinct characteristics that seem to hold a foreshadow in intellectual thought when taken in consideration of Arabi's cosmology. It holds essential motion, and causes life in the lower world. Most significantly, the "heavenly bodies" are alive, permeated with the transcendent, and each hold domain over various faculties, senses, and cognitive functions. They hold intelligence in higher degrees to their correspondences found on earth. By invoking Plotinian understanding of sympathy despite his favouritism expressed towards Aristotelian and stoic thought.

Al-Kindi did write about the effects of planetary and other celestial bodies on human affairs, considering he was not only a philosopher who expressed his cosmological and cosmogonical ideas, but was also an astrologer. As an astrologer, he believed that heavenly bodies not only influenced human actions, but also were a deciding factor in character, as the planets indicated a psychological profile determined at the time, date, and place of birth. He asserted that the planets and celestial bodies not only had influence, but also intelligence, that were decreed by God. The planets held aptitude and prescience in a more concentrated form than beings on earth, and their sympathy to what is on earth allowed them to hold influence and direction. This was done through God's degree, and was only a minute insight into the direction and influence of the prime mover that was veiled by the planets.

3.4 Al Biruni

Nasr also identified Al-Biruni, born in 973 AD, as imperative in the development of early Islamic cosmology in the early ninth century. Al-Biruni was a well-travelled person who came under the intellectual influences of many cultures. He made a distinction for himself as being well versed in Greek and Hindu philosophers. Described as anti-Aristotelian, he was perhaps first and foremost an astrologer, and spent much of his philosophical considerations articulating an understanding of the cosmos, which incorporated the zodiac.

Astrology was seen as holding a contemplative value due to its symbolism. The metaphysical foundations of astrology reveal a rhythmic pattern that was thought to both withhold and disclose Pure Being concurrently. The zodiac is not only a veil, a fond metaphor of the Muslims of the time, but simultaneously a reflection of the great light that shines forth from the Source. Astrology affirmed the interconnection between Micro and Macro, between matter and spirit.

Astrology was another affirmation of the pervasiveness and eminence of God.

It is hard to ascertain if Al-Biruni had the same depth of symbolic understanding of the cosmos, as seen in the metaphysical articulations of Ibn Arabi. But we can see clear connections that indicate Al-Biruni influence on the work of Arabi . We see in Al-Biruni's work the understanding of the zodiac as an indicator of universal nature, and also the correlation of the planets as modes of intellect . Al-Biruni also makes great significance of the lunar mansions, believing that the moon acts as and connects the conciliator between the earth and heavens, so that the mansions then synthesize that which occurs and is revealed in all aspects of the intellect, with their counterpart in the planets and zodiacal archetypes. He also makes correlations to the divine names and the lunar mansions as well, placing them in specific sequence and purpose, aligning them with the lunar mansion. With this reasoning, it is further asserted that that all that occurs on the material level is a reflection of what is occurring on the planetary level, which is also linked to the source. The moon then becomes the great synthesizer, bringing the Source "down" and "into" the material realm. Through the moon, nature itself becomes a starting place of contemplation for those seeking the disclosure of divine mysteries.

3.5 The Ikh'wan al Safa

Nasr states that the *Rasa'il*, written in the late tenth century, was an influential text written in the early ninth century written by a group of Islamic scholars from Basra named Ikhwan al-Safa. The exact members of the Ikhwan al-Safa remain debatable, and this exact authorship of the document also holds uncertain origins . Still this document articulated a cosmology that was to be highly influential and reflected in the later work of Islamic philosophical and cosmological articulations. The *Rasa'il* is a philosophical text that unites the religious law of Islam

with Greek philosophy. Though the text is highly metaphysical, its ownership to a specific sect in Islam, like the Sunnis or the Sufis, cannot be ascertained.

The Ikhwan al-Safa identify their intention in writing the Rasa'il is to aid in the realization and excellence the hidden senses so that one may gain deliverance and spiritual liberation. Nasr details that each chapter of the Rasa'il reminds the reader that one is but a hostage in the material world, and that knowledge can be the salvation from earthly emphasis. All sciences, and a range of what we would classify as esoteric subjects including astronomy and angelology, is discussed along with cosmological articulations, done not for intellectual gain but for practical purposes and application. It is articulated in order to:

“Untie the knots in the soul of the reader by making him aware, on the one hand, of the great harmony and beauty of the Universe, and on the other hand, of the necessity of man to go beyond material existence.”

Their articulations of ideal and perfect man is revealing in itself for conveying their multi-cultural influences:

East Persian derivation, Arabic in faith, of Iraqi, that is, Babylonian, education, a Hebrew in astuteness, a disciple of Christ in conduct, as pious as a Syrian monk, a Greek in the individual sciences, an Indian in the interpretation of all mysteries, but lastly and specifically, a Sufi in his whole spiritual life.

The Ikhwan believe they are articulating a wisdom that is eternal and inherent. It is a wisdom that we all already know, and have always known. Using the analogy of a cave, reminiscent perhaps of Plato's famous analogy and likely considering the influence of Greek philosophers on the Rasa'il, the Ikhwan assert that they are drawing on numerous ancient sources that have all been aware of the truth, even if

articulated during pre-Islamic times. It is their intention to create a text that inspires and has practical applications, outside of a strictly historical canon, and to guide its readers to a fundamental Truth which has always been known, a Truth reflected in there numerous and eclectic assortment of sources, ancient and contemporary of the time, from which they draw on as resource and muse. They are mindful to point to Islamic revelation as the ultimate source of knowledge and inspiration for the existing human historical period.

Nasr asserts it is largely held that the goal of the Ikhwan was to combine philosophy with religion. The text cites philosophers often, and points to the virtues of philosophical considerations as a pathway to Truth, and is also honest and open in their intention of combining philosophy with Divine law, as expressed in the Qu'ran. It is important here to point out that their connotation to philosophy is different than thinkers representing Western schools of thought; similar to the way that reason differs in the early Islamic period also. Philosophy is in no way identified with rationalism, or an exercise in intellectual analysis. Instead, philosophy is identified with 'hikmah', which is wisdom that finds its central source within the revelatory texts of the ancient prophets. It is what makes the human being most like God. It is philosophy that attracts the most choice of people and draws them closer to the Source of all creation. By utilizing philosophy one exerts the highest virtue of being a human being and utilizes the greatest gift of being on earth. It is a means of lifting one out of mundane existence and moves one towards purification of the soul. The aim is to live as an angel on earth, realizing higher spiritual truths in this lifetime. This understanding is a philosophy in itself reminiscent of the Aristotelian aim.

The Ikhwan identify themselves as drawing their cosmological perspectives from Pythagorean and Jabirian sources. They claim that they are flowers of Pythagoras and Nicomachus, especially where it

comes to articulating the sacredness of numbers and their correlation to the mysteries of the universe, as they believe numbers to be the key to understanding the sacred in nature, and the nature of God. As well as utilizing metaphysical and symbolic arithmetic and geometry, sacred geometry being central to Islamic metaphysics, they also express affinity for Harannian thought.

The Ikhwan identify four key sources of their thought. The first being the philosophers of sciences and mathematics, the second divine revelations which include the Qu'ran, the Torah, and the Gospels of the Christians. The third is a Platonic, and its resultant archetypal, understanding of the cosmos, and they here specifically point to the zodiac and an understanding to cosmic spheres and knowledge of stars, again arising from Platonic sources. The fourth consist of divine books available only to purified souls. They do so with an understanding that there is a singular truth that underlies all these books, or systems of thought.

A distinction between the Ikhwan and the Sufis of the time is important to make here. Where the Sufis believe, on conscious levels and through their own assertions, that the lives of the prophets can provide the inspiration necessary to achieve this state of purification, the Ikhwan specifically mention Greek philosophers, which is something that the Sufis, generally and as a rule, do not do. They only mention the prophets and stories from the prophets' lives as examples of achieving a Gnostic state. For the Ikhwan, the description and articulation would lead the reader to believe that it is this same Gnostic aim of which they encourage within their reader.

The Ikhwan articulates a perspective of the cosmos in line with the medieval cosmological view of the time. The earth is at the centre of the universe. The luminaries and planets revolve above the earth. Beyond Saturn is the sphere of the fixed stars, and then the furthest sphere

called "Muhit". The Universal Soul is the primary cause of everything that operates in the world. All movements are thus perceived as perfectly circular, the circular representative of wholeness, self-subsisting, completion, and mystery. The Universal Soul operates through three vehicles, which are the twelve signs of the Zodiac, the heavens, and the planets. These three primary agents behave upon the world, as would a soul upon a body, in that they illuminate and animate the whole of the visible world, so that through perception some clue to the divine may be revealed within it.

The Ikhwanian cosmos is distinctly different than an Aristotelian understanding. A cosmos comprehended by Aristotle, and the subsequent neo-Aristotelians, divides the whole of the cosmos into two regions. The sublunary, which consists of the four elements, and the celestial, made of a fifth element only, ether. The Ikhwan asserted the cosmos as unified, a cosmos in which all the four primary elements are simultaneously infused with ether. This characteristic supports the articulation of the zodiac, and the basis of an astrology, which is founded and explored on the principal of the sacredness of nature and its ability to be a revelatory conduit to the truth of the Source.

The importance and influences of the seven planets is discussed in detail in the Ikhwan, correlating them to different historical periods. Later Sufis then began to correlate different prophets to these planets, as embodiments of those time frames, as reflected in the work of Ibn Arabi.

Fakhry identifies The Ikhwan for their understanding of the physical world occurring as the result of emanation, through spheres, and resulting in matter. They then say that the First created subordinate entities from prime matter, speaking to the variety of life not only terrestrial but perhaps supra terrestrial as well.

As far as the cosmological sciences, Nasr identifies the Ikhwan al-Safa and Ibn Sina as expressing principals which undoubtedly influenced Ibn Arabi. Arabi's doctrine is at essence a Gnostic one. Nasr believes that reflections of the Rasa'il are seen in the works of Ibn Arabi. It is where the Rasa'il discusses the concept of 'tasawwuf', and especially in relation to cosmology, where one can see that Arabi drew many of his articulations and was most certainly an influential writing on his thinking .

Nasr explains that "Tasawwuf is a branch of Islamic knowledge which focuses on the spiritual development of the Muslim, largely through the study of the life of the prophets, and most specifically the life of the prophet of Islam" however, it is imperative to point out that though this text likely influenced Arabi's thinking greatly, it did not contain the same degree and depth of esoteric science as expressed in Arabi. The Ikhwan do however use express language and great beauty and passion in articulating the grandness of the universe and their conceptions of nature remain awe inspiring to many Muslim thinkers of the time and to the present day.

3.6 Al-Farabi

Fakhry identifies Al-Farabi, who lived in the tenth century, as the first Islamic philosopher to lay the basis of Islamic Neo-Platonism in a systematic and methodical way. It is his cosmogony and metaphysics that were clearly Neo-Platonic in origin, and even articulated in a manner reminiscent of Plotinus. Farabi conceptualizes the First Being as the cause of all things, and this First Being, over-flowing with abundance and goodness, would then emanate outwards thus arising a series of hierarchies and sympathies. The first cannot be fully identified with what is emanated because its profound beauty and power is beyond human comprehension or understanding, but is only a reflection of it.

Al-Farabi's cosmogony of the First thus emanates into the cosmos that is understood as a series of spheres. Each form of intellect that arises out of concentric circles from the core gives rise to a new intellect that is expressed through different spheres. There are ten spheres in all, corresponding to ten intellects, seven of which hold ruler ships by planetary or luminary bodies. The order of the spheres becomes an emanation of descent of the One, and an order of ascent for the human observer. Al-Farabi makes mention of the heavenly bodies as having specific and unique correspondences to all things terrestrial. In this way, all that is found on earth has a celestial counterpart acting in correspondent sympathy, through the process of emanation, which originates in the One.

3.7 Al-Sina

Another influential Islamic cosmologist identified by Nasr is Ibn Sina, who lived in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. It was Sina who was most notable for combining a Neo-Platonic understanding of the cosmos within an Islamic monotheistic framework. It was the Neo-Platonist influence of Sina that met with the Gnosticism of Ibn Arabi, which have formed a basis of Islamic mysticism, and especially a mystical understanding of the cosmos, which still remains influential to this day. It was primarily Sina's angelology that lent itself most notably to Sufi doctrines, as it articulated a philosophy of preparing the human soul for the catharsis necessary to experience the ecstatic states of Gnostic vision, seen as the ultimate revealing of wisdom and truth.

Ibn Sina was a student of Al-Farabi, but distinguished himself through his elegant and voluble writing style. Because of his manner of articulation, Al Sina became widely recognized in his time as the founder of Islamic Neo-Platonism, even though it was his teacher who was the first. Fakhry describes al Sina as clearly influenced by the work of his teacher and Plotinus in the way he understands philosophical and

cosmological aspects. He has been described as giving voice to a “rational mysticism”. Though Al Sina also allied his ideas of the First Principle as the vital cause of creation, He distinguished his thought from his predecessors by saying that, when considering the aim of the soul, the soul cannot ever achieve union with the One, rather, it was contact that the soul sought and could acquire.

Al Sina’s cosmogony is distinct in that he also identified with concentric circles of realization that originates from the creative principle. The outermost sphere, and all the heavenly bodies, are a result of emanation and the First comprehending itself repeatedly. This continual “looking upon itself” happens as part of the generative process; of which the source is constantly involved in. Here we can see the definite influence on Arabi, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

4. Ibn Arabi’s Cosmogony and Cosmology

Keith Critchlow identifies Ibn Arabi’s work as clearly Neo-Platonic. Critchlow considers the Platonic tradition as that which articulates a process by which the divine permeates, infuses, floods and saturates everything we see in our material world. It is the Platonic perspective that asserts that everything we see in the terrestrial realm has a cause that originates in the unworldly. This unworldly is also known as the “principle first cause”. What has manifested in the material realm is only the very furthest reflection of this first cause. This is the belief that each and everything is connected through the inherent divine which permeates within and through it.

This can be contrasted with Aristotelian thought, which asserts that anything that relates to the whole does so only as an abstraction or a conception of the human mind. The thing may not actually hold sympathy with anything else; it is mainly that we make it so by our attachment of meaning and conceptual correspondences. This, for

Critchlow, represents a reversal of Platonic thought and has been the dominant paradigm of western society. Through Aristotelian thought the progression towards creating the mind vs. body, or spirit vs. matter duality came to be, and dominates western ideals to this day.

Ibn Arabi's cosmology finds its foundation on the Platonic understanding of the cosmos within an Islamic context, interpreted with the mystical and Gnostic aspects at the forefront. Under Arabi's cosmology, the character of being and the nature of existence become intimately connected with a personal experience of unity with the first principle. This characterizes a return that can be seen in the reflection of a Platonic influenced Islamic zodiac.

Titus Burckhardt asserts that astrology is not Islamic in its essence, nor is it Christian. Its origins lie in Alexandrian hermeticism. Astrology cannot be monotheistic because it relies on conciliatory causes, where the monotheistic framework insists on only one source for insight, inspiration, or causation. Astrology in early Islamic esotericism did find a place because it asserted a "primordial symbolism" that allowed an undeviating and collective holiness that was at once accessible and mysteriously contemplative, thereby lending to a "living esotericism". Arabi's system is essentially geocentric, symbolic of the chief position that human beings play within the vast whole. In this point of view, it is empirical knowledge, which is deviant and disadvantageous. To believe that reality consists of only the observable is to deny the transcendent and eminent sacred of which a human being is the total and most consecrated embodiment. By no longer being at the centre, human beings have become displaced. Arabi's cosmology and hermetic understanding of the zodiac returns one to the rightful place of observer and participant in the monotheistic Islamic revelation.

In Arabi's cosmology, the symbol is what is being symbolized. There is no necessity to make a distinction between the symbol and what it is

referencing. The planets are an aspect of the visible world, and yet at the same time they are not. They reflect the various scales to which one may comprehend the greater mystery of the Source, not as a symbol, but rather as a revealing. The zodiac, from this perspective, becomes the place in which the universal force, in its various manifestations, is expressed and emblemized.

It is the way that Arabi articulates how one would perceive the world that would allow a mystical understanding of the cosmos to occur. Arabi divides people into two groups. The first group of people are occupied with only their five senses, and as such are limited by what they perceive. When they read passages in the Qu'ran that speak of an inanimate object speaking to a prophet, they deduce that it was only for that moment that God chose to speak to that specific person through the avenue of that object. For these people, their eyesight is the limits of what they will perceive, for they do not consider themselves able to receive communication of any knowledge outside of their own intellect.

Arabi then turns to the second classification of people. These people are aware that the entire world, animate or not, and indeed the cosmos, is in a constant state of life. Every object that appears inanimate to us when perceived only through the intellect is actually alive, breathing, and beating with the pulse and the will of God. This awareness, this contact with God through the most superficially dead of objects, requires that one shift their awareness and perceive the world not through the five senses, for they are limiting. Arabi encourages that we go beyond this worldview by shifting our focus. This focus may come naturally to some, but often it must be earned through religious and spiritual ritual that would slowly open up the perception to see the truth of all reality.

For Arabi, that truth is that every form manifested is infused with the mystery of God. God lives in and through it, and God realizes it's own

existence through everything and everyone, regardless of whether we perceive that object as living or inanimate by the five senses. This form of animism maintains its monotheistic root, in that it attributes the spirit infused within each one and thing as that of a sole agent, but also recognizes that there is a life force that permeates all of existence. It would follow, that if all that we perceive with our mere eyesight were infused with the impulse of the Divine, and then the planets we perceive in the sky would also contain, with and through them, this same force of the creative impulse that defines God.

4.1 Spheres of the World

In Ibn Arabi's Cosmology, there exist four worlds, which although are in a hierarchy of importance are nonetheless interfolded and interdependent, fusing into each other and subsisting within each. These four comprise the totality of the world, which is all of existence. Arabi states:

"The highest world, which is the world of subsistence (al-baqa); then the world of transmutation (al-istihala), which is the world of annihilation (al-fana); then the world of inhabitation (al-ta'mir), which is the world of subsistence and annihilation; then the world of relations (al-nisab). These worlds are in two locations (mawtinayn): in the Greater World, which is everything outside man, and the Smaller world, which is man."

This connection of a person to one's larger environment speaks to the micro-macro interconnection Arabi speaks of often, for the smaller world is within the Greater world and not exclusive or external to it. As Arabi describes these four spheres, he remains mindful to constantly make the connection between the microcosm and the macrocosm. As each part of the greater world is reflected in and connected to the smaller world, so too is this seen in each sphere he understands and articulates.

The highest world is that of subsistence. It can be likened to what Arabi terms the "Muhammadan Reality". This is the sphere of verve. It is life force that is found here, and because this spiritual force permeates everything, it is found everywhere and is the source of all that manifests in the material world. Its counterpart within a person is that which is the hallowed essence, the astral body, which gives dynamism to one's material form. Within this world one would find the "All-Encompassing Throne", its corresponding item is the person which resides in the body, as Arabi considers one's body to be the container which holds the essence of who one really is, and yet the essence reaches far out of the container which is our physical body. This world also contains the "Footstool"; the equivalent within a person is one's soul. What Arabi terms the "Inhabited House"; one can find the counterpart within the human heart. Angels and Spirits are found here. This sphere represents a fusion of all the cosmos and the entire visible world, of which the human is the ultimate synthesis. Bruckhardt says this "spherical form is purely symbolic...(marking) the passage from astronomy to metaphysical and integral cosmology."

The highest sphere is also where the planets reside. Each planet itself, though within this highest sphere, maintains a sphere of its own within it. Arabi believes that each planet is connected to some aspect of the experience of being human and inhabiting our physical bodies. Each planet speaks to some aspect of how our essence, which is the same substance as the highest reality of the source, uses the physical body for its expression. The way that Arabi connects the physical manifestation of the planets with our various spiritual faculties again speaks to his assertion, and an important part of understanding this worldview; that the micro is the macro, and reversed.

Saturn represents the corresponding item of human cognitive faculties and breath. Jupiter corresponds to the faculty of memory and the back

of the brain. Mars corresponds to the intellectual faculty and the crown of the head. The Sun is the reflective faculty and the middle of the brain. Venus is the estimative faculty and the animal spirit. Mercury is the imaginal quality and the front of the brain. The Moon is the sensory faculty and the organs.

The world of transmutation is the world of the five elements, comprising of air, water, fire, earth, and ether. It includes the earth, with seven strata, which have human correspondences. Titus Bruckhardt clarifies this sphere by stating that “the sub-lunary spheres of ether- which do not signify here the quintessence, but the cosmic centre in which the fire is reabsorbed- of air and water, one should rather see a theoretical hierarchy according to degrees of density, rather than spatial spheres”.

The world of inhabitation is the sphere that includes animals, corresponding to human sensory faculties. Plants, which correlates to “that of man which grows”. Inanimate objects of the world are found here, corresponding to that aspect of a person that has no sensation. Perhaps this section more than others demonstrate the assertion, or underlying assumption, that all that is external connects to some aspect of the human being, and the connection is continuous and constant.

The world of relations includes relationships, accidents, events, states, and happenings, which hold human and environmental correspondences, but also carry verve of their own.

4.2 Cosmogony

Arabi is concerned with communicating the origins of creation, for it is this origin that gives rise all of the visible world, whether that visible world is found in the place of material or the ‘imaginal’ world, to use a term coined by Henry Corbin. The world is, according to Arabi, the Divine manifestation of God, with God as the source and the centre. It is God

that holds the sacred desire to move outwards and towards a “Universal Reality”, which Arabi terms “the Dust”. God understood his attributes, as classified in the ninety-nine divine names. As God held the sacred desire to move towards the Dust, so these ninety-nine divine names manifested. From these names all matter, and all we see in the material world, comes forth. The very first instance of the material world is where Dust finds itself. It is the light of God that is the impetus, the drive from source, through divine names, and its unveiling into Dust which has allowed all of the material world, as we know it, to manifest and become evident through our five senses. God is the creative source, and its constant unveiling is the world and all which inhabits it, whether we perceive that object to be animate, as in a person, or inanimate, as in a rock or a star.

There is a specifically Sufi understanding, as exemplified by Ibn Arabi, which holds a Gnostic comprehension of the continuity between the Principle and the Manifestation. The principle is the originating cause. The cosmogony is the creation arising from the source and cause. The cosmology is the manifestation as evidenced in nature and the planets. Cosmology is also the articulated world-view that represents the understanding of all three; principle, cosmogony, and cosmology together. The Sufi sages hold that, since there cannot be two realities, the infinite necessarily is infused in and expressed through the finite. The finite, being all that we see in the material world, must be connected to and indeed an extraction of the infinite. The two are intimately connected. In this way, matter is infused with spirit, it is not that matter is devoid or leads one astray. One need only have the understanding of the Unifying Principal in order to comprehend the totality of the only one reality. In this world-view, the entire manifested world becomes a symbol for the transcendent One, where the One may still transcend, as the visible world is only a symbol, but yet at the same time, the whole of the physical world further asserts the existence of the Divine Principal.

One need only reflect on the natural world in order to have the secrets of its symbols, and the transcendence, revealed. In this way, Nature becomes the breath of the divine, an illustration that originates and ends with only one.

4.3 Zodiac

As explained earlier, Arabi believes that everything within the cosmogony and cosmology of the world began and continues with purpose and intention. There is a deliberate enfoldment corresponding to the way that God chooses to reveal Himself with each "Breath". When considering the zodiac as a reflection of the divine revealing, Chittick explains:

Ibn Arabi arranges the twenty-eight letters according to their traditionally assigned places of articulation, beginning with the letter that is pronounced most deeply in the throat. In other words, the arrangement represents the order in which the all-merciful articulates the levels of the cosmos, beginning with the most internal letters. The deepest and most hidden letter is hamza, which corresponds to the First Intellect, the first thing created by God. Each succeeding degree apparently represents a logical rather than ontological progression in the direction of manifestation. I say "logical" because Ibn al- Arabi does not refer to all these degrees as actually existing entities. Some are conceptual tools and have no external existence save the traces that they leave in the cosmos or in our minds.

The arrangement of the universe in terms of twenty eight letters is one of four basic ways in which Ibn al-Arabi orders the cosmic degrees, the other three being the temporal (prior and posterior), spatial (higher and lower), and qualitative (more excellent and less excellent). He mentions in several contexts that he has realized the external existence of many

of these cosmic degrees during his ascents (mi raj) to God in Muhammad's footsteps.

Arabi believes that there are certain people, whom we classify as prophets, who exemplify one of the ninety-nine divine names in their purest expression. Though he points out that all of us exemplify the unveiling and enfoldment of the Source, Arabi especially classifies the prophets and saints as being examples of how God may manifest in a manner so that His presence may be undeniable. He articulates the Muslim prophet Muhammad as being the physical manifestation of the intellect of the light, the light being the impulse of God, though not to be confused with God Itself. The source of the prophet is the light, though this is separate from his physical existence within the Dust. Similarly, the prophet's cousin Ali, considered to be a Muslim saint, represents the intellect of God in a more subdued, or removed form, than that found in the prophet. There is a sympathy being spoken of here, in that there is a definitive hierarchy within the sympathies found from Source to outward manifestation. If the Source, which is God, is exalted above all else, then the ninety-nine divine names would follow from that Source as a close second. As the enfoldment of God's sacred desire continues from light to material form, we come to the prophets, the saints, and each and every thing remains connected and holds the essence of the Source, though in their own place and with their own part within the hierarchy.

All of creation holds purpose and intention. There is no chance manifestation according to Arabi. Every shape, every form, every material manifestation, and every spiritual being, including but not limited to human beings, are created with intention and purpose, and are created as reflections and expressions of the Source. God has initiated the goal of creation for the purpose of service.

Everything and everyone functions as a part of the expression of the creative Source, and serves the creative Source through its existence.

Though Arabi points out in many of his writings that the prophets are specially chosen and exemplify a purer expression of the Source than other people would, the fact that each expression of the Source is here in service of the Source, and that though prophets are more apparent in their service, each entity, each person, has its purpose and function in the unveiling, experience, and expression of the Source, and through sympathy, the ninety-nine divine names are exemplified in each of us. They are just more comprehensible in the soul of the prophets and saints, who could perhaps be understood as archetypal anthropomorphized expressions of the divine names . As Chittick explains:

Ibn Arabi lived in the intimate awareness of the ongoing articulation of words within the divine breath. When he refers to the Folk of God as the “Men of the Breaths” he is alluding precisely to this experience of the cosmos as speech. He was tremendously aware that everything is God’s speech and that the most basic way, as divine forms, has of communicating with reality is through speech. The most direct of all linguistic communications of the true nature of things is God’s own communication through the prophets. Hence it is incumbent upon human beings to understand what the prophets are saying. Only then will it be possible to understand the cosmos and the self and to become truly realized and fully functioning human beings.

What then is Ibn Arabi trying to communicate? In one word- the speech of God as articulated in the Koran. This means that the Koran...is his constant point of reference. Over and over again, his basic intention is to bring out the meaning inherent in this divine speech, whose articulation is aimed specifically at establishing human awareness of self, cosmos, and God. Hence Ibn Arabi is constantly meditating on Qu’ran verses.

5. Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this paper, Ibn Arabi was a deeply mystical man, who understood his spirituality within the revelation of Islam. Focusing on his educational background and personal experience, he was led to become one of the most eloquent and articulate voices of the Early Islamic Sufi movement . He held a depth of eloquence and conviction in a sky imbued with signs of the divine Source, as is evidenced when Arabi states:

The fluctuations of the states in the cosmos are all signs. People undergo these fluctuations while remaining unaware. (III 344.33)

The “signs” are the signifiers that He is the Real who is manifested within the loci of manifestation that are the entities of the cosmos. (II 151.3)

The cosmos, all of it, is a book inscribed (55-2), since it is an orderly arrangement, parts of which have been joined to other parts. Instant by instant in ever state it gives birth. There is nothing but the appearance of entities perpetually. No existence giver ever gives existence to anything until it loves giving it existence. Hence everything...is a beloved, so there is nothing but loved ones. (IV 424.21)

God has placed His signs in the cosmos as the habitual and non habitual...(the habitual) signs, such as the alteration of day and night...”(10.67)

When summarizing Arabi’s beliefs, William Chittick says:

The signs point to God, and each carries a message given to it by God. Each is a “messenger”...the cosmos is the sum total of the words of God as articulated within the breath of the All Merciful. The fact that the whole cosmos signifies and names God explains its beauty and goodness. The cosmos has an innate eminence, so it must never be condemned.

Nasr asserts quite clearly that:

Ibn Arabi integrated into his Gnostic vision of the cosmos Alexandrian cosmology as found in the writings of the Ikhwan, the pseudo-Empedoclean cosmology of Ibn Masarra, as well as certain astronomical and astrological works of Al-Biruni, and elevated Hermetic doctrines, of which traces are also to be found in the Rasa-il, to the highest level of their meaning.

Fakhry asserts that Ibn Arabi's was the first to bring a harmonic understanding between Neo-Platonism and Sufism. Fakhry summarises Arabi's cosmogony as fundamentally based on emanationist, clearly revealing its Neo-Platonist origins. The first cause of creation occurs within the "divine mind". God was at one point hidden, and decides to reveal Himself, motivated by Love. It is here in motivation that Arabi differs from other Neo-Platonist of his time. Where al-Farabi held that creation occurs out of necessity, showing his Plotinus influence clearly in this respect, for Arabi it is God's love that motivates His desire to be known. All that manifests from this beginning, as evidenced in nature, is only a reflection of the divine that emanates through and in it.

This paper has drawn a historical intellectual line of thought, from Plato's articulations right through to Ibn Arabi, thereby demonstrating that Arabi's specific cosmological interpretations of the Qu'ran were founded on a foundation of Neo-Platonism, influenced and informed by the developments of other thinkers preceding him. This is done not to question his authenticity, or the value of his self-professed mystical experience, but rather, to illustrate that his education provided him with the language to articulate his religious understanding and perceptions. While the revelatory text of Islam can be held as unique and sanctosanct, and be granted the respect that any text so important to a large cultural segment be afforded, this paper has demonstrated that the interpretations of the text were reflective of the personal values,

philosophical articulations, and level of education available to those interpreting within their historical, cultural, and intellectual context. The writings of Arabi clearly indicate that Neo-Platonist, who chose to interpret the Qu'ran in its most mystical rendering, influenced him. This demonstration could perhaps also be made on examination of other interpretive schools, leading up to the present day, though that is an area for future research.

Regardless of his historical and intellectual influences, Arabi's writings continue to be the driving force behind projects to translate his varied work, indicating perhaps that Arabi's articulation and Islamic mystical interpretation, though classical in the way it reaches back to Neo-Platonic roots, still holds interest and a unique perspective desired to be explored, known, and uncovered today.

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Thank you for reading this paper.