Unity of Being vs. Unity of Experience

A Comparative Primer of Ibn ‘Arabi’s and Ahmad Sirhindi’s Ontologies

Kevjn Lim

All thou beholdest is the act of one
In solitude, but closely veiled is He.
Let Him but lift the screen, no doubt remains:
The forms are vanished, He alone is all.¹

(Ibn al-Farid)

INTRODUCTION

As an aspect of the Islamic faith in its own right, Sufism (taṣawwuf) emphasizes the importance of intuitive knowledge or gnosis (maʿrifa) as a means of directly ‘tasting’ (dhawq) Divine Reality. Given its largely ineffable experiential and cognitive environment and its controversial substance, knowledge of the Sufi Path was handed down only from master to initiate. Indeed, occasional public disclosures, most famously al-Hallaj’s cry ‘anā al-ḥaqqa!’ were often met with censure and even execution. Still others have sought to approach mysticism from the standpoint of philosophy (e.g. Ibn Sina) or theology (e.g. al-Ghazali). As Peripatetic philosophy declined in the Arab world and shifted to Latin Europe, two somewhat parallel trends began taking its place: Suhrawardi’s philosophy of Illumination (Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq) and Ibn ‘Arabi’s speculative theosophy. Yet only with the latter did the first explicit and systematic formulation of Islam’s esoteric aspect come into being. This article focuses on the central theme of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ontology – variously known as Unity of Being, Unity of Existence, or Oneness of Existence –

and its bearing on the Sufi worldview, and proceeds to contrast it against Sirhindī’s Unity of Experience in the following section.

**IBN ‘ARABI’S UNITY OF BEING (WAḤDAT AL-WUJŪD)**

The term waḥdat al-wujūd was never employed as such by the Andalusi mystic–philosopher Abu Bakr Muhammad b. al-ʿArabi (better known as Muḥyī al-dīn b. al-ʿArabi or ‘al-Shaykh al-Akbar’; 561–638/1165–1240), but it nonetheless best captures the essence of his theosophy (as opposed to pure rationalism). While the Quran is established upon the confession ‘There is no god but God’ (lā ilāha illā ‘llāh), the Sufi view of reality may be better understood through its alternate reading ‘There is no being but Being’ (lā mawjūd illā ‘llāh).2 Given this premise, we now briefly look at what Ibn ‘Arabi meant by the terms ‘Being’ and ‘Unity’.

Ibn ‘Arabi distinguished between two types of being: Being qua Being (wujūd), and all other, namely possible or contingent being (mawjūd).3 The former, also known as Necessary Existence in Avicennian terms, appertains intrinsically only to God and cannot not be. As such, His Existence cannot be separated from His Essence, and it is through and from Him that all of creation derives its being.4 In other words, only wujūd is Real (al-ḥaqq); the cosmos and all else that is ‘not He’ (lā huwa) but that is nevertheless included therein is merely ‘imaginary’ (khayālī or mukhayyal). By virtue of its intermediary and ambiguous position, the second type of being represented the greater problem for Ibn ‘Arabi. This may be further divided into things that exist in actuality (relative existence) and things that only exist in potentia, or in God’s mind (relative nonexistence),


3. The ontological difference between the nominal form wujūd, ‘existence’ or ‘finding’, and the passive participle mawjūd, ‘that which is found’, is already arguably evident from a grammatical perspective.

but that nevertheless exist. Since only God is Real, anything that is neither Sheer Being (al-wujūd al-muṭlaq) nor absolute nonexistence (al-ʿadam al-muṭlaq) is both existent and non-existent at the same time.  

Furthermore, wujūd not only literally denotes ‘finding’ but implies a certain consciousness inherent therein, just as mawjūd is a limited derivative of both. It thus follows that in His Self-Finding, God is also pure Consciousness.

All of creation (al-khalq) is a reflection or shadow of Divine Reality (al-ḥaqq) and the fruit of His desire for self-disclosure (tajallī). Out of ‘the sadness of the primordial solitude’ God yearned to be known by other than Him. As the Hadith records, ‘I was a hidden Treasure and I wanted to be known, so I created the world’. Moreover, it is an act of Divine Love – ‘I wanted [i.e. loved] to be known’ – such that the ‘movement of the world from non-existence to existence is then…the movement of love manifesting itself’.  

Likewise, Ibn ‘Arabi compared creation to the ‘Breath of Compassion’ (nafas al-raḥmān) or the Creative

Breath by alluding to the ‘merciful expansion of the possibilities of manifestation starting from their latent state in the Source’.¹¹ Just as the act of breathing involves a cycle of expansion and contraction, so the universe is (re)created in one breath and annihilated or withdrawn unto God in the next, a theophanic process that is ‘renewed at every moment’.¹²

When considered in toto, reality may be said to consist of three degrees: Absolute Being, the Divine Names or Attributes, and the phenomenal world.¹³ God in His Absolute Being transcends all knowledge and experience. He is also undetermined, unconditioned and absolutely incomparable (tanzīh), being as He is ‘independent of the worlds’.¹⁴ Awareness begins only on the level of Divine Names or Attributes, or in other words God’s relationship with creation.¹⁵ These same constitute the reference point through which the universe is determined, differentiated and understood, and from which ‘unitive knowledge of the Divine Reality’ is attainable.¹⁶ The Attributes ‘Life’ and ‘Knowledge’ by which we name God, i.e. the ‘Living’, the ‘Knowing’, are in their turn manifested as attributes in ephemeral and sentient beings for, after all, ‘we are the fruit of Divine unconditional generosity towards the Divine Names (which demand creation as their logical complement)’.¹⁷ Being’s self-determination (taʿayyun) by means of the Names likewise accounts for the emergence of multiplicity from Unity. For

¹³. Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism, p.27; Stepaniants, Sufi Wisdom, p. 16; following the Shaykh himself, Chittick classifies them in these corresponding terms: Divine Essence (dhāt), the attributes (ṣīfāt) or names (asmāʾ), and the acts (afʿāl). See Sufi Path, p. 5; Ibn ʿArabi, Fuṣūṣ, p. 98.
¹⁵. Indeed, Ibn ʿArabi uses the terms (Divine) Names, Attributes and Relations interchangeably.
¹⁷. Ibn ʿArabi, Fuṣūṣ, p. 86; as Izutsu put it, ‘the Divine Wish for the creation of the world (and man in particular) did not arise from the Absolute qua Absolute...[but from] the essential inner drive of the Beautiful Names or Attributes’, Sufism and Taoism, p. 219.
this reason, God is both One and Many (al-wāḥid al-kathīr), or One in His Essence and Many in His Attributes. On the one hand, the Divine Names are hierarchically ranked and differentiated among themselves – a hadith for instance describes how ‘God’s mercy takes precedence over His wrath’. On the other hand, the Divine Names are indistinguishable from God, being in essence various aspects of the all-comprehensive Name Allāh. In this same manner, existent things differ only among themselves, being in essence modalities of the One Existence. From another point of view, if Unity relates to Being, then multiplicity must logically relate to non-Being. Prior to existentiation (takwīn), things can only subsist in God’s knowledge as ‘immutable entities’ (aʿyān thābita). Being the ‘self-manifesting forms of the Divine Names’, all the existential possibilities immanent in the created universe are represented herein which, when given the Divine Command ‘kun!’ (‘Be!’), come

18. Chittick, ‘Between the Yes and the No’, p. 102; in what amounts to the same assertion in another article by Chittick, God is One in His Being while Many in His Knowledge, see Nasr and Leaman, History of Islamic Philosophy, p. 505.

19. Cited in William C. Chittick, The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s Cosmology (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. xviii; similarly, God’s four principal Attributes of Life, Knowledge, Desire and Power are ranked in precisely that order. The Power to create the cosmos stems in the first place from the Desire to do so, which comes about by means of Knowledge, which in turn is impossible if God were dead.


21. Ibn ʿArabi, Fuṣūṣ, p. 36; see also p. 65: ‘There is in existence only that which denotes Unity; and there is in imagination only that which denotes multiplicity.’

22. They are ‘immutable’ precisely because they are subsistent in God’s knowledge which is immutable and forever; in a sense, the theologians’ belief in creatio ex nihilo finds substantiation in Ibn ʿArabi’s concept of existence. It is possible to argue that ex nihilo here refers not to absolute nonexistence but to relative nonexistence, that is to say that God created the universe out of the ideal archetypes (cf. the Platonic forms) that were hitherto present only in His mind, see Chittick, Sufi Path, pp. 84–5; Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism, p. 201; Corbin, Creative Imagination, p. 186.

to in-form the actual, phenomenal world. In turn, each created existent becomes a ‘locus of manifestation’ (*maẓhar*) or receptacle (*qābil*) according to which form and preparedness or properties the Divine Essence ‘conforms’ Itself.\(^{24}\) In this way, God is all according to their common existence, yet He is not all according to their individual properties, which paradoxically do not exist except through Him: the world is both ‘He’ and ‘not He’ (*huwa lā huwa*).

Though this may be the case, Annemarie Schimmel observed that ‘God is necessary to us in order that we may exist, while we are necessary to Him in order that He may be manifested to Himself.’\(^{25}\) This relationship, known in Latin as *unio sympathetica*, binds the Names to the named ones and represents the aspect of Divinity known as Lordship (*rubūbiyya*).\(^{26}\) What is meant by ‘Lordship’ may be understood by again looking at the ambiguous status of the Divine Names as they stand between God and the world. In relation to God, the Names are passive, awaiting the effusion of Being which then externalizes and actuates them. In relation to the world, the Names are active determinants of the form that individual existents are destined to assume.\(^{27}\) From this perspective it follows that each Name becomes the ‘personal’ lord (*rabb*) of its thing-vassal (*marbūb*): without the vassal, there can be no lord. Similarly, a God (*ilāh*) demands a ‘Godded’ (*maʾlūh*) or a ‘divine thrall’ at least in a relational if not an absolute sense, so that Ibn ‘Arabi says: ‘By knowing Him, I give Him being’.\(^{28}\) After all, that the hidden Treasure ‘yearned to be known’ necessitates another that may know Him.\(^{29}\)

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26. Ibid. p. 271.
27. Cf. the Neoplatonic Intellects in their vertical relationships, i.e. passive with regards to the preceding one and active with regards to the proceeding one.
29. Ibid. p. 128.
Inasmuch as the cosmos is ‘He’, Being may ‘be found’ on five descending levels or ‘Divine Presences’. The Divine Essence in the state of supreme transcendence – comparable to Brahman of the Upanishads – cannot be but absolute Unity or Simplicity, aḥadiyya, and is thus the epitome of al-hāhūt, ‘He-ness’. Mystical union is impossible on this highest plane because contemplation (shahāda) would imply a seer–seen (nāẓir–manẓūr) or subject–object division, which does not exist here. In His Absolute Mystery, ‘None knows God but God’. Divine self-disclosure properly begins on the plane of Oneness (of the Many), wāḥidiyya, and is as such also known as al-lāhūt, that is Divinity revealed and determined by means of the Attributes. In revealing Himself to Himself through the Names, God lays the framework, as it were, for multiplicity and alterity. Ibn ‘Arabi argued that the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘We’ both referring to God in the Quran correspond contextually and semantically to the Unity of the One (ahadiyya), as in ‘Verily, I am God; there is no god but I’, and the Unity of the Many (wāḥidiyya), as in ‘Surely We have created everything in measure’. The next three presences respectively encompass the spiritual, imaginal and corporeal realms of existence, thus: al-jabarūt, spiritual existence beyond forms and the plane in which Divine Action operates; al-malakūt, home to the angelic and subtle substances, similitudes and imagination – for which reason it is also called

30. Burckhardt, Introduction, p. 96; Nasr, Three Muslim Sages, p. 113. Given their hierarchical structure, they are also known as the five ‘Descents’, tanazzulāt; see Corbin, Creative Imagination, p. 225.
31. Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism, p. 23; the letter ha (臊) is symbolic of the essence, see Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions, p. 270; cf. the Deus Absconditus or Essentia Abscondita of the Latins.
32. Hadith.
33. Cf. the Deus Revelatus of the Latins; the difference between wāḥid and aḥad, both meaning ‘one’, is this: while the former refers to ‘one’ as the basis of numerical progression, the latter refers to ‘one’ in the sense of absolute wholeness and simplicity. For this reason, the second stage called wāḥidiyya posits God as ‘One’ in relation to more-than-one, or manyness; see Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism, p. 24.
34. Chittick, Self-Disclosure, pp. 169–70, Quranic verses 20:14 and 54:49, respectively.
ʿālam al-mithāl or ʿālam al-khayāl; and finally, al-nāsūt, the bottom-most plane of self-determination.

Now the imaginal realm or ‘imagination’ (khayāl) plays a key role in our discussion of He/not He for what we perceive to be manifest existence is in reality Divine Imagination. That is to say, although all created things reflect and testify to Being (‘He’), they do not really exist in themselves (‘not He’). Similarly,

the world is illusory (mutawahham), it has not a veritable existence; and it is that which one means by the imagination (encompassing the entire world): that is to say that thou dost imagine that (the world) is an autonomous reality, separated from God and added on, whereas it is in itself nothing.

Ibn ʿArabi applied the term ‘imagination’ on three separate levels, namely everything in the cosmos other than ‘He’ (‘Nondelimited Imagination’); that which exists in the macrocosm between the spiritual and the corporeal worlds (‘discontiguous imagination’); and the human soul or microcosm that joins spirit and body (‘contiguous imagination’), including the imaginative faculty itself.

The common thread among these is the state of ambiguity and intermediate reality not unlike dreams in which the sensory becomes pure intelligible and the intelligible seemingly assumes sensory forms. At the cosmic level, the ‘Breath of the Compassionate’ containing the totality of possible existences posits itself halfway between Being and nothingness, such that it is at one and the same time existent and non-existent or He/not He, and thus imaginary. In the realm between the spiritual and corporeal worlds, ‘unveiling takes place, the angels descend to the prophets with revelation, and

35. Corbin, Creative Imagination, p. 191.
36. Ibn ʿArabi, Fuṣūṣ, p. 64.
37. Also known as the world of Mystery (ʿālam al-ghayb) and the world of visibility (ʿālam al-shahādat).
38. Chittick, Sufi Path, p. 116; these adjectives deserve some explanation here: imagination is ‘Nondelimited’ when it refers to the cosmos as an integral or infinite reality; ‘discontiguous’ because the macrocosm exists independently of the perceiver; and ‘contiguous’ by virtue of its connection to the perceiving subject.
all the after-death events described in the Quran and Hadith take place as described’. In man’s ternary constitution, interaction between spirit (rūḥ) and body (jism) occurs through the soul (nafs), which is not incidentally also the seat of psychological imagination. Just as we are capable of imagining the impossible, say a two-headed unicorn, so too with Divine Imagination except that God also possesses the power of preponderance to bring it into being. When viewed in this light, imagination is not only the site of prophetic revelation but also quite literally the wellspring of reality. The Prophet Muhammad recognized this dream-truth when he said that ‘people sleep, and when they die they awaken’. Furthermore, in addition to reason, employed by philosophers and scholastic theologians alike as the sole basis of understanding God by what He is not, the Sufi mystic also looks to imagination as the means of understanding God by what He is.

Ibn ‘Arabi employed another term, barzakh (‘isthmus’ or ‘limit’) to describe this intermediate state. According to him, a barzakh is that which

meets what is between the two by its very essence. If it were to meet one of the two with a face that is other than the face with which it meets the other, then there would have to be within itself, between its two faces, a barzakh that differentiates between the two faces so that the two do not meet together. If there is no such barzakh, then the face with which it meets one of the two affairs between which it stands is identical with the face with which it meets the other. This is the true barzakh. It is, through its own essence, identical with everything that it meets. Hence the separation between the things and the separating factor become manifest as one in entity. Once you come to know this, you have come to know what the barzakh is.

39. Nasr and Leaman, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 506; the spiritual and corporeal worlds are also respectively known as the worlds of meaning (maʿnā) and sense perception (ḥiss).
41. Cited in Ibn ʿArabi, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 59; see also p. 94.
42. From the Persian pardah, i.e. ‘veil’ or ‘partition’.
43. Excerpted from *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Chap. 382, cited in Chittick,
A *barzakh* not only differentiates between diverse realities but provides the conceptual basis for defining things. Conversely, *barzakhs*, because of this, risk becoming veils as well, like the ‘screen’ that conceals the truth of the Unity of Being in the introductory epitaph by Ibn al-Farid. Consider the mirror as a metaphor for reality. A man gazing at a mirror sees his form or reflection, yet he fails to perceive the mirror itself. God is this mirror in which creation is reflected, and ironically it is man’s own reflected form that veils him from perceiving the Source of the reflection. Only through mystical unveiling (*kashf*) can the Sufi perceive the mirror behind the form – that is, ‘the Form of the Absolute assuming the form of his own’. The Supreme *Barzakh*, i.e. the cosmos in its entirety or ‘Universal Reality’ is also referred to as the ‘Third Thing’ (*al-shayʾ al-thālith*), because it is ‘a unifying principle of the totality of both the limited and the unlimited aspects of existence’. Paradoxically, even as the *barzakh* creates the basis for epistemological differentiation and definition, it also renders possible the ontological unity of Being and nonexistence, Eternity and temporality, God and the universe.

The mystery of He/not He may be further explained with the following analogy: pure light, when directed through a prism or pieces of coloured glass, refracts into different colours, each with its own chromatic properties. Yet, in so far as ‘red’ and ‘blue’ are different from pure light in phenomenon, they are identical in essence. Light as such encapsulates all the possible modalities of its manifestation and though there can be light without colour, there cannot be colour without light. Multiplicity may similarly be envisaged as varying intensities.

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46. Ibid. p. 35.
of light. In the *Fuṣūṣ*, the Prophet Moses replies to Pharaoh’s challenge regarding God’s Quiddity (‘what-ness’), describing Him simply as ‘The Lord of the Heavens and of the Earth and of that which is between the two, if you have the certitude’.\(^{49}\) Based on Moses’ assertion, Pharaoh then responds: ‘certainly the Essence is indivisible, inseparable as such, but the degree of its actual manifestation in myself, is that of power over thee, O Moses; I am thee by the essence but I am other than thee by dignity’.\(^{50}\) As Seyyed Hossein Nasr noted, the charge of pantheism leveled against Ibn ʿArabi founders precisely because it posits creation’s substantial rather than essential (here, essence being synonymous with God’s existence) continuity and identity with the Divine Principle, when the latter in fact transcends all categories including substance.\(^{51}\)

Such is the all-inclusivity of Being that it is also called the ‘coincidence of opposites’ (*jamʿ al-aḍḍād*).\(^{52}\) For the mortal mind, the only possible reaction is one of ‘perplexity’ (*ḥayra*), which Ibn ʿArabi anticipated.\(^{53}\) God is at one and the same time incomparable (*tanzīh*) with regard to the universe and yet similar (*tashbīh*) to it. To the extent that He is unknowable, He is incomparable; and to the extent that He ‘discloses [Himself] as every form in the external and internal worlds’, He is similar.\(^{54}\) According to William Chittick, a proper understanding of God – insofar as is humanly possible – requires balancing both

\(^{49}\) Cited in Ibid. p. 109; i.e., the Lord is ‘He who manifests Himself by the forms of the world’, p. 110.

\(^{50}\) Ibid. p. 111.


\(^{52}\) Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 188.

\(^{53}\) Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 68.

\(^{54}\) Chittick, ‘Between the Yes and the No’, p. 99; the two highest Divine Presences testify to this: as *al-Aḥad*, God is unknown; as *al-Wāḥid*, He is immanent in all of Creation; see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p. 168.
reason, which emphasizes His distance and harsh attributes, and mystical revelation, which appeals to His proximity and gentle attributes.\(^{55}\)

As the sum of the Divine Names is reflected in the universe *qua* macrocosm, so it is contained in Man *qua* microcosm – the most perfect of all creation and therefore God’s vicegerent (*khalīfa*) on earth.\(^{56}\) Adam was not only created in His Form but molded with His two Hands, signifying the synthesis of active spirit (i.e. the Names) and passive matter (*hayūlā*, from Gk. *hyle*), eternity and temporality, transcendence and immanence, manifest and nonmanifest. Adam’s exterior was creature, but his interior was God.\(^{57}\) For this reason, Iblis (Satan) whose constitution was merely elemental was commanded to prostrate before Adam, which he refused but not without cosmic consequences. More importantly, it is through mankind that God ‘contemplates His creation and dispenses His mercy’.\(^{58}\) The notion of man as God’s perfect image may again be understood through the mirror metaphor: ‘God, then, is the mirror in which thou seest thyself as thou art His mirror in which He contemplates His Names. Now these are none other than Himself, so that reality reverses itself and becomes ambiguous.’\(^{59}\) Hence the hadith ‘he who knows himself, knows his Lord’.\(^{60}\) Yet, just as light itself varies in intensity, so the prophets and saints represent the cream of humankind with Muhammad incarnating the truly Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). Another hadith records Muhammad

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56. According to the *Fuṣūṣ*, ‘He is to the world that which the setting is to the ring; the setting carries the seal which the King applies to his treasure chests; and it is for this that (Universal) Man is called the Representative of God, Whose creation he safeguards, as one safeguards the treasures by a seal...’, p. 12; according to the Quran (2:31), ‘[God] taught Adam all the names’.

57. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 120.

58. Ibid. p. 12; the word *insān* also means the pupil of the eye, such that man is to God what the pupil is to the eye; see Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 227.


as saying, ‘I was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay’.\textsuperscript{61} This brings to mind the Johannine Logos, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’.\textsuperscript{62} Being the firstborn of God’s creatures, Muhammad later returned in time as the ‘seal of the prophets’ that began with Adam.\textsuperscript{63} Creation is therefore believed to have commenced and concluded through him, and it is his perfect encapsulation of all existence in time and space that has come to be identified with the ‘Muhammadan Reality’ (\textit{al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya}).\textsuperscript{64}

Being the epitome of creation and hence all of creation too, Man is consequently indistinguishable from God except for one thing. ‘Although we are qualified in every respect by the qualities which come from God Himself’, Ibn ʿArabi wrote, ‘there is (between Him and us) certainly a difference, that is to say our dependence towards Him, in so far as He is the Being’\textsuperscript{65}. As the greatest Sufi poet of all time Jalaluddin Rumi pointed out, to utter ‘\textit{anā al-ḥaqq}’ (‘I am the Truth’) is to affirm only God’s Existence, whereas to say ‘\textit{anā al-ʿabd}’ would be to affirm one’s own existence alongside that of God’s, and this is polytheism. In the following section, we see that Sufism would soon split along differing interpretations of Unity and Being.

**SIRHINDI’S UNITY OF EXPERIENCE**

\textit{(WAḤDAT AL-SHUḤŪD)}

For the next several centuries after Ibn ʿArabi’s death, the concept of the Unity of Being penetrated the Islamic world and became particularly entrenched in the Shiite, Persian-speaking provinces. Then, in 16th-century Mughal India, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (971–1034/1563–1624; also known as ‘Mujaddid-i Alf-i

\textsuperscript{61.} See ibid. p. 437.
\textsuperscript{62.} The Gospel of John, 1:1.
\textsuperscript{63.} Schimmel, \textit{Mystical Dimensions}, p. 272.
\textsuperscript{64.} Izutsu compares him to Plotinus’ First Intellect, that is the first self-manifestation of the Divine, \textit{Sufism and Taoism}, p. 237; Nasr, \textit{Three Muslim Sages}, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{65.} Ibn ʿArabi, \textit{Fuṣūṣ}, p. 16.
Thāni\textsuperscript{66} on account of his campaign to revive Sunni orthodoxy) mounted a fierce attack, among other things, on what he regarded as antinomianism on the part of many Sufis. Much in the same vein as al-Ghazali generations before, Sirhindi argued that true Sufism affirmed rather than opposed the Revealed Law (\textit{sharīʿa}). As a consequence, internal purification merely served as a prelude to a higher calling, meaning unconditional adherence to the Prophet’s religion as laid out in the Quran and the Sunnah.\textsuperscript{67} Along with this, mystical union (\textit{ittiḥād}) with God was not to be regarded as the final objective but only one of many stages along the believer’s Path. Sirhindi pointed out that the ‘promise of God is to unveil Himself to His good people in the hereafter and not here’, and that explains why even Moses himself could not behold YHWH on Mount Sinai.\textsuperscript{68} Having said this, Sirhindi also argued that Sufis such as al-Hallaj and Ibn ‘Arabi who in their ecstasy came to perceive God alone as Real and all else as imaginary were not wrong, only incomplete. At the moment of ecstasy, intense love and awareness of God naturally eclipses everything else including the Sufi’s self. For this reason, al-Hallaj’s cry ‘\textit{anā al-ḥaqq!}’ should not be taken to mean ‘I am God [Truth]’, but that ‘God exists, not I’.\textsuperscript{69} Yet, Sirhindi also held that intoxication (\textit{sukr}) needed to be followed by a return or ‘descent’ to (the second) sobriety (\textit{al-ṣaḥw al-thānī}), only at which point the divine message may

\textsuperscript{66}. Lit. ‘the Renower or Reviver of the second [Islamic] millennium’. This ties in with the general belief among Muslims that God sends a \textit{mujaddid} to the people on the eve of every century in order to reverse the decline of the Islamic faith. According to Sirhindi, the one sent on the eve of the next millennium after Muhammad bears an even more crucial burden, and it was to him that this lot supposedly fell. See Yohanan Friedmann, \textit{Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity} (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1971), p. 17.


\textsuperscript{68}. Ibid. p. 880; \textit{Maktūbāt-i Mujaddid}, Letter No. 217, in ibid. loc. cit.

\textsuperscript{69}. Friedmann, \textit{An Outline}, pp. 59–60.
be imparted to the common believer.\textsuperscript{70} This reflected his belief that prophecy (\textit{nubūwa}) surpassed sainthood (\textit{wilāya}) in rank since the former vocation involved experiencing both union and awakening from it in order to edify the \textit{umma}, whereas the latter merely stopped at union.\textsuperscript{71} Nevertheless, to the uninitiated majority, this kind of mysticism could often appear indistinguishable from pantheism, thereby exacerbating the rift between Sufism and orthodox Islam.\textsuperscript{72} Because \textit{waḥdat al-wujūd} represented the most authoritative formulation of this worldview, it was only natural that Sirhindi directed his offensive against its author.

Broadly speaking, Sirhindi rejected Ibn ‘Arabi’s fundamental principle that only Being exists and that everything else is a manifestation of Being. He then set out his response as follows. \textit{Tawḥīd}, the core of Islamic faith, refers strictly to the belief in One God who is absolutely without peer and not to the \textit{wujūdī}’s notion of One Reality. Paraphrasing Sirhindi, Muhammad Farman explained that ‘[no] prophet ever preached that creation is an incarnation of the Creator. Their aim was to inculcate faith in the One Lord who is unique and has no like.’\textsuperscript{73} Rather than asserting an ontological unity in which Creator (\textit{Ḥaqq}) and creation (\textit{khalq}) are indistinguishable, Sirhindi instead posited an epistemological or perceptual unity involving only subjective rather than objective reality. He called this the Unity of Experience or Vision (\textit{waḥdat al-shuhūd, tawḥīd shuhūdī}). The Mujaddid went on to elaborate that

\begin{quote}
\textit{Tawḥīd shuhūdī} is to see One Being; that is, in his perception the Sufi has nothing but One Being. \textit{Tawḥīd wujūdī}, on the other hand, is to believe that there is only One Being there, that other
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid. p. 25.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. p. 37.
\textsuperscript{72} Farman, ‘Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhindī’, p. 879.
things are non-existent, and that in spite of their non-existence, they are the manifestations and appearances of One Being.\(^{74}\)

The metaphor best suited to this passage is that of the sun and the stars. During the night, we see the stars and know that they exist. During the day, the stars disappear due to the sun’s overwhelming brilliance, yet this does not mean that they do not exist, only that we cannot see them. As such we come to behold only one thing, the sun. An actual distinction exists between God and creation and the basis of reality is dualism (\(ithnayniyya\)) rather than existential monism, if the latter was indeed the interpretation intended by Ibn ‘Arabi.\(^{75}\) Similarly, God is absolutely transcendent and absolutely Other, a premise upheld from the beginning by orthodox theologians. Despite this distinction however, the world’s existence as such is just as imaginary as the one described by Ibn ‘Arabi. In this narrow sense, one could argue that Real Being alone exists. The difference is that rather than being identical with God, the imaginary nature of the world can be conceived of separately and ‘by no means threatens the unity of the Real Being’.\(^{76}\) Again, we return to the metaphor of the mirror. A man’s mirror reflection possesses no existence on its own since it is nothing but an optical illusion. If it looks like the man in every aspect, it is not him either because, having proceeded from him, the image henceforth becomes something else. In this sense, Sirhindi’s belief that creation is a reflection of God was in accord with Ibn ‘Arabi. Conversely, if Ibn ‘Arabi was thought to have conflated the two by arguing that ‘All is He’ (Per. \(hama ʿūst\)), Sirhindi maintained a distinction in so far as the image is not the man. Still, it appears evident from the use of the same metaphor that the dualism discussed by Sirhindi is only relative, for in the final reckoning everything proceeds from God (Per. \(hama az ʿūst\)).

\(^{74}\) Cited in Ansari, ‘\(Wahdat ʿI-Shuhūd\)’, p. 102.
\(^{75}\) Ibid. pp. 106, 111.
\(^{76}\) Ibid. p. 112.
Creation for Ibn ‘Arabi consists of Being manifesting and determining Itself by means of the Divine Names, but for Sirhindi the created universe begins, in line with its imaginary but distinct essence, on the basis of its own, inherent non-existence and becomes manifest only by virtue of the shadow or reflection (zill) of God’s Being upon it. As a result, everything that we have come to recognize as knowledge, power etc. is in reality the exact opposite (i.e. ignorance, impotence) except for the corresponding Divine Attributes reflected thereupon. Indeed, the Divine Names exist independently of God rather than as mere hypostatic projections establishing God’s multiple relationships with creation.\(^\text{77}\) By this same logic, the fundamental objects of God’s knowledge, referred to by Ibn ‘Arabi as the ‘immutable entities’ (al-a‘yān al-thābita) also become untenable in principle. For Sirhindi, the ideal archetypes are instead ‘essences of contingent beings’ (haqā‘iq mumkināt) because in the absence of Divine zill they properly belong to the realm of non-being.\(^\text{78}\) Again, this zill is as its meaning suggests and is in no way identical with God and moreover, the divine reflections notwithstanding, all existing things remain finite and even non-existent relative to God Himself.\(^\text{79}\) Nonetheless, because the entire cosmological infrastructure is sustained by Him, it receives a measure of stability and permanence (thubūt ē thabāt) and is therefore ‘both unreal and real, a non-real reality’.\(^\text{80}\) By formulating his argument along these lines, Sirhindi demonstrated that the universe can be both imaginary yet ontologically distinct at the same time.

Sirhindi also raised important moral and ethical issues in his critique of wahdat al-wujūd. As with any belief system equating God with the world and vice versa, Ibn ‘Arabi’s (supposed) pantheism appears to justify idolatry. Worse still, pantheism denies actual existence to evil and instead defines it as degrees of good. Closely related to this is the apparent

\(^\text{77}\) Friedmann, An Outline, p. 63.
\(^\text{78}\) Ansari, ‘Wahdat I-Shuhād’, p. 113.
\(^\text{79}\) Ibid. pp. 113, 115.
\(^\text{80}\) Ibid. p. 114; Friedmann, An Outline, p. 64.
determinism based on the belief in One Actor (*tawḥīd fiʿlī*). The pantheists for instance took the Quranic verse ‘You did not throw [the handful of dust] when you threw, but God threw’ to mean that behind every human act is the Divine Actor.\(^8^{1}\) This belief effectively attributed all perceived evil to God. In contrast, the dualism and relative ontological independence of the universe postulated by Sirhindi provides for a measure of freewill and just desert on man’s part,\(^8^{2}\) and this allowed the Sufism of that period to be reconciled with mainstream Islamic orthodoxy.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite the differences between Ibn ʿArabi and Sirhindi’s ontologies, Yohanan Friedmann noted that even late in his life, Shaykh Ahmad continued holding ‘the Greatest Master’ in extremely high regard. After all, it was Ibn ʿArabi who

laid down the foundations of the theory of gnosis (*sukhan-i maʿrifat ŏ ʿirfān*) and elaborated on it...Most of those who came after him chose to follow in his footsteps and used his terms. We latecomers (*mā pas māndagān*) have also benefited from the blessings of that great man and learned a great deal from his mystical insights. May God give him for this the best reward.\(^8^{3}\)

Elsewhere, Sirhindi wrote that ‘in most assertions about reality (*taḥqīqāt*) the Shaykh is in the right and his detractors far from the truth’.\(^8^{4}\) That Sirhindi launched so harsh a critique of *waḥdat al-wujūd* might have resulted not only from doctrinal conviction, but equally from fear of leading astray the common believer not initiated into such profound Sufi secrets.\(^8^{5}\) After him, renowned Sufis such as Shah Waliullah (Qutb ad-Din Ahmad, 1114–76/1703–62) attempted to reconcile both *waḥdat* 

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81. Quran 8:17; Ansari, ‘*Waḥdat ʿl-Shuhūd*’, pp.107–8.
82. Friedmann, *An Outline*, p. 64.
85. Ibid. p. 67.
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al-wujūd and waḥdat al-shuhūd, in turn sparking off new controversies but enriching the debate.

The first part of this article provided a brief account and analysis of a central principle of Sufi discourse, Ibn ʿArabi’s Unity of Being. The second part examined the major contender to the notion of Unity of Being as laid out in Sirhindī’s Unity of Experience. Even so, the sharp disagreements generated as a result hardly belied the common dedication of each towards the profession of God’s Unity (tawḥīd) and absolute Submission.