

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

A COMPARATIVE SURVEY OF MYSTICAL
ONTOLOGIES EAST AND WEST

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THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	10
Dedication.....	11
Acknowledgments	12
Tables and Figures.....	13-14

INTRODUCTION

1. Thesis.....	15-18
A Point of Contact	15-16
The Oneness of the Manifold.....	16-18
2. Preliminary Discussion.....	18-24
Existence.....	18-20
Manifestation	20-22
Knowledge.....	22-24
3. Method.....	24-49
The Way of Eranos	25-27
Henry Corbin	27-32
Mircea Eliade.....	32-38
Toshihiko Izutsu	38-49
The Comparative Method.....	49-50
4. Outline	50-52
Part One: Eastern Traditions.....	51
Part Two: Western Traditions.....	52
5. Criticisms and Objections.....	53-57
The Prevailing Attitude.....	53-54

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Two Critiques	54-56
A Way Forward	56-57
6. Terminology	57
Mysticism	57-58
Speculation	59
Ontology	60-62
7. Implications	62-63

PART ONE: EASTERN TRADITIONS

1. CHAPTER 1: Advaita Vedānta Hinduism	65-126
2. Introduction.....	65-71
Vedānta.....	65-66
Advaita.....	66-68
The Philosophy of Śaṅkara.....	68-69
The Commentaries of Śaṅkara.....	69-70
Method and Outline.....	70-71
3. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis	71-123
Section One: Existence.....	71-96
Structural Exposition: Existence as <i>Sat</i>	72-77
Textual Analysis: <i>Prasthānatrayī</i>	78-96
The Upaniṣads	78-82
<i>Kena Upaniṣad</i>	78-80
<i>Taittirīya Upaniṣad</i>	80-82
The Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā Bhāṣya.....	82-90
<i>The Sāṅkhya Yoga</i>	83-87
<i>Yoga of the Field and the Field-Knower</i>	87-90

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

The Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya	90-96
<i>Samanvaya</i>	91-93
<i>Avirodha</i>	93-96
Section Two: Manifestation.....	96-111
Structural Exposition: Manifestation as <i>Māyā</i>	96-101
Textual Analysis: <i>Prasthānatrayī</i>	101-111
The Upaniṣads	102-105
<i>Aitareya Upaniṣad</i>	102-104
<i>Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad</i>	104-105
The Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā Bhāṣya.....	106-108
<i>Kṛṣṇa 's Manifested Powers</i>	106-107
<i>The Vision of the Cosmic Form</i>	107-108
The Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya	108-110
<i>The Above of Heaven, Earth, Etc</i>	109-111
Section Three: Knowledge.....	111-123
Structural Exposition: Knowledge as <i>Jñāna</i>	111-115
Textual Analysis: <i>Prasthānatrayī</i>	115-123
The Upaniṣads	116-118
<i>Īśā Upaniṣad</i>	116-117
<i>Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad</i>	117-118
The Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā Bhāṣya.....	118-121
<i>The Sāṅkhya Yoga</i>	118-120
<i>Yoga of Knowledge and Realization</i>	120-121
The Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya	121-123
<i>Phala</i>	121-123
4. Concluding Summary	123-126

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

CHAPTER 2: Philosophical Daoism.....	127-176
1. Introduction.....	127-135
Dao.....	127-129
Philosophical Daoism	129-133
Method and Outline	133-135
2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis	135-174
Section One: Existence.....	135-152
Structural Exposition: Existence as <i>Dao</i>	136-140
Textual Analysis: The <i>Zhuangzi</i>	140-152
Discourse on the Equalization of All Things.....	144-148
The Great Lordly Master	149-152
Section Two: Manifestation.....	152-165
Structural Exposition: Manifestation as <i>Wu Hua</i>	153-155
Textual Analysis: The <i>Zhuangzi</i>	155-165
The Ten Thousand Things Are One Horse.....	156-160
The Ten Thousand Hollows.....	160-165
Section Three: Knowledge.....	165-174
Structural Exposition: Knowledge as <i>Ming</i>	165-168
Textual Analysis: The <i>Zhuangzi</i>	168-175
The Symbols of Manifested Power Fulfilled.....	168-171
Fit To Be Emperors and Kings	172-174
3. Concluding Summary	174-176
CHAPTER 3: Zen Buddhism	177-233
1. Introduction.....	177-196
Zen.....	177-178

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

India: Nāgārjuna and the Doctrine of Emptiness.....	178-182
From India to China: Two Interpretations of Emptiness	182-192
From China to Japan: The Rinzai and Sōtō Branches of Zen.....	192-194
Method and Outline	194-196
2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis	196-230
Section One: Existence	196-209
Structural Exposition: Existence as <i>Shinnyo</i>	196-199
Textual Analysis: The <i>Shōbōgenzō</i>	199-210
<i>Shōbōgenzō</i> Busshō.....	203-209
Section Two: Manifestation.....	209-221
Structural Exposition: Manifestation as <i>Engi</i>	209-214
Textual Analysis: The <i>Shōbōgenzō</i>	214-221
<i>Shōbōgenzō</i> Genjō-kōan.....	214-221
Section Three: Knowledge.....	221-230
Structural Exposition: Knowledge as <i>Satori</i>	221-226
Textual Analysis: The <i>Shōbōgenzō</i>	226-230
<i>Shōbōgenzō</i> Sansuigyō.....	226-230
3. Concluding Summary	230-233

PART II: WESTERN TRADITIONS

CHAPTER 4: Kabbalistic Judaism.....	235-291
1. Introduction.....	235-253
Kabbalah.....	235-238
Historical and Conceptual Development	238-251
An Exegetical Tradition.....	239-240
Merkavah Mysticism	240-241

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Major Texts.....	242-251
<i>Bahir</i>	242-244
<i>Yetsirah</i>	244-247
<i>Zohar</i>	247-249
Moses Cordovero and the School of Safed.....	249-251
Method and Outline	252-253
2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis	254-289
Section One: Existence	254-268
Structural Exposition: Existence as <i>Ein Sof</i>	254-262
Textual Analysis: <i>Or Ne'erav</i>	262-268
Section Two: Manifestation.....	268-281
Structural Exposition: Manifestation as <i>Shekhinah</i>	268-273
Textual Analysis: <i>Or Ne'erav</i>	274-281
Section Three: Knowledge.....	281-289
Structural Exposition: Knowledge as <i>Hokhmah</i>	281-286
Textual Analysis: <i>Or Ne'erav</i>	286-289
3. Concluding Summary	289-291
CHAPTER 5: Mystical Christianity	292-345
1. Introduction.....	292-311
Mystical Christianity	292-293
Historical and Conceptual Development	293-310
Origen of Alexandria.....	296-298
Augustine.....	298-299
Boethius.....	299-301
Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.....	301-302

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

John Scotus Eriugena.....	302-303
Albert the Great	303-304
Thomas Aquinas	304-306
Meister Eckhart.....	306-308
The Legacy of Christian Mysticism.....	308-310
Method and Outline	310-311
2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis	312-343
Section One: Existence	312-321
Structural Exposition: Existence as <i>Esse</i>	312-317
Textual Analysis: <i>Deutsche Predigten</i>	317-321
Section Two: Manifestation.....	321-332
Structural Exposition: Manifestation as <i>Fluxus</i>	321-325
Textual Analysis: <i>Deutsche Predigten</i>	325-332
Section Three: Knowledge.....	332-343
Structural Exposition: Knowledge as <i>Intellectus</i>	332-337
Textual Analysis: <i>Deutsche Predigten</i>	337-343
3. Concluding Summary	343-345
CHAPTER 6: Mystical Islam	346-400
1. Introduction.....	346-365
Mystical Islam	346-349
Historical and Conceptual Development	350-365
Avicenna.....	350-357
Suhrawardī.....	357-359
Ibn ‘Arabī.....	359-361
Mullā Ṣadrā.....	361-364

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Method and Outline	364-365
2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis	365-398
Section One: Existence	365-375
Structural Exposition: Existence as <i>Wujūd</i>	365-371
Textual Analysis: <i>Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam</i>	371-375
Section Two: Manifestation	376-386
Structural Exposition: Manifestation as <i>Tajallī</i>	376-380
Textual Analysis: <i>Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam</i>	380-386
Section Three: Knowledge	386-398
Structural Exposition: Knowledge as <i>Ma'rifah</i>	386-391
Textual Analysis: <i>Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam</i>	392-395
3. Concluding Summary	395-398

CONCLUSION

1. Thesis and Method	399-403
2. A Summary of Corresponding Concepts	403-415
Existence	404-405
Manifestation	405-406
Knowledge	407-408
Two Questions	408-415
3. Implications	415-419
Existential Wonder	416-418
Non-Dual Unity	418-419
Mutual Understanding	420-423
Bibliography	424-447

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

ABSTRACT

This study consists of a two-part comparative survey of mystical ontologies East and West. Part One examines the Eastern traditions of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, philosophical Daoism, and Zen Buddhism, while Part Two takes for its focus the Western traditions of Kabbalistic Judaism, mystical Christianity, and mystical Islam. The burden of my thesis is to show how these traditions coalesce around a shared conception of existence as simultaneously one and manifold. According to this shared conception, just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the diversified modes of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as the discrete manifestations of a single meta-ontological Principle or Field. I survey this point of correspondence under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how the mystical ontologies of the East and the West provide the possibility of a mutual understanding among religions at the ontological level.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

DEDICATION

To Sarah Beth

Unanimi Sumus

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TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLES

Table 1. Izutsu’s Comparative Method..... 46

Table 2. Corresponding Concepts – Preview..... 48

Table 3. Corresponding Concepts – Advaita Vedānta Hinduism 71, 124, 134

Table 4. Corresponding Conceptus – Philosophical Daoism..... 134, 175

Table 5. Corresponding Concepts – Zen Buddhism 195, 232

Table 6. Corresponding Concepts – Kabbalistic Judaism..... 253, 290

Table 7. Corresponding Concepts – Mystical Christianity 311, 344

Table 8. Corresponding Concepts – Mystical Islam..... 365, 396

Table 9. Corresponding Concepts – Review..... 404

Table 10. Corresponding Concepts – Existence 404

Table 11. Corresponding Concepts – Manifestation..... 406

Table 12. Corresponding Concepts – Knowledge 407

FIGURES

Figure 1. Structure of Knowledge – Advaita Vedānta Hinduism 115, 167, 226,
286, 337, 391

Figure 2. Structure of Knowledge – Philosophical Daoism..... 167, 225, 286,
337, 391

Figure 3. The Two Aspects of Emptiness 199

Figure 4. Structure of Knowledge – Zen Buddhism 225, 286, 337, 391

Figure 5. The Sefirotic Tree..... 255

Figure 6. Centrifugal Radiation 257

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Figure 7. Centripetal Return 257

Figure 8. Non-Reciprocity of the One and the All..... 264

Figure 9. The Triadic Structure of Manifestation 269

Figure 10. The Circular Path of Emanation 277

Figure 11. Structure of Knowledge – Kabbalistic Judaism 286, 337, 391

Figure 12. Structure of Knowledge – Mystical Christianity 336, 391

Figure 13. Structure of Knowledge – Mystical Islam..... 390

INTRODUCTION

This introduction consists of the following: (1) a statement of my thesis, (2) a preliminary discussion of the three main headings under which I survey mystical ontologies East and West, (3) a presentation of the method I employ, (4) an overview of the criticisms and objections commonly raised against the comparative method, (5) an outline of each chapter, (6) the clarification of a few key terms, and (7) an initial sketch of this study's implications.

1. Thesis

A Point of Contact

In 1926, Rudolf Otto published his landmark comparative study *West-Östliche Mystik* (“Mysticism East and West”), the opening page of which cites a line from the English poet Rudyard Kipling: “East is east, and west is west, / Never the twain will meet...” Otto then posed the following question: “Is that true? Are the worldviews of East and West so different and incommensurable that they can never meet and therefore at bottom never understand each other (*verstehen*)?”¹ Rather than put forward a blanket yes or no answer, Otto proceeded to identify one possible point of contact, namely, *der Mystik und der mystischen Spekulation* (“mysticism and mystical speculation”).² Nor had Otto selected his answer at random.

¹ Rudolf Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik: Vergleich und Unterscheidung zur Wesendeutung* (Gotha: Leopold Klotz Verlag, 1926), 1.

² Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik*, 1.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Mysticism provides a common and fertile ground for cross-civilizational and interreligious dialogue. After all, every major religious tradition and civilization has, with very few exceptions,³ produced mystics of speculative rank and rigor. From Hindu India, there arose Śaṅkara; from Daoist China, Zhuangzi; from Buddhist Japan, Dōgen; from Jewish Israel, Cordovero; from Christian Germany, Meister Eckhart; and from Islamic Spain, Ibn ‘Arabī. Many more could be named, of course. But even if limited to just these few seminal figures, one would still be able to discern numerous threads of connection, and none of them more substantial than in the field of mystical speculation concerning the doctrine of existence or ontology.

The Oneness of the Manifold

As its subtitle has already given away, this study consists of a two-part comparative survey of mystical ontologies East and West. Part One examines the Eastern traditions of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, philosophical Daoism, and Zen Buddhism, while Part Two takes for its focus the Western traditions of Kabbalistic Judaism, mystical Christianity, and mystical Islam. The burden of my thesis is to show how these traditions coalesce around a shared conception of existence as simultaneously one and manifold. According to this shared conception, the phenomenal world—the world of things and objects—has no reality of its own. It is ontologically

³ Modern Western civilization appears to be the only one.

poor, possessing nothing, not even itself. Far from an autonomous or self-standing reality, it is what the Muslim Mullā Ṣadrā had called a “pure relation”,⁴ what the Christian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite had styled a “pure participation”,⁵ or what the Buddhist Dōgen had dubbed a “total reliance”.⁶ Just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the diversified modes of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as the discrete manifestations of a single meta-ontological Principle or Field—the oneness of the manifold.

In the chapters to follow, I survey this shared conception of existence as simultaneously one and manifold through a comparative study of each tradition under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge, with each heading comprised of a structural exposition and textual analysis. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how the mystico-speculations of the East and the West not only provide a setting where the two can meet, but the possibility of their mutual understanding at the ontological level.

⁴ Mullā Ṣadrā speaks of all created existents as “pure relations” (*rawābiṭ maḥḍah*) and thus as “relational” (*al-iḍāfāt*) to their core. See Ibrahim Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mullā Ṣadrā on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 235.

⁵ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus*, II.v.644a.

⁶ Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō: The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*, trans. Gudo Wafu Nishijima and Chodo Cross, 4 vols. (Moraga: BDK, 2007-2009; hereafter cited as TDET), II:8.

Before proceeding further, however, I first foreground my thesis in a brief sketch of the three interrelated headings just mentioned, namely, existence, manifestation, and knowledge.

2. Preliminary Discussion

Existence

At the heart of all mystical ontologies East and West is the conviction that existence is “one”. This unity or oneness should not be taken in its ordinary mathematical sense, however. Existence is neither “one” as the sum of all parts; nor still “one” as contrasted with the many. It is a *metaphysical* oneness that is being indicated, possessed of a hierarchic structure with inner modalities, stages, and degrees.

In its purest form, the concept of “oneness” refers to absolute existence itself, i.e., to that which is “absolved”⁷ of all forms, names, distinctions, qualities, and relations. It is not even permissible to speak of this stage of existence as “God” or as the “Source” of being, in that these terms imply relationality of one kind or another. Viewed at the level of its absoluteness, existence is beyond all determinations (“no-thing”) and in excess to all oppositions (“not-other”). It is not a thing among other things or an object in relation to other objects. “Neither this nor that” (*neti, neti*),⁸ “neither here nor there” (*noch hie noch da*),⁹ absolute existence is, like the

⁷ From the Latin *absolvere*, meaning “to be set free” from something.

⁸ A Sanskrit phrase employed in Vedānta Hinduism.

⁹ See Franz Pfeiffer, ed., *Deutsche Mystiker des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts: Meister Eckhart*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: G.J. Göschen’sche Verlagshandlung, 1857; hereafter

Zen Buddhist symbol of a closed and empty circle (○), a sheer “is-ness”, an ineffable void.

The mystical ontologies that I survey all speak of this purely unconditioned stage of existence in diverse but corresponding ways. For Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, it is *nirguṇa Brahman* (“Brahman without attributes”). For philosophical Daoism, it is *xuan zhi you xuan* (“Mystery of/beyond mysteries”).¹⁰ For Zen Buddhism, it is *śūnyāta* (“Emptied Emptiness”).¹¹ For Kabbalistic Judaism, it is *Ayin* (“No-thingness”). For mystical Christianity, it is *Hyperousios* (“Beyond Being”). And for mystical Islam, it is *Dhat al-wujūd* (“Unqualified Existence”).

Before the groundless ground of the absolute, all language recoils on itself. Systems implode. Categories crumble. Thought dissolves. Words turn back. It is just here that we run up against a bewildering paradox: if absolute existence is an ineffable void beyond all knowledge, as the mystical ontologies of this study all claim, then how should we have ever come to *know* it? Moreover, if absolute existence is a sheer ipseity absolved of all relations, then how should the phenomenal world have ever come “to

cited as DM), I:306. For the English translation, see *Meister Eckhart*, trans. C. de B. Evans, 2 vols. (London: John M. Watkins, 1956; cited hereafter as ME), I:235.

¹⁰ For the sake of clarity and consistency, I have chosen to use the modern pinyin system of Chinese romanization throughout this study. Titles of works that use the older system developed by Sir Thomas Francis Wade and Herbert Allen Giles (also known as the “Wade-Giles” system) are cited as they are in the footnotes. Where passages of these works are quoted within the main text of this study, however, pinyin is substituted for the Wade-Giles romanization.

¹¹ Cf. Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Steven Heine (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 142.

be”? Or as G.W.F. Leibniz had formulated the question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”¹²

Manifestation

Answers to these questions must await fuller elaboration in the chapters that follow. Suffice it here to say that the absolute is known *to be unknowable* in no other way than through the subsequent stages of its manifestation. In other words, it is only by the irradiating descent of the absolute into relativity that it becomes “known” through a kind of apophatic wisdom or “learned ignorance”—“understood by those who do not understand” (Kena Upaniṣad, II.3).

According to the mystical ontologies of this study, not only does the absolute shine in all things, but all things *are* its shining. To take an example: the light of a glowworm and the light of a star. Between them, there is no ultimate difference to be noted. The same effulgence shines in both. They differ only according to the mode of their actualization.¹³ This means that the lower, subsequent stages of existence are not to be construed as divesting the absolute of its absoluteness. The stages of existence are not temporally sequential but metaphysically simultaneous. The absolute remains forever itself in every modality, stage, and degree. And yet—and

¹² Cf. Martin Heidegger, “The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics,” in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 1-56.

¹³ This is an ancient principle common to Eastern and Western philosophy, mystical and scholastic. See, for example, *Liber de causis*, XIX.157 and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 75, a. 3.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

this is where the paradox becomes most bewildering—it is precisely by dint of its own eternal self-identity that the absolute “becomes” the existentiating act (*esse*) of all existents and the oneness of the manifold.

The absolute, *qua* absolute, is thus, in a certain sense, “more” than absolute. As “the One without a second”, the absolute is also infinite, enfolding and unfolding all possibilities. Like the *Ein Sof* (“Without End”) of Cordovero or the *Dao* of Laozi, existence is intrinsically self-diffusive and self-manifesting. The absolute Sun of existence cannot help but shine. It is the very essence of the absolute to disperse itself infinitely. Or as the renowned *ḥadīth qudsi*¹⁴ of Islam articulates the mystery: “I was a hidden treasure; I loved to be known. So to make Myself known, I created the world...”

The logic of oneness is therefore as straightforwardly simple as it is unfathomably deep: *only the Real is real*. Everything “else” is relative to it and qualified by it. Through the interplay of these two fundamental aspects of pure existence, namely, its absolute “no-thingness” and its infinite “not-otherness”, the world is pervaded to its core with an ontological ambiguity. On the one hand, the world is regarded as a “dream” or “illusion” (*māyā*); and on the other, as a veritable theatre of “sacred play” (*līlā*). Relativity is nothing more than a shadow. But a shadow born of the Sun. As such, it is both a veil and an unveiling, an inscrutable hiddenness and an unlimited revelation. Every phenomenon is a symbol or mirror wherein the whole of

¹⁴ A “sacred saying” spoken directly by God.

existence is reflected, as a single dewdrop on a blade of grass reflects the whole moon.¹⁵ On this understanding, the manifold of existent things is viewed as essentially prismatic, with the myriad forms of nature disclosing the simplicity of their origin, as colors disclose the simplicity of light.

Knowledge

To know the absolute in this manner—as the Self of all selves, the Being of all beings, and the Oneness of the manifold—is to utterly eclipse, and even to effectively negate, the ordinary level of human knowledge and consciousness. The common plane of human thought is of a discursive and analytic type. It operates within and vacillates between the dichotomies of subject and object, self and other, knower and known, and as such can conceive of no higher laws than those of identity (*A is A*) and non-contradiction (*A is not non-A*). For the mystical ontologies surveyed in this study, however, discursive reason is neither the sole nor the highest form of knowledge. Each tradition gives pride of place to a trans-rational mode of knowing, whether it be the Hindu *jñāna*, the Daoist *ming*, the Buddhist *prajñā*, the Jewish *ḥokmah*, the Christian *intellectus*, or the Islamic *maʿrifah*.

From within this essentially “gnostic”¹⁶ perspective, knowledge is transmuted into a “mode of existence”, and all epistemology becomes an

¹⁵ TDET I:43.

¹⁶ The Greek word *gnōsis* is used throughout this study in accordance with its etymological meaning and use within the mystical traditions I analyze, and bears no

inflection of ontology. To truly know oneself and fulfill the Delphic oracle (*Gnōthi seauton*, “Know thyself”) is therefore about more than mere data-collection. No amount of factual information *about* oneself can lead to a knowledge *of* oneself. To the perennial question, “Who am I?” mystical ontologies East and West answer unanimously: *To know who you are, you must be what you know*. Here all the presumably inviolable distinctions between subject and object, knower and known, self and other, are summarily fused together in a seamless *coincidentia oppositorum* or “unity of opposites”.

The one who has attained this state of illumination is spoken of in Daoist philosophy as he who “walks two ways at once” (*liang heng*), or in Islamic mysticism as “the man of two eyes” (*dhu ‘aynayn*), i.e., he who sees—in a single vision—all things in the One and the One in all things. Having plunged himself into the “void” of absolute existence, the mystic-philosopher surpasses every dialectic and negates all negations, dying even to death and living beyond life, so as to perceive in nature’s many masks of “illusion” (*māyā*) the “play” (*līla*) of One Face; as in the Qu’rānic verse that says: “Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God” (2:115).¹⁷

To reiterate: the mystical ontologies examined in this study all share a concept of existence as *one*, manifestation as *manifold*, and knowledge as

similarity (beyond mere homonymy) with the so-called “gnosticism” identified as a heresy by the early Christian church.

¹⁷ All translations of the Qu’rān are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, chief ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

the intuitive perception (and, in the last analysis, the non-dual mode) of their *simultaneity*: the oneness of the manifold.

Having provided a preliminary sketch of the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge, I now turn to the issue of methodology.

3. Method

In terms of method, I begin with two basic premises. First, that there is no one way to study anything; and second, that some ways are better than others.

To state the first premise a little differently: there is no one perspective that can capture the full scale of a given phenomenon. This is due not only to the multifaceted and inexhaustible nature of phenomena themselves, but also to the limits of human thought and language. Reason (*ratio*) does not consume the world in one bite, as it were. Instead, it turns the world into an object of analysis, carving it up into digestible pieces, and re-assembling them into some kind of coherent unity or system. The implication being that in every analysis there will be an arbitrary element at play. Analysis involves more than the mind passively reflecting the object of its study. It is an interpretive act, and therefore also a creative one. To analyze is to engage in an intentional process of elaboration, of steering a particular set of data in one direction rather than another, and thereby determining, to some extent, the final form that the object of one's analysis

will take. It has been said that the mesh of a net will dictate the sort of fish it catches.¹⁸ Similarly, the method one employs in any investigation will dictate the sort of truths it discovers; and ultimately, “more than anything else, the investigator himself is the net.”¹⁹

As such, a “successful” study will not be the one that has purged itself of all arbitrariness. That much is impossible. On the contrary, it will be the study that has sufficiently subordinated its own arbitrary element to the scale of the object it investigates: “*It is the scale that makes the phenomenon.*”²⁰ This means that while there is no one way to study anything, yet there are ways not to. All methods are not equal. In the same way that elephants are not best studied under microscopes,²¹ or protozoans with the naked eye, so also every phenomenon must be approached with a method capable of “saving the appearances” (*sōzein tà phainόμενα*) and attending to the integral structure that the object of its study discloses.

The Way of Eranos

To that end, I approach the analysis of mystical ontologies East and West with a comparative method akin to that found in the works of three main figures: the eminent French theologian and Islamicist Henry Corbin (1903-1978), the Romanian historian and phenomenologist of religions Mircea

¹⁸ To borrow the analogy of Sir Arthur Eddington (1882-1944).

¹⁹ See William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY, 1998), xii.

²⁰ See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1996), xvii.

²¹ This was a point made by the great French polymath Henri Poincaré (1852-1912).

Eliade (1907-1986), and the late Japanese linguist and metaphysician Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-1993). It is within this intellectual tradition—associated with the Eranos Conference of the early twentieth century, founded by Olga Fröbe, and centered on the “revival of gnosis”²²—that the method of the present study places itself. Less a school of thought and more an intellectual “habit”, the *weltanschauung* of Eranos embraces a wide range of comparative scholarship, among which includes not only the contributions of Corbin, Eliade, and Izutsu, but of Rudolf Otto, Gershom Scholem, D.T. Suzuki, Louis Massignon, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Kitarō Nishida, and many others as well.²³

In order to better grasp the method I employ, it will be beneficial to outline the basic methodological contours of the work of Corbin, Eliade, and Izutsu, limited here to the following three positions: (1) the esoteric dimension of phenomena, (2) the irreducibility of the meaning of phenomena to their historico-empirical causes, and (3) the need to establish a “meta-language” capable of facilitating dialogue and fostering a mutual understanding among religions. Accordingly, what follows functions as a

²² Giovanni Filoramo, *Il risveglio della gnosi ovvero diventare dio* (“The Revival of Gnosis or How to Become God”) (Bari: Laterza, 1990), 22.

²³ The “history” of the Eranos tradition has only recently begun to be told. See, e.g., Henry Corbin, “The Time of Eranos”, in *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), xiii-xx; William McGuire, *Bollingen: An Adventure in Collecting the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh (New York: Routledge, 2014).

kind of “literature review”: locating where my research “fits” within the broader field of comparative philosophy and religious studies.

Henry Corbin

In a lecture delivered at the University of Tehran in 1974, Corbin remarked that the method of comparative philosophy was “still only in its infancy.”²⁴ At the time of this statement, the first explicit formulation of comparative philosophy had been made just a half-century before, with a book of the same title (*La Philosophie Comparée*, 1926) by Paul Masson-Oursel. Wanting to establish comparative philosophy as an objective science “capable of exactitude”, Masson-Oursel took up what in mathematics is called the “analogy of proportion”, according to which an indirect comparison is drawn between two ratios of the kind $A/B = Y/Z$. Thus we can legitimately say, for example, that “Confucius [A] was in China [B] what Socrates [Y] was in Greece [Z].”²⁵ In this way Masson-Oursel understood the task of comparative philosophy to consist “essentially in disentangling not so much likenesses in terms which are more or less deceptive, but rather analogies of relationship...”²⁶

While acknowledging Masson-Oursel’s achievement, Corbin had also criticized it as “perhaps too subservient to the unique perspective of the

²⁴ Henry Corbin, *Philosophie Iranienne et Philosophie comparée* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1985; hereafter cited as PIPC), 21. English translations are taken from *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, trans. Peter Russel (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1981; hereafter cited as CCP), 4.

²⁵ Paul Masson-Oursel, *Comparative Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000), 44.

²⁶ PIPC, 22; CCP, 3.

history of philosophy as history,” and too entranced by “the chronological succession and the hypothetical laws of historical causality.”²⁷ This is not to say that Corbin rejected the historical method wholesale. Just the opposite. He readily accepted its legitimacy. “Certainly one should not exclude this type of research: there is the right time and place for it.”²⁸ As it pertains to the method of comparative philosophy, however, history—conceived as the mere flow and flux of temporal existents—is not of primary consequence. To say that the events of *x* and *y* occurred on such and such a date is one thing. To say what the events of *x* and *y* mean or signify is quite another. History cannot interpret itself. Its meaning is not its own to decide. It has no power or faculty with which to make such a judgment. Indeed, even if it were possible to arrange every individual “event” of history on a chronological map with absolute precision, it would still be impotent to articulate the *sense* of the history it documents.

It was for these reasons, among others, that Corbin was careful to delineate between a comparative *philosophy*, on the one hand, and a comparative *history* of philosophy, on the other. Whereas the latter is “anxious to determine the generic causes, currents, influences, etc., which make themselves felt at such and such a date, in order to deduce from them certain *processus*, in the belief that it is possible to compare them among themselves”, the former is concerned above all with what Edmund Husserl, founder of the German school of phenomenology, had called *Wesenschau*,

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

“the intuitive perception of an essence” (*la perception intuitive d’une essence*).²⁹ For Corbin, it was precisely the emergence of this phenomenological conception that had overtaken previous, narrowly historical efforts.

Phenomenology consists in ‘saving the appearance’, saving the phenomenon, while disengaging or unveiling the hidden [*dégageant ou dévoilant le caché*] which shows itself beneath this appearance. The Logos or principle of the phenomenon, phenomenology, is thus to tell the hidden, the invisible present beneath the visible [*l’invisible présent sous le visible*]. It is to make the phenomenon show itself forth such as it shows itself to the subject to whom it reveals itself. It is thus an altogether different course from that of the history of philosophy or historical criticism.³⁰

According to Corbin, the Hellenistic understanding of phenomena is analogous to that of Islamic philosophy. The *phainómenon* of the Greeks, he says, is comparable to the *zāhir* of the Muslims, i.e., “the apparent, the external, the exoteric” (*l’apparent, l’extérieur, l’exotérique*).³¹ Likewise, that which shows itself beneath the appearance corresponds to the *bātin*, i.e., “the interior, the esoteric” (*l’intérieur, l’ésotérique*).³² This distinction between the outward and the inward, the exoteric and the esoteric, is what

²⁹ PIPC, 22; CCP, 4.

³⁰ PIPC, 23; CCP, 5.

³¹ PIPC, 23; CCP, 4.

³² PIPC, 23; CCP, 4-5.

Corbin takes to be the very core of the phenomenological method, and by extension, of comparative philosophy.

It [phenomenology] is connected essentially with the motto of Greek science: *sōzein tà phainόμενα*, saving the appearances. What does this mean? The phenomenon is that which shows itself [*c'est ce qui se montre*], that which is apparent and which in its appearance shows forth something which can reveal itself therein only by remaining concealed [*caché*] beneath the appearance. Something shows itself [*se montre*] in the phenomenon and can show itself there only by remaining hidden [*cachant*]. In the philosophical and religious sciences the *phenomenon* presents itself in those technical terms in which the element ‘-phany’ from the Greek, figures: epiphany, theophany, hierophany, etc.³³

For Corbin, then, hermeneutics is itself a mystical enterprise, “the veiling or revealing of that which is hidden” (*le dévoilement de ce qui est caché*).³⁴ Its task is therefore tantamount to what Islam designates as *ta'wīl*, or the process of tracing a phenomenon back to its origin, as an image is returned to its archetype—what Corbin elsewhere referred to, following Goethe, as the *Urphänomen* of a thing, i.e., its “absolutely primary and irreducible, objective, initial fact”.³⁵ Accordingly, for Corbin, phenomenology is not sufficient unto itself. It must be “pure”³⁶—informed at every turn by a

³³ PIPC, 22-23; CCP, 4.

³⁴ PIPC, 23; CCP, 5.

³⁵ Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 28.

³⁶ See, e.g., Henry Corbin, “Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis”, in *Man and Transformation*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Pantheon, 1964), 69-161.

philosophy capable of perceiving not only “*what* is being given” (phenomenology), but “what is *being* given” (ontology). Seen in this light, the role of the interpreter is that of goading a given phenomenon on the reverting arc of its ascent, so as to make it “pass through level after level of being”, and all toward the end of revealing its essential “structure”.³⁷

What did Corbin mean by the word “structure”? Having nothing to do with modern “structuralism”, for which a “structure” is a merely formal concept, Corbin finds its semantic equivalent in the Islamic notion of *tartīb al-mazāhir*, “the system of the forms of manifestation of a given essence.”³⁸ If this were more generally understood, Corbin avers, then “the false dilemma” between “myth” and “history” would dissolve before our very eyes, and the great malady of the modern age would receive its remedy. What is that malady? For Corbin, it is the modern world’s inability to perceive the reality of any event beyond “history”, taken once again in its strictly empirical sense. Over and against the prevailing view of modern scholarship, which would posit “man as being in history”, Corbin seeks to recall us to the fact that, from another perspective far more profound, “it is history that is *in man*” (*c’est l’histoire qu’est dans l’homme*).³⁹

It is in this way that Corbin sought to conduct a comparative philosophy under the auspices of a meta-historical dialogue (*un dialogue dans la métahistoire*).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ PIPC, 31; CCP, 13.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

In order to artificially allow philosophers, whose histories and traditions are completely different, to be able to meet and talk together and understand one another, a common philosophical language has to be established. Once the ideas of philosophers from various countries have been grasped analytically in their spiritual depth, there has to be an intellectual manipulation that will allow them to speak a common language to each other. The creation of this sort of common philosophical language is what I call philosophical semantics, and it is a task I hope to accomplish myself.⁴⁰

To summarize: Corbin's method of comparative philosophy can be seen as advancing the following three positions: (1) the esoteric aspect of "appearances", (2) the irreducibility of their meaning to purely historico-empirical causes, and (3) the need to construct a meta-language or "philosophical semantics" capable of fostering interreligious and cross-civilizational dialogue. The same three positions are no less prominent in the work of Mircea Eliade.

Mircea Eliade

The work of Mircea Eliade represents an effort to speak beyond the reductivist tendencies of nineteenth and twentieth-century religious scholarship. For Eliade, all phenomena show themselves by way of an irreducible integrity. It is by preserving this integrity that one "saves the

⁴⁰ As cited in Eisuke Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu and the Philosophy of the Word: In Search of the Spiritual Orient*, trans. Jean Connell Hoff (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2014), 226.

appearance”; and it is by reducing this integrity to a single aspect of its disclosure (e.g., to its historico-empirical dimension alone) that one condemns it to oblivion. Here Eliade was of one accord with Viktor Frankl, who had identified the modernist inclination to reduce every object (*O*) to a data-set of its empirically verifiable⁴¹ features (*D*) as a not-so-subtle form of nihilism, according to which *O* is *R*, and “nothing but” *R*. In the words of Frankl: “Reductionism is today a mask for nihilism. Contemporary nihilism no longer brandishes the word nothingness; today nihilism is camouflaged as *nothing-but-ness*. Human phenomena are thus turned into mere epiphenomena.”⁴²

Against these and other similar tendencies, Eliade sought to rejuvenate the study of religion through the rigorous analysis of its integral structure. Taking up Henri Poincaré’s illustration of a scientist attempting to study an elephant through the lens of a microscope, Eliade writes: “The microscope shows the structure and mechanism of the cells, a structure and mechanism which are the same in all multicellular organisms. But is that all there is to know? At the microscopic level one cannot be certain.”⁴³ Eliade goes on to say that it is only by transcending the framework of this diminutive vision to “the level of human eyesight” that one is able to

⁴¹ As in the so-called “verification principle” of the Vienna Circle. This principle claims that a statement, if it is to have any semantic value, must be either an analytic statement or empirically verifiable. In that the verification principle fails to meet either of these criteria, it is self-refuting.

⁴² See Victor Frankl, “Reductionism and Nihilism”, in *Beyond Reductionism: New Perspectives in the Life Sciences*, ed. Arthur Koestler and J.R. Smythies (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 398.

⁴³ Eliade, *Patterns*, xvii.

recognize what is, strictly speaking, *apparent*: “the elephant as a phenomenon of zoology”. It is at *this* level, i.e., the level appropriate to the scale of the phenomenon in question, that “all uncertainty departs.”⁴⁴

For Eliade, this principle of congruence applies as much to religion as it does to elephants: “In the same way, a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false...” Why “false”? Not because these modes of study are without any legitimacy of their own, and not because they are incapable of garnering a degree of knowledge vis-à-vis the objects they analyze. As Eliade himself states unequivocally, “I do not mean to deny the usefulness of approaching the religious phenomenon from various different angles”. Such methods become “false” in Eliade’s view only where they are treated as the primary means of studying religion. Severed from the integral structure of religion itself, these methods cannot help but miss “the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred.”⁴⁵

To think that one can explain a religious phenomenon by cataloguing its sociological factors is, for Eliade, “as futile as thinking you could explain *Madame Bovary* by a list of social, economic and political

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

facts; however true, they do not affect it as a work of literature.”⁴⁶ A whole must therefore be seen as a *whole* before it can be dissected into parts, just as each part can only be seen as a *part* in light of the whole in which it is comprehended. It is from the integral structure of a phenomenon that all ancillary approaches receive their justification—and not vice versa.

This is a far cry from denying the relative value of historical inquiry—a position which Eliade has been routinely accused of advocating. The historical and phenomenological methods are, in Eliade’s judgment, inseparably conjoined. No manifestation of the sacred—or what Eliade terms “hierophany”⁴⁷—can be understood irrespective to its historical circumstances. Whereas such nineteenth-century scholars of religion as E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer had interpreted “the reaction of the human mind to natural phenomena as uniform”, Eliade readily concedes that “man’s reactions to nature are often conditioned by his culture and hence, finally, by history.”⁴⁸ The content of religious experiences can be shown to differ on the basis of certain historical contingencies, such as whether they transpired within a nomadic or sedentary context, for example. But even among the most widely divergent of socio-cultural settings, there is a fundamental unity of outlook or *weltanschauung* that can be said to embrace them all, namely, the sacrality of the cosmos.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1987), 11.

⁴⁸ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 17.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

For the mystic, and for the traditional religious mind more generally, every “cosmic fragment” is utterly transparent before the light of its sacred origin, its eternal beginning, such that all phenomena are seen as so many modalities of sacrality itself, and sacrality as the “full manifestation of being”,⁵⁰ i.e., the oneness of the manifold. The cosmos is therefore as much hierophanic as it is ontophanic. Every sacred show is, at one and the same time, a showing forth of existence. As Eliade remarks: “The cosmos as a whole is an organism at once *real*, *living*, and *sacred*; it simultaneously reveals the modalities of being and of sacrality. Ontophany and hierophany meet.”⁵¹ What is more, this dialectic repeats itself indefinitely through “a series of archetypes, so that a hierophany revealed at a certain ‘historical moment’ is structurally equivalent to a hierophany a thousand years earlier or later.”⁵²

This leads to one of Eliade’s principal assertions: the universality of religious symbolism. Symbolism provides the “metalanguage” through which the religions of the world, however different, can converse with one another. Immune to time, history has no power to fundamentally change or alter the symbols of religion. History can at most augment them, as seen in the case of aquatic symbolism, which the historical religion of Christianity

⁵⁰ Ibid, 138.

⁵¹ Ibid, 117.

⁵² See Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), xxiii. Eliade uses the concept of “archetype” in an Augustinian rather than a Jungian sense, i.e., “as a synonym for ‘exemplary model’ or ‘paradigm’...” See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), xxix.

and its particular doctrine of baptism could neither replace nor destroy, but only add new layers of significance.⁵³ More basically still, the world itself is a symbol, in that “nature always expresses something that transcends it.” It is not whim that has made the sky a symbol of “transcendence, force, eternity.”⁵⁴ It is rather the sky itself which has done so, and that “*by its own mode of being*”.⁵⁵ Far from the fevered dreams of the human psyche, all symbols are “bound up with ontology” and the mystical vision of “the *real*”⁵⁶—a mysticism which, as a perennial feature of otherwise disparate spiritual and historical environments, yields a common basis on which to compare and contrast a diversity of religious systems.⁵⁷ For Eliade, the esoteric purpose of symbolism is “to *unify*, to *totalize*, to construct a *center*”; and its final aspiration: “the reintegration of man into the All”.⁵⁸

Eliade’s method of comparative philosophy thus advances the same three positions found in Corbin: (1) the esoteric “structure” of things, (2) the irreducibility of “appearances” to their strictly temporal aspect, and (3) the need to identify a universal or meta-language capable of facilitating dialogue among historically and culturally disparate traditions.

Having outlined the basic contours of Corbin’s and Eliade’s method of comparative philosophy, I turn now to the work of Toshihiko Izutsu, in

⁵³ *Sacred and Profane*, 137.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 118.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 119.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 95.

⁵⁷ Eliade, *Shamanism*, xxiv.

⁵⁸ See Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 139-141.

which the esoteric, non-reductivist, and meta-historical positions are set forth in a uniquely lucid and systematic way.

Toshihiko Izutsu

Perhaps the most influential in shaping the method of this study is the remarkable figure of Toshihiko Izutsu. Fluent in over thirty languages and thoroughly conversant with all the variegated streams of mystical speculation East and West,⁵⁹ no one was better fit to develop a method of comparative philosophy than “the Eastern”.⁶⁰

According to Izutsu, the various attempts to execute a comparative philosophy, from its explicit inception in the early-twentieth century up to his own time, had failed due to the lack of a robust methodology. In Izutsu’s own words:

It is undeniable that attempts have in the past sometimes been made to actualize a better understanding between East and West at the level of philosophical thinking under the name of comparative philosophy. But it is no less undeniable that up till now comparative philosophy has remained rather in the peripheral

⁵⁹ Izutsu was a leading authority on mystical speculation ranging from the “Occidental” figures of Plato and St. Bernard of Clairvaux to the “Oriental” figures of Sabzawari and Zhuangzi. See, e.g., Izutsu’s *Shinpi tetsugaku* (“Philosophy of Mysticism”), 2 vols. (Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin, 1978); his article “Shinpihugi no erosuteki keita: Sei Berunāru-ron” (“The Mysticism of St. Bernard”), *Tetsugaku* [“Philosophy”] 27 (1951), 33-64; or what is arguably his magnum opus in English, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism: Ibn ‘Arabī and Lao-tzū, Chuang-tzū*, 2 vols. (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1966-67), later revised as *Sufism & Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; hereafter cited as S&T).

⁶⁰ See the recent documentary film on Izutsu’s legacy, *The Eastern: A Portrait of Toshihiko Izutsu* (2018) by Masoud Taheri.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

regions of the intellectual activity of the philosophers. In most cases, the choice of the terms of comparison, to begin with, has been arbitrary, and the work consequently unsystematic. In short, comparative philosophy has, in my opinion, not been very successful, and it has not been given the kind of serious attention it duly deserves. And the main cause of this failure, I think, lies in its poverty in methodology.⁶¹

To amend this situation, Izutsu proposed the following:

In order to bring home the true significance of comparative philosophy, particularly for the purpose of promoting a real, deep philosophical understanding between East and West, it must first be developed in a more systematic way into what we might call a “metaphilosophy” of philosophies. I understand by *metaphilosophy* a comprehensive structural framework with a number of sub-structures at different levels, each of which will consist of a more or less large network of philosophical concepts that have analytically been taken out or worked out from the basic concepts found in the major philosophical traditions, both of East and West. The first practical step to be taken in the process of arriving at a metaphilosophy of this nature will, at least in my particular case, consist in a careful semantic analysis of the structure of the key-concepts of each philosophical system. And the result will hopefully be a vast, very complicated, but well-organized and flexible conceptual system in which each individual system will be given its proper place and in terms of which the differences as well

⁶¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, “An Analysis of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*: Toward a Metaphilosophy of Oriental Philosophies”, in *The Concept and Reality of Existence* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1971; hereafter cited as CRE), 36.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

as the common grounds between the major philosophical schools of the East and West will systematically be clarified.⁶²

From the excerpts just cited, it becomes clear that, for Izutsu, the very possibility of “dialogue” depends on the presence of a shared language between participating interlocutors. Without such a language to facilitate an adequate correspondence of meaning, all dialogue inevitably breaks down into so many fragmented monologues, with everyone talking only to themselves. To realize this need for a shared language, Izutsu sought to develop a structural framework that he referred to as a “meta-philosophy”. This framework would transcend—without denying the relative value of—the historical and socio-cultural study of ideas so as to engage in the semantic cross-analysis of the key concepts embedded within the major religious traditions, East and West. Faithfully executed, such a project would, or so Izutsu believed, eventually crystallize in a veritable *philosophia perennis* or “perennial philosophy”, thus laying the foundation for a mutual understanding among religions at the philosophical level.⁶³

In a world that is constantly getting smaller, religions have become forced to encounter each other in ways unknown to previous ages. This has made the need for their mutual understanding more than a sentimental or pious wish. It has become an urgent task necessary for the flourishing of

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ S&T, 469.

human civilization.⁶⁴ Izutsu was well aware of this. He was also aware of the fact that a mutual understanding among religions could be sought and realized on any number of levels and in a multitude of domains. The realm of ethics, for example, has proven fruitful in identifying many overlapping concerns among religious worldviews, from issues pertaining to the ecological crisis to matters of social justice. The spheres of religious ritual, devotion, and practice have borne similar results. Even discussions over the finer points of theological doctrine have, on occasion, allowed religions to understand each other in a more balanced and congruent light. But of the many possible levels available for pursuing mutual understanding, it is the “philosophical level” which, for Izutsu, must be said to rank among “the most important of them.” Why? Because the level of *philosophia*, “unlike other levels of human interest which are more or less closely connected with the current situations and actual conditions of the world,” provides a unique setting amicable to a “meta-historical dialogue.”⁶⁵

The main thrust of Izutsu’s research was centered on the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* or the “oneness of existence”, and its pervasive role in “Oriental” philosophies.⁶⁶ By focusing on this “narrowly limited and partial field” and “bringing to light its fundamental structure,” Izutsu aspired to “provide a basic conceptual model by means of which the majority of Oriental philosophies [could] be brought up to a certain level of structural

⁶⁴ See CRE, 1.

⁶⁵ S&T, 469.

⁶⁶ That is, philosophies from the “Orient”, in contrast to the “Occident”, which extends from Arabia and Persia to the civilizations of the Far East.

uniformity concerning...one of their most fundamental aspects.”⁶⁷ To distance his own use of the word “structure” from that of (post-) structuralist modes of thought, Izutsu made the following remarks:

In undertaking a structural analysis of *wahdat al-wujūd*, I must emphasize at the very outset that I do not agree with those who tend to understand the word “structure” in a purely formal sense. For a structure understood in the sense of a mere form or a formal external system is almost of no value for the purpose of constructing the kind of metaphilosophy I am aiming at. Of course, I also take the word “structure” to mean a form or system. For my particular purpose, “structure” means a system with inner articulations; or to express the idea in more concrete terms, it is to be understood as a linguistic or conceptual system of higher order constituted by a number of more or less well-organized and well-coordinated key philosophical concepts. The important point, however, is that the system must be grasped as an external form of an inner spirit or an original philosophical vision which lies behind it and which manifests itself in that particular form. Methodologically, the essential thing for us is first to grasp that central vision of a whole system or the spirit that animates the system from within and informs it, and then to describe the system as an organic evolvement of that central vision.⁶⁸

What did Izutsu understand the animating “spirit” of *wahdat al-wujūd* to be? And why was he so confident of its ability to facilitate interreligious and cross-civilizational dialogue? For Izutsu, this “spirit” was the metaphysical apprehension of existence. There is a sense in which the

⁶⁷ CRE, 1.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 37.

history of metaphysics can be said to revolve around the issue of how existence relates to the “thingness” of a thing, or what the scholastic philosophers of the West had called “quiddity” (*quidditas*). To this question there developed two main approaches. The first was inclined to see “existence” as a mere accident of quiddity. Such a view aligns with the ordinary or commonsensical way of human thinking and language. When we say that something (*Q*) exists (*E*), we typically interpret *E* to function as a modifier of *Q*, just as the adjective “white” functions as the modifier of the noun “flower”. On this understanding, to predicate “whiteness” of a flower and to predicate “existence” of a flower is to engage in two structurally identical acts, with both predicates (“whiteness” and “existence”) functioning in the exact same way, namely, as accidental properties of the quiddity “flower”.

According to the second approach, however, the concept of existence was seen as metaphysically ultimate. Whereas the former position views *E* as the accident of every *Q*, the latter views every *Q* as the accident of *E*. This leads to the metaphysically jarring conclusion that, strictly speaking, it is not the flower that exists, but *existence that flowers*.⁶⁹ A flower is not an isolated “substance” to which “existence” relates as “something added”. Rather, the flower “is” only as a determinate manifestation of Being, a particular mode of the pure act (*actus purus*) of Existence Itself.

⁶⁹ See *Isurāmu tetsugaku no genzō* (“The Original Image of Islamic Philosophy”) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1980), 290.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

It is this latter reading of existence as metaphysically ultimate that Izutsu saw as constituting the animating “spirit” of mystical ontologies East and West. It is the mystic, and not the detached or “objective” scholar, who is the true metaphysician, in that he alone perceives the One in the many and the many in the One. As Izutsu says, “A true metaphysician worthy of the name is one who is capable of witnessing in every single thing in the world the underlying Reality of which the phenomenal form is but a self-manifestation and self-determination.”⁷⁰

The method of comparative philosophy that Izutsu developed on the basis of this peculiar interpretation of existence may be said to find its fullest expression in what is still an unrivaled work in the field: *Sufism & Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (1983, rev. ed.). In this groundbreaking study, Izutsu undertook a painstaking analysis of historically estranged philosophies. The difficulties of this task can hardly be overstated. It is only natural that the problem of a shared language should never emerge when comparing figures of similar historical and philosophical backgrounds. The differences between, say, a Thomas Aquinas and a Duns Scotus are indeed great, as the ferocity of Thomist and Scotist debates since the fourteenth century make evident. But they are not so great as to completely outstrip the conceptual heritage they hold in common. For all their differences, the *doctor angelicus* and the *doctor subtilis* still operate within a shared world of meaning.

⁷⁰ CRE, 8.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Things become far more difficult when comparing two figures of remote or tenuous historical connection, say, a Thomas Aquinas and an Avicenna. Interpreted in a narrowly historical fashion, there is no common language to connect them. On a much broader level, however, they are both children of the same basic intellectual tradition, namely, Western philosophy and its Peripatetic vein specifically.

The problematic of a “meta-language” only really asserts itself where the figures in question bear no historical or cultural similarities whatsoever, as in the case of, say, a Thomas Aquinas and a Śaṅkara, or, as in Izutsu’s *Sufism & Taoism*, the great Sufi mystic Ibn ‘Arabī and the two Daoist sages, Laozi and Zhuangzi. Through a meticulous investigation of Sufi and Daoist thought, as conducted through a multilayered set of key philosophical concepts, Izutsu convincingly demonstrates how for “both of these systems, the whole of Being is represented as a kind of ontological tension between Unity and Multiplicity”, and how “the relation between the two terms of the ontological tension is that of Unity.”⁷¹ This feat was accomplished by Izutsu, not through a simplistic corroboration of dictionary forms (e.g., linking the Arabic word *waḥda* with the Chinese word *tong*, both of which mean “unity”), but by a penetrating analysis of their inner structure. Thus, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the underlying “unity” of existence is represented by the concept of *ḥaqq* (“truth”), which corresponds to Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s use of the concept *dao* (“way”). Similarly, the concept of

⁷¹ S&T, 473.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

multiplicity expressed by Ibn ‘Arabī in terms of *mumkināt* (“possible beings”) finds its equivalent in the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi under the title of *wan wu* (“ten thousand things”). Further still, Ibn ‘Arabī’s employment of *tajallī* to denote the “self-manifestation” of *ḥaqq* through the *mumkināt* corresponds to Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s use of *sheng* to denote the mode whereby the *dao* “produces” or “brings into existence” the *wan wu*. Through this method Izutsu was able to identify “the broad conceptual framework” that Ibn ‘Arabī and the Daoist sages hold in common, a framework built up from the concept of the unity or oneness of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd; tian jun*).⁷²

Below is a visual summary of Izutsu’s method (Table 1). The concept of the oneness of existence serves as the “comprehensive structural framework” of the study, while the three headings of unity, multiplicity, and manifestation represent the sub-structural network of key concepts that have been analytically worked out from the oneness of existence, and through which the differences and similarities between Sufi and Daoist thought are given systematic clarification.

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: UNITY	Heading 2: MULTIPLICITY	Heading 3: MANIFESTATION
Sufism	<i>waḥdat al-wujūd</i>	<i>ḥaqq</i>	<i>mumkināt</i>	<i>tajallī</i>
Daoism	<i>tian jun</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wan wu</i>	<i>sheng</i>

Table 1. *Izutsu’s Comparative Method*

⁷² Ibid.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Within the field of contemporary religious scholarship, studies that analyze diverse religious traditions at the level of ontology and metaphysics are, admittedly, sparse, but for that no less impressive. Reza Shah-Kazemi's *Paths to Transcendence According to Shankara, Ibn 'Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (2006); David Bentley Hart's *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (2013); Shuhong Zheng's *Zhu Xi and Meister Eckhart: Two Intellectual Profiles* (2016); Patrick Laude's *Shimmering Mirrors: Reality and Appearance in Contemplative Metaphysics East and West* (2017) represent just a few examples of some relatively recent work undertaken in the general "spirit"—if not the "letter"—of Eranos. It is from this same basic orientation (rather than an ideologically fixed "school") that the method of the present study is derived and within which its impetus and aim is properly located.

By way of synopsis: the method of comparative philosophy as developed by Izutsu shares the same three positions noted in the work of Corbin and Eliade: (1) the esoteric structure or animating "spirit" of phenomena, (2) the irreducibility of "appearances" to their purely historico-empirical dimension, and (3) the need to establish a "meta-language" capable of fostering a mutual understanding among religions. With the basic methodological contours of these three main figures in view, I return to the question of method as it pertains to this study.

The method I employ seeks to develop a metaphilosophical framework in which to analytically survey and systematically organize a

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

coordinated network of key concepts, in the style of Izutsu. The overarching framework of this study is the mystico-speculative notion of reality as simultaneously one and manifold. My contention is that the concept of the oneness of the manifold, far from an awkward imposition on the systems examined, emerges organically from the surrounding sub-structural network of key concepts unique to each tradition, namely, existence, manifestation, and knowledge. What is more, this coordination of concepts is based, not on mere structural similarities, but the shared vision of an immediate experience of Ultimate Reality in its pure realness—what Izutsu had called the “animating spirit” of true philosophy. To portray my method visually (Table 2):

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta				
Philosophical Daoism				
Zen Buddhism				
Kabbalistic Judaism				
Esoteric Christianity				
Mystical Islam				

Table 2. *Corresponding Concepts – Preview*

This visual representation is one that I revisit at the beginning and conclusion of each chapter. In doing so, I attempt to catalogue a metaphysical inventory of sorts, one that is necessary to establish a shared language between mystico-speculative systems. Each chapter is therefore

taken first as an independent study, and only then as a possible ground for comparing traditions. Only by first attending to the irreducible integrity of each system (Eliade) and undertaking the task of “saving the appearances” (Corbin), can the arbitrary element of this kind of study be adequately subordinated to the object it purports to analyze.⁷³

The Comparative Method

In order to accomplish this goal, the overarching framework of this study must be broad and durable enough to embrace all the traditions examined, while at the same time narrow and precise enough to be genuinely *methodical*.

The overarching framework of the oneness of the manifold proves to be a fitting locus for comparative study in that it is both broad and narrow enough to bring out the sort of correspondences I wish to identify. On the one hand, it is broad enough in that the problem of “the one and the many” exerts a perennial and universal presence in all the mystico-speculative systems I survey, “ever-recurring” (*per-annus*) and “belonging to the whole” (*universus*). On the other hand, it is sufficiently narrow in that it is a concept that deals with a very specific and limited notion of “unity” as an absolute “no-thingness” (beyond all determinations) and infinite “not-otherness” (transcending all oppositions). The oneness of the manifold is therefore a concept as philosophically durable as it is precise, and for this

⁷³ Here we follow the insight of Masson-Oursel, whose own method regarded “philosophies as materials no less real than other data”. See *Comparative Philosophy*, 29.

very reason provides a suitable framework in which to study diverse traditions comparatively.

To proceed with this method requires that I dispense, as much as this can be done, with those classifications and typologies which would determine a given structure *a priori*. That Chinese philosophy has no real interest in questions of existence,⁷⁴ or that Buddhism and Judaism are both averse to metaphysical speculation, may be true in a very general sense. But it is not religion in general that concerns me. Nor am I interested in “mysticism” or “ontology” as vague, loosely defined categories. Rather, my focus in this study is on the highly restricted form of mystico-speculative thinking as represented within the specified limits of the six traditions surveyed.

Having clearly stated my intention, foregrounded my argument through a preliminary discussion of its three main headings, and set forth this study’s method, I devote the next section to a cursory overview of its outline.

4. Outline

As previously stated, I have chosen to divide this study into two parts, each comprising three chapters. Part One examines the Eastern traditions of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism (Chapter 1), philosophical Daoism (Chapter 2), and Zen Buddhism (Chapter 3). Part Two turns to the Western traditions of

⁷⁴ Cf. P.T. Raju, *Introduction to Comparative Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992), 277.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Kabbalistic Judaism (Chapter 4), mystical Christianity (Chapter 5), and mystical Islam (Chapter 6). The remainder of this section previews each chapter's principal representative and primary text(s).

Part One: Eastern Traditions

Part One begins with Advaita Vedānta Hinduism (Chapter 1). Its principal representative is the great Indian sage and founder of its non-dualist school of philosophy, Śaṅkara (c. 8th century C.E.). The chapter's primary texts include selections from the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and the *Brahma Sūtras*, as understood in the light of Śaṅkara's commentaries.

Chapter 2 turns to philosophical Daoism. Its principal representative is Zhuangzi (4th century B.C.E.), one of the two founding figures of Daoism. The chapter's primary texts include selections from the work that bears his name, the *Zhuangzi*.

Part One concludes with Zen Buddhism (Chapter 3). Its principal representative is Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253 C.E.), founder of the Sōtō school of Japanese Zen. The chapter's primary texts include selections from Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* ("The True Dharma-Eye Treasury"), with scattered, supportive references also drawn from the *Mumonkon* ("Gateless Gate") and *Hekiganroku* ("Blue Cliff Records"), the two classic collections of Zen *kōans*, revered by both the Sōtō and Rinzai schools.

Part Two: Western Traditions

Part Two begins with Kabbalistic Judaism (Chapter 4). Its principal representative is Moses Cordovero (1522-1570 C.E.), one of the most towering mystico-speculative minds in the tradition. The chapter's primary texts include selections from Part VI of Cordovero's *Or Ne'erav* ("The Pleasant Light"), which offers a synopsis of his masterwork *Pardes Rimonim* ("Orchard of Pomegranates").

Chapter 5 turns to mystical Christianity. Its principal representative is Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 - c. 1328 C.E.), the great German mystic and metaphysician. The chapter's primary texts include selections from Eckhart's German Homilies (*Deutsche Predigten*).

Part Two concludes with mystical Islam. Its principal representative is Ibn 'Arabī (1165-1240 C.E.), "the greatest master" (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) and founder of the "oneness of existence" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) school of Islamic philosophy. The chapter's primary texts include selections taken from his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* ("Bezels of Wisdom").

Finally, the study as a whole concludes with a brief conspectus of the connections drawn between mystical ontologies East and West, and an overview of the relevant implications they bring to bear on contemporary thought and life.

This section has provided an outline of this study. In the section to follow, I address some prominent criticisms and objections.

5. Criticisms and Objections

No method is without its critics—a fact that “comparative philosophy” knows well. Objections to the very prospect of pursuing an interreligious and cross-civilizational dialogue among traditions East and West are legion. It is impossible to address them all. What can be offered here is only a highly generalized sketch of what the main objections are, as well as some of the ways that the present study hopes to surmount them.

The Prevailing Attitude

The prevailing attitude of suspicion vis-à-vis the comparative philosophical method is due, in part, to the empiricist and historicist assumptions of the modern Western academy. Inherited mainly from the Enlightenment and the philosophy of the nineteenth century, these assumptions have engendered a profound skepticism among contemporary intellectual historians and religious scholars toward any attempt to draw comparisons between socio-culturally diverse phenomena. As Louis Dupré has noted,⁷⁵ the field of contemporary religious studies remains essentially “Kantian” in its orientation. Which is not to say that the majority—or even a sizeable minority—of religious scholars would identify themselves as “Kantians”. Far from it. It is only to say that the famed timekeeper from Königsberg continues to set the conditions within which the current study of religion is undertaken. The restriction of theoretical knowledge (*theoría*) to the

⁷⁵ See Louis Dupré, *A Dubious Heritage: Studies in the Philosophy of Religion After Kant* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1977), 3.

empirical realm; the relegation of transcendence to the mode of subjective experience; and the postulate of an autonomous, “buffered self”⁷⁶—these are just some of the chief dogmata that determine the basic contours of conventional religious scholarship today. Add to this the historicist supposition that all ideas are the products of their unique social and material circumstances, and any effort to discern a trans-historical, inter-religious, cross-civilizational unity among those ideas is not only rendered suspect but precluded *a priori*.

Two Critiques

None of this is meant to suggest, however, that the reasons and motivations behind this attitude of incredulity vis-à-vis the comparative philosophical method are simply false. On the contrary, they have been routinely substantiated by the very method they seek to criticize. In its eagerness to establish a common ground among world religions, the method of comparative philosophy has often been guilty of producing “shallow and facile ‘syntheses’ of Eastern and Western thought and superficial attempts at their unification.”⁷⁷ This has left the method vulnerable to an array of criticisms, all of which can be reduced to the following two categories: (1) the homonymous, and (2) the sectarian.

⁷⁶ As in the phrase of the sociologist and philosopher Charles Taylor. See *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁷⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (London and New York: Longman, 1975), 34.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

As for the first category, the comparative method stands accused of deracinating ideas from their specific intellectual, historical, and socio-cultural settings; of blending disparate worldviews into a syncretistic heap rather than a properly unified and integrated synthesis; and of having presupposed the very correspondences and connections it purports to have “demonstrated”. Far from sufficiently subordinating its own arbitrary element to the scale of the object it investigates, it has—or so its detractors protest—merely reduced the latter to the former. Needless to say, studies of this sort are not so much “comparative” as they are “homonymous”: inferring feigned likenesses between words and concepts that remain fundamentally equivocal in their respective contexts of meaning.⁷⁸ The results are inevitably simplistic and predictably contrived.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the comparative method has also been forced into the service of a sectarian apologetics in whose hands it has been wielded, not as a means for facilitating a mutual understanding among religions, but as a kind of intellectual “cudgel” with which to beat the “other” into submission. Here all emphasis is placed on the total difference between religio-philosophical systems, to the neglect of their affinities at other (and often higher) levels of analysis. Rather than appreciating these traditions on the basis of their intrinsic form and internal logic, this approach imposes the categories of its own *weltanschauung* onto

⁷⁸ E.g., drawing an unqualified comparison between the “atomist” theories of the Ash’arite school of Islam and the strictly empiricist philosophy of David Hume.

those it “examines”, and for no other reason than to demonstrate their relative inferiority.⁷⁹

A Way Forward

In order to avoid these twin pitfalls of flaccid homonymy, on the one hand, and shallow sectarianism, on the other, what is most needed is an even- (and open-) handed approach capable of doing “justice to the complexities and development of specific teachings”, while at the same time “reaching a level of theoretical synthesis allowing for meaningful parallels and contrasts.”⁸⁰

In the words of Nasr,

...comparative philosophy *per se* is either a shallow comparison of apparently similar but essentially different teachings, or, if it is to be serious, it is a comparative study of different ways of thinking and various matrices determining different sciences and forms of knowledge in reference to the total vision of the Universe and of the nature of things, a vision which is inseparable from the religious and spiritual background that has produced the ‘philosophy’ in question.⁸¹

⁷⁹ One of the more notorious contemporary examples of this was Pope (emeritus) Benedict XVI’s *Regensburg Address* (2006). Having reduced Islam to its most extreme and voluntaristic position, Benedict XVI went on to say that a “confrontation between the values held by Islam and those of the West are inevitable. There is already a clash, and we are in some sense already at war. That Western civilization is superior is not simply my opinion but a reality I have experienced and continue to appreciate every day.” As Nasr would rightly point out, however, the reduction of Islam to the most intemperate doctrines of Ash’arism is no less arbitrary and untenable than the reduction of Christianity to the most fanatical and perverse doctrines of Calvinism. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Word of God—The Bridge between Him, You, and Us”, in *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Volume 14, no. 2 (Winter 2008-2009), 115.

⁸⁰ Cf. Patrick Laude, *Shimmering Mirrors: Reality and Appearance in Contemplative Metaphysics East and West* (Albany: SUNY, 2017), 207.

⁸¹ Nasr, *Plight of Modern Man*, 30.

It is precisely this style of method that the present study intends to employ: constructing a meta-philosophical framework in which to analytically survey and systematically organize a coordinated network of key concepts spanning diverse traditions, without neglecting or suppressing the irreducible integrity of each religious “form” in its own distinctive historical and conceptual development.

This section has sketched out the main criticisms and objections commonly raised against the comparative method. The next section provides a clarification of terminology.

6. Terminology

This section attempts to throw light on a few of the terms employed throughout this study, so as to secure, in the spirit of Corbin’s “philosophical semantics” or Izutsu’s “metalanguage”, a common point of departure. In laconic fashion, I spell out the following three terms: mysticism, speculation, and ontology.

Mysticism

Mysticism is a word with many meanings. For the sake of conceptual clarity, and in view of my purposes here, it is possible to divide “mysticism” into two main types. The first is what might be called “union mysticism”, which is of an erotic and devotional character, and whose ultimate goal of *unio mystica* implies the indefinite preservation of the difference between

creature and Creator, slave and Master, lover and Beloved, etc. The second type is “unity mysticism”,⁸² which is, by contrast, of a more noetic and speculative character, and whose ultimate goal of *coincidentia oppositorum* implies the “breaking through” (Eckhart) of every distinction—even that of creature and Creator—to absolute unity or oneness itself. It is this latter type that serves as the focus of this study and is closely tied to the notion of “esoterism”. Etymologically, the word “esoteric” comes from the Greek *esōterikós* (“of or belonging to an inner circle”), from *esōtērō* (“innermost”), a comparative form of *ésō* (“inward”), itself from *es* or *eis* (“into”). At the functional level, it was only natural that the term should accrue occultic connotations, given that what is nearest is always the most “hidden” (*occultus*). After all, the eye cannot see itself with itself, and this due not to any great span of distance, but to the blinding closeness of proximity. This is not to suggest that these two types of mysticism are mutually exclusive, however. Both can—and often are—present in a single author, as found in the works of Śaṅkara and Ibn ‘Arabī, for example. My only point in mentioning this typology is to identify the precise kind of mysticisms I wish to compare, namely, mysticisms of the speculative order.

Speculation

⁸² A similar classification of mysticism is presented in Annemarie Schimmel’s classic work, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 5. See also the distinction drawn by Ninian Smart between “union” and “identity” mysticism in his essay, “The Purification of Consciousness and the Negative Path”, in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 125.

My designation of mystical ontologies as “speculative” requires some clarification as well, given its opprobrious overtones in popular nomenclature. As Patrick Laude has noted, “speculation” is a term that, over the period of the last few hundred years, “has accrued strong connotations of imaginative insubstantiality and arbitrariness, while evoking a sense of intellectual illusoriness, at least within the range of the most common contemporary lexicon.”⁸³ Despite these accruals, however, “speculation” is a term that still preserves, in its etymology at least, the exact meaning I wish to convey here.

Etymologically, the word “speculation” captures the symbolism of the intellect as “mirror” (Lt.: *speculum*). It is the mirror of the intellect, in contrast to the faculty of ratiocination or discursive reason, which is said to reflect the light of existence and connect the soul to its origin. As used in this study, “speculation” is therefore not—primarily—an epistemological concept, but a thoroughly ontological and metaphysical one, in that it denotes the non-dual intuition of Reality as such. While other writers have understandably foregone the use of this word for pragmatic reasons, so as to avoid the regrettable subtexts that have latched themselves onto it,⁸⁴ I employ it here in accordance with, and in the interest of resuscitating, its original meaning.

⁸³ Laude, *Shimmering Mirrors*, 5.

⁸⁴ Laude makes this decision for the same reason, choosing “contemplative” over “speculative”.

Ontology

The word “ontology” is as semantically diverse and contentious as any other. Derived from the Greek *ón* and *lógos* (translated as “being” and “logic”, respectively), “ontology” is “the logic of being”. But what *is* being? That all depends on whom you ask. For the mystical schools of this study, “being” is both (1) absolutely “no-thing” (beyond all determinations) and (2) infinitely “not-other” (exceeding all oppositions). It is in this way that the classic philosophical “problem” of the one and the many is not so much “solved” as revealed to be no longer a “problem”. It is only where the “one” is construed as relative to the “many”, i.e., as a thing—even the “supreme” or “maximal” thing—in relation to all other things, that their unity becomes a Gordian knot. The mystico-speculative ontologies compared in this study, however, conceive of “oneness” as absolute and unqualified, negating all negations and transcending even transcendence—which is why the “oneness of existence” is so often expressed in apophatic language, e.g., “emptiness”, “void”, “gulf”, or “abyss”. It is precisely the “no-thingness” of the absolute that functions as the ground of its “not-otherness” vis-à-vis the manifold of phenomena. Because the absolute is *truly absolute*, it is also the infinite field in which the forms of the world are latent and from which they are spontaneously produced, such that every existent becomes perceivable as a limited modality or adaptation of existence itself.

Seen in this way, ontology and metaphysics are regarded as alternative expressions of a single science: the science of the absolute. Other

approaches, whether they be the quasi-essentialist ontologies of an Aristotle or a Suhrawardī, or the propositional views of a Gottlob Frege or Bertrand Russell, would reduce “existence” to either an accident of quiddity, as previously discussed, or a bare logical concept, thus precluding from the outset any consideration of existence *qua* existence.⁸⁵

It is from this latter consideration (i.e., the consideration of existence in and of itself) that the mystical ontologies of this study are born. As Ludwig Wittgenstein had said: “Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.”⁸⁶ The world is One Face with many “looks”. Beneath every “this”—be it a man, or a flower, or a grain of sand—lies the pure and undetermined act of existence (“thatness”) itself. As the English Romantic poet and philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, could ask:

Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of existence, in and by itself, as the mere act of existing? Hast thou ever said to thyself thoughtfully, It is!, heedless at that moment, whether it were a man before you or a flower, or a grain of sand? Without reference, in short to this or that particular mode or form of existence? If thou hast indeed attained to this, then thou wilt have felt the presence of a mystery which must have fixed thy spirit in awe and wonder...⁸⁷

⁸⁵ While it is true that Aristotle did define metaphysics as the study of “existence *qua* existence” (*Metaphysica*, IV.1), yet, for the Stagirite, existence is subordinate to the category of “substance”, such that the ultimate question of metaphysics becomes not “What is existence itself?” but “What is true of substances (primary and secondary) insofar as they exist?”

⁸⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (Mineola: Dover, 1999), 6.44.

⁸⁷ See *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, vol. 4.1 (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 514.

Having clarified a few of the key terms of this study, I turn now to an initial sketch of its implications—which I treat more fully at this study’s conclusion.

7. Implications

What does it mean “to be”? Not only is this a “timely” question, it may very well be the only question anyone has ever asked: the question we ask in all our asking and to which our every action, thought, and desire is, either intentionally or unwittingly, a ventured answer. This is a point seldom conceded today, however. Philosophical questions surrounding the doctrine of existence are systematically disparaged as being no less trivial than arguing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin,⁸⁸ and no less futile than a blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that is not there.⁸⁹ Hence the ubiquitous argument that we must put off such questions, if not indefinitely, then at least until matters of a more “pressing” and “urgent” nature have been sufficiently dealt with. Let us first fill our bellies. Metaphysics can wait till then.

But as the French philosopher Edgar Morin has rightly cautioned: “By dint of sacrificing the essential for the urgent one ends up forgetting the urgency of the essential.”⁹⁰ And what could be more essential to us, or

⁸⁸ While this example is routinely cited as a way of castigating the medieval scholastics, it appears to be an invention of the critics themselves.

⁸⁹ This saying, intended as a pejorative description of speculative philosophy, is ascribed to the great American philosopher and pragmatist William James (1842-1910).

⁹⁰ See Edgar Morin, “Ethics in Process: Turbulence, Uncertainty and Urgency”, in *Ethics of the Future*, ed. Enrique Rodriguez Larreta and Candido Mendes (Rio de Janeiro: Unesco, 1998), 94.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

by the same token more urgent, than existence itself? It is in this light that the mystico-speculative doctrine of existence as simultaneously one and manifold can be seen, not as an abstract theory pronounced from an armchair, but as the product of an existential encounter beyond the realms of rational and empirical knowledge, and thus replete with implications for contemporary thought and life. Here I list only three—to which I return at the conclusion of this study: (1) the renewal of the sense of wonder before the mystery of existence, (2) the overcoming of the dualistic and reductionist modes of (post-) modern thought, and (3) the establishment of the possibility of a mutual understanding among religions.

With this introduction concluded, I turn to Part One of this study, the focus of which is the mystical ontologies of the East, and its first chapter on the tradition of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

PART ONE:

EASTERN TRADITIONS

CHAPTER 1

Advaita Vedānta Hinduism

The present chapter consists of the following three parts: (1) a short introduction to Advaita Vedānta Hinduism; (2) its exposition and analysis under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge; and (3) a concluding summary of key concepts.

1. Introduction

In this introduction I prepare the way for an exposition and analysis of the mystico-speculative doctrine of existence as espoused by the Advaita Vedānta school of Hinduism through (1) a brief sketch of the terms Vedānta and Advaita, (2) a few prefatory remarks on the philosophy and commentaries of Śaṅkara, and (3) a basic summary of the method and outline of the present chapter.

Vedānta

Vedānta forms one of the six major philosophical schools (sg. *darśanas*, from *drś*, meaning “vision”) of the Hindu religion. The word Vedānta means “the end (*anta*) of knowledge (*veda*)”, with *anta* conveying the following two senses: (1) the “conclusion” of the Vedas, the earliest sacred writings of the Indian world, and (2) the “completion” or “perfection” of knowledge, the purest form of which is *Brahma-vidyā* or “knowledge of Absolute Reality”. As such, Vedānta has both a narrow and a broad sense.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Narrowly speaking, it refers to the Upaniṣads, which constitute the final portion of the Vedas. More broadly, however, it refers to all three canonical books (*prasthānatrayī*) of the Vedāntic tradition, namely, the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad-Gītā, and the Brahma Sūtras, as well as to the immediate intuition of the oneness of reality to which these books apophatically point. In the words of Swami Nikhilananda,

A spirit of synthesis generally pervades the philosophy of Vedānta. The search is always directed to the discovery of the First Principle, through which the multiplicity of the universe can be known and explained...As Ramakrishna said, “To know the many, without the knowledge of the One, is ignorance, whereas to know the One is knowledge.”⁹¹

Advaita

The aim of Vedānta is the elimination of nescience (*avidyā*) through the emancipating knowledge (*mokṣa*) of Absolute Reality (*Brahman*), i.e., the knowledge of that in the light of which everything else becomes known.⁹² This aim is implied in the etymology of the word “Upaniṣad”, signifying that form of knowledge which, when received from (*upa*) a true teacher, completely (*ni*) removes (*ṣad*) the disciple from every attachment to relative

⁹¹ Swami Nikhilananda, “Introduction”, in *Self-Knowledge* (Ātmabodha), trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1974), 16.

⁹² See Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, I.i.3.

existence, thereby uniting him to that pure consciousness identical to Brahman itself.⁹³ “Brahman is consciousness.”⁹⁴

As the science of the “Absolute”—“the one Being without a second”⁹⁵—Vedānta is “a purely metaphysical doctrine”⁹⁶ and, as such, a “doctrine of non-duality” (*advaita-vāda*).⁹⁷ “Non-duality” is a term belonging to the oldest extant sub-school of Vedānta philosophy, the main representative of which is the remarkable eighth-century Indian sage, Adīśaṅkarācārya (Śaṅkara), whose single greatest contribution to Oriental metaphysics is his “creation of a structure of thought that is rigorously consistent, internally cohesive and groundbreaking in projecting the non-dual reality of the cosmic play.”⁹⁸ The “non-” (*a-*) in “non-duality” (*advaita*) therefore serves more than a merely privative function. It denotes a plenitudinous excess vis-à-vis every possible negation or affirmation. The absolute is therefore “non-dual” in the sense that it surpasses all limits (*neti, neti*, “neither this nor that”⁹⁹) and transcends all antitheses (“non-different from everything”¹⁰⁰).

⁹³ See Nikhilananda, “Introduction”, 10.

⁹⁴ Aitareya Upaniṣad, III.i.3.

⁹⁵ See T.M.P. Mahadevan, *The Philosophy of Advaita* (Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2006), 8.

⁹⁶ René Guénon, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, trans. Richard C. Nicholson (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999), 2.

⁹⁷ Guénon, *Man and His Becoming*, 32.

⁹⁸ Pavan K. Varma, *Adi Shankaracharya: Hinduism’s Greatest Thinker* (Manduravoyal: Tranquebar Press, 2018), 90.

⁹⁹ Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, II.iii.6

¹⁰⁰ See *Eight Upaniṣads: With the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, 2 vols., trans. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2018; hereafter cited as EU), I:319.

Therefore, while the absolute is inconceivable in itself, free from all conditions, even to the point of being beyond the condition of being unconditioned, yet insofar as the absolute is the principle of the whole phenomenal order, it becomes conceivable in its inconceivability: “It is unknown to those who know (*avijñātaṃ vijānatām*), and known to those who do not know (*vijñātamavijānatām*).”¹⁰¹ As the “Inner Self” (*Pratyak-Ātman*) and “Pure Witness” (*Sākṣī*) of all beings, the absolute is revealed in the identity of subject and object, knower and known, self and other. To “know” the absolute is therefore to “be” the absolute, to be awakened to one’s own identity with Brahman, and thus to realize the great Upaniṣadic pronouncement (*mahāvākyam*)—what Max Müller had called “the boldest and truest synthesis in the whole history of philosophy”:¹⁰² “Thou art that” (*tat tvam asi*).

The Philosophy of Śaṅkara

Śaṅkara was not a “philosopher”, or at least not in the modern Western understanding of that word.¹⁰³ Analysis, reason, and logic, while necessary instruments in the formulation of truth, are not viewed by Śaṅkara as sufficient in themselves.¹⁰⁴ Rather, for the Hindu sage, each requires and

¹⁰¹ Kena Upaniṣad, II.3.

¹⁰² Max Müller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1919), 122.

¹⁰³ Cf. Matthew T. Kapstein, “Interpreting Indian Philosophy Three Parables”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (New Delhi: Oxford, 2017), 23-27.

¹⁰⁴ Y. Keshava Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya* (Fort, Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2014), xii.

operates within “an intuitive grasp of reality” as a sacred mystery “in which every movement of life and every atom of the world is implicated.”¹⁰⁵ Whereas the “analytic” tradition of the West has largely contented itself with speaking “about” existence,¹⁰⁶ Śaṅkara stops at nothing less than the pure and immediate encounter with existence itself. To understand Śaṅkara properly, then, it is necessary to recognize that his engagement with philosophy is never for its own sake, but always subordinate to what he perceives as his primary role and vocation, namely, a commentator on scripture and, just so, a link on the great chain of the interpreters of the “eternal way” (*sanātana dharma*).

The Commentaries of Śaṅkara

The commentaries (sg. *bhāṣya*) of Śaṅkara present the earliest surviving effort to fuse the three main textual sources of Vedānta together through the principle of non-dual unity or “oneness” (*advayatā*). Three works in particular will serve as the focus of this chapter: Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Upaniṣads, his *Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā Bhāṣya*,¹⁰⁷ and his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*.¹⁰⁸ My reasons for selecting these works are both philosophical and historical. Philosophically, they express the fundamental insights of the

¹⁰⁵ See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Oxford, 2004; hereafter cited as IP), II:613.

¹⁰⁶ Or even “talking about existence”, as David Bentley Hart has said with respect to the Fregean tradition. See *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale, 2013), 126.

¹⁰⁷ *Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. A.G. Krishna Warriar (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1983; hereafter cited as SBGB).

¹⁰⁸ *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (hereafter cited as BSB).

non-dual doctrine of existence as understood by the Advaita Vedānta tradition; and historically, they are numbered among the indisputably authentic works of Śaṅkara, as established by contemporary scholarship.¹⁰⁹ The occasional reference to treatises whose authorship remains historically questionable, such as, for example, the celebrated *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (“The Crest-Jewel of Discrimination”), will therefore only be made to lend further support to what the authentic commentaries of Śaṅkara have already indicated, as well as to show how the later Advaitic tradition was developed under their influence.

Method and Outline

In this chapter I analyze the ontology of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism and its mystico-speculative concept of reality as simultaneously one and manifold, according to which just as many waves “are” only as the modifications of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the diversified modes of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as the “manifestations of the one real principle, Being.”¹¹⁰ I undertake this examination through the three interrelated headings of existence (Section One), manifestation (Section Two), and knowledge (Section Three), with each heading comprised of a structural exposition and textual analysis.

¹⁰⁹ See, e.g., A.J. Alston, *Śaṅkara on the Absolute in A Śaṅkara Sourcebook*, 6 vols. (London: Shanti Sadan, 2004; hereafter cited as SS), I:44.

¹¹⁰ SS I:6.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

As discussed in the introduction of this study, my broader intention is to develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory through which to compare mystical ontologies East and West. I seek to analytically survey and systematically organize a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the mystico-speculative notion of reality as simultaneously one and manifold. A visual portrait of this method is provided below (Table 3), one to which I return at the conclusion of this chapter:

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayaī</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>

Table 3. *Corresponding Concepts – Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

Having completed this introduction, I turn to the exposition and analysis of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism under the three headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge.

2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis

Section One: Existence

In order to properly foreground my textual analysis of Śaṅkara's commentaries, a word must first be said of the basic structure of existence as conceived by the Advaitic tradition.

Structural Exposition: Existence as *Sat*

Advaita Vedānta conceives of existence (*sat*) as a pure, non-dual unity. This unity or “oneness” (*advayatā*) is therefore not mathematical but metaphysical in its meaning. Existence cannot be counted. Perfectly simple, it is without parts. Perfectly infinite, it is beyond enumeration. As a pure, homogenous plenum (*bhūmā*), existence is beyond all division and diminishment, such that to existence, nothing can be added, and from existence, nothing can be taken away. Existence is therefore not an instantiation of reality, as some modern philosophers have argued.¹¹¹ It is the essence of the real itself. This “essential nature” (*svarūpa-lakṣaṇa*) is signified by the tertiary formula *sat-cit-ānanda* (“existence-consciousness-bliss”)—three different designations for one reality.¹¹² As Mahadevan writes, “The Vedānta regards existence neither as the appearance of reality nor as a species of the real, but as the characteristic nature of the Absolute.”¹¹³

Thus while it is true that, from an exclusively quantitative standpoint, “one” is the loneliest of all numbers, yet, qualitatively considered, an entirely different picture emerges. Here existence is not “one” according to the logic of solitude, as a “thing” severable from other things or an “object” distinguishable from other objects. Instead, existence

¹¹¹ Philosophers as diverse in orientation as F.H. Bradley and Gottlob Frege arrive at what is, ultimately, the same conclusion on this point: existence is a particular “instance” or “form of the appearance of the Real”.

¹¹² See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, “Introduction”, in *The Principle Upaniṣads* (New Dehli: Harper Collins, 1999), 69.

¹¹³ Mahadevan, *Philosophy of Advaita*, 99.

is “one” by dint of its own limitless fecundity and super-abounding excess. Ontological solitude (“no-thingness”) and solidarity (“not-otherness”) are thus shown to be modes of coincidence or identity, with the former being ultimately convertible with the latter. Put another way: it is precisely because existence is “no-thing” (*neti, neti*), that it is “not-other”, negating every negation, transcending even transcendence, and being more inward to all things than they are to themselves, such that the manifold of phenomena are “not many but one, and not one only, but *the One* without a second—Brahman-Ātman.”¹¹⁴

For the Advaitic school and the philosophy of Śaṅkara, *sat* is therefore most properly known as the existentiating act and metaphysical substratum of all existents, the super-essential “mode” which, simply by virtue of being what it is, makes all things to be what they are. Or in the words of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan: “All things that exist are what they are, because of the nature of *Brahman* as *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda*. All things are forms of one immutable being, variable expressions of the invariable reality.”¹¹⁵

Accordingly, the oneness of existence, far from a monolithic concept, is of a thoroughly gradational or analogical character, enfolding a hierarchy of corresponding stages, modalities, and degrees.

¹¹⁴ R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 76.

¹¹⁵ Radhakrishnan, “Introduction”, 70.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Taken in its highest sense, existence corresponds to absolute reality, i.e., “the really real” (*satyasya satyam*). The fundamental claim of Advaitic ontology is that the absolute *qua* absolute is void of every difference (*viśeṣa*), quality (*guṇa*), limitation (*upādhi*), and form (*ākāra*).¹¹⁶ This claim is maintained by Śaṅkara through the distinction—often misunderstood—between Brahman “with attributes” (*saguṇa*) and Brahman “without attributes” (*nirguṇa*), a distinction otherwise referred to as “lower” (*apara*) and “higher” (*para*) Brahman. To grasp this distinction, it is essential to acknowledge that, for Śaṅkara, there are not two absolutes, one ineffable and the other nameable, one higher and the other lower. Both refer to the same exact reality, albeit as perceived from two radically different standpoints or levels of consciousness: (1) the phenomenal (*saprapañca*) and (2) the transcendental (*niṣprapañca*). It is in this way that pure existence (*sat*), though one in itself, is grasped under the two opposed aspects (*dvirūpa*) of transcendence (“no-thingness”) and immanence (“not-otherness”), absoluteness and relativity.

To the “lower” Brahman applies the manifold predications of attributes, names, and forms. This is the personal God or Īśvara whose existence is inseparable from the phenomenal order and of whom one may speak as the causative principle of all things. This causative principle or creator-deity is said to have “produced” or “emanated” the world from itself as a fire emits its sparks, a spider weaves its web, or a flute produces its

¹¹⁶ See Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedānta*, trans. Charles Johnston (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1912), 205.

music.¹¹⁷ The manifold of phenomena is, from this perspective, no miscellany of “arbitrary inventions” that a Divine Being has fashioned “out of nothing”, but the manifestations of oneness itself (*advayatā*),¹¹⁸ such that all ontophany (the manifestation of existence) is henophany (the manifestation of oneness).

To the “higher” Brahman, by contrast with the “lower”, no attribute, name, or form applies. As Śāṅkara says, to “the transcendental Brahman, beyond all conditions, there can be no such ascription.”¹¹⁹ The “really real” or “absolutely absolute” is “beyond all concepts and all words,” such that even those negative or apophatic attributions like invisibility, immutability, and so forth are all infinitely surpassed. Or as Śāṅkara writes elsewhere, “Words with the mind turn back without reaching It as It is without qualities, without actions and without attributes.”¹²⁰

This denial of all names and forms to pure existence must not be understood in a merely negative way, however. The absolute manifests itself throughout every grade of relativity without forfeiting its limitlessness, and that because it bears no dialectical relation to it. Finitude, far from something “other” than the infinite, is the latter’s limited expression, just as form (*rūpa*) is the limited expression of the formless (*arūpa*). Śāṅkara thus regards the most profound statements of the

¹¹⁷ Radhakrishnan, “Introduction”, 87.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ EU I:385.

¹²⁰ See Śrī Śāṅkarācārya, *Upadeśa Sāhasrī* (“A Thousand Teachings”), XV.31, trans. Swāmi Jagadānanda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press, 2018), 160.

Upaniṣads to have for their primary referent, not a personal creator-deity (*Brahmā*), or even a transcendent Being of endless qualities (*saguṇa Brahman*), but absolute and unqualified existence as such (*nirguṇa Brahman*), i.e., “the impersonal (or super-personal) *ground* in and through which manifestation takes place, itself bereft of all finite characteristics.”¹²¹

As Izutsu summarizes the philosophy of Śaṅkara:

...the Absolute which is indicated by the word Brahman is conceived as pure being or “existence” (*Sat*)—all-pervasive, non-temporal, non-spatial, absolutely unqualified and unlimited—which all so-called “things” are considered so many determinations and particularizations of this absolute Indeterminate¹²²... whenever we perceive something in this world we are in reality perceiving Brahman itself, not in its absolute aspect, to be sure, but in one of its particular phenomenal forms.¹²³

This raises an important question: how can the absolute remain itself throughout the varied stages of manifold relativity? If, as the famous phrase ascribed to Śaṅkara puts it, “the universe is an continuous series of intuitions of Brahman”, then how can the universe at the same time be “in all respects nothing but Brahman”?¹²⁴ Here it must be said that, according to Śaṅkara’s mystico-speculative notion of existence, just as the *saguṇa Brahman* is not a reality in addition to the *nirguṇa Brahman*, so the latter does not in any

¹²¹ SS I:5.

¹²² CRE, 39.

¹²³ Ibid, 44.

¹²⁴ *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (“The Crest-Jewel of Discrimination”), 521.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

way “become” or “change into” the former. The absolute *qua* absolute remains eternally unaltered and unalterable. It is itself forever. Brahman does not “become” Īśvara. On the contrary, Īśvara *is* Brahman, though as viewed from the plane of phenomenal perception (*saprapañca*). What is more, the ineffable oneness of the absolute abides undiminished throughout the descending degrees of its manifestation, from the pure act of existence (*sat*) down to the pure possibility of *prakṛti*, the material principle of nature, corresponding to the Aristotelian notion of *hylē* or *materia prima*.

It is only at the level of parabrahmanic oneness, says Śāṅkara, that phenomena can be seen for what they are: not so many insular “essences” or independent ontological “units” all neatly cordoned off from each other, but the mutually interpenetrating modifications of absolute existence itself (*sat*), each indwelling all and all indwelling each. As Alston writes:

All is one, and that one an eternal mass of homogenous light. But as one fire breaks up into many sparks without losing its unity, so does the one Self (ātman) of all assume the form of the objects of the world and enter into living beings as their “living soul” without forfeiting its essential unity.¹²⁵

Having previewed the basic structure of existence as understood by Advaitic ontology, I turn to an analysis of Śāṅkara’s commentaries on the triple canon of Hinduism.

¹²⁵ SS I:5.

Textual Analysis: *Prasthānatrayī*

In this subsection I analyze Śāṅkara's mystico-speculative concept of existence as simultaneously one and manifold through select passages drawn from his commentaries on (1) the Kena and Taittirīya Upaniṣads, (2) The second (*Sāṅkhyayoga*, "The Yoga of Distinguishing Body From Soul") and thirteenth (*Kṣetrakṣetrañā*, "The Yoga of the Field and the Field-Knower") chapters of the Bhagavad-Gītā, and (3) the Samanvaya ("Harmony"¹²⁶) and Avirodha, ("Nonconflict"¹²⁷) chapters of the Brahma Sūtras.

The Upaniṣads

Kena Upaniṣad

The Kena Upaniṣad (I.2) speaks of the Self as both "no-thing" and "not-other". The absolute does not see. It is Vision itself, "the Eye of the eye" (*cakṣuṣaḥ cakṣuḥ*). The absolute does not hear. It is Sound itself, "the Ear of the ear" (*śrotrasya śrotram*). The absolute does not think. It is Thought itself, "the Mind of the mind" (*manaso mano*). The absolute does not live. It is Vitality itself, "the Life of life" (*prāṇasya prāṇaḥ*).¹²⁸ In his commentary on this verse, Śāṅkara engages the objection that propositions such as "the Eye of the eye" or "the Ear of the ear" are superfluous, given that, just as light does not need another light to be luminous, so an eye does

¹²⁶ Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy: Sanskrit Terms Defined in English* (New York: SUNY, 1996), 271.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 76.

¹²⁸ EU I:46-47.

not need another eye to see or an ear another ear to hear.¹²⁹ To this objection Śāṅkara answers that, while it is true that the ear is “able to reveal its own object”, namely, sound, yet this ability is only possible “when the eternal non-composite, all pervading light of the Self is there, and not otherwise.”¹³⁰

The manifold of sensory and psychic faculties has a purely relative function, and thus requires a meta-sensorial (and meta-psychical) unity to activate it and give it coherence. This principle of unity is the Self. As Śāṅkara writes, “There does exist something which is known to the intellect of the men of realization, which dwells in the inmost recesses of all, which is changeless, undecaying, immortal, fearless, and unborn, and which is the Ear etc., even of the ear etc., i.e., the source of their capacity to act.”¹³¹ The purest transcendence (“no-thingness”) is the purest immanence (“not-otherness”). It is not a second ear that is being added to a first ear, or a second eye that is being added to a first eye. Rather, “the Eye of the eye” (*cakṣuṣaḥ cakṣuḥ*) is the one Eye without a second, the singular “Eye-ness” of which the manifold of eyes are the restricted articulations or modalities.

Only by awakening to this oneness does the “self” (*jīva*) become capable of throwing off the chains of its identification (*atimucya*) with “this” eye or “that” ear. By excising itself from the world of phenomenal dealings, in which the bifurcative logic of “I and mine” ceaselessly operates, the self is assimilated into the pure existence of the absolute (*sat*) and

¹²⁹ Ibid, 44.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid, 45.

becomes immortal (*pretyāsmāllokādamṛtā*).¹³² This is the unmistakable logic of non-duality: what the Eye is to the eye, the Self (*Ātman*) is to the self (*jīva*), and oneness (*advatayā*) is to the manifold (*bahutayā*).

Taittirīya Upaniṣad

According to Śāṅkara, the manifold is a limited symbol of unlimited oneness. It is not necessary to choose between Brahman and the world, in that the latter is not-other-than the former. That is why, when commenting on the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (II.i.1), Śāṅkara can say that only he who has realized the parabrahmanic oneness of the manifold is able to delight in all desirable phenomena “simultaneously” (*saha*).¹³³

It is in this connection that Śāṅkara posits three categories of infinitude: (1) spatial infinity, (2) temporal infinity, and (3) non-dual infinity. The sky, for example, can be said to adequately symbolize the infinite in terms of space, having no visible boundaries. But no symbol is exhaustive of what it symbolizes. Therefore, while the sky may adequately symbolize the infinite with respect to space, it falls short with respect to time, since the sky is necessarily circumscribed within temporal limits, as all finite things are. The same can be said of the sky in its relation to other objects. The sky, precisely in its sky-ness, is not the earth or a stone or a tree. This is true of all things at the empirical level. Every phenomenon is the limiting principle of something else. The objects of manifestation are all

¹³² Ibid, 47.

¹³³ EU I:317.

mutually restrictive and delimiting, such that wherever the mind becomes occupied with “this” (e.g., the sky), it is compelled to detach itself from “that” (e.g., the earth, a stone, a tree). “[W]hen the intellect gets occupied with something, it becomes detached from something else.”¹³⁴

Śaṅkara illustrates this point with the two reciprocally delimiting notions of “cowhood” and “horsehood”. A mind gripped with the distinct idea of “cowhood” cannot be gripped, at the same time and in the same manner, by the distinct notion of “horsehood”. This is due to the very fact that cows and horses are distinct kinds of objects. In Śaṅkara’s words: “The idea of cowhood is repelled by the idea of horsehood; hence horsehood debars cowhood, and the idea (of cowhood) becomes delimited indeed.”¹³⁵ At the empirical level, all things stand opposed to each other. Each thing “is” precisely that which distinguishes it from everything else. “A thing that is different acts as a limitation to another.”¹³⁶

Not so with Brahman. As Śaṅkara says, Brahman is not a distinct object among other objects, or a thing in relation to other things. Brahman is “no-thing” at all, and therefore “not-other”: “...there is nothing different from Brahman”.¹³⁷ Indeed, the no-thingness and wholly-otherness of Brahman is identical to its all-thingness and not-otherness vis-à-vis the world. Absolutely different, it is absolutely the same. Which is why Śaṅkara can assert, on the one hand, that “Brahman is not differentiated in this way

¹³⁴ Ibid, 319.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

[that is, as a distinct object]”, and, on the other hand, that Brahman “is non-different from everything.”¹³⁸ Or as the Hindu sage says later in the same Upaniṣad (II.vi.1): the absolute is at once “devoid of all distinctions” (“nothing”) and “common to all” (“not-other”).

This commentary of Śaṅkara conveys his mystico-speculative notion of existence as simultaneously one and manifold. For Śaṅkara, all of the Upaniṣads have for their goal the realization of parabrahmanic unity. To know all things *in* the Self (the oneness of the manifold) is to know all things *as* the Self (manifold oneness). Or as Radhakrishnan could say, “*Brahman* is the one self of all and the many are the becomings of the one Being.”¹³⁹ Pure existence (*sat*) is here conceived as the one ontological ocean wherein the many “are” only as waves, since, from the transcendental standpoint, nothing *is* but the twoless one (*ekam eva advitīyam*).

The Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā Bhāṣya

Before delving into Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Gītā, it seems fitting to preface my remarks with a few words about what is arguably “the best loved and most widely read of the sacred books of India.”¹⁴⁰ The Bhagavad-Gītā is part of the much larger epic Mahābhārata, likely written sometime between 300 B.C.E. and 300 C.E. The content of the book is a dialogue between Arjuna, a Pandavan¹⁴¹ prince and warrior, and Kṛṣṇa, his charioteer

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Radhakrishnan, *Principal Upaniṣads*, 572.

¹⁴⁰ Brian Hodgkinson, *The Essence of Vedānta* (London: Arcturus, 2016), 11.

¹⁴¹ One of the five sons of Pandu, king of Hastinapur.

and one of the principal deities of the Hindu religion who is worshipped as the eighth avatar of Viṣṇu and thus as a form of the Supreme Brahman.

Despondent over the prospect of having to kill or be killed by his own blood relatives in battle, the Kauravas, Arjuna begins to doubt whether he should fight at all. Kṛṣṇa's subsequent counsel to Arjuna constitutes the heart of the dialogue, masterfully blending the Hindu notions of *dharma* (eternal order), *bhakti* (worship), and *yoga* (union) toward the end of recalling Arjuna to his true vocation as a warrior (*kṣatriyaḥ*) and to oneness with the Self (*ātman*) of all selves (*jīvas*). As Radhakrishnan writes, the Gītā is at once metaphysics (*brahmavidyā*) and ethics (*yogaśāstra*), “the science of reality and the art of union with reality.”¹⁴²

The Sāṅkhya Yoga

In verse 17 of the Sāṅkhya Yoga chapter, Arjuna is commanded by Kṛṣṇa to “know that to be indestructible (*avināśī*) which is diffused throughout the whole world”. Commenting on this verse, Śāṅkara writes, “Know *that*. What? Brahman or *Sat*, i.e., Being, by which the whole world, together with the sky, is pervaded...”¹⁴³ Śāṅkara continues:

This Brahman known as *sat* does not change Its own nature, i.e., does not forfeit it; for It is partless, unlike the body, etc. Neither in respect of Its properties does It change; for, It has no property... Therefore, none can bring about the destruction

¹⁴² Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita: With an Introductory Essay, Sanskrit Text, English Translation and Notes* (London: Harper, 2014), 3.

¹⁴³ SBGB, 36.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

of this immutable Brahman. None, not even God, may destroy the Self. Indeed the Self is Brahman and any transitive activity of the Self (the Self acting on Itself) is inconceivable.¹⁴⁴

This passage carries several important implications for the present chapter. First, it highlights what has already been noted above, namely, the identification of Brahman with that absolute existence (*sat*) whose unity or oneness is not mathematical but metaphysical in meaning. Having no parts or properties, it cannot suffer change. Not even God (*Īśvara*) can alter the absolute oneness of existence, in that the latter is the principle and ground of the former, and not vice versa.¹⁴⁵ In another place (XIV.27), Śaṅkara speaks of the “inner Self” as “the ground of Brahman”, with “inner Self” corresponding to the *nirguṇa Brahman* and “Brahman” corresponding to the *saguṇa Brahman*. As Śaṅkara, speaking boldly in the voice of the transpersonal absolute, clarifies: “‘Brahman’ here refers to Brahman with attributes...Of this Brahman, I, who am beyond all attributes, alone am the ground, and none else.”¹⁴⁶

Second, this passage also reiterates my thesis that the absolute oneness of existence is diffused throughout the manifold levels of empirical phenomena without in any way forfeiting or diminishing its homogenous “essence”, or what Śaṅkara elsewhere refers to as its “mass of splendour”

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 37.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgita*, 120.

¹⁴⁶ SBGB, 489.

(XV.6). In the words of Radhakrishnan, “the real is above all opposites.”¹⁴⁷ Existence is immune from the flux and processes of becoming for the very reason that it has nothing to change into or become. It *is* all things, and all things are *it*. One might even venture to say that, for Śāṅkara, the Advaitic unity of existence is itself the very manyness of the many, the plurality of the plural, and the multiplicity of the multitude, just as a star is the radiance of its rays, or a fire the luminosity of its light.

Verse 20 of the Sāṅkhya Yoga chapter elaborates on the unconditional and transpersonal aspect of existence (*sat*). Unborn and undying, existence is eternal (*nityaḥ*), immortal (*śāśvato*), and ancient (*purāṇo*). For Śāṅkara, this means that the “really real” is beyond the dialectic of birth and death, beginning and end. “The Self is not born, i.e., It does not come into being. The sense is that the transformation of things known as birth does not happen to the Self. Similarly It does not die either.”¹⁴⁸ The absolute is “no-thing”, and therefore transcends completely the dichotomy of existence (*sat*) and non-existence (*asat*). “That which, having been non-existent, comes into being, is said to be born. The Self is not an entity like that.”¹⁴⁹ This is so because, due to the sheer infinity of *sat*, non-existence (*asat*) cannot be its dialectical correlate. Pure existence is that to which nothing is opposed. To quote Radhakrishnan again: “Brahman is the basis of all things and is not itself a thing.”¹⁵⁰ Or as Śāṅkara writes in a

¹⁴⁷ Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgita*, 41.

¹⁴⁸ SBGB, 41.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgita*, 116.

later chapter of the Gītā (XI.37), the absolute Brahman is all: existence (*sat*), non-existence (*asat*), and “that which is beyond both”.¹⁵¹

Absolute *sat* “is devoid of internal differentiations and external relations.”¹⁵² It is not a “part” or “property” but constitutive of the Brahmanic “essence”. Brahman is thus a sheer, ineffable “is-ness” which, as verses 23-25 tell us, cannot be pierced by weapons, burned by fire, wetted by water, or eroded by wind. It is immovable (*acalo*), omnipresent (*sarvagataḥ*), and prior to all beginnings (*sanātanaḥ*); unmanifest (*avyakto*), inconceivable (*acintyo*), and without variation (*sthāṇur*).

That is why, toward the conclusion of the Sāṅkhya Yoga chapter (II.70), Śaṅkara employs the analogy of the sea (*samudra*) and its waters (*āpas*): “Though being filled on all sides by waters, the sea remains unchanged; for it is stable. These waters flow into it from all sides, while the sea abides in itself, unaltered.”¹⁵³ In the same way, “all forms of desire, all around, like the waters into the sea, enter the sage’s mind. He contains them all, and is not enslaved by them.”¹⁵⁴ All that enters Brahman attains the status of Brahman (*brāhmī sthitiḥ*; II.72). The manifold becomes itself in the absolute oneness of existence, precisely in that it becomes nothing other than itself. This is what the Hindu tradition calls *prāptasyaprāptiḥ*, or “the attainment of the already attained.”¹⁵⁵ When a wave becomes the

¹⁵¹ SBGB, 370.

¹⁵² Mahadevan, *Philosophy of Advaita*, 96.

¹⁵³ SBGB, 90.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Grimes, *Concise Dictionary*, 241.

ocean, it does not become something other than what it was before. Rather, it receives itself (*jīva*) into Itself (*ātman*), so as to become what it *is*, rising above every duality (*nirdvandva*; II.45).

The Yoga of the Field and the Field-Knower

The thirteenth chapter of the Gītā opens with the injunction: “Know also that I am the field-knower in all fields, Arjuna! Knowledge of the field and the field-knower—that is true knowledge” (XIII.2). Here the term “field” (*kṣetra*) denotes the manifold of existent things, while the term “field-knower” (*kṣetrajñā*) denotes the oneness of existence. As Śāṅkara says: “The idea is that the field-knower, present in and variegated by these countless fields beginning from Brahman and extending down to clumps, is devoid of all differences derived from the adjuncts and is beyond the range of expressions like being and non-being.”¹⁵⁶

To this point an objection is raised (v.12): “All cognitions, surely, must conform to the concept of existence or non-existence.”¹⁵⁷ This objection comports to the common-sense notion of “being”. A thing either “is” (*sat*) or “is not” (*asat*). This dialectic of existence and non-existence, being and non-being, embodies the seemingly inviolable laws of identity (*A is A*) and non-contradiction (*A is not non-A*), the duality of which is perceived as ultimate. Re-stated in the form of the Hamletian query: “To be

¹⁵⁶ SBGB, 404.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 433.

[*sat*] or not to be [*asat*], that is the question.”¹⁵⁸ For Śaṅkara, however, this is neither *the* question nor indeed the *only* question to be asked. There is a deeper inquiry that must be engaged, since absolute existence, in that it is supersensible, “transcends both these concepts [i.e., *sat* and *asat*].”¹⁵⁹ Śaṅkara had already said as much in his commentary on the Sāṅkhya Yoga chapter (v.25), where he wrote: “Being beyond the ken of all the senses, the Self is not manifest; so It is unmanifest. For the same reason, one cannot ponder on It. Only what is accessible to the senses becomes an object of thought. Being beyond their ken, the Self is imponderable.”¹⁶⁰ Returning now to verse 12 of the Yoga of the Field and the Field-Knower chapter, Śaṅkara observes in a similar way how

[s]ensible objects like a pot indeed conform either to the concept of existence or to that of non-existence. But the knowable in question, beyond supersensible, may be cognized exclusively by means of revelation. Unlike pot, etc., It cannot conform to the concept of existence or non-existence. Hence It is said to be neither existent nor non-existent.¹⁶¹

In saying that existence cannot be used to denote the absolute Brahman, Śaṅkara is simply reiterating his claim that Brahman is “that which is beyond both”¹⁶² *sat* (defined as an attribute) and *asat* (defined as the mere

¹⁵⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act III, Sc. I).

¹⁵⁹ SBGB, 433.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 52.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 433.

¹⁶² Ibid, 370.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

absence of attributes). Interpreted from the standpoint of pure transcendence, however, *sat* is identical with Brahman. Both propositions are equally valid and true: (1) Brahman is not anything (“no-thingness”) and (2) Brahman is not different from anything (“not-otherness”). As verse 27 says, “He who sees the Supreme Lord [oneness] dwelling alike in all beings [manifold], not perishing when they perish, sees truly.” In other words, to see the One in the manifold and the manifold in the One, is to see Brahman dwelling “alike in all beings” (*samam sarveṣu bhūteṣu*), as that which is also unlike them by means of a “total difference”. The one who sees in this way, “sees truly” (*sa paśyati*). Śaṅkara thus interprets the word “alike” (*samam*) to mean “without distinction of any kind”; and the word “not perishing” (*avināśya*) to mean “total otherness”.

“Alike”—without distinction of any kind. “Dwelling” where? In all beings—all living beings, extending from Brahmā to things stationary. Whom?—the supreme Lord in relation to body, senses, mind, intellect, the unmanifest and the individual self. He who rules is the supreme and the Lord. He dwells alike in all beings who are characterized by “perishing”. He is distinguished as “not perishing” to stress the total difference between these beings and the supreme Lord. Whence this difference?...Attributes presuppose substance...Thus follows the total otherness of the supreme Lord as against all contingent beings, the absence in Him of all adjuncts and His unity. He only sees, who perceives the supreme Lord as set forth above.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Ibid, 457.

Verse 30 is even more explicit: “When he [the seer of oneness] perceives the manifold states of being (*bhūtapṛthagbhāvam*) as abiding in the One (*ekastham*), and that plurality as spreading out (*vistāram*) from the One alone, he becomes Brahman (*brahma saṃpadyate*).” Śāṅkara identifies this mode of perception as a direct and immediate grasping of “the multiplicity of beings as abiding in the one Self”.¹⁶⁴ The chapter’s second to last verse (v.33) refers to the same mode of perception, albeit this time through the analogy of the sun and its light: “Just as the one sun illumines this entire world, so the Lord of the field illumines the entire field, O Arjuna.” For Śāṅkara, this analogy serves two fundamental purposes, the first of which is to show how, like the sun, the Self is one light (oneness); and the second, how the Self remains unstained by its indwelling presence in all beings (manifold).¹⁶⁵

The Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya

The Brahma Sūtras (c. 500-200 B.C.E.) are a collection of 555 verses (*sūtras*, lit. “threads”) that are divided into four chapters, with each chapter further divided into four sections. Here I focus on passages drawn from the Samanvaya (“Mutual Connection”, Chapter 1) and Avirodha (“Non-Opposition”, Chapter 2).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 460.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 463.

Samanvaya

Topic one of the first section of the Samanvaya chapter begins with the concept of *Brahma-jijñāsā*, or “deliberation on Brahman.”¹⁶⁶ This deliberation or “wish to know” (*jijñāsā*) is said to culminate in the immediate apprehension of Brahman as the object of the greatest wish possible: “that Brahman be realized”.¹⁶⁷ According to Śaṅkara, “the existence of Brahman [oneness] is well known from the fact of Its being the Self of all [manifold].”¹⁶⁸ Despite the fact that, when considered in itself, Brahman is an absolute existence precluding degrees, relations, and qualities, it nevertheless becomes knowable by “assuming some conditioning factor, however tenuous it be”.¹⁶⁹ That is to say, the unconditional Brahman (*nirguṇa Brahman*) enters into the manifold realms of conditionality (*saguṇa Brahman*) without the slightest surrender of its non-dual oneness. As Śaṅkara says in topic six (“The Blissful One”): “Brahman is known in two aspects—one as possessed of the limiting adjunct constituted by the diversities of the universe which is a modification of name and form, and the other devoid of all conditioning factors and opposed to the earlier.”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, while the Self is indeed “unchanging” and “homogenous”, it is still possible to note “a difference in the degrees of Its manifestation of glory and power”—degrees which are themselves

¹⁶⁶ BSB, 9.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 11.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 76.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 62.

“caused by the gradation of the mind by which It becomes conditioned.”¹⁷¹

As Alston remarks,

the Absolute as unmanifest cause is somehow both different and non-different from the same Absolute as manifest effect, namely the world, even as the water of the sea is both different and non-different from the waves and the foam. The logic of this system denies the law of contradiction in its ontological application, the law that a thing cannot both have and not have the same characteristics at the same time.¹⁷²

The awakened or liberated self thus sees with “two eyes”, as it were. The first, principal eye sees the parabrahmanic oneness of existence, as in the Upaniṣadic verse, “Verily, this whole world is Brahman”.¹⁷³ And the second, subordinate eye sees the aparabrahmanic multiplicity of names and forms, not as so many insular “essences”, but as the mutually interpenetrating modes of oneness. Stated more precisely: parabrahmanic oneness is itself the “eye of wisdom” (*jñānacakṣu*) through which aparabrahmanic multiplicity is seen as so many faces of absolute existence (*sat*). Or in the words of the Mundaka Upaniṣad (II.ii.12): “All that is in front is but Brahman, the immortal. Brahman is on the right, as well as on the left. It spreads forth below and above. Brahman, indeed, is this universe.” In this sense, the dynamic interplay of the oneness and

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 63.

¹⁷² SS I:21.

¹⁷³ Chāndogya Upaniṣad, III.xiv.1.

multiplicity of existence may be perceived as a kind of shadow or reflection of the two opposed aspects (*dvirūpa*) of the absolute: “the superior and inferior Brahman”.¹⁷⁴

Śaṅkara returns (in topic ten) to the analogical concept of light, noting that “whatever reveals other things is referred to by the word “light”. Hence Brahman, as consciousness itself (*cit*), can also be referred to by the word Light, “inasmuch as It reveals the whole universe.”¹⁷⁵ For Śaṅkara, then, it is not enough to say that the manifold appears through the light that Brahman shines. Rather, one must go still further and affirm that the manifold “is” nothing other than the shining of that Light which is Brahman.¹⁷⁶ Here Śaṅkara cites again the words of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (II.ii.11): “He shining [oneness], everything shines accordingly [manifold]; by His effulgence [oneness] all this shines diversely [manifold].”

Avirodha

The analogy of light again comes into play in Śaṅkara’s commentary on chapter 2 of the *Sūtra*. In reply to the objection (topic 3) that the Vedas contradict the distinction, universally presupposed by ordinary human consciousness, between cause and effect, as well as between subject (“experiencer”) and object (“experienced”), Śaṅkara answers first by saying that “the effect (universe) has existence only in identity with its material

¹⁷⁴ BSB, 63.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 92.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

cause (Existence-Brahman), so it had its existence in that very way even before creation.”¹⁷⁷ This is a point that will be more explicitly laid out in the following section on manifestation. However, as it pertains to the consideration of non-dual existence, it is necessary to remark here that any attempt to divide manifold relativity from absolute oneness is—metaphysically speaking—impossible, since their relation is that of a total, albeit non-reciprocal, dependence—the former being correlated to the latter as a reflection is correlated to the image that it reflects. In the same way that a reflection is both distinguishable and indistinguishable from its image, so the world is distinguishable and indistinguishable from Brahman. It is distinguishable in that Brahman is “no-thing”, beyond the determinations that define the manifold; and it is indistinguishable in that Brahman is “not-other”, transcending every opposition as the “one without a second” (*ekam eva advitīyam*).

This purely participative vision of reality is further elaborated by Śaṅkara in topic five, where he presents another analogy, that of the sea and its waves. For Śaṅkara, the distinction between the oneness and multiplicity of phenomena obtains on the level of empirical experience.

Thus though foam, ripple, wave, bubble, etc. which are different modifications of the sea, consisting of water, are non-different from the sea, still amongst themselves are perceived actions and reactions in the form of separating or coalescing. And yet the foam, wave, etc., do not lose their individuality in relation

¹⁷⁷ BSB, 316.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

to one another, even though they are modifications of the sea and non-different from it, which is but water. Again, even though they do not lose their individuality in one another, they are never different from the point of view of their being the sea.¹⁷⁸

According to this passage, the individuality (and hence multiplicity) of the waves of the sea applies in their “relation to one another”. But this interrelationality is not grounded elsewhere. The ocean is the root of their “being”, as existence (*sat*) is the root of the world.¹⁷⁹ On the plane of their interrelation, they are distinct—one wave “here”; another wave “there”. But on the plane of pure existence (*sat*), “all things are non-different from the supreme cause, Brahman”.¹⁸⁰

In topic 17 of section 3, Śaṅkara re-invokes the analogy of reflection: “[the] individual soul is a reflection of the supreme Self like the semblance of the sun in water. Not that the soul is the Self Itself, nor is it something else.”¹⁸¹ Just as the reflection of the sun in water neither “is” nor “is not” the sun itself, so the manifold of phenomena neither “is” nor “is not” the absolute oneness (*advayatā*) it manifests. It is significant that the word used here for reflection, *ābhāsa*, can also be translated as “false appearance”. The manifold both reveals and hides the non-dual existence that originates, sustains, and enfolds it. Relative manifestation is not “non-

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 325.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.viii.6.

¹⁸⁰ BSB, 326.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 515.

existent”. Nor does it, strictly speaking, “exist”. Existence alone *is*; Reality alone is *real* (*satyasya satyam*). Everything “else” is but a modification of that pure and unique existence (*sat*), at once wholly other and wholly other-less—the oneness of the manifold.

Having completed the present section on existence, I turn now to an exposition and analysis of the Advaitic concept of manifestation.

Section Two: Manifestation

I begin this section with an outline of the structure of manifestation as conceived by Advaita Vedānta, dealing principally with the interplay of Self (*ātman*) and world (*māyā*), reality (*satya*) and appearance (*mithyā*), oneness (*advayatā*) and the manifold (*bahutayā*). After outlining this structure, I turn to an analysis of several passages lifted from Śaṅkara’s commentaries on the “triple canon”.

Structural Exposition: Manifestation as *Māyā*

As stated at the opening of the previous section, existence (*sat*) is conceived within the Advaita Vedānta tradition as gradational in structure, enfolding a hierarchy of corresponding stages, modalities, and degrees. While no single taxonomy can claim exclusive rights in depicting the structure of this view of reality, it is most commonly depicted by the fourfold division of (1) Absolute Reality (*nirguṇa Brahman*), (2) Reality as a personal and intrinsically creative power (*Īśvara*), (3) Reality as the universal principle

of manifestation (*hiranyagarbha* and *puruṣa*), and (4) Reality as material nature (*prakṛti*).¹⁸² Brahman, as absolute existence-consciousness-bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*), prolongates and diffuses itself, as it were, into the sphere of relativity, such that all phenomena become pure participants in *asti*, “it is”, corresponding to *sat*; *bhāti*, “it shines”, corresponding to *cit*; and *priyam*, “it is blissful”, corresponding to *ānanda*.

These three modes of participation are analogous to the Western idea of the “transcendentals”—so named on account of their “transcending” Aristotle’s ten categories.¹⁸³ Every created thing is possessed of truth (*verum*), goodness (*bonum*), and beauty (*pulchrum*), but only in a strictly dependent and participatory way, the full reality of the transcendentals subsisting in the Divine essence alone. Similarly, existence (*asti*), manifestation (*bhāti*), and delight (*priyam*) are co-extensive with and universal to the whole phenomenal order, being grounded in the Brahmanic essence itself. Yet, for Śāṅkara, there are two other elements (*upādhis*) “beyond” (or rather “beneath”) that of *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda* that must also be noted. These elements, expressed in the singular as “name-and-form” (*nāma-rūpa*), are not, in contrast to the three just mentioned, proper to the “essential nature” (*svarūpa-lakṣana*) of Brahman, but are said to be the products of *māyā* or “illusion”. Accordingly, manifestation is experienced in two opposed ways: (1) as it *is* (*satya*), and (2) as it *appears* (*mithyā*).

¹⁸² Cf. Radhakrishnan, “Introduction”, 65.

¹⁸³ For Aristotle, these categories are: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, condition, action, and affection.

It is necessary to state at the outset that *māyā* is not a purely negative concept. *Māyā* neither posits nor entails the total nihility of phenomena. After all, an illusion, like a reflection (*ābhāsa*), while not ultimately real, is not ultimately unreal either. A mirage of water in the desert has a relative degree of existence in that it has an objective basis, namely, the atmospheric conditions of which it is a product. Correspondingly, all that is born into the phenomenal realm, whether moving or unmoving, animate or inanimate, is the upshot of the “union” of the “field-knower”, and the “field”, oneness and the manifold.¹⁸⁴ For Śaṅkara, this union is not substantial but superimposed (*adhyāsa*). It is a union like that of a rope mistaken for a serpent, or nacre mistaken for silver. The manifold is the child of *māyā*, a creature born of its power (*śakti*)—a power that is, in the last analysis, not-other-than Brahman. Just as water is not wet to itself, so *māyā* is not *māyānic* or illusory to Brahman.¹⁸⁵ Only what is *not* water can experience water as wet; and only those who are captive to what Rāmakrishna calls “the sense of ‘I’”¹⁸⁶ stand under the spell of *māyā*.

This implies that the concept of *māyā* is not only possessed of a negative aspect but a positive one as well. Negatively, *māyā* hides Brahman like a veil hides a face, or fog hides a path. Understood in this way, the world is a dream spun of dreams, all of which deceive us into thinking that

¹⁸⁴ Cf. SBGB, 404.

¹⁸⁵ Mukhyananda, *Sri Shankaracharya*, 56.

¹⁸⁶ See *The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna: Based on M.’s English Text*, Abridged, ed. Swami Abhedananda and Joseph A. Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2011), 19.

they are ultimately real. Again, this accords with the so-called “common-sense” notion of what it means to “exist”. From the perspective of the lower, relative levels of *sat*, we speak of what is “real” indiscriminately. We point and say, for example, that “The stone is real” or that “The tree is real” or that “The river is real”, etc. But *are* they? For the Advaitin, the answer is both yes and no. The stone is the appearance of Brahman *as a stone*. Or to switch back to Śaṅkara’s analogy, what looks to be a serpent (but is actually a rope) cannot be nothing (*asat*) pure and simple, since what “is” nothing has no look to give. The appearance of the serpent is instead a strictly relative and relational borrowing of existence, i.e., a sheer participation in what is “really real”—the one true Reality in relation to which all “else” is shown to be (ultimately) “false”.

Which leads now to the positive aspect of *māyā*. Beyond its magical and illusory connotations, *māyā* is also considered to be the theatre of “sacred play” (*līlā*), the cosmic dance of Brahman. “Divine indeed is this illusion (*māyā*) of mine”.¹⁸⁷ *Māyā* is not only a veil that hides reality. It is also a mirror that reveals it. Whereas the veiling power (*āvaraṇa-śakti*) of *māyā* serves to obscure the truth of existence, its projecting power (*vikṣepa-śakti*) functions something like the heat that spontaneously irradiates from a fire. It is the *saguṇa Brahman* or personal creator-deity who wields the power of *māyā* in this way, at once immanent and transcendent, Esoteric

¹⁸⁷ BG VII.14.

Ruler (*Antaryāmīn*) and Oversoul (*Paramātmān*).¹⁸⁸ “There is nothing in this world which is not lit up by God.”¹⁸⁹

That is why the Upaniṣads can also speak of Brahman as a poet (*kavi*). Just as a poem reveals the heart of its poet, so the world manifest the heart of Brahman.¹⁹⁰ This poetic symbolism is already implied in the etymology of the word Brahman itself, which is derived from *br̥h*, meaning “to grow”, “to burst forth”, or “to bubble over”. For Śāṅkara, as well as for the broader Vedāntic tradition, creation is seen as a development or process of becoming or change, rather than an unprecedented work of bringing something out of nothing.¹⁹¹ *Māyā* is the unmanifest “seed of the world” (*jagad-bīja*), spoken of variously as nature (*prakṛti*), nescience (*avidyā*), slumber (*nidrā*), etc.; the eternally fertile “ground” from which the realms of manifestation blossom and grow.¹⁹² In short, the term *māyā* is indicative of that dynamic process by which the absolute is manifested “under a plurality of finite forms”, the dynamism of which is identified with the concept of nature (*prakṛti*) as comprised of the three constituents (*guṇas*, lit. “threads”): harmony (*sattva*), activity (*rajas*), and chaos (*tamas*).¹⁹³

Therefore, when Śāṅkara identifies the manifold with nescience or advocates for its elimination through *vidyā* or knowledge, it is not the manifold as such that he seeks to eliminate. Relative phenomena are not

¹⁸⁸ Mukhyānanda, Sri Shankaracharya, 65.

¹⁸⁹ Radhakrishnan, “Introduction”, 85.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 86.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 39.

¹⁹² SS I:64.

¹⁹³ SS II:68

invalid *as relative phenomena*. They are only invalid where they are mistaken as ultimately real. Which means that, for Śaṅkara, manifestation is both: (1) *relatively* real (i.e., not absolute) and (2) *relatively real* (i.e., a participation in and through the two-less One). In the words of Klaus Klostermaier,

Śaṅkara does not consider the world a pure illusion, as is sometimes maintained...He only looks at it from the standpoint of absolute being. If *brahman*, which is eternal, self-sufficient, pure consciousness, is the measure of reality, then the phenomenal world, which is evanescent, changing, devoid of consciousness, cannot be called real in the same sense.¹⁹⁴

Textual Analysis: *Prasthānatrayī*

Having briefly outlined the structure of manifestation as understood from the Advaitic perspective, I proceed now with an examination of that same structure as interpreted through Śaṅkara's commentaries on (1) the Aitareya and Muṇḍaka Upaniṣads, (2) the tenth (*Vibhūti-yoga*, "Kṛṣṇa's Manifested Powers") and eleventh (*Viśvarūpa-darśana-yoga*, "The Yoga of the Vision of the Cosmic Form") chapters of the Gitā, and (3) the first chapter of the Brahma Sūtras.

¹⁹⁴ Klaus Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Oneworld, 2015), 129.

The Upaniṣads

Aitareya Upaniṣad

The Aitareya Upaniṣad begins (I.i.1) with an account of the origins of the manifested cosmic order. “In the beginning this [the cosmos] was but the absolute Self alone. There was nothing else whatsoever that winked. It thought, ‘Let Me create the worlds.’” This is a quintessential verse of Advaitic philosophy, in that it explicitly affirms the non-duality of Brahman and creation. Brahman is the pure “no-thingness” (i.e., existential plenitude) in which there is no “nothingness” (i.e., existential privation). As Śaṅkara comments, the *ātman* or “absolute Self” is “by nature eternal, pure, conscious, and free; birthless, undecaying, immortal, deathless, fearless, and without a second.”¹⁹⁵ *Idam* or “this”, referring to the entire order of phenomenal manifestation, *is* Brahman as “diversified through the differences of name, form, and action.”¹⁹⁶

Here Śaṅkara poses an objection: “Has It (*ātman*) ceased to be the same one entity?” Śaṅkara’s answer is worth citing at length:

Though even now that very same single entity endures, still there is some distinction. The distinction is this: The universe in which the differences of name and form were not manifest before creation, which was then one with the Self, and which was denotable by the single word and idea ‘Self’, has now become denotable by many words and concepts as well as by the single word and concept

¹⁹⁵ EU II:19.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

‘Self’, because of its diversification through the multiplicity of names and forms.¹⁹⁷

Śaṅkara elaborates on this point by again invoking the analogy of water and foam.

Foam is denoted by the single word and concept ‘water’, before the manifestation of names and forms distinct from water; but when that foam becomes manifested as (an entity) distinct from water, owing to the difference of name and form, then the very same foam becomes denotable by many words and concepts, viz. foam and water, as well as by only one word and one concept, viz. water. The same is the case here.¹⁹⁸

Śaṅkara goes on to compare the manner in which *ātmān* created—beginning with space (*ākāśa*), moving on to the cosmic egg or golden germ (*hiranyagarbha*), and from that to the formation of all worlds (*lokān*)—to the way an intelligent architect builds a palace according to a preconceived thought or plan. Here Śaṅkara anticipates and rejoins another objection: while it may be logical to say that an architect builds a palace, given that he possesses the materials to do so, yet it seems absurd to say that *ātman* builds anything, much less the entire universe, given that it possesses no materials at all.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 20.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 22.

For Śaṅkara, this objection gets something fundamentally right: *ātman* has nothing with which to build anything—nothing, that is, but itself. The names and forms of existence are identical to Brahman in their unarticulated state, as foam is contained (potentially) in water prior to its becoming manifest in the crashing of waves. Hence there is nothing incongruous or improper in saying that *ātman* “creates the universe by virtue of Its oneness with the materials—viz. name and form (*namā-rupā*)—which are identical with Itself.” The absolute Self as creator (*saguṇa Brahman* or *Īśvara*) is thus, for Śaṅkara, the “supreme magician” (oneness) who “creates Himself as another in the form of the universe” (manifold).²⁰⁰

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad presents creation as a process of unfolding and enfolding, emanation and return. Creation is said to proceed from Brahman as a web is spun from a spider, as herbs sprout from the earth, or as hair is grown from the human body (I.i.7). The purpose of these comparisons is to show how Brahman both has and needs nothing other than itself to create all worlds, just as the spider (*ūrṇanābhi*), “by itself and independently of any other auxiliary...spreads out the threads that are indeed non-different from its own body;” only to then withdraw “those very threads”, “[making] them one with itself”.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ EU II:84-5.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

A similar comparison is drawn in II.i.1, where the imperishable Brahman is likened to a single “fire” from which the manifold of phenomena is thrown off like “sparks”. “As from a blazing fire, sparks of analogous form are thrown by the thousands, even so, O Beautiful one, do manifold beings proceed from the Immutable and return to It as well.” The same principle found throughout the Upaniṣads is here at play: “the basic reality is the One, and the derivative and dependent reality is the many.”²⁰²

That is why the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad can later say (II.i.10) that “Puruṣa alone (*eva*) is all this (*viśvam idam*),” i.e., the entire manifold order. Manifestation has no existence apart from What it manifests, namely, the Self (*ātman*). The manifold is the product of oneness: “...all that is but the product of Brahman.”²⁰³ This suggests a basic non-reciprocity between Brahman and the world, as expressed in II.ii.10: “There the sun does not shine, nor the moon or the stars; nor do the flashes of lightning shine there.” Śaṅkara interprets “there” (*tatra*) as referring to the absolute oneness of Brahman or “the Self of the sun itself.”²⁰⁴ The “sun” of Puruṣa does not shine on its own. Rather, “it is by the light of Brahman that the sun lights up all that is not the Self. This is the idea.” As verse 10 concludes: “Everything [manifold] shines according to this Light [oneness]; by His light [oneness] all this shines diversely [manifold].”

²⁰² Radhakrishnan, “Introduction”, 88.

²⁰³ EU II:121.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 134.

The Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā Bhāṣya

Kṛṣṇa's Manifested Powers

The tenth chapter (X.20) of the Gītā speaks of Brahman as the Self (*ātman*) who abides at the “heart” or “viscera” (*āśaya*) of all beings. He is their beginning (*ādi*), their middle (*madhyam*), and their end (*antaḥ*). As the inner “sense” of all things, Brahman is the Self that is “to be meditated on, always.”²⁰⁵ Every phenomenal encounter is an encounter with the trans-phenomenal Brahman, just as to be splashed with a wave is the same as being splashed by the ocean, or to bask in a ray of light is the same as basking in the sun. Which is why Śāṅkara comments on the following verse (X.21): “Of the luminaries that illumine [manifold], I am the radiant sun [oneness].”²⁰⁶ Or as Radhakrishnan remarks: “The world is a living whole, a vast interconnectedness, a cosmic harmony inspired and sustained by the One Supreme.”²⁰⁷

Several verses later (v.39), toward the conclusion of the chapter, we are told that Brahman, as the causative principle of manifestation, is “the seed of all beings” (*sarvabhūtānām bījam*), and that “there is nothing that could ‘be’ (*syāt*) without existing through Me (*māyā*)”. Here the term *māyā* captures the non-dual understanding of the metaphysics of participation. All things “are” only as the modifications of their meta-ontological principle. In themselves, they are nothing, or as Śāṅkara says, “null and void.”²⁰⁸ This

²⁰⁵ BGB, 334.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgīta*, 311.

²⁰⁸ BGB, 344.

principle is not only the Light of all lights, but also the Unity of all unities and, just so, the Difference of all differences. As Śaṅkara writes,

I am that which is the seed of all beings which causes them to multiply, O Arjuna!...There is nothing moving or unmoving, that exists without Me. What is not uplifted by Me or is abandoned by Me will be without a Self—indeed, null and void. Therefore all [manifold] have Me [oneness] as their Self—this is the idea.²⁰⁹

The Vision of the Cosmic Form

In a remarkable passage in the chapter “The Vision of the Cosmic Form” (XI.13), the Pandavan prince, Arjuna, is led to the vision of the body of Kṛṣṇa, that “God of gods” (*devadevasya*), in whom he sees the entire world established and assembled together (*eka-stham*), but “in variegated and manifold ways” (*anekadhā*). Hence Śaṅkara: “There, in that single being with cosmic form—in the body of Hari [another name for Kṛṣṇa], the God of gods—the Paṇḍava prince Arjuna beheld ‘the entire world, variegated in endless ways’, as gods, manes [spiritual beings], humans, etc.”²¹⁰ On this vision, Radhakrishnan writes,

Arjuna had the vision of the One in the many and the many in the One. All things remain the same and yet all are changed. There is astonishment at the disappearance of the familiar landmarks of the everyday world. Everything is

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 353.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

interfused, each with each and mirrors of the whole. The vision is a revelation of the potential divinity of all earthly life.²¹¹

This vision is echoed in verse 38, where the same “primal Lord” (*ādideva*), “ancient Spirit” (*puruṣaḥ purāṇas*), and “supreme abode of the universe” (*viśvasya param nidhānam*) is said to be capable of limitless manifestation: “O One of infinite forms!” (*anantarūpa*). As Śaṅkara comments: “The entire universe has been pervaded by You...Of your forms there is no end.”²¹² Precisely as infinite (*ananta*) and boundless (*amita*), this Lord pervades all things (*sarvaṁ samāpnoṣi*), and therefore *is* all things (*tato 'si sarvaḥ*), since whatever is in the infinite, is itself the infinite (XI.40).

Here again we are confronted by the two opposed aspects of the absolute. The absolute is the oneness of the many (“no-thing”), and therefore the many-ness of the many as well (not-other). It is the latter in that it is the former, and it is the former in that it is the latter. The two are one. “Since You alone [“no-thing”; oneness] pervade the entire universe,” writes Śaṅkara, “You are ‘the all’. The idea is that there is nothing divorced from You [“not-other”; manifold].”²¹³ This is the recurring proclamation of the chapter, and of the Gītā in its entirety: all things are the One and the One is all things.²¹⁴

²¹¹ Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgita*, 325.

²¹² BGB, 371.

²¹³ Ibid, 373.

²¹⁴ Cf. Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgita*, 337.

The Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya

The Above of Heaven, Earth, Etc.

In the first chapter of his commentary on the Brahma Sūtras (III.1), Śāṅkara identifies the “repository of heaven, earth, etc.” with Brahman.²¹⁵ Reaching for support from the Vedas, Śāṅkara cites the verse of the Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad: “All is Brahman” (II.xiv.1); along with the verse of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad that says: “Know that Self alone that is one without a second” (II.ii.5).²¹⁶ Here Śāṅkara explicitly denies any notion of the Self as a “composite entity,” like a tree composed of “branches, trunk, and roots”.²¹⁷ “The Self is not to be cognized as a heterogeneous thing comprising the manifold created universe.”²¹⁸ How is one to contemplate Brahman if not on the analogy “between a container and the thing contained”?²¹⁹ Śāṅkara answers: “The meaning is that, after eliminating, through knowledge, the universe conjured up by ignorance, you should know that one and homogenous Self alone that appears as the repository.”²²⁰ That is to say, the relation of oneness and the manifold is not that of a whole to its parts, but of reality (*satya*) to its appearance (*mithyā*). Appearance is not-other-than reality, but a pure participation in it. Having no reality of itself, an illusion is reducible to the real.

²¹⁵ BSB, 160.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 161.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 160.

²²⁰ Ibid, 161.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

In this study's introduction, brief mention was made of Viktor Frankl's statement that modern nihilism has taken the form of a reductionist ideology that would turn all phenomena into epiphenomena, what Frankl had called "*nothing-but-ness*." Here it might be asked: is the mystical ontology of Śāṅkara not guilty of doing the very same thing, albeit in the reverse? That is to say, instead of reducing all phenomena to that which is "beneath" them, does Śāṅkara not simply invert the procedure by reducing all phenomena to what is "above" them?

This is a weighty critique, deserving of an equally weighty reply. Given the constraints of this chapter, however, it is only possible to briefly touch on a single point: the critique just noted makes an equivocal use of the word "reduction". That is to say, it equates the "reduction" of the relative to the absolute ($R \rightarrow A$) with the "reduction" of the absolute to the relative ($R \leftarrow A$), and in doing so displays a complete indifference to the direction each pursues. This is a profound mistake, since, here at least, direction is everything. For whereas the reduction of $R \leftarrow A$ results in their mutual destruction, the reduction of $R \rightarrow A$ does not. As understood by Śāṅkara, Brahman is not one thing, albeit absolute, set over against a manifold of relative things. It is "no-thing" and therefore "not-other". For Śāṅkara, multiplicity is eliminated only on the level of ontology, and not on its own relative level of empirical experience. Thus whereas Śāṅkara likens *māyā* to a magician's trick, as neither wholly real nor wholly unreal, he likens Brahman to a "lump of salt", homogenous through and through, having no

“interior or exterior”, and being “purely saline in taste”. To transition to the following section on knowledge: the ontological “flavor” of manifestation is that of Brahman as “entire, pure Intelligence alone”.²²¹

In this section I have offered an exposition and analysis of the Advaitic concept of manifestation. In the section to follow, I turn to the last heading of this chapter: knowledge.

Section Three: Knowledge

Structural Exposition: Knowledge as *Jñāna*

If one were forced to summarize the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta in a single statement, then one could do no better than the following: “from knowledge comes deliverance” (*jñānān mokṣa*). And if knowledge is nothing else than becoming liberated from nescience (*avidyā*), then “liberation is nothing else than the becoming one with Brahman”, as Deussen had said.²²² Which leads to the question: How, exactly, is the Self to be known? “According to Śaṅkara,” writes Alston, “the true nature of the Self must ever remain a mystery for the mind in its thinking capacity, for in this capacity it inhabits the realm of subject-object dualism, which the Self transcends.”²²³ Or in the words of Y. Keshava Menon: “The answer is that if we truly know anything at all, it is the Self...”²²⁴ Because all things “are” only as the manifestations of a single meta-ontological principle or field, to

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Deussen, *System of the Vedanta*, 401.

²²³ SS I:161.

²²⁴ Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shakaracharya*, 40.

know any of them truly is to know them all equally as Brahman; and to know them equally as Brahman is to see with that “eye of wisdom” (*jñānacakṣu*) which, once opened, is its vision. In the Advaitic perspective, ontology and epistemology are not two separate sciences. The latter is a mode or inflection of the former, such that to know what one “is” entails being what one knows. Hence to the perennial question, “Who am I?” the Advaitin answers unfalteringly: “a phenomenon of Brahman.”²²⁵

At the beginning of this chapter I described the aim of Vedānta as the elimination of nescience (*avidyā*) through the knowledge of absolute reality (*parā-vidyā* or *Brahma-vidyā*), i.e., the knowledge of that in the light of which everything else becomes known. This knowledge of the absolute issues in liberation or release (*mokṣa* or *mukṭi*) from the cosmic wheel of *samsāra*—literally, that which flows (*śr*) together (*sam*). This release is, in turn, “only another name for the eternal Self”.²²⁶ Hence it is not action (*karma*) but knowledge (*jñāna*) that leads to deliverance. Why knowledge instead of action? Śaṅkara gives us at least two reasons, the first of which is action’s insufficiency. While Śaṅkara concedes that action is legitimate within its own sphere, and to some degree even necessary in removing the layers of nescience that hide the *jīva* from its true Self (*ātman*), yet he is no less aware of how every action remains beholden to a perspective that is by definition arranged in accordance with the dualisms of subject and object,

²²⁵ Müller, *Six Systems*, 123.

²²⁶ Mahadevan, “Vedantic Meditation and Its Relation to Action”, in *Contemplation and Action in World Religions*, ed. Yusuf Ibish and Ileana Marculescu (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1978), 73.

agent and recipient, path and goal, etc. It is only *jñāna*, and the *mokṣa* it produces, that is able to rise above all dualities through “identity with the Infinite Non-dual Absolute, beyond time, space, and causation, where there is no ‘other’ to limit it...the original state beyond and before the creation of the universe.”²²⁷

The second reason for the primacy of knowledge over action is the essence of liberation itself, which is one of realization and not attainment. In the words of Mahadevan, “Release is not a new acquisition; it is the realization of what eternally is.”²²⁸ Whereas *karma*, *bhakti*, *upsānā*, *yoga*, etc. all move toward a goal that is not yet present, so as to achieve origination, attainment, purification, or modification, *jñāna* seeks that which is unoriginated, unattainable, infinitely pure, and without modification, namely, the eternal state of things. Phrased otherwise: whereas every action is “subject-oriented” (*kartri-tantra*) and depends on its agent, knowledge is “object-oriented” (*vāstu-tantra*) and so depends on nothing but what it knows.²²⁹ This “objective” orientation is of a decidedly unique order, however. Here the object is not construed as “something other than” the subject. The former relates to the latter as reality relates to appearance. Release is entrance into that eternal moment wherein the distinctions between God (*Īśvara*), self (*jīva*), and world (*jagat*), all of which are mutual correlates in the māyānic realm, no longer have relevance.

²²⁷ Mukhyananda, *Sri Shankaracharya*, 80.

²²⁸ Mahadevan, “Vedantic Meditation”, 73.

²²⁹ *Ibid*, 75.

In lifting the veil of illusion, one “attains the already attained” (*prāptasyaprāptih*), the manifold giving way to oneness, as shadows give way to the sun.

Nor should this be taken to imply that knowledge and action are antithetical to each other. The antithesis of knowledge is not action but nescience (*ajñāna*). For Śaṅkara, it is not action *per se* that binds the soul to illusion, but the soul’s attachment to what those actions produce. This is why Śaṅkara lists four necessary qualifications for those who would enter on the path (*mārga*) of knowledge: (1) discrimination between the eternal and the non-eternal, (2) detachment from the fruits of action, both here and hereafter, (3) possession of virtue, and (4) desire for release.²³⁰ Furthermore, the path of knowledge is comprised of three stages: (1) hearing (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*), and contemplation (*nididhyāsana*). These stages or modes of knowledge have for their purpose the annihilation of all that would stand in the way of release. This annihilation is ultimately (and paradoxically) accomplished through the crowning mode (*antya-vṛtti*) of knowledge itself, the technical term of which is *akhaṇḍākāra-vṛtti-jñāna*, the direct intuitive perception of absolute reality, also called *sākṣātkāra*.²³¹ What makes this mode of knowledge so remarkable is its self-annihilatory character. Not only is it the highest mode of knowledge, enfolding every other possible mode of knowledge whatsoever; it is also the *negation* of itself and thus of every lower mode of knowledge as well.

²³⁰ Cf. BSB, 9.

²³¹ Cf. Grimes, *Concise Dictionary*, 24.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Knowledge thus begins at the level of *jīva* or ego-consciousness (K), opens out onto the negation of all knowledge via the direct intuition of the *akhaṇḍa* or impartite Self ($\sim K$), and is at last completely absorbed into non-dual reality (K), the absolute “moment” wherein the shadows of knowledge all vanish in the eternal sun of existence, the manifold rays of which now re-appeared as the many articulations of one Light.

This threefold structure of knowledge is visually portrayed below (Figure 1):

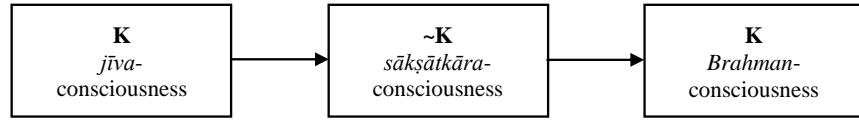


Figure 1. Structure of Knowledge – *Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

Textual Analysis: Prasthānatrayī

In the proceeding subsections I analyze the Advaitic structure of knowledge through several passages drawn from Śaṅkara’s commentaries on (1) the Īśā and Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣads, (2) the second (*Sāṅkhyayoga*, “The Yoga of Distinguishing Soul From Body”) and seventh (*Jñānayoga*, “The Yoga of Knowledge and Realization”) chapters of the *Gītā*, and (3) the fourth chapter of the *Sūtras* (*Phala*, “Result”).

The Upaniṣads

Īśā Upaniṣad

Śaṅkara offers an exemplary account of his doctrine of knowledge in his commentary on verse 18 of the Īśā Upaniṣad. It is part of a longer prayer (vv.15-18), often read at the hour of death and still included in Hindu funeral rites. The verse reads as follows: “O Fire! O God! Lead us along the good path for the enjoyment of the fruits of deeds, you who knows them all. Remove from us all our crooked sins. We offer you many words of salutation.”

The word “fire” (*agni*) is interpreted by Śaṅkara as referring to that knowledge (*vidyā*) which consumes the works of ignorance (*karma*). His commentary is therefore naturally concerned with answering the question of what relationship, if any, obtains between works (*karma*) and knowledge (*vidyā*). When his interlocutor proposes that *vidyā* and *karma* be thought of as cohering within “the same person successively”, Śaṅkara replies,

No. For when *vidyā* (knowledge) arises, *avidyā* (*karma*) vanishes, since in the person in whom there is knowledge, *avidyā* (*karma*) cannot remain. Indeed, it is a fact that when the knowledge, “Fire is hot and effulgent”, has arisen in a person, then in that very person, in whom that knowledge has dawned, cannot arise the ignorance or doubt or error (of the form), “Fire is cold or non-illuminating”.²³²

²³² EU I:31-2.

Here Śaṅkara cites an earlier verse (v.7) of the Īśā, which says that “When to the man of realization all beings have become the Self alone, then what delusion and what sorrow can remain for that seer of oneness?” For Śaṅkara, this verse clearly demonstrates the incompatibility of *karma* and *vidyā* on the level of “the knowledge of the supreme Self” (*akhaṇḍākāra-vṛttijñāna*); while also permitting their combination on lower levels of knowledge, such as hearing, reflection, or contemplation.²³³ Thus the saying of Śaṅkara that “Release is by knowledge alone” (*Jñānāttava mokṣa*).²³⁴

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

Verse 7 of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad speaks of that absolute existence

which is not conscious of the internal world, nor conscious of the external world, nor conscious of both the worlds, nor a mass of consciousness, nor conscious, nor unconscious; which is unseen, beyond empirical dealings, beyond the grasp (of the organs of action), uninferable, unthinkable, indescribable; whose valid proof consists in the single belief in the Self; in which all phenomena cease; and which is unchanging, auspicious, and non-dual. That is the Self, and That is to be known.

But how can one know what is, in essence, unknowable? From the Advaitic perspective, existence and knowledge form a seamless whole, such that one can only know what one is by being what one knows. Therefore to know Brahman, one must *be* Brahman. There are no other means available for

²³³ Ibid, 32.

²³⁴ See Mukhyananda, *Sri Sankaracharya*, 80.

such a realization than that of learned ignorance or unknowing knowledge, i.e., a knowledge that simultaneously negates and transcends itself, along with every lower mode of knowledge: “It is unknown to those who know, and known to those who do not know.”

For Śaṅkara, the lower modes of knowledge function to remove “the unwanted darkness” that has enveloped the mind and obstructed the vision of its true Self. To illustrate: the space that lies hidden within the dark contours of a jar of clay is not-other-than the space that lies beyond it. All that separates it from the space beyond are the limits that have been superimposed on it “from without”, as it were. These limits are foreign and unreal. The space within the jar is in fact no less expansive, transparent, or receptive to light than is the space outside. What is needed to bring this truth to realization? The jar must be broken. Its non-dual unity with the whole of space must be realized. Knowledge—understood in the technical sense of *akhaṇḍākāra-vṛtti-jñāna*—is the jar that breaks itself.

The Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā Bhāṣya

The Sāṅkhya Yoga

In the Sāṅkhya Yoga chapter (II.68), it is asserted: “Therefore, O Arjuna, the wisdom (*prajñā*) of him whose senses are withdrawn from the objects of the senses; that wisdom stands firm” (II.68). The next verse (v.69) refers to “the sage who sees”—identical to the person of wisdom mentioned in the

previous verse—for whom what other creatures call night is day, and what other creatures call day is night. Śāṅkara explains:

The supreme Truth, the sphere of the sage of stable wisdom, is night for the rest of the world. At night things cannot be distinguished because of darkness. Just as what is day to nocturnal creatures is night for others, so the supreme Truth is, as it were, ‘night’ for all ignorant beings who correspond to these nocturnal creatures...Into that (day of) ultimate Truth, the ascetic sage, the Yogin who has mastered his senses, wakes up from the sleep of nescience. Sunk in the sleep of nescience, marked by the plurality of subjects and objects, the rest of the world is said to be awake like dreamers in their sleep. But this is night for the sage who has grasped the ultimate Truth.²³⁵

Prior to what Śāṅkara calls “the dawn of knowledge”, the self is asleep. Upon rising with the sun of *jñāna*, however, everything is seen in a “new” light—which is in reality the eternal light that shows them. Such knowledge opens out onto the state of release (*mokṣa*) in which “it is no longer possible to discuss the distinctions between the means of knowledge and their objects.”²³⁶ As Śāṅkara says elsewhere, in his treatise *Upadeśa Sāhasrī* (X.13), the sage or “man of realization” is the “one who, though perceiving the world of duality in the waking state, does not, like the man in deep sleep, perceive it owing to duality being negated, and who is (really) actionless even when (apparently) acting...” Similarly, in his commentary on the

²³⁵ SBGB, 87.

²³⁶ Ibid, 88.

Māṇḍukya Karika of Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara quotes his master's statement that "duality is a modification of non-duality."²³⁷ What this means, for Śaṅkara, is that "non-dual reality undergoes modification through illusion (*māyā*)...like the moon appearing as many to the one afflicted with the disease called timira, or like the misperceived rope appearing as a snake or a trickle of water."²³⁸

This returns us to the idea of the sage as one who sees with "two eyes": with the first, parabrahmanic oneness; and with the second, the aparabrahmanic manifold. It is crucial to emphasize that, for Śaṅkara, to simultaneously "see" and "not-see" the manifold does not entail pretending as if the world had no empirical reality (which Śaṅkara never denies), but rather the condition of being awake to the fact that the world has no *metaphysical* reality of its own.²³⁹

The Yoga of Knowledge and Realization

Chapter VII of the Gītā opens with the declaration of Viṣṇu to Arjuna, "The Blessed Lord spoke: With mind absorbed in Me, Arjuna...You shall know Me completely." The following verse goes on to identify this absorptive moment of realization with what, as the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (I.i.3) also says, "having been known (*jñātvā*), nothing further remains to be known (*jñātavāyam*) here in the world." True knowledge moves from the lower

²³⁷ As quoted in Alston, SS II:231.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 59.

(*aparā*) to the supreme nature of Brahman (v.5), in which the entire universe has its origin (*prabhava*) and dissolution (*pralaya*), and upon which the manifold “is strung like pearls on a thread” (v.7).

The three constituents (*guṇas*) of *māyā* also proceed from Brahman, the latter being a modification of non-duality. The inverse, however, does not hold: “I am not in them; they are in Me” (v.12). It is surely a testimony to the allure of sensory objects that one can so easily get lost in them, even to the point of supposing that they are all that exists, that they are absolute in themselves. The magician’s trick is lovely to behold, betraying what can only be described as a “hypnotic power (*māyā*).”²⁴⁰ What therefore distinguishes the sage from others is his imperviousness to the flux and flow of the world, an imperviousness born of the knowledge (*jñāna*) that leads to release (*mokṣa*) and, finally, to the direct intuitive perception of the non-dual absolute (*akhaṇḍākāra-vṛtti-jñāna*). “Only those who resort to Me transcend this illusion” (v.14). And those who transcend the world in this way, through knowledge, become Brahman: “the knower is the very Self—not different from Me.”²⁴¹

The Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya

Phala

Sections 3 and 4 of the final chapter of Śaṅkara’s *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* are centered on a discussion surrounding the results of knowledge (*jñāna*). For

²⁴⁰ As quoted in Alston, SS VI:229.

²⁴¹ SBGB, 264.

Śāṅkara, the “object” of knowledge, viz., Brahman, “can never become a goal to be achieved”, since “one cannot reach where one already is.”²⁴² In the world of empirical dealings, it is a well-known law “that one thing is reached by something else.” In the realm of pure oneness, however, no such rule applies. As has been stated repeatedly throughout the present chapter, Brahman is, according to the Advaitic understanding, “no-thing” and therefore “not-other”. The absolute is not a “point *A*” in relation to a “point *B*”. It is without relations altogether. Relations imply the mutual thingness (and thus the mutual otherness) of that which is related, as one point (*A*) relates to another (*B*). Through knowledge, however, identity with Brahman is realized, such that the many *jīvas* are merged into the one *ātman*, as many waves are merged into one sea. Every verse of the scriptures concerning the manifold is, Śāṅkara maintains, there for the sole reason of imparting this “knowledge of oneness,” i.e., the knowledge which does not acquire a new state of affairs, or travel from one point to another, but unveils the eternal truth of existence: “Being but Brahman, he is merged in Brahman”.²⁴³

This recalls the threefold structure of knowledge as outlined above. In the first stage of knowledge (*K* or *jīva*-consciousness), one sees the relative as^1 absolute—with as^1 meaning the reduction of the latter to the former ($R \leftarrow A$). In the second stage of knowledge ($\sim K$ or *sākṣātkāra*-consciousness), one sees, via an immediate intuitive perception, the absolute as^2 absolute—with as^2 here denoting the pure identity of the latter

²⁴² BSB, 884.

²⁴³ Ibid, 886.

with the former ($R=A$). In the third and final stage of knowledge (K or *Brahman*-consciousness), one returns, as it were, from oneness to the manifold, to see again the relative as^3 absolute—but with the as^3 now corresponding to the reduction of the former to the latter ($R\rightarrow A$), having been utterly negated and surpassed, such that the whole phenomenal world has become for the “seer of oneness” nothing more than the manifold articulations of the one Brahman. Through this self-annihilatory knowledge, the manifold is therefore both “seen” (to the extent that it possesses empirical reality) and “unseen” (to the extent that it has no ontological reality of its own). The universe is rendered metaphysically transparent, with the result that “the world of phenomena is grasped as *Brahman*”,²⁴⁴ and the manifold as^3 oneness.

To summarize, Śāṅkara’s commentaries on the Upaniṣads, the Gītā, and the Sūtras set forth a theory of knowledge (*jñāna*) that is inseparable from ontology and the overarching mystico-speculative doctrine of existence as simultaneously one and manifold.

3. Concluding Summary

Having completed my analysis of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge, I close this chapter with a few remarks meant not only to recap what has been said up to this point, but to prepare the way for the chapters that follow.

²⁴⁴ Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 57.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

As discussed in this study’s introduction, my intention is to develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory through which to compare mystical ontologies East and West. To accomplish this aim I have sought to analytically survey and systematically organize a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the mystico-speculative notion of reality as simultaneously one and manifold. This overarching concept is designated by the Advaitic school as *advayatā* (“oneness”). The network of interrelated concepts that *advayatā* coordinates and structures are: existence (*sat*), manifestation (*māyā*), and knowledge (*jñāna*). This structural framework may be visually represented as follows:

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayatā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>

Table 3. *Corresponding Concepts – Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

By way of summary: for Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, existence forms an infinitely seamless unity (*advayatā*), the “one without a second” (*ekam eva advitīyam*). Nothing “relates” to the infinite in that nothing is different from the infinite. The absolute is nothing but itself. As such, it is both “no-thing” (beyond all determinations) and “not-other” (in excess to all oppositions). Existence (*sat*) is therefore conceived as metaphysically primary or principal, such that, strictly speaking, it is not the flower or the sun or the

river that “exists”, but existence that “flowers”, “suns”, or “rivers”—“here” in one way and “there” in another.

Manifestation is *māyā* or “illusion”. This māyānic realm of manifestation is, from the Advaitic perspective, “called forth, like the mirage in a desert,” having “its reality in Brahman alone.”²⁴⁵

Liberation or release from this “illusion” is possible only through that knowledge (*jñāna*) which is capable of negating, not only every lower form of knowledge, but even itself, so as to realize the great Upaniṣadic pronouncement: “Thou art that” (*tat tvam asi*). In doing so, the manifold is not destroyed but perfected, in that, just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the diversified modes of a single sun, so are all things but the “manifestations of the one real principle, Being”²⁴⁶—the oneness of the manifold.

This Advaitic understanding of existence as simultaneously one and many is nowhere better encapsulated than in the famous statement ascribed to Śaṅkara, cited here in full:

The universe is a continuous series of intuitions of Brahman (*Brahma-pratyayasantair jagat*); hence it is, from start to finish, nothing but Brahman. Behold this with an illumined eye and a still mind, under every circumstance. Is

²⁴⁵ Müller, *Six Systems*, xv.

²⁴⁶ SS I:6.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

he who has eyes ever found to behold anything else around him but forms?

Likewise, what is there to meet the intellect of him who is awake but Brahman?²⁴⁷

Having concluded the present chapter on Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, I turn now to an exposition and analysis of philosophical Daoism.

²⁴⁷ *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, §521.

CHAPTER 2

Philosophical Daoism

The present chapter consists of the following three parts: (1) a short introduction to philosophical Daoism; (2) its exposition and analysis under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge; and (3) a concluding summary of key concepts.

1. Introduction

This introduction prepares the way for an exposition and analysis of the mystico-speculative doctrine of existence as espoused by philosophical or classical Daoism (*dao*) through (1) a brief sketch of the term *dao*, (2) a few prefatory remarks on Daoist thought, and (3) a basic summary of the method and outline of the present chapter.

Dao

Philosophical Daoism derives its name from the Chinese *dao*, a word that can (and has) been translated in seemingly endless ways, from “path”, “way”, “mode”, or “course” to “reality”, “principle”, “the absolute”, or “the one”. While none of these translations are without some validity and each has its own distinct set of advantages and disadvantages, yet for reasons that will become clearer as this chapter unfolds, *dao* is a word that is ultimately untranslatable—not only into English, but into any language at all: “The *dao* that can be told is not the Eternal *Dao*...”

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Be that as it may, as a matter of strict dictionary definition, the word *dao* means a “way that leads somewhere, road, route, pathway, passage.”²⁴⁸ Considered ideographically, *dao* is composed of two radicals: head and feet—with the head denoting an intelligent, originating principle, and the feet denoting a dynamic movement forward. Taken together, several images suggest themselves: a pupil being led by his master; the whole human being (literally head-to-toe) living in unison with the manifold order of nature; the primacy of intuitive wisdom over mere discursive knowledge or mental power; etc.²⁴⁹ Far from uniform or stationary, the term *dao* is thus semantically plastic, shifting its meaning in accordance with whatever level of reality it addresses.²⁵⁰ In its specifically metaphysical use, however, *dao* functions as an “image suggesting how things exist, fundamental reality, a constant Way in which the diverse ways of living and relating are essentially balanced and whole.”²⁵¹ More than just “the Way”, then, the *dao* is also “the Way of the way”. Entirely beyond all phenomena (“no-thing”), it is not different from any of them (“not-other”). Perfectly transcendent, it is perfectly immanent. Like the Brahman of the Upaniṣads, the *dao* is simultaneously the path and the passage, the manifested and the manifestation, the unifying substratum of the “ten thousand things” (*wan*

²⁴⁸ See Paul W. Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 79.

²⁴⁹ Jean C. Cooper, *Taoism: The Way of the Mystic* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1990), 12.

²⁵⁰ Huston Smith captures this “plasticity” in his threefold summary of the *dao* as (1) “the way of ultimate reality”, (2) “the way of the universe”, and (3) “the way of human life.” See *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 198-199.

²⁵¹ Kroll, *Student's Dictionary*, 79.

wu) and the principle of their ceaselessly proliferative and evolutive processes²⁵²—the oneness of the manifold.²⁵³

Philosophical Daoism

The two primary texts of philosophical Daoism are the *Daodejing* (“Of the Way and Its Power”; c. 4th century B.C.E.) and the *Zhuangzi* (4th-2nd centuries B.C.E.). Laozi (6th/4th century B.C.E.), a likely legendary figure whose name means “Old Master”, is said to have written the former work, while Zhuangzi, c. 369 – c. 286 B.C.E., a mystico-speculative philosopher who lived during the intellectual “Golden Age” of Chinese civilization,²⁵⁴ is said to have written, either in whole or in part, the latter work that bears his name. It is Zhuangzi who will serve as the principal representative of philosophical Daoism in this chapter. But first, in order to better contextualize the core principles and development of Daoist thought—and, by extension, the thought of Zhuangzi—a few words must be said about what was undoubtedly its “main source of inspiration”,²⁵⁵ namely, the *Yijing* or “Book of Changes” (10th-4th centuries B.C.E.).

According to the *Yijing*, the whole of existence is produced through the continual interpenetration of two principles, the first of which is the

²⁵² Cf. Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea* (Danville: Benjamin Press, 2019), 58.

²⁵³ Cf. Radhakrishnan, *India and China* (Bombay: Hind Kitabs Limited, 1947), 89-90.

²⁵⁴ This period, extending all the way from the sixth to the third centuries B.C.E., is commonly known as the “The Hundred Schools of Thought” or “Hundred Schools Contend” (*baijia zhengming*).

²⁵⁵ Carl G. Jung, “Foreword”, in *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), xxxv.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

“Creative” or *Qian*, symbolized by a hexagram of six unbroken lines (☰), and corresponding to the primordial, originating force of *yang*. The second principle is the “Receptive” or *Kun*, inversely symbolized by a hexagram of six broken lines (☷), and corresponding to “the dark, yielding, receptive primal power of *yin*.”²⁵⁶ The complex symbolic structure of the *Yijing* is made up of sixty-four hexagrams in total, each of which is a particular mathematical combination of the *yin* (— —) and *yang* (——) symbols. The idea communicated through these “imageless images” is that the manifold of existent things has arisen from a unifying principle or field, “the Great Ultimate” (*taiji*). Originally in the state of “a vast undifferentiated reservoir” (*wuji*), this singular field “began to fracture, shift, eddy, and gather into discrete layers or zones, differing in clarity, purity, density, movement, and the like.”²⁵⁷ From these multi-stratified regions of the “ultimate” were born various types, patterns, images, and shapes (*xiang*), unfolding further into forms more distinct and stabilized (*xing*), and precipitating finally in the individuation of concrete phenomena (*qi*). The ontology of the *Yijing* is therefore rooted in the meta-ontological principle of oneness, such that the manifold oppositions of the world are interpreted not as mutually eliminating forces, but “as different aspects of the whole.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Richard Wilhelm, *I Ching*, 10.

²⁵⁷ Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

²⁵⁸ Jean C. Cooper, *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1981), 59.

It is this “one-is-all and all-is-one philosophy”—which Wing-tsit Chan referred to as the “common heritage of all Chinese philosophical systems”,²⁵⁹ and what Hans-Georg Moeller has more recently designated as “the fundamental pattern” and “grammar of ancient Chinese philosophical semantics”²⁶⁰—that the Daoist sages would assume and develop. The key philosophical concept of Daoist thought is that of “supreme oneness” (*taiyi*),²⁶¹ i.e., the concept of “a metaphysical first principle that embraces and underlies all being, a vast Oneness that precedes and in some mysterious manner generates the endlessly diverse forms of the world.”²⁶² As in the Advaitic concept of *advayatā*, the Daoist *taiyi* is at once “no-thing” (*wu-wu*), beyond all determinations, and “not-other” (*wuyi*), in excess to all oppositions. Though in itself amorphous (*hun*), changeless (*bugai*), and complete (*cheng*), the *dao* is also the dynamic potency which pervades the whole of nature, “the mother of all things under heaven” (*tianxia mu*).²⁶³ The *dao* is therefore, as Arthur Waley had said, “not only a means, a doctrine, a principle. It is the ultimate reality in which all attributes are united...the unity underlying plurality.”²⁶⁴

²⁵⁹ Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 320.

²⁶⁰ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 34.

²⁶¹ Yu-Lan Fung (pinyin: Youlan Feng), *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. E.R. Hughes (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1947; hereafter cited as SCP), 63.

²⁶² Burton Watson, “Introduction”, in *Tao Te Ching Lao Tzu*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Boulder: Shambhala, 2007), xxvii.

²⁶³ Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the *Daodejing* are taken from Arthur Waley’s English translation, *The Way and its Power: Lao Tzu’s Tao Tē Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 1958). Hereafter cited as WP, followed by the chapter (e.g., XXV) and page number (e.g., 174).

²⁶⁴ Arthur Waley, “Introduction”, in WP, 50.

For the Daoists, the dialectic of being (*you*) and non-being (*wu*) is therefore penultimate. Both are surpassed and enfolded by the non-dual embrace of “supreme oneness” (*taiyi*). While it is true that from one perspective the entire Daoist conception of reality could be said to form a vast ontological circle in which “what is” and “what is not” are regarded as mutually manifesting and co-originating principles, each giving birth to the other through the other, yet from another perspective this ontological circularity does not discount or foreclose an internal scale of ordered relations.²⁶⁵ As the *Daodejing* declares, the manifold of phenomena are born of being (*you*), and being is, in turn, born of non-being (*wu*),²⁶⁶ i.e., the plenitudinous void in whose subtle matrix the manifold of phenomena are eternally latent.

It was for these reasons, among others, that the sages preferred to speak of the *dao* in terms of “emptiness” or “no-thingness” (*xu*).²⁶⁷ “Emptiness...[is] the root of the ten thousand things.”²⁶⁸ “He who fixes his eyes on nothingness—he is the true friend of Heaven and earth.”²⁶⁹ This unrestricted “emptiness” is not purely negative, however. It is trans-dialectical, representing a “middle way” that, more than steering an irenic course “between” dualities, rises infinitely “beyond” them both, as in the

²⁶⁵ This is true of all the circles of life, e.g., the internal ordering of the seasons. Cf. CW:101.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, chapter 40.

²⁶⁷ Chan, *Source Book*, 142.

²⁶⁸ *Zhuangzi*, chapter 13. This is the translation of Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 98. Hereafter I cite this work as CWZ, followed by chapter number (e.g., XIII) and page number (e.g., 98).

²⁶⁹ CWZ, XI, 82.

Advaitic phrase: *neti, neti*. The “void” of supreme oneness does not “exist”; nor does it “not exist”. Rather, the yawning gulf of the absolute is, as Zhuangzi had put it, “non-non-non-existent” (*wu-wu-wu*), beyond all negations and affirmations, speech and silence: “...neither words nor silence is worthy of expressing it. Not to talk, not to be silent—this is the highest form of discourse.”²⁷⁰

Reduced to its most simple essence, philosophical Daoism may be summarized as the mystico-speculative effort to formulate a peculiar “metaphysical experience of Being in which the existence of all things in the so-called empirical world is actually experienced as an ontological process of their emerging out of the primordial Nothing, and establishing themselves gradually in the domain of phenomenal multiplicity.”²⁷¹

Method and Outline

In what follows I explore Daoist ontology under the three interrelated headings of existence (Section One), manifestation (Section Two), and knowledge (Section Three), with each of these headings comprised of a structural exposition and textual analysis. Whereas the previous chapter was focused on the tradition of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism and the commentaries of Śāṅkara, the present chapter will be focused on

²⁷⁰ Ibid, XXV, 226.

²⁷¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, “Between Image and No-Image”, in *Eranos Lectures 7: On Images, Far Eastern Ways of Thinking* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1988), 7.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

philosophical Daoism as represented by Zhuangzi and the classic work that bears his name.

My more general intention, once again, is to develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory through which to compare mystical ontologies East and West, analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the overarching idea of the oneness of the manifold. In the previous chapter's examination of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, the following inventory was noted:

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayatā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>

Table 3. *Corresponding Concepts – Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

The present chapter expands this inventory by identifying a set of corresponding concepts drawn from philosophical Daoism, as represented below in bold (Table 4).

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayatā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>míng</i>

Table 4. *Corresponding Concepts – Philosophical Daoism*

Having completed this introduction, I turn now to the exposition and analysis of philosophical Daoism under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge.

2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis

Section One: Existence

As noted above, the key concept of philosophical Daoism is that of “ultimate unity” or “supreme oneness” (*taiyi*). Akin to the Advaitic concept of *advayatā*, this “oneness” is not mathematical but metaphysical in meaning. Here “one” is not a number or a thing to be counted. In the words of Feng, the term *tai* or “supreme” is indicative of transcendence, as conveyed by various Chinese titles such as *taishang huang* (“the emperor’s emperor”) or *lao tai ye* (“the master’s master”). As such, *taiyi* does not simply mean “one”, but the Oneness of the one and the Unity of unities.²⁷² The concept of “supreme oneness” is therefore identical to the *dao* as viewed in the light of its absoluteness. “The Dao is that from which oneness came to be...Since it did that, it is the supreme oneness”.²⁷³

Along with Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, Daoist thought interprets existence as possessed of two opposed aspects or *dvirūpa*. Exceeding every limit, the *dao* is “no-thing”. Transcending every opposition, it is “not-other”. Though in itself an undifferentiated mass or “Uncarved Block” (*pu*,

²⁷² SCP, 63.

²⁷³ Ibid.

lit. “simplicity”),²⁷⁴ the *dao* is nevertheless spontaneously diffusive, “the mother that rears the ten thousand things” (*wan wu zhi mu*).²⁷⁵ Not unlike the vision of Śāṅkara, philosophical Daoism views existence as a harmonic manifold of corresponding stages, modalities, and degrees.

The following subsection provides a brief overview of this gradational structure of existence as conceived by philosophical Daoism.

Structural Exposition: Existence as *Dao*

Following Laozi and the *Daodejing*, Zhuangzi delineates four basic stages of the *dao*. All four of these stages are contained within the terse formula: *wu-wu-wu*, translatable as “non-non-non-existence” or “no non-being.”²⁷⁶ Proceeding backwards from the lowest to the highest of the four levels, we have (4) existence (*you*), (3) non-existence (*wu*), (2) not-non-existence (*wu-wu*), and (1) not-not-non-existence (*wu-wu-wu*). Stage four (*you*) corresponds to the manifested power (*de*) of the *dao* in its spontaneous production (*sheng*) of external phenomena. Stage three (*wu*) corresponds to the mystery (*xuan*) of the *dao* as fecund with inner, though as yet hidden, modes or articulations. Stage two (*wu-wu*) corresponds to the unconditioned aspect of the *dao* as the mystery of mysteries (*xuan zhi you xuan*) or negatively qualified oneness, in which there are no inner

²⁷⁴ WP, XXXII, 183.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, I, 141.

²⁷⁶ *Zhuangzi*, ch. 2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the first seven or “interior” chapters of the *Zhuangzi* are taken from Fung Yu-lan’s English translation, *Chuang Tzu: A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1995). Hereafter I cite this work as CT, followed by chapter number (e.g., II) and page number (e.g., 48).

articulations at all. Finally, the first and highest stage (*wu-wu-wu*) corresponds to the pure ineffability of the absolute as beyond even the negative condition of being unconditioned.

In its sheer absoluteness, the *dao* is beyond all words and concepts, as the opening lines of the *Daodejing* read: “The Way that can be told is not an Unvarying Way (*chang dao*); The names that can be named are not unvarying names (*chang ming*).”²⁷⁷ The absolute *dao* is ineffable, formless, unqualified, and without relation. It does not “exist”. It *is*—purely and simply. Which is why the *Zhuangzi* goes to such lengths in denying that the name “dao” in any way comprehends the reality it purports to signify. The fragile semantic thread that links conceptual language to the absolute is, in the last analysis, severed by the sharp edge of their total incommensurability. Predications serve what the human mind requires; they do not capture what the absolute oneness of existence “is”. Concepts are the inventions of human necessity, and thus, like the very linguistic systems they are derived from, merely conventional and provisional in their function. As A.C. Graham once put it, “We cannot name the undifferentiated, since names all serve to distinguish, and even to call it ‘Way’ reduces it to the path which it reveals to us. However, since that path is what one seeks in it, the ‘Way’ is the most apposite makeshift term for it.”²⁷⁸ Or in the words of Zhuangzi, “If the Way is made clear, it is not the

²⁷⁷ WP, I, 141.

²⁷⁸ A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzū: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 21.

Way. If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice.”²⁷⁹ Or again: “The Way cannot be thought of as being, nor can it be thought of as non-being. In calling it the Way, we are only adopting a temporary expedient.”²⁸⁰ From this standpoint, the *dao* is a pure, undifferentiated, and unreifiable reality in which even a division as fundamental as that between existence and non-existence coalesces into a *coincidentia oppositorum*: “The two are the same”.²⁸¹

The *dao* is thus conceived along the lines of an ontological void or gulf, the “emptiness” (*xu*) of which is ultimately—and paradoxically—convertible with the swarming profusion of life. To borrow one of Feng’s illustrations: the principle of “squareness” is at once “no-square” and “not-other-than-all-squares”.²⁸² Embracing all, it is embraced by none. The principle of “thingness” is likewise at once “no-thing” and “not-other-than-all-things”, i.e., the indeterminate womb or chaos (*hundun*) from which all determinate phenomena are born. As immanent, it is the “All-Suffusive” (*fan*); as transcendent, the impenetrable mystery of the world (*miao*).

Here we arrive at the key distinction between the *dao* or “Way” and its *de* or “Manifested Power”—a distinction that resembles the one drawn by Śaṅkara between the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* Brahman. The *dao* and its *de*, like Brahman “without attributes” (*nirupādhika*) and Brahman “with

²⁷⁹ CWZ, II, 13.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, XXV, 226.

²⁸¹ *Daodejing*, ch. 1. This is the translation of Wing-tsit Chan, *The Way of Lao Tzu* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1963), 97.

²⁸² Cf. SCP, 46.

attributes” (*sopādhika*), are not two different realities, one “superior” and the other “inferior”, one “higher” and the other “lower”. Nor does this distinction suggest a metamorphosis of one into the other, as if the absolute unity of the *dao* could, by “entering” into the realm of manifestation, be fractured and dissolved in the multitude. Both terms (*dao* and *de*) point to one and the same reality: the *dao* that is at once absolutely “no-thing” and infinitely “not-other”, containing all phenomena and moving among them simultaneously, without forfeiting its uniqueness or constancy in the process. Indeed, it is by means of its total difference from the world (as “squareness” is “wholly other” than a square) that the *dao* is non-different from the world it manifests. All things “are” only as the manifold determinations of the one indeterminate *dao*. In the words of Zhuangzi: “Comprehending Heaven and earth: that is the Way [*dao*]. Moving among the ten thousand things: that is its Power [*de*].”²⁸³ Or as another influential Daoist text, *The Book of Liezi*, makes the contrast:

Hence there are the begotten and the Begetter of the begotten, shapes and the Shaper of shapes, sounds and the Sounder of sounds, colours and the Colourer of colours, flavours and the Flavourer of flavours. What begetting begets dies, but the Begetter of the begotten never ends. What shaping shapes is real, but the Shaper of shapes has never existed. What sounding sounds is heard, but the Sounder of sounds has never issued forth. What colouring colours is visible, but the Colourer of colours never appears. What flavouring flavours is tasted, but the

²⁸³ CWZ, XII, 84.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Flavourer of flavours is never disclosed. All are the offices of That Which Does Nothing.²⁸⁴

This echoes Śaṅkara's discussion of Brahman as "the Eye of the eye" (*cakṣuṣaḥ cakṣuḥ*), "the Ear of the ear" (*śrotrasya śrotram*), etc.²⁸⁵ Just as Brahman, conceived as absolute *sat*, is not one more eye among others, but the very ground and possibility of there being any eyes at all, so also the *dao*, conceived as "supreme oneness" (*taiyi*), is not another shape among shapes or sound among sounds. It is the absolute "no-thingness" that is infinitely "not-other", the existentiating act of every existent, the mystery of all mysteries (*xuan zhi you xuan*), and the "gateway to myriad wonders" (*zhong miao zhi men*).²⁸⁶

Textual Analysis: The *Zhuangzi*

In this subsection I analyze the mystico-speculative concept of existence as espoused by philosophical Daoism through select passages drawn from the *Zhuangzi*. Before doing that, however, it is necessary to make a few comments on the historical and philosophical background of this remarkable text, so as to better grasp its meaning.

Unlike the figure of Laozi, whose person seems to be the product of legend, the figure of Zhuangzi, however scant our knowledge may be of

²⁸⁴ *The Book of Lieh-tzū: A Classic of Tao*, trans. A.C. Graham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 20.

²⁸⁵ EU I:46-7.

²⁸⁶ *Daodejing*, ch. 1.

him, almost certainly enjoys an historical basis. It is generally agreed that Zhuangzi lived during the fourth century B.C.E., a contemporary of the great Confucian philosopher, Mencius (c. 372 - c. 279 B.C.E.). The “grand historian of China”, Sima Qian (145 - c. 90 B.C.E.), in his landmark *Shiji* (“The Book of History”), identifies Zhuangzi’s birthplace as Meng, located in the ancient state of Song during the Zhou dynasty. This fact is important for several reasons. It was the place where, as Izutsu remarks, “the ancient Yin people were allowed to live after having been conquered by the Zhou people.”²⁸⁷ The distinction between these two peoples is encapsulated in an early Chinese dictum, “Yin worships spirit while Zhou places the highest value on human culture.”²⁸⁸ Whereas the Yin culture was essentially shamanic and mythopoeic in its orientation, the Zhou culture exhibited a “humanistic” attitude more congenial to the influence of the Dialecticians, such as the Song native, Hui Shih (370-310 B.C.E.). It was this combination, writes Feng, that allowed Zhuangzi “to put his soaring thoughts into order, and formulate a unified philosophical system.”²⁸⁹

Understood in this light, it becomes possible to assert that philosophical Daoism does not merely betray a metaphysical “streak” every now and then, or disclose an inward, mystical tendency on occasion. It is both: a pure metaphysics and a pure mysticism.²⁹⁰ This gets to what Izutsu

²⁸⁷ S&T, 294.

²⁸⁸ As quoted by Izutsu, *ibid.*

²⁸⁹ Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2 vols., trans. D. Bodde (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952-53; hereafter cited as HCP), I:222.

²⁹⁰ Cooper, *Taoism*, 11. See also Fung Yu-lan, *On the Methodology of Metaphysics: Selected Essays on East-West Philosophical Traditions* (San Francisco: Long

identified as the “shamanic mode of thinking” that pervades “the long history of Chinese thought”,²⁹¹ and which can arguably be said to culminate in the pages of the *Zhuangzi*.

But this only begs the question: what is a “shaman”? Contrary to prevalent misconceptions, “shamanism” is not a naïve or “primitive” form of what modern physicians and psychiatric professionals are now able to do more efficiently and with less superstition. The shaman was all: a “doctor”, a “seer”, and a “magician”, as well as a “poet”, a “priest”, and even a “king”. Eliade defines the shaman primarily as a technician of ecstasy²⁹² whose entranced visions were not thought to be derived from this world, but were seen as the gifts of an ecstatic encounter with the inner structure of existence itself.²⁹³ Laozi refers to this shamanic figure as the “sacred man” (*sheng ren*), and Zhuangzi as the “true man” (*zhen ren*), the “supreme man” (*zhi ren*), or the “super-human man” (*shen ren*). Moreover, according to what is the oldest etymological dictionary of the Chinese tradition, the *Shuowen Jiezi* (“Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters”; early second century C.E.), the term *sheng* “designates a man whose orifices of the ears are extraordinarily receptive.”²⁹⁴ That is to say, the shaman is one “endowed with an unusually keen ear, who is capable of hearing the voice of a super-

River Press, 2013), 15. Here Yu-lan notes how in the traditional Chinese understanding the term metaphysics is used synonymously with “mystical learning” (*xuan-xue*).

²⁹¹ S&T, 300. This claim receives further support from Eliade, who credits the Daoists with having “elaborated and systematized the shamanic technique and ideology of protohistorical China.” See *Shamanism*, 450.

²⁹² Eliade, *Shamanism*, 4.

²⁹³ Cf. S&T, 301-302.

²⁹⁴ As quoted and translated by Izutsu, S&T, 301.

natural being, god or spirit, and understands directly the will or intention of the latter.”²⁹⁵

Here Daoism emerges as the perfect marriage of myth and discourse, mysticism and metaphysics, speculative and symbolic thought,²⁹⁶ such that the *Zhuangzi* becomes interpretable as a series of shamanic visions forged in the crucible of a robust mystico-speculative philosophy. Both Laozi and Zhuangzi are thus rightly labelled “shamans” as it pertains to “the experiential basis of their world-vision”, without in any way detracting from their status as “intellectual thinkers” who sought “to elevate and elaborate their original vision into a system of metaphysical concepts designed to explain the very structure of Being.”²⁹⁷ For Izutsu, the fundamental ethos of philosophical Daoism cannot be properly grasped apart from the recognition of this “most intimate relationship between shamanistic cosmology and Daoist metaphysics”, and “how the mythical world-view represented by the former develops and is transformed into the ontology of the Way.”²⁹⁸

Bearing these remarks in mind, I turn now to the analysis of the *Zhuangzi* itself, limited to the so-called “Interior Chapters” (*nei pian*; chapters 1-7), generally held to be part of the original work, and thus best representative of Zhuangzi’s own authentic views. References to the writings known as the “Exterior Chapters” (*wai pian*; chapters 8-22) and

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ SCP, 59.

²⁹⁷ S&T, 300.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 302.

“Miscellaneous Chapters” (*za pian*; chapters 23-33) are mentioned only sparingly and for the sake of observing the received tradition of the *nei pian*; just as intermittent quotes from the *Daodejing* serve only to fill in some crucial gaps in the philosophical backdrop. The remainder of this subsection is devoted to an analysis of passages drawn from the following two chapters of the *Zhuangzi*: the *Qiwulun* (“Discourse on the Equalization of All Things”, Chapter 2) and the *Dazongshi* (“The Great Lordly Master”, Chapter 6).

Discourse on the Equalization of All Things

The second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* contains an excerpt already alluded to above:

There is beginning, there is no beginning. There is a no no-beginning. There is being, there is nonbeing. There is no nonbeing. There is no no-nonbeing. Suddenly there is a distinction of being and nonbeing. Still, between being and nonbeing, I do not know which is really being and which is really nonbeing. I have just said something; but I do not know whether what I have said is really something said or not really something said.²⁹⁹

Here Zhuangzi ventures the paradoxical task of speaking of the unspeakable and naming the nameless—which is why he remains doubtful as to whether his words have made any “sense” at all. And to the extent that the absolute

²⁹⁹ CT, II, 48.

is unspeakable, what else can the attempt to speak of it be but the pinnacle of “non-sense”? This leads to a further question (one we have had recourse to in the previous chapter on Advaita Vedānta): If the absolute *dao* really is as inconceivable as Zhuangzi says, then how should we ever have come to know it? Zhuangzi’s answer is the same as that given by Śāṅkara: the “absolutely absolute” or “really real” (*satyasya satyam*) is conceived *as* inconceivable only through the event of its manifestation. But that is getting ahead of ourselves. It is neither manifestation nor knowledge that specifically concerns us in this subsection, but existence *per se*. Nevertheless, in order to get at the crux of Zhuangzi’s mystico-speculative doctrine, it is necessary, given the interrelatedness of the headings involved, to do so indirectly, by passing briefly through manifestation and knowledge to the core of Daoist ontology.

Translated into Western terms, the inconceivable *dao* becomes “conceivable” only as *actus purus* (“pure act”) or *actus essendi* (“the act of existence”). The *dao*, as pure act, cannot be reified into a “thing” or a “substance”. It can only be known according to the “traces” it leaves everywhere and in everything. Even so, in order to think about the *dao* at all, the need to turn it into an “it”, a “thing”, or a “substance” proves inescapable. It is the nature of discriminative thought to turn all that it touches into an “object” of knowledge, a “thing” to be cut up into manageable portions, i.e., “analyzed” (from the Greek *análysis*, meaning

“to break up” or “to cut apart”). This is one of the perennial problems of philosophy. Can it be resolved?

Zhuangzi believes it can, though—and this point cannot be overstated—*not* at the level of discriminative knowing (*xin* or *zhi*). Instead Zhuangzi champions a non- or trans-dual mode of knowledge, arrived at through what the Western mystical tradition terms the *via negativa* or “negative way”. This negative or apophatic approach begins with a confession of its total ignorance. It admits the impossibility of grasping what the absolute *is* in any straightforward, “objective” sense. It concedes that one cannot speak of the absolute as one would an object in the world (e.g., “*that* is a mountain” or “*this* is a river”), since the absolute is neither “this” nor “that”, but is rather, to borrow the Advaitic phrase, “one without a second” (*ekam eva advitīyam*). The absolute *dao* knows no genus; or rather, no genus knows it. Indeed, not only does the absolute *dao* transcend every possible category, but, in its purest aspect, it transcends even the category of “transcendence” (understood as relatively opposed to “immanence”).

It is for these reasons that Zhuangzi adopts the laconic expression *wu-wu-wu*. The third *wu* negates the level of empirical existence, acknowledging that the *dao* is beyond all determinations (“no-thing”). The second *wu* negates the level of conditional existence, acknowledging that the *dao* is beyond all oppositions (“not-other”). The third *wu*, however, is the negation of negation itself, acknowledging that the *dao* is beyond even

the “condition” of being unconditioned. It is with this last phase of the *via negativa* that the limits of conceptual thought are reached, so that epistemology becomes fully absorbed into ontology, and the divisions between knower and known, subject and object, self and other, are erased. Capturing the trans-conceptual thrust of Zhuangzi’s apophatic formula, Izutsu writes,

...the concept of No-No-Nothing [*wu-wu-wu*] does justice to the reality of the Absolute only when we transcend, in understanding it, the sphere of logical thinking itself into that of ecstatic or mystic intuition. But when we do so, the concept of No-No-Nothing will immediately cease to be a concept. And we shall end up by realizing that all the logical reasoning that has preceded has in reality been futile and of no use.³⁰⁰

Far from denoting a mere deficiency or lack (as in the famous dictum, *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, “from nothing, nothing comes”), the non-non-non-existence of the absolute *dao* is interpreted by Zhuangzi as a plenitudinous “void” or super-abounding “emptiness”. It is in this way that Zhuangzi’s reading of existence demands that the dictum just mentioned be radically revised to read: *ex nihilo, omnia fiunt*, “from no-thing, all things come”. This reading further resonates with Śāṅkara’s understanding of “non-duality” (*a-dvaita*) as having reference to a meta-ontological “plenum” (*bhūmā*) infinitely exceeding every affirmation and negation. As neither “this” nor “that” (*neti*,

³⁰⁰ S&T, 379.

neti), while yet not-other-than “this” or “that”, the absolute *dao* of Zhuangzi and the non-dual *sat* of Śāṅkara relativize or “equalize” (*qi*) all boundaries, such that all phenomena become mingled and fused into a single whole: “Heaven and Earth and I came into existence together, and all things with me are one.”³⁰¹

The ontologies of Śāṅkara and Zhuangzi may thus both rightly be characterized as “bimodal”³⁰² to the extent that they succeed in upholding the tension between the absolute unity of existence, on the one hand, and the relative multiplicity of nature, on the other. For both of these thinkers, every phenomenon “is” only as a “form of one unique Reality which goes on assuming successively different forms of self-manifestation.”³⁰³ Again, the simultaneity of this vision is grounded not in discriminative thinking (*zhi*), but illuminative intuition (*ming*), i.e., the immediate ecstatic encounter with the non-dual structure of pure existence itself. Anxieties over whether this non-dual oneness negates the manifold of phenomena are misplaced. Neither unity nor multiplicity must be forsaken for the other, in that there is ultimately no “other” to forsake. The oneness of the manifold is therefore no abstract or purely theoretical matter for Zhuangzi, but the *modus operandi* of his mystico-speculative ontology.

³⁰¹ CT, II, 49.

³⁰² See Harold D. Roth, “Bimodal Mystical Experience in the ‘Qiwulun’ Chapter of the Zhuangzi”, in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. Scott Cook (New York: SUNY, 2003), 16.

³⁰³ *Ibid*, 316.

The Great Lordly Master

In chapter VI of the *Zhuangzi*, entitled “The Great Lordly Master” (*Dazongshi*), we read the following:

Dao has reality and evidence, but no action and form. It may be transmitted, but cannot be received. It may be attained, but cannot be seen. It exists by and through itself. It exists prior to heaven and earth, and indeed for all eternity. It causes the gods to be divine and the world to be produced. It is above the zenith, but it is not high. It is beneath the nadir, but it is not low. It is prior to heaven and earth, but it is not ancient. It is older than the most ancient, but it is not old.³⁰⁴

This paragraph provides a concise summary of what has been said about the Daoist conception of existence up to this point. As we saw with Śāṅkara’s doctrine of Brahman in the preceding chapter, as well as in the overview of the Daoist understanding given above, Zhuangzi posits a distinction between the “absolute” and “relative” aspects of the *dao*, so as to distinguish between its unqualified aseity, on the one hand, and its spontaneous diffusiveness, on the other. The absolute is therefore never “merely” absolute, i.e., the absolute is never “absolute” as opposed to the “relative”, or “one” as antithetical to the “manifold”. Rather, because the *dao* is *absolutely* absolute, it is also infinite, fecund with the limitless forms of manifestation. As Izutsu, commenting on this Daoist perspective, writes: “The Absolute, although it is in itself a Mystery having nothing to do with

³⁰⁴ CT, VI, 95-6.

any other thing, and a completely self-sufficient Reality—has another, positive aspect in which it is turned toward the world.”³⁰⁵ Again, these are not two different realities that are being signified, but two different aspects of a single truth: the absolute *dao*.

Another way to put this distinction is by saying that the *dao* is at once “cosmic” and “personal”, i.e., it is both the meta-ontological principle of all phenomena and the “Creator-God” or “Maker of things” (*zao wu che*). Not only does the absolute *dao* bestow spirituality on the spirits, but it even makes the gods (or “God”, *tian di*, lit. “the Heavenly Emperor”) divine. This means that, for Zhuangzi, as for the larger Daoist tradition, unity is not the product or effect of divinity. To the contrary, “supreme oneness” (*taiyi*) is the origin and cause of the divine. The “personal” aspect of the *dao* is but a reflected image of that mystery (*xuan*) which infinitely transcends it. Whereas the “personal” aspect of the absolute corresponds to the stage of “being” (*you*) and its concomitant modes of religious devotion, the “transpersonal” aspect of the absolute corresponds to the “hidden” stages of “non-being” (*wu-wu-wu*) and their concomitant modes of apophatic knowledge, culminating finally in non-dual intuition.

The transpersonal aspect of the absolute might, in this sense, be compared to the line of an absolute circle (○) which, as an *absolute* line, does not mark a boundary relative to something else. There is no “outside” to it, no “beyond”. It is the boundless boundary of all boundaries, the

³⁰⁵ S&T, 391.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

nameless name of all names, the formless form of all forms, etc. As such, it is akin to the Hermetic notion of an infinite circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. This is precisely what Zhuangzi intends to convey in speaking of the *dao* as a sheer ipseity, being “its own source, its own root.” The *dao* is more ancient than the world, yet it is never old; it is newer than the present moment, yet it is never young; it is higher than the highest heaven, yet it is never exalted; it is beneath the lowest limits of the earth, yet it is never debased.

For Zhuangzi, the *dao*, as its own root and source, exists by and through itself. It therefore cannot be “seen” as would an object in the world (e.g., a mountain or a river). Why? Not because the *dao* is “less visible” than a mountain or a river. All manifestation is a kind of light, a “phenomenon” (from *phaínein*, meaning “to bring to light”). What reveals a mountain or a river is not so much its “brightness” as its “dimness”. Both are dark enough to behold. Conversely, what hides the *dao* is not its dimness, but its all-too-bright-effulgence. It is beyond what the power of human vision can grasp or bear. Before the blinding resplendence of the absolute, every act of subjective perception is like an owl dazzled by the light of the sun.³⁰⁶ But what our eyes judge to be “dark” is in fact an infinite gulf of light. The *dao* is therefore an absolute radiance, the light of which *is* its veil. In the words of the *Daodejing*, “The way [*dao*] out into the light often looks dark.”³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Cf. Plato, *Thaetatus*, 155d; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, II.i, 982b.

³⁰⁷ WP, XLI, 193.

In this connection, it is fitting that the word *xuan* or “mystery”, which refers to the absolute *dao* in its non-dual transcendence and pure ineffability, should mean “‘black’ with a mixture of redness”, as Izutsu reminds us.³⁰⁸ Here the color “black” is suggestive of the *dao* in its unfathomable depths, while the color “red” is, in turn, suggestive of the endless forms of manifestation prefigured within the super-luminous shadow of their origin, and eventually produced (*sheng*) in concrete form by the *dao* in its personal operation as “The Great Lordly Master” (*Dazongshi*).

Having completed my exposition and analysis of the Daoist conception of existence, I turn now to Section Two and the principle of manifestation.

Section Two: Manifestation

Structural Exposition: Manifestation as *Wu Hua*

For philosophical Daoism, as for Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, manifestation is cyclical in structure. All things proceed from the *dao*, abide in the *dao*, and return to the *dao*. That which only appears real to us melts away in the light of that which alone *is* real: the “fundamental unity which underlies all plurality, the unchanging principle which supports the shifting multiplicity, the truth that remains while the world moves on”³⁰⁹—the oneness of the manifold.

³⁰⁸ S&T, 393.

³⁰⁹ Radhakrishnan, *India and China*, 91.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Zhuangzi, following the *Daodejing*, regards the cyclical structure of the cosmos to be fundamentally “chaotic” and “transmutative”, such that “there is never a moment when things in the universe are not in a process of change.”³¹⁰ The forms of nature are not fixed or stable “essences”, but the perpetually evolving, mutating, and adapting modes of the non-dual absolute. It is in this sense that all things are said to be co-originating and co-dependent. As Zhuangzi writes in the *Qiwulun* chapter: “‘The ‘that’ and the ‘this’ produce each other.”³¹¹ Objects such as “that” tree or “this” stone are, as viewed at the phenomenal level, undeniably different things. It is this level of empirical existence that the ordinary person is accustomed to calling “the real world”. According to the “shamanic mode of thinking” as exemplified by Zhuangzi, however, there is a higher level of existence and knowledge at which the difference between a tree and a stone vanishes. Zhuangzi refers to this level as *hundun* (“chaos”) or *wu hua* (lit. “things transform”).

The concept of *wu hua* corresponds to that of *māyā*, in that both are possessed of a negative and positive aspect. Negatively, the level of phenomenal manifestation is seen—ultimately—as a “dream” or an “illusion”: “...life itself is a great dream.”³¹² Positively, however, it is interpreted as the jubilant play (*līlā*) of supreme oneness: “...the ten thousand things are all one.”³¹³ The world, we might say, is a game of hide-

³¹⁰ HCP I:225.

³¹¹ CT, II, 44.

³¹² CT, II, 53.

³¹³ CWZ, V, 34.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

and-seek that the *dao* plays with itself. And as with any game, its play is not solely arbitrary or random, but operates according to a set of rules that imply “winning and losing choices and moves and throws which influence the outcome of the game and set an irrevocable force in motion.”³¹⁴

For Daoism, the “chaotic” structure of reality is not an occasion for falling into despair, irrationalism, or moral indifference. To the contrary, it is the supreme oneness of the transmutational circle that makes the world a kind of sacred jest or *divina commedia*, to which bliss and wonder are the only “natural” responses. In this connection, there is a legend told in China of Confucius, the Buddha, and Laozi. Gathered around a single jar of vinegar, itself a symbol of the essence of life, we are informed that each of the three great religious representatives took a turn dipping their finger in the jar and tasting its contents. Confucius went first, and said it was “sour”. Buddha went next, and said it was “bitter”. Finally, Laozi went, smiled, and declared it “sweet” to the tongue. Far from debasing or abandoning the manifold in favor of an “other-worldly” pursuit of oneness, Daoism embraces the manifold through oneness, and oneness through the manifold. Daoism is a religion larger than life, a religion capacious enough to “store the world within the world,” such that “there will be no room left for it to be lost. This is the great truth of things.”³¹⁵

This is what Zhuangzi means when he speaks of “walking two ways at once” or “following two courses at the same time” (*liang heng*), i.e., to

³¹⁴ Cooper, *Yin and Yang*, 91.

³¹⁵ CT, VI, 95.

see the manifold as oneness and oneness as the manifold. “Not to discard the relative and to achieve the absolute,” writes Feng, “this is ‘to follow two courses at the same time.’”³¹⁶ Only the one who has passed through the fires of “Great Awakening” (*da jue*) knows how to live contentedly in a dream, and to re-assemble the scattered fragments of the world into their ultimate unity. Or in the words of Izutsu:

In the eye of the one who has experienced the Great Awakening, all things are One; all things *are* the Reality itself. At the same time, however, this unique Reality discloses to his eye a kaleidoscopic view of infinitely various and variegated things which are ‘essentially’ different one from another, and the world of Being, in this aspect, is manifold and multiple. Those two aspects are to be reconciled with each other by our considering these ‘things’ as so many phenomenal forms of the absolute One. The ‘unity of existence’, thus understood, constitutes the very core of the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi.³¹⁷

Textual Analysis: The *Zhuangzi*

In this subsection I examine the Daoist understanding of manifestation through an analysis of two passages drawn from the *Qiwulun* chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, which I title as (1) “The Ten Thousand Things Are One Horse”, and (2) “The Ten Thousand Hollows”.

³¹⁶ SCP, 71.

³¹⁷ S&T, 313.

The Ten Thousand Things Are One Horse

In the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* we read:

To use a finger (*zhi*) to show that fingers are not fingers is not as good as using a non-finger to show that fingers are not fingers. To use a horse to show that a horse is not a horse is not as good as using a non-horse to show that a horse is not a horse; Heaven and Earth are one finger; the ten thousand things are one horse.³¹⁸

This would seem to be a hopelessly obscure passage, bordering on—if not falling headlong into—the absurd. When placed within its broader philosophical context, however, its meaning becomes more intelligible. Here Zhuangzi is referring to the great sophist and dialectician, Gongsun Long (c. 325-250 B.C.E.), who had famously argued that “A white horse is not a horse”. Oversimplifying his argument, Gongsun Long had said that a name like “horse” (*ma*) can designate either: (1) a particular form (e.g., “this” horse) or (2) a universal concept (“horseness”). For Gongsun Long, not only are particulars and universals at odds with each other, but universals are at odds with themselves. He attempts to demonstrate this incompatibility with an example that makes use of the universal concepts of “whiteness” (*pai*) and “horseness” (*ma*). The name “horse” (*ma*) in the phrase “white horse” (*pai ma*) denotes a shape or form, and the name

³¹⁸ CT, II, 44. The word *zhi* is sometimes translated as “attribute” (see Watson’s translation). This is hardly inappropriate. However, Youlan translates it here in its literal sense of “finger” or “pointer”, i.e., as that which a name indicates. In this sense, *zhi* comes close to the Western notion of a “universal”. Cf. SCP, 52-53.

“white” (*pai*) in the phrase “white horse” (*pai ma*) denotes a color. Yet, for Gongsun Long, if “horseness” and “whiteness” really are universal concepts, then they cannot be predicated of “this” horse without being predicated of “that” horse as well. But not every horse is white. *Ergo*: “A white horse is not a horse.” This is why Gongsun Long can further say that “There are no things which are not universals, but a universal is not a universal.”³¹⁹ The interrogation of any universal reveals its impermeable singularity. Horseness is *horseness*—and nothing else. Whiteness is *whiteness*—and nothing else. White-horseness is *white-horseness*—and nothing else. Every universal is its own autonomous domain: “...each stands alone...”³²⁰

Against this view, Zhuangzi posits the fundamental oneness of the manifold, such that a horse both “is” a horse and “is not” a horse simultaneously. For Zhuangzi, existence is not univocal but analogical in structure. At the level of ordinary empirical experience, things admittedly appear “to be” what they “are” and not otherwise. On this common level of perception everything is interpreted as fundamentally identical to itself and, just so, fundamentally different from everything else. Each stands alone. Hence the principle of identity: *A* is *A*. Hence the principle of non-contradiction: *A* is not non-*A*. When viewed from a more elevated standpoint, however, one discovers—by means of an ecstatic “illumination” (*ming*)—that a finger is not a finger and a horse is not a horse. While such

³¹⁹ As quoted in SCP, 57.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

a conclusion may sound similar to the one just asserted by Gongsun Long, it could not be further removed in its meaning.

In contrast to the sophistry of his interlocutor, Zhuangzi does not use a “finger” to show that there are no fingers. Instead, he uses a “non-finger” to show that the whole world is but “one finger”, “one horse”. Here, as Izutsu remarks, “non-finger” means something like “super-finger” or “more-than-a-mere-finger”.³²¹ It is through ecstatic illumination—what Zhuangzi refers to elsewhere as the state of “sitting in oblivion” (*zuowang*)—that one is able to go beyond the “essentializing” perspective that would define each existent as irrevocably separate from every other and toward a view of the “ten thousand things” as mutually interwoven and inter-joined, so as to be at once themselves (individuation) and every other phenomenon (unification).

The term Zhuangzi uses for this particular mystico-speculative vision of existence is *zhi wu* or the “equalization of things”—corresponding to his use elsewhere of “heavenly levelling” (*tian ni*) and “heavenly equalization” (*tian jun*). According to this vision, both statements are true at the same time: the *dao* is manifested in all things (manifold), and all things are the manifestations of the *dao* (oneness). Every horse *is* a horse (at the level of *de* or phenomenal manifestation) and is also not a horse (at the level of *dao* or pre-phenomenal unity). This recalls the quadratic structure of existence as articulated above: (1) non-dual oneness (*wu-wu-*

³²¹ S&T, 362.

wu), (2) negatively conditioned oneness (*wu-wu*), (3) oneness with intrinsic modalities (*wu*), and (4) oneness as extrinsically manifested in phenomenal forms (*you*). It is vital to recall here how these four stages are not sequential but metaphysical in their order and logic. Each stage interpenetrates the others. None stands alone. In fact, Zhuangzi can even go so far as to say that “Heaven and Earth are one finger; the ten thousand things are one horse.” It is because all things “are” only as the manifestations of a single meta-ontological principle or field, that to know any of them truly is to know them all equally as the *dao*.

The myriad processes of nature thus constitute for Zhuangzi “a huge ontological circle”³²² in which there is, strictly speaking, neither a beginning nor an end. The ceaselessly changing movements from day to night and night to day, from birth to death and death to birth, from winter to spring, spring to summer, summer to fall, and fall to winter—they are all, from the phenomenal standpoint, events of history, of time. To that extent, they are sequential and successive moments; individual points on the circle. What each of these points finally discloses, however, is the circle itself: the “whole circle”—a whole that is infinitely more than the sum of its points. For Zhuangzi, the inner aspect of history is thus *trans*-historical (an eternal “now”), and the inner aspect of the many *trans*-manifold (“supreme oneness”). Just as every temporal moment unfolds—i.e., appears, vanishes, and re-appears—only where it is enfolded by eternity, neither appearing nor

³²² Ibid, 493.

vanishing nor re-appearing, but abiding wholly in the state of its pure undifferentiation (*hundun*), so every relative phenomenon is made manifest only where it is hidden in the oneness of the absolute.

The Ten Thousand Hollows

The principle of “walking two ways at once” is aptly illustrated in an earlier passage taken from the same chapter.

The Great Earth eructates, and the eructation is called Wind. As long as the eructation does not actually occur, nothing is observable. But once it does occur, all the hollows of the trees raise ringing shouts. Listen! Do you not hear the trailing sound of the wind as it comes blowing from afar? The trees in the mountain forests begin to rustle, stir, and sway, and then all the hollows and holes of huge trees measuring a hundred arms’ lengths around begin to give forth different sounds. There are holes like noses, like mouths, like ears; some are (square) like crosspieces upon pillars; some are (round) as cups, some are like mortars. Some are like deep ponds; some are like shallow basins. (The sounds they emit are accordingly various): some roar like torrents dashing against the rocks; some hiss like flying arrows; some growl, some gasp, some shout, some moan. Some sounds are deep and muffled, some sounds are sad and mournful.

(One and the same Wind) blows on ten thousand things in different ways, and makes each hollow produce its own peculiar sound, so that each imagines that its own self produces that particular sound. But who, in reality, is the one who makes (the hollows) produce various sounds?³²³

³²³ This is the translation of Izutsu. See S&T, 368-369.

Here the manifold of phenomena is likened by Zhuangzi to the “hollows of trees”. As a musician plays the gaps of a flute, the *dao* plays the hollows of the “ten thousand things”. Every hollow produces its own unique sound when the “Breath” or “Wind” of the *dao* blows through them. But it is always one and the same Breath that blows. The Cosmic Breath represents existence as “pure potency” (*potentia absoluta*), and the hollows in the trees represent the “essences” of individuated things. What are these “essences” made of? Zhuangzi compares them to noses, mouths, and ears, each of which is a particular combination of “that which is” (flesh, cartilage, veins, etc.) and “that which is not” (the orifices of the nostrils, throat, and ear canals). These orifices, like the hollows of the trees, are ontologically ambiguous. They have no “being” of their own, and yet they are not simply “nothing”. Again, to borrow scholastic terminology, they are, for Zhuangzi, pure possibilities. They “exist” only *in potentia*. Apart from the Wind blowing through them, they have no actuality. The Wind makes the many hollows to be what they are. Only when filled with the eructating Breath of the *dao* is their bare potential brought to actualization. In this sense one could say that the “hollows” do not manifest themselves at all, in that they have nothing of their “own” to manifest. Rather, they “are” only as pure participations in the act of existence. According to Zhuangzi, then, the multiplicity of phenomena is not the contrary of oneness, but rather the latter’s dynamic unfolding or prolongation.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

It is in this connection that Zhuangzi identifies two modes of sound: the “sound of Heaven” (*tian lai*) and the “sound of Earth” (*di lai*). Whereas the former is silent and undetectable to the physical ear, the latter may be audibly discerned. How, if at all, do these modes of “sound” connect? For Zhuangzi, it is the silent “sound of Heaven” that is heard in every “sound of Earth”. Silence here is not merely the absence of sound, but, as we saw earlier in the passage quoted from the *Liezi*, “the Sound of sounds”. It is not a sound among the manifold of sounds (“no-thing”), nor is it dialectically different from them (“not-other”). Rather, the *tian lai* is the supra-audible silence by which the possibility of every sound is actualized and made to “raise ringing shouts”. As Izutsu remarks: “The infinitely various sounds which the hollows emit are no other than the one, absolute sound of Heaven.”³²⁴ This runs parallel to Zhuangzi’s doctrine of “Heavenly Equalization” (*tian jun*), i.e., the metaphysical condition of all things resting in their original unity, the pre-phenomenal “stillness” (*jing*) of the *dao*—a stillness that is not barren, but “pregnant with infinite vitality.”³²⁵

For Zhuangzi, were the manifold not permeated at every turn by oneness, and were oneness not always diffusing itself in the production of endless forms, both would be reducible to a kind of ontological inertia or *rigor mortis* (lit. “stiffness of death”), void of all change, growth, and vitality. But this is not how existence is experienced. The world is neither statically identical nor statically different. It is a vast manifold of ever-

³²⁴ Ibid, 369.

³²⁵ Ibid, 412-413. Cf. *Daodejing*, ch. 25.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

changing, interpenetrating phenomena, all of which “are” only as the restricted manifestations of a single meta-ontological principle or field. This principle or field is not an alien invader or force acting from without, but a power (*de*) more immanent to the manifold than the manifold is to itself. Because the *dao* is both “no-thing” and “not-other”, its immanence is absolute, disclosing the phenomena of the world to be “so many different forms assumed by the Way itself.”³²⁶ In the words of Izutsu, summarizing Zhuangzi’s view of “oneness”:

The root of Being is absolutely one. But it does not repose forever in its original Unity. On the contrary, it belongs to the very nature of Being that it never ceases to manifest itself in infinite forms. It goes on diversifying itself into ‘ten thousand things’ which, again, go on endlessly transforming themselves into one another. This is the phenomenal aspect of Being. But by going through this very process of ‘diversification’ and ‘differentiation’ all things are returning to their ultimate metaphysical source. The process of ‘descent’ and the process of ‘ascent’ are paradoxically one and the same thing. The relation between Unity and Multiplicity must be understood in this way. Just as Unity is not a static ‘oneness’ of death and rigidity, but is a never-ceasing dynamic process of a *coincidentia oppositorum*, Multiplicity is not a static ‘differentiation’ of things that are rigidly fixed once for all, but is a constant life process which contains within itself the ontological tension of Unity and Multiplicity.³²⁷

³²⁶ Ibid, 403.

³²⁷ Ibid, 366.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

To see the One as all and all as the One, or to “follow two courses at the same time” (*liang heng*), is therefore to know the whole of “nature” (*ziran*) as that which “of-itself-is-so”, i.e., as that which is “what it is” in virtue of its innermost principle. This principle is that of *wu wei*, meaning “inactive action” or “passive activity”. The *dao* creates the world by not-creating it, that is, by not being “something” from which the world is made. Unlike William Paley’s infamous “Watchmaker”, the *dao* does not construct the universe externally, “from the outside”; nor like Henri Bergson’s *élan vital* does the *dao* impel the universe internally, “from the inside”. Rather, the *dao* is nothing at all (“no-thing”), and therefore utterly non-different from everything (“not-other”). As the great Daoist commentator Guo Xiang (4th century C.E.) had put it, “*Dao* is nothing...*Dao* does not produce the world, but the world produces itself. So *Dao* produces it by not producing it...*Dao* is everywhere, but everywhere it is nothing.”³²⁸

This is why Zhuangzi likens the mind of the perfect sage to a “mirror”, effortlessly reflecting the endless transformations of nature without ever seeking to retain them or be transformed by them. There is no need for either. The *dao* sees itself in the *de*, and the *de* sees itself in the *dao*. They are not two separate realities, but more like two empty mirrors facing each other. Hence Zhuangzi’s concluding exhortation: “Identify yourself with the infinite. Make excursion into the void. Exercise fully what

³²⁸ As quoted by Yu-lan in CT, 119.

you have received from nature, but gain nothing besides. In one word, be empty.”³²⁹

Section Three: Knowledge

Structural Exposition: Knowledge as *Ming*

In the previous chapter on Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, I demonstrated how the Advaitic concept of knowledge culminates in the negation of all knowing. This self-annihilatory structure of knowledge is found in philosophical Daoism as well.

According to Zhuangzi, the structure of knowledge is comprised of three basic stages. The first is *zuoji* (“sitting-galloping”), the stage at which the mind (*xin*) is limited to the realm of phenomenal distinctions. Though in constant flight from “this” to “that”, “here” to “there”, “now” to “then”, this stage of knowledge nevertheless occupies a thoroughly fixed, torpedied position. Zhuangzi refers to this stage elsewhere as *zheng xin* or the “made-up-mind”. This “made-up” or “finished” mind consists of a stiff, brittle mentality that presumes the ultimacy of the distinctions drawn between subject and object, knower and known, self and other, etc. For Zhuangzi, *zuoji* is a condition of epistemological slavery, due precisely to its having mistaken itself for its own master (*shi xin*, “making the mind one’s own master”).

³²⁹ CT, VII, 113.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

The second stage of knowledge is referred as *zhi* or the “extreme limit” of knowledge. At this stage the false reign of the ego is supplanted by an immediate and trans-personal intuition of the absolute *dao*. Far from the product of a particular psychological disposition, it is the fruit of a “direct experience, not thinking ‘about’ a thing or naming it and so relegating it to second-hand.”³³⁰ At this “extreme limit” of knowledge, all the distinctions between “this” and “that”, “here” and “there”, “now” and “then”, are shown, “in the light of Heaven”,³³¹ to be purely relative and provisional.³³² The knower is one with what he knows.

The third and culminating stage of knowledge is what Zhuangzi calls *zuowang* (“sitting in oblivion”). At this stage, an absolute forgetting occurs, such that there is no longer any knowledge to be spoken of. Knowledge is always a knowledge *of something*. But in the stage of oblivion, there is no knowledge *of anything*. Existence alone *is*. Here again, as we saw with Śaṅkara, epistemology is unveiled as a mode or inflection of ontology. Yet rather than simply negating the “ten thousand things”, the stage of “oblivion”—once total—opens out onto a radically ecstatic vision of the world. This vision is more generally designated as *ming* or “illumination”, corresponding exactly to Śaṅkara’s *jñāna*. Having passed through the “gateway of myriad wonders” (*zhong miao zhi men*),³³³ the sage returns to the world of phenomena to see not only “a ‘this’ but a ‘this’ that

³³⁰ Cooper, *Yin and Yang*, 64.

³³¹ CW, II, 10.

³³² SCP, 65.

³³³ *Daodejing*, ch. 1.

is also a ‘that,’ a ‘that’ that is also a ‘this.’”³³⁴ Zhuangzi thus ascribes a central or axial position to the illumined sage: “If a ‘that’ and a ‘this’ be not contrasted, it (i.e., the resultant point of view) can be described as the Dao Axis. An axis is the center of a revolving system, in which it responds to changes endlessly.”³³⁵ The “Dao Axis” is not one more relative perspective among others, but the absolute vantage point from which the myriad beings of the world are communed with and surveyed. Only he who has forgotten *every thing* (i.e., “this” in contrast to “that”, “here” in contrast to “there”, “now” in contrast to “then”) knows how to remember *everything* (i.e., the whole of existence), to roam in the single “Breath” (*qi*) of the universe, and to “enter the mysterious oneness of Heaven.”³³⁶

To reiterate, for Zhuangzi and philosophical Daoism, knowledge begins at the level of *xin* or ego-consciousness (*K*), enters upon *zhi* or threshold-consciousness ($\sim K$), and is at last annihilated in the state of *zuowang* or oblivion-consciousness, also designatable as *dao*-consciousness (*K*), where it is buried beyond death and reborn beyond life, so as to “see-with-brightness” (*ming*) the oneness of the manifold. This threefold structure of knowledge is visually portrayed below (Figure 2):

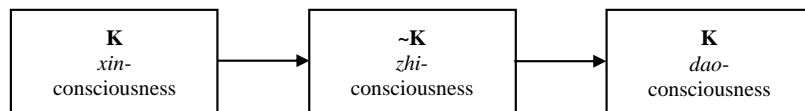


Figure 2. Structure of Knowledge – *Philosophical Daoism*

³³⁴ CW, II, 10.

³³⁵ SCP, 67.

³³⁶ Ibid, 51.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

It will be observed that this structure of knowledge closely parallels the one outlined in the previous chapter on Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, re-displayed below:

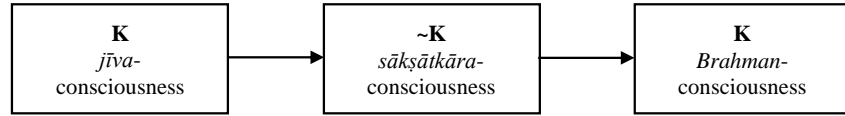


Figure 1. Structure of Knowledge – *Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

Having briefly presented the Daoist structure of knowledge, I turn to a textual analysis of the same.

Textual Analysis: The *Zhuangzi*

In this subsection I examine the Daoist view of knowledge through an analysis of two passages taken from the following chapters of the *Zhuangzi*: the *Dechongfu* (“The Symbols of Manifested Power Fulfilled”, Chapter 5) and the *Yingdiwang* (“Fit To Be Emperors and Kings”, Chapter 7).

The Symbols of Manifested Power Fulfilled

In Chapter 5, Zhuangzi, speaking through the mouth of Confucius, declares:

“If we see things from the point of view of their difference,” said Confucius, “even liver and gall are as far away from each other as Chu in the south and Yue in the north. If we see things from the point of view of their identity, the ten thousand things are one. The latter viewpoint is what this man [i.e., the illumined sage] takes. So he knows no even to what his ears are appropriate, but dallies in the

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

harmony of manifested power (*de*). He sees the unity of things, but not his own loss. He considers the chopping off of his foot to be no different than the casting away of a clod of soil.³³⁷

This excerpt highlights two radically opposed epistemological standpoints. The first is the standpoint of “difference”, which draws definitive boundary lines between “this” and “that”, riving all things from each other and each from all things. The second is the standpoint of “sameness”, which sees the world in the state of its pre-phenomenal unity, where “existence and non-existence form a single body” and “the ten thousand things are one.” While the first standpoint corresponds to the stage of *xin*-consciousness, the second corresponds to *zhi*-consciousness as it enters the threshold of “oblivion” (*wang*). Only the second kind of knowing is “liberated” from the slavery of the mind to itself (*shi xin*), so as to be able to “play in the harmony of manifested power” and behold “that which makes all things one and the same”: the oneness of the manifold.

Accordingly, for philosophical Daoism, as for Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, one’s theory of existence cannot be divided from one’s theory of knowledge. The two are mutual correlates, such that *how* I view the world (epistemology) and *what* the world is (ontology) are indissociable. Stated differently: who I am determines what I know, and what I know determines who I am. A sea of thrashing waves may be a sublime spectacle, but only

³³⁷ CT, V, 81-2.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

the sea whose surface is still can reflect the infinite beauty of that which is beyond itself: Heaven (*tian*). Similarly, only the sage who dwells in the ontological tranquility (*ning*) of oneness can reflect the diffusive activity (*ying*) of the *dao*.

In this way, the methodology of Daoism can be seen to differ sharply from that of traditional Confucianism in that whereas the latter is focused on “ritual” (*li*), “righteousness” (*yi*), and the attainment of “knowledge” (*zhi*), the former seeks “to discard knowledge, and so to forget the self, and by this means to enter the sphere of undifferentiable oneness with all creation.”³³⁸ The unifying vision described in this passage is summarized by Feng as follows:

The One includes everything, it is the Great Whole. For the Great Whole there is no past or present, for past and present are measurements of time, and since the Great Whole includes time, we cannot have any time with its measurement of past and present outside this whole. In this Great Whole there is neither death nor life. Because this Great Whole cannot cease to be, therefore there is no real death. Because the Great Whole did not begin at any particular time, therefore there is no mortal life. This being so, the man who is one with the Great Whole also has no past or present: death and life have no meaning to him. The man who dwells in this sphere, regarding the material world from the point of view of the Great Whole, sees all things as neither being constructed nor being destroyed. At the same time he can also say that there is nothing which is not being constructed and not being destroyed. So we have the words “*ying ning*”, *ying* to be in state of

³³⁸ SCP, 79-80.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

activity, *ning* to be in a state of tranquility. Hence *ying ning* means a condition of tranquility which is not incompatible with the confused activity of things.³³⁹

This is the uncreated Sage—Zhuangzi’s “true man” (*zhen ren*)—who, through the realization of non-dual oneness with the One, is united to the whole of phenomenal existence. Fire burns only that which is not one with its flame. Water drowns only that which is not one with its fluidity. The “true man” is he who has become all fire, all wind, all water, all metal, all earth, and who is thus able to drown himself in the sea without getting wet or submerge himself in flames without getting burned.³⁴⁰

It is also worth pointing out that the word *māyā* etymologically refers to “that which *measures* everything” (*mīyate anayā iti māyā*).³⁴¹ In order to be liberated from the tyrannical “reign of quantity” (to borrow the apt phrase of Guénon³⁴²), one must come to experience *mokṣa* or “Great Awakening” (*da jue*), i.e., the qualitative vision of “supreme oneness” (*taiyi*), as neither reducible to the manifold (“no-thing”) nor different from it (“not-other”). “Beholding that which makes all things [manifold] one and the same [oneness], nothing can ever be lost.”

³³⁹ Ibid, 74-75.

³⁴⁰ CT, VI, 91.

³⁴¹ Mukhyananda, *Sri Shankaracharya*, 134.

³⁴² See René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004).

Fit To Be Emperors and Kings

The final passage I analyze comes from the last of the *Zhuangzi's* Interior Chapters (*nei pian*), “Fit To Be Emperors and Kings”, which relays the myth of the Emperor “Chaos” (*Hundun*).

The Emperor of the South Sea was called Shu, the Emperor of the North Sea was called Hu, and the Emperor of the central domain was called Chaos (*Hundun*). Once, Shu and Hu met in the domain of Chaos, who treated both of them very well. Thereupon, Shu and Hu deliberated together over the way in which they might possibly repay his goodness. “All men,” they said, “are possessed of seven orifices for seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing. But this one (i.e., Chaos) alone does not possess any (orifice). Come, let us bore some for him.” They went on boring one orifice every day, until on the seventh day Chaos died.³⁴³

In this myth, the South and North Seas are representative of the peripheral, centrifugal modes of knowledge (*xin* or *zhi*), while the “central domain” of the Emperor Hundun serves as a symbol of “the Dao Axis” at which “point” one “sits in forgetfulness” (*zuowang*). It is important to observe that neither Shu nor Hu are guilty of killing the Emperor Hundun out of malice. Their intentions are undeniably noble. Their minds are “made-up” (*zheng xin*), rigidly fixed on the virtues of benevolence and righteousness. Their mentality operates in an exclusively deliberative way, and for that very reason cannot bear the undifferentiated oneness of things. Deliberate or

³⁴³ As translated by Izutsu, S&T, 304.

discursive knowledge is blind to the naked splendor of unity. All it can see are the slivers of light that penetrate the veil of its rational distinctions and logical boundaries. The “made-up-mind”—equivalent to Śāṅkara’s *advīyā* or nescience—cannot help but bore holes into the “Uncarved Block” (*pu*) of existence. To know the “face” of reality, reason must give it distinctive features: a nose here, a mouth there; eyes here, ears there; etc.

However noble its intentions, the made-up-mind’s effort to “repay” the oneness of reality always ends up eviscerating the very same. As Izutsu observes, “the Absolute can be brought into the grasp of Reason by ‘essential’ distinctions being made in the reality of the Absolute, and becomes thereby something understandable; but the moment it becomes understandable to Reason, the Absolute dies.”³⁴⁴ Reason must be brought to its own “extreme limit” (*zhi*)—the threshold of “illumination” (*ming*)—in order that it might die to death and live beyond life.

Illuminative knowledge abides in the stillness of oblivion. Here, in the state of total forgetting, the idea of “repaying” the absolute for its prodigal goodness becomes literally unthinkable. Infinity cannot be bought (or sold). Whatever abides in the infinite, *is* the infinite. Whatever knows the *dao*, *is* the *dao*. No exchange is possible. Yet far from succumbing to a simplistic denial of the relative in the name of the absolute, it is precisely by awakening from the dream of the world that one comes to see all things from the “Dao Axis” of that infinite circle whose “central domain” is

³⁴⁴ S&T, 305.

everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. For Zhuangzi, the awakened sage is not concerned with the question of where he came from or where he is going to, and that because he himself *is* the answer: “no-thing” and “no-where”. As “no-one”, the sage is bound to all; as “no-where”, his presence is ubiquitous. Like the still sea, he has become the mirror of Heaven, in whose reflection all the distinctions between “this” and “that” are shown to be “illusory”, i.e., not “really real”. They are only relative, provisional, and penultimate. That is how the sage is able to “follow two courses at the same time” (*liang heng*). In the “true man” (*zhen ren*) the “two ways” of life and death, stillness and action, transcendence and immanence, the sublime and the ordinary are not “two ways” after all, but constitute “one and the same course.”³⁴⁵ The stage of oblivion (*wang*) is thus the supreme stage of learned ignorance or foolish wisdom, the stage at which every “this” and “that”, “here” and “there”, “now” and “then” are stripped of their oppositions in the oneness of the manifold.³⁴⁶

Having expounded and analyzed the Daoist concept of existence as simultaneously one and many under the heading of knowledge, I turn now to a concluding summary.

3. Concluding Summary

Throughout this chapter I have sought to further develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory through which to compare mystical ontologies East

³⁴⁵ SCP, 80.

³⁴⁶ CT, II, 44.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

and West. I have done this by analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the overarching idea of the oneness of the manifold. This overarching idea is designated by philosophical Daoism as *taiyi* (“supreme oneness”). The network of interrelated concepts that *taiyi* coordinates and structures are: existence (*dao*), manifestation (*wu hua*), and knowledge (*ming*). The key philosophical concepts germane to Daoism find their correlates in the previously specified conceptual framework of the Advaita Vedānta system, as seen below:

MYSTICO- SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayatā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>

Table 4. *Corresponding Concepts – Philosophical Daoism*

To conclude: from the Daoist perspective, as from the Advaitic perspective as well, existence is an absolute unity or oneness (*taiyi*), beyond all relations (“no-thing”) and in excess to all oppositions (“not-other”). The *dao* is pure and unqualified existence, and as such metaphysically primary or principal vis-à-vis the manifold of “things” or “essences”. Again this means that, in the strictest sense, it is not the flower or the sun or a river that exists, but the *dao* that “flowers”, “suns”, or “rivers”—“here” in one way and “there” in another. Through the power of its manifestation (*de*), the ineffable *dao* becomes the mother of the “ten thousand things” (*wan wu*). The realm of

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

manifestation is, as we have seen, chaotic (*hundun*) and endlessly transmutative (*wu hua*), and in this way resembles Śaṅkara's doctrine of *māyā* or "illusion". The transmutational structure of reality effectively negates all the clear and distinct boundaries that the "made-up-mind" assumes are ultimately real, leading to the threshold of knowledge (*zhi*) where one learns to "sit in oblivion" (*zuowang*) and bask in the illumination (*ming*) of non-dual unity. The manifold does not simply disappear in the "oblivion", however, but passes through and beyond it, so as to be revealed anew as so many restricted forms of a single meta-ontological principle or field: the oneness of the manifold.

Having concluded this chapter on philosophical Daoism, I now turn to an exposition and analysis of Zen Buddhism.

CHAPTER 3

Zen Buddhism

The present chapter consists of the following three parts: (1) a short introduction to Zen Buddhism; (2) the exposition and analysis of Zen under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge; and (3) a concluding summary of key concepts.

1. Introduction

In this introduction I prepare the way for an exposition and analysis of Zen Buddhist ontology through (1) a sketch of the historical and conceptual development of Zen, and (2) a summary of the method and outline of the present chapter.

Zen

The Japanese word *zen* is a contracted form of the Chinese *channa*, itself the phonetic equivalent of the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, meaning “meditation”. Zen is a distinct school of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, the literal meaning of which is “Great Vessel”, as contrasted with the “little vessel” (Hīnayāna) of the older “School of the Elders” (Theravāda). While conflicting theories abound regarding the precise historical origins of the Mahāyāna tradition,³⁴⁷ its core principles and chief proponents remain, on the whole, uncontested. As with the other mystico-speculative ontologies of this study, Mahāyāna

³⁴⁷ See Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3: “Mahāyāna is not, and never was, an overall single unitary phenomenon.”

Buddhism asserts the primacy of *śūnyatā* or emptiness over “being”.³⁴⁸ There are some who have lauded this principle for its candor in espousing what is “purely negative” or “absent”, indicating “what is *not* there”,³⁴⁹ while others have, for the very same reasons, anathematized it as “an intellectual plague on humanity”.³⁵⁰ It was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy who once said that, in the modern period, and in the quarters of Western scholarship especially, “Buddhism has been so much admired [and, by extension, detested] mainly for what it is not.”³⁵¹ Which makes it all the more necessary to clarify the historical and philosophical background of Buddhism prior to our analytical engagement with it. The subsections below therefore trace out the complex development of Zen through its prefiguration in (1) the Mahāyāna metaphysics of India, (2) its establishment in the so-called Northern and Southern schools of China, and (3) its eventual flourishing in the Sōtō and Rinzai branches of Japan.

India: Nāgārjuna and the Doctrine of Emptiness

It was the great Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150 - c. 250 C.E.), founder of the Mādhyamika or “Middle-Path” school, whose metaphysical insights would play an integral role in shaping later Buddhist thought and the

³⁴⁸ See Gadjin M. Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra: A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies*, trans. Leslie S. Kawamura (Albany: SUNY, 1991), 187: “...ontology in a Buddhism context is not an ontology of ‘being,’ but that of *śūnyatā*.”

³⁴⁹ Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.

³⁵⁰ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (1930), trans. E.I. Watkin (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 13.

³⁵¹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: The Philosophical Library, n.d.), 48.

philosophy of Zen in particular. Nāgārjuna is traditionally credited in China and Japan for having established the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism, as well as for having given the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyavāda*) “a thorough philosophical foundation by drawing out the implications of the mystical intuition seen therein and developing it into a complete philosophical realization.”³⁵² Indeed, the writings of Nāgārjuna are, as David Ruegg has remarked,

the first philosophic treatises (*śāstra*) known to us in which an attempt has been made to give a systematic scholastic exposition of the theory of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and non-substantiality (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) not only of the self (*ātman*) or individual (*pudgala*) but also of all factors of existence (*dharma*), one of the most fundamental ideas of the Mahāyānasūtras.³⁵³

Although Nāgārjuna was possessed of a unique brilliance and acuity, his views were hardly unprecedented. Far from an invention *ex nihilo*, his mystico-speculative ontology was an elaboration and synthesis of earlier Buddhist thought. For Nāgārjuna, the notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) was the implicit logical correlate of the early Buddhist theory of dependent co-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*). According to this latter theory, the world is seen as a vast manifold of substantially empty relations, such that all of the firm ontological boundaries that ordinary human experience takes for

³⁵² Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, 141.

³⁵³ David Seyfort Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), 5-6.

granted are revealed as illusory. Nothing stands alone. Everything “is” only in total reciprocal dependence vis-à-vis everything else. Akin to Śāṅkara’s notion of “illusion” (*māyā*), or Zhuangzi’s notion of the “transformation of things” (*wu hua*), the co-dependent origination of Nāgārjuna, as re-envisaged through metaphysical “emptiness”, radically relativizes all phenomenal and conceptual categories toward an intuitive grasp of “suchness” (*tathatā*) in its absolute non-dual unity. In this sense one can say that Nāgārjuna perceived phenomena as the manifold aspects or restricted determinations (*lakṣaṇa*) of absolute suchness itself. In the words of D.T. Suzuki,

Buddhist philosophy...is the philosophy of Suchness, or the philosophy of Emptiness, or the philosophy of Self-identity. It starts from the absolute present which is pure experience, an experience in which there is yet no differentiation of subject and object, and yet which is not a state of sheer nothingness...it is a state of absolute Suchness, of absolute Emptiness which is absolute Fullness.³⁵⁴

The Abhidharma scriptures (3rd century B.C.E.) were the first to elevate the idea of emptiness to the rank of a philosophical principle, albeit as limited to the analytic process of “cutting up” all empirical phenomena into variegated elements, without ever addressing the precise ontological status of the elements thus analyzed.³⁵⁵ Focused more on the non-substantiality of

³⁵⁴ D.T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (London: Routledge, 2006), 60.

³⁵⁵ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, ed. William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 93.

the individual person (*pudgalanairātmya*), the Abhidharma did not directly answer the question of the non-substantiality of things in general (*dharmanairātmya*). Nāgārjuna pushed the logic of emptiness to its breaking point, articulating a robust metaphysical vision of *śūnyatā* as the very “suchness of existent things” (*bhūtatathatā*).

Yet contrary to the claims of his critics, Nāgārjuna’s denial of a changeless, underlying “substance” to phenomena did not ineluctably commit him to “nihilism”. For Nāgārjuna, the view that “phenomenon-*X* exists” (eternalism) and the view that “phenomenon-*X* does not exist” (nihilism) are both extremes to be avoided: “Intrinsic nature and extrinsic nature, existent and nonexistent—who see these do not see the truth of the Buddha’s teachings (*te tattvaṃ buddhaśāsane*).”³⁵⁶ The manifold of empirical objects is neither absolutely real nor absolutely unreal; it does not properly “exist”, nor is it simply “non-existent”. It is of a purely relative, conventional character (*saṃvṛti*). As such, the Middle-Path of Nāgārjuna does not offer a “compromise” between two extremes. It transcends them both, as the negation of all negations and the emptying of all emptiness.³⁵⁷

The sheer “suchness” of reality is therefore, according to Nāgārjuna, that which surpasses all determinations (“no-thing”) and exceeds all oppositions (“not-other”). Paradoxically, it is the very “no-thingness” of the absolute that makes it “not-other”, and emptiness “that makes all

³⁵⁶ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (XV.6), trans. Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2013), 159.

³⁵⁷ Cf. IP I:571.

phenomena, all existents, truly *be*.”³⁵⁸ With Nāgārjuna, then, the doctrine of *śūnyatā* is no longer the product of an analytic exercise, but the fruit of a transcendental vision of reality in its pure indeterminacy, prior to its having become bifurcated into the dualities of subject and object, knower and known, self and other. Reality infinitely prevents every possible analysis of it. In the words of Izutsu:

[For Nāgārjuna, w]hat really *is* is the dimension of Reality before it is analytically grasped through the network of articulating words. That pre-linguistic Reality is the Reality, i.e., Nothingness (*śūnyatā*). The word *śūnyatā* refers to the original metaphysical state of absolute Reality where there are no falsely posited, fixed things. The simple fact that there are absolutely no fixed essences behind the ever-changing forms of phenomena, when subjectively realized by man, constitutes the highest Truth. When man attains to this highest stage and looks back from this vantage point, he discovers that the very distinction which he initially made between the primary or “sacred” level of Reality and the secondary or “vulgar” level of Reality was but sheer imagination. Even the “sacred” is an articulated piece of Reality which distinguishes itself from what is not “sacred”.³⁵⁹

From India to China: Two Interpretations of Emptiness

It is customary to trace the origins of Zen in China to the semi-legendary Indian Buddhist, Bodhidharma (5th/6th century C.E.), who, in the following Zen *kōan* (Ch.: *gong’ an*; lit. “case study”) taken from the famous “Blue

³⁵⁸ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 94.

³⁵⁹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism* (Boulder: Prajñā Press, 1977; hereafter cited as PZB), 106.

Cliff Record” (Ch.: *Biyān Lu*; J.: *Hekiganroku*), exemplifies “the central teaching of Nāgārjuna.”³⁶⁰

Emperor Wu of Liang: “What is the meaning of the most sacred truth?”

Bodhidharma: “Vast emptiness! Nothing sacred!”³⁶¹

Here it is worth noting that what most distinguishes Zen from the other mystico-speculative systems in this study is, as this chapter will demonstrate, its radical aversion to “conceptual idolatry”,³⁶² i.e., its refusal to allow the non-dual unity of existence to become reified into any kind of substantial or conceptual form.³⁶³ For Zen, there is no Absolute Being “out there” (transcendence) or “in here” (immanence); no Supreme Reality in which all phenomena participate, as one thing participates in another. Rather, as the words cited above from Bodhidharma make clear, the aim of Zen is to break through every conceptual distinction of the mind in order to grasp absolute reality prior to its having become bifurcated into the categories of subject and object, sacred and profane: “Vast emptiness! Nothing sacred!”

³⁶⁰ PZB, *ibid.*

³⁶¹ Cf. *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and the Blue Cliff Records*, trans. Katsuki Sekida (Boulder: Shambhala, 2005), 147.

³⁶² A phrase coined by the contemporary French philosopher and Roman Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion (b.1946). Marion captures the thrust of Zen when he writes: “When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names ‘God,’ this concept functions exactly as an idol.” See *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 16.

³⁶³ Laude, *Shimmering Mirrors*, 86.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Ultimately, however, Chinese Zen traces its view of emptiness back much further than the Bodhidharma, all the way “to certain esoteric teachings allegedly expounded by the historical Buddha to a disciple, and thereafter transmitted through a series of Indian patriarchs”.³⁶⁴ This original esoteric transmission of the Buddha’s wisdom (*prajñā*) is narrated in another *kōan*, this one taken from the revered collection *The Gateless Gate* (Ch.: *Wumenguan*; J.: *Mumonkan*):

Once in ancient times, when the World-Honored One was at Mount Gridhrakūta, he held up a flower, twirled it, and showed it to the assemblage. At this they all remained silent. Only the venerable Kashyapa [or Mahākāśyapa] broke into a smile.³⁶⁵

Why did Mahākāśyapa smile? Because he understood. What did he understand? That which cannot be understood by the understanding or known by knowledge, namely, that “the ten thousand things are of one Suchness.”³⁶⁶ As Nanquan Puyuan (J.: Nansen Fugan; c. 749 - c. 835), a Zen master of the Tang dynasty, once answered when asked how one can know the Way (*dao*): “The Way does not belong to knowing or not-knowing. Knowing is delusion; not-knowing is a blank consciousness.”³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴ HCP II:387.

³⁶⁵ See *The Gateless Gate: The Classic Book of Zen Koans*, ed. Kōun Yamada (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 35.

³⁶⁶ This epigrammatic verse can be found in the Zen text, *Shinjin-No-Mei* (Ch.: *Xinxin Ming*; “On Believing In Mind”), II.21. See D.T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove, 1994), 80.

³⁶⁷ *Gateless Gate*, 93.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

In this sense one can say that the entire notion of a “Zen philosophy” is a misnomer. Taken in its modern conventional use, the act of philosophizing suggests “thinking about something”, i.e., analyzing and critically engaging a particular idea or set of ideas. And to the extent that Zen is profoundly mistrustful of discriminative thinking and the logical structures it assumes incontrovertibly valid, Zen is rightly called “anti-philosophical”. This is not to say, of course, that Zen is simply opposed to thinking altogether. On the contrary, it is a very particular kind of thinking that it opposes, and an equally particular kind of thinking it seeks to cultivate. Zen is not interested in thinking about anything. It is interested in breaking through all thoughts so as to become thought itself, consciousness itself, mind itself (better rendered as THOUGHT, CONSCIOUSNESS, MIND).

This would go some way in explaining the apparent “irrationalism” so often associated with the Zen outlook, especially in its popular Western presentations. In actual fact, Zen only appears to be the most “irrational” of spiritual methods on account of its being the most unremittingly noetic of them all.³⁶⁸ Zen is not so much anti-conceptual as it is supra-conceptual, not so much irrational as trans-rational. Far from advocating a state of sheer mental vacuity or “mindlessness”, the very heart and lifeblood of Zen is MIND emptied of mind and THOUGHT emptied of thinking—or what Kitarō Nishida, founder of the Kyoto school and arguably the brightest luminary of modern Japanese philosophy, had termed “pure experience”.

³⁶⁸ Cf. Toshihiko Izutsu, “Meditation and Intellection in Zen Buddhism”, in *Contemplation and Action in World Religions*, 56.

It is this existential event that the *kōan* of Mahākāśyapa’s smile means to convey. At the true sight—or “pure experience”—of a single flower, the entire world appears as it *is*: “a white heron hidden in the light of a full moon”.³⁶⁹ At the metaphysical level, such a statement refers to “a white thing, or an infinite number of white things, in the very midst of a broad white field”, and thus to the *coincidentia oppositorum* of unity and multiplicity, oneness and the manifold.³⁷⁰ For Zen, absolute *śūnyatā*, though in itself purely formless, “does not exclude forms, but freely and unrestrictedly takes any form as its own expression.”³⁷¹ It is the very “nothingness” of absolute reality (*bhūtatathatā*) that functions as the ground of its “not-otherness” vis-à-vis the world, such that each is all and all is each, and every thing (manifold) is everything (oneness). Hence, just as Zhuangzi could say that the whole universe is “one finger”, “one horse”, so Mahākāśyapa can “say” that the whole universe is “one flower”, “one smile”.

Setting aside these traditional accounts and limiting ourselves only to a consideration of the historical evidence at our disposal today, however, the emergence and development of Zen in India remains, at best, a precarious topic of inquiry, if not an “entirely imaginary”³⁷² one. As Suzuki had already said in the middle of the previous century: “The traditional

³⁶⁹ This is the celebrated saying of Dongshan Liangjie (J.: Tōzan Ryōkai), founder of the Caodong School (J.: Sōtō) in China.

³⁷⁰ PZB, 38.

³⁷¹ Abe, Masao. *Zen and Comparative Studies*, ed. Steven Heine (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 146.

³⁷² HCP II:388.

origin of Zen in India before its introduction into China, which is recorded in Zen literature, is so mixed with legends that no reliable facts can be gathered from it.”³⁷³ Thus while it is hardly unexpected that Zen, as a sect of Buddhism, should seek to legitimize its connection to the broader history of the Buddhist religion in India, it must also be conceded that “Zen as such did not exist in India”—or, if it did, then certainly not in the form familiar to us today.³⁷⁴

Given all that, it is necessary to shift somewhat abruptly to the evolution of Zen in China and the two interpretations of emptiness that arose there. To do this it is important to recognize that China was not a religious vacuum when Buddhism arrived on the scene. Its milieu was of a strong Confucian and Daoist bent. As P.T. Raju observed,³⁷⁵ when the Buddhists arrived in China and began to encounter and engage with the thought forms of the Confucians and the Daoists, they found themselves compelled to engage in comparative thinking. It has even been suggested that the *geyi* (“analogizing concepts”) method of the Chinese Buddhists in the third century C.E., which endeavored to translate the vocabulary of the Sanskrit Buddhist canon into corresponding Chinese terms, as well as to incorporate Daoist terminology into its own linguistic structure, constitutes the earliest documented effort to systematically construct a comparative philosophy.³⁷⁶

³⁷³ See Suzuki, *Essays*, 163.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 164.

³⁷⁵ Raju, *Introduction*, 277.

³⁷⁶ See Tang Yongtong, “On ‘Ko-Yi [pinyin: Geyi],’ the Earliest Method by which Indian Buddhism and Chinese Thought were Synthesized”, trans. M.C. Rogers, in *Radhakrishnan: Comparative Studies in Philosophy Presented in Honour of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. P.T. Raju and others (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1951), 280-83.

Kumārajīva (Ch.: Jiumoluoshi; 344-413 C.E.), the renowned Buddhist monk and scholar immersed in the thought of the Middle-Path school, sought to overcome the sometimes pedantic approach of the *geyi* method through a more esoteric one centered on “mysticism” (*xuan-xue*) and a “profound searching for first principles”.³⁷⁷

The name of Kumārajīva is most notable, however, for having produced two highly prominent disciples: Daosheng (c. 360-434 C.E.) and Sengzhao (384-414 C.E.). It is from these two figures that the main interpretations of emptiness in Chinese Buddhism were fostered and clarified. Both men were agreed that all things were substantially empty or “qualityless”, and that “to be qualityless is the real quality of all things”.³⁷⁸ Where they differed was in their precise understanding of what the term “emptiness” (Ch.: *wu*; J.: *mu*) meant. One view, adopted by Sengzhao, was of a thoroughly apophatic character, asserting that *wu* was “not anything at all, a final nil, nullity as against all that is, even null in relation to its own nullity.”³⁷⁹ The second view, adopted by Daosheng, had a more kataphatic emphasis, asserting “that *wu* denotes the mind, the mind which brings all things into existence.”³⁸⁰ Far from a matter of mere philosophical conjecture, the dispute over these negative and positive interpretations of

³⁷⁷ Yongtong, “Ko-Yi”, 286.

³⁷⁸ SCP, 158.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 159.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

emptiness would have significant implications for the practice of *dhyāna* or meditation.³⁸¹

This point is illustrated in a later debate that arose between the so-called Northern and Southern schools, as represented by Shenxiu (J.: Jinshu; c. 600-706 C.E.) and Huineng (J.: Enō; 638-713 C.E.), respectively. According to one account of the story, we are told that one day, in Xinzhu, a city in southern China, the venerable Fifth Patriarch decided it was time to choose his successor. He subsequently made the announcement that the man who could demonstrate his total mastery of Buddhist doctrine would be the one to assume his patriarchal position. Attempting to meet this challenge, Shenxiu, by far the most erudite and revered of the Fifth Patriarch's disciples, published the following verse on the outside wall of the monastery:

The body is like the Bodhi-tree,
The soul is like a mirror bright;
Take heed to keep it always clean,
And let not dust collect on it.

All who read the verse were astounded by its author's acumen, causing them to be even more thoroughly convinced that Shenxiu was the true heir of the

³⁸¹ See D.T. Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No Mind: The Significance of the Sutra of Hui-Neng (Wei-Lang)* (London: Rider and Company, 1949), 43.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Patriarch. But the very next morning, another verse unexpectedly appeared on the monastery wall that read:

The Bodhi is not like the tree,
The mirror bright is nowhere shining;
As there is nothing from the first,
Where can the dust itself collect?

These words were not written by a learned scholar of Buddhist doctrine, but “by an insignificant layman in the service of the monastery, who spent most of his time in pounding rice and splitting wood for the Brotherhood.”³⁸² It was none other than Huineng. This story, whatever its fabrications, communicates the basic difference between the Northern and Southern schools. While their difference is commonly attributed to opposing emphases, namely, the former’s emphasis on “gradual enlightenment”, and the latter’s emphasis on “sudden” or “instantaneous enlightenment”, this attribution is ultimately superficial. As far as mere emphasis is concerned, such a delineation is perfectly valid. But when these respective emphases are overemphasized themselves, they obscure what most divides the two schools. After all, Shenxiu’s Northern School did not reject sudden enlightenment altogether, nor did Huineng’s Southern School reject gradual enlightenment wholesale. As Wing-tsit Chan remarks, “The contrast

³⁸² Suzuki, *Essays*, 206-207.

between the two schools is much deeper”, resting as it does on two “different concepts of mind.”³⁸³

First it should be said that both schools begin with the same premise: all human beings are endowed with the Buddha-nature, itself identical to the Buddha-mind, so that every single human being is a potential Buddha. Where the schools differ is with respect to their precise conceptions of what constitutes the mind and the particular method of enlightenment that this conception, in turn, implies. While the Southern School argued that the true mind can only emerge out of a purgative process designed to eliminate nescient thoughts until enlightenment is fully realized, the Northern School insisted that the mind could not be divided in this way. The mind, being identical with the absolute oneness of *wu*, cannot be enlightened one step at a time, but only through a single momentary leap, as it were, into suchness (Ch.: *zhen ru*). As Sengzhao had said, echoing the words of Zhuangzi: “Heaven and earth are of one and the same root as myself, and all things are one with me.” The oneness of the manifold is that “Supreme Vacuity which neither comes into [nor goes out of existence]...the subtle principle reflected in the mysterious mirror of wisdom (*prajñā*) and the source of all existents.”³⁸⁴

As such, existence is conceived as an absolute whole or infinite circle that necessarily precludes the distinctions of “within” and “without”,

³⁸³ Chan, *Source Book*, 427.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 350.

in that it is “one unadulterated mass”³⁸⁵ or, as Śāṅkara had said, “an eternal homogenous mass of light.” Every phenomenon *is* its relation to every other phenomenon. Nothing stands alone. Hence the classic Zen analogy of “the bottom of the tub falling out”.³⁸⁶ When the bottom of a tub of water is removed, the water does not gradually make its exit with slow drips over an extended period of time. Instead, the water departs from the tub all at once, suddenly—in a flashing instant.

It is from these two interpretations of emptiness outlined above, namely, the kataphatic and the apophatic, that the divergent concepts of mind arose and the peculiar methods of Zen were later developed.³⁸⁷

From China to Japan: The Rinzai and Sōtō Branches of Zen

It took several centuries after its introduction into Japan (c. 7th century) before Zen came to flourish during the Kamakura period (1185-1333 C.E.).³⁸⁸ Although other classifications are possible, yet, as it pertains to the purpose of this chapter, Japanese Zen can be divided into two main branches: (1) the Rinzai School (Ch.: Linji zong), founded during the Tang dynasty by Rinzai Gigen (Ch.: Linji Yixuan, 9th century C.E.) and later brought to Japan through the Buddhist priest Myōan Eisai (1141-1215 C.E.), and (2) the Sōtō School (Ch.: Caodong zong), founded during the

³⁸⁵ TDET IV:72.

³⁸⁶ SCP, 168.

³⁸⁷ Chan, *Source Book*, 428.

³⁸⁸ See Ruth Fuller Sasaki, “The Koan in Japanese Zen”, in Isshū Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Zen Koan* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), 17.

same dynasty by Tōzan Ryōkai (Ch.: Dongshan Liangjie, 9th century C.E.) and later established in Japan by the outstanding Buddhist priest, poet, and philosopher, Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253 C.E.).

While the Sōtō branch has historical ties to the Northern School of Shenxiu and the Rinzai branch has ties to the Southern School of Huineng, their differences are not nearly so great as they are sometimes portrayed. This is not to say that their differences are simply negligible. It is only to say that what divides them is, again, more a matter of “stress” than of “substance”. In the end, the goal of both is the same: *kenshō*, meaning “insight into one’s true nature”, or what Zen elsewhere refers to as “the original face you had before your father and mother were born”.³⁸⁹

The main stress of the Rinzai school is laid on the dynamic existential engagement with a particular *kōan*. By contrast, the main stress of the Sōtō school is laid on the practice of “just sitting” or “sitting only” (*shikantaza*), and the “silent illumination” (*mokushō*) with which that act is ultimately identical. It is important to state clearly that neither school rejects the other’s emphasis. Dōgen, for example, did not deny the use of *kōans*,³⁹⁰ and in his *Shōbōgenzō* comments on them extensively. Likewise, the Rinzai branch affirms the gradual, deepening struggle with a given *kōan*, until what the great Japanese Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1769 C.E.) called “the iron ball of doubt” is finally broken and *satori* (“enlightenment”) arrives “as

³⁸⁹ *Gateless Gate*, 115.

³⁹⁰ See Sasaki, “The Koan in Japanese Zen”, 19. Sasaki goes on to note, however, that eventually, with Keizan Jōkin (1268-1325 C.E.), the fourth patriarch of the Sōtō School, “the koan was completely discarded, in theory at least...”

an abrupt and sudden spiritual event.”³⁹¹ In the last analysis, the Rinzai school refuses to admit differing “degrees” within the event of enlightenment for the very same reason that the Sōtō school affirms them: the non-dual oneness of reality (*ichinyo*). Each school proceeds from an integrating logic that fundamentally repudiates every attempt to transpose the qualitative unity of existence into a mere multitude of quantifiably analyzable parts. Therefore, just as enlightenment cannot be divided into separate “steps” (Rinzai), so too one cannot gain “insight into one’s own real nature” other than through the total, unitive participation of the Zen disciple (Sōtō).³⁹²

To summarize, Zen represents a radical interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness (oneness) and dependent co-origination (manifold), one that is entirely inseparable from its internally diverse meditational practices. Having sketched the complex development of Zen from its prefiguration in India, its establishment in China, to its eventual flourishing in Japan, I turn to a summary of the method and outline of the present chapter.

Method and Outline

In this chapter I expound and analyze the Zen Buddhist understanding of reality as simultaneously one and manifold, an understanding according to which just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the differentiated

³⁹¹ Izutsu, “Meditation and Intellection”, 60.

³⁹² *Ibid*, 59.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

modes of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as so many limited determinations of a single suchness (Sk.: *tathatā*; J.: *shinnyo*), the myriad “manifestations of emptiness.”³⁹³ I examine this doctrine under the three interrelated headings of existence (Section One), manifestation (Section Two), and knowledge (Section Three), with each heading comprised of a structural exposition and textual analysis. My intention in doing so is to further develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory by which to compare mystical ontologies East and West, analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the mystico-speculative notion of reality as simultaneously one and manifold. A visual portrait of this method, as compared with the concepts derived from the previous two studies on Advaita Vedānta Hinduism and philosophical Daoism, is provided below (Table 5), with Zen terms in bold:

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayatā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shinnyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>

Table 5. *Corresponding Concepts – Zen Buddhism*

³⁹³ Abe, *Zen and Comparative Studies*, 64.

Having completed this introduction, I turn now to an exposition and analysis of Zen under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge.

2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis

Section One: Existence

Structural Exposition: Existence as *Shinnyo*

As we have already seen with Advaita Vedānta Hinduism and philosophical Daoism, Zen understands “existence” to be an absolute unity or oneness—a oneness that is not mathematical but metaphysical in meaning. For Zen, existence is neither “one” in contrast to the “many”, nor “absolute” in contrast to the “relative”; neither “transcendent” in contrast to “immanence”, nor “empty” in contrast to “fullness”; neither “being” in contrast to “non-being”, nor “eternal” in contrast to the “temporal”, “infinite” in contrast to the “finite”, “sacred” in contrast to the “profane”, etc. Again, to borrow the Advaitic phrase, existence is *neti, neti*, “neither this nor that”. Which means that existence is at once “no-thing”, beyond all determinations, and “not-other”, exceeding all oppositions. More than a merely negative concept, existence is interpreted as a homogenous plenum or profusive void (*śūnyatā*); a boundless circle with no “inside” or “outside”; an infinite field where “there is not an inch of grass growing”;³⁹⁴

³⁹⁴ This statement is taken from a famous Zen *mondō* or dialogue between a student and his master.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

an “undifferentiated world”³⁹⁵ where every negation is negated and even transcendence itself is transcended. To quote Suzuki,

Reality is all-inclusive, there is nothing that can be outside of it. Because it is all-inclusive, it is the fullness of things, not a content-free abstraction, as the intellect is too frequently apt to make it. It is not a mere aggregate of individual objects, nor is it something other than the objects. It is not something that is imposed upon other things stringing them together and holding them together from the outside. It is the principle of integration residing inside things and identical with them.³⁹⁶

The American Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) once summarized the fundamental ethos of Zen as “the ontological awareness of pure being beyond subject and object, an immediate grasp of being in its suchness and thisness.”³⁹⁷ Izutsu remarks that while such a statement is quite correct as far as metaphysical descriptions go, it nevertheless tends to promote a picture that is much too immobile and static. The radical dynamism of Zen is lost in its precision.³⁹⁸ As outlined in the introduction above, Zen is centered on the interplay of (1) the co-original dependence of all things on each other and each on all things, and (2) the substantial emptiness of phenomena that allows them to be what they are: the restricted articulations of unrestricted oneness. In the words of the “Song of

³⁹⁵ Kobori Sōhaku Nanrei, “A Dialogue: A Discussion Between One and Zero”, in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries*, ed. Frederick Franck (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), 144.

³⁹⁶ D.T. Suzuki, “The Buddhist Conception of Reality”, in *The Buddha Eye*, 93.

³⁹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 16.

³⁹⁸ PZB, 125.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Enlightenment” (Ch.: *Zhengdao ge*; J.: *Shōdōka*), ascribed to Yongjia Xuanjue (J.: Yōka Genkaku; 665-713 C.E.):

One Nature, perfect and pervading, circulates in all natures;
One Reality, all comprehensive, contains within itself all realities;
The one moon reflects itself wherever there is a sheet of water,
And all the moons in the waters are embraced within the one moon;
The Dharma-body of all the Buddhas enters into my own being,
And my own being is found in union with theirs.³⁹⁹

Accordingly, the absolute oneness of existence is not a static but a dynamic concept, embracing myriad levels, modalities, and degrees, without forfeiting its original unity. In order for the undifferentiated absolute to “exist” (from *ex-sistere*, meaning “to stand forth”), it must differentiate itself. This is the paradox at which every mystico-speculative tradition of this study eventually arrives: *the absolute “no-thing” is infinitely “not-other”*. The circle of metaphysical emptiness (○) is, at the very same time, the circle pregnant with and productive of infinite forms (⊙). The appearance of this phenomenal “dot” or “point” within the circle of absolute emptiness comes about in a metaphysical instant, and not as the result of a change or movement achieved in time. Which is only another way of saying that both are metaphysically simultaneous. The “no-thingness” of the absolute is the “ground” (non-objectively speaking) of its infinite “not-otherness” vis-à-vis

³⁹⁹ Translation by Suzuki, *Manual*, 97.

the world. Or to quote Yung Chia once more: “In one stage are stored up all the stages”.⁴⁰⁰ The dynamic interrelation—and ultimate identity—of these two circles is illustrated in the figure below (Figure 3).

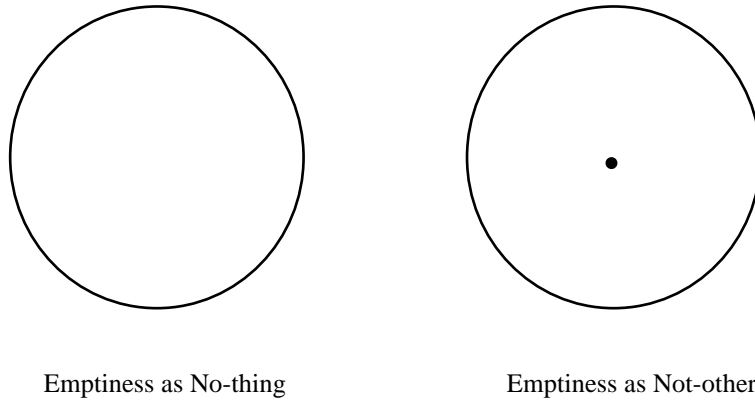


Figure 3. *The Two Aspects of Emptiness*

Having briefly outlined the structure of existence as understood within Zen Buddhism, I turn now to a textual analysis of select passages drawn from Dōgen’s monumental *Shōbōgenzō*.

Textual Analysis: The *Shōbōgenzō*

Given that the main focus of the present subsection is on the mystico-speculative vision of Dōgen and his *Shōbōgenzō*, a few prefatory remarks on his life and work are in order. According to Abe, what makes Dōgen such an exceptional figure in the history of Japanese Zen—and, indeed, in the history of religious thought in general—was the way in which he was

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

able to synthesize “the experience of a profound religious realization with keen philosophical and speculative skills that surpassed his predecessors and followers.”⁴⁰¹ Though born into a noble family, Dōgen would in his youth become a humble monk at Mt. Hiei, a monastery of the Tendai school of Buddhism. It was here that the young Dōgen was gripped by the question: If it is true that all beings are originally endowed with the Buddha-nature or Dharma-nature, such that “Every voice is the voice of Buddha, every form is the Buddha-form”,⁴⁰² then what purpose is there in seeking after enlightenment or in practicing meditation? Stated differently: How, if at all, do “original attainment” (*hongaku*) and “acquired attainment” (*shikaku*) relate?⁴⁰³

Unsatisfied with the prominent Japanese sects of that time, he undertook a journey with his master, Rujing (J.: Tendo Nyojō; 1163-1228 C.E.) to Song China, where he found what he believed was “the Buddha Dharma directly transmitted from the buddhas and patriarchs.”⁴⁰⁴ It is out of this existential realization that Dōgen came to perceive the “oneness of practice and attainment” (*shushō-ittō*), or, transposed into Western terms, the unity of *theoría* and *praxis*, doctrine and method. In fact, the mystico-speculative notion of “oneness” (*ichinyo*), defined as the “essential

⁴⁰¹ Masao Abe, *A Study of Dōgen: His Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Steven Heine (New York: SUNY, 1992), 11.

⁴⁰² From the *Zenrin kushū* or “Zen Phrase Anthology”. As quoted in *Zen Koan*, 103.

⁴⁰³ Abe, *Dōgen*, 19.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

substance of all existences”,⁴⁰⁵ can be said to constitute the pivotal principle of his entire philosophy.⁴⁰⁶ Hence the very first chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*, entitled *Bendōwa* (“Discourse on the Pursuit of Truth”), begins by stating its purpose as making the manifold of phenomena real to experience through the enactment of the “oneness of reality” (*ichinyo*).⁴⁰⁷ The *Shōbōgenzō* is therefore not only a voluminous work of supreme importance to Japanese intellectual history, but a document of the most far-reaching “philosophical speculation”, comparable in its influence to the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas in the Christian West.⁴⁰⁸

Since scattered, supportive references are also made to several Zen *kōans*, it becomes necessary to briefly say something about the unique origin and function of the *kōan* as well. The word *kōan* (Ch.: *gong’ an*) was employed during the Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.) as a legal term. Etymologically, *kō* (Ch.: *gong*) means “public”, while *an* (Ch.: *an*) means “records”. The *kōan* was therefore a case record or study that established a legal precedent. Later, during the Song dynasty (960-1279 C.E.), when the “Gateless Gate” and “Blue Cliff Record” were both written, the *kōan* was adapted into “a highly distinctive element in the literature of Zen Buddhism”, having no clear equivalent or parallel with any other set of

⁴⁰⁵ Hisao Inagaki, ed., *A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms: With Supplement* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2007), 120.

⁴⁰⁶ Abe, *Dōgen*, 19.

⁴⁰⁷ TDET I:3.

⁴⁰⁸ Abe, *Dōgen*, 18.

religious writings.⁴⁰⁹ In the words of Sasaki, “The origin of the koan and the method of using it lie in the nature of Zen itself.”⁴¹⁰

The peculiar method and function of the *kōan* is irreducible to any single interpretation. On one level, the *kōan* represents a logically irresolvable paradox; on another, a deliberately meaningless statement; on still another, an utterance designed to inflict a “violent, drastic psychological shock”;⁴¹¹ etc. While these are legitimate descriptions of how the *kōan* operates, they are all nevertheless restricted to what might be called a second-order mode of discourse, i.e., a cogitational, discriminative mode of thinking. Interpreted at the primary or first-order level, however, the *kōan* is no longer seen as “a conundrum to be solved by a nimble wit” or “a verbal psychiatric device for shocking the disintegrated ego of a student into some kind of stability”,⁴¹² but rather as a “problem” resolvable through an extra-mental, trans-psychical mode in which the subject merges into the object of its meditation. In this sense, the *kōan* is a kind of alchemical technique aimed to transmute the “lead” of thought into the “gold” of *hi-shiryo*, “thinking-beyond-thought”. Everything must be purged away and shattered to pieces, so as to realize the truth of the Zen phrase: “Now that I’ve shed my skin completely, One true reality alone exists”.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁹ A.V. Grimstone, “Introduction”, in *Two Zen Classics*, 13.

⁴¹⁰ Sasaki, “The History of the Koan in Rinzai (Lin-chi) Zen”, in *Zen Koan*, 7.

⁴¹¹ PZB, 167-9.

⁴¹² Sasaki, “Foreword”, in *Zen Koan*, xi.

⁴¹³ As quoted in *Zen Koan*, 95.

While it is common to construe this act of “shattering” as ordered toward the psychological condition of a serene or tranquil mind, this fails to realize that even the most serene state of the psyche must be shattered as well. Nothing is spared from the flames. As in Zhuangzi’s notion of “sitting in forgetfulness” (*zuowang*), the oblivion must be total. Hence the “public” aspect of the *kōan*, foreclosing all private interpretations. At its highest, supra-individual level, the *kōan* is no longer a riddle to be explained, but a reality to be experienced, such that the only way to “solve” the *kōan* is to *become* the *kōan*. What is more, this identification is possible through any *kōan* that a master assigns to his student, since each and every *kōan* communicates and expresses, in its own unique manner, the “epitome of Zen philosophy.”⁴¹⁴

With these remarks in mind, the following subsection turns to a textual analysis of Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō*, focusing on the *Busshō* chapter (“The Buddha-nature”, ch. 22).

Shōbōgenzō Busshō

Dōgen’s view of existence is nowhere better expressed than in the *Busshō* chapter of his *Shōbōgenzō*. The Japanese word *busshō* is derived from *butsu*, meaning “buddha”, and *shō*, meaning “nature”, and is therefore equivalent to the Sanskrit *buddhatā* or “buddha-nature”. Traditionally in Buddhist thought, the notion of buddha-nature was interpreted as the

⁴¹⁴ Izutsu, “Meditation and Intellection”, 64.

potential of all sentient beings to become buddha or as a static attribute that things intrinsically possess. In contrast to these views, Dōgen reinterprets the concept of buddha-nature or buddha-hood as the dynamic presence of absolute suchness in the here and now.⁴¹⁵

The *Busshō* chapter opens with a quote from the *Mahāparanirvāṇa-sūtra* (ch. 27).

Śākyamuni Buddha says: All living beings totally possess the buddha-nature: the Tathāgata abides [in them] constantly, without changing at all.⁴¹⁶

The term “totally possess” (*shitsu-ū*) is usually interpreted as a verb, with *shitsu* meaning “totally” and *ū* meaning “possess”. Dōgen, however, interprets it as a noun, with *shitsu* meaning “total” and *ū* meaning “existence”, i.e., “true suchness” (*shinnyo*). For Dōgen, suchness is not a property that things possess (e.g., “this flower is white”). Rather, as “total existence”, it is that which differentiates itself “here” in one way and “there” in another, such that, strictly speaking, it is not the rose or the lily that exists, but existence that “roses” “here” and “lilies” “there”. The *shinnyo* or suchness of Dōgen is thus, like the *sat* of Śaṅkara, or the *dao* of Zhuangzi, a non-dual, trans-dialectical concept, “beyond the ‘existence’ of existence and non-existence.”⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁵ Translator’s Note, TDET II:3.

⁴¹⁶ TDET II:3.

⁴¹⁷ TDET II:4.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

According to Dōgen, existence is an analogical oneness, i.e., a unity-in-multiplicity and a multiplicity-in-unity. “Total existence” is neither “smashed into hundreds of bits and pieces” (mere difference) nor “a single rail of iron” (mere undifferentiation).⁴¹⁸ This recalls the mystico-speculative thesis that “the Undifferentiated *ex-ists* only through its own differentiations.”⁴¹⁹ Which is why Dōgen goes on to deny that absolute suchness is “related to inside, outside, or middle”, on the one hand, while also affirming that all phenomena “are” only in their absolute reliance (*zen-e*) on the Absolute.⁴²⁰ Similar to Śāṅkara’s use of the analogy of the ocean and its waves, Dōgen writes that the “mountains, rivers, and earth [i.e., manifold waves] are all the ocean of buddha-nature [i.e., the oneness of reality or *ichinyo*].”⁴²¹

The unitive knowledge of “total existence” is not, for Dōgen, a static state or intrinsic property of the mind, but an experiential event of “really knowing just here and now” (*tō-chi*).⁴²² In the same way that absolute suchness transcends the relative categories of existence and non-existence, so the event of “knowing here and now” transcends the categories of subjective and objective reflection. Such “knowledge” is “not-knowledge” in that it is not “about” anything. Rather, it “is the buddha-nature itself—the buddha nature rid of its own substance”.⁴²³

⁴¹⁸ TDET II:6.

⁴¹⁹ PZB, 171.

⁴²⁰ TDET II:8.

⁴²¹ TDET II:8.

⁴²² TDET II:10.

⁴²³ TDET II:7.

This returns us to the concept of emptiness. Emptiness, as employed by Dōgen, cannot be construed as something merely negative: “...‘emptiness’ [*kū*] is not non-existence [*mu*].”⁴²⁴ Thus while it may be standard practice to translate the Sanskrit Buddhist term *śūnyatā* as “emptiness”, it is perhaps more advantageous (and accurate) to translate it as “wondrous being”, “boundless openness”, or “luminosity”, as Masao Abe and Herbert Guenther have done. On this reading, *kū* is a plenitudinous void or super-abounding abyss, beyond all determinations (“no-thing”) and transcending all oppositions (“not-other”). It is not a mere negation, but the absolute negation that negates negation, the absolute emptiness that empties out emptiness.

Pursuing the logic of the Mahāyāna doctrine of *śūnyatā* to its full and radical conclusion, Dōgen thus argues that all things—whether sentient (*ujō*) or non-sentient (*mujō*)—are identical to the buddha-nature, in that the buddha-nature is identical to the ontological ocean of *kū*. It is through the luminous plenum of emptiness that all things are just themselves, namely, the many articulations of the Unarticulated, the manifold expressions of the Inexpressible. It is in this connection that Dōgen cites another verse, this one from Huineng’s revered *Platform Sutra* (Ch.: *Liuzu Tanjing*; 8th-13th centuries C.E.): “All living beings, being without being, are the buddha-nature.” Here Dōgen criticizes the way in which traditional Buddhism restricts the buddha-nature to sentient beings only. Such a view, in Dōgen’s

⁴²⁴ TDET II:10.

estimation, falsely absolutizes the standpoint of sentience, while arbitrarily discounting the standpoint of non-sentient beings as either insignificant or irrelevant. As Dōgen writes elsewhere, in *Shōbōgenzō Sansuigyō* (“The Sutra of Mountains and Water”), to truly see water is not to see it as a human or a mammal or an insect sees water. It is to see water *as water sees itself*.⁴²⁵ Izutsu summarizes Dōgen’s understanding by saying that “we must...develop the spiritual ability to look at things not in terms of a culturally conditioned pattern of looking at things, not even in terms of the humanly predetermined categories of cognition, but in terms of the limitless ontological possibilities of the Non-Articulated itself.”⁴²⁶

It is in this way that Dōgen can be said to have achieved “a radical broadening of the scope of Buddha nature”,⁴²⁷ so as to re-envisage “suchness” as all: principial, analogical, and universal. Suchness is principial in that “everything is a dynamic disclosure of absolute reality”;⁴²⁸ it is analogical in that it is simultaneously “no-thing” (oneness) and “not-other” (manifold); and it is universal in that it is boundlessly open, enfolding and unfolding all phenomena at every moment.

All of this evokes the first *kōan* of the *Mumonkan* in which a monk asks the great Zen master of the Tang dynasty, Jōshū Jūshin (Ch.: Zhaozhou Congshen; 778-897 C.E.): “Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?” To

⁴²⁵ TDET I:224.

⁴²⁶ PZB, 142.

⁴²⁷ Francis H. Cook, “Dōgen’s View of Authentic Selfhood”, in *Dōgen Studies*, 141.

⁴²⁸ Cook, “Authentic Selfhood”, 142.

which Jōshū replies, “Mu!” Literally understood, the Chinese word *mu* means “nothing” or “non-existence”, implying that Jōshū answered in the negative. However, as stated above, the *kōan* is the killer of all concepts. It is designed to annihilate the discriminative modes of knowing and awaken what Guenther calls “mystic-intuition”.⁴²⁹ Interpreted in this way, i.e., esoterically, Jōshū’s answer is neither negative nor affirmative. It does not deny the buddha-nature to the dog in question, nor does it acknowledge the buddha-nature as something the dog “has” or “possesses”. Rather, dog, buddha-nature, and *mu* are all absolutely—and thus non-dually—*one*. In *mu*, here used as a synonym of *kū* or “no-thingness”, all phenomena are not-other-than each other. Hence, for Dōgen, to ask whether a dog has the buddha-nature is simply another way of asking whether a dog is a dog.⁴³⁰ Jacqueline I. Stone captures this point well when she writes,

Because suchness is the real aspect of things, to think of oneself and others in this way is to open a perspective from which individuals are not separate, unrelated, or conflicting existences but nondual—each identical with the totality of all that is and encompassing all others within itself. In other words, it is to see all beings manifesting original enlightenment *just as they are*.⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ Herbert Guenther, *Tibetan Buddhism Without Mystification: The Buddhist Way from Original Tibetan Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 9.

⁴³⁰ TDET II:26.

⁴³¹ Jacqueline I. Stone, “The Contemplation of Suchness”, in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. George J. Tanabe (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 201 (italics mine).

Dōgen concludes the *Busshō* chapter: “Because the buddha-nature is just the buddha-nature, living beings are just living beings.”⁴³² Or to better align this statement to the thesis of the present study: “Because oneness is just oneness, the manifold is just the manifold.”

Having finished the preceding section on existence, I turn to the next section on manifestation.

Section Two: Manifestation

Structural Exposition: Manifestation as *Engi*

From the standpoint of Zen Buddhism, manifestation is a term with multiple senses. In Japanese terminology, it is variously designated as *genzen* (lit. “in front of oneself; before one’s eyes”⁴³³), *innen* (“causes and conditions”), *engi* (“arising from conditions”), etc. Dōgen likens manifestation to a flower unfolding in total reliance on its root, and the root, in turn, existing on the basis of the flower it unfolds.⁴³⁴ The enfolding and unfolding of manifestation therefore constitutes a single, co-originating event made possible by dint of the substantial emptiness of all things. Again, “emptiness” does not here refer to what Heidegger had rightly denounced as an “onto-theo-logical” “support” or objective “ground” of phenomena. To the contrary, it denotes the non-reifiability of existence. Emptiness cannot be objectified or conceptualized. It is not a quality inhering in things.

⁴³² TDET II:22.

⁴³³ Inagaki, *Dictionary*, 63.

⁴³⁴ TDET III:22.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Rather, all things “are” as the “quality-less qualities” of emptiness. Therefore, to say that “everything is emptiness” is just another way of saying that “everything is *what it is*.” The principle of unity (oneness) and the principle of individuation (manifold) are one and the same principle.⁴³⁵

This gets us to what Nagao has called the key principle of Mahāyāna Buddhism (and, by extension, Zen Buddhism as well), namely, the oneness of the manifold. Whereas the Mādhyamika idea of “twofold truth” (i.e., the distinction between what is “really real” and what is merely “convention”, Sk.: *saṃvṛti*) implies the total discontinuity and no-thingness of the absolute, the doctrine of emptiness implies the total identity and not-otherness of (1) the absolute vis-à-vis the relative, (2) all things vis-à-vis each other, and (3) each vis-à-vis all things. In the words of Sengzhaio: “...a thing is a thing because it becomes so in relation to other things...”⁴³⁶ This principle can be expressed in any number of ways: “identity-difference”, “identical as well as different”, “identity of difference”, “identity in difference”, “identity is difference”, etc.⁴³⁷ The perennial philosophical “problem” of the one and the many is therefore only a “problem” where it is perceived from an infra-noetic mode of consciousness, i.e., a mode of consciousness that discriminates between the absolute oneness of reality (*ichinyo*) and its manifold determinations (*engi*), as if the former were a thing related to other things or an object related to other objects. According

⁴³⁵ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 223.

⁴³⁶ Chan, *Source Book*, 352.

⁴³⁷ Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra*, 124.

to the viewpoint of Zen, manifestation can only be grasped through an immediate mystical intuition, what Dōgen had styled “just seeing”; an absolute vision of suchness prior to its having become bifurcated into seer (subject) and seen (object). Or to quote Nagao again: “The joining together of identity with difference is nothing more than a mystical intuition.”⁴³⁸

Manifestation is therefore neither a static monolith nor a conglomeration of so many ontologically isolated “substances”, but the dynamic emergence and submergence of endless forms, each of which expresses the total dynamism of the whole.⁴³⁹ Phenomena “appear” as instantaneous flashes of light, having neither “before” nor “after”, freshly articulated at every moment. Time is not the locus wherein things (X) perpetuate themselves through a linear sequence of events (E): $X=E^1 \rightarrow X=E^2 \rightarrow X=E^3, \infty$. “The whole of existence, the whole universe, exists in individual moments of time.”⁴⁴⁰ The notions of “before” and “after” are drawn from the mind’s analysis of absolute reality after it has been bifurcated into the conceptual categories of subject and object, knower and known, self and other, “this” and “that”, “here” and “there”, “then” and “now”. Every instant is its own instant. Existence and time are, for Dōgen, absolutely identical; hence his innovative concept of “being-time” (*uji*): “Time in itself is being; all beings are time.”⁴⁴¹ Yet rather than fracturing the manifold into some form of ontological atomism, Dōgen instead

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Abe, *Dōgen*, 82.

⁴⁴⁰ TDET I:144.

⁴⁴¹ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 62.

perceives every individuated moment of time as a total dynamic manifestation of timelessness (*zenkigen*). This relates to Dōgen’s distinctive understanding of meditational practice. For Dōgen, the practice of “just sitting” (*shikantaza*) is not a spiritual technique or device ordered toward realization; it is realization itself. To “just sit” is to “just see” all things in their mutual coalescence, simultaneously “undifferentiated yet distinct.”⁴⁴²

Everything is a manifestation of the Unmanifest, and thus an analogical unity of sameness-in-and-through-difference. As “no-thing”, the oneness of the manifold is not identical to the manifold, or at least not in any kind of straightforwardly monistic fashion. Yet, as “not-other”, the oneness of the manifold is not merely different from the manifold either, which would lead to a grotesque ontological dualism. On the contrary, just as squareness is the no-square that manifests itself as every square, so oneness is the “no-thing” that manifests itself as everything: “wondrous being” (*kū*).

It is in this way that all phenomena are perceived as ontologically “poor” or “needy”, possessing nothing, not even themselves. However, similar to Śāṅkara’s doctrine of “illusion” (*māyā*), or Zhuangzi’s “transmutation of all things” (*wu hua*), the concept of *engi*, as formulated by Zen Buddhist thought and the mystico-speculative thinking of Dōgen especially, is not only negative in significance, but has a positive implication as well. Negatively, it refers to the non-substantiality and

⁴⁴² Ibid, 66.

impermanence of all phenomena; while positively, it refers to their ceaseless interplay and co-origination, as in the Mahāyānic notion of *pratītya-samutpāda*.

Hence the Zen structure of manifestation functions according to the logic of “absolutely contradictory self identity” (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu*), to borrow the phrase of Nishida.⁴⁴³ Unity and multiplicity relate via their dynamic “interexpression”⁴⁴⁴—all things subsisting “as the many through the self-negation of the One.”⁴⁴⁵ This exactly corresponds to what Dōgen means by “the oneness of reality” (*ichinyo*). Each of the myriad phenomena ontologically interpenetrate every other as “mutually reflecting mirrors”,⁴⁴⁶ and precisely in doing so manifest the non-dual unity (*byōdō*) of suchness itself (*shinnyo*). All phenomena “are” as (1) the many instantiations of a single Instant and (2) the single Instant of their own instantiation, such that to say “X exists at this moment” is no different than saying “this moment!”⁴⁴⁷ As the revered compiler of the “Blue Cliff Record”, Engō Kokugon (Ch.: Yuanwu Keqin; 1063-1135 C.E.), could say: “When even one particle stirs, the whole universe is involved; a blossom opens and the world responds. But what do you see when there are as yet no particles to stir and no blossoms to open? It is said that it is like cutting a thread on a reel: one cut and you cut it all.”⁴⁴⁸ The implication here is, as

⁴⁴³ Kitarō Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 103.

⁴⁴⁴ Kitarō, *Nothingness*, 103.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 108.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 123.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴⁸ *Two Zen Classics*, 197.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Izutsu observes, that neither the stirring particle nor the blossoming flower are “solid self-subsistent entities. They are transparent and permeable. Reflecting each other, interpenetrating each other, and dissolving themselves into each other, they form an integral whole which is nothing other than the direct appearance of the primary level of Reality”:⁴⁴⁹ the oneness of the manifold.

Textual Analysis: The *Shōbōgenzō*

I now analyze the Zen Buddhist concept of manifestation through several passages drawn from Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō Genjō-kōan* (“Manifestation of Ultimate Reality”,⁴⁵⁰ Chapter 3).

Shōbōgenzō Genjō-kōan

Dōgen opens his *Genjō-kōan* chapter by making the following assertion:

When we use the whole body and mind to look at forms, and when we use the whole body and mind to listen to sounds, even though we are sensing them directly, it is not like a mirror’s reflection of an image, and not like water and the moon. While we are experiencing one side, we are blind to the other side.⁴⁵¹

This corresponds to Śāṅkara’s discussion of the objects of manifestation as mutually restrictive and delimiting in nature, such that wherever the mind

⁴⁴⁹ PZB, 112.

⁴⁵⁰ This is the translation of Abe. See *Dōgen*, 244.

⁴⁵¹ TDET I:42.

becomes occupied with “this” (e.g., the sky), it must detach itself from “that” (e.g., the earth, a stone, a tree). At the empirical level, all things stand opposed to each other. Each thing “is” precisely that which distinguishes it from everything else. Here Dōgen is saying something similar. Even when directly sensing the world with “the whole body and mind”, i.e., the somatico-psychic unity of the individual human subject or ego, it is only possible to experience “one side” of a given phenomenon, the limited concentration of which necessarily blinds us “to the other side.”⁴⁵² To this problem, Dōgen advocates the solution of “body-and-mind-dropping-off” (*shinjin-datsuraku*).

To learn the Buddha’s truth is to learn ourselves. To learn ourselves is to forget ourselves. To forget ourselves is to be experienced by the myriad dharmas. To be experienced by the myriad dharmas is to let our own body and mind, and the body and mind of the external world, drop off.⁴⁵³

According to Dōgen, it is only by forgetting ourselves as ontologically fixed essences cordoned off from every other essence, that we are able to remember our “original element”⁴⁵⁴—“the original face we had before our father and mother were born”. It is in this connection that Dōgen proceeds by making use of the analogy of firewood and ashes.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Firewood turns into ashes. The ashes can never go backward and regain the form of firewood. On the basis of the observation of this fact, however, one should not hastily conclude that the ashes are posterior and the firewood prior. Know that firewood remains established in its own *dharma*-position (i.e., its ontological position) of “being firewood;” yet, in this position, it has “before” and “after.” Although it has “before” and “after,” it is cut off from “before” and “after.” Ashes, likewise, remain in the *dharma*-position of “being ashes,” yet, in this position, they have “before” and “after.”⁴⁵⁵

The meaning of this passage can be explained as follows. At the empirical level of analysis, firewood (*F*) appears to “become” ash (*A*) when it is burned ($F \rightarrow A$). This idea of firewood “becoming” ash can only arise, however, within the locus of a much broader assumption, namely, that there is a stable essence (*E*) that is identical to both elements of firewood and ash throughout the process of their “becoming” ($E = F \rightarrow E = A$). For Dōgen, this assumption is illusory, a conceptual fiction grounded in the mere appearance of things and not in their reality. Firewood is just firewood. Ashes are just ashes. The latter does not “become” the former precisely because there is nothing to “become”. As Dōgen says, even the firewood in the ontological position of “being firewood” is not the same for so much as two consecutive moments. All phenomena are continually proceeding from, returning to, and re-emerging again from emptiness, at each and every instant, such that what we name “firewood” at one point of time ($F^I = P^I$) is

⁴⁵⁵ As translated by Izutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1994), 143-144.

not the same piece of firewood as seen at a later point ($F^1 \neq P^2$), as in the Heraclitean dictum: “No one steps into the same river twice”.

Dōgen is not offering up a philosophical thesis at this point, itself the “product of rational thinking in the nature of a scholastic atomism”. It is no theoretical postulate that Dōgen is describing, but rather “a personal testimony” of what he himself has experienced and seen “in the state of contemplation”,⁴⁵⁶ i.e., in the state of “just seeing”. It is the fruit of a mystico-speculative vision that Dōgen seeks to communicate, a vision in which all things are the Buddha-nature (oneness) and the Buddha-nature is all things (manifold): “This is Dōgen’s world of manifestation of the Buddha-nature.”⁴⁵⁷ Which brings us now to one of the more well-known passages of the *Shōbōgenzō*:

A person getting realization is like the moon being reflected in water: the moon does not get wet, and the water is not broken. Though the light [of the moon] is wide and great, it is reflected in a foot or an inch of water. The whole moon and the whole sky are reflected in a dewdrop on a blade of grass and are reflected in a single drop of water.⁴⁵⁸

This passage succinctly captures the Zen understanding of manifestation. The moon is not any reflection (“no-thing”). Just so, it is the “ground” of all reflections (“not-other”). The use of the word “ground” should not be

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 146.

⁴⁵⁷ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 66.

⁴⁵⁸ TDET I:43.

interpreted in its ordinary sense, however. For Dōgen, the absolute suchness of things is, as Abe aptly notes, “not a substantial ground or a ground that is some particular thing, but a ground as no-thing, that is, a non-substantial and non-objectifiable ground.”⁴⁵⁹ Irreducible to any single body of water, the unarticulated oneness of reality (*ichinyo*) is capable of articulating itself endlessly, without forfeiting its pre-phenomenal quietude. As Dōgen says, the moon can reflect itself in innumerable bodies of water without ever getting wet, just as water can reflect the whole moon without ever being broken. Water as nothing but water reflects the whole moon as nothing but moon, “like two mirrors mutually reflecting each other without even the shadow of an image between.”⁴⁶⁰ Neither the moon nor the water withholds anything of themselves from the other. Perfectly empty, they are more than full. The moon is thus as prodigal in the mode of its giving as a single dew drop on a blade of grass is in its mode of receiving, both obeying the logic of “contradictory identity” (*mujunteki dōitsu*).

To attain realization is to be one with this unity, a living mirror wherein the total dynamism of existence is reflected and made manifest (*zenkigen*).⁴⁶¹ As Titus Burckhardt could say, of all the myriad symbols that have been employed throughout the ages to express the mystico-speculative vision of existence, the mirror is the most felicitous of them all. To the extent that the mirror communicates the trans-rational and non-dual mode

⁴⁵⁹ Abe, *Dōgen*, 28.

⁴⁶⁰ Isshū Miura, “Koan Study in Rinzai Zen”, in *Zen Koan*, 69.

⁴⁶¹ Abe, *Dōgen*, 163.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

of subject-object unity, it is properly called “the symbol of the symbol.”⁴⁶² Every mirror (Lt.: *speculum*) is whatever it reflects. Dōgen’s use of the word *yadoru* corresponds to this insight. *Yadoru* does not simply mean “to be reflected in”, but “to dwell in”. Here oneness and the manifold are “interexpressed”, such that every phenomenon—be it firewood, ashes, the moon, or a dewdrop on a blade of grass—is the absolute instant of its appearing, or what Dōgen refers to as its “immediate now” (*nikon*). Put another way: everything is the absolute oneness of reality manifesting-itself-to-itself and articulating-itself-as-itself. The total dynamic structure of manifestation is, in other words, that of mirrors mirroring mirrors. Firewood is suchness-articulating-itself-as-firewood; ashes are suchness-articulating-itself-as-ashes; the moon is suchness-articulating-itself-as-moon; water is suchness-articulating-itself-as-water; etc.⁴⁶³ Which means that the suchness of a piece of firewood is not something lurking above, behind, or beneath it. To truly know a piece of firewood or a puddle in a field is to know it as it knows itself, i.e., to know it *just as it is*.

To better understand this, it may be helpful to compare the following two *kōans*:

A monk asked Master Tōzan in all earnestness, “What is Buddha?” Tōzan said, “*Masagin!* (Three pounds of flax)”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶² Titus Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science & Sacred Art*, trans. and ed. William Stoddart (Albany: SUNY, 1987), 118.

⁴⁶³ PZB, 141.

⁴⁶⁴ *Gateless Gate*, 89.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

A monk asked Unmon in all earnestness, “What is Buddha?” Unmon said, “*Kanshiketsu!* (a dried shit-stick).”⁴⁶⁵

What are these *kōans* saying? Both are reiterating the key principle of Zen, namely, that all things are the Buddha-nature and the Buddha-nature is all things, that the one is the many and the many are the one. Every phenomenon is identical to the moment of its manifestation, and every moment of its manifestation is identical to the whole universe. The absolute oneness of reality is not “this” to the exclusion of “that” or “here” to the exclusion of “there”. All is one. One is all. In the event of realization, the mind attains to the mystical intuition of “identity-difference”, such that the entire world is—simultaneously—nothing but a piece of firewood, nothing but three pounds of flax, even nothing but *kanshiketsu* (“a dried shit-stick”).

The dynamic structure of manifestation is thus identical to the structure of emptiness (*kū*), wherein no form is excluded. Emptiness, far from something merely “negative” or “empty”, is in fact replete with infinite forms, “the boundless field or bottomless ground which lets everything exist and work with its particular form within itself.”⁴⁶⁶ Like Zhuangzi’s twin concepts of the “transformation of all things” (*wu hua*) and the “equalization of all things” (*qi wu*), the Zen concepts of “co-original dependence” (*engi*) and “emptiness” (*kū*) overcome the “essentializing” perspective that would define each existent as irrevocably separate from

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, 102.

⁴⁶⁶ Abe, *Zen and Comparative Studies*, 148.

every other toward a view of all phenomena as mutually porous and “interexpressive”, so as to be at once themselves (individuation) and every other phenomenon (unification). For Dōgen, “oneness” denotes the non-dual unity of beings with Being, “neither identical nor different” (*fuitsu-fui*), “neither one nor many” (*fusoku-fui*)—or what the “Flower Garland” (Huayan) school of Buddhism refers to as “mutual identity and mutual penetration” (*sōsoku-sōnyū*).⁴⁶⁷ All things are at every instant the total dynamic manifestation of ultimate reality (*genjō-kōan*), i.e., the oneness of the manifold.

Having completed this section on the Zen view of manifestation, I turn to the final section of this chapter on knowledge.

Section Three: Knowledge

Structural Exposition: Knowledge as *Satori*

As stated in the introduction of this chapter, Zen Buddhism is philosophically rooted in the *Mādhyamika* or “Middle Path” school of Nāgārjuna, a “path” which Japanese Zen terms *chūdō*, denoting the principle of non-duality.⁴⁶⁸ With regard to the Zen structure of existence (*shinnyo*), non-duality expresses a mode of absolute reality beyond relative being and non-being; with regard to the Zen structure of manifestation (*engi*), non-duality expresses a mode of absolute instantiation beyond relative unity and individuation; and with regard to the Zen structure of

⁴⁶⁷ Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (Somerville, MA: 2004), 128.

⁴⁶⁸ See Inagaki, *Dictionary*, 25.

knowledge, as this section will demonstrate, non-duality expresses a mode of absolute knowing beyond relative knowledge and ignorance.

Similar to the structures of knowledge in Advaita Vedānta Hinduism and philosophical Daoism, the Zen structure of knowledge is threefold. The first stage of knowledge is designated by the Sanskrit *vikalpa*, which may be translated as “thinking-through-distinction”. This term functionally corresponds to Śāṅkara’s concept of nescience or *avidyā*, equivalent to the Japanese *mumyō*, “darkness (of mind)”.⁴⁶⁹ At this stage of thinking, one begins to know “this” or “that” thing by way of identification (as in the law of identity: *A is A*) and differentiation (as in the law of non-contradiction: *A is not non-A*). This mode of thinking would seem to be self-evidently valid. After all, if one had no ability to identify a tree as a *tree*, and thus no ability to distinguish a tree from what is *not* a tree (like a cat or a rock or the face of one’s lover), then the entire plane of phenomenal existence would simply dissipate into a sheer, unintelligible chaos. At the very same time, however, if knowledge were constrained only to this mode of “thinking-through-distinction”, then it could never attain to the “true suchness” (*shinnyo*) of things, nor still to “the oneness of reality itself” (*ichinyo*), since wherever discursive reason attempts to transcend the empirical and logical plane, it can at most succeed in encountering its own limits, and perhaps, should it

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 214.

be graced with the slightest degree of humility, feel its own powerlessness to surmount them.⁴⁷⁰

No epistemological theory can grasp the trans-rational, non-dual suchness of phenomena. Every attempt to do so, however “correct” its analysis or “accurate” its interpretation, can at best point to wisdom, as a finger, to use a Zen phrase, points to the moon. Abstract theories are powerless to secure the experience of wisdom or awaken its realization. For this a new mode of knowledge is required.

This second mode of knowledge is called *prajñā* in Sanskrit and *chi* in Japanese, corresponding to Dōgen’s concept of “body-and-mind-dropping-off” (*shinjin-datsuraku*). In this stage, the ego restricted to the empirical level of consciousness (*lokāyata*) is negated and transcended into a realm beyond all distinction, i.e., the boundless field of original emptiness—what Buddhism sometimes calls *tathāgatagarbha* (“Womb of the Absolute”). Here it must be added that transcendental *prajñā* or *chi* is not to be confused with a sub-rational impulse. *Chi* does not negate thought—at least not in a purely privational sense. What it denies is not thought *per se*, but all that the lower forms of thinking are able to affirm or deny, since every affirmation or denial is to some extent relative in its predication. *Chi* is therefore a supremely apophatic mode of knowledge, a “not-thinking” which, as Abe has remarked, “transcends both relative

⁴⁷⁰ Cf. Leo Schaya in his *L’homme et l’absolu selon la Kabbale* (Paris: Éditions Dervy, 2009; hereafter cited as HA), 7.

thinking and relative not-thinking.”⁴⁷¹ Surmounting the dichotomous and discriminative aspects of lower-level consciousness, *chi* reclaims the boundlessness of thought in “metaphysico-epistemological nothingness.”⁴⁷² In this stage, knowledge negates itself so as to coalesce in a unity beyond distinction, like an eye become all sight, an ear become all sound, or a word become all meaning.

The final stage of the Zen structure of knowledge is expressed by the term *kenshō*, “insight into one’s real nature”, or *satori*, “enlightenment”, corresponding to Dōgen’s concept of “dropped-off-body-and-mind” (*datsuraku-shinjin*).⁴⁷³ This event of enlightenment or wakefulness vis-à-vis the whole of being (*shitsu-u*), cannot be emphasized too strongly. To speak of its role in Zen Buddhism as “integral” or “paramount” would succeed only in underselling the depth of its significance. Suzuki states the matter well when he writes: “Satori is the *raison d’être* of Zen, and without which Zen is no Zen.”⁴⁷⁴ In this culminating stage, one re-emerges from the no-thingness into which one fell in the prior stage of *chi*, so as to be “completely transformed into an absolute Self.”⁴⁷⁵ In the words of Izutsu,

⁴⁷¹ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 112.

⁴⁷² CRE, 10.

⁴⁷³ For an insightful study on Dōgen’s understanding and use of this concept, see Steven Heine, “Dōgen Casts Off ‘What’: An Analysis of *Shinjin Datsuraku*”, in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Volume 9 (1986), No. 1, 53-70.

⁴⁷⁴ Suzuki, *Essays*, 261.

⁴⁷⁵ CRE, 10.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

What is resuscitated [at the stage of *satori*] is outwardly the same old man, but he is a man who has once transcended his own determination. He regains his normal, daily consciousness and accordingly the normal, daily, phenomenal world of multiplicity again begins to spread itself out before his eyes. The world of multiplicity appears again with all its infinitely rich colors. Since, however, he has already cast off his own determination, the world of multiplicity he perceives is also beyond all determinations. The new world-view is comparable to the world-view which a drop of water might have if it could suddenly awake to the fact that being an individual self-subsistent drop of water has been but a pseudo-determination which it has imposed upon itself, and that it has in reality always been nothing other than the limitless sea.⁴⁷⁶

This threefold structure of knowledge is visually portrayed below (Figure 4), along with the corresponding threefold structures of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism and philosophical Daoism:

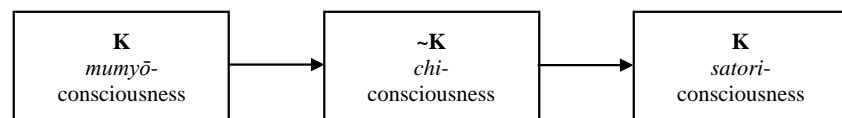


Figure 4. Structure of Knowledge – *Zen Buddhism*

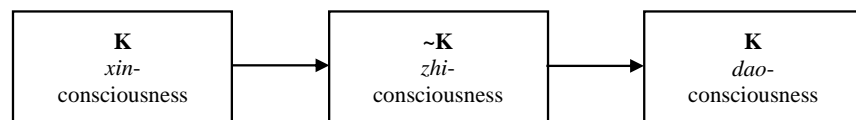


Figure 2. Structure of Knowledge – *Philosophical Daoism*

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

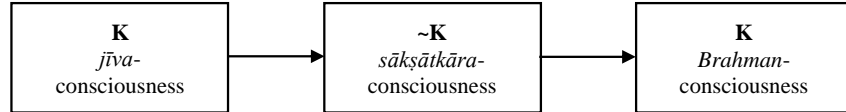


Figure 1. Structure of Knowledge – *Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

Textual Analysis: Shōbōgenzō

In this section I analyze the Zen Buddhist concept of knowledge through a select passage from Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō Sansuigyō* (“The Sutra on Mountains and Waters”).

Shōbōgenzō Sansuigyō

As briefly alluded to above in the section on existence, the *Sansuigyō* chapter presents Dōgen’s elucidation of what it means to see mountains as mountains and water as water. To that end, Dōgen cites the saying of the great Zen Master of the Tang dynasty, Unmon Bunen (Ch.: Yunmen Wenyan; 862/864-949 C.E.): “Mountains are mountains. Water is water.” According to Dōgen’s interpretation, “These words do not say that ‘mountains’ are ‘mountains’; they say that mountains are mountains.”⁴⁷⁷ What does Dōgen mean? To answer this question, it is advantageous to recall another classic Zen statement, this one made by the great Master of the Song dynasty, Qingyuan Weixin (11th century C.E.):

⁴⁷⁷ TDET I:227.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Before a man studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains are to him not mountains and waters not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once more mountains and waters are waters.⁴⁷⁸

This statement reflects the threefold structure of knowledge as outlined above through its equivocal use of the terms “mountains” and “waters”. The first, pre-Zen stage, is that of a purely empirical, discriminative knowledge—what Buddhism everywhere renounces as the darkened eye of “worldly habit” (Sk.: *lōkavyavahāra*).⁴⁷⁹ At this stage, every phenomenon is perceived as a self-standing, self-contained reality, roughly equivalent to the Aristotelian notion of “substance”. Here “mountains” are “mountains” ($m=m$) and “waters” are “waters” ($w=w$), to the mutual exclusion of every other kind of phenomenon. As such, the bifurcations of subject and object, knower and known, self and other, are interpreted as absolute and inviolable.

The second stage corresponds to what Dōgen refers to as “body-and-mind-dropping-off”, i.e., the immediate sapiential intuition of suchness *as* emptiness and the manifold *as* oneness. Here mountains are no longer so-called “mountains” ($M\neq m$) and waters are no longer so-called “waters” ($W\neq w$). That is to say, what the darkened mind of nescience had mistakenly

⁴⁷⁸ As quoted in Suzuki, *Essays*, 24.

⁴⁷⁹ PZB, 13.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

conceptualized as “mountains” (m) and “waters” (w) are now shown, in the light of emptiness, to be nothing of the sort. The real suchness of mountains (M) and waters (W) is not to be located in the insular “essences” which discursive thinking imposes on the world through the predications of “mountains” (m) or “waters” (w), but in the infinite field of emptiness where “there is not an inch of grass growing”, i.e., in the undifferentiated condition of the absolute prior to its having become bifurcated into subject and object, knower and known, self and other.

Finally, the third stage of “mountains again being mountains” ($M=M$) and “waters again being waters” ($W=W$) corresponds to the “dropped-off-body-and-mind” or *satori*-consciousness. Here the world of myriad phenomena returns in its illimitable splendor, teeming with endless forms, such that the absolute oneness of unarticulated emptiness is now disclosed as the manifold of infinitely articulated suchness. As Izutsu explains, it is this culminating stage

at which the undivided Something divides itself into subject and object in the very midst of the original oneness, the latter being still kept intact in spite of the apparent subject-object bifurcation. And the result is that the subject and object (the ‘I’ and the mountain) are separated from one another, and merged into one another, the separation and merging being one and the same act of the originally undivided Something. Thus at the very moment that the ‘I’ and the mountain come out of the Something, they merge into one another and become one: and this one

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

thing establishes itself as the absolute Mountain...[which] is just a simple mountain.⁴⁸⁰

It is in this way that Dōgen’s *Sansuigyō* chapter must be read. When Dōgen says that (1) “mountains” are not “mountains” and (2) mountains *are* mountains, he is saying that “we can never know mountains with the human intellect [i.e., the powers and processes of ratiocination],”⁴⁸¹ but only through the stage of *kenshō* or *satori*-consciousness, where mountains “are the self before the sprouting of creation”.⁴⁸² The face we had before our fathers and mothers were born is the same face the mountains had before there was an earth or a sky.⁴⁸³ That is why Dōgen sternly warns that if we want to attain insight into the true nature of things, then “we should not stick blindly in only the human sphere; we should move forward and learn water in the Buddha’s state of truth”,⁴⁸⁴ i.e., the state of “absolute Subjectivity”, “the absolute point where no dualism in whatever form resides”⁴⁸⁵—the oneness of the manifold.

This mode of “seeing” is what Dōgen calls the “Dharma Eye”, itself identical to the eye and wisdom of the Buddha (*prajñā*). It is no mere “perspective” or “way of using our brains”, whether common or exotic, that this mode of “just seeing” offers. What the Dharma Eye sees is that which

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, 209.

⁴⁸¹ TDET I:226.

⁴⁸² TDET I:216.

⁴⁸³ See Shohaku Okumura, *The Mountains and Waters Sūtra: A Practitioner’s Guide to Dōgen’s “Sansuikyo”* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2018), 53.

⁴⁸⁴ TDET I:224.

⁴⁸⁵ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 73.

remains after every possible perspective has been thoroughly dismantled and surmounted, enfolding “both sides of reality” in a single field of vision.⁴⁸⁶ For Dōgen, that is the essence of what it means “to be liberated” (*tōdatsu*; from *tō*, “to permeate” or “to be seen through”, and *datsu*, “to drop off” or “to rid oneself of”).⁴⁸⁷ To “just see” means to realize the ontological emptiness and permeability of all things, and therefore one’s own inseparable connection to them. Shohaku Okumura remarks that the term “just” or “simply” (*shikan*) represents “the cornerstone of Dōgen’s teaching.”⁴⁸⁸ Everything is *just what it is* (individuation)—be it a mountain or water. But rather than the “just-is-ness” of a thing excluding and isolating it from all other phenomena, it makes it porous and permeable before them, so as to make it, in a certain way, everything else as well (unification). This mutually interfusive vision of the one in the many and the many in the one, of all in each and each in all, presupposes an “awakening” whose magnitude extends far beyond the mere conceptual grasp of a theory of “oneness”, to the total realization—the “pure experience”—of oneness itself (*ichinyo*).⁴⁸⁹

3. Concluding Summary

It has been my intention in this chapter to further develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory through which to compare mystical ontologies East

⁴⁸⁶ Okumura, *Mountains and Waters Sūtra*, 87.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁸⁹ Shohaku Okumura, *Realizing Genjōkōan: The Key to Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 146-148.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

and West. Having analytically surveyed and systematically organized a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the Zen understanding of “suchness” as simultaneously one and manifold, I have identified the overarching concept of Zen as *ichinyo* (“the oneness of reality”), and the network of interrelated concepts it coordinates and structures as: existence (*shinnyo*), manifestation (*engi*), and knowledge (*satori*). This structural framework is visually portrayed below (Table 5), as compared with the key concepts derived from the previous two chapters on Advaita Vedānta Hinduism and philosophical Daoism.

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayatā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shinnyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>

Table 5. *Corresponding Concepts – Zen Buddhism*

From the perspective of Zen Buddhism, as interpreted throughout this chapter by the thought of Dōgen, reality is, however paradoxically, an absolute, undifferentiated oneness (*ichinyo*) with an endless number of co-originally dependent manifestations (*engi*). All things “are” as the interpenetrating and mutually porous modes of non-dual reality. This truth can only be known through a mode of insight that is neither knowledge nor ignorance, neither speech nor silence. Like the absolute *sat* of Śāṅkara, or

the *dao* of Zhuangzi, the *shinnyo* of Zen is an unqualified reality from which names reel and “words turn back”. Therefore, just as the *dao* that can be told is not the unchanging *dao*, so the “suchness” that can be articulated in verbal or conceptual form is not suchness *as such*. As one Zen phrase puts it: “Speech is blasphemy, silence is a lie. Above speech and silence there is a way out.”⁴⁹⁰ Or again: “When the mouth wants to speak about it, words break down; When the mind seeks affinity with it, thought vanishes.”⁴⁹¹ Or yet again: “The instant you speak about a thing you miss the mark”.⁴⁹² One cannot speak about the absolute for the very reason that it is “no-thing”, beyond the very limits that make relative thought possible. At the same time, however, neither can one remain silent about the absolute in that it is “not-other”, nearer to all things than they are to themselves. For Zen, as for the other mystico-speculative traditions of this study, suchness is only speakable beyond relative affirmations and negations, knowledge and ignorance, being and non-being.

This state of “knowing-beyond-knowledge” or “thinking-beyond-thought” is designated by Zen as *satori*, meaning “enlightenment” or “awakening”, through which the emptiness (*kū*) of reality is seen for what it is, namely, not a relative “emptiness” dialectically set over against “fullness”, but an absolute emptiness emptied of all emptiness: the oneness of the manifold. Similar to the pure existential plenitude of the Upaniṣadic

⁴⁹⁰ See John C.H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 187.

⁴⁹¹ As quoted in *Zen Koan*, 100.

⁴⁹² As quoted in *Zen Koan*, 104.

parabrahman (“Brahman-beyond-brahman”) or the *xuan zhi you xuan* (“Mystery-of-and-beyond-mysteries”) of the *Daodejing*, the *ichinyo* of Zen is both absolutely undifferentiated (“no-thing”) and infinitely differentiated (“not-other”) at every moment.

In terms of its overall approach, Zen is, like the Advaitic and Daoist schools, not interested in setting forth a theory about existence, or formulating a systematic doctrine of reality. It seeks instead to *be* reality, and thus to “see” the one and the many in “a single glance”.⁴⁹³

Having completed both the present chapter on Zen Buddhism and Part One of this study, I turn now to Part Two, with its exposition and analysis of the mystico-speculative traditions of the West, and its opening chapter on Kabbalistic Judaism (Chapter 4).

⁴⁹³ *Complete Poison Blossoms from a Thicket of Thorn: The Zen Records of Hakuin Zenji*, trans. Norman Waddell (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017), 373.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

PART TWO:

WESTERN TRADITIONS

CHAPTER 4

Kabbalistic Judaism

The present chapter consists of the following three parts: (1) a short introduction to Kabbalistic Judaism; (2) the exposition and analysis of Kabbalah under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge; and (3) a concluding summary of key concepts.

1. Introduction

In this introduction I prepare the way for an exposition and analysis of the Kabbalistic notion of reality as simultaneously one and manifold by (1) defining the term Kabbalah, (2) tracing its historical and conceptual development, and (3) summarizing the method and outline of the present chapter.

Kabbalah

Kabbalah is a Hebrew word whose root is *kibel*, meaning (subjectively) “to receive” and (objectively) “that which is received”. Taken in its full etymological sense, then, Kabbalah suggests the total act of receiving what has been handed down, i.e., “tradition”.⁴⁹⁴ In its narrower and more restricted use within Judaism, however, Kabbalah refers to the body of mystical doctrine that expounds the inward or “esoteric wisdom” (*hokhmah*

⁴⁹⁴ Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 1.

penimit) of the written *Torah*⁴⁹⁵—the crystalline form⁴⁹⁶ of the Divine revelation given to the prophet Moses on Mount Sinai.⁴⁹⁷

It must be stated at the outset of this chapter that the Kabbalah is not a static system of uniformly exegeted principles. There are different and often divergent ways of categorizing this bewilderingly vast tradition.⁴⁹⁸ Despite its polysemous nature, however, the Kabbalah can nevertheless be said to comprise “a common range of symbols and ideas”, all of which are accepted—*mutatis mutandis*—by its chief proponents and practitioners. As Isaiah Tishby writes, while Kabbalistic doctrine is “extremely wide-ranging, impinging on every area of existence and seeking solutions from a religio-mystical point of view”, yet at its core lies one fundamental subject of inquiry: “the mystery of the knowledge of the Godhead.”⁴⁹⁹

According to the late Aryeh Kaplan, the Kabbalah can be divided into three main categories or types: (1) the “theoretical” (or what might also be called the “speculative”), (2) the “meditative”, and (3) the “magical”.⁵⁰⁰ Moshe Idel opts for the twofold classification of (1) the “theosophical-

⁴⁹⁵ Brian L. Lancaster, *The Essence of Kabbalah* (London: Arturus, 2016), 11.

⁴⁹⁶ HA, 13.

⁴⁹⁷ Ira Robinson, “Introduction” in *Moses Cordovero’s Introduction to Kabbalah: An Annotated Translation of His Or Ne’erav*, trans. Ira Robinson (Brooklyn: KTAV, 1994; hereafter cited as ON), xiii.

⁴⁹⁸ Jonathan Garb, *A History of Kabbalah: From the Early Modern Period to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Chapter 2. As Garb notes, even the three main Kabbalistic schools of Safed (namely, the schools of Caro, Cordovero, and Luria) are marked by innumerable differences.

⁴⁹⁹ Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, 3 vols., trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008; hereafter cited as WZ), I:229.

⁵⁰⁰ Aryeh Kaplan, “Introduction” in *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation: In Theory and Practice*, ed. and trans. Aryeh Kaplan (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1997; hereafter cited as SY), ix.

theurgical”, with its emphasis on both (a) the inner structure of the Divine essence and (b) the experiential modes and methods of the soul’s assimilation to it, and (2) the “ecstatic”, with its more anthropocentrically driven emphasis on the spiritual end or *télos* of the individual mystic.⁵⁰¹ Another classification is the one traditionally drawn between *Kabbalah iyunit* (“speculative Kabbalah”) and *Kabbalah ma’asit* (“practical Kabbalah”), which Gershom Scholem saw as the product of the encounter of the Kabbalistic tradition with medieval Jewish thought, and thus as mimetically mirroring the Maimonidean distinction between “speculative” and “practical” philosophy.⁵⁰² Be that as it may, the primary type of Kabbalah to be examined in the present chapter is best characterized as theosophical or speculative, the essential focus of which is “the inner structure of reality.”⁵⁰³

Given the opprobrious connotations with which the term “theosophy” is associated today, it becomes necessary to set down its original meaning, as understood within mystico-speculative circles prior to its having become “a label for modern pseudo-religion”.⁵⁰⁴ To that end I cite here the standard definition of Scholem, who writes of “theosophy” as signifying

⁵⁰¹ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), xi.

⁵⁰² Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 5.

⁵⁰³ Lancaster, *Essence*, 48.

⁵⁰⁴ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 206.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

a mystical doctrine, or school of thought, which purports to perceive or describe the mysterious workings of Divinity, perhaps also believing it possible to become absorbed in its contemplation. Theosophy postulates a kind of divine emanation whereby God, abandoning his self-contained repose, awakens to mysterious life; further, it maintains that the mysteries of creation reflect the pulsation of this divine life.⁵⁰⁵

In short, the theosophical outlook of the Kabbalah seeks to give expression to the mystery of the absolute unity of existence in its infinitely variegated manifestations—the oneness of the manifold.

Historical and Conceptual Development

The central mystico-speculative insights of the Kabbalah cannot be properly understood apart from their historical origins and development. Contrary to its portrayal in the contemporary marketplace of ersatz “spiritualities”, the Kabbalah is not a religion unto itself, having no reality apart from the unique form and contours of the Judaic tradition. Like every other form of Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah is a particular “rereading of earlier Jewish tradition, including both the Bible and the corpus of rabbinic literature.”⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁵ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 206.

⁵⁰⁶ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 9.

An Exegetical Tradition

In the previous chapter (Chapter 3), the difficulty of parsing fact from legend with respect to the origin of Zen Buddhism in India was noted. Here the same principle applies with equal force. The lines that typically serve to identify where myth begins and history ends are blurred, and occasionally erased altogether, in traditional genealogical accounts of the Kabbalah. According to its own self-understanding, the Kabbalah is ultimately traced back to the Torahic revelation on Mount Sinai, and even further still to “the secret of God’s revelation to Adam” in the Edenic paradise.⁵⁰⁷ On a more general level, however, the Kabbalah grounds itself on the touchstone of all Jewish mysticism: the Hebrew scriptures (*Tanakh*).

Following the great Rabbinic tradition, the Kabbalah contends that the scriptures, and the Torah specifically, are possessed of two aspects: (1) the *Torah Shebal-peh* (“oral Torah”) and (2) the *Torah Shebikh-tab* (“written Torah”). These aspects are not like the severable components of a machine, but the complementary members of a single, living organism, each presupposing and perfecting the other. Whereas the latter “serves as the unchanging point of departure for spiritual contemplation of revealed truth”, the former functions “like a hammer that breaks the rock to pieces” (Jer. 23:29), so as to penetrate the written word and set free the theosophical “sparks” that hide in its depths.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁷ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 21. See also Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 2.

⁵⁰⁸ HA, 14-15.

Which leads to the following, and not insignificant, point: novelty is an element utterly foreign to the Judaic mindset. There can be no “new” interpretation of the Torah, no freshly minted meaning devoid of all precedent. Rather, every authentic interpretation is seen as an unfolding of eternal *hokhmah* or wisdom, such that the *modus operandi* of Jewish hermeneutics is that of a pure originality, i.e., a perpetual fidelity to its source and origin. It was in this connection that the rabbinic scholars made appeal to a verse taken from the book of Exodus: “God spoke *all* these words...” (20:1). For the rabbis, the word “all” (*kal-*) is viewed as encompassing every possible future development of the exegetical tradition, such that even the most fantastical readings of the Mishnah, the Midrashim, and the Talmud are regarded as the manifold expositions of one truth.⁵⁰⁹

Merkavah Mysticism

The main exegetical source for the development of Jewish mysticism is not to be found in the book of Exodus, however, but the opening chapter of the book of Ezekiel and its vision of a celestial chariot (*merkavah*, lit. “thing to ride in”) and Divine throne (*kisseh*).⁵¹⁰ According to Scholem, the establishment and spread of Merkavah mysticism among the rabbinic schools “constitutes an inner Jewish concomitant to Gnosis,” and thus may be designated as a form of “rabbinic Gnosticism.”⁵¹¹ The flourishing of this

⁵⁰⁹ Lancaster, *Essence*, 45.

⁵¹⁰ Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 20.

⁵¹¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 12-13.

mystico-speculative approach within the rabbinic tradition is in many ways an astonishing, even inexplicable, fact, given this tradition's otherwise strong anti-speculative ethos, as explicitly laid out in the famous warning of the Mishnah: "Whoever ponders on four things, it were better for him if he had not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what was before time, and what will be hereafter."⁵¹²

Warnings of this sort, far from deterring mystical speculation, turned out to be rarely heeded, if they were acknowledged at all. The Merkavah mystics, for example, devoted themselves precisely to a speculative analysis of "the upper world", an ascent that journeyed through the seven palaces (*hekhalot*) of the heavenly realms only to culminate in the vision of "the primordial man" (*Adam Kadmon*) seated on the divine throne (Ezek. 1:26). Perhaps the most blatant instance of this disregard for anti-speculative injunctions can be found in one of the most daring doctrines in all of Judaism: the *Shi'ur Komah* ("the measure of the [divine] body"). While this doctrine was routinely assailed for espousing a credulous anthropomorphism, and by none less than Moses Maimonides himself, this did not stop it from exerting a profound influence on "the bold mythical language of the Kabbalah."⁵¹³

⁵¹² As cited by Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 12.

⁵¹³ Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, 4.

Major Texts

Lasting the span of nearly ten centuries (1st-10th C.E.), Merkavah mysticism not only constitutes the first but the longest phase in the genealogy of the Jewish mystical tradition and the conceptual formation of Kabbalism in the late Middle Ages.⁵¹⁴ In this formation, two texts are of particular significance. First is the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (“Book of Illumination”), most likely consisting of compiled and edited forms of older Kabbalistic documents, such as, for example, the no longer extant *Sefer Raza Rabba* (“Book of the Great Mystery”), the surviving quotations of which—few but lengthy—suggest a deeply theosophical element.

Bahir

The authorship of the *Bahir* is sometimes traced to the Mishnaic era (1st-3rd centuries C.E.) and an oral tradition extending back to Rabbi Nehunyah ben HaKanah (c. 1st century C.E.). Whether such a tradition ever existed is not relevant here. What is relevant is that the *Bahir* is thought to have been put into writing at some point during the twelfth century in Provence, and its first extant manuscript later compiled and edited by Isaac the Blind (c. 1160-1235 C.E.), the great French rabbi and “father of Kabbalah”,⁵¹⁵ who though physically sightless was allegedly capable of perceiving directly into a

⁵¹⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 40.

⁵¹⁵ This attribution was made by the distinguished Spanish Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (1255-1340 C.E.).

person's soul.⁵¹⁶ It was through this series of events that the *Bahir* would come to play a pivotal role in the transmission of theosophical and “gnostic” ideas to the Kabbalistic circles of the thirteenth century.

As Arthur Green notes, the *Bahir* boldly postulates “a secret inner life of God,” one that opens out onto the vision of “a complex and multifaceted divine realm.”⁵¹⁷ The ascription of various stages, modalities, and degrees to the Divine Essence—which the *Bahir* numbers precisely as ten, corresponding to the ten times that the expression, “God said” (*Elohim wayomer*) is repeated in the first chapter of the book of Genesis⁵¹⁸—must not, however, be regarded as in any way influenced or compromised by dualistic notions, and far less by polytheistic ones. Contrary to appearances, the *Bahir* does not depart from its monotheistic heritage, unreservedly declaring God to be “the Unity of unities, who is unified in all His names.”⁵¹⁹ The twelve names⁵²⁰ and ten powers (*sefirot*)⁵²¹ with which God is unified (and of which He Himself *is* the Unity) are presented in the *Bahir* in a mythic and unsystematized fashion, viewing the structure of the intra-Divine life in terms of “a mythical universe, a *pleroma*,” in which the

⁵¹⁶ Aryeh Kaplan, “Introduction”, in *The Bahir*, ed. and trans. Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1979), xvii.

⁵¹⁷ Green, *Guide*, 29.

⁵¹⁸ *Bahir* (§118), 45.

⁵¹⁹ *Bahir* (§141), 52.

⁵²⁰ *Bahir* (§112), 43. According to the *Bahir*, there are twelve “explicit names” (*Shem HaMeporash*) of God “included in the Heart of heaven [*leb hassamayim*; Deut. 4:11].”

⁵²¹ *Bahir* (§125), 47. Here the word *sefirot* is taken from the words of Psalm 19:12, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” *Sefirot* is connected to the word for “declare”, *me-sepperim*, from *safar*, meaning “to count”; itself from *sefer*, meaning “book.”

fullness of reality dwells and from which “all directions lead forth.”⁵²² In this sense, the *Bahir* shares the same purpose of all Kabbalistic thought and literature: “to grasp the unity that underlies all manifestation”⁵²³—the oneness of the manifold.

Yetsirah

The second major text in the formation of the Kabbalah is the *Sefer Yetsirah* (“Book of Formation”), itself part of the much larger corpus of Merkavah literature commonly labelled as *Ma’aseh Bereshit* (“Work of Creation”). This work exemplifies the mystico-speculative style that would come to inform later Kabbalistic understandings of cosmology and cosmogony.⁵²⁴ With respect to its authorship, the *Yetsirah* finds its earliest attributed source in none other than the Patriarch Abraham himself. Such an attribution not only places the date of this text (or at least its orally transmitted teaching) in the eighteenth century B.C.E.,⁵²⁵ but is also indicative of the reverential posture that the Kabbalists took toward it. As the great Babylonian rabbi and philosopher of the tenth century, Sa’adia Gaon (882/892-942 C.E.) writes in reference to the *Yetsirah*: “...the ancients say that Abraham wrote it.”⁵²⁶ Or as the Spanish rabbi Moses Botarel (14th-15th centuries C.E.) would later contend: “It was Abraham our Father—blessed be he—who

⁵²² Green, *Guide*, 33.

⁵²³ Lancaster, *The Essence of Kabbalah*, 84.

⁵²⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 75.

⁵²⁵ Cf. “Introduction”, SY, xiv.

⁵²⁶ As quoted in Kaplan, “Introduction”, in SY, xii.

wrote this book to condemn the doctrine of the sages of his time, who were incredulous of the supreme dogma of the Unity.”⁵²⁷

While the precise date of this text remains unknown, contemporary scholarship has narrowed the list of authorial candidates down to a certain Neo-Pythagorean Jew who lived somewhere between the third and sixth centuries C.E.⁵²⁸—though, to be sure, this claim is hardly uncontested, with some arguing for a much later date, and others for a still earlier one.⁵²⁹ Nonetheless, the suggestion of a Neo-Pythagorean influence comports well to the philosophical bent of the document, with its numerical mysticism, portraying the above mentioned *sefirot* as the ten archetypal numbers through which the universe receives its spatial, temporal, and moral proportions.⁵³⁰ When combined with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, these ten *sefirot* comprise “the thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom”, or, translated from mythical to metaphysical language, “the essential structure of existence.”⁵³¹

The *Yetsirah*, along with the rest of early Kabbalistic literature, and beyond the speculative scope of the *Bahir*, elaborates the concept of *Ein Sof* (lit. “endless” or “without limit”) into that of an infinite divine reservoir

⁵²⁷ As quoted in William Wynn Wescott, “Introduction to the Third Edition”, in *Sepher Yetzirah: The Book of Formation with The Fifty Gates of Intelligence and The Thirty-Two Paths of Wisdom*, trans. William Wynn Wescott, ed. Darcy Kuntz, 4th edition (Edmonds: Holmes Publishing Group, 1996), 10.

⁵²⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 167. Scholem was inclined to accept the earlier date (3rd century).

⁵²⁹ The dates range anywhere from the Talmudic period (200-500 C.E.) to the Early Middle Ages (5th/6th-10th centuries C.E.).

⁵³⁰ Lancaster, *Essence*, 42.

⁵³¹ Green, *Guide*, 33.

from which all things proceed and to which all things return.⁵³² This concept of the fundamental unity (*eḥad*) of the world bears a striking resemblance to the Advaitic *advayatā*, the Daoist *taiyi*, and the Zen *ichinyo*, each of which expresses—after its own manner and within the integral structure of its own tradition—the non-dual oneness of reality. Like the singular field of *wuji* (“limitless”), *Ein Sof* is viewed as being initially in the state of a closed and empty (*belimah*) circle, containing its own beginning and end, and “within” which there is not an inkling of anything other than itself; the infinite “place” where, to borrow the Zen phrase, “there is not an inch of grass growing”. It is only through the subtlest of processes that the *sefirot* begin to appear or “emerge” in continuously more distinct and refined form, and yet without ever acquiring an autonomous reality of their own. Far from a change in God or an addition to God, each *sefirah* is therefore seen as “an aspect of reality that has been there forever.”⁵³³ The *sefirot* therefore constitute a “mystical organism” whose “varying aspects” are actually the many “faces” of One King.⁵³⁴ In the words of Scholem, “Creation is nothing but an external development of those forces which are active and alive in God Himself. Nowhere is there a break, a discontinuity.”⁵³⁵

At the methodological level, the *sefirot* can therefore be interpreted as the Kabbalistic answer to “the classic question of all mysticism,” namely,

⁵³² Ibid, 34.

⁵³³ Ibid, 35.

⁵³⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 213-214.

⁵³⁵ Ibid, 223.

“If all is one...where do the many come from?”⁵³⁶ The doctrine of the ten *sefirot* posits the simultaneity of the “one” and the “many” in the Divine, such that the oneness of God is not simply homogenous but fecund, “teeming with energy, life, and passion.”⁵³⁷

Zohar

Beyond the two texts just mentioned, there is a third which in many ways serves as the crowning achievement of Kabbalistic speculation: the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (“Book of Splendor”). This work represents the synthesis of two prominent Kabbalistic schools in thirteenth-century Spain: (1) the more philosophically oriented school of Gerona, and (2) the more mythologically oriented school of the “Gnostics” or *ma’amikim* (lit. “those who delve deeply”), centered mainly in Castile.⁵³⁸ The *Zohar* is often dated at the end of the thirteenth century (c. 1280 C.E.) and its authorship ascribed to Moses de León (c. 1240-1305 C.E.), though it is traditionally attributed to Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai (2nd century C.E.), the revered disciple of Rabbi Akiva (c. 50-135 C.E.).⁵³⁹ With a pedigree of such high distinction, the *Zohar* eventually attained the status of “the Holy Zohar” (*Ha-Zohar ha-Kadosh*), having risen to the level of “a sacred text of unquestionable value.”⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁶ Green, *Guide*, 36.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 56.

⁵³⁹ Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, 6.

⁵⁴⁰ Scholem, *Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 1.

The consensus view of twentieth-century scholarship, under the aegis of Scholem,⁵⁴¹ saw De León as not only the compiler, but the primary composer of this document. More recent scholarship⁵⁴² has upheld the claim of Isaiah Tishby that the *Zohar* “is not a single unified work, but a great literary anthology consisting of sections from various sources.”⁵⁴³ Interpreted at a holistic rather than merely historical level, however, the *Zohar* may be understood as a theological drama or “mystical novel”⁵⁴⁴ in which the mysterious “stages” of the intra-Divine life have been transposed into narrative form.⁵⁴⁵

It was Scholem who had also famously referred to the historical unfolding of the Kabbalah as “the revenge of myth”.⁵⁴⁶ To this it must be added that the Kabbalah is only the revenge of myth insofar as it is the revenge of *gnōsis*, i.e., the dynamic resurgence of the sapiential dimension of knowledge in Jewish thought. It is in the *Zohar*, perhaps more than any other book produced by the various Kabbalistic schools, that interjoins the two dominant trends of Jewish mysticism, namely, the theosophical and the ecstatic. It is through these two opposed aspects that the distinct Kabbalistic

⁵⁴¹ See, e.g., Scholem, “Introduction”, in *Zohar, the Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah*, ed. Gershom Scholem (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), xviii.

⁵⁴² See, e.g., Yehuda Liebes, “How the Zohar was Written”, in *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 85-138. For an authoritative and relatively recent study on the origins, development, and influence of the *Zohar*, see Boaz Huss, *Zohar: Reception and Impact*, trans. Yudith Nave (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016).

⁵⁴³ Tishby, WZ I:1.

⁵⁴⁴ Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, 6.

⁵⁴⁵ Daniel C. Matt, “Introduction to the *Zohar*”, in *The Zohar: Annotated and Explained*, trans. Daniel C. Matt (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2002), xxiii.

⁵⁴⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 35.

view of reality as simultaneously one and manifold emerges. As Idel writes, the theosophical, gnostic element of Kabbalah is expressed in terms of *visio rerum omnium in Deo* (“seeing all things in God”), and its ecstatic element in terms of *visio Dei in omnibus rebus* (“seeing God in all things”).⁵⁴⁷ In other words, whereas theosophy is oriented towards transcendence or “nothingness”, the ecstatic is oriented towards immanence or “not-otherness”. Each interprets the other, such that neither can be understood on its own. It is in this Zoharic light that the Kabbalah becomes known as “a thorough amalgamation of these two very different ways of thinking, with the tension between them never fully resolved.”⁵⁴⁸

Moses Cordovero and the School of Safed

While many other important developments in the genealogy of the Kabbalah could be mentioned (e.g., the Hasidic movement in Europe and Egypt during the Middle Ages), yet for the purposes of this study it is necessary to turn now to sixteenth-century Safed and the school of Moses Cordovero (1522-1570 C.E.). To say that Cordovero looms large in the Kabbalistic tradition would be an understatement. Scholem regarded him as “the most profound speculative mystic of the Kabbalah.”⁵⁴⁹ Similarly, Ira Robinson referred to Cordovero as “the greatest theoretician of Kabbalah.”⁵⁵⁰ Jonathan Garb describes him as “one of the most prolific,

⁵⁴⁷ Idel, *Kabbalah*, 154.

⁵⁴⁸ Green, *Guide*, 37.

⁵⁴⁹ See Scholem, *Godhead*, 39.

⁵⁵⁰ Robinson, “Introduction”, xxiv.

learned and analytic writers in the entire history of Kabbalah.”⁵⁵¹ And the late Leo Schaya simply called him “the great Master.”⁵⁵²

The ongoing debate over whether the most pivotal event in the historical development of the Kabbalah was the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492⁵⁵³ or the formation of the Safedian schools in the sixteenth century,⁵⁵⁴ is more a matter of accent than of mutually exclusive alternatives. Both are so intimately connected as to be not two isolated events, but two distinct phases of a single development. It was as a result of the Spanish expulsion that sixteenth-century Safed, then of Ottoman Syria, came to flourish as the hub of Kabbalistic studies, attracting and producing such mystical luminaries as Yosef Caro (1488-1575 C.E.), Shlomo ha-Levi Alqabetz (c. 1500-1576 C.E.), and Isaac Luria (1534-1572 C.E.). Of all the Kabbalists that could be named, however, Cordovero is frequently regarded as “the greatest of the day.”⁵⁵⁵

While Cordovero’s voluminous *Pardes Rimonim* (“Orchard of Pomegranates”) is best representative of the profound scale and substance of his thought, several other works approach the same degree of insight. One is a devotional text entitled *Tomer Devorah* (“Palm Tree of Deborah”), a mystico-ethical treatise that masterfully fuses together the speculative and

⁵⁵¹ Garb, *History of Kabbalah*, 41.

⁵⁵² Leo Schaya, “Contemplation and Action in Judaism and Islam”, in *Universal Aspects of the Kabbalah & Judaism*, ed. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2014), 147.

⁵⁵³ See, e.g., Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 4 vols. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1999), III:58.

⁵⁵⁴ See, e.g., Garb, *History of Kabbalah*, 1.

⁵⁵⁵ Kaplan, “Introduction”, in SY, xxv.

practical dimensions of the Kabbalah into a single, seamless harmony.⁵⁵⁶ “This harmonistic impulse” pervades the whole of Cordovero’s vast corpus and “is probably related to his general tendency toward unity, expressed in his predilection for ‘great chain of being’ imagery of cosmic connectivity”.⁵⁵⁷ Grounded in the interplay of identity and difference, unity and multiplicity, Cordovero’s theosophical vision had for its controlling premise the idea that “everything which is above has its counterpart here below.”⁵⁵⁸ Resembling the postures of Śaṅkara, Zhuangzi, and Dōgen, Cordovero “was not a philosopher for whom mystical concerns and mythical terminologies served as means to metaphysical ends.” On the contrary, Cordovero was, as Zohar Raviv has demonstrated, “a staunch mystic who endorsed metaphysics as a means to vindicate mystical speculation whose main focus was theosophical, cosmological, moral and even anthropological.”⁵⁵⁹

It was another popular work entitled *Or Ne’erav* (“Pleasant Light”) that would present the unitive thrust of Cordovero’s mystico-speculative thinking in its most condensed and accessible form, and whose sixth part—arranged in accordance with the sections of the *Pardes Rimonim*—serves as the main focus of the present chapter’s textual analysis.

⁵⁵⁶ Zohar Raviv, *Decoding the Dogma within the Enigma: The Life, Works, Mystical Piety and Systematic Thought of Moses Cordoeiro (aka Cordovero; Safed, Israel, 1522-1570)* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co., 2008), 229-230.

⁵⁵⁷ Garb, *History of Kabbalah*, 41.

⁵⁵⁸ See Zohar, *Shemoth*, 20a. See also Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, III:340.

⁵⁵⁹ Raviv, *Decoding the Dogma*, 161-162.

Method and Outline

In this chapter I expound and analyze the Kabbalistic understanding of reality as simultaneously one and manifold. According to this understanding, just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the diversified modes of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as so many limited determinations of a single, meta-ontological Reality which “exists in every existent”—be it an ant or an angel, a star or a stone. In the words of Cordovero,

The essence of divinity is found in every single thing—nothing but it exists. Since it causes every thing to be, no thing can live by anything else. It enlivens them; its existence exists in each existent. Do not attribute duality to God. Let God be solely God. If you suppose that Ein Sof emanates until a certain point, and that from that point on is outside of it, you have dualized. Realize, rather, that Ein Sof exists in each existent. Do not say, “This is a stone and not God.” Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity.⁵⁶⁰

As with the previous chapters, I here examine the Kabbalistic conception of the oneness of the manifold under the three interrelated headings of existence (Section One), manifestation (Section Two), and knowledge (Section Three), with each heading comprised of a structural exposition and

⁵⁶⁰ Moses Cordovero, *Shi'ur Komah* (“Measurements of the Divine Stature”), 20b, as quoted and translated by Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 24.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

textual analysis. In doing so, my intention remains the same: to further develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory by which to compare mystical ontologies East and West, analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the mystico-speculative notion of reality as simultaneously one and manifold. A visual portrait of this method, as compared with the corresponding concepts derived from Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, philosophical Daoism, and Zen Buddhism in Part One, is provided below (Table 6), with Kabbalistic terms in bold:

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayaṭā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shinmyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>eḥad</i>	<i>ein sof</i>	<i>shekhinah</i>	<i>ḥokhmah</i>

Table 6. *Corresponding Concepts – Kabbalistic Judaism*

Having completed this introduction, I turn now to an exposition and analysis of Kabbalistic Judaism under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge.

2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis

Section One: Existence

This section examines the Kabbalistic notion of existence as a trans-dual unity, i.e., that which “is one and has no second.”⁵⁶¹ Prior to engaging directly in a textual analysis of Cordovero’s *Or Ne’erav*, however, it is first necessary to sketch out the basic structure of Kabbalistic ontology.

Structural Exposition: Existence as *Ein Sof*

Along with the mystico-speculative traditions examined in the first part of this study, Kabbalistic Judaism views existence as an absolute “nothingness” (*ayin*) that is infinitely “not-other” (*ein od*)⁵⁶²—beyond all determinations and in excess to all oppositions (*Ein Sof*). This non- or trans-dual “oneness” is therefore not mathematical but metaphysical in meaning. Existence is not a static monolith, but a dynamic unity (*eḥad*), possessed of various stages, modalities, and degrees. Again, far from a concession to dualism or polytheism, these existential “strata” are not external to God. They do not fracture the non-dual reality of *Ein Sof* or assign to it a composite nature, in that the Infinite is as much without parts (“this” or “that”) as it is without place (“here” or “there”). Rather, these strata are interpreted esoterically, i.e., as “inner stages within the Godhead.”⁵⁶³

⁵⁶¹ ON, VI.1, 111.

⁵⁶² As in the repeated biblical phrase, “I am the LORD and there is no other (*ein od*).” E.g., Is. 45:5; Deut. 32:39; Joel 2:27; etc.

⁵⁶³ WZ I:233.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

As mentioned in the introduction above, these various stages are most commonly elaborated by the Kabbalistic tradition in terms of a sefirotic “tree”, one that “grows upside down”,⁵⁶⁴ as it were, from heaven to earth, and whose ten “branches” may be listed, in the order of their descension, as follows: (1) crown (*keter*), (2) wisdom (*ḥokhmah*), (3) understanding (*binah*), (4) mercy (*ḥesed*), (5) power (*gevurah*), (6) beauty (*tiferet*), (7) endurance (*netsah*), (8) splendor (*hod*), (9) foundation (*yesod*), and (10) kingdom (*malkhut*). This particular taxonomy of the sefirotic tree is shown in the figure below (Figure 5):

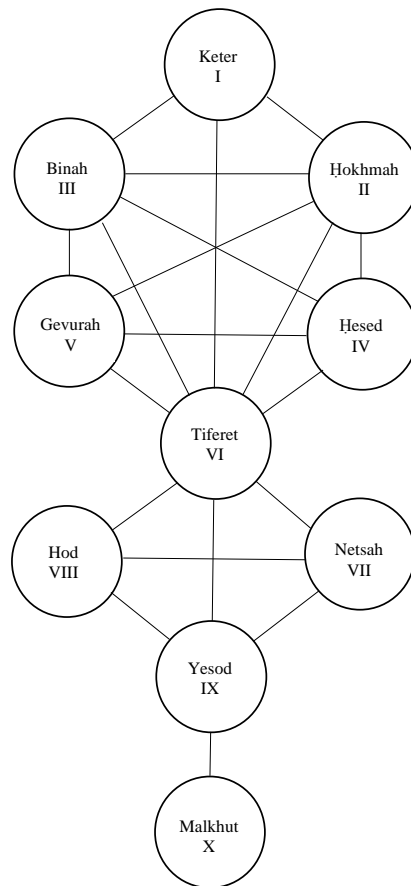


Figure 5. *The Sefirotic Tree*

⁵⁶⁴ Scholem, *Godhead*, 42.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

The “limbs” or “life forms” (*ha-adam*) of this tree are ineffably conjoined by mysterious, mediating channels through which the ten *sefirot* become like mutually interpenetrating mirrors, each indwelling all and all indwelling each. The *sefirot* therefore “unfold” within *keter* not as temporally successive developments, one after the other, like a row of dominoes, but as the unified aspects of a metaphysically simultaneous “event” (corresponding to the Zen circle of “emptied emptiness” or *śūnyatā*). Scholem captures both the mutuality and the simultaneity of this meta-cosmic “organism” when he writes that

[the *sefirot*] are not a series of ten emanations of aeons emerging from one another; on the contrary, they constitute a well-structured form, in which every part or limb operates upon every other, and not just the higher ones on the lower. The *sefirot* are connected with one another by means of secret “channels,” *tsinorot*, whereby each radiates into the other and in which the other is in turn reflected. The specific nature of each potency is deeply rooted in itself, but every potency likewise contains some aspects of all the others. Moreover, each one repeats in itself the structure of the whole, and so ad infinitum...It is through this process of infinite reflection that the whole is reflected in every member and thus, as Moses Cordovero explained, becomes a whole.⁵⁶⁵

The *sefirot* may also be portrayed as a chain of concentric circles, as in the two figures seen below, each representing the emanative process of the

⁵⁶⁵ Scholem, *Godhead*, 43.

sefirot in terms of their radiation from (Figure 6) and return to (Figure 7) the Divine Essence.

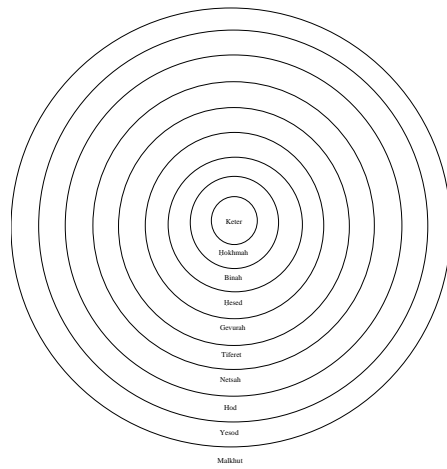


Figure 6. *Centrifugal Radiation*

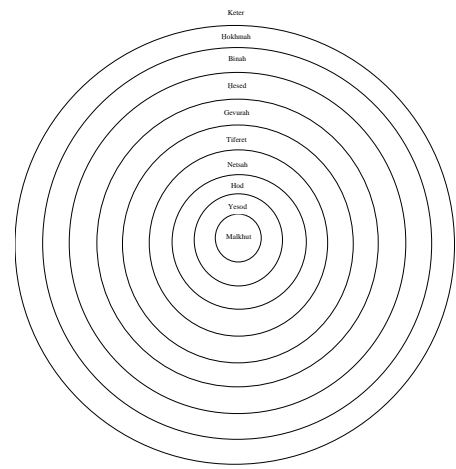


Figure 7. *Centripetal Return*

Here the focus is not on the inter-relationship of the *sefirot* but the relevant structure of their ordering when looked at from different perspectives. In Figure 6, for example, the movement of the *sefirot* is viewed as centrifugally proceeding *ad extra* or “to the outside”. In Figure 7, by contrast, the *sefirot* are viewed from the inverse perspective, namely, as centripetally proceeding *ad intra* or “to the inside”. The former places *keter* at the central point and *malkhut* (also known as *shekhinah*) beyond the outermost circle, while the latter places *malkhut* at the innermost point of Divine “contraction”—what the Kabbalists call *tsimtsum*—and *keter* at the periphery, conceived as the infinite circumference that enfolds and permeates all *sefirot*.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁶ HA, 26-29.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Accordingly, *keter* is interpreted by the more philosophically oriented Kabbalists as the “Cause of all causes” (*sibah ha-sibot*) and the “Root of all roots” (*shoresh ha-shorashim*). On this understanding, *keter* is that which enfolds and unfolds the *sefirot*. As such, it cannot be numbered among them. However, to preserve the received Kabbalistic maxim that there are always ten—and not nine or eleven⁵⁶⁷—*sefirot*, this mode of enumeration proceeds to identify the “tenth” *sefirah* as *da’at* (“intimate knowledge”), the confluence of wisdom (*hokhmah*) and understanding (*binah*),⁵⁶⁸ connoting the act of sexual union, as in the verse, “And Adam knew his wife...” (4:1).⁵⁶⁹

It is in this connection that *keter* is sometimes referred to by the Kabbalists as “nothingness” (*ayin*), i.e., the apophatic setting or locus in which the emanative powers of the ten *sefirot* emerge and from which they are dispersed; “an inner movement” of the Divine Essence “that potentially bears all content but actually bears none.”⁵⁷⁰ *Keter* is therefore identical to both the “nothingness” of *ayin* and the “I am” of the *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (Ex. 3:14), otherwise known as the tetragrammaton. To that extent, *keter* (or rather *keter elyon*, the “supreme crown”) can be said to ultimately converge with *Ein Sof*—the non-dual oneness of the manifold. As Schaya remarks,

⁵⁶⁷ See *Sefer Yetsirah*, 1:4.

⁵⁶⁸ Lancaster, *Essence*, 49-50.

⁵⁶⁹ SY, 27.

⁵⁷⁰ Green, *Guide*, 36.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

In the absolute unity of its supra-being (*ayin*), *keter* bears no trace of multiplicity and transcends the causal unity of its being (*ehyeh*) which contains, in the entity of its intelligible aspects or *sefirot*, the archetypes of the cosmic manifold: duality in principle. But at the same time the unity of being surpasses all dualism by dint of its infinity, which integrates itself—eternally and without any motion—in the pure and non-dual essence: supra-being. In the One, therefore, there is no scission, no separation between being and supra-being or non-being, nor is there any hierarchical confusion amongst them...*Keter* is thus the principle which is identical at once with *ayin* and with *ehyeh*, without nullifying the hierarchy of universal degrees; in other words, *keter* is *Ein Sof* which, in its all-possibility, includes both being and non-being, while allowing each possibility to retain its own integral structure.⁵⁷¹

In its highest conception, then, existence is not simply “posited being” (*yesh*) in contrast to “non-posited being”, but the absolute “no-thing” that is infinitely “not-other”, and thus whose trans-dual unity embraces both existence and non-existence, neither forfeiting its own simplicity nor violating the integrity of the multitude it embraces. Or as Śaṅkara could say, the non-dual absolute is neither existence (*sat*) nor non-existence (*asat*), but “that which is beyond both.” Like Laozi and the tradition of philosophical Daoism, the manifold of phenomena is conceived by the Kabbalists as born of being (*yesh*; *you*), and being, in turn, born of non-being (*ayin*; *wu*).⁵⁷² The dialectic of being and non-being is therefore not ultimate but penultimate, infinitely surpassed and enfolded by non-dual “oneness” (*ehad*; *taiyi*).

⁵⁷¹ HA, 38.

⁵⁷² Cf. *Daodejing*, ch. 40.

Recalling the quadratic ordering of existence in philosophical Daoism as well, Kabbalistic ontology is structured according to the following four stages of apophatic ascent: (1) oneness as extrinsically manifested in phenomenal forms (*yesh*), (2) oneness prior to its phenomenal manifestation and possessed of inner articulations (*keter*), (3) negatively conditioned oneness without any inner articulations (*ayin*), and (4) existence beyond the condition of being unconditioned (*Ein Sof*).⁵⁷³ Echoing the *wu-wu-wu* of Zhuangzi, the Kabbalists interpret existence as “concealed [*wu*] within the concealed [*wu-wu*] of the mystery of *Ein Sof* [*wu-wu-wu*].”⁵⁷⁴ Through the modes of its concealment, *Ein Sof* never appears “outside its own hidden domain” or partakes “directly in the processes of creation or conduct of the world.”⁵⁷⁵ It is the transcendent source and cause of all things, before which all the categories of human thought and language are sent reeling, blinded by the abundance of light. As Tishby writes, “Its nature is not apprehensible, and is beyond the limits of thought or perception.”⁵⁷⁶ Here *Ein Sof* is conceived as the supernal crown (*keter elyon*) of all things, the Causality of all causation, and the Substantiality of all substances. In the loftiest mode of its concealment, however, *Ein Sof* is beyond every possible attribution and negation, speech

⁵⁷³ As with every taxonomy of the mystico-speculative traditions examined in this study, there is no one “correct” ordering of the pre-sefirotic descent of *Ein Sof*. Another way of ordering it puts *ayin* in the highest place, followed by *Ein Sof*, *Or Ein Sof* (“Endless Light”), and *tsimtsum* (“contraction” or “withdrawal”).

⁵⁷⁴ See *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 12 vols., trans. Daniel C. Matt, Joel Hecker, Nathan Wolski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004-2017), I:108.

⁵⁷⁵ WZ, I:233.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

and silence,⁵⁷⁷ so that “even the *sefirot* are unable to apprehend its nature.”⁵⁷⁸

Similar to Śāṅkara’s distinction between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* Brahman, the Kabbalists delineate between (1) the personal Creator Deity who is revealed in the manifold of existent things, and (2) the impersonal (or trans-personal) Reality known only to Itself. This “impersonal element” of the absolute is referred to variously as “the One” (*ha-eḥad*), “the perfect unity” (*ha-aḥdut ha-shelemah*), “the perfection of unity” (*hashlamat ha-aḥdut*), “the symmetry of unity” (*hasva’at ha-aḥdut*), etc.⁵⁷⁹ According to the Zoharic rendering of Genesis 1:1, for example, “God” (*Elohim*) is understood not as the subject, but the object of the verb “created” (*bara*), leaving the subject of the sentence unnamed: “*With beginning, _____ created God.*”⁵⁸⁰ This ineffable source of existence (and Divinity!) is *Ein Sof*, the *ayin* that creates “with beginning”, i.e., with wisdom (*ḥokhmah*) as its first determinate principle. The “no-thingness” of *Ein Sof* is therefore not a mere negation of being, but denotes an existential plenitude. It is not an “is” in contrast to a “not”, but Emptiness emptied of emptiness, Fulness filled beyond fullness, and thus the “No-thing” from which all things come (*ex nihilo omnia fiunt*).⁵⁸¹ This delineation between “personal God” and

⁵⁷⁷ Cf. Lawrence Fine, “Introduction”, in *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, The Beginning of Wisdom*, trans. Lawrence Fine (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 6.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁹ WZ I:235.

⁵⁸⁰ *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, I:110.

⁵⁸¹ Cf. Daniel C. Matt, “*Ayin*: the Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism”, in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 67.

“impersonal Godhead” is found especially in the work of Cordovero. As Scholem writes, “For Cordovero, only *Ein Sof* was the real God of whom religion speaks, and the world of divinity with all its *sefirot* nothing but the organism in which He constitutes Himself in order to bring forth the universe of creation, and to act in it.”⁵⁸²

For the Kabbalists, then, the oneness of the Godhead is neither “an absolute, static unity, nor a firm, personal unity, but a kind of organic unification of disparate parts, a dynamic unity with an inner movement, a surge of secret life, the unity of a source together with the springs that well up from it”⁵⁸³—the oneness (*eḥad*) of the manifold (*rabab*). Hence why the Kabbalists refer to the interior stages of the Divine life collectively as “the mystery of unification” (*sod ha-yihud*), and why the *Zohar* tirelessly repeats the refrain, “and all is one” (*ve-khula ḥad*).⁵⁸⁴

Having briefly presented the structure of Kabbalistic ontology, I turn now to a textual analysis of Moses Cordovero’s *Or Ne’erav*.

Textual Analysis: *Or Ne’erav*

Cordovero opens the sixth part of his *Or Ne’erav* with the following passage:

First of all, [the beginner] must know that the Creator, *Ein Sof*, is one and has no second. He is the Cause of causes and Prime Mover. He is not one in the numerical

⁵⁸² Scholem, *Major Trends*, 271.

⁵⁸³ WZ I:240.

⁵⁸⁴ WZ I:239-40.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

sense, for [the concepts of] mutation and change and form and multiplicity do not apply to Him. [One] is rather a word utilized by way of parable and likeness, since the number one stands by itself and is the beginning of each number, all numbers [being contained] within it in potential, while it is a part of every number in actuality. When they call the Creator, may He be blessed, One, it is in this manner: that the Creator, may He be blessed, [is found] in all things in actuality, while all things are [found] in Him in potential. He is the beginning and cause of all things. In this way they ascribed to the Creator, may He be blessed, unity, without change by addition or subtraction, similar to the [number] one. [They found] also that He is the [necessary] Cause of being, just as [the number] one is necessary for [all] numbers, for no number could be in existence without it. He is not a number. If the one should be eliminated, [all] numbers would be eliminated, [whereas] if the numbers should be eliminated, the one would not be eliminated in their elimination. This is the power of [the divine] unity.⁵⁸⁵

This passage conveys what is arguably Cordovero's fundamental metaphysical thesis: existence is an absolute "no-thing" (*ayin*) that is infinitely "not-other" (*ein od*)—what Śaṅkara had called the "One without a second" (*ekam eva advitīyam*). As Raviv has shown, for Cordovero "any honest and rigorous treatment of divine unity must yield the indisputable conclusion: 'God is *one*' means 'God is *all*'—wholly beyond opposites and utterly transcending contradiction!"⁵⁸⁶ This unity, says Cordovero, is not numerical but metaphysical in quality. God is predicated as "One" only in the mode of "parable and likeness"—which is to say, it is an analogical

⁵⁸⁵ ON, VI.1.1., 111.

⁵⁸⁶ Raviv, *Decoding the Dogma*, 158.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

rather than a univocal unity; an infinite oneness in which manifold possibilities reside. Thus, as we saw in the first chapter on Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, the “one” and the “all” are related through a total, albeit non-reciprocal, dependence. Whereas the “one” is in the “all” by way of actuality (*in actus*), the “all” is in the “one” by way of potentiality (*in potentia*), as seen in the figure below (Figure 8):

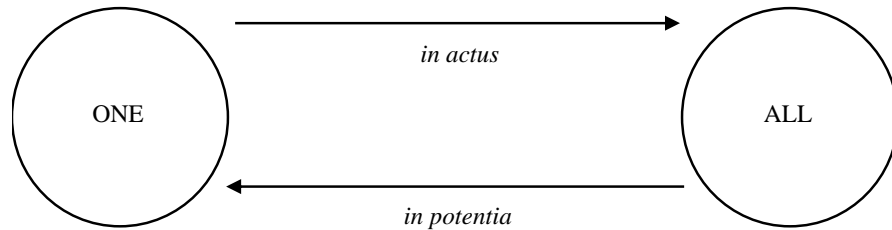


Figure 8. *Non-Reciprocity of the One and the All*

Whereas Robinson translates the last sentence of the passage just cited as “the power of [the divine] unity” (*ko’ah ha-ehad*), Raviv suggests a more ontologically oriented translation: “potentiality/potency of the One”, or “an infinitely unified singular *potentiality* and an infinitely singular *potency*.”⁵⁸⁷ All things “are” as the phenomenal manifestations of a “potential potency” in whose infinitude all the divine attributes are fused together in a “*unified aseity*”⁵⁸⁸: “He [the Godhead] and His potency are unified as one (*ehad*).”⁵⁸⁹ The whole of existence is a dissemination of Divinity, a prolongation of

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid, 402.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, 401.

⁵⁸⁹ Cordovero as quoted in Raviv, *Decoding the Dogma*, 401.

limitless Plenitude. It is because the Godhead is *what it is* that all things are *what they are*: the manifold refracted colors of an infinitely unified light.⁵⁹⁰

“He is He, and all is one.”⁵⁹¹

For Cordovero, “oneness” is akin to an infinite circle—a “homogenous mass of light” (Śaṅkara), an “Uncarved Block” (Laozi), a “strange amorphousness” (Zhuangzi), an “unadulterated mass” (Dōgen)—whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Everything proceeds from it and returns to it. It has no inside or outside, no before or after, no here or there, no beginning or end. To it, nothing can be added. From it, nothing can be taken away. *Ein Sof* is Itself and nothing else (“no-thing”), such that whatever emerges from the Infinite cannot be other than the Infinite (“not-other”). As Green remarks,

Multiplicity begins to arise so subtly within the One that its presence can barely be detected. Nothing is ever added to *Ein Sof*, but it ever so gradually reveals itself to contain an increasingly differentiated reality...The oneness of God is absolute; it does not begin a series and can be followed by no “two.”⁵⁹²

Seen in this light, the ten *sefirot* are not to be thought of as in any way “adding” to the non-dual oneness of *Ein Sof*. They are comprised within it, as mathematical tenths are comprised within a whole.⁵⁹³ *Ein Sof* is not a

⁵⁹⁰ Cf. Garb, *History of Kabbalah*, 43.

⁵⁹¹ Cordovero as quoted in Garb, *History of Kabbalah*, 41.

⁵⁹² Green, *Guide*, 37.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

relative oneness that must be balanced against the manifold, but an *absolute* oneness that utterly eclipses the relative categories of the “one” and the “many”, and so is able to embrace both in a non-dual fashion.

Cordovero continues, following the *Bahir* and the *Yetsirah*, not only by connecting the *sefirot* to the ten utterances of the creation narrative (Gen. 1), but also by numbering the *sefirot* as exactly “ten and not nine; ten and not eleven.”⁵⁹⁴ The strictness of this numbering is not for its own sake, however, but serves as a means to absolutely differentiate the Divine Essence from all things. In the words of Kaplan, “God belongs to a totally different category than the Sefirot, and is not to be counted among them.”⁵⁹⁵ *Ein Sof* is neither this nor that (*neti, neti*). It cannot be an object of thought, since it is “that which thought cannot grasp” (*mah she-en ha-mahashavah masseget*).⁵⁹⁶ Put another way: *Ein Sof* is always beyond the world as that which is nearer to the world than the world is to itself.

The oneness of the manifold is therefore not an ontological armistice between two otherwise opposed forces, but a “true, wondrous Unity”⁵⁹⁷ beyond all determinations (“no-thing”) and exceeding all antitheses (“not-other”). *Ein Sof* is “the King of the King of Kings, whom we cannot imagine and of whom we cannot speak or posit either judgment or mercy, passion

⁵⁹⁴ ON, VI.1.2, 112.

⁵⁹⁵ SY, 39

⁵⁹⁶ WZ I:234-35.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

or anger, change or boundedness, sleep or motion, or any quality whatsoever, either prior to the emanation *or now after the emanation*.”⁵⁹⁸

This last statement is especially crucial in understanding Cordovero’s notion of existence as simultaneously one and manifold. As with Śaṅkara’s *nirguṇa Brahman*, Zhuangzi’s *wu-wu-wu*, or Dōgen’s *kū*, the *Ein Sof* of Cordovero is not one thing (A^1) prior to its manifestation and another thing (A^2) afterward. It is the One (“no-thing”) that has no second (“not-other”). As such, everything that proceeds from *Ein Sof* “is” a finite instantiation of the Infinite: “He and they [i.e., oneness and the manifold] are all included in a complete [i.e., non-dual] unity.”⁵⁹⁹ Which means that, for Cordovero, just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the diversified modes of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as so many limited determinations of a single meta-ontological principle or field, which not only “exists in every existent” but “*is* everything that exists”—be it an ant or an angel, a star or a stone. As Cordovero writes elsewhere:

Before anything emanated, there was only Ein Sof. Ein Sof was all that existed. Similarly, after it brought into being that which exists, there is nothing but it. You cannot find anything that exists apart from it. There is nothing that is not pervaded by the power of divinity. If there were, Ein Sof would be limited, subject to duality. Rather, God is everything that exists, though everything that exists is not God. It is present in everything, and everything comes into being from it. Nothing

⁵⁹⁸ ON, VI.5, 115 (emphasis added).

⁵⁹⁹ ON, VI.1.6, 115.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

is devoid of its divinity. Everything is within it; it is within everything and outside everything. There is nothing but it.⁶⁰⁰

Having provided a structural exposition and textual analysis of the Kabbalistic notion of existence as simultaneously one and manifold, I turn now to the next section on manifestation.

Section Two: Manifestation

Structural Exposition: Manifestation as *Shekhinah*

The Kabbalistic concept of manifestation is tied to its account of the sefirotic tree, the structure of which—when viewed from the level of manifestation—is triadic, with an upper, an intermediate, and a lower set of three. The first and uppermost triad consists of *keter* (the supernal crown), *ḥokhmah* (sapiential knowledge), and *binah* (discriminative understanding); the second, middle triad consists of *ḥesed* (mercy), *gevurah* (judgment), and *tiferet* (beauty); and the third, lowermost triad consists of *netsah* (endurance), *hod* (majesty), and *yesod* (foundation). It is in the tenth *sefirah* that manifestation attains its culminating point, namely, *malkhut* (kingdom) or *shekhinah* (glory), “God’s royal rule, into which they [the triads of *sefirot*] flow as into the ocean.”⁶⁰¹ It is through the *shekhinah*, as a receptive medium or womb, that the infinite possibilities of the Godhead are brought

⁶⁰⁰ As translated by Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, 24.

⁶⁰¹ Scholem, *Godhead*, 43.

into the world, thus explaining the predominantly feminine imagery of its symbolism.⁶⁰²

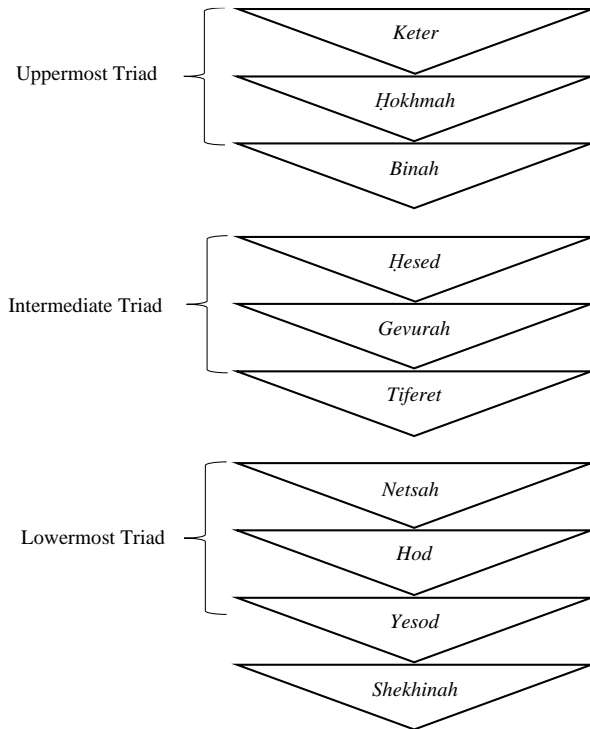


Figure 9. *The Triadic Structure of Manifestation*

The figure above (Figure 9) illustrates the triadic structure of manifestation from the perspective of Kabbalistic ontology, tracing its descent from the uppermost, intermediate, and lowermost triumvirates to the exilic light of *shekhinah*. This descending movement parallels that of the so-called “four worlds” (*olamot*): (1) the world of emanation (*atsilut*), (2) the world of creation (*beri’ah*), (3) the world of formation (*yetsirah*), and (4) the world of making (*asiyah*). To the first world corresponds the as-yet-undivided

⁶⁰² Ibid.

radiation of the *sefirot* from *Ein Sof*. To the second corresponds the separative birth of existence (*yesh*) from non-existence (*ayin*). To the third corresponds the subtle process through which existence emerges with increasingly refined shape and form. And to the fourth corresponds the realm of the manifold: material, multiple, divided.

It is just here—at the level of *malkhut* or *shekhinah*—that we find a key correspondence between the Kabbalistic view of manifestation and the previously examined mystico-speculative traditions of the East. According to the Kabbalistic understanding, God contemplates only Himself in the uppermost triad of *keter-ḥokhmah-binah*. To contemplate the creative potencies of His Essence, however, requires the opening of His “seven eyes”, i.e., “the seven *sefirot* of construction.”⁶⁰³ If absolute reality is “One without a second”, as all the mystico-speculative traditions of this study affirm, then any positing of a “second” must bear the quality of an “illusion”, “apparition”, or “shadow”. This illusory quality is signified by the doctrine of *tsimtsum* (“contraction”), according to which the absolute must “withdraw” its infinite radiance to a “point”—which is really a void—so as to apportion a “place” for the world’s creation. Needless to say, the non-dual oneness of the manifold does not have “parts”, but rather “an infinity of possibilities, of which only the creatural possibilities appear under the aspect of separate illusory forms”.⁶⁰⁴ Moreover, this “illusory” quality is not merely negative, as if creation were only “real” to the extent

⁶⁰³ See *Zohar*, *Shemoth* 10a.

⁶⁰⁴ HA, 66.

that it negates that which alone is Real. Creation is not the opposite of its Source (equivocity). Nor is it merely “more of the same”, so to speak (univocity). Nor still is it a mere “likeness” of *something* else (analogicity)—which is precisely where the analogy of creation as a “shadow” or “reflection” breaks down. Creation is rather the limited and diversified expression of the Limitless One—a “One” that is as much “two-less” as it is “one-less” (understood in a relative, mathematical sense). The world is therefore only a “deception” where it is seen as a reality in, of, and toward itself. For Cordovero and the Kabbalistic tradition, by contrast, the world is always receiving itself from that which is both not itself (“nothing”) and infinitely more itself than itself (“not-other”), i.e., non-dual Oneness.

In this sense, the *sefirot* can be split into two main divisions: (1) the meta-cosmic and (2) the cosmological. Beneath the three meta-cosmic *sefirot* of *keter*, *ḥokhmah*, and *binah* are the seven cosmological *sefirot* that disseminate their “vanity” (*habel*) “under the sun” (Eccl. 1:2), projecting “the mirage of an existential multitude at the heart of undifferentiated Unity”.⁶⁰⁵ The Kabbalistic conception of *shekhinah* therefore corresponds to the Advaitic *māyā*, the Daoist *wu hua*, and the Zen *engi*—all of which refer in their own way to the ontological ambiguity of the world. Like mirages in the desert, phenomena have no reality *of their own*. Yet they are not merely nothing, having a positive aspect as well. Illusions do “exist”,

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid, 69.

albeit in the condition of a pure participation or total reliance. As such, they are a “mixture” of non-being and being, absence and presence, darkness and light. Creaturely existence therefore holds in perfect tension the dichotomies that its non-dual Principle overcomes “in advance”, as it were.

While the Spanish Kabbalists had previously spoken of the *shekhinah* as the exilic mode of Divinity, yet “it was the Kabbalists of Safed, now consumed by the horrors of historical exile, who took up this theme and pushed it to its extreme.”⁶⁰⁶ Breaking ranks with the consensus view of medieval Kabbalism, Cordovero saw in the *shekhinah* a “positive view of femininity”,⁶⁰⁷ one which regarded the highest glory of the human being to be that of wandering with the “Queen” in exile: “One should wander, as if exiled from place to place, purely for the sake of Heaven, and thereby make oneself a vessel for the *Shekhinah* in exile.”⁶⁰⁸ As *māyā* is conceived in Advaitic thought as the feminine consort (*śakti*) of Brahman, so also is *shekhinah* conceived in Kabbalistic thought “[a]s the feminine principle within God”, possessed of both a positive and a negative aspect, having “no divine light of Her own” (negative) and “reflect[ing] the light of the upper *Sefirot*” (positive).⁶⁰⁹

Cordovero had accordingly drawn attention to the etymological link between the Hebrew words *erav* (“pleasant”), *erev* (“mixed”), and *arav*

⁶⁰⁶ Fine, “Introduction”, 8.

⁶⁰⁷ Garb, *History of the Kabbalah*, 55.

⁶⁰⁸ As translated by R.J.Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 52.

⁶⁰⁹ Fine, “Introduction”, 8. See also Scholem, *Godhead*, 51.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

(“darkened”), writing that “*Malkhut* was called by past sages ‘thick light’ and due to its thickness it was also rendered ‘a mixed darkness’”.⁶¹⁰ Schaya aptly describes this Kabbalistic “mixture” (*mélange*) of existence and non-existence when he writes the following:

The whole of creation is an illusory projection of the transcendental aspects of God into the “mirror” of His immanence. In fact, the *Zohar* remarks that the verb *baro*, “to create”, implies the idea of “creating an illusion”. But although creation is by nature illusory, it still comports to a part of reality; for every reflection of reality, though distant, fragmented, and transitory, necessarily possesses something of its cause. Even if creation is regarded as pure illusion, that aspect of reality which constitutes its essence still cannot be excluded. Illusion itself is not nothingness pure and simple, for there cannot be any such thing, since by virtue of its existence, it would no longer be nothing; illusion is a “mixture” (*mélange*) of the real and the ephemeral or—to use a Kabbalistic expression—of light and darkness.⁶¹¹

Having outlined the basic structure of the Kabbalistic understanding of manifestation, I now take up a textual analysis of the same concept as elaborated in Cordovero’s *Or Ne’erav*.

⁶¹⁰ As quoted by Raviv, *Decoding the Dogma*, 236.

⁶¹¹ HA, 70.

Textual Analysis: *Or Ne'erav*

Cordovero articulates the Kabbalistic view of manifestation in a lengthy passage at the end of the first chapter of Part VI:

[The beginner] must also know that before the emanation of the aforementioned qualities, these qualities were utterly hidden within Him [the Godhead] in the greatest possible unity. It is not appropriate [to ascribe to them] any image or point at all. They were, rather, united in Him. Afterward He emanated one point from Himself. [This] one emanation is *Keter*, which is called *Ayin* (“Nothingness”) on account of its great transparency and closeness to its source, such that being (*yesh*) cannot be posited of it. From [*keter*] a second point was emanated in a second revelation. It is *Hokhmah*, and it is called “being” because it is the beginning of revelation and being. It is called “being from nothingness” (*yesh me-ayin*). Because it [*hokhmah*] is the beginning of being and not being itself, it required a third point for the revelation of existents. That is [the *sefirah*] *Binah*, which [constitutes] the revelation of the existents. *Hokhmah* is the beginning of existence, and *Binah* is the end of existence, since the beginning of the founding of existence comes from *Hokhmah*, which is called “Beginning” (*re'shit*).⁶¹²

Here Cordovero is describing the emanatory process of the *sefirot* in terms of a hierarchically ordered set of triads. The first triad consists of three “points”: (1) *keter*, whose ontological transparency before the light of its Origin also renders it *ayin* or “nothingness”; (2) *hokhmah*, which is the first determination of *Ein Sof* and the primordial idea of the Divine Essence;⁶¹³

⁶¹² ON, VI.1.7, 116.

⁶¹³ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 213.

and (3) *binah*, which, as Cordovero says, “constitutes the revelation of the existents.” The first and uppermost triad is “thought of as one.” The mind should never “divide [the Godhead] and think in terms of multiplicity in God,” but should rather understand that “the entire emanation [of the *sefirot*] constitutes a complete unity”;⁶¹⁴ “the greatest possible unity.” *Keter* is *ayin*—beyond being and non-being—and corresponds to the “intellect”. *Hokhmah* is the originating principle of being—“being from non-being” (*yesh me-ayin*)—and corresponds to “wisdom”. *Binah* is the end or goal of being—being in its being-ness—and corresponds to “understanding.”⁶¹⁵ Each *sefirah* is the locus for those below it. Therefore, *keter* is the locus of nine *sefirot*, *hokhmah* of eight, *binah* of seven, and so forth.

Cordovero goes on to list the two remaining triads—which he collectively terms the “six directions”—as follows: *hesed* is derived from *hokhmah*, *gevurah* from *binah*, and *tiferet* from *keter*. This is what was referred to in the structural exposition above as the “intermediate triumvirate”. The lowermost triad emerges next: *netsah* from *hesed*, *hod* from *gevurah*, and *yesod* from *tiferet*. The emanation of *malkhut* or *shekhinah* occurs simultaneously with these “six directions” as “the sum of all”.

Accordingly, the order of emanation [occurred] in one of three ways, all of which are true: either one after the other, *Keter*, *Hokhmah*, *Binah*, *Gevurah*...to *Malkhut*;

⁶¹⁴ ON, VI.2, 123-124.

⁶¹⁵ ON, VI.3, 125.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

or else *Keter*, *Tiferet*, *Yesod*, *Malkhut* constitute one point, which propagated itself to the end of *Malkhut*, while *Hokhmah*, *Hesed*, and *Netsah* constitute a second point, which propagated itself until *Hod*. Alternatively, *Keter*, *Hokhmah*, *Binah*. Afterwards, *Netsah*, *Hod*, *Yesod*. *Malkhut* is the sum of all.⁶¹⁶

Cordovero's analysis of the sefirotic "organism" thus reveals three interlocking orders of emanation: (1) sequential ("one after the other"), (2) constitutional (three constituent "points"), and (3) summational (with *malkhut* enfolding the triad of higher, 3^1 , intermediate, 3^2 , and lower, 3^3). It is perhaps difficult, if not impossible, for the late or "post-" modern mind to see in this passage anything more than metaphysical hairsplitting, no less futile than looking in a dark room for a black cat that is not there. A vision more attuned to its speculative impulse, however, sees in this passage the "problem" that Cordovero everywhere sought to address: that of the "one" and the "many". As Scholem writes of Cordovero: "The problem of the relation of the substance of *Ein Sof* [oneness] to the 'organism,' the 'instruments' (*kelim*: i.e., vessels or bowls), through which it works and acts [manifold] was one to which he returned again and again."⁶¹⁷

In addressing this perennial "problem" of philosophy, Cordovero followed what Tishby had called "the basic principle of kabbalistic symbolism": the unity of transcendence and immanence, above and below.⁶¹⁸ Garb is therefore correct in identifying "connectivity" as "the

⁶¹⁶ ON, VI.1, 117.

⁶¹⁷ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 252.

⁶¹⁸ WZ II:654.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

organizing trope” of Cordovero’s vast mystico-speculative system.⁶¹⁹ Everything is related to everything else. Nothing stands alone: “...the upper [*sefirot*] need the lower ones, and the lower ones need the upper ones.”⁶²⁰ Transcendence echoes throughout the deepest depths of immanence, and the deepest depths of immanence in turn reverberate into the inner sanctum of the Divine Essence, even to that level of *keter* termed “wonder” (*peleh*), where the words of the prophet Isaiah are fulfilled: “In all their trouble, He [God] is afflicted” (Is. 63:9).⁶²¹ Accordingly, it can be said that Cordovero’s thought “ultimately charts a circular path which starts with divine emanation down to the most miniscule of cosmic elements and returns to the most enigmatic levels of *Keter Elyon*”, as Raviv has observed.⁶²² This circular “path” is portrayed below (Figure 10).

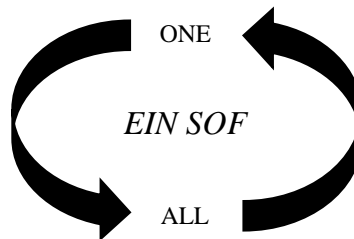


Figure 10. *The Circular Path of Emanation*

The whole of nature is thus viewed by Cordovero as a vast nexus of interpenetrating forms, “links in a continuous chain, and the physical

⁶¹⁹ Garb, *History of the Kabbalah*, 51.

⁶²⁰ ON, VI.2, 119.

⁶²¹ Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, *The Palm Tree of Devorah (Tomer Devorah)*, trans. Rabbi Moshe Miller (Spring Valley, NY: Feldheim, 1993), 12-13.

⁶²² Raviv, *Decoding the Dogma*, 158.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

cosmos is the last link.”⁶²³ This is why Cordovero is careful to emphasize that “the actions of [the sefirotic world] of holiness and spirituality are not like the deeds of the lowly and inadequate human beings.” What is the difference? Cordovero answers: “when a human being acts and performs any action, then the thing which is acted upon acquires the form required, and necessarily loses its former form and nature, and transforms from one existence to another, while the former existence of that thing will no longer be remembered.”⁶²⁴ Whereas the empirical world operates according to the logic of duality and separation, the sefirotic world operates according to the logic of non-dual oneness.

This [separation] is not the case with the *Sefirot*. [Despite] all the things that develop out of them, their previous existence will not cease. Rather they will develop from one existence to another. For example, when the sefirot were submerged within *Keter*, all of them were present there. Even after their emanation, their existence remains there, for [*Keter*] does not cease to exist and will not change. This is also [the rule] concerning their emanation from *Hokhmah* and for all their subjects. Thus the [sefirotic] qualities themselves also have their existence in this manner. They exchange and multiply infinitely.⁶²⁵

The *sefirot* do not alter their Source in emanating from it, in that they are not something other than their Source, but the manifestations of its hidden modalities. Each *sefirah* “is” only relative to the absolute reality of *Ein Sof*:

⁶²³ WZ II:654.

⁶²⁴ ON, VI.4, 135.

⁶²⁵ ON, VI.4, 136.

“All of them need *Ein Sof*, while He has need of none of them.”⁶²⁶ As such, Cordovero’s concept of “connectivity” corresponds analogically to the Buddhist notion of “co-dependent origination” (*pratītya-samutpāda*), in which the bifurcated categories of being and non-being, self and other, knower and known, are all relativized—and, paradoxically, *realized*—in the infinitude of non-dual oneness (*eḥad*). Far from its antithesis or dialectical opposite, the non-dual absolute (“the One that has no second”) is the very possibility of the manifold, the very “many-ness” of the many, in whose infinite embrace all things “exchange and multiply infinitely.” As mirrors of the infinite, every sefirotic “surface” is infinitely deep, with each *sefirah* possessing innumerable aspects (*beḥinot*), the fullness of which is rooted in the uncountable One Itself (*Ein Sof*).⁶²⁷ Every reflection is therefore viewed by Cordovero as both infinitely like and infinitely unlike its Source. To the extent that the emanated *sefirot* are all sprung from the infinite, they are themselves infinite. But to the extent that their infinitude is *in potentia*, the chain of their continuity is *ad infinitum*, so as to never “reach an identity with the essence of the Emanator”.⁶²⁸ As Schaya comments: “[The essence of the absolute] is all; and, in it, all is it, all is all, without the slightest restriction, distinction, opposition or relation. In truth, there is neither subject nor object, neither cause nor effect; there is only the One without a second, ipseity without otherness, indivisible totality.”⁶²⁹

⁶²⁶ ON, VI.2, 120.

⁶²⁷ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 114.

⁶²⁸ Ibid, 115.

⁶²⁹ HA, 36.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

For Cordovero and the Kabbalistic tradition, the world of manifestation (*shekhinah*) reflects or shadows forth the two opposed aspects of the non-dual absolute, such that every phenomenon both hides (“nothing”) and manifests (“not-other”) its Principle. Like the sea, *shekhinah* is at once serenely beautiful (revelation) and tempestuously sublime (hiddenness). On her surface, violence rages. In her depths, stillness reigns. As Tishby writes: “The large number of changes that take place in the nature of the *Shekhinah*, and all the different relationships that it has,” naturally invoke “the problem of its unification with the other *sefirot*” arises⁶³⁰—the problem of the “one” and the “many”. From the Kabbalistic perspective, and the view of speculative mysticism in general, no problem is of greater significance. It was “in his thought” that Adam (representative of primordial humanity) “destroyed the divine unity”, having separated the Tree of Knowledge from the Tree of Life.⁶³¹ The goal of the Kabbalah is to amend this fallen state of disunity by “rectifying the sparks” (*birur hanitsutsot*) present at the core of all created beings.

Here cosmogony is seen to operate by the law of inversion or “inverse analogy” (*de l’analogie inverse*).⁶³² The “withdrawal” of the Infinite into its own infinity (oneness) is the “act” by which all things are brought into being (manifold). The cosmos—conceived as the “primordial man” (*Adam Kadmon*)—in turn imitates this cosmogonic act by

⁶³⁰ WZ I:373.

⁶³¹ WZ I:375.

⁶³² HA, 73.

withdrawing itself into its Origin, so as to invert the original inversion and thus return the manifold to oneness—a oneness, we must repeat, which is not contrary to the manifold but the non-dual principle of the same. In the words of Scholem: “With Cordovero the *Sefirot* are more than emanations which manifest the attributes of the Emanator, though they are this too. They actually become the structural elements of all beings, even of the self-manifesting God Himself.”⁶³³ Just as waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the diversified modes of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as the expressed modalities a single meta-ontological principle or field: the oneness of the manifold. Again, to conclude this section with the words of Schaya: “The finite is existentially different from the Infinite but in its innermost depth, beyond its createdness, it is nothing other than the Infinite; it is created to realize this, to testify to this, and to return thereunto.”⁶³⁴

Having concluded the present section on manifestation, I turn now to the final section of this chapter on knowledge.

Section Three: Knowledge

Structural Exposition: Knowledge as *Hokhmah*

The structure of knowledge in the Kabbalah is, as with the previously examined mystico-speculative traditions of this study, intimately tied to its view of existence. For the Kabbalists, epistemology is not a separate domain

⁶³³ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 115.

⁶³⁴ Schaya, *Universal Aspects*, 131.

of its own, but an inflection of ontology, and whose tripartite structure corresponds to that of the microcosmic, macrocosmic, and metacosmic worlds. The highest form of knowledge is *hokhmah* or *sophía*, equivalent to the Advaitic *jñāna*, the Daoist *ming*, and the Zen *satori*. The proper “object” of this knowledge is no object at all, namely, the pre-phenomenal stillness of being. As Kaplan writes: “In a Kabbalistic sense, Wisdom is seen as pure, undifferentiated Mind. It is pure thought, which has not yet been broken up into differentiated ideas. Wisdom is the level above all division, where everything is a simple unity.”⁶³⁵ *Hokhmah* therefore “knows only the One and all in the One.”⁶³⁶

Beneath the level of wisdom lies that of understanding (*binah*), whose root is *ben* or “between”. It is at this level that “ideas exist separately, where they can be scrutinized and comprehended. While “Wisdom” is pure undifferentiated Mind, “Understanding” is the level where division exists, and where things are delineated and defined as separate objects.”⁶³⁷ Here every *A* is *A* (law of identity) and not non-*A* (law of non-contradiction). Thus whereas *hokhmah* corresponds to the singular *Yah*, *binah* corresponds to *Elohim*, the plural Name of God.

The third level of knowledge is that of *da'at*, which is not so much the “end” of knowledge as “the between of the between”, located at the “midpoint” of wisdom and understanding, and thus enabling their

⁶³⁵ SY, 11-12.

⁶³⁶ HA, 41.

⁶³⁷ Ibid, 12.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

intercourse. In this sense, *da'at* represents the “highest spiritual state” of the soul: “intimate knowledge (*Da'at*) that a transcendent source lies behind all things.”⁶³⁸ Where *da'at* is neglected or eviscerated, there the thread that binds the understanding to wisdom is severed, and the former is rendered “diabolical”, tearing the manifold of phenomena away from the oneness of its meta-ontological principle. As Abraham Heschel writes,

The universe, exposed to the violence of our analytical mind, is being broken apart. It is split into the known and unknown, into the seen and unseen. In mystic contemplation all things are seen as one. The mystic mind tends to hold the world together: to behold the seen in conjunction with the unseen, to keep the fellowship with the unknown through the revolving door of the known...What our senses perceive is but the jutting edge of what is deeply hidden. Extending over into the invisible, the things of this world stand in a secret contact with that which no eye has ever perceived.⁶³⁹

These three levels of knowledge (*hokhmah*, *binah*, and *da'at*) correspond to the three levels of the soul (*neshamah*, *nefesh*, and *ruah*), the world (*beriyah*, *yetsirah*, and *asiyah*), and the sefirotic tree (*hesed*, *gevurah*, and *tiferet*). Everything within the Kabbalistic system is therefore interpreted through the premise of unity, with nothing excluded. The Kabbalistic structure of knowledge provides a particularly well-developed instance of its controlling premise.

⁶³⁸ Lancaster, *Essence*, 50.

⁶³⁹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Mystical Element in Judaism* (Skokie: Varda, 2017),

Analogous to the structures of knowledge found in Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, philosophical Daoism, and Zen Buddhism, the Kabbalistic structure of knowledge is divided into three main stages. The first stage can be designated as *pargod*, in that it sees through the cosmic “curtain” which the Light of *Ein Sof* places before Itself, dulling its brilliance so that the finite order might be able to perceive it.⁶⁴⁰ Where this symbolism is taken still further, *pargod* suggests “the imperceptible screen on which appear the fleeting forms that lead the pilgrim astray”.⁶⁴¹ Unaided by a light brighter than itself, the stage of *pargod*-consciousness becomes “dispersed and lost in a multitude of phenomena,” unable to integrate the multiple into the One.⁶⁴² It therefore corresponds to the Advaitic *jīva*-consciousness, the Daoist *xin*-consciousness, and the Buddhist *mumyō*-consciousness.

The second stage is referred to in any number of different ways: the “contemplation of nothingness” (*histaklut el ha-ayin*), the “cessation of existence” (*bitul ha-yesh*), or the “nullification of mind” (*afisat ha-ra’ayon*). It is at this stage that the same annihilatory structure seen in Advaita Vedānta, Daoism, and Zen is repeated, albeit within the integral form of Kabbalistic thought and practice. Here the human being is submerged back into the undifferentiated unity from which it came, like a drop in the ocean.⁶⁴³ This is not simply an intellectual adventure, however. It involves the entirety of the self and all existence with it. All things

⁶⁴⁰ HA, 67-68.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid, 69.

⁶⁴² Schaya, *Universal Aspects*, 142.

⁶⁴³ See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 68-69.

undergo the same death, thereby disclosing themselves as a single unified whole. The ontological boundaries that otherwise divide “this” from “that”, “here” from “there”, are all broken down, and the veils that normally cover the esoteric core of things removed, such that all phenomena are rendered mutually porous and transparent. This stage, which can be called *bitul*-consciousness, corresponds to the Advaitic *sākṣātkāra*-consciousness, the Daoist *zhi*-consciousness, and the Zen *chi*-consciousness. It is the stage of “sitting in oblivion” (*zuowang*), or of the “body-and-mind-dropping-off” (*shinjin-datsuraku*).

The third stage involves the realization of non-dual knowledge, what might be referred to as *ehad*- or *ayin*-consciousness. At this stage, the human being re-emerges from the pre-phenomenal stillness of the absolute, having died beyond death and risen beyond life. The metacosmic, macrocosmic, and microcosmic worlds return too, but this time as seen through the light of infinite unity, wherein the “problem” of the one and the many vanishes in the splendor of their simultaneity—the oneness of the manifold. This stage corresponds to the Advaitic *Brahman*-consciousness, the Daoist *dao*-consciousness, and the Zen *satori*-consciousness.

The Kabbalistic structure of knowledge (Figure 11), along with its noted correlations to the previously surveyed mystico-speculative traditions of this study, is displayed below:

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

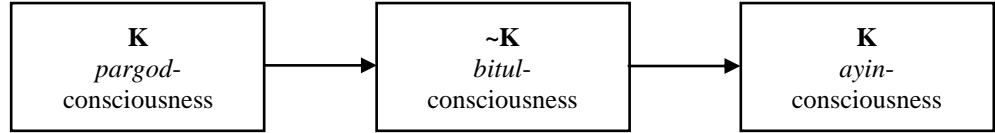


Figure 11. Structure of Knowledge – *Kabbalistic Judaism*

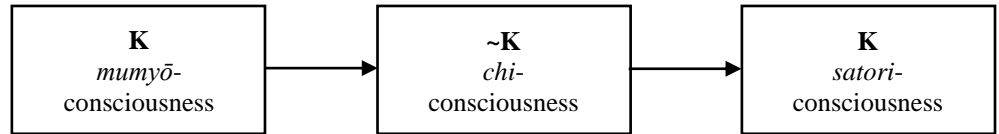


Figure 4. Structure of Knowledge – *Zen Buddhism*

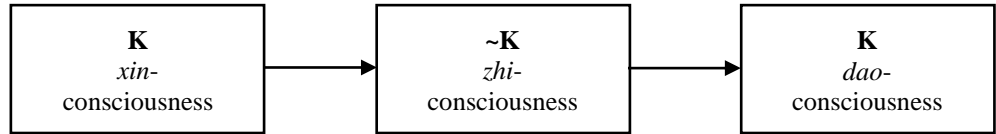


Figure 2. Structure of Knowledge – *Philosophical Daoism*

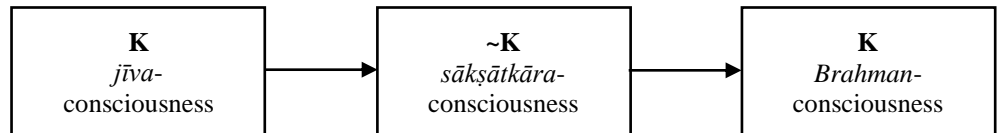


Figure 1. Structure of Knowledge – *Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

Having provided an overview of the Kabbalistic structure of knowledge, I turn now to a textual analysis of Cordovero’s *Or Ne’erav*.

Textual Analysis: *Or Ne’erav*

For Cordovero, wisdom (*hokhmah*) is the creative principle of all things, “the beginning of revelation and being.” As has already been mentioned, wisdom and understanding (*binah*) relate in a way “similar to physical union

and mating,” which is why “they are called ‘Husband’ and ‘Wife,’ ‘Father’ and ‘Mother’”.⁶⁴⁴ The coital link that binds them together is “the primordial mystery of *Da’at*, which is in the middle between ‘Father’ and ‘Mother.’”⁶⁴⁵ Here Cordovero cites the book of Job, identifying *da’at* with “the path which the bird of prey does not know” (Job 28:7).⁶⁴⁶ Worth emphasizing here is Cordovero’s claim that “this union [of *ḥokhmah* and *binah* through *da’at*] is the existence and renewal of the Sefirot, which are continually renewed through their root, which is sunk in the depths of Binah and Ḥokhmah, and also continues in the mystery of the soul, which is from Binah.”⁶⁴⁷ This union is not a one-sided movement from above to below, since “all union requires an arousal from below, and the arousal of Binah [stems] from Malkhut”.⁶⁴⁸ The implication is that *da’at* is more than a connecting “tie” between wisdom and understanding, but the “heart” at the center of the sefirotic body, disseminating the “blood” of knowledge to all its members. In the words of Schaya,

...the essential and incorruptible unity of the *sefirot* is revealed not only by their reciprocal “relations”...but also by their mutual luminary which “circulates” in the “channels” of these relations and is named *da’at*, “knowledge”. This refers to the omniscience or universal consciousness of God which does not properly speaking

⁶⁴⁴ ON, VI.3, 127.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid, 128.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

constitute a *sefirah* but signifies the cognitive presence of the One in each of them.⁶⁴⁹

For Cordovero, the mystery of *da'at* which expresses the simultaneity of the “one” and the “many”, i.e., the one Thought in all thoughts, the one Mind in all minds. It is through *da'at* that the oneness of wisdom and understanding is facilitated, thus bringing together the theosophical and ecstatic acts of *visio rerum omnium in Deo* (“seeing all things in God”) and *visio Dei in omnibus rebus* (“seeing God in all things”). The simultaneity of this vision has for its possibility the non-dual oneness of Divine knowledge, itself ultimately convertible with the non-dual oneness of the Divine Essence, and the existential infinity it “discovers” within itself.

The Creator’s knowledge is not like that of creatures, for in the latter, knowledge is distinct from the subject of knowledge and has to do with objects that are likewise distinguished from the subject. This is what is referred to by the three terms: thought, what thinks, and what is thought. On the contrary, the Creator is Himself at once Knowledge, Knower, and Known. Indeed, His manner of knowing does not consist of applying His Thought as it were to things outside of Him; but it is by knowing Himself and of Himself that He knows and sees all that is. Nothing exists but that which is united with Him and found by Him in His own Essence.⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁹ HA, 31-32.

⁶⁵⁰ Cordovero as quoted and translated by Schaya, *Universal Aspects*, 147.

Through the act of pure participation, discriminative knowledge (*pargod*-consciousness) dies to itself (*bitul*-consciousness) and is resurrected in the pure vision of “non-dual duality” (*ayin*-consciousness), so as to see the “one” in the “many” and the “many” in the “one”.

3. Concluding Summary

In this chapter I have sought to further develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory through which to compare mystical ontologies East and West. I have done this by analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the overarching idea of the oneness of the manifold. This overarching idea is designated by Kabbalistic Judaism as *eḥad* (“oneness”). The network of interrelated concepts that *eḥad* coordinates and structures are: existence (*ein sof*), manifestation (*shekhinah*), and knowledge (*hokhmah*). These key philosophical concepts find their correlates in the previously specified conceptual frameworks of the Advaitic, Daoist, and Zen systems, as seen below (with Kabbalistic terms in bold):

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayatā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shimyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>eḥad</i>	<i>ein sof</i>	<i>shekhinah</i>	<i>ḥokhmah</i>

Table 6. *Corresponding Concepts – Kabbalistic Judaism*

From the Kabbalistic perspective, as for all the mystico-speculative viewpoints examined thus far, existence is an absolute unity or oneness (*eḥad*), beyond all relations (“no-thing”) and in excess to all oppositions (“not-other”). As a pure, unqualified existence, *Ein Sof* is metaphysically primary or principal vis-à-vis the manifold of “things” or “essences”, such that, in the strictest sense, it is not an angel or a stone that exists, but *Ein Sof* that “angels” or “stones”—“here” in one way and “there” in another.

Through the power of its sefirotic emanations, originating with *keter* or *ayin* and descending to *malkhut* or *shekhinah*, the non-dual absolute of *Ein Sof* becomes (without becoming) the existentiating act and metaphysical substratum of all things. The realm of manifestation is therefore akin to an “illusion” or existential “mirage”, in that *Ein Sof* is “the One that has no second”.

Lifting the “veil” (*pargon*) of Isis, the Kabbalist “follows the traces of the Divine and, decoding the symbolic cipher, recognizes the archetypes” that non-dually undergird them, so as to interpret the whole of history as a book consisting “of different manifestations of the basic hidden pattern—

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

the theosophical one—embodied on varied levels that could be perceived by penetrating the veil of history or the plain meaning of the text.”⁶⁵¹ Passing through its own “annihilation” (*bitul*), the soul is at last awakened to the non-dual oneness of the manifold.

Each of us emerges from Ein Sof and is included in it. We live through its dissemination. It is the perpetuation of existence. The fact that we sustain ourselves on vegetation and animal life does not mean that we are nourished on something outside of it. This process is like a revolving wheel, first descending, then ascending. It is all one and the same, nothing is separate from it. Though life branches out further and further, everything is joined to Ein Sof, included and abiding in it. Delve into this. Flashes of intuition will come and go, and you will discover a secret here.⁶⁵²

Having concluded the present chapter on Kabbalistic Judaism, I turn now to Chapter 5 on mystical Christianity.

⁶⁵¹ Idel, *Kabbalah*, 155.

⁶⁵² Cordovero, as quoted and translated in Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, 27.

CHAPTER 5

Mystical Christianity

The present chapter consists of the following three parts: (1) a short introduction to mystical Christianity; (2) the exposition and analysis of mystical Christianity under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge; and (3) a concluding summary of key concepts.

1. Introduction

In this introduction I prepare the way for an exposition and analysis of the mystical Christian view of existence as simultaneously one and manifold by (1) defining mystical Christianity, (2) tracing its historical and conceptual development, and (3) summarizing the method and outline of the present chapter.

Mystical Christianity

While it is an oversimplification to do so, Christian mysticism may be reduced to two basic forms: (1) *affective* mysticism, corresponding to the “mysticism of union”, and centered on the soul’s practical devotion, and (2) *speculative* mysticism, corresponding to the “mysticism of unity”, and centered on the direct intuition or immediate experience of existence itself.⁶⁵³ Whereas the first is predominantly psychological in its orientation,

⁶⁵³ See Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, vol. 4, in *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2005), 84: “Categories based on oppositions between knowing and loving, essence

the latter is basically noetic, and to that extent represents the sapiential or gnostic element of the Christian religion. The key mystico-speculative concept I want to address in this chapter is that of the “oneness of the manifold”, through which the One is beheld in the many and the many in the One.

Historical and Conceptual Development

At first glance, the Christian tradition—even in its most mystical vein (which is really its very heart and core)—would seem to have only a tenuous connection to the mystico-speculative ontologies surveyed up to this point. The notion of “the One” as a purely undifferentiated unity would appear to contradict the chief article of Christian dogma, namely, the doctrine of God as “Trinity”—three “persons” (sg., *hypóstasis*; lit. “fundamental reality”), one “essence” (*ousía*). As Laude remarks, “The idea of a ‘beyond’ the Trinity, although occasionally expressed in some threads of Christian mysticism, most often probably with a more spiritual than theological intent, remains profoundly ill-sounding to a Christian theological sensibility.”⁶⁵⁴ From another perspective, however, Christianity can be equally interpreted as an exemplary, even paradigmatic, form of the mystico-speculative concept of “oneness”, given its unique understanding of the simultaneous presence of unity and diversity in the Godhead. It is the

and desire, and the like, ultimately tell us little about the nature of particular forms of mysticism.”

⁶⁵⁴ Laude, *Shimmering Mirrors*, 53.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

tension between these two perspectives, a tension embedded at the heart of the historical and conceptual development of mystical Christianity, that the present section attempts to outline.

There is, at bottom, one fundamental interpretation of Christian Trinitarianism, an interpretation which more or less identifies the absolute oneness of the Divine *ousía* with the hypostatic triunity of Father, Son, and Spirit. This identification is not simply univocal, however, but retains an analogical element. The main difference between Trinitarian expressions within Christianity therefore varies not according to kind but degree.

It is in this connection that the great Buddhist metaphysician associated with the Kyoto School, Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990), constructively questions whether the analogical identification of *essentia* and *persona* does not end up reducing the latter to a mere manifestation of the former. For Nishitani, the only identification that does not fall into the error of pitting the absolute unity of essence against the plurality of persons, or absorbing one into the other, is by transcending both perspectives through the experiential encounter with a “total nothingness” (*mu*). The following excerpt, which attempts to root out the metaphysical implications of the notion of *persona* as a “mask”, demonstrates how this insight of Nishitani, though thoroughly Buddhist in its motivation and attitude, nevertheless bears a striking resemblance to the work of some of the greatest Christian mystics, Meister Eckhart chief among them. Hence Nishitani writes:

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Person is an appearance with nothing behind it which might make an appearance. Behind person there is nothing at all; that is, behind it lies absolute nothingness...While this absolute nothingness is wholly other to his person and means the absolute negation of the person, it is not *something* different from the person. Absolute nothingness is that which, becoming one with that “being” called person, brings into being that person. Accordingly, the previously used expressions, “there is absolute nothingness,” and “it *is* behind,” are, in fact, inaccurate. Nothingness is not a thing which is nothingness...Rather, there not being even any nothingness is true nothingness, absolute nothingness.⁶⁵⁵

This understanding of “absolute” or “total nothingness” corresponds to what has been asserted in this study by the use of the term “absolute oneness”. Just as “absolute oneness” non-dually transcends the categories absolute-relative, one-many, transcendence-immanence, etc., so too absolute nothingness non-dually transcends the very same. To repeat yet again: absolute oneness is not “one” in a mathematical but a purely metaphysical sense, and therefore is not opposed to the many, but identical to it in the most analogically radical mode of thinking.

Those who have espoused this position have often been suspected, if not accused or outright condemned, of harboring heretical opinions—as Origen, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, and Eckhart (to varying degrees) all were. For each of these figures, reality is conceived as a pure oneness that is simultaneously beyond all determinations (“no-thing”) and in excess to

⁶⁵⁵ As quoted in Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, trans. James W. Heisig (Nagoya, Japan: Chisokudo, 2020), 81.

all oppositions (“not-other”). As such, “oneness” is the infinite “light unifying all lights into one light which is one, clear, undifferentiated illumination”, the “ineffable unity” (*áphthegton henōsin*) of which all things “are” only as the limited articulations.⁶⁵⁶

In what follows I trace out the historical and conceptual development of this formidable tradition—what might be called “the Eckhartian line” of Christian mysticism—by offering a brief doctrinal synopsis of eight key figures: Origen, Augustine, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart. My reasons for doing so are twofold: (1) to demonstrate the speculative “credentials” of this particular line of Christian mysticism, and (2) to provide an adequate context in which to better view and assess the ontological vision of Meister Eckhart and the broader tradition he represents.

Origen of Alexandria

The “orthodoxy” of Origen (c. 184 - c. 253 C.E.) has never gone unquestioned. Neither, however, has his mystico-speculative brilliance. In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, “It is all but impossible to overestimate Origen and his importance for the history of Christian thought. To rank him beside Augustine and Thomas simply accords him his rightful

⁶⁵⁶ “The Divine Names” (*De Divinis Nominibus*), II.5.644A in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, ed. and trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2015; hereafter cited as DN), 111.

place in this history.”⁶⁵⁷ For Origen, the absolute cannot be the object of knowledge for the very reason that it is not an “object” to be known, being at once “no-thing” and “not-other”. A “simple intellectual nature” (*intellectualis natura simplex*), “the One” can have nothing added to it or subtracted from it. Following his fellow Alexandrians Philo, Clement, and Plotinus, Origen draws an important distinction between (1) the principal “unity” (*monás*) of God, from which the phenomenal manifold is born, and (2) the trans-principal “oneness” (*henás*) of the Godhead,⁶⁵⁸ which bears no relation to anything and is therefore conceivable only in its inconceivability: “God is higher than anything thinkable” (*epékeina tōn noētōn*).⁶⁵⁹ For Origen, the human mind can only know the absolute “Sun” of the Godhead through the dispersion of its manifold “rays” of light.

Sometimes our eyes cannot look upon the light itself, that is, the actual sun, but when we see the brightness and rays of the sun as they pour into our windows...we are able to infer from these how great is the source and foundation of physical light. So, too, the works of divine providence and the plan of this universe are as it were rays of God’s nature in contrast to his real substance and being, and because our mind is of itself unable to behold God as he is, it understands the

⁶⁵⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Introduction”, in *Origen: Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1984), 1.

⁶⁵⁸ Origen, *On First Principles (De Principiis)*, I.i.6, trans. G.W. Butterworth, ed. John C. Cavadini (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 2013), 14.

⁶⁵⁹ Origen as quoted in Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 121.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Father of all creatures [oneness] from the beauty of his works and the splendor of the universe [manifold].⁶⁶⁰

Augustine

No shadow looms larger on the theological landscape of the West than that of St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.). While scholarship leading up to the present century has tended to restrict the mystical orientation of Augustine's work to the psychological realm,⁶⁶¹ there has recently been a turn toward a more ontologically-based reading.⁶⁶² According to the great North African bishop, the manifold of creation is conceived as the utterance of one Divine Word (*verbum*). As such, the manifold of existent things is not a self-enclosed reality of its own. The world is pervaded by an ontological ambiguity. In itself, the world is nothing (*non est*). Only in God can it be said "to be" (*est*).⁶⁶³ All things manifest the "oneness" (*unitas*) of existence,⁶⁶⁴ such that "the One" is simultaneously higher to all things than the highest heaven (*exterior summo*) and nearer to all things than they are to themselves (*interior intimo*).⁶⁶⁵ The Augustinian doctrine of sin, whatever its shortcomings,⁶⁶⁶ is rooted in the understanding of humanity as

⁶⁶⁰ Origen, *De Principiis*, *ibid* (translation modified).

⁶⁶¹ E.g., Philip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁶⁶² E.g., Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁶⁶³ Cf. Augustine *Confessions*, XII.6, in Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), II:356-357.

⁶⁶⁴ Cf. Williams, *On Augustine*, 45.

⁶⁶⁵ *Confessions*, III.6, I:110-111.

⁶⁶⁶ E.g., the notion of an "imputed guilt" is logically incoherent, morally perverse, and unknown to the spirit of Eastern and Western Christian traditions prior to the fourth century C.E.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

having “turned from unity” (*ab uno...aversus*) to become “lost in multiplicity” (*in multa evanui*).⁶⁶⁷ Soteriology therefore consists in the Divine act of reconciliation and reintegration: bringing back to unity (*redigimur in unum*) what multiplicity has torn apart (*in multa defluximus*).⁶⁶⁸ For Augustine, it is Christ whose theandric person mediates between the “One” (*unum*) and the “many” (*multos*),⁶⁶⁹ leading the soul back to the triune God who

exists in both simplicity and multiplicity, the Persons being defined by relation to each other, yet infinite in themselves. So the divine being is and knows itself and is immutably sufficient to itself, because of the copious span of diversity in its the unity (*copiosa unitatis magnitudine*). Who can find a way to give expression to that?⁶⁷⁰

Boethius

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480-525) is, along with Augustine, “the most influential of late antique Latin authors”,⁶⁷¹ and is rightly credited with having synthesized the three disparate philosophical branches of his time: Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism. For Boethius, there can be found no trace of difference (*diversitas*), plurality (*ex diversitate*

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid, II.1. I:60-61.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid, X.29, II:130-139

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid, XI.29, II:254-255.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid, XIII.11, II:356-357.

⁶⁷¹ James J. O’Donnell, “The Latin in Early Christian Philosophy”, in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 129.

pluralitas), multiplicity (*ex accidentibus multitudo*), or number (*numerus*) in God, since there is nothing “in” the Divine Essence but “oneness alone” (*unitas tantum*).⁶⁷² All things exist by virtue of their participation in absolute being (*esse*),⁶⁷³ i.e., the “stable simplicity” (*stabilem simplicitatem*) through which the manifold of phenomena is bound together by an “indissoluble causal chain” (*indissolubili causarum conexione*).⁶⁷⁴ As Lady Philosophy comforts the imprisoned Boethius in his seminal work *Philosophiae Consolationis*,

The generation of all things and the whole development of changeable, moving natures are given their causes, order, and forms from the immovability of the divine mind (*divinae mentis*). That mind, in the grand citadel of its oneness (*simplicitatis*), established the mode in which the manifold of phenomena (*multiplicem rebus*) conducts itself. And this mode, when considered according to the sheer purity of the divine intelligence, we call providence...Providence embraces all things together, even though they are infinite in number and different from one another...⁶⁷⁵

The manifold of temporal phenomena is therefore a moving image of the non-dual oneness of eternity, i.e., “the total (*tota*), simultaneous (*simul*), and

⁶⁷² Boethius, *De Trinitate* II.55-III.1, in Loeb Classical Library, vol. 74: *Boethius: Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H.F. Stewart, E.K. Rand, and S.J. Tester (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973; hereafter cited as BTC), 12-13.

⁶⁷³ Boethius, *De hebdomadibus*, in *Boethius*, 42-43.

⁶⁷⁴ Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolationis*, IV.6, in BTC, 362-363.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 356-359.

perfect possession (*perfecta possessio*) of infinite life (*interminabilis vitae*).”⁶⁷⁶

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

The Pseudo-Dionysian corpus (5th century C.E.) plays an integral role in the history of Christian mysticism. The treatise entitled *De Divinis Nominibus* speaks of the Godhead first in terms of a henadic simplicity in which all things are meta-cosmically unified, enfolding the manifold divisions of nature.⁶⁷⁷ Only then does the anonymous Areopagite refer to God as “Trinity”, i.e., “the three-person (*trisypóstaton*) manifestation of the fecundity beyond being (*hyperoúsios*).”⁶⁷⁸ According to Dionysius, human thought and language are impotent before the “dazzling darkness” of the Divine Essence, as the eyes of an owl are overwhelmed by the light of the sun. The non-dual oneness of existence is neither this nor that, neither here nor there, neither dark nor light, neither false nor true.⁶⁷⁹ As absolute, the Godhead is “no-thing”, “beyond the whole” (*epekeina ton holon*). And yet, in that the Divine is also infinite, it is not simply other than or different from the manifold of phenomena. Rather, the entire cosmos is to be regarded as a kind of prolongation of God—what Dionysius terms *theophánia* or “manifestation of the Divine”.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid, V.6, 424-425.

⁶⁷⁷ DN, I.4.592D, 111.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ “Mystical Theology”, V.1048A, in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 222.

⁶⁸⁰ See Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: SUNY, 2007), 32.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

It [the Godhead] is differenced in a unified way: being given to all beings...That one be-ing is said to be multiplied by the bringing forth of all beings out of itself. It abides not less than itself, one in its manifoldness, unified in its procession, full in its difference...Be-ing one it has bestowed unity to every part and whole...indivisible in those who are divisible...[and] unmixed in the many.⁶⁸¹

John Scotus Eriugena

The work of John Scotus Eriugena (c. 815 - c. 877 C.E.) represents a “grand theological and cosmological system” in which “God and nature are thought together.”⁶⁸² Following the apophatic logic of Dionysius, Eriugena begins by (1) predicating essence of God: “He is called essence”, (2) negating this predication: “He is not essence”, and (3) asserting the plenitudinous excess of the Divine: “Therefore He is *hyperousios* (more-than-essence).” It is by this same “excessive” logic that Eriugena denies even Divinity to God: “Therefore He is *hypértheos*, that is, more-than-God” (*id est plus quam deus*).⁶⁸³ For the great Irish mystic and metaphysician, the Godhead is not any created thing (“no-thing”), and therefore “not-other” (*non aliud*) than what It manifests. In the trans-dual Godhead, all things are of “one and the same (*una et atque*) nature whose simplicity is inviolable (*inviolabilis est simplicitas*) and whose unity is indivisible (*et inseparabilis unitas*).”

⁶⁸¹ DN, III.11.649B-C, 126-128.

⁶⁸² Dermot Moran, “*Spiritualis Incrassatio*: Eriugena’s Intellectual Immaterialism: Is It An Idealism?”, in *Eriugena, Berkeley, and the Idealist Tradition*, ed. Stephen Gersh and Dermot Moran (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), 129.

⁶⁸³ See Johannes Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)*, II.459b-460a, ed. I.P. Sheldon-Williams (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968), 76-79.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Eriugena can even go so far as to say that “God is all things everywhere” (*omnia ubique deum esse*), and “wholly in the whole” (*totum in toto*); at once “the Maker and the made” (*factorem et factum*), “the Seer and the seen” (*videntem et visum*), the One and the manifold: “[the Godhead is] multiplied in Himself through genera and species to infinity, not abandoning the simplicity of His nature but calling back the infinity of His multiplicity into Himself, for in Him all things are one (*in ipso enim omnia unum sunt*).”⁶⁸⁴

Albert the Great

Albert the Great (c. 1200-1280 C.E.) “was one of the great Dionysians of the thirteenth century” and “prepared the way for the Dominican mystics who grew up under his influence”.⁶⁸⁵ It was Albert’s mystico-speculative ruminations that provided the problem of the “one” and the “many” with its first thoroughly systematic treatment in Western Christian thought. According to Albert, creation is a form of analogical rather than univocal emanation through which “the aspects of sameness and unity” are inseparably conjoined.⁶⁸⁶ An apparent contradiction stands at the center of Albert’s thinking. On the one hand, Albert affirms the principle of *ab uno unum* (“from one, only one”), and yet, on the other hand, Albert holds God

⁶⁸⁴ *Perphyseon*, III.677c-d, 158-161.

⁶⁸⁵ Thomas Merton, *A Course in Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 150.

⁶⁸⁶ See Thérèse Bonin, *Creation as Emanation: The Origin of Diversity in Albert the Great’s On the Causes and the Procession of the Universe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 15.

to be the author of all diversity. How can both be true? This apparent contradiction is resolved by Albert in saying that “God produces all things by producing one thing.” This implies the twofold assertion that (1) there is only *esse* and nothing but *esse*, and (2) *esse*, as primary cause, pre-contains within itself the manifold possibilities it brings to actuality.⁶⁸⁷ Albert therefore distinguishes between a craftsman, who is not the idea of the knife he produces, “although he has the idea of the knife in himself,” and the creative Godhead who “is the idea of everything, as well as containing it, because he is whatever he has.”⁶⁸⁸ In this way, Albert conceives all things “to be” only as the particular instantiations of a single meta-ontological principle (*principium*)⁶⁸⁹: the oneness of the manifold.

Thomas Aquinas

It was Albert’s best pupil, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.), who would systematically clarify, by way of a “*synoptic vision*”, the mystico-speculative conception of reality as “somehow *both one and many*.”⁶⁹⁰ Whereas the One is the unrestricted act of existence (*esse*), the many “are” only as the particularized modes of the principle they manifest—“here” in

⁶⁸⁷ Bonin, *Creation as Emanation*, 75.

⁶⁸⁸ See Albert the Great, “Commentary on Dionysius’ Mystical Theology”, in *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 152-153.

⁶⁸⁹ Cf. Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd edition (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952), 64. Here Gilson underscores the way in which Albert follows the *Liber de Causis*, which asserts that “the first principle is, to all things, their own being.”

⁶⁹⁰ W. Norris Clarke, S.J. *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomist Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 72-73.

one way and “there” in another. Or to say the same thing differently: every created phenomenon “is” only as a limited articulation (i.e., an “essence” or *essentiam*) of illimitable being.⁶⁹¹ As Thomas says, “each and every created thing participates (*participat*) in the nature of existence (*naturam essendi*), for God alone is His own existence (*solus Deus est suum esse*).”⁶⁹² For Thomas, God is “the very *natura essendi* in which each and every being, so to speak, participates.”⁶⁹³ As the pure act of existence (*actus essendi*), God is not an entity among other entities or an object among other objects (“no-thing”), but the superessential reality by which all things are what they are (“not-other”). Accordingly, Thomas views *esse* as simultaneously (1) “simple and complete” (*simplex et completum*) and (2) “non subsistent” (*non subsistens*).⁶⁹⁴ *Esse* is the oneness that is two-less. Its unity transcends the manifold—each and all, part and whole—and, just so, inheres within it “innermostly” (*intime*).⁶⁹⁵ Hence Thomas can speak of God as the “universal cause” (*causa universalis*) from which all beings emanate,⁶⁹⁶ and who is present to all things “by His own essence” (*per essentiam suam*), such that, as the Angelic Doctor says elsewhere, “things are more truly in God than God is in things” (*magis res sunt in Deo, quam Deus in rebus*).⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹¹ See Bruno Bérard, *A Metaphysics of the Christian Mystery: An Introduction to the Work of Jean Borella* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2018), 85.

⁶⁹² ST I, q.45, a.5.

⁶⁹³ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 176.

⁶⁹⁴ See Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q.1, a.1.

⁶⁹⁵ ST I, q.8, a.1

⁶⁹⁶ ST I, q.45, a.1.

⁶⁹⁷ ST I, q.8, a.3.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

The manifold is that which “comes out from unity and returns to it”;⁶⁹⁸ and unity is the “one existence” (*una existentia*) that “contains all things in advance” (*omnia praehabet*).⁶⁹⁹ Or to paraphrase the classic Thomist dictum: oneness does not destroy the manifold, but discloses its true perfection.⁷⁰⁰

Meister Eckhart

It is in Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 - c. 1328 C.E.)—“the greatest of all speculative mystics”⁷⁰¹—that the zenith of Christian mysticism is reached. For Eckhart, all ontology is henology, i.e., the aspectual appearing of absolute “oneness” (Lt.: *unitas*; Ger.: *einicheit*). Following the lead of Albert, Eckhart interprets the problem of the “one” and the “many” through the non-dual simplicity of the Godhead: “Simple is the thing that is in itself one without a second (*ein ist âne ander*), that is God, and all united things are by the fact that He is (*daz er ist*).”⁷⁰² The absolute simplicity of the Divine Essence is not opposed to the relative multiplicity of created phenomena. On the contrary, for Eckhart, it is precisely the unique “oneness” or “no-thingness” of the Godhead that renders it infinitely “not-other”. As McGinn summarizes the view of Eckhart: “What makes God

⁶⁹⁸ Wayne J. Hankey, *Aquinas’s Neoplatonism in the Summa Theologiae of God: A Short Introduction* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2019), 16.

⁶⁹⁹ ST I, q.4, a.2.

⁷⁰⁰ Cf. ST I, q.1, a.8; ST III, q.73, a.2.

⁷⁰¹ William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism: The Bampton Lectures, 1899* (North Charleston: CreateSpace, 2015), 155.

⁷⁰² Meister Eckhart, *The German Works: 64 Homilies for the Liturgical Year, I: «De Tempore»*, ed. and trans. Loris Sturlese and Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2019; hereafter cited as GW), 730-731.

utterly distinct or different from everything else [“no-thing”] is that he alone is totally one or indistinct from everything [“not-other”].”⁷⁰³ Or as Suzuki remarks: “It [the Godhead] is absolute nothingness; therefore it is the ground of being from where all beings come.”⁷⁰⁴ Denys Turner makes a similar observation when he writes that, for Eckhart,

God’s ‘oneness’ consists simply in his *esse indistinctum*, that is to say, not as an ‘apartness’ or ‘separation’ from anything else, least of all in any relation of mutual exclusion, but precisely in God’s not being one of the kinds of thing that is ‘distinct’: not in any way whatever...in this alone is God distinct, that whereas one creature is distinct from another, God is not distinct from any of them.⁷⁰⁵

According to Eckhart, then, the oneness of existence is not of a numerical but a metaphysical kind, in that it is a unity to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away. The pure “is-ness” (*isticheit*) of the Godhead is what Eckhart speaks of variously as “pure existence” (*lūter wesen*), “abyss” (*abgrunt*), “groundlessness” (*gruntlōsicheit*), “principle without principle” (*principium*), “negation of negation” (*versagen des versagennes*), etc. For Eckhart, the soul’s true vocation is that of “breaking-through” (*durchbrechen*) every possible distinction between “this” and “that” (relative being), “here” and “there” (relative space), “now” and

⁷⁰³ McGinn, *Harvest*, 139.

⁷⁰⁴ D.T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (London: Routledge, 2006), 12.

⁷⁰⁵ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 164.

“then” (relative time), to the “naked oneness of God” (*bloz einikeit gotiz*).⁷⁰⁶ Only the eye of the soul—the “little spark” (*vunkelîn*), “little castle” (*burgelîn*), or “pure intellect” (*vernunfticheit*), whose ground is “uncreated and uncreatable” (*incretatus et increabilis*)—is able to see how “all multitude is One [in principle], and is in and through the One,”⁷⁰⁷ i.e., how “oneness makes one of the manifold” (*einicheit inet alle manivalenticheit*).⁷⁰⁸

The Legacy of Christian Mysticism

The mystico-speculative line of Christian mysticism that I have just briefly traced and summarized is by no means limited to or exhausted by the eight figures above. Many others could be included, such as the highly influential Eastern figures of Clement, Evagrius, Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas. In fact, various non-Christian sources would need to be added to the list as well: Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Proclus, among the Greeks; Philo and Maimonides, among the Jews; Avicenna and Averroes, among the Muslims; etc. And while it is true that this particular line of Christian mysticism culminates with the work of Meister Eckhart, it certainly does not end with him. Its mystico-speculative insights would eventually find place in the work of his fellow Dominicans Henry Suso,

⁷⁰⁶ GW, 810-811.

⁷⁰⁷ As quoted in C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2009), 148.

⁷⁰⁸ DM I:296.

Johannes Tauler, and Nicholas Cusanus, along with the theosophical legacy of Jacob Boehme, Robert Fludd, Angelus Silesius, and William Blake.

According to Cusanus, God is a “simple oneness” (*simplex unitas*), a non-dual unity “prior-to-all-number” (*ante omnem numerum*) and “discrete quantity” (*quantitate discreta*).⁷⁰⁹ At once perfectly unique (“no-thing”) and perfectly universal (“not-other”), God is equidistant to every individual point of the universe, in that, like an infinite circle, His center is everywhere and His circumference is nowhere.⁷¹⁰ Similarly, for Boehme, “all beings [manifold] originally arise out of one eternal mystery [oneness],” and “that same mystery begets itself in itself from eternity to eternity”.⁷¹¹ The controlling principle of Fludd’s speculative philosophy is “the correspondence between worlds or levels of being”—worlds whose very possibility resides in that Infinite Unity in relation to which all phenomena “are” only as discrete manifestations.⁷¹² As Silesius had both posed and “solved” the “problem” of the “one” and the “many”: “God one, yet manifold, how can they coexist? / Clearly because they all in one as One subsist.”⁷¹³ Or as Blake could say, in the oneness of the “Eternal World” resides “the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in

⁷⁰⁹ *Dialogus De Possessio*, §46, in *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins, 2nd edition (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 38.

⁷¹⁰ *De Docta Ignorantia*, Bk. 2, Ch. 12, in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 161.

⁷¹¹ Paul Deussen, “Preface to the Reader”, in *The Signature of All Things*, trans. Clifford Bax (Woodland, CA: Ancient Wisdom Publications, 2013), 7.

⁷¹² Jocelyn Godwin, *The Greater & Lesser Worlds of Robert Fludd: Microcosm, Macrocosm, and Medicine* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2019), 27.

⁷¹³ *Ibid*, 105.

this Vegetable Glass of Nature.” The manifold “exists” only as the many looks of one Face or the many members of a single, indivisible body: “All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the divine body of their Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination.”⁷¹⁴

To sum up: for each of the figures in this tradition, existence is understood as a unity that is at once absolutely unique (“no-thing”) and infinitely self-diffusive (“not-other”). Far from something opposed or contrary to the manifold of phenomena, the pure oneness of existence is the non-objective “ground” of the same,⁷¹⁵ such that “[t]he more a person knows the root and kernel and ground of the Godhead to be one (*ein*), the more he knows all things (*alliu dincas*).”⁷¹⁶ It is in this non-dual light that the bifurcated categories of being and non-being, transcendence and immanence, the one and the many, are all transfigured so as to no longer be seen as ontological rivals or competitors, but as the mutually interpenetrating modes of a single, undivided reality: the oneness of the manifold.

Method and Outline

In this chapter I explore Christian-mystical ontology under the three interrelated headings of existence (Section One), manifestation (Section

⁷¹⁴ For how Blake’s thought relates to the perennial problem of the “one” and the “many”, see Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), II:200-202.

⁷¹⁵ Shitzuteru Ueda, “‘Nothingness’ in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism”, in *The Buddha Eye*, 158.

⁷¹⁶ Eckhart as quoted in McGinn, *Harvest*, 122.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Two), and knowledge (Section Three), with each of these headings comprised of a structural exposition and textual analysis.

My broader intention throughout is, once again, to develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory by which to compare mystical ontologies East and West, analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the overarching idea of the “oneness of the manifold”. Below is a visual portrait of the notable correspondences between the mystico-speculative traditions examined up to this point (Table 7), with the terms of Christian mysticism set in bold.⁷¹⁷

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayatā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shinnyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>ehad</i>	<i>ein sof</i>	<i>shekhinah</i>	<i>hokhmah</i>
Esoteric Christianity	<i>unitas</i>	<i>esse</i>	<i>fluxus</i>	<i>intellectus</i>

Table 7. *Corresponding Concepts – Mystical Christianity*

Having completed this introduction, I turn to an exposition and analysis of mystical Christianity under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge.

⁷¹⁷ I employ Latin rather than German terms in “cataloguing” the key philosophical concepts of Christian mysticism for no other reason than that the former’s presence is more universal in the Western tradition.

2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis

Section One: Existence

Structural Exposition: Existence as *Esse*

For the ontology of Christian mysticism, existence (Lt.: *esse*; Ger.: *wesen*) is interpreted as all: (1) one, (2) principal, and (3) analogical. In order to expound the basic structure of this tradition, the present subsection takes each of these three points in turn.

Mystical Christianity (of the “speculative” variety outlined above) conceives of existence as “one”, i.e., a “single simple unity” (*ein einic ein*). Like the Advaitic, Daoist, Zen, and Kabbalistic views of existence examined in the previous four chapters, Christian mysticism views the “oneness” of existence from a metaphysical rather than numerical standpoint. Existence (*esse*) is not “one” among the “many”; nor is it “one” in juxtaposition to the “many”. It is in this connection that Eckhart employs the term *principium*, the meta-ontological “root” (*radix*) in which the relative unity and multiplicity of the created order is non-dually embraced. Hence why Eckhart, in his commentary on the book of Genesis (*Liber parabolarum Genesis*), strips the concept of *principium* of every numerical association. For Eckhart, *principium* is the metaphysical “first” (*primo*) that creates not only beyond number, “but also beyond the ‘beyond number’”.⁷¹⁸ The term *principium* therefore expresses “the tension between what is one and what is multiple”. As Wojtulewicz comments, it is Eckhart’s basic

⁷¹⁸ Christopher M. Wojtulewicz, *Meister Eckhart on the Principle: An Analysis of the Principium in His Latin Works* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 133-134.

claim that “the *principium* or root of one thing (heaven) is equally the *principium* or root of the other thing (earth), without compromising the unity of the *principium*.”⁷¹⁹

As “one”, existence is also “principal”. This recalls a pivotal debate in the history of metaphysics: How does existence (*esse*) relate to the “thingness” (*quidditas*) of a thing? In addressing this question, two fundamental approaches were developed: (1) essentialism and (2) existentialism. The first regards existence as an “accident” (*accidens*) of quiddity, such that to predicate existence (*E*) of a thing (*Q*) is analogous to predicating “redness” of a flower. On this view, *E* modifies *Q*, just as the adjective “red” modifies the noun “rose”. The second approach assumes a radically different posture, conceiving of existence as metaphysically principal or ultimate. Thus, rather than *E* functioning as a modifier of “this” or “that” *Q*, it is “this” or “that” *Q* which modifies *E*, with the result that, strictly speaking, it is not the flower that exists, but existence that “flowers”—“here” in one way (e.g., a rose) and “there” in another (e.g., a lily, a crocus, an orchid, etc.). Accordingly, no *Q* is an isolated “substance” upon which *E* “supervenes”. On the contrary, *E* “prevenes” every *Q* absolutely, such that, just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the limited determinations of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, 134.

so many “mode[s] of presence of that single being which is God.”⁷²⁰ It is this latter position to which Eckhart’s mystico-speculative system, and the Christian tradition he represents, is most properly aligned. To quote Eckhart himself:

Existence itself, and the terms convertibly the same as it, are not added to things as though posterior to them; on the contrary they are prior to every aspect of things. It is not the nature of existence to be in something or from something or through something; neither is it added or joined to anything. On the contrary, it precedes and comes before everything. So the existence of everything is immediately from the first and universal cause of all things. *All things exist from existence itself...*⁷²¹

Thirdly and finally, the concept of existence is viewed from the mystical Christian perspective as “analogical” or “gradational”. Taken in its highest and absolute sense, existence and God are two terms indicative of one reality. As Eckhart could say: *esse est deus* (“existence is God”). Not only does this statement *predicate* existence of God;⁷²² it also *equates* both terms, fusing them into a single identity: “God and existence are identical”.⁷²³

⁷²⁰ Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), 175.

⁷²¹ Meister Eckhart, “General Prologue to the ‘Opus Tripartitum’”, in *Parisian Questions and Prologues*, trans. Armand A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), 83 (emphasis added).

⁷²² Cf. Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1991), 108.

⁷²³ Eckhart, “General Prologue”, in *Parisian Questions*, 85.

Here the distinction drawn by Eckhart between “God” (*got*) and the “Godhead” (*gotheit*) comes into play. Like the *nirguṇa Brahman* of Śāṅkara, the *wu-wu-wu* of Zhuangzi, the *kū* of Dōgen, or the *Ein Sof* of Cordovero, the *gotheit* of Eckhart is “neither this nor that” (*noch diz noch*), “neither here nor there” (*noch hie noch*).⁷²⁴ As the “groundless ground” (*gruntlōs grund*) of all things, the Godhead is the infinite plenum of “is-ness” (*istischeit*), beyond every determination (“no-thing”) and in excess to every opposition (“not-other”). Thus, in his homily on the epistle reading for the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity (“Unus Deus et pater omnium”, Eph. 4:6), Eckhart writes that (1) “God is one in Himself and separated from everything” (*got ist ein in im selben und gesundert von allem*) and (2) “God has all things in Himself in fullness” (*Got hât alliu dinc in im in einer vüllede*).⁷²⁵ Or as Eckhart says elsewhere: “in there”—that is, in the “nothingness” or “silent desert” (*stille wüeste*) of the Divine Nature (*Gotes natüre*)—“there is nothing alien” (*dâ enist niht vremden inne*), “nor can anything alien enter” (*noch dâ enmac niht vremdes ingevallen*).⁷²⁶

Considered in and of itself, existence is absolutely simple and “homogenous” (*ēkarāsa*), while nevertheless (or rather by virtue of its unbroken simplicity) containing the infinite “fullness of reality”, as Śāṅkara had said.⁷²⁷ Far from a static monolith, *esse* is for Eckhart what Cordovero had referred to as a dynamic unity (*eḥad*), possessed of various stages,

⁷²⁴ GW, 86-87.

⁷²⁵ GW, 788-789.

⁷²⁶ GW, 558-559.

⁷²⁷ Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik*, 30.

modalities, and degrees. As such, Eckhart does not speak of existence “with one voice” (*uni-vocus*), but in different modes and with multiple senses. For Eckhart, the most basic existential difference is that between (1) “absolute existence” (*esse absolutum*), “simple existence” (*esse simpliciter*), “purity of existence” (*puritas essendi*), or “existence itself” (*esse ipsum*), and (2) “determinate existence” (*esse determinatum*), “limited existence” (*esse limitatum*), “existence as this or that” (*esse hoc et hoc*), or “existence as such and such” (*esse tale*).⁷²⁸ Or as Denys Turner remarks, “*esse* is improperly predicated of creatures, properly predicated only of God. As predicated of creatures, *esse* is *esse distinctum* (this and that). As predicated of God, *esse* is *esse indistinctum*.”⁷²⁹ The former is “manifold”. The latter is “one”.

The whole of existence—in every aspect of its multiplicity—is therefore seen by Eckhart as enfolded by an infinite “oneness” (*unitas*) whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Not unlike the mystico-speculative systems of Śaṅkara, Zhuangzi, Dōgen, and Cordovero, the system of Eckhart can be said to form a vast ontological circle patterned on the movement of emanation (Lt.: *emanatio*; Ger.: *uzfliessen*) and reversion (Lt.: *restoratio*; Ger.: *durchbrechen*), exit (Lt.: *exitus*; Ger.: *ûzganc*) and return (Lt.: *reditus*; Ger. *inganc*): “out of Godhead into being and from being into Godhead.”⁷³⁰ As Inge had summarized the

⁷²⁸ Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1991), 108.

⁷²⁹ Turner, *Darkness*, 163.

⁷³⁰ Eckhart as quoted in Kelley, *Divine Knowledge*, 117.

movement of Eckhart's philosophy: "the whole process is a circular one— from God and back to God again."⁷³¹ Or to quote Eckhart himself: "...multitude descends and proceeds from unity...and multitude is reduced to and returns to unity..."⁷³²

Having provided an overview of the basic structure of existence as espoused by Christian mysticism, I turn now to a textual analysis of Meister Eckhart's German Homilies (*Deutsche Predigten*).

Textual Analysis: *Deutsche Predigten*

In a homily briefly alluded to above (Homily 60⁷³³: "Unus Deus et pater omnium"), Eckhart writes the following:

One is somehow more pure than goodness and truth. Goodness and truth do not add anything, they add in a thought; when something is thought, it is added. One does not add anything (*Ein enleget niht zuo*), as He is in Himself, before He emanates into the Son and the Holy Spirit...A master says: One is the negation of negation (*versagen des versagennes*). If I said: God is good, it would be adding something. One is a negation of negation and a denial of denial (*verlougen des verlougennes*). What is the meaning of 'one'? 'One' means that nothing is added to it. The soul takes the Godhead as it is purified in her, where nothing is added, where nothing is thought about. One is a negation of negation. All creatures have a negation in them; 'one' negates being the other. 'One' angel negates being

⁷³¹ Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 158.

⁷³² Eckhart, "Selections from the Commentary on the Book of Wisdom", in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1986), 154.

⁷³³ My numerical assignments to Eckhart's homilies follow that of GW.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

another. But God has a negation of negation; He is one, and negates anything else, because there is nothing except God. All creatures are in God and are of His own Godhead (*Alle créatûren sint in gote und sint in selbes gotheit*); and this means fullness (*und meinet ein vülled*)...⁷³⁴

Eckhart continues:

By God being one, the Godhead of God is perfected (*sô ist volbrâht gotes gotheit*). I say: God could never give birth to His only-begotten Son, if He were not one. By God being one, He takes all that He acts in creatures and in the Godhead. I say more: God alone has unity (*einicheit hât got aleine*). God's property is unity (*Gotes eigenschaft ist einicheit*); in this God is God, otherwise He would not be God (*got niht*). Anything that is number depends on 'one', but 'one' does not depend on anything. God's richness, wisdom and truth are completely 'one' in God; they are not 'one' (*ein*), they are oneness (*einicheit*). God has everything that He has in 'one': it is 'one' in Him. The masters say that heaven moves around in order to bring all things to 'one'; therefore it moves so fast. God has all the fullness as 'one' (*Got hât alle vülled als ein*), and God's nature depends on it (*und gotes natûre hanget daran*)...⁷³⁵

These two excerpts touch on several key points of the Christian view of existence. Of particular importance are the following: (1) oneness as the “negation of negation”, and (2) oneness as the perfection of the Godhead.

⁷³⁴ GW, 790-793.

⁷³⁵ GW, 794-795.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

According to Eckhart, one (*ein*) has a purity (*lûterz*) which goodness and truth (*güete und wârheit*) do not. Whereas goodness and truth are capable of expansion (in thought), nothing can be added to “one”. This means that, for Eckhart, “one” is not a number. Numbers are determinations which distinguish “this” from “that”, “here” from “there”, by means of counting and measurement. Every creature is in this sense a numerical unity. As was shown in our earlier analysis of Śaṅkara, empirical phenomena are all mutually restrictive and delimiting. The sky, precisely in its sky-ness, is not the earth or a stone or a tree, such that wherever the mind becomes occupied with the notion of “sky-ness”, it is compelled to detach itself from all other notions: “earth-ness”, “stone-ness”, “tree-ness”, etc. As Eckhart says, “All creatures have a negation in them; ‘one’ negates being the other.” At the empirical level, all things comport to the laws of identity (*A is A*) and non-contradiction (*A is not non-A*). Everything “is” that which differentiates it from everything else—which is why Thomas, in his treatise *De Veritate*, ranks “difference” (*aliquid*; lit. the distinguishing “somethingness” of a thing) among the “transcendentals”.⁷³⁶

Beyond the level of empirico-numerical unity and multiplicity, however, is the pure oneness of existence: the “One without a second”; the “no-thing” that is “not-other”. For Eckhart, “oneness” (*einicheit*) is not numerical but metaphysical in meaning, denoting the non-dual “negation of

⁷³⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 1. The other transcendental perfections Thomas lists are: “one” (*unum*), “good” (*bonum*), “being” (*ens*), and “thing” (*res*).

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

negation”, and therefore, like the *śūnyatā* of Zen Buddhism,⁷³⁷ “the supreme, unconditional affirmation”.⁷³⁸ While the created aspect of things negates their “unity”, the non-dual oneness of the Godhead negates this negation, so as to distinguish Itself absolutely (“no-thing”) as that which is infinitely indistinct (“not-other”). As Eckhart writes elsewhere, in his commentary on the Gospel of St. John: “[God] is solely distinguished by his indistinction” (*ipse sola sua indistinctione distinguitur*).⁷³⁹ All things (manifold) are simultaneously “in” and “of” God (oneness), in that all things “only *are* because being constantly flows into them, directly and immediately, from God”, i.e., the “First Cause” (*causa prima*) who “communicates its very self [oneness] continually to the created thing, as its perfection, whilst remaining distinct [manifold].”⁷⁴⁰

This leads to the second excerpt cited above and its radical claim that the “oneness” is perfective of the Godhead (*gotheit*). For Eckhart, if God were not “one simple unity” (*ein einic ein*), neither the Trinity nor the incarnation would be possible. The singular “property” (*eigenschaft*) of the Divine Essence is its non-dual “oneness” (*einicheit*), such that “in this [i.e., *einicheit* or *unitas*] God is God, otherwise He would not be God” (*er enwære anders got niht*). That which is numerically unified (which is true of all created things and the universe as a whole) depends on the “oneness” of the Godhead, but the “oneness” of the Godhead “does not depend on

⁷³⁷ Suzuki, *Mysticism*, 13.

⁷³⁸ Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 141.

⁷³⁹ Eckhart as quoted in Wojtulewicz, *Principle*, 51.

⁷⁴⁰ Wojtulewicz, *Principle*, 92-93.

anything.” Accordingly, Eckhart goes out of his way to make a sharp delineation between “one” (*ein*) and “oneness” (*einicheit*): “...richness, wisdom and truth are completely ‘one’ in God; they are not ‘one’” (*ez enist niht ein*), “they are ‘oneness’” (*ez ist einicheit*). Because the “oneness” of the Godhead is absolutely “no-thing”, it is infinitely “not-other”: “God has all fullness as ‘one’, and God’s nature depends on it...” Or as Eckhart concludes his homily: “God is everything and is one” (*Got ist allez und ist ein*)⁷⁴¹—the oneness of the manifold.

Having expounded and analyzed the Christian notion of existence, I turn now to the concept of manifestation.

Section Two: Manifestation

Structural Exposition: Manifestation as *Fluxus*

The mystical Christian view of manifestation is premised on what Alain de Libera has called *la métaphysique du flux* (“the metaphysics of flow”).⁷⁴² This particular understanding is generally traced back to Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, though its first intimations are already discernible in Origen, Augustine, Boethius, Dionysius, and Eriugena. Eckhart not only appropriates this tradition but develops it further. According to Eckhart, creation is best expressed as “the giving of existence” (*collatio esse*), even a “boiling over” (*ebullitio*) whereby God “creates all things from himself

⁷⁴¹ GW, 796-797.

⁷⁴² Alain de Libera, *Albert le Grand et la philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1990), 116-177.

and in himself.”⁷⁴³ All things therefore “are” only insofar as they “flow” (*fluxus*) from God’s own intra-trinitarian life: from Himself (Father), through Himself (Son), and to Himself (Spirit). The entire order of the universe is therefore patterned on the “inner boiling” (*bullitio*) of the Divine Essence, so that the emanation of the trinitarian hypostases serves as “the prior ground” (*ratio est et praevia*) of everything that “is”.⁷⁴⁴ It is in this way that Eckhart effectively makes “God’s trinitarian life the inner reality of every mode of production”.⁷⁴⁵

The “process” involved in the production of all things is therefore divided by Eckhart into three stages: (1) “inner boiling” (*bullitio*), (2) “boiling over” (*ebullitio*), and (3) “creation” (*creatio*).⁷⁴⁶ Critically, for Eckhart, these stages are not three separate events successively strung together. They are not temporally distinct, but metaphysically simultaneous. In the words of Eckhart: “God’s going-out *is* his going-in” (*gotes ûzganc ist sîn inganc*).⁷⁴⁷ The upshot here is that God loves the world with the same love with which He loves Himself.⁷⁴⁸ By extension, we could say that God makes all things “to be” by the very Being He Himself *is*.

In common with Śaṅkara, Zhuangzi, Dōgen, and Cordovero, Eckhart notes a fundamental ambiguity in the ontological status of created

⁷⁴³ See the discussion of Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2001), 100-106.

⁷⁴⁴ McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 73.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 79.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 72-73.

⁷⁴⁷ Eckhart as quoted in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 72 (emphasis added).

⁷⁴⁸ GW, 696-697 (Homily 51).

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

phenomena. Eckhart refers to this ambiguity in terms of the *duplex esse* or “two forms of being”: (1) Created and (2) Uncreated; or as Burkhard Mojsisch draws the distinction: (1) “absolute being” and (2) “determinate being”.⁷⁴⁹ Reduced to its core, this principle of double-identity, also known as the *inquantum* principle, postulates that insofar as (*inquantum*) the creature is created, it is determinate, multiple, and ultimately “nothing” (*niht*). Yet insofar as the creature is uncreated, i.e., insofar as it remains within its Divine *fons et origo*, it is identical to God. As Eckhart says, “there is something in the soul so nearly kin to God that it is one (*ein*) and not united (*niht vereinet*).”⁷⁵⁰ This distinction between “unity” and “union” is one which recurs throughout Eckhart’s homilies, often illustrated with the analogy of a water barrel.

The soul becomes one (*ain*), and not united (*veraint*) with God. Take an example: When one fills a barrel with water, the water and the barrel are united within, but they are not one, because where there is water there is no wood, and where the wood is, there is no water. Now, take the wood and throw it into the midst of the water, and still, the wood is only united and not one. Thus it is not with the soul; she becomes one (*ain*), but not united (*veraint*) with God. Because where God is, there is the soul, and where the soul is, there is God.⁷⁵¹

⁷⁴⁹ Burkhard Mojsisch, *Eckhart: Analogy, Univocity, and Unity*, trans. Orrin F. Summerell (Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner, 2001), 156-157.

⁷⁵⁰ DM I:310-311.

⁷⁵¹ GW, 700-701 (Homily 52).

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

For Eckhart, the concept of “union” is always imperfect, in that it necessarily retains, however slight, the dualities of subject and object, knower and known, self and other, Creator and creature. It is only when things are perceived in the light of their “primal emanation” (*êrsten ûzfluzze*), the pre-phenomenal stillness of the One, that all things are equal and alike (*alliu dinc gelleh*).⁷⁵² All creatures exist as a single embryo in the Divine Essence.⁷⁵³ The original simplicity of God (oneness) divides itself into all things (manifold).⁷⁵⁴ Oneness gives birth to “manifold creatures” (*manigerleie crêatûre*) in order to reveal Its singular glory “in manifold ways” (*manigerleie wîs*), such that “all creatures are a messenger and a sign towards God” (*alle crêatûren sint ein bote oder ein winken ze gote*)⁷⁵⁵— what Dionysius had called a “theophany”.

Accordingly, if creatures are an ambiguous mixture of absolute and determinate being, the question naturally arises: “With which part do we identify?”⁷⁵⁶ Eckhart utilizes the terms “oneness” (*unitas*) and “ground” (*grunt*) to express the relation of God to creature in non-dual terms, i.e., not as two disparate “parts” that must be fit together, but as “poles of fused identity.”⁷⁵⁷ The concept of creation as “flow” or *fluxus* therefore corresponds to Śaṅkara’s *māyā*, Zhuangzi’s *wu hua*, Dōgen’s *engi*, and

⁷⁵² DM I:312.

⁷⁵³ DM I:316.

⁷⁵⁴ GW, 306-307 (Homily 17).

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid, 304-305.

⁷⁵⁶ See Huston Smith, “Preface”, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, ed. and trans., Bernard McGinn and Edmund Colledge (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), xiv.

⁷⁵⁷ McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 43.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Cordovero's *shekhinah*, in that the relative or determinate being it expresses does not actually "exist" (perceived from the metaphysical and not empirical standpoint) but "only pretends to be being".⁷⁵⁸ "Relativity is an aspect of reality", writes Suzuki, "and not Reality itself."⁷⁵⁹ Hence Eckhart: "nothing we find in the creature is more than a shadow (*schate*) and dark (*naht*)."⁷⁶⁰ Ultimately, only the Ultimate *is*: "the one being is God himself."⁷⁶¹ All creatures therefore relate to God as accidents relate to substance: like waves to an ocean, rays to the sun, or—to shift analogies—"colour" (*varwe*) to a "wall" (*want*):

The colour that is on the wall is sustained (*enthalten*) by the wall; thus, all creatures are sustained in their being by the [outflowing] love that is God. If one took away the colour from the wall, it [the colour] would lose its being: thus, all creatures [manifold] would lose their being if one took them away from the love that is God [oneness].⁷⁶²

Textual Analysis: *Deutsche Predigten*

In a homily based on the Gospel reading for the First Sunday after Trinity (Homily 55), Eckhart proposes an "esoteric" or metaphysically penetrative reading of the anonymous "rich man" (Lk. 16:19, "Homo quidam erat dives"). For Eckhart, it is the combination of the anonymity and wealth of

⁷⁵⁸ Mojsisch, *Eckhart*, 56.

⁷⁵⁹ Suzuki, *Mysticism*, 22.

⁷⁶⁰ DM I:81.

⁷⁶¹ Wojtulewicz, *Principle*, 97.

⁷⁶² GW, 708-709 (Homily 53).

this man which serves as a symbol of “the groundless Godhead” (*der gruntlôsen gotheit*) “beyond-being” (*überwesenlich*), “beyond-praise” (*überlobelich*), “beyond-speech” (*überredelich*), and “beyond-knowledge” (*überverstentlich*).⁷⁶³ Moreover, Eckhart interprets “man” (*mensche*) as referring to the “intellect” (*verstantnisse*), the implications of which are four. It is in the intellect that (1) “God is revealed to Himself” (*ist got im selben offenbære*); (2) “God flows into Himself” (*vervliuzet got in sich selber*); (3) “God emanates into all things” (*vliuzet got ûz in alliu dinc*); and (4) “God created all things” (*schuof got alliu dinc*). From this Eckhart concludes that “were there in God no intellect, the Trinity would not be” (*drîvalticheit niht gesîn*); “hence neither would any creature ever have emanated” (*nie créatûre ûzgevlozzen*).⁷⁶⁴ While a more focused treatment of the intellect must wait for the next section on knowledge, here it can be said that intellect is identified in Eckhart’s later writings with *puritas essendi* (“the purity of existence”) or *plenitudo essendi* (“the plenitude of existence”)⁷⁶⁵—what the Bodhidharma had styled a “vast emptiness” with “no distinctions whatever”.⁷⁶⁶

Eckhart goes on to link the richness of the anonymous man with the wealth of God, both in terms of His ipseity (“no-thingness”) and His self-diffusion (“not-otherness”): “God is rich in Himself [oneness] and in all things [manifold].” According to the Dominican Master, the “richness of

⁷⁶³ GW, 726-727.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁵ McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 5.

⁷⁶⁶ Suzuki, *Mysticism*, 20.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

God” (*richeit gotes*) comprises five main points: (1) as “first cause” (*êrste sache*), God is always “pouring Himself into all things” (*ûzgiezendesich in alliu dinc*); (2) as absolutely “simple” (*einvaltic*), God is “the inwardness of all things” (*innerkeit aller dinge*); (3) as “originating” (*ursprunclich*), God is forever “communicating Himself to all things” (*gemeinende sich allen dingen*); (4) as “unchangeable” (*unwandelhaftic*), God is “the most stable” (*daz behaldelîcheste*); and (5) as “perfect” (*volkomen*), God is “the most desirable” (*daz begerlîcheste*).⁷⁶⁷

In relation to the second point, Eckhart poses the question: “What is ‘simple?’” (*Was ist einvaltic?*); and answers by paraphrasing the words of Albert the Great: “Simple is the thing that is in itself one without a second (*ein ist âne ander*), that is God, and all united things [manifold] are by the fact that He is [oneness].”⁷⁶⁸ In relation to the fourth point, Eckhart underscores the particular manner in which God is one with the manifold. For Eckhart, God simultaneously (1) “unites Himself with things” (*vereinet sich mit den dingen*) and (2) “retains Himself as one in Himself” (*ein an im selben*), so as to make “all things one with Him” (*und alliu dinc an im ein*). Insofar as creatures have been given existence (“on loan”,⁷⁶⁹ as it were), they are “one in the one” (*ein in dem einem*) and “God in God” (*got in gote*); but insofar as they are considered in and of themselves, “they are nothing” (*sint sie niht*).⁷⁷⁰ It is here that Eckhart compares the manifold of phenomena

⁷⁶⁷ GW, 728-729.

⁷⁶⁸ GW, 730-731.

⁷⁶⁹ Cf. Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 105.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

to a tiny “drop” (*tropfe*) before the “wild ocean” (*wilden mer*) of non-dual oneness: “all things compared to God are as small as a drop before the wild ocean. Whoever threw a drop into the ocean, the drop would transform itself into the ocean, but not the ocean into the drop.”⁷⁷¹ Eckhart’s concept of manifestation is therefore, as Schürmann observes, “characterized by the fleetingness of borrowed being—evanescent like a ray of the sun in the air”.⁷⁷²

This brief homily carries with it several important implications, the most notable of which, as it pertains to the present chapter, is how every creature “exists” not merely *through* but *as* the eternal “flow” (*fluxus*) of the Divine Essence. Every stage of being—from the initial stage of “inner boiling” (*bullitio*), to the emanative stage of “boiling over” (*ebullitio*), and culminating finally in the stage of “creation” (*creatio*)—is enfolded by the non-dual oneness of Being Itself. “Only God can truly manifest being,” writes Kelley, summarizing the view of Eckhart, “which is to say that God does not *have* isness but is all-inclusive and all-possible isness itself.”⁷⁷³ As such, creatures possess neither being nor the qualities of being in themselves. “Rather, God *lends* such qualities to them.” In the words of Davies,

creatures do not represent a reality in themselves (viewed outside their relation to God, that is). His [Eckhart’s] meaning is not that God exists while creatures do

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷⁷² Schürmann, *Wandering Joy*, 176.

⁷⁷³ Kelley, *Divine Knowledge*, 71.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

not exist, but that the existence of creatures is given them immediately by God, that it still remains in God, and that creatures have no existence other than this.⁷⁷⁴

Shadows do exist. But only as shadows—and not as the light by which they are cast. In the same way, creatures also exist. But only as creatures, i.e., “only as ‘this or that’ (*esse hoc et hoc*)”. For Eckhart, created existence “occurs only in a ‘manner’” or “mode”—manifesting the Unmanifest “here” in one way and “there” in another.⁷⁷⁵

Existence (*qua* existence) is never divided externally, but instead “divides itself from within”,⁷⁷⁶ as was shown in the Advaitic, Daoist, Zen, and Kabbalistic systems as well. The manifold of created phenomena “are” only as the manifestations of infinite oneness: “In God all things have the same form (idea), though this is the form of very different things.”⁷⁷⁷ Viewed from the perspective of the “single simple unity” of the Divine Essence, there is no difference between an angel (*engel*), a soul (*sêle*), or a fly (*mugge*), in that they all share the same prototype (*bilde*).⁷⁷⁸ In giving all things, God gives Himself—neither more nor less. Creatures have nothing of their own “to be” but the infinite *esse* of God. This seems to be what William Blake had in mind when he wrote that “If the doors of

⁷⁷⁴ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 105.

⁷⁷⁵ Turner, *Darkness*, 163.

⁷⁷⁶ Kelley, *Divine Knowledge*, 57.

⁷⁷⁷ ME I:211.

⁷⁷⁸ DM I:269.

perception were cleansed everything [manifold] would appear to man as it is: infinite [oneness].”⁷⁷⁹

The infinite diversity of things is therefore not something foreign to God or opposed to His unity (*unitas*). On the contrary, the endless manifold of phenomena expresses the very nature of the Divine goodness, which—*as goodness*—seeks to manifest itself infinitely. As Thomas says, “Being itself, considered absolutely, is infinite; for it can be participated by an infinite number of things and in an infinite number of ways” (*Ipsum esse absolute consideratum infinitum est: nam ab infinitis et infinitis modis participari possibile est*).⁷⁸⁰ Or as St. Augustine had argued centuries before: “we are” (*sumus*) “because [God] is good” (*inquantum bonus est*).⁷⁸¹

Accordingly, the oneness of reality “unites in such a way that being ‘from’ and being ‘in’ are not opposed”.⁷⁸² That is to say, the procession of all things “from” God is not temporally subsequent to or ontologically incompatible with their remaining “in” Him. Indeed, insofar as (*inquantum*) all things “have” existence, they are—in *principle*⁷⁸³—identical to Existence. As Eckhart says: “all creatures are being” (*alle créature sint ein wesen*). And insofar as being is *being* (*esse*), it is the same as God: “God’s idiosyncrasy (*eigenschaft*) is being.”⁷⁸⁴ The *inquantum* principle is

⁷⁷⁹ See William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 39.

⁷⁸⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.43.

⁷⁸¹ See St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.32.

⁷⁸² Wojtulewicz, *Principle*, 39.

⁷⁸³ Kelley, *Divine Knowledge*, 69.

⁷⁸⁴ DM I:263. The translation of *eigenschaft* as “idiosyncrasy” is that of Evans.

therefore, as McGinn has noted, a “principle of formal reduplication” which serves as a “bond or ordering of two things”,⁷⁸⁵ such that, as Schürmann further notes, the “oneness” of God and creation is no longer conceived as “the static coincidence of two Aristotelian substances...but an active identification; nor is it univocal, but analogical: the uncreated being which is the Godhead belongs all the more and more properly to the mind than if it were its own. The Godhead is the mind’s being.”⁷⁸⁶

On this reading, analogy is not simply a logical observation or linguistic device, but rather deals, however indirectly, with the *ontological* “likeness” of God and creatures—a “likeness” which “is itself a mode of identity.”⁷⁸⁷ In the same way that God is the Prime and Immediate Mover of all that is moved, and the Prime and Immediate Knower of all that is known, so is God the Prime and Immediate Existence of all existents.⁷⁸⁸ Again, for Eckhart, the “no-thingness” of the Godhead does not deny its “not-otherness” vis-à-vis the manifold order, but “comprises within itself the principle of all being and manifestation”; its “inclusive unicity” (oneness) in no way “contradicted by its manifest diversity” (manifold).⁷⁸⁹

When viewed from the standpoint of absolute *esse*, God is not the “essence” or “substance” of the world, seeing that the world—viewed *per se* or “in itself”—has no existence at all. When viewed from another

⁷⁸⁵ McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 89.

⁷⁸⁶ Schürmann, *Wandering Joy*, 154.

⁷⁸⁷ Bernard Kelly, “The Metaphysical Background of Analogy”, in *A Catholic Mind Awake: The Writings of Bernard Kelly*, ed. Scott Randall Paine (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2017), 71.

⁷⁸⁸ Kelly, “Metaphysical Background”, 62-63.

⁷⁸⁹ Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 138.

standpoint, however, it can also be said that insofar as (*inquantum*) the world receives the gift of existence, it *is* that gift; and the gift, in turn, *is* its Giver. It is in this sense that God and the soul can be said to share an “asymmetric identity”⁷⁹⁰: “For as God is infinite in giving, so the soul is infinite in receiving”.⁷⁹¹ The Christian concept of manifestation is therefore premised on “a structure of unity and opposition which turns on the principle that God is both infinitely beyond us [“no-thing”] and infinitely present to and within us [“not-other”]”⁷⁹²—the oneness of the manifold.

Having concluded my textual analysis, I turn now to the final section of this chapter on the Christian view of knowledge.

Section Three: Knowledge

Structural Exposition: Knowledge as *Intellectus*

As with the previously examined mystico-speculative ontologies of this study, the Christian view of knowledge assumes a threefold, hierarchical structure. Following Augustine and Aquinas, Eckhart identifies “three kinds of knowledge” (*drierleie bekenntnisse*): (1) “bodily” (*liplich*), (2) “mental” or “rational” (*geistlich*), and (3) “imageless” (*âne bilde*).⁷⁹³ These three kinds of knowledge correspond to the three faculties of the soul, which the scholastic theologians, borrowing from the categories of Neoplatonic

⁷⁹⁰ Rik van Nieuwenhove, “Meister Eckhart and Jan Van Ruusbroec”, in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, Vol. 7 (1998), 162.

⁷⁹¹ ME I:13.

⁷⁹² Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 116-117.

⁷⁹³ DM I:315.

philosophy, had referred to as (1) “sense perception” (*aisthetikón*), (2) “discriminative reason” (*dianoetikón*), and (3) “intellective intuition” (*noûs*). To the first kind of knowledge corresponds the apprehension of sensible images. This kind of knowledge tends toward division and multiplicity, and away from unity and oneness. At this level of *liplich* or “bodily” knowledge, the eye is deceived into regarding as “real” what is, in reality, an ontological “shadow” (*schate*) whose essence is “dark” (*naht*). The level of *geistlich* or “mental” knowledge brings us a step higher. Here the mental faculty of *ratio* comes to the fore, analyzing and discerning between “this” and “that” (relative being), “here” and “there” (relative space), “now” and “then” (relative time). It is only at the level of “imageless” knowledge that the soul reaches its “summit” (*hæhe*),⁷⁹⁴ so as to say with Eckhart: “What I perceive in God, that is light” (*Waz ich in got bekenne, das ist ein liebt*); “what touches creatures, that is darkness” (*das crêatûre rüeret, das ist naht*).⁷⁹⁵ “God detests to work among images” (*Got den versmâhet ze wirkenne in bilden*).⁷⁹⁶

Elsewhere Eckhart divides knowledge into the three stages of: (1) “evening” knowledge (*verspertina*), (2) “unknowing” knowledge (*ignorantia*), and (3) “morning” knowledge (*matutina*). “Evening” knowledge, or what Eckhart also refers to as “multitudinous knowledge” (*K*), operates only within the manifold distinctions of nature, and therefore

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid, 316.

⁷⁹⁶ DM I:8.

can be said to include both bodily and rational forms of knowing. “Unknowing” knowledge ($\sim K$) signifies the stage of epistemological annihilation, wherein knowing becomes being and being becomes knowing. Here God and the soul stand before each other like mutually interpenetrating mirrors, “without anything in between”.⁷⁹⁷ As a result, epistemology becomes a pure inflection of ontology, and vice versa. Knowledge becomes itself only by “breaking-through” (*durchbrechen*) itself⁷⁹⁸ to the non-dual unity of existence.⁷⁹⁹

The final stage—that of “morning” or “daybreak” knowledge (K)—opens out onto the simultaneous vision of the one and the manifold. It is here that we arrive at what is for Eckhart, and Christian thought more broadly, the central concept of “oneness” (*einicheit*) as the “negation of negation” or “denial of denial”, which, as Ueda remarks,

entails a pure movement in two directions at the same time: (1) the negation of negation in the sense of a further denial of negation that does not come back around to affirmation but opens up into an endlessly open nothingness; and (2) the negation of negation in the sense of a return to affirmation without any trace of mediation. Absolute nothingness, which first of all functions as radical negation, is maintained as this dynamic coincidence of infinite negation and straightforward affirmation. In this coincidence, and because of it, a fundamental

⁷⁹⁷ Eckhart as translated in Raymond B. Blakney, ed. and trans., *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 79.

⁷⁹⁸ ME I:195.

⁷⁹⁹ Kelley, *Divine Knowledge*, 242.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

transformation and a complete return—a sort of “death and resurrection”—are achieved in *ex-sistence*.⁸⁰⁰

Eckhart identifies this doubly negated mode of knowledge with the uncreated and uncreatable element or “eye” of the soul, namely, the intellect (*intellectus*), of which the Dominican friar had famously said: “The eye wherein I see God, is the same eye wherein God sees me: my eye and God’s eye are one eye (*ein ouge*), one vision (*ein gesiht*), one knowing (*ein bekennen*), one loving (*ein minnen*).”⁸⁰¹ Such an “eye” perceives—in a single “look”—the many in the One and the One in the many, thereby “seeing two ways at once”, to paraphrase Zhuangzi. “Morning” knowledge is therefore a truly “principial knowledge” that “is always as it were in *divinis*,” and thus always perceiving the manifold of temporal phenomena beneath “the simple now of eternity” (*nunc simplex aeternitatis*).⁸⁰² It is at this stage of knowledge that the soul becomes (or rather reveals itself to be) an “aristocrat”, “because [it] is One and knows God and creatures as they are One.” Far from merely negating the manifold of existent things, the oneness of existence negates the negation, shining in and from every creature, and thereby disclosing all things “to be” as the many “parts” of the Partless One. As Eckhart says,

⁸⁰⁰ Shizuteru Ueda, “Nothingness”, 162.

⁸⁰¹ DM I:312.

⁸⁰² Kelley, *Divine Knowledge*, 160-161.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Be therefore that One so that you may find God. And of course, if you are wholly that One, you shall remain so, even where distinctions are. Different things will all be parts of that One to you and will no longer stand in your way. The One remains the same One in thousands of thousands of stones as much as in four stones: a thousand times a thousand is just as simple a number as four...to look for unity short of God is to be self-deceived.⁸⁰³

To summarize the correspondences of the mystico-speculative traditions examined up to this point: the first stage of *vespertina*-consciousness corresponds to the Advaitic *jiva*-consciousness, the Daoist *xin*-consciousness, the Zen *mumyō*-consciousness, and the Kabbalistic *pardod*-consciousness; the second stage of *ignorantia*-consciousness corresponds to the Advaitic *sākṣātkāra*-consciousness, the Daoist *zhi*-consciousness, the Zen *chi*-consciousness, and the Kabbalistic *bitul*-consciousness; and the third stage of *matutina*-consciousness corresponds to the Advaitic *Brahman*-consciousness, the Daoist *dao*-consciousness, the Zen *satori*-consciousness, and the Kabbalistic *ayin*-consciousness. These correspondences are visually portrayed below (Figure 12).

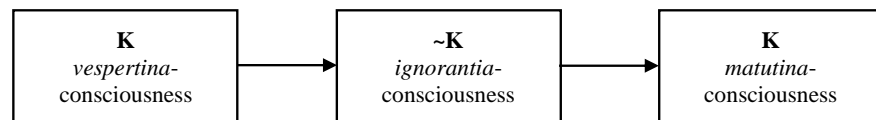


Figure 12. Structure of Knowledge – *Mystical Christianity*

⁸⁰³ Eckhart, *Modern Translation*, 78-79.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

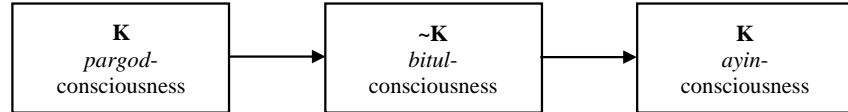


Figure 11. Structure of Knowledge – *Kabbalistic Judaism*

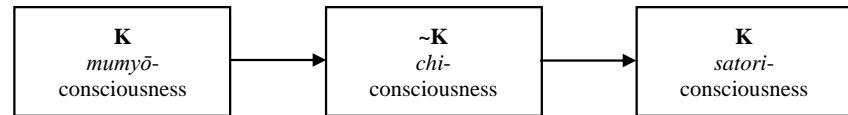


Figure 4. Structure of Knowledge – *Zen Buddhism*

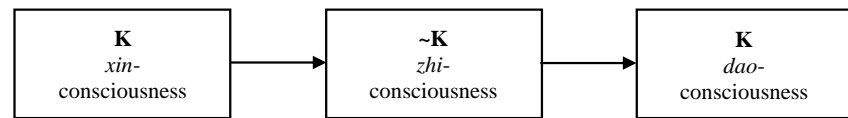


Figure 2. Structure of Knowledge – *Philosophical Daoism*

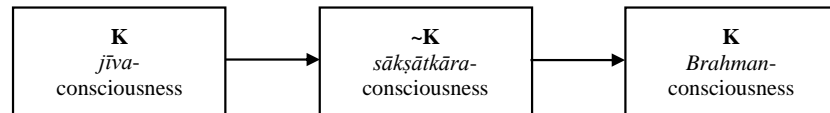


Figure 1. Structure of Knowledge – *Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

Having provided a brief structural exposition of the Christian view of knowledge, I turn now to a textual analysis of Meister Eckhart’s *German Homilies*.

Textual Analysis: *Deutsche Predigten*

In his homily on the Gospel reading for the Octave of Epiphany (Lk. 2:42-46), Eckhart addresses the question of how one can obtain the “noble birth” (*edele geburt*) of God in the soul. To obtain this birth, says Eckhart, one

must do as Christ did: forsaking the “multitude” (*menige*) for the oneness of the Father: “...if you would find this noble birth, you have to leave all the crowds (*menige*) and have to come back into the origin (*ursprunc*) and into the ground (*grunt*) from where you have come forth.”⁸⁰⁴ What constitutes the “crowds” or “multitude” (*menige*) that the soul must leave behind? Eckhart answers: “All the powers of the soul and all their activities are all crowds: memory (*gehugnisse*), understanding (*verstantnisse*), and will (*wille*)...sensibility (*sinnelicheit*), imagination (*bildunge*) and all that in which you find or intend to find yourself.” Both “bodily” and “rational” knowledge are, for Eckhart, incapable of realizing unity with the ground of all things, and for the very reason that they both rely on what is “carried into” (*îngetragen*) them “from the outside” (*von ûzen*) “through the senses” (*durch die sinne*), even the divine notions of God’s existence, goodness, wisdom, and mercy, along with the highest thoughts that the intellect can conceive.⁸⁰⁵ The Godhead is thus for Eckhart what Brahman is for Śaṅkara, or the *dao* for Zhuangzi: the ineffable One from which words turn back and thoughts lose their balance. As Eckhart says elsewhere: “What we speak of Him [God], we have to stutter” (*Waz wir von im sprechen, daz müezen wir stameln*).⁸⁰⁶

According to Eckhart, the “natural light” (*natiurlich lieht*) of bodily and rational knowledge must be reduced to “pure nothing” (*lûtern nihte*)

⁸⁰⁴ GW, 256-257 (Homily 15).

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁶ GW, 534-535 (Homily 36).

and “go entirely beyond itself” (*sîn selbes ûzgân zemâle*). Only then can God “enter with His light” (*îngân mit sînem liehte*).⁸⁰⁷ In order for one to “know God divinely” (*got götlîche wîzzen*), one’s knowledge must become a “pure unknowing” (*lûter unwîzzen*), as well as a “forgetting of yourself and all creatures” (*vergezzen dîn selbes und aller crêatûren*). In short, one must enter “total darkness” (*einem dînsternisse*).⁸⁰⁸

Here Eckhart poses the question: “Ah, Lord, has everything to go, is there no return (*widerkêren*)?” To which Eckhart replies unequivocally: “No (*Nein*)...there can be no return (*da enmac kein widerkêren sîn*).”⁸⁰⁹ The reason for this, according to Eckhart, is that the nature of this “darkness” is “the potential of receptivity” (*mügelich enpfenclîcheit*). Here “all is a pressing forth” (*alles ein vûr sich dringen*) and “a potential reception (*erlangen*) and achieving (*ervolgen*)” that never ceases until it is “fulfilled by the fulness of being” (*ervüllet mit vollem wesene*).⁸¹⁰ In the same way that matter does not stop until it is filled with all possible forms, so the intellect never stops until it is “fulfilled by all that is possible for it.” It is therefore necessary to keep oneself “naked” (*ledic*) and “bare” (*blôz*) before the superluminous darkness of oblivion, never returning to what had previously passed for “knowledge”, and thereby gaining “the one who is all things” (*der dâ alliu dinc ist*).⁸¹¹

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid, 258-259.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid, 260-261.

⁸¹¹ Ibid.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Corresponding to Zhuangzi's notion of "sitting in oblivion" (*zuowang*), Eckhart understands the "unknowing knowledge" of the soul to consist in a desertion of all things: "The true word of eternity (*Daz wâre wort der êwicheit*) is only spoken in solitude, where man is deserted (*verwüestet*) and depleted (*verellendet*) of his own self and all multiplicity (*aller manicvalticheit*)."⁸¹² By depleting itself of all createdness and becoming "pure nothing", the soul stands before God like clear air before the sun: "as soon as air is clear and pure the sun must pour herself into it and cannot withhold herself from it." In the same way, God pours Himself into every soul He finds "naked" and "bare."⁸¹³

Toward the conclusion of this homily, Eckhart describes the stage of knowledge that has passed through both (1) the bodily and rational forms of the "evening" (*vespertina*) and (2) the blessed ignorance caused by the superluminous light of the gnostic sun. This is "morning" knowledge (*matutina*), wherein God is born in the soul, and all things become transparent before the light of their origin: "...when this birth has taken place in truth, none of the creatures [manifold] will hinder you; rather, they will point you to God and to this birth [oneness]." Eckhart continues,

Your face, therefore, will be turned towards this birth. Indeed, everything that you see or hear, whatever it is, you can only grasp in all things nothing but this birth. Indeed, all things become the naked God (*alliu dinc werdent dir lûter got*), as in

⁸¹² Ibid, 260-263.

⁸¹³ Ibid, 262-265.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

all things you cannot recognize or love but the naked God. Just as if a man had looked for a long time into the sun in heaven, what he sees after that is that the sun is placed in him. If you fail to search for God, to grasp and love Him in all things and in each thing (*in allen dingen und in einem ieglîchen dinge*), there you miss this birth.⁸¹⁴

Pertinent here is the observation of Otto, who noted how the same spirit of “mystical intuition” (*intuitus mysticus*) that gave birth to Advaitic ontology in India is discernible in Eckhart as well. Confronted by the manifold order and the multiplicity of “this” and “that”, the speculative mind presses forward to perceive this multiplicity *as unity*—even as the One that has no second. Whereas the naïve mind caught in the twilight of knowledge can only apprehend the manifold in a distinct, temporal, and scattered way, the intellect grasps, by way of a single and immediate intuition, the whole of existence and the fundamentally *ontological* relationship of the One and the many. To see all things *in principio*—a concept which, as Otto correctly observes, constitutes the “shibboleth” of Eckhart’s entire position—“is to see all things ‘in God’, in the eternal unity of their principal being (*prinzipiellen wesens*), where all *idam*, all ‘this’ and ‘that’, all *hic et nunc*, all multiplicity and duality is eternal oneness (*ewige Einheit*).”⁸¹⁵ Or in the words of Shah-Kazemi, “the eye of the intellect can only gaze on the light

⁸¹⁴ Ibid, 266-269.

⁸¹⁵ Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik*, 9-10.

of God because of the affinity—and, in the final analysis, identity—between its own uncreated substance and the uncreated reality of God.”⁸¹⁶

The mystico-speculative philosopher is one who “passes all kinds of multiplicities and sees a kind of unity behind all of the things in the world and claims that there is only one existence or even one existent thing in the world that has such an embrative unity that it covers all apparent multiplicities.”⁸¹⁷ Whereas *vespertina*-consciousness (K^1) can only look at creation beneath the shadow of “clearly distinguished ideas”, the absolute darkness of *ignorantia*-consciousness ($\sim K^1$) blinds the eyes completely, due not to an absence but an abundance of light, and thus opening out on a return beyond all returning: *matutina*-consciousness (K^2), i.e., the non-dual sun in whose light everything is received back into its own eternal newness and “all creatures are perceived without distinctions”.⁸¹⁸

It is at this highest stage of knowledge that “unity unifies multiplicity” and knowing and being are fused into a single science, a single reality. Both statements are true: (1) existence is God (*esse est Deus*), and (2) intellect is God (*intellectus est Deus*).⁸¹⁹ And it is because both of these statements are true that Eckhart can say: “Intellect is the summit of the soul.”⁸²⁰ Or again: “the soul’s perfection lies in gnosis”.⁸²¹ It is only when every temporal “beam” is removed from the eye of the soul that “divine

⁸¹⁶ Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 167.

⁸¹⁷ Ghasem Kakaie, “The Extrovertive Unity of Existence from Ibn ‘Arabi’s and Meister Eckhart’s Viewpoints”, in *Topoi* 26 (2007), 178.

⁸¹⁸ Eckhart, *Modern Translation*, 79.

⁸¹⁹ Turner, *Darkness*, 166.

⁸²⁰ ME I:198.

⁸²¹ ME I:136.

oneness” can be realized. The soul must learn to “cast herself out of herself”, into “the desert of the Godhead where neither act nor form exists”, so as to die and be buried, “crossing over into uncreated life...beyond the ken of multitudinous knowledge.”⁸²²

3. Concluding Summary

In this chapter I have sought to further develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory through which to compare mystical ontologies East and West. I have done this by analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the overarching idea of the oneness of the manifold. This overarching idea is designated by mystical Christianity as *unitas* (“oneness”). The network of interrelated concepts that *unitas* coordinates and structures are: existence (*esse*), manifestation (*fluxus*), and knowledge (*intellectus*). The key philosophical concepts germane to Christian mysticism find their correlates in the previously specified conceptual frameworks of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, philosophical Daoism, Zen Buddhism, and Kabbalistic Judaism, as seen below:

⁸²² ME I:194-195.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advaya</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shinnyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>eḥad</i>	<i>ein sof</i>	<i>shekhinah</i>	<i>ḥokhmah</i>
Esoteric Christianity	<i>unitas</i>	<i>esse</i>	<i>fluxus</i>	<i>intellectus</i>

Table 7. *Corresponding Concepts – Mystical Christianity*

To conclude: for the Christian tradition, the non-dual oneness of the manifold, far from denying the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation, supplies them with their innermost logic. As Turner notes, “to be God is not to be exclusive of any other kind of being”. Only God is God: the absolute “no-thing” that is infinitely “not-other”. As such, the *esse indistinctum* of the Godhead “cannot be distinguished from the *esse distinctum* of the created human by any relation of displacement, so that to be the one *entails* not being the other”. On the contrary, the identity of the human being (and, by extension, the entire manifold order) with the uncreated “no-thingness” of God is in no way exclusive of that same human being’s given finitude, createdness, and *esse distinctum*—the logic of Chalcedon. To truly “be” is to be “nothing-in-particular”, “neither this nor that”, i.e., pure undifferentiated oneness (*unitas indistinctionis*).⁸²³

Oneness is therefore conceived as intrinsically manifold, an infinite plenum that cannot help but ebulliate itself into the “flow” (*fluxus*) of

⁸²³ Turner, *Darkness*, 165-166.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

manifestation. God is the “One” that contains the “all”.⁸²⁴ It is in the *intellectus* as the deepest element of the soul—the eye by which one sees and is seen by God—that the dualities of “this” and “that” (relative being), “here” and “there” (relative space), “now” and “then” (relative time) are dissolved in “the revelation of the nothingness of otherness and the sole reality of the One.”⁸²⁵ It is precisely by entering into the darkness of annihilation that the soul is plunged into its “groundless ground”, only to awaken to “morning” knowledge (*matutina*) and the vision of the One in all things and all things in the One.

“How is God in everything?” As preserving their unity of nature (*einikeit der nature*). [All things] have but one property (*eigenschaft*) and this property is the Divine Essence as a whole (*götlich wesen alzemâle*). As such, God is in all places and in each place God is all at once. Because God is perfectly simple, all things and all places are the place of God. So everything is full of God (*gotes vol*), of His Divine Essence, without end.⁸²⁶

Having completed the present chapter on mystical Christianity, I turn now to the final chapter of this study on mystical Islam.

⁸²⁴ DM I:83.

⁸²⁵ Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 160.

⁸²⁶ DM I:389.

CHAPTER 6

Mystical Islam

The present chapter consists of the following three parts: (1) a short introduction to mystical Islam; (2) the exposition and analysis of mystical Islam under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge; and (3) a concluding summary of key concepts.

1. Introduction

In this introduction I prepare the way for an exposition and analysis of mystical Islam's view of existence as simultaneously one and manifold by (1) defining Islamic mysticism, (2) tracing its historical and conceptual development, and (3) summarizing the method and outline of the present chapter.

Mystical Islam

Mystical Islam represents an immense, multi-faceted, and highly complex phenomenon. On the one hand, it can refer to any of several historical schools: the "illuminists" (*ishrāqī*), the "gnostics" (*urafā*), the "Twelver" (*imamiyyah*), the Ismā'īli (*al-'Ismā'īlīyah*), the "Brethren of Purity" (*Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*'), the Sufis (from the Arabic root *suf*, meaning "wool"), etc. On the other hand, and in a much broader sense, mystical Islam refers

to the “inward dimension” or “esoteric interpretation of Islam”,⁸²⁷ and to that extent is practically synonymous with an equally broad use of the term “Sufism” (*taṣawwuf*), i.e., the “invisible spiritual presence that animates all authentic expressions of Islam.”⁸²⁸ Far from constituting a separate branch of its own, Sufism—thus conceived—penetrates the core of Islam’s two major segments, namely, Sunnism and Shi‘ism,⁸²⁹ infusing and pervading them both as their “common element.”⁸³⁰

Based on the principle of *tawḥīd* or “unification”, the diverse forms of Islamic mysticism evince a spirit of synthesis and harmonization, integrating “the theoretical knowledge” (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*) of philosophy (*falsafah*) and theology (*kalām*) through the “intuitive knowledge” (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*) of pure sapience (*ḥikmah*) or gnosis (*ma‘rifah*). Whereas the scholarship of the nineteenth century tended to argue that Islamic mysticism was the product of a purely historical and syncretistic borrowing, with sources ranging anywhere from the Zoroastrianism of Persia, to the Neoplatonism of the Greeks, to the Hinduism of India,⁸³¹ the scholarship of the previous century—including but not limited to the work of the eminent French scholar Louis Massignon, the English Islamicist David Margoliouth, the German Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel, and the American scholar

⁸²⁷ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 77.

⁸²⁸ William Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: Oneworld, 2013), 11.

⁸²⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 3rd edition (Chicago: Kazi, 1999), 120.

⁸³⁰ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard and Philip Sherrard (London: Routledge, 2014), 284.

⁸³¹ See, e.g., the work of such eminent twentieth-century Orientalists as Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (1868-1945), Miguel Asín Palacios (1871-1944), Arthur John Arberry (1905-1969), and Robert Charles Zaehner (1913-1973).

Carl W. Ernst—would establish a more integrative and organic view of mystical Islam as a phenomenon which, far from an extrinsic imposition, is linked by an intimate, “initiatic chain” (*al-silsilah*) to: (1) the Prophet Muhammad himself, (2) the matrix of “the Qur’anic event”,⁸³² and therefore, ultimately, (3) the mystery of the Divine Essence (*al-Ḥaqq*).

Annemarie Schimmel, in her classic study *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975), identifies “two main types” of mysticism: (1) the “Mysticism of Personality” and (2) the “Mysticism of Infinity”.⁸³³ These two types correspond to the “ecstatic” and “theosophical” forms of mysticism encountered in Chapter 4 on Kabbalistic Judaism, as well as to the “affective” and “speculative” forms of mysticism outlined in Chapter 5 on mystical Christianity. As it pertains to the Islamic tradition, however, these two types correspond to (1) “practical Sufism” (*al-taṣawwuf al-‘amālī*) and (2) “theoretical” or “contemplative Sufism” (*al-taṣawwuf al-naẓarī*). While these two types of mysticism are by no means mutually exclusive,⁸³⁴ it is the latter, associated with the school of “the greatest master” (*shaykh al-akbar*), Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240 C.E.) and its chief metaphysical thesis of the “oneness of existence” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*),⁸³⁵ that most closely approximates the speculative and metaphysical focus of this study.

⁸³² See Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997), Chapter 2.

⁸³³ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 5.

⁸³⁴ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 283.

⁸³⁵ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 5.

According to this peculiar metaphysical understanding of “oneness” (*tawhīd*), the Absolute is conceived as the “Reality of all realities” (*Ḥaḥiqatu’l Ḥaḥqā’iq*). Just as a wave “is” only as the restricted articulation of a single ocean, or just as a ray of light “is” only as the limited mode of a single sun, so every phenomenon “is” only as the discrete “modality of *wujūd*” or Being.⁸³⁶ For Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers, then, there is a principial distinction to be drawn between the “one” and the “many”, or “reality” (*ḥaḥqq*) and “appearance” (*khalq*)—with the former representing “real unity” (oneness), and the latter pointing to “empirical diversity” (manifold).⁸³⁷ In drawing this distinction, Ibn ‘Arabī did not intend to suggest the existence of two realities (the first, unified; and the second, differentiated). On the contrary, there is only one Reality, albeit with many (indeed, infinite) appearances, such that oneness relates to the manifold “as a substance [relates] to its accidents”.⁸³⁸ Nor can this distinction between “oneness” and the “manifold” be pushed aside or viewed as something merely peripheral to Ibn ‘Arabī’s mystico-speculative vision. In the words of A.E. Affifi, “The whole of [Ibn] ‘Arabī’s metaphysics rests on this distinction and there is not a single point in his system where it is not introduced in some form or other.”⁸³⁹

⁸³⁶ William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (New York: SUNY, 1994), 55.

⁸³⁷ A.E. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Dīn Ibnul ‘Arabī* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1964), 10-11.

⁸³⁸ Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy*, 12.

⁸³⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

Historical and Conceptual Development

The particular mystical vein to be expounded and analyzed in the present chapter is one I refer to as “Oriental Gnosis”, connected mainly with the Eastern lands of Islam (Persia especially), and whose genealogy comprises (1) the Peripatetic philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, 980-1037 C.E.), (2) the “illuminist” school of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154-1191 C.E.), (3) the “oneness” (*waḥdah*; *tawḥīd*) school of Ibn ‘Arabī, and (4) the “transcendent theosophy” (*al-ḥikmat al-muta‘āliyah*) of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā, c. 1571/2-1635/40 C.E.). Rather than providing an exhaustive historical treatment of Oriental Gnosis, which would require several volumes unto itself, the subsections below offer an interpretation calibrated to the specific parameters of this study’s overarching thesis. What follows is therefore a reading of Oriental Gnosis as perceived through the discrete lens of what Izutsu had called “the greatest metaphysical problem” of Islamic thought: the concept and reality of existence (*wujūd*).⁸⁴⁰

Avicenna

While the Peripatetic (*mashshā’ī*) school of Islam is often identified with Islamic philosophy as such, it is in fact but one school among many others.⁸⁴¹ Traditionally, the Peripatetic school is said to have begun with Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb al-Kindī (c. 801-873 C.E.), known as the “philosopher

⁸⁴⁰ CRE, 3.

⁸⁴¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardī, Ibn ‘Arabī* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1964), 9.

of the Arabs”. The term “Peripatetic philosophy”, as used by early Islamic figures like al-Kindī, should not be confused with its later employment in Western scholasticism, however. In contrast to its later Western developments, the Aristotle of al-Kindī was interpreted in a deeply Neoplatonic fashion, in the light of his Alexandrian commentators, fusing Proclean and Plotinian systems. Not only was Aristotle read as having authored the classic metaphysical treatise, *Liber de Causis* (“The Book of Causes”), but sections of the *Enneads* as well.⁸⁴² The great successor of al-Kindī was Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (c. 872 - c. 950 C.E.), sometimes referred to as the “Second Teacher” (*al-mu‘allim al-thānī*).⁸⁴³ Of a distinctively Pythagorean bent, al-Fārābī wrote one of the most influential medieval texts on musical theory, *Kitāb al-mūsīqa ‘l-kabīr* (“The Grand Book of Music”). Moreover, his musical compositions would enjoy special prominence among the Eastern lands of Islam and the Sufī orders in particular.⁸⁴⁴

Avicenna was not only the passive inheritor of this Peripatetic legacy; he actively shaped its structure and, by unanimous consensus, serves as its culminating point. In the words of Christian Jambet, the entire development of Islamic metaphysics—from Suhrawardī’s mysticism of light, to Ibn ‘Arabī’s mysticism of unity, to Mullā Ṣadrā’s mysticism of existence—is “built on the foundations Avicenna laid”.⁸⁴⁵

⁸⁴² See Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy*, 11.

⁸⁴³ Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 13.

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁴⁵ Christian Jambet, *The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mullā Ṣadrā*, trans. Jeff Fort (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2006), 116.

Avicenna's main contributions to a full-fledged Oriental Gnosis were in the areas of cosmology (i.e., the study of "creation", or "all that is not God") and metaphysics (i.e., the study of being *qua* being). For Avicenna, the odyssey of speculative thought "from the Unity of the absolute One to the multiplication of being and the multiplicity of beings" is facilitated by the principle: *ex uno non provenit nisi unum* ("out of one, nothing proceeds except one"). It is by this principle that Avicenna overcomes the idea of creation as "a voluntary decision, a sort of arbitrary *coup d'état*", and instead posits "Intellect" (*'aql*) as the "First Caused" (*al-ma'lūl al-awwal*) and "primordial Originated" (*al-Mubda' al-awwal*), grounding all existentiated beings—which are themselves merely "possible" (*mumkin*)—in the one necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) of the Divine Absolute.⁸⁴⁶ Through the negative aspect of intellection (namely, the contraction of being, corresponding the Kabbalistic notion of *tsimtsum*), "the passage from the absolute Unity of the primordial One to the multiple Unity that is then multiplied in the multitude of unities" is secured and established.⁸⁴⁷

By far the most influential notion of Avicenna, however, is the distinction he draws between "existence" (*wujūd*), on the one hand, and "essence" or "quiddity" (*māhiyah*), on the other. While al-Fārābī was the first Muslim philosopher to explicitly engage the question of how

⁸⁴⁶ See Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Irving, TX: Spring Publications, 1980), 56-57.

⁸⁴⁷ Corbin, *Visionary Recital*, 57.

“existence” relates to “quiddity”, it was the Avicennian thesis of the “accidentality of being” that would set the terms for future debate—a debate unfortunately (and fatefully) based on a misreading. The great Arab philosopher of Spain, Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198 C.E.), would accuse Avicenna of espousing an “essentialist” ontology,⁸⁴⁸ and Thomas Aquinas would, in turn, adopt this interpretation, transmitting it to the Latin-Christian West.⁸⁴⁹

According to Avicenna, existence is an “accident” (*‘arad*) of quiddity. Precisely what Avicenna meant by this thesis has been matter of intense controversy ever since. There are basically two ways of interpreting this thesis: (1) logically/grammatically, or (2) ontologically. To say that “this flower is white”, for example, is logically and grammatically equivalent to saying, “this flower is existent.” Here the concept of existence is predicated (*P*) of an object (*O*) in the same way that an adjective like “whiteness” is predicated of a flower, such that “the flower (*O*) is white (*P*)” is structurally identical to the statement “the flower (*O*) exists (*P*)”. By contrast, the ontological mode of interpreting Avicenna’s thesis—the course taken by both Averroes and Thomas—finds the great Peripatetic philosopher guilty of construing existence as “a property inhering in a substance,” not merely at the level of logical or grammatical analysis, but

⁸⁴⁸ Nor has this (mis)reading been abandoned by contemporary Western interpreters. See, e.g., Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 161. Here Pabst asserts that, for Avicenna, “a thing’s existence is extrinsic to its essence”, even categorizing Avicenna’s philosophy as a form of “ontological essentialism.”

⁸⁴⁹ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (New York: SUNY, 2006), 69.

in terms of the objective structure of reality itself.⁸⁵⁰ On this critique, Avicenna is thought to have understood existence in terms of *ens in alio*, “something existing in something else”, i.e., “a real property qualifying real substances,” just as “whiteness” inheres in the substratum of a flower. Such an understanding of existence as a mere “predicamental accident” leads to the following, patently absurd conclusion: if a flower must exist before it is “white”, then, by extension, a flower must also exist before it is “existent”.⁸⁵¹

What is often overlooked in this debate is the fact that the critique of Averroes and Thomas is derived from the statements made by Avicenna in his *Kitab al-Shifā'* (“The Book of Healing”) along with other works which, in fairness, not only insufficiently clarify but tend to obscure exactly what the concept of the “accidentality of being” is supposed to signify. It is another work, the *Ta'liqāt* (“Glosses”), that provides Avicenna’s most lucid discussion of the relation of “existence” to “quiddity”. Completely unknown to the medieval Latin West, the *Ta'liqāt* was profoundly influential on the Islamic metaphysicians of Eastern lands (Persia in particular), and effectively vindicates Avicenna from the accusations of his critics. In the pages of this work, Avicenna clearly states that while *wujūd* is indeed an “accident” (*‘araḍ*) of quiddity, yet it is such only in a highly specified and unique sense.

⁸⁵⁰ CRE, 3.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

The “existence” of all “accidents” in themselves is their “existence for their substrata”, except only one “accident”, which is “existence”. This difference is due to the fact that all other “accidents” in order to become existent, need each a substratum (which is already existent by itself) while “existence” does not require any “existence” in order to become existent. Thus it is not proper to say that its “existence” (i.e., the “existence” of this particular “accident” called “existence”) in a substratum is its very “existence”, meaning thereby that “existence” has “existence” (other than itself) in the same way as (an “accident” like) whiteness has “existence”. (That which can properly be said about the “accident”-“existence”) is, on the contrary, that its “existence in a substratum” is the very “existence” of that substratum. As for every “accident” other than “existence”, its “existence in a substratum” is the “existence” of that “accident”.⁸⁵²

For Avicenna, existence or *wujūd* is not an “accident” in any ordinary use of that word. Ordinarily conceived, an accident is that which inheres in a substratum, as “whiteness” inheres in wool. An accident is not essential or intrinsic to that which it inheres, but relates to it in a merely extrinsic way. Whether wool is of the purest white or dyed the darkest black, it is still *wool*. Such accidental modifications do not affect its underlying substance. What this passage from the *Ta’līqāt* clarifies is that, for Avicenna, existence is an utterly unique accident (“no-thing”) whose “occurrence” (*urūd*) in a substratum *constitutes that very substratum’s own deepest and most fundamental reality* (“not-other”).⁸⁵³

⁸⁵² As translated and quoted by Izutsu, CRE, 125-126.

⁸⁵³ Ibid, 126.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

In the Avicennian thesis of the “accidentality of being”, two opposing standpoints are thus at play. The first is the standpoint of “conceptual existence” (*wujūd dhihnī*), and the second, of “objective existence” (*wujūd khārijī*). Considered from the former perspective, quiddity is perceived in a state of pure isolation, so completely abstracted from everything that even its own act of “existence” is viewed as something external to it. Only at the highest summit of intellectual abstraction can existence be regarded in this way, namely, as that which “occurs” (*ya‘riḍ*) to quiddity from the “outside”. When considered from the latter perspective, however, the entire conceptual structure of the mind is inverted so that existence is now seen as “principlial” (*aṣīl*), and all things or quiddities as so many phenomenal “forms” that existence “assumes”.⁸⁵⁴ While the *concept* of existence admits of endless qualifications and distinctions, the *reality* of existence is absolutely unqualified and undifferentiated—corresponding to Eckhart’s “single simple unity”, Cordovero’s “undifferentiated oneness”, Dōgen’s “one unadulterated mass”, Laozi’s “Uncarved Block”, Zhuangzi’s “strange amorphousness”, and Śaṅkara’s “homogenous mass of light”.

Here the Aristotelian view of existence as an “ontological block without fissure” (*bloc ontologique sans fissure*)⁸⁵⁵ is taken up into the mystico-speculative vision of non-dual oneness, where “existence” is no longer confined to the category of substance, but is now identified with the

⁸⁵⁴ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*, 70.

⁸⁵⁵ See Étienne Gilson, *L'être et l'essence* (Paris: Vrin, 1948), 90.

Reality of all realities, the Being of all beings, and the Oneness of the manifold. On this view, quiddities are not separate, self-standing realities, but the “internal productions” of Existence Itself, such that it is not the stone, or the sun, or a flower that “exists”, but existence that “stones”, “suns”, or “flowers”—“here” in one way, and “there” in another. Hence the statement, “This flower exists” is semantically identical to the statement, “This flower is *this flower*”—neither more nor less. For Avicenna, then, *wujūd* “gives each essence, or quiddity, its reality and is therefore principal (*aṣīl*).”⁸⁵⁶

Suhrawardī

Suhrawardī may, at first glance, appear as a strange heir to Avicenna’s legacy, given not only his critical attitude toward Peripatetic philosophy, but his explicit rejection of the “principality of existence” (*aṣālat al-wujūd*)—a doctrine that would become the metaphysical keystone of Oriental Gnosis. Appearances, however, can be deceiving. As Nasr observes, the apparent philosophical rupture between (1) the existentialism championed by the likes of Ibn ‘Arabī and Mullā Ṣadrā, and (2) the essentialist position of Suhrawardī, for whom existence is merely a mode of “considering” (*i’tibar*) quiddity, and thus a kind of “fictitiousness” (*i’tibārīyah*), is overcome by the fact that the role *wujūd* plays in the former

⁸⁵⁶ Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 26.

system is equivalent to the role played by “light” (*nūr*) in the latter.⁸⁵⁷ Or in the words of Izutsu, “What is conceived metaphysically as existence (*wujūd*) coincides with what is grasped in terms of the root experience as light (*nūr*). In this context existence *is* light.”⁸⁵⁸

According to Suhrawardī, the “Master of Illumination” (*shaykh al-ishrāq*), all phenomena “are” only as the diversified modes of a single Sun, the “Light of lights” (*nūr al-anwār*).⁸⁵⁹ The entire manifold order is nothing but the eternal radiance of the Divine Essence (*al-dhāt*) and Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*), albeit as communicated through “various degrees of intensity”,⁸⁶⁰ such that the “ontological status of a being depends on the degree to which it is illuminated or veiled.”⁸⁶¹ It was this equation of “that which is” with Ultimate Reality that would place the “oneness of existence” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) among the “major concepts” of Islamic metaphysics.⁸⁶²

Contrary to the notion that Islamic philosophy died with Averroes, it was only after the twelfth century that a chain of successive metaphysical revolutions erupted in the Eastern lands of Islam, impelled by the spread of Suhrawardī’s theosophy, such that the long held supremacy of *falsafah* and *kalām* was summarily “swept away in a torrent of unprecedented speculative metaphysics and visionary power.”⁸⁶³ That Islamic philosophy

⁸⁵⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Introduction”, in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, 5 vols., ed. S.H. Nasr and Mehdi Aminrazavi (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999-2015), IV:19.

⁸⁵⁸ CTO, 44.

⁸⁵⁹ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 211.

⁸⁶⁰ Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 69.

⁸⁶¹ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 261.

⁸⁶² Jambet, *The Act of Being*, 26.

⁸⁶³ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 292.

was buried with Averroes is true only to the extent that, from the thirteenth century onward, it no longer served as a major influence on medieval Western thinkers.⁸⁶⁴ However, the significance of Islamic philosophy can hardly be confined to such a narrow measurement. The very opposite tells the truer story: it is only with the dawning of the thirteenth century, after the death of Averroes, that the most robust and integral developments of Islamic philosophy were born. It was Suhrawardī's school of "illumination" (*ishrāq*) that would act as an isthmus or bridge between the Peripatetic philosophy of Avicenna and the mystical speculations of Ibn 'Arabī.⁸⁶⁵

Ibn 'Arabī

Ibn 'Arabī in many ways serves as the fulcrum around which the entire edifice of mystical Islam turns. Rightly ranked among "the greatest visionary theosophers of all time",⁸⁶⁶ Ibn 'Arabī, more than any other individual figure, would substantially shape later Islamic philosophy, "especially as far as the study of *wujūd* was concerned."⁸⁶⁷ While the specific term *waḥdat al-wujūd* or "oneness of existence" is nowhere explicitly used in the vast corpus of the Spanish-born Shaykh,⁸⁶⁸ it was nevertheless interpreted by his later students as the implicit, controlling principle of his whole metaphysical system.

⁸⁶⁴ Frederick C. Copleston, *A History of Medieval Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), 124.

⁸⁶⁵ Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 56.

⁸⁶⁶ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 291.

⁸⁶⁷ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*, 87.

⁸⁶⁸ See William Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 50.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, the manifold of phenomena is neither simply identical with God (“no-thing”), nor simply different from Him (“not-other”)⁸⁶⁹—as in the Sufi formula, “Neither He nor other than He” (*lā huwa wa lā ghayruhu*).⁸⁷⁰ The “true knower” (*‘ārif*) of reality perceives the world through the dynamic interplay of two “moments”: (1) the moment of “transcendence” or “incomparability” (*tanzīh*), and (2) the moment of “immanence” or “similarity” (*tashbīh*). According to the first, “God is above all limitation”; and according to the second, “[God] is the Essence of all that is.”⁸⁷¹ In itself a sheer and incommunicable ipseity (*huwiyyah*), the Divine Essence is also infinitely manifold in its theophanies vis-à-vis the “mirror” of creation, such that the *wujūd* of all things is none other than the one *wujūd* of God Himself. Just as many blocks of ice “are” only as the limited determinations of a single element (water), so all things “are” only as the diversified modes of a single reality (Being).⁸⁷²

Beyond the categories of “apophatic” (positive) and “cataphatic” (negative) thought, the mystico-speculative vision of Ibn ‘Arabī is perhaps best described as “emphatic”, i.e., both at once. It does not gaze upon being from any single, static perspective, but turns existence in its hand like a diamond, so as to penetrate its innumerable facets (manifold), perceiving in each the same light (oneness). According to Ibn ‘Arabī, then, the highest

⁸⁶⁹ William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (New York: SUNY, 1998), xxvii.

⁸⁷⁰ See Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), 46.

⁸⁷¹ Affifi, *Mystical Philosophy*, 19.

⁸⁷² Cf. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 266-267.

form of knowledge is that which is able to behold existence with “two eyes”, as it were, such that the *visio rerum omnium in Deo* (“seeing all things in God”) and the *visio Dei in omnibus rebus* (“seeing God in all things”) are fused into a single vision.⁸⁷³ Or in the words of Izutsu: “The right attitude which combines in itself *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* is, in short, to see the One in the Many and the Many in the One, or rather to see the Many as One and the One as Many.”⁸⁷⁴

Mullā Ṣadrā

The work of Mullā Ṣadrā represents the fullest flowering of Oriental Gnosis, joining the Peripatetic (Avicenna), Illuminist (Suhrawardī), and Unitive (Ibn ‘Arabī) strands of the Islamic tradition into a magisterial synthesis, and thereby effecting a “revolution in the metaphysics of being”⁸⁷⁵—what Jambet has called “an existential revolution” (*inqilāb wujūdī*).⁸⁷⁶ For Mullā Ṣadrā, the whole of being is an expression of a single meta-ontological Principle that is “above all limitations, including even the condition of standing above limitations.”⁸⁷⁷ Quiddities are not stable, enduring substances, all neatly cordoned off from each other, as in the “essentialist” laws of identity (*A is A*) and non-contradiction (*A is not non-A*), but the ceaselessly transubstantiated and mutually pervading intensities of *wujūd*,

⁸⁷³ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, xxiii.

⁸⁷⁴ ST, 68.

⁸⁷⁵ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 342-343.

⁸⁷⁶ Jambet, *Act of Being*, 186.

⁸⁷⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and His Transcendent Theosophy: Background, Life, and Works*, 2nd edition (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997), 100.

with the various levels of being (i.e., the sensible, the imaginal, and the intellectual) all “governed by the same law of unity”.⁸⁷⁸

This ontological “law of unity” remains inaccessible to discursive reason. It is only through the event of “illuminative presence” (*ḥudūr ishrāqī*) or “direct witnessing” (*shuhūd ‘anyī*) that it can be known.⁸⁷⁹ Beyond discursive reason is the intellect (*al-‘aql*), the proper office of which is to “unite” or “bind” all things together, thus granting passage “from multiplicity to Unity.”⁸⁸⁰ Piercing the veil of the manifold, the intellect perceives the transcendent unity (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) of every phenomenon, and in doing so is awakened to the distinction “between the permanent and the transient, substance and accidents, the Absolute and the relative, the Principle and its manifestation, the One and the many”.⁸⁸¹ Here epistemology and ontology are no longer distinguishable. Knowledge is now a “mode of existence” (*naḥw al-wujūd*). This knowledge or “gnosis” (*ma‘rifah*) in turn opens out onto an intuitive grasp of being in its three aspects of “unity” (*waḥdah*), “principiality” (*aṣālah*), and “analogicity” (*tashkīk*).⁸⁸² It is because existence is both one and principial that it cannot be reduced to a “property” or “accident” of things,⁸⁸³ but must instead be

⁸⁷⁸ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 343.

⁸⁷⁹ Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy*, 88.

⁸⁸⁰ Nasr, *Transcendent Theosophy*, 102.

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸⁸³ Or, at least, as was shown above with the Avicennian thesis of the “accidentality of existence”, not in any ordinary sense. The notion of existence as a mere “property” is best represented by the so-called “analytic” branch of modern Western philosophy, as seen in the work of the late W.V.O. Quine and Richard Rorty.

“the very reality by virtue of which things exist.”⁸⁸⁴ All phenomena are therefore nothing but the “pure relations” or “sheer connections” (*rawābiṭ maḥḍah*) by which the one Reality manifests Itself—“here” in one way and “there” in another. All things thus receive existence in a manner that is at once identical and different, i.e., “by analogy” (*bi-l-tashkīk*).⁸⁸⁵ Accordingly, for Mullā Ṣadrā, the entire manifested order is not just a “relation” (understood as one of Aristotle’s ten categories), but an “illuminative relation” (*iḍāfah ishrāqīyah*) whereby the “many” are established in the superluminous Light of “the one absolute Reality.”⁸⁸⁶

Like the “Eckhartian line” surveyed in the preceding chapter, the Islamic tradition of Oriental Gnosis is not limited to the figures or history outlined above.⁸⁸⁷ Many others could be named, such as Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (858-922 C.E.), al-Ghazālī (c. 1058-1111 C.E.), Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (1201-1274 C.E.), Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207-1273 C.E.), Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (1207-1274 C.E.), Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. 1213/1214 C.E.), Maḥmūd Shabastarī (1288-1340 C.E.), Ḥaydar Āmulī (1319-1385 C.E.), Ḥājī Mullā Hādī Sabzawārī (1797-1873 C.E.), et al. Given the limited space and scope of this study, however, I now conclude: the Islamic mystical tradition of “Oriental Gnosis” has for its central premise the notion that, “despite the multiplicity of the levels of existence, there is but one Being,

⁸⁸⁴ Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy*, 91.

⁸⁸⁵ Jambet, *Act of Being*, 151.

⁸⁸⁶ CRE, 44.

⁸⁸⁷ For a study relating Ibn ‘Arabī to the broader Sufi, both early and late, see Binyamin Abrahamov, *Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Sufis* (Oxford: Anqa, 2014).

and all the presences are ultimately the Presence of the One who alone is”⁸⁸⁸—the oneness of the manifold.

Method and Outline

In this chapter I expound and analyze Islamic mysticism’s understanding of reality as simultaneously one and manifold. According to this understanding, just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the differentiated modes of a single sun, so all things “are” only as “so many phenomenal forms assumed by one single Reality.”⁸⁸⁹

As in the previous five chapters, I examine mystical Islam’s conception of the oneness of the manifold under the three interrelated headings of existence (Section One), manifestation (Section Two), and knowledge (Section Three), with each heading comprised of a structural exposition and textual analysis. My broader intention remains that of further developing a metaphysical catalogue or inventory by which to compare mystical ontologies East and West, analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the mystico-speculative notion of reality as simultaneously one and manifold. A visual portrait of this method, as compared with the corresponding concepts derived from the

⁸⁸⁸ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*, 90.

⁸⁸⁹ S&T, 257.

other traditions of this study, is provided below (Table 8), with the terms of mystical Islam set in bold:

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advaya</i> tā	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shinnyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>eḥad</i>	<i>ein sof</i>	<i>shekhinah</i>	<i>ḥokhmah</i>
Esoteric Christianity	<i>unitas</i>	<i>esse</i>	<i>fluxus</i>	<i>intellectus</i>
Mystical Islam	<i>tawḥīd</i>	<i>wujūd</i>	<i>tajallī</i>	<i>ma'rifah</i>

Table 8. *Corresponding Concepts – Mystical Islam*

Having completed this introduction, I turn to an exposition and analysis of mystical Islam under the three interrelated headings of existence, manifestation, and knowledge.

2. Structural Exposition and Textual Analysis

Section One: Existence

Structural Exposition: Existence as *Wujūd*

Before delving into a structural exposition of mystical Islam’s view of existence (*wujūd*), it is necessary to clarify precisely what this term signifies, especially as used within the tradition of “Oriental Gnosis”. While *wujūd* is commonly translated as “being” or “existence”, it carries far more metaphysical weight than either of these English terms—in their

conventional employment—are able to lift.⁸⁹⁰ Taken in its most literal sense, *wujūd* means both “to find” and “to be found”, and is etymologically related to *wijdān*, meaning “knowledge” or “consciousness”, as well as to *wajd*, meaning “ecstasy” or “bliss”.⁸⁹¹ Put together, this ternary of *wujūd-wijdān-wajd* corresponds to the revered formula of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, namely, *sat-cit-ānanda* (“existence-knowledge-bliss”). This view of existence stands opposed to the prevailing modern conception of phenomena as “objects” that are simply and statically “just there”. For the mystico-speculative vision of Islam, by contrast, all things “are” only as the dynamic acts of *wujūd*. As such, the true “mood” of existence is neither infinitive (to be) nor substantive (being), but imperative: “Be!” (*kun*)—a conclusion supported by the Qu‘rānic verse which says: “When He [God] decrees a thing, He only says to it, ‘Be!’ [*kun*] and it is” (2:117). Or translated into Western terms: *wujūd* is not only *esse*, it is *esto*.⁸⁹² *Wujūd* is never a “brute fact” to which the awareness and experience of it are external additions. Rather, presence, knowledge, and awareness are the perfectly coincident aspects of a single reality: *wujūd*.⁸⁹³

Strictly speaking, God alone is *wujūd*, as the first *Shahādah* of Islam declares: *Lā ilāha illa’Llāh* (“There is no god but God”). All other “realities” are of a purely relative and relational nature. They do not “exist”

⁸⁹⁰ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 267.

⁸⁹¹ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*, 66.

⁸⁹² Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 259.

⁸⁹³ See R.W.J. Austin, “Introduction”, in *Ibn al-Arabi: Bezels of Wisdom* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 26.

in any proper sense, but instead have existence “lent” or “borrowed” to them. The implication is that God is both (1) the unique Reality that is beyond all determinations (“no-thing”), and (2) the all-embracing Reality that comprises all things within its Infinity (“not-other”). Seen in this light, *wujūd* is really nothing other than God manifesting Himself (oneness) to Himself (manifold),⁸⁹⁴ such that every phenomenon just *is* God sought and found.⁸⁹⁵ It is for this reason that the first *Shahādah* begins with the negation *lā*, thereby denying the ontological autonomy of creation. If creation were an independent reality unto itself, it would be a god alongside of God—a position indistinguishable from what Islam condemns as an idolatrous polytheism or *shirk*. At the same time, however, the “oneness of existence” does not succumb to a crude pantheist or monist construal of reality, in that, while *wujūd* is the “essence” of all things, all things are not the “essence” of *wujūd*. In this way, the mystico-Islamic doctrine of “unity” (*tawḥīd*) is rightly viewed as “the direct consequence of the *Shahādah*” and, more generally, as the necessary confession of monotheism.⁸⁹⁶

As with the previous traditions examined in this study, mystical Islam conceives the “oneness” (*tawḥīd*) of reality in a metaphysical rather than mathematical sense, i.e., as “the unknowable and inaccessible ground of everything that exists.” As nondelimited and indeterminate, this metaphysical “oneness” is simultaneously (1) “totally different from

⁸⁹⁴ Burckhardt, *Sufi Doctrine*, 50.

⁸⁹⁵ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, xix.

⁸⁹⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: Kazi, 2000),

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

everything else” and (2) “able to assume every delimitation.”⁸⁹⁷ Accordingly, “oneness” does not exclude multiplicity, nor does multiplicity negate “oneness”. Both are convertible within the trans-dual unity of the Infinite. In the words of Affifi,

In its absolute indeterminateness, the divine Essence is a bare monad, void of all qualities and relations; it is the most indeterminate of all indeterminates (*ankar al nakirāt*)...It is indestructible, independent and unchangeable. It is not a substance, but *the One Substance* which, in itself, embraces all substances...⁸⁹⁸

Or as Izutsu remarks,

The sight of the Multiplicity of phenomenal things does not obstruct the sight of the pure Unity of ultimate Reality. Nor does the sight of Unity stand in the way of the appearance of Multiplicity. On the contrary, the two complement each other in disclosing the pure structure of Reality. For they are the two essential aspects of Reality, Unity representing the aspect of “absoluteness” (*iḥlāq*) or “comprehensive contraction” (*ijmāl*), and Multiplicity the aspect of “determination” (*taqyīd*) or “concrete expansion” (*tafṣīl*). Unless we grasp in this way Unity and Multiplicity in a single act of cognition we are not having a whole integral view of Reality as it is really is.⁸⁹⁹

Accordingly, reality is not uniform and static, but multi-stratified and dynamic, possessing various stages, modalities, and degrees. It is in this

⁸⁹⁷ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 53.

⁸⁹⁸ Affifi, *Mystical Philosophy*, 35.

⁸⁹⁹ CRE, 18.

way that the tradition of Oriental Gnosis distinguishes between *aḥad*, on the one hand, and *wāḥid*, on the other, as in its exegesis of the verse: “Say, ‘He, God, is One [*aḥad*], God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself. He begets not; nor was He begotten. And none is like unto Him” (112:1-4). Here the term *aḥad* denotes the sheer ipseity (*huwiyyah*) and incomparability (*tanzīh*) of the Divine Essence. This is contrasted with the term *wāḥid*, which denotes the unity of the “Divine Names” (*asmā’ al-ilāhīyah*) and their “similarity” (*tashbīh*) to created existents, as in the verse, “Say, ‘God is the Creator of all things, and He is the One [*wāḥid*], the Paramount” (13:16). Similar to Eckhart, for whom God is both nearer to all things than they are to themselves and higher to all things than the highest heaven, mystical Islam, and the tradition of Oriental Gnosis in particular, speaks of the Divine as both the “outward” (*al-ẓāhir*) and the “inward” (*al-bāṭin*), the extrinsic “form” (*ṣūrah*) and intrinsic “meaning” (*ma’nā*) of creation.

God is therefore “one” in two different senses. In Himself, God is the “Unity of Reality” (*aḥadīyah al-‘ayn*) or the “Unity of the Unique” (*aḥadīyah al-wāḥid*), beyond all determinations and in excess to all oppositions. At the level of the Divine Names and their inseparable relation to the phenomenal order, however, God is the “Unity of the manifold” (*aḥadīyah al-kathrah*), the “Unity of unification” (*aḥadīyah al-jam’*), or the “Unity of the united” (*aḥadīyah al-majmū*). While the unity of the Divine Essence, as both unique (*wāḥidīyah*) and indivisible (*aḥadīyah*), corresponds to the trans-personal aspect of the absolute (i.e., the *nirguṇa*

Brahman of Śaṅkara, or the *gruntlôsen gotheit* of Eckhart), the unity of the manifold, as both nondelimited (*al-ṣamad*) and all-encompassing (*al-muḥīṭ*), corresponds to the “personal” or “self-manifesting” aspect of the Divine (i.e., the *saguṇa Brahman* of Śaṅkara, or the *got* of Eckhart).

It is in this connection that mystical Islam makes a threefold delineation between (1) “the Unity of the Divine Essence” (*tawḥīd al-dhāt*), (2) “the Unity of the Divine Names and Qualities” (*tawḥīd al-asmā’ wa’l-ṣifāt*), and (3) “the Unity of the Divine Acts” (*tawḥīd al-af’āl*). There is also the fourfold distinction of (1) *dhāt*, understood as *wujūd* in its absolute non-duality; (2) *aḥadīyah*, understood as *wujūd* in its unconditioned “oneness”, without any multiplicity or inner articulations; (3) *wāḥidīyah*, understood as *wujūd* with multiplicity, i.e., “internal modes of being” (*shu’ūn*) or “permanent archetypes” (*al-a’yān*); and (4) *tajallī*, understood as *wujūd* manifested in the outward, phenomenal forms of creation (*khalq; al-’alām*), what Ibn ‘Arabī refers to collectively as the “shadow” (*ẓill*) of the Absolute.⁹⁰⁰

The school of Ibn ‘Arabī, whose most influential commentator and codifier is Qūnawī, also speaks of “Five Divine Presences” (*al-ḥaḍarāt al-ilāhiyyat al-khams*): (1) *Hāhūt*, the level of the absolute Divine Essence, (2) *Lāhūt*, the level of the Divine Names, (3) *Jabarūt*, the level of the archangelic beings and paradisaal worlds, (4) *malakūt*, the level of imagination, which serves as a kind of “conduit” between celestial and

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid, 55.

terrestrial realms, and (5) *nasūt*, the level of relative, phenomenal existence. What is most important to note here, however, is the fact that throughout all the various stages, modalities, and degrees of manifestation, there is nothing sought or found but the presence (*ḥudūr*) of “one single Divine Reality”⁹⁰¹—the oneness of the manifold.

Textual Analysis: *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*

Prior to analyzing a select passage from Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, it will be helpful to say a few words on the nature of this text, as well as to identify the pivotal role it has played within the tradition of Oriental Gnosis.

Written toward the end of his life, the *Fuṣūṣ* is a text “intended to serve as a summing up of the Andalusian master’s mystical teachings.”⁹⁰² At the same time, however, it must be said that the style of Ibn ‘Arabī’s seminal work does not lend itself to an effortless grasp of its meaning. As Michel Chodkiewicz notes, “the work of the Shaykh al-Akbar does not easily surrender its secrets.”⁹⁰³ In a similar way, Reynold A. Nicholson had said that the theories set forth in the *Fuṣūṣ* “are difficult to understand and even more difficult to explain.”⁹⁰⁴ Chittick has likewise remarked that, given the Spanish-born Shaykh’s tendency to constantly shift his perspective, ceaselessly turning existence in his hand, it becomes “relatively

⁹⁰¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 50.

⁹⁰² Austin, “Foreword”, in *Bezels of Wisdom*, xvii.

⁹⁰³ Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabī, the Book, and the Law*, trans. David Streight (New York: SUNY, 1993), 1.

⁹⁰⁴ Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Studies in Mystical Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 149.

easy to have Ibn al-‘Arabī say what one wants him to say.”⁹⁰⁵ Or in Caner K. Dagli’s terse description of the *Fuṣūṣ*: “[It] is a difficult book.”⁹⁰⁶ The daunting complexity (and frequent obscurity) of the *Fuṣūṣ* notwithstanding, it is nevertheless a fitting text with which to probe the mystico-speculative vision of Ibn ‘Arabī, insofar as it “contains the basic principles of his thought.”⁹⁰⁷ While it is possible to study this text on any number of levels, the primary aim of this chapter is to analyze its central ontological insights, so as to better understand Ibn ‘Arabī as “one of the profoundest, but at the same time, obscurest thinkers Islam has ever produced.”⁹⁰⁸

The word *fuṣūṣ* (the plural form of *faṣṣ*) refers to the loci in which the gems of wisdom are set. It is in this sense that the twenty-seven chapters of the *Fuṣūṣ* correspond to the respective “essence” (*kalima*) of the twenty-seven prophets of Islam, each serving as a “signet” of a particular Divine Attribute. For Ibn ‘Arabī, all things “are” only as “so many phenomenal forms of one unique Being”, the manifold identities (*a’yān*) of the one, indivisible Essence (*‘ayn*). It is this dialectic of unity and multiplicity, oneness and the manifold, that informs the whole of the *Fuṣūṣ*: “God is One and All, and One in All.”⁹⁰⁹ As such, the *Fuṣūṣ* represents an especially

⁹⁰⁵ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, ix.

⁹⁰⁶ Caner K. Dagli, “Preface”, in *Ibn al-‘Arabī: The Ringstones of Wisdom*, trans. Caner K. Dagli (Chicago: Kazi, 2004; hereafter cited as CKD), vii.

⁹⁰⁷ Binyamin Abrahamov *Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Fuṣūṣ Al-Ḥikam: An Annotated Translation of the Bezels of Wisdom* (London: Routledge, 2015; hereafter cited as BA), 2.

⁹⁰⁸ S&T, 4.

⁹⁰⁹ Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 152.

poignant expression of Oriental Gnosis and “a peculiarly recondite phase of mystical scholasticism.”⁹¹⁰

In chapter 4 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī writes the following:

If you affirm only transcendence, you restrict Him,

And if you affirm only immanence, you limit Him.

If you hold both of these aspects together, you follow the right course,

And you are a true Imām and Master of gnosis.

Whoever holds that the Divine Being is two things, is a polytheist,

While whoever holds that the Divine Being is an individual thing, is a monist.

If you hold to the position of dualism, beware of *tashbīh*,

And if you hold to the position of monism, beware of *tanzīh*.

You are not He, and yet you are He, and you see Him,

In the essences (*a’yān*) of things, as both undelimited and self-manifesting.⁹¹¹

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, *wujūd*, when viewed from the standpoint of its highest aspect, is neither “transcendent” nor “immanent”, “absolute” nor “relative”, “one” nor “many”, “identical” nor “different”, but all simultaneously. Where only transcendence is affirmed, God is—paradoxically—reduced to “being”, albeit in the form of its “maximal” instantiation. Likewise, where only immanence is affirmed, God is reduced to a mere thing among things, or an object among objects. It is only in holding these contrary aspects together, in a single vision, that one becomes

⁹¹⁰ Ibid, 149.

⁹¹¹ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 3 (my translation).

an Imām (“leader”) and Shaykh (“master”) of sacred knowledge or gnosis (*maʿrifah*). Therefore, to be simultaneously inward and outward, absolute and relative, identical and different, one and many, *wujūd* must be both “no-thing” and “not-other”, i.e., beyond all determinations (even the determination of being “indeterminate”) and in excess to all oppositions. The manifest order of creation reflects or mirrors this dyadic structure, so as to be both identical to (“you are He”, corresponding to “no-thingness”) and different from the Divine Essence (“you are not He”, corresponding to “not-otherness”). For Ibn ‘Arabī, then, *wujūd* abides at the core of all phenomena in its absolute non-delimitation and infinite non-duality. Stated more succinctly: all things are both God (oneness) and not God (manifold), “He” (*huwa*) and “not He” (*lā huwa*).

Absolute Reality is therefore possessed of two aspects or “perfections”.⁹¹² On the one hand, it is “a pure, simple, attributeless essence”; and on the other, “an essence endowed with attributes.”⁹¹³ Considered in its sheer absoluteness, the God of Ibn ‘Arabī resembles that trans-personal and hyper-theistic aspect of the Ultimate that has been encountered in all the mystico-speculative traditions of this study. It is at this level of sheer ipseity that “God, in a sense, is not God.”⁹¹⁴ The “One” (*al-aḥad*) is never the object of worship, but the non-dual possibility of all theurgic ritual and personal devotion. While Reality (*al-ḥaqq*) is, in the

⁹¹² Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 28.

⁹¹³ Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 150.

⁹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

uniqueness of its Essence, entirely independent of relative, created being (“no-thing”), yet, with respect to its Infinite desire to manifest and communicate Itself in the endless array of phenomena, it actually requires the created order to be Divine (“not-other”). The Supreme Essence (*al-dhāt*) is simply and eternally Itself. The Divinity which arises from that Essence, however, “is” only as the “object of worship” (*ilāh*). According to Nicholson, it is this dialectic between absolute “no-thingness” (oneness) and infinite “not-otherness” (manifold), which “dominates the *Fuṣūṣ*.”⁹¹⁵ At the heart of reality lies the non-dual coincidence of opposites (*jam‘ bayna’l-naqīdayn*), in which the absolute oneness of existence is beheld as “diversified into Many through its own [singular] activity.”⁹¹⁶ It is through the act of mystical perception or experiential “tasting” (*dhawq*) that one becomes aware of both “the unity of the One God *and* of His necessary pluralization in His manifestations.”⁹¹⁷

Having concluded the present section on the mystico-Islamic understanding of existence, I turn next to an exposition and analysis of the concept of manifestation.

⁹¹⁵ Ibid.

⁹¹⁶ S&T, 68.

⁹¹⁷ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 204.

Section Two: Manifestation

Structural Exposition: Manifestation as *Tajallī*

The mystico-Islamic concept of manifestation is conveyed through various images and metaphors. Prominent among these images are those of “shadow” (*ẓill*), “darkness” (*ẓulumāt*), and “veil” (*ḥijāb*). According to Ibn ‘Arabī, created phenomena have no reality in and of themselves. Indeed, considered in and of themselves, they are less than a shadow, even “nothing” (*ma‘dūm*). When viewed from the standpoint of their meta-ontological principle, however, all phenomena are ultimately reducible to the permanent archetypes latent in the Divine Essence, which are in turn reducible to that Essence Itself. Again, we are here confronted by the same fundamental dialectic: all things are simultaneously God (oneness) and not God (manifold). The causal structure of manifestation is therefore essentially “symbolic”, such that every “secondary cause” is, in reality, nothing but a reflection or shadow of the “First Cause”, possessing no being of its own.⁹¹⁸ In the words of Ibn ‘Arabī,

...the cosmos is a fantasy, having no real existence. This is the meaning of imagination. You imagine that the cosmos is something separate, existing by virtue of itself (*qā'im bi-nafsihi*) and unconnected to the Real, but actually this is not so...It is inconceivable that the shadow should be separated from this

⁹¹⁸ Titus Burckhardt, *Mystical Astrology: According to Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Bulent Rauf (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2001), 27.

connection, because it is inconceivable that a thing should be separated from its essence.⁹¹⁹

Ibn ‘Arabī accordingly speaks of creation as essentially “poor” or “needy” (*iftiqār*), while at the time affirming it as a theophany or manifestation of the Divine (*tajallī*). It is in this sense that all things can be said to have a “twofold dimension”.⁹²⁰ Insofar as phenomena appear (*zāhir*), they are the “symbols” (*rumūz*) of God; and insofar as they are hidden (*bāṭin*), they are not-other-than their Principle. Hence Ibn ‘Arabī’s description of the world as both (1) “many forms in one mirror” (i.e., the many in the One) and (2) “a single form in many mirrors” (i.e., the One in the many).⁹²¹ The entire cosmos so utterly “belongs to God” (*li-allāh*) and “exists through God” (*bi-allāh*) that it is possible even to say that “the whole is God” (*al-kull huwa allāh*).⁹²²

Ontologically speaking, all phenomena are both destitute (“nothing”) and fecund (“not-other”). To the extent that they are not *wujūd*, they manifest the infinite plurality of the Divine Names (manifold); and to the extent that they are identical to *wujūd*, they manifest the unity of the Divine Essence (oneness). It is this “twofold dimension” that both necessitates and elicits a hermeneutic capable of holding together the theosophical dyads of Creator-creature (*ḥaqq-khalq*), Divinity-humanity (*lāhūt-nāsūt*), Lord-

⁹¹⁹ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 9; BA, 71.

⁹²⁰ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 208.

⁹²¹ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 4; BA, 47.

⁹²² *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 3; BA, 42.

vassal (*rabb-‘abd*)—each of these “pairs” typifying a unity “not of contradictories but of complementary opposites”.⁹²³ This required hermeneutic is none other than *ta’wīl*, i.e., the act of “tracing” or “carrying back” all phenomenal forms “to their true reality.”⁹²⁴ As such, all things are theophanies (*tajalliyāt*; sg. *tajallī*) or Divine Self-manifestations—a mystico-speculative idea which, in many ways, constitutes Ibn ‘Arabī’s entire ontological outlook.⁹²⁵

Similar to the concepts of *māyā* (Advaita Vedānta), *wu hua* (philosophical Daoism), *engi* (Zen Buddhism), *shekhinah* (Kabbalistic Judaism), and *fluxus* (mystical Christianity), the mystico-Islamic concept of “manifestation” (*tajallī*) regards the entire phenomenal order as “illusory” (*mutawahham*), which does not simply mean “unreal”, but rather “not ultimately real.”⁹²⁶ Only the absolute *is*. Everything “else” can be said to “be” only in a purely relative sense. This explains the various metaphors that the tradition of Oriental Gnosis employs to express the relation of oneness to the manifold. Shabastarī, for example, uses the image of letters (manifold) and ink (oneness), in order to convey the idea that “letters”, like the empirical phenomena of nature, are rightly perceived “as so many intrinsic modifications of the ink [i.e., *wujūd*].”⁹²⁷ In a similar way, Amulī uses the image of waves (manifold) and the sea (oneness), in order to

⁹²³ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 209.

⁹²⁴ Ibid, 208.

⁹²⁵ S&T, 99.

⁹²⁶ Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 48.

⁹²⁷ CRE, 20.

express that, just as waves are nothing but the unfolding of the sea, “so are the determined existents nothing other than the unfolding of absolute existence”.⁹²⁸ Shah-Kazemi expounds this point well when he writes that

To speak of the distinction between the creature and the Creator is to speak of a real ontological distinction, but this does not preclude the assertion that the entire context in which this and other distinctions are manifested is necessarily relative and ultimately illusory, since the Real in its absoluteness does not admit of differentiation and distinction...insofar as the creature is, and insofar as being is unique, the creature, in its essence, cannot be other than the transcendent One.⁹²⁹

For Ibn ‘Arabī, the dynamic structure of the universe is one of “contraction” (*qabḍ*) and “expansion” (*bast*), the exhaling and inhaling “Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-rahmān*). In the words of the Qu‘rān: “Truly we are God’s, and unto Him we return” (2:156). Not only is God the origin (*al-mabda’*) of the world. He is also its end or goal (*al-ma‘ād*). Indeed, He is the one in that He is the other. This means that, from the perspective of mystical Islam, creation is not “an absolute beginning preceded by *nothing*”, as in the exoteric interpretation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather “the *manifested*, diversified, successive, and evanescent forms, which have their substance not in their fictitious autonomy but in the Being that is manifested in them and by them.”⁹³⁰ Accordingly, it is the “essence” of

⁹²⁸ Ibid, 22.

⁹²⁹ Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 78.

⁹³⁰ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 200.

every created form to be ceaselessly annihilated (*fanā'*) and perpetuated (*baqā'*) at every moment, so that all things are being constantly repeated in a non-identical fashion, i.e., as a “recurrence of likes”⁹³¹—the “many” subsisting as the modalities of the “one”. This is Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of “new creation” (*khalq jadīd*), better translated as “ever-new” or “perpetual creation”, according to which “[a]t every single moment the whole world emerges in a new form.”⁹³² The upshot of this metaphysical thesis is that, to quote Izutsu, “All existents in the world [manifold]—whether so-called substances or so-called accidents—are in reality accidents that appear and disappear on the surface of the ultimate Substance [oneness], just like innumerable bubbles that appear and disappear on the surface of water.”⁹³³

Textual Analysis: *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*

The mystico-Islamic concept of manifestation is captured in another passage taken from the fourth chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*, addressing the relation of the non-numerical “one” to the “numbers” which emanate from it.

Affairs become confused, and the numbers become manifest by means of one within known levels. One existentiates the numbers, and the numbers unfold one. The determinations of numbers can appear only in what is numbered...Each level of number is a single reality—(Take for example nine, ten, anything smaller, or anything larger *ad infinitum*. None are a sum, but neither can any escape being

⁹³¹ Ibid, 207.

⁹³² CTO, 166.

⁹³³ Ibid, 170.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

called a grouping of ones. Indeed two is a single reality and three is a single reality, no matter what level one reaches, even though they are one.)—so none of them are identical with any other.⁹³⁴

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the apparent multiplicity of the world generates a sense of bewilderment or confusion (*ḥayrah*) in the perceiving mind. The ordinary mode of human thinking does not have the stomach to digest it or assimilate it into the form of a unified vision. Ibn ‘Arabī intimates such a vision through a metaphysically provocative discourse on the way in which all numbers are produced by “one”. Here “numbers” represent the manifold of phenomena, while “one” represents their non-dual unity.

All numbers, says Ibn ‘Arabī, unfold what they are enfolded by, namely, “one”. While the number 4 is, from a certain perspective, a distinct reality of its own, in that 4 is 4 and not 2, 3, 5, 6, etc., yet, from another perspective, 4 is, along with every other possible number, nothing but a counted modality of “one” ($1+1=2$; $1+1+1=3$; $1+1+1+1=4$; etc.). None of the numbers are identical to each other (manifold), and yet every number is identical to its source (oneness). In the words Izutsu,

The structure of the metaphysical fact that the One appears in the multiplicity of things, and the things that are many are ultimately reducible to the One or the Absolute, is identical with the structure of the reciprocal relation between the mathematical ‘one’, which is the very source of all numbers, and the numbers.⁹³⁵

⁹³⁴ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 4; CKD, 54-55.

⁹³⁵ S&T, 77.

Quantity or number is always an “accidental” feature of something else. It cannot exist on its own. “One”, by contrast, is not a number at all, but is rather the originating ground and principle of every number. Stated another way: numbers have no extrinsic reality. They “exist” only to the extent that they are perceived in the things that can be counted (*ma’dūd*), e.g., 3 flowers, 7 stones, 12 stars, etc. Similarly, the “modes” or “states” of *wujūd* have no reality “*apart* from the Essence of which they are states.”⁹³⁶

Throughout the fourth chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī seeks to communicate the “instantaneity of two angles of vision, the first being that of absolute oneness and the second that of manifested multiplicity.”⁹³⁷ All phenomena, like numbers, are “pure relations” (*rawābiṭ maḥḍah*); the Divine Names are “the realities of the relations” (*ḥaqā’iq al-nisab*); and the Divine Essence (*al-dhāt*) is that which is endlessly “repeating itself” (*mutakarrir*) in both. As Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “All relative existence is but a dream within a dream (*manām fī manām*)”,⁹³⁸ i.e., concrete existents which appear within the mirrors of the Divine Names. The “two eyes” of the true interpreter (*‘ābir*) and “knower” (*‘arīf*) of existence are alone able to perceive—by way of “a single glance”, to quote Hakuin—the two kinds of oneness: (1) the oneness of multiplicity (i.e., the pure relations whose reality subsists in the Divine Names and Attributes; *wāḥidīyah*), and (2) the

⁹³⁶ Affifi, *Mystical Philosophy*, 48.

⁹³⁷ Dagli, *Ringstones*, 53, fn.19.

⁹³⁸ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 9.

oneness of unity (i.e., the relations of the Divine Names and Attributes whose reality subsists in the mystery of the Divine Essence; *aḥadīyah*).

This dynamic interplay of the “one” and the “many” may be described in another way as follows: phenomena are perpetually in a state of flux and alteration, while the Divine Essence abides in the condition of its own eternal stillness. The Divine Names are born out of that “most sacred effusion” (*al-fayḍ al-aqdas*) of the Absolute, while the phenomenal forms of creation are born out of the “sacred effusion” (*al-fayḍ al-muqaddas*) of the Divine Names. And, as Izutsu points out, Ibn ‘Arabī’s use of the Plotinian term “effusion” (*fayḍ*) is “completely synonymous...with ‘self-manifestion’ (*tajallī*).”⁹³⁹

It is only as a consequence of “tasting” (*dhawq*) this dynamic interplay, i.e., of experientially entering into the non-dual intuition of the Real, that the total infinite series of articulated forms becomes known as “one eternal and everlasting *tajallī* which never repeats itself.”⁹⁴⁰ Ibn ‘Arabī’s “mystical theory of number”⁹⁴¹ therefore conceives of “one” as both absolutely unique (“no-thing”) and infinitely self-diffusive (“not-other”). While “one” is “a unique reality in itself, unrelated to and beyond any possibility of multiplication”, it is also that from which all numbers are derived, “and of which they are merely manifestations”.⁹⁴² That is to say:

⁹³⁹ S&T, 154-155.

⁹⁴⁰ Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 154.

⁹⁴¹ Austin, *Bezels of Wisdom*, 83.

⁹⁴² *Ibid.*

just as numbers “are” only as the non-identical repetitions of “one”, so all phenomena “are” only as the non-identical repetitions of the Infinite.

Ibn ‘Arabī continues,

He who has understood what I have established regarding the nature of numbers, namely, that the negation of them is at the same time the affirmation of them, must have thereby understood how the Absolute in *tanzīh* is at the same time the creatures in *tashbīh*, although there is a distinction between the Creator and the creatures. The truth of the matter is that we see here the Creator who is the creatures and the creatures who are the Creator. Moreover, all this arises from one unique Essence; nay, there is nothing but one unique Essence, and it is at the same time many essences.⁹⁴³

The identities or essences (*a ‘yān*) of creation are, for Ibn ‘Arabī (as well as for Śaṅkara, Zhuangzi, Dōgen, Cordovero, and Eckhart), both like and unlike their meta-ontological Principle, recalling again the important distinction between the “comparability” (*tashbīh*) and “incomparability” (*tanzīh*) of Creator and creature, which itself corresponds to the *inquantum* principle of Eckhart, noted in the previous chapter. As Chittick remarks,

The cosmos...is He/not He. It is both identical with *wujūd* and different from *wujūd*. Inasmuch as it is identical to *wujūd*, it manifests the oneness of *wujūd*'s Essence. Inasmuch as it is different, it manifests the multiple properties designated by *wujūd*'s names. As Ibn al-‘Arabī often says, *wujūd* is one in its Essence and

⁹⁴³ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 4; Izutsu’s translation, S&T 79-80.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

many through its self-disclosures. It is both incomparable with all entities and similar to every created thing.⁹⁴⁴

All diversity has its ultimate birthplace in the “unique Essence” (*‘ayn wāḥida*), and, to that extent, is identical to It. However, in that the modes of diversity have no reality in or of themselves, they are different from the Essence—though the Essence is never, strictly speaking, different from them. For reasons that should, by now, be readily evident, Ibn ‘Arabī juxtaposes the terms “one” (*wāḥid*) and “single” (*fard*). Whereas what is “single” is only outwardly unified but inwardly divisible, “one” is unified in every respect, and therefore capable of infinite manifestations. This is the paradox of manifestation: everything is the repetition of “one”, but always in the form of a “new creation” (*khalq jadīd*). “This [i.e., Ibn ‘Arabī’s view of perpetual creation] is no repetition of the identical”, writes Corbin, “but a recurrence of likes: like is not identical.”⁹⁴⁵ Or in Ibn ‘Arabī’s laconic phrase: “The essence is one, while the aspects are many.”⁹⁴⁶

It is in this way that Ibn ‘Arabī’s view of manifestation (*tajallī*) corresponds to the Zen Buddhist doctrine of *engi* or “co-dependent origination”, in that, for both, the “causeness” (*‘illīyah*) of a “cause” (*‘illah*) is unthinkable apart from the “causedness” (*ma‘lūlīyah*) of the “caused” (*ma‘lūl*). The former requires the latter, and the latter demands the

⁹⁴⁴ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 28.

⁹⁴⁵ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 207.

⁹⁴⁶ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 4; BA, 46.

former.⁹⁴⁷ For Ibn ‘Arabī, as for Dōgen, everything is the absolute oneness of reality manifesting-itself-to-itself and articulating-itself-as-itself: “I was a hidden treasure; I loved to be known. So to make Myself known, I created the world...” The total dynamic structure of manifestation is that of mirrors mirroring mirrors, or dreams dreaming dreams, so that every “flower” is nothing but *wujūd*-articulating-itself-as-a-flower, every “stone” nothing but *wujūd*-articulating-itself-as-a-stone, and the “manifold” nothing but *wujūd*-articulating-itself-as-the-many. The final word of the present section goes to the great Sufi master, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 1330 C.E.), who said: “...the Absolute is one in itself, but it is multiple because of its various self-determinations, specific and individual. These self-determinations do not contradict the real Unity. In conclusion we say: (The Absolute) is One in the form of Many.”⁹⁴⁸

Having completed the present section on manifestation, I turn now to an exposition and analysis of the mystico-Islamic concept of knowledge.

Section Three: Knowledge

Structural Exposition: Knowledge as *Ma‘rifah*

The fundamental thesis of Islamic mysticism, namely, the metaphysical unity (*tawhīd*) of all things, is, according to the greatest Muslim sages, not the result of “reason” (*‘aql*) or “ratiocination” (*baḥth*), but of “tasting”

⁹⁴⁷ S&T, 258.

⁹⁴⁸ As translated and quoted by Izutsu in S&T, 81.

(*dhawq*), “unveiling” (*kashf*), and “illumination” (*ishrāq*).⁹⁴⁹ For Ibn ‘Arabī and the tradition of Oriental Gnosis, in contrast to the strictly philosophical and theological strains of Islam, reason is not the master but the servant of the house of knowledge. It sweeps the floor clean and dusts the furniture. But it has not built the house, nor does it rule over it. True knowledge or “esoteric science” (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*), by contrast, is identified with what the Sufis call the “eye of the heart” (Arabic: *‘ayn al-qalb*; Persian: *chishm-i dil*),⁹⁵⁰ as in the *ḥadīth qudsī* which says, “Neither My heaven nor My earth embraces Me, but the heart of my servant with faith does embrace Me.” It is by means of the heart’s “eye” that one is made aware of his own real and original nature (*fiṭrah*)—what Zen refers to as “the original face you had before your father and mother were born”.

This brings us to one of the central concepts of Islamic mysticism in general, and of the mystico-speculative vision of Ibn ‘Arabī in particular: “the Perfect Man” (*al-insān al-kamīl*). The “Perfect Man” (also called the “Universal Man”) is one in whom all the Divine Names and Attributes are present and alive, thereby serving not only as “the androgynic prototype of the human state, both male and female,” but also as “the prototype of the cosmos.”⁹⁵¹ For this reason, “he” (or “it”, in the sense of a trans-gendered humanity), is the bridge or isthmus (*barzakh*) between heaven and earth, and thus the “vicegerent of God” (*khalīfatallāh*). The “Perfect Man” is the

⁹⁴⁹ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*, 76-77.

⁹⁵⁰ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 221.

⁹⁵¹ Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 21.

“comprehensive being” (*al-kawn al-jāmi‘*), i.e., the being that recapitulates or “re-collects” the manifold cosmos within itself. As such, the Perfect Man perceives all things through the “faculty of recollection” (*al-quwwat al-dhākira*), in that only the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God can bring the unity of existence to light, revealing it *as* light.⁹⁵² In the words of the Prophet Muhammad: “He who knows (*‘arafa*) himself, knows his Lord.” And as the Qu‘rān says: “God is the Light (*al-nūr*) of the heavens and the earth” (24:35).

Like all the other mystico-speculative traditions examined in this study, the school of Oriental Gnosis divides knowledge into three basic stages. The first stage is that of *zāhir*-consciousness. Those who “see” in this way are referred to as “the people of externality” (*ahl-e zāhir*), in that they “see only the exterior surface of Reality.”⁹⁵³ They are even spoken of as being afflicted with *hawal*, a disease of the eye by which a single object is split into a double-image, so as to appear as two entirely different things. This is what *zāhir*-consciousness does to existence, splitting it up into two separate “substances”: transcendence and immanence, divinity and humanity, unity and multiplicity—with no “inner connection” between them.⁹⁵⁴

The second stage of knowledge is that of *fanā’*-consciousness, according to which an immediate intuition of non-dual Reality is attained,

⁹⁵² Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 347.

⁹⁵³ CRE, 16.

⁹⁵⁴ Ibid.

and an “annihilation” of the empirical self, along with all phenomena, is achieved. At this stage, multiplicity melts away completely, and the entire world reverts to the absolute quietude of existence prior to its having become bifurcated into the categories of subject and object, self and other, knower and known. If the first stage of knowledge falsely sees one thing as if it were two, then the second stage of knowledge is in danger of falsely seeing two things as if they were merely “one” (in a relative sense).

It is only at the third stage of knowledge—the stage of *baqā’*-consciousness—that the full arc of gnosis comes to its completion, and “the relation between the Absolute and the phenomenal world is correctly grasped as the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Unity and Multiplicity.”⁹⁵⁵ From this summit or “utmost limit” (*nihāyah*)⁹⁵⁶ of knowledge, the many are seen as one and the one is seen as many—simultaneously and without conflict. The person capable of this vision is rightly called a “man of two eyes” (*dhu al-‘aynayn*), in that, with his right eye, he sees the oneness of existence, and with his left eye, the manifold of phenomena.⁹⁵⁷ Here the ordinary view of “externality” (*zāhir*) and “separation” (*farq*), which subordinates reality to the laws of identity (*A is A*) and non-contradiction (*A is not non-A*), and so views every “substance” as ontologically cordoned off from every other, is overcome through a “second separation” (*farq thānī*), or “annihilation of annihilation” (*fanā’-ye fanā’*), such that the multiplicity

⁹⁵⁵ Ibid, 17.

⁹⁵⁶ See Qūnāwī, *al-Nuṣūṣ*, in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, 4:422.

⁹⁵⁷ CRE, 13.

of the world is no longer sheerly multiple, but disclosed as the manifold inflections and intensities of non-dual Reality, i.e., the “One/Many” (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*).⁹⁵⁸

Creation shadows forth this “non-dual duality” of the “One/Many”, in that every phenomenon “is” only as the mutual interfusion of “two opposed states”: (1) *al-fanā’ fī-illāh* (annihilation in God; “no-thingness”), and (2) *al-baqā’ bi-llāh* (eternal subsistence through God; “not-otherness”).⁹⁵⁹ Here all the lines typically drawn to demarcate epistemology from ontology are erased, and knowledge and being are no longer two but one science. In the words of Kāshānī: “This knowing is existence, subsistence, completeness, and perfection.”⁹⁶⁰ In the immediate “tasting” of existence, the knower *is* what he knows, having become the “Perfect Man” who knows God through God (*al-‘arīf bi’Llāh*), and therefore the one in whom “knowledge and being coincide.”⁹⁶¹

This threefold structure of knowledge in mystical Islam may be visually portrayed as follows (Figure 13):

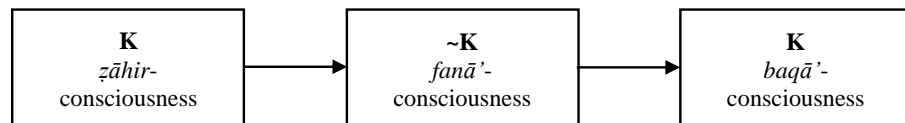


Figure 13. Structure of Knowledge – *Mystical Islam*

⁹⁵⁸ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: SUNY, 1989), 25.

⁹⁵⁹ Jambet, *Act of Being*, 379.

⁹⁶⁰ *Muṣannaḥāt*, in *An Anthology of Philosophy*, 4:251.

⁹⁶¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 337.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

The corresponding structures of knowledge, as examined in the previous five chapters, are shown below, beginning with mystical Christianity (Chapter 5) and proceeding “backward” to Advaita Vedānta Hinduism (Chapter 1):

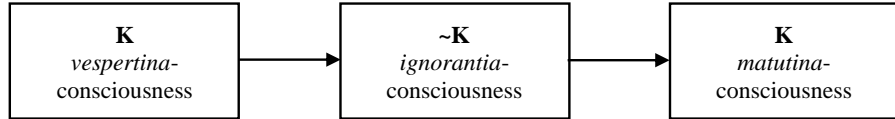


Figure 12. Structure of Knowledge – *Mystical Christianity*

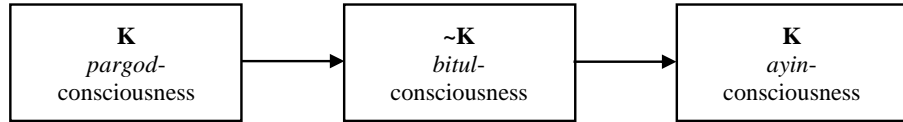


Figure 11. Structure of Knowledge – *Kabbalistic Judaism*

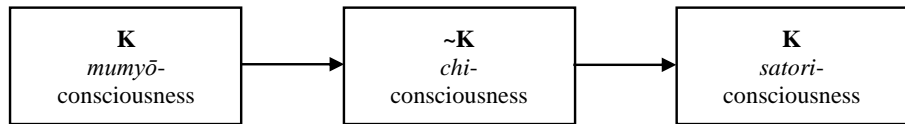


Figure 4. Structure of Knowledge – *Zen Buddhism*

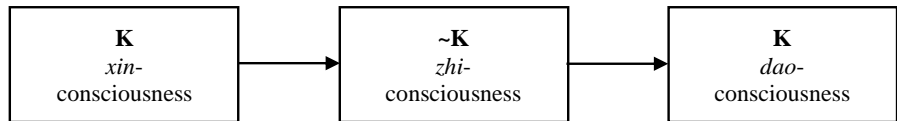


Figure 2. Structure of Knowledge – *Philosophical Daoism*

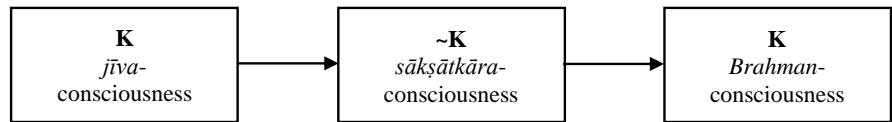


Figure 1. Structure of Knowledge – *Advaita Vedānta Hinduism*

Textual Analysis: *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*

Chapter 12 of the *Fuṣūṣ* begins with the following statement: “Know that the heart—I mean the heart of the knower of God (the gnostic—‘*arif*)—derives from God’s Mercy, but is more encompassing (*awsa’*) than Mercy, because the heart encompasses the Real, while His Mercy does not.”⁹⁶² According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the “heart” (*qalb*) is the all-encompassing organ of knowledge, enfolding not only the creation (*khalq*) but the Creator (*al-khāliq*) as well. In doing so, it views the multitude of created forms as a “concatenation of theophanies” or *tajalliyāt*, i.e., so many mirrors that reflect—each according to the degree of its ontological intensity—one “Divine Face” (*wajh al-ḥaqq*).⁹⁶³ “Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God” (2:115)

For Ibn ‘Arabī, all things follow the same course: appearing, disappearing, and re-appearing in the metaphysically simultaneous events of *fanā’* and *baqā’*, “annihilation” and “perpetuation”. This corresponds to the view of Dōgen, who had spoken of all phenomena as continuously proceeding from, returning to, and re-emerging again from emptiness (*mu*), at each and every instant, such that what we call “firewood” (F^1) at one point in time (P^1) is not the same piece of firewood as seen at a later point ($F^1 \neq P^2$). Ultimately, for Ibn ‘Arabī, as well as for Dōgen and the other mystico-speculative figures of this study, everything is implicated in a vast

⁹⁶² *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 12; BA, 86.

⁹⁶³ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 202-204.

ontological circle with no “inside” or “outside”, “here” or “there”.⁹⁶⁴ Insofar as creatures are *created*, they “exist” as distinct points on that circle; but insofar as they are *uncreated* (i.e., reducible to their meta-ontological Principle), they are the circle Itself. The absolute (“no-thing”) circle of *wujūd* is, therefore, at the very same time, an infinite (“not-other”) circle pregnant with and productive of endlessly variegated forms. As such, “oneness” does not contradict the “manifold”, any more than the “manifold” obstructs oneness. Both perfectly coincide within the non-dual embrace of the Real: “the One is the Manifold and the Manifold is the One.”⁹⁶⁵

Hence Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to say that

One form is not the same as another, for the knower is aware of the fact that they (the forms) are similar, (not identical), to each other, (and hence) different (from each other). He who verifies (*ṣāhib al-taḥqīq*) the divine realities sees multiplicity in the One, just as he knows that the divine names, although their realities are many and different, apply to only one essence. Thus, in self-manifestation, multiplicity is witnessed in one essence, just as Prime Matter (*hayūlā*) exists in everything, and Prime Matter, though having many and various form, is actually reduced to a single substance (*jawhar*).⁹⁶⁶

Here the Andalusian master notes how the true gnostic sees both (1) the plurality of the singular (i.e., all things in God), and (2) the singularity of the plural (i.e., God in all things). Neither “eye”—that is, the “eye” of the

⁹⁶⁴ Cf. Affifi, *Mystical Philosophy*, 46-47.

⁹⁶⁵ ST, 207.

⁹⁶⁶ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 12; BA, 90.

“one” or the “eye” of the “many”—can be divorced from the other, in that they constitute *one look*, albeit as beheld from two radically different perspectives. The analogy between the Divine presence (*ḥaḍra*) and Prime Matter (*hayūlā*) is especially apt in conveying this point. Just as Prime Matter assumes “many and various forms”, while still remaining “a single substance”, so the Divine Names, while “their realities are many and different”, nevertheless “apply to only one essence.”

In his great commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ*, entitled “The Texts” (*al-Nuṣūṣ*), Qūnāwī follows Ibn ‘Arabī in conceiving of God as the “existentiating act” (*al-fi‘l al-ijādī*) of all existents, i.e., the non-dual oneness of the manifold. For Qūnāwī, the One fully “comprehends” (*jam‘*) the many, and the many ceaselessly “pluralize” (*ta‘dīd*) the One, as eternally “latent” (*kāmin*) in the One. This non-dual apprehension of a thing, be it a face or a flower, a star or a stone, “is only gained through unification [*ittiḥād*] with the known thing and the knower’s being no different [*mughāyarah*] from it”. The ultimate cause of ignorance is “distance” (*bu‘d*)—in whatever respect or degree—between the knower and the known. Where epistemology and ontology meet, however, there every distanced is bridged, and “Oneness makes manyness one” (*wahḥadat al-kathrah*).⁹⁶⁷

Ibn ‘Arabī concludes Chapter 12 of the *Fuṣūṣ* with the following words:

⁹⁶⁷ Qūnāwī, *al-Nuṣūṣ*, in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, 4:432-433.

As for the people of unveiling (*ahl al-kashf*), they believe that God reveals Himself in every breath and never repeats His self-manifestation. They (also) believe from witnessing that every self-manifestation bestows a new creation and removes a preceding creation. Its removal is the essence of annihilation (*fanā'*) in the passing self-manifestation and subsistence (*baqā'*) in the bestowal of the following self-manifestation. So understand!⁹⁶⁸

The “Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-rahmān*) is continuously exhaling and inhaling existence. All things are perpetually proceeding from God into nothingness and returning from nothingness to God at every moment. In this sense, the attainment of true knowledge (*ma'rifah*) is not an “attainment” at all—if by that term is signified a novel state of affairs. It is not a “change” that is accomplished in the event of gnosis, but the full awareness of and immersion in that which eternally *is*—what the Hindu tradition refers to as “the attainment of the already attained” (*prāptasyaprāptih*). That is the final goal creation: “extinction (*fanā'*) in the real of the divine unity (*fī-l-tawhīd*)”,⁹⁶⁹ i.e., the total dynamic realization of the many in the One: “All things perish, save His Face” (28:88).

3. Concluding Summary

In this chapter I have sought to further develop a metaphysical catalogue or inventory through which to compare mystical ontologies East and West. I

⁹⁶⁸ *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 12; BA, 92.

⁹⁶⁹ Jambet, *Act of Being*, 372.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

have done this by analytically surveying and systematically organizing a coordinated network of key concepts (existence, manifestation, and knowledge) through the overarching idea of the oneness of the manifold. This overarching idea is designated by mystical Islam as *tawḥīd* (“oneness”). The network of interrelated concepts that *tawḥīd* coordinates and structures are: existence (*wujūd*), manifestation (*tajallī*), and knowledge (*maʿrifah*). These key philosophical concepts find their correlates in the previously specified conceptual frameworks of the Advaitic, Daoist, Zen, Kabbalistic, and Christian systems, as seen below (with Islamic terms in bold):

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayātā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shinnyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>ehad</i>	<i>ein sof</i>	<i>shekhinah</i>	<i>ḥokhmah</i>
Esoteric Christianity	<i>unitas</i>	<i>esse</i>	<i>fluxus</i>	<i>intellectus</i>
Mystical Islam	<i>tawḥīd</i>	<i>wujūd</i>	<i>tajallī</i>	<i>maʿrifah</i>

Table 8. *Corresponding Concepts – Mystical Islam*

To conclude, for Ibn ‘Arabī and the tradition of Oriental Gnosis, existence (*wujūd*) is an absolute and infinite “unity” (*tawḥīd*), at once beyond all determinations (“no-thing”) and in excess to all oppositions (“no-other”). In itself a closed circle of sheer ipseity, the absolute—in that it is also

infinite—nevertheless comprises within itself “a dimension of finitude”,⁹⁷⁰ possessed of various stages, modalities, and degrees, such that existence is rightly said to occur “by analogy” (*bi-l-tashkīk*).⁹⁷¹ Accordingly, existence is both “multiple in form” (*al-kathīr bi'l-ṣuwar*) and “singular in essence” (*al-wāḥid bi'l-'ayn*).⁹⁷² The world as a whole and in all its parts is irradiated from God, “like the rays of light from the sun”.⁹⁷³ As such, God is “the light of existence” (*nūr al-wujūd*) who analogically “shines” and “diffuses” that which is both Himself (oneness) and not Himself (manifold).⁹⁷⁴

The relation of Creator (*al-khalīq*) and creature (*khalq*) is therefore comparable to the relation of water and ice—“the same being in different modes or manifestations”.⁹⁷⁵ Humanity and the cosmos are in this way conceived as intimately fused together in their meta-ontological Principle and Source, as in the Sufi maxim which says, “the world is a large man, and man is a small world” (*al-kawnu insānum kabīrun wa-l-insānu kawnun ṣaghīr*).⁹⁷⁶ It is through the “unific being” (*al-kawn al-jāmi'*) of humanity that the co-dependency of the entire manifold order is disclosed, and with it the truth that “the every single part of the world contains all the other parts

⁹⁷⁰ Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 73.

⁹⁷¹ Jambet, *Act of Being*, 151.

⁹⁷² *Fuṣūṣ*, ch. 22.

⁹⁷³ Abrahamov, *Ibn al-'Arabī and the Sufis*, 123.

⁹⁷⁴ Ibn Sawdakīn (d. 1248 C.E.), as quoted in Ibn 'Arabī, *Mashāhid al-asrār al-qudsiyya wa maṭāli' al-anwār al-ilāhiyya* (“Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries and the Rising of the Divine Lights”), trans. Cecilia Twinch and Pablo Beneito (Oxford: Anqa, 2008), 26 fn.1.

⁹⁷⁵ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 267.

⁹⁷⁶ Burckhardt, *Sufi Doctrine*, 65.

of the world,”⁹⁷⁷ woven together in a single arabesque of Self-manifestation (*tajallī*).

This mutual interfusion of each-in-all and all-in-each can only be grasped, however, at the level “of an intellectual knowledge that transcends the dualism and dichotomy between reason and emotions, or the mind and the heart as they are usually understood.”⁹⁷⁸ Such knowledge (*ma’rifah*) pierces through the “shadow” (*ẓill*) and tears away the “veil” (*ḥijāb*) of the world to perceive its hidden core, thereby transforming the “illusory” (*mutawahham*) elements of the world into the variegated modes of the One Divine Presence (*ḥuḍūr*)—a vision rooted in the essential identity of the knower and the known:⁹⁷⁹ “He who knows himself, knows his Lord.”

Having completed the present chapter on mystical Islam, and, with it, Part Two on Western traditions, I turn now to the conclusion of this study.

⁹⁷⁷ S&T, 107.

⁹⁷⁸ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*, 102.

⁹⁷⁹ Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy*, 64.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion consists of the following three parts: (1) a restatement of my thesis and method, (2) an overview of the corresponding philosophical concepts of the six mystico-speculative traditions I have surveyed, and (3) a closing word on the value and implications of this study.

1. Thesis and Method

When comparing Eastern and Western traditions, especially those that bear little—if any—cultural or historical connection, it becomes necessary to establish a common point of departure.⁹⁸⁰ Reduced to its broadest intention, the aim of the present study has been to provide one such possible “point”, namely, “mystical speculation”. It is therefore neither “religion” in general nor “mysticism” as a vaguely defined concept with which the preceding pages have been concerned. Rather, what I have proposed to analyze and compare is a narrowly defined group of mystico-speculative schools, each of which is the child of a particular religious tradition, whether that be Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, philosophical Daoism, or Zen Buddhism in the East, or Kabbalistic Judaism, mystical Christianity, or mystical Islam in the West. Within each of these schools can be found representative mystics of profound speculative skill, rigor, and acuity, as has been demonstrated

⁹⁸⁰ Cf. Jerome Klotz, “The Concept of Non-Duality in Śaṅkara and Cusanus”, in *Comparative Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2021), 98-110.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

through the respective analyses of Śāṅkara, Zhuangzi, Dōgen, Cordovero, Eckhart, and Ibn ‘Arabī.

The burden of my thesis has been to show how each of these schools and figures can be seen to coalesce around a shared conception of existence as simultaneously one and manifold. According to this shared conception, the phenomenal world has no reality of its own. It is ontologically “poor”, like a “shadow”, an “echo”, or a “dream”, possessing nothing, not even itself. Far from an autonomous or self-standing reality, the world is an exhaustively relative and participatory “symbol”. Just as many waves “are” only as the restricted articulations of a single ocean, or just as many rays of light “are” only as the diversified modes of a single sun, so all phenomena “are” only as the discrete manifestations of a single meta-ontological principle or field—the oneness of the manifold.

It is this overarching concept of “oneness” which has served as the “prism”, so to speak, through which the various traditions of this study have been expounded and analyzed, a concept which, I argue, has proven both (1) narrow enough to identify a core set of well-defined principles amenable to systematic study, and (2) broad enough to permeate the thought-forms of each tradition, thereby allowing for the sort of shared language and structural frame of reference within which meaningful comparisons might be drawn and a mutual understanding among religions, East and West, more fruitfully developed.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

In terms of its method, this study began with a twofold acknowledgment: (1) there is no one way to study a given phenomenon, and (2) some ways are nevertheless better than others. These statements become particularly relevant in the area of religious studies. Religions are wild things, far too elusive and complex to fit neatly into any single system or category-set. Deprived of their feral natures, religions become ossified and inert, their once tameless forms of devotion and modes of life now turned into mere exhibit pieces at a museum or sedated animals miserably pacing the floors of their cages at a zoo. The task of the religious scholar is therefore not that of domestication, but of *perception*, so as to grasp the fundamental “structure” of each religious “animal” within the space of its own natural habitat. The field of mystical speculation concerning the “science of being” or ontology reinforces this project by serving as a kind of “dismantling operation” or “deconstructionist movement inside religion”,⁹⁸¹ one which not only lays the groundwork for a respectful dialogue, but points to the possibility of “the mutual transformation of the religions involved.”⁹⁸²

As such, the method I have employed in this study may be re-stated as follows: “*It is the scale that makes the phenomenon.*” Just as an elephant is not best analyzed under the lens of a microscope, or a protozoan through the power of the naked eye, so every phenomenon must be approached with a method capable of “saving the appearances” (*sōzein tà phainόμενα*), i.e., of attending to the integral “form” that the object of one’s analysis discloses.

⁹⁸¹ Izutsu, as quoted in Wakamatsu, *Philosophy of Word*, 210.

⁹⁸² Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, 5.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

While the study of religion can be pursued at any number of levels, including those of history, sociology, philology, psychology, and others (all of which have their proper place within the overall context of scholarly research), yet it is the phenomenological method—i.e., the “analysis of given structures”⁹⁸³—that most closely aligns with the impetus and aim of the present study. The implied hermeneutic of this phenomenological method is that of “openness”, or what might otherwise be termed a “hermeneutic of porosity”, in that it provides a limpid framework from which to perceive each phenomenon *in the mode of its own appearing*, rather than as something merely reducible to the interpreter’s own predetermined classifications.

The phenomenological method does not stand alone, however. It must—paradoxically—transcend itself in order to fulfill its own objectives. Phenomenology begins by posing the question: “*What* is being given?” But it does not end there. Its initial question, in turn, evokes another, deeper question, which can only be artificially suppressed: “What is *being given*?” Without a robust ontology (and, in the final analysis, a metaphysics—conceived as the “science of the Real”), phenomenology has no way of realizing its highest aspiration: saving the appearances. It is this method—namely, that of a phenomenology informed at every step by metaphysics—that the present study has sought to follow, observing the three basic interpretive principles found in the work of Corbin, Eliade, and Izutsu: (1)

⁹⁸³ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 6.

the inner or esoteric dimension of each mystical ontology, (2) the irreducibility of philosophical concepts to their historico-empirical aspect alone, and (3) a recognition of the need to construct a “meta-language” capable of fostering a mutual understanding among religions at the level of ontology.

Having briefly re-stated my central thesis and overall method, I now turn to an overview of the main correspondences between the six mystico-speculative traditions examined.

2. A Summary of Corresponding Concepts

In this study, I have undertaken a comparative survey and analysis of six mystico-speculative schools and their corresponding conceptions of existence as simultaneously one and manifold. In doing so, I have attempted to show how this narrowly defined group of mystico-speculative schools not only provides a setting wherein the great religious traditions of the East and the West can “meet”, but presents the possibility of their mutual understanding at the ontological level. Hence my effort to build up a metaphysical catalogue or inventory of key philosophical concepts by which to bring the peculiar languages of these traditions up to a level of structural uniformity, so as to make possible their comparative analysis. The visual representation of this project is shown below (Table 9):

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Key Concept: ONENESS	Heading 1: EXISTENCE	Heading 2: MANIFESTATION	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>advayaṭā</i>	<i>sat</i>	<i>māyā</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>taiyi</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>wu hua</i>	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>ichinyo</i>	<i>shinnyo</i>	<i>engi</i>	<i>satori</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>eḥad</i>	<i>ein sof</i>	<i>shekhinah</i>	<i>ḥokhmah</i>
Esoteric Christianity	<i>unitas</i>	<i>esse</i>	<i>fluxus</i>	<i>intellectus</i>
Mystical Islam	<i>tawḥīd</i>	<i>wujūd</i>	<i>tajallī</i>	<i>ma'rifah</i>

Table 9. *Corresponding Concepts – Review*

The key correspondences of the mystico-speculative ontologies of this study are most adequately presented under the three interrelated headings by which they have been examined, namely, (1) existence, (2) manifestation, and (3) knowledge. After offering a recap of terminological correspondences, I proceed to outline a few broader points of agreement.

Existence

The terminological correspondences pertaining to the concept of “existence” are as follows (Table 10):

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Heading 1: EXISTENCE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>sat</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>dao</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>shinnyo</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>ein sof</i>
Esoteric Christianity	<i>esse</i>
Mystical Islam	<i>wujūd</i>

Table 10. *Corresponding Concepts – Existence*

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

The broader points of agreement include:

1. Existence is “one”—not in a mathematical, but a *metaphysical* sense.
2. Existence is simultaneously beyond all determinations (“no-thing”) and in excess to all oppositions (“not-other”).
3. Existence, while in itself an absolute ipseity devoid of all relations, distinctions, and qualities, is nevertheless latent with an infinitude of archetypal possibilities, and thus spontaneously “pregnant” with variegated stages, modalities, and degrees.
4. Existence is present at every possible stage of its self-manifestation, vertically penetrating every horizontal layer, as it were, without ever forfeiting its original unity.
5. Existence is metaphysically principal vis-à-vis the “essences” or “quiddities” of things, such that it is not, strictly speaking, the sun, a mountain, or a flower that “exists”, but Existence that “suns”, “mountains”, and “flowers”—“here” in one way, and “there” in another.

Manifestation

The terminological correspondences pertaining to the concept of “manifestation” are as follows (Table 11):

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES **Heading 2: MANIFESTATION**

Advaita Vedānta	<i>māyā</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>wu hua</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>engi</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>shekhinah</i>
Esoteric Christianity	<i>fluxus</i>
Mystical Islam	<i>tajallī</i>

Table 11. *Corresponding Concepts – Manifestation*

The broader points of agreement include:

1. Manifestation is “manifold”—the many differentiated forms of One Undifferentiated Reality.
2. Manifestation is an “illusion”, a “shadow”, or a “dream”. The only “existence” it can be said to “possess” is that which it has “borrowed” from Existence Itself. It is therefore ontologically “poor”: a “sheer relation” constituted by a “total reliance”.
3. Manifestation is not only the “shadow of the Absolute”, but, to some extent, a “light” as well. Insofar as manifestation is *created*, it is dark, illusory, and unreal—even nothing. But insofar as manifestation is *uncreated*, it is identical to its Source and Origin, such that every phenomenon *is* the very radiance of the Real, albeit in “this” or “that” assumed form or mode.

Knowledge

The terminological correspondences pertaining to the concept of “knowledge” are as follows (Table 12):

MYSTICO-SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES	Heading 3: KNOWLEDGE
Advaita Vedānta	<i>jñāna</i>
Philosophical Daoism	<i>ming</i>
Zen Buddhism	<i>satori</i>
Kabbalistic Judaism	<i>ḥokhmah</i>
Esoteric Christianity	<i>intellectus</i>
Mystical Islam	<i>maʿrifah</i>

Table 12. *Corresponding Concepts – Knowledge*

The broader points of agreement include:

1. Knowledge—conceived as “gnosis”—is the immediate, non-dual vision of the One in the many and the many in the One.
2. Knowledge is comprised of ascending stages of meaning: (1) an empirical stage of knowledge that is tied to multiplicity, (2) a self-annihilatory stage of knowledge that is tied to unity, and (3) an analogical stage of knowledge in which the oneness of the manifold and manifold oneness are mutually beheld, standing before each other like two interpenetrating mirrors “without the shadow of an image between them”.

3. Knowledge is ultimately not-other-than the existence it intuitively perceives or “tastes”, but is rather an inflection or mode of the same, such that ontology and epistemology constitute a single, unified science.

These various correspondences refer to a meta-structural plane of discourse—what might be called “the highest common denominator” of mystico-speculative systems. Rather than flattening down the respective concepts of each tradition to a single, univocal sense, they are here brought up to a level of uniformity at which they become mutually transparent and receptive. This is not to say that the distinctions and differences between these mystico-speculative traditions are ignored by this method. It is only to say that, at a certain level of analysis (i.e., the level of ontology and metaphysics), these distinctions and differences are seen to coalesce in a kind of *coincidentia oppositorum*, just as the further one traces the spectrum of colors back to its source, the more mutually interfused the colors become, eventually reaching a state of total identity with the undifferentiated light which, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, is the refuge of all differences⁹⁸⁴—the oneness of the manifold.

Two further points are deserving of mention: (1) the question of the ternary of existence-manifestation-knowledge as it relates to inner structure of the Divine Essence or Absolute Reality, and (2) the question of what constitutes the unifying thread this study has sought, on the metaphysical

⁹⁸⁴ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955), vol. 4, 370.

level of analysis, to identify, and whether it can legitimately be ascribed to each of the mystical traditions this study has examined.

As already noted in Chapter 1 on Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, Śaṅkara conceives of Brahman as *sat-cit-ānanda* (“existence-consciousness-bliss”). On this view, both knowledge and the blissful manifestation of the world are themselves the consequence of the threefoldness of Absolute Reality. To quote Radhakrishnan again: “All things that exist are what they are, because of the nature of *Brahman* as *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda*.”⁹⁸⁵ The same basic position can be found in the speculative systems of Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabī, for whom the formulas of *arche-logos-pneuma* and *wujūd-wijdān-wajd* encapsulate, respectively, the insight that all things “are” purely on account of the fact that Reality is *what it is*: non-dual Oneness or Unity.

It could be argued that such a position cannot be ascribed to the philosophical views of the Daoist Zhuangzi or the Buddhist Dōgen—or at least not in a way as straightforward and obvious. The question, as this study conceives it, is not whether these figures affirm some kind of analogical relationship between reality and appearance, unity and multiplicity. This much is clear by the very concepts they employ, such as Dōgen’s view of the world as standing in the condition of complete existential dependence or “total reliance”, as well as Zhuangzi’s understanding of phenomenal reality as a vast transmutational circle (*wu hua*) that “follows two courses

⁹⁸⁵ Radhakrishnan, “Introduction”, 70.

at the same time” (*liang heng*). Nor is the question whether differences obtain between the ternaries just cited. After all, any and every correspondence must encapsulate both moments: one of unity and one of difference. The question, rather, is to what extent the analogicity of reality and appearance can be said to apply in the thought of Zhuangzi and Dōgen, and, in consequence, how the limits of this application either confirm or deny the thesis of the present study that there is a unitive thread which ties together all the mystico-speculative systems examined, namely, the immediate experiential intuition of reality as the Oneness of the manifold.

Perhaps the best place to turn in reference to Zhuangzi’s philosophy is his own ternary formulation of existence as *wu-wu-wu* (“not-no-non-being”). As previously mentioned, this threefold formula intends to denote four basic stages of the absolute *dao*. Tracing the logic of this formula backwards from the lowest to the highest of the four levels, we have (4) existence (*you*), (3) non-existence (*wu*), (2) not-non-existence (*wu-wu*), and (1) not-not-non-existence (*wu-wu-wu*). Each stage symbolizes a deepening and heightening sense of reality, with the fourth stage (*you*) corresponding to the manifested power (*de*) of the *dao* in its spontaneous production (*sheng*) of external phenomena; the third stage (*wu*) corresponding to the mystery (*xuan*) of the *dao* as fecund with inner, though as yet hidden, modes or articulations; the second stage (*wu-wu*) corresponding to the unconditioned aspect of the *dao* as the mystery of mysteries (*xuan zhi you xuan*) or negatively qualified oneness, in which there are no inner

articulations at all; and, finally, the first and highest stage (*wu-wu-wu*) corresponding to the pure ineffability of the absolute as beyond even the negative condition of being unconditioned. Each of these four stages are hierarchically interrelated, so as to express a view of existence not so obviously different (on the metaphysical plane of analysis) from that of Eckhart or Ibn ‘Arabī as sometimes suspected.

The same can be said on behalf of Dōgen. As recounted in Chapter 3 of this study, Dōgen elucidates what it means to see things “just as they are” by citing the venerable Zen saying: “Mountains are mountains. Water is water.” According to Dōgen’s interpretation, these words represent a kind of ternary formula of their own: (1) mountains are mountains, (2) mountains are not mountains, and (3) mountains *are* mountains. Like the *wu-wu-wu* formulation of Zhuangzi, Dōgen’s formula also proceeds in a “backwards” direction, tracing phenomena back to their non-dual Source and Origin. At the first stage, every phenomenon is perceived according to the Aristotelian notion of “substance”, such that “mountains” are seen to be “mountains” ($m=m$) and “waters” are seen to be “waters” ($w=w$) in an ontologically restricted way, to the mutual exclusion of everything else. The second stage overcomes this “worldly habit” through the immediate sapiential intuition of the manifold *as* oneness, corresponding to what Dōgen refers to elsewhere as “body-and-mind-dropping-off”. What the mind darkened by ignorance had conceptualized as “mountains” (m) and “waters” (w) are now seen, in the blinding light of emptiness, to be something of another order

entirely. The real suchness of mountains (M) and waters (W) are here viewed in their totally undifferentiated condition, prior to their having become bifurcated into the categories of subject and object, knower and known, self and other. It is only at the third stage, however, that “mountains again are mountains” ($M=M$) and “waters again are waters” ($W=W$), corresponding to what Dōgen refers to as *satori*-consciousness or “dropped-off-body-and-mind”, where the myriad of phenomena returns in its illimitable splendor, teeming with endless forms, such that absolute, unarticulated Oneness is now disclosed *as* the manifold of infinite articulation. Dōgen thus also expresses, with Zhuangzi, a hierarchically ordered view of reality as (1) phenomenal manifestation, (2) transcendental knowledge, and (3) non-dual existence. Paradoxically, it is only at the level of non-dual existence that the phenomenal plane of manifestation receives its own sense of ontological integrity, according to which everything is *just what it is*: mirrors mirroring mirrors, and upon whose surface can be seen the One face of all phenomena in their pre-phenomenal stillness.

Accordingly, the differences between Śāṅkara, Cordovero, Eckhart, and Ibn ‘Arabī, on the one hand, and Zhuangzi and Dōgen, on the other, while substantial on any number of levels, does not delegitimize the central argument of this study—an argument that has been set forth within the context of a specific method and mode of analysis, namely, the direct, experiential intuition of the metaphysical structure of reality.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

This leads now to the second point: the question of what constitutes the “unity” that this study claims to have identified in a number a highly diverse mystico-speculative traditions. If the “unity” in question were merely structural (e.g., a similarity in terms of historical and/or conceptual development), then this study would have failed to achieve its most basic goal: *the demonstration of a common point of departure rooted in the immediate experiential intuition of reality as such.*

That is why this study has made reference to the distinction between discursive and speculative thinking throughout, as well as why it has sought to identify in each chapter a notion of knowledge as fundamentally noetic in nature, rather than ratiocinative or confined to the limits of the laws of identity (A is A) and non-contradiction (A is not non- A). The differences that obtain between each of the traditions examined, be they in the realms of doctrine, devotion, history, language, culture, etc., and while of profound significance in their own right, do not touch on the aim and impetus of the present study in a way that would impair its central thesis. A merely structural corroboration of terminology would not be a commonality worth demonstrating. In fact, at the level of a merely structural analysis, it is difference, not commonality, that holds sway. The only “structure” that this study has taken for its focus is that of *the structure of the experience of metaphysical Reality Itself.*

Hence why Śaṅkara had referred to the crowning mode (*antya-vṛtti*) of knowledge as “the direct intuitive perception of absolute reality”

(*akhaṇḍākāra-vṛtti-jñāna*), and why Zhuangzi had spoken of the simultaneity of the one and the many as grounded beyond discriminative thinking (*zhi*) in the illuminative intuition (*ming*) of the real, whereby one is experientially met with the non-dual structure of sheer existence. Dōgen had also spoken of knowledge as the pure experience of Reality, i.e., the beholding all things “just” (*shikan*) as they are, so as to transcend the mere conceptual grasp of a theory of “oneness”, to the total and dynamic realization of oneness itself (*ichinyo*).

This insight is no less true of the Western traditions and figures examined in Chapters 4-6. For instance, Cordovero asserts that the oppositional coincidence of the “one” and the “many” is perceived through an immediate noetic apprehension of the one Thought in all thoughts, the one Mind in all minds, such that the otherwise distinct acts of “seeing all things in God” and “seeing God in all things” are made to coalesce in a single event of knowing. Similarly, Eckhart identifies the ultimate mode of knowledge with the uncreated and uncreatable element or “eye” of the soul, namely, the intellect (*intellectus*), in which the eye wherein the soul sees God is disclosed as the same eye wherein God sees the soul, such that the eyes of the soul and the eye of God constitute “one vision, one knowing, one loving.”⁹⁸⁶ The “eye” of the intellect is thus said to perceive—in a single “look”—the many in the One and the One in the many. Ibn ‘Arabī as well speaks of the highest stage or “utmost limit” (*nihāyah*) of knowledge as that

⁹⁸⁶ DM I:312.

at which the absolute and the relative, the one and the many, are intuitively grasped as a *coincidentia oppositorum*. From within this immediate vision of non-dual reality, the “one” are seen *as* the “many” and the “many” are seen *as* the one, not in a kind of ontological truce of otherwise quarrelsome parties, but as the pure, peaceful participation of all things in their non-dual Origin and End.

In sum, the foregoing discussion has attempted not only to vindicate the central thesis of this study that there is a point of departure common to the mystico-speculative traditions East and West, but to further clarify and establish precisely what constitutes that commonality, itself rooted in the immediate experiential intuition of reality in its supreme realness.

Having summarized the main correspondences between the mystico-speculative traditions that have been surveyed, I now turn to the final section of this conclusion on the implications that this study brings to bear on contemporary thought and life.

3. Implications

The mystico-speculative doctrine of existence as simultaneously one and manifold is, as was said in this study’s introduction, not the result of a mental exercise, but the fruit of an immediate, sapiential vision beyond the realms of rational and empirical knowledge. As such, it is replete with implications for contemporary thought and life, of which I list three: (1) the renewal of a sense of wonder vis-à-vis the mystery of existence, (2) the

overcoming of the dualistic and reductivist modes of (post-) modern thought, and (3) the provision of the possibility of a mutual understanding among religions.

Existential Wonder

“The world is a continuous series of intuitions of Brahman” (*Brahmapratyayasantair jagat*). Not only does this statement capture the core insight of Śāṅkara’s entire metaphysical system; it could just as well be used to summarize the mystico-speculative system of every other figure and school of this study, being rooted in that “philosophical drive of the human Mind” which, “regardless of ages, places and nations, [is] ultimately and fundamentally one.”⁹⁸⁷ The German Romantic poet and philosopher Novalis had referred to this “drive” as “the urge to be at home everywhere” (*ein Trieb überall zu Hause zu sein*);⁹⁸⁸ Heidegger, as the “*fundamental attunement of philosophizing*”;⁹⁸⁹ and Plato, as the existential “wonder” (*thaumázein*) from which the love of wisdom is born.⁹⁹⁰

Wonder makes a home of the world. For each of the traditions surveyed in this study, wonder opens before existence like a flower before the sun. From within this peculiar field of vision, the world is known as one Face with many “looks” or “expressions”. Beneath, throughout, and beyond

⁹⁸⁷ S&T, 469.

⁹⁸⁸ See also Novalis, “General Draft”, no. 45, in *Novalis: Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: SUNY, 1997), 135.

⁹⁸⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9.

⁹⁹⁰ *Theaetetus* 155c-d.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

every “this” and every “that” (be it a man or a flower or a grain of sand), lies the purely undifferentiated act of Existence Itself.⁹⁹¹ As such, nature is never “just there”, never a mere “thing” or “object” to be put on the rack and tortured for her secrets. On the contrary, every phenomenon “is” only as the total dynamic manifestation of the Real, such that “ontophany and hierophany meet”,⁹⁹² and the soul—which, as Aristotle had said, is in a certain way all things⁹⁹³—is able to find its “home in the haunts of every living creature”.⁹⁹⁴

The “modern” world—by which I intend to denote not so much the chronological present as an ideological outlook—is perhaps best characterized by the loss of wonder. Attendant to this loss is the notion of a “*completely* profane world,” a “wholly desacralized cosmos”, itself “a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit.”⁹⁹⁵ Modern humanity has become a stranger to the world, alienated and weighed down by “the crushing power of the mechanization of life.”⁹⁹⁶ The difficulty in addressing this predicament is only further compounded by the fact that the very assumptions which have led to this impasse are the very ones almost exclusively consulted for solutions. What sociologist Charles Taylor has called “the primacy of instrumental reason” exerts an influence so

⁹⁹¹ See Coleridge, *Collected Works*, vol. 4.1, 514.

⁹⁹² Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 117.

⁹⁹³ Aristotle, *De anima* III, 8, 431b 21.

⁹⁹⁴ *Corpus Hermeticum*, Bk. XI, §20a-b, in *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, Volume 1, ed. and trans. Walter Scott (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), 221.

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 13.

⁹⁹⁶ CRE, 32.

formidable in its scope and power as to go virtually unquestioned today. Advancements in medicine and technology, the momentum and ambition of which grow exponentially with every passing hour, seem to have been enough to persuade an entire civilization that “we should seek only technological solutions even when something very different is called for.”⁹⁹⁷

What is more, this instrumentalization of human life has surged well beyond the walls of the Western world, attaining global proportions, and thus forcing both Western and Eastern civilizations to join arms in combatting a common enemy: “the dehumanizing and dehumanized structure of modern society.”⁹⁹⁸ The mystico-speculative concept of existence as simultaneously one and manifold addresses this predicament at the qualitative level, so as to renew a sense of wonder before the mystery of being, and make humanity at home in the world again.

Non-Dual Unity

From the loss of wonder arises the “diabolical” (from *diábolos*; lit. “one who throws apart”) logic that underlies the modern predicament. The divorce of subject from object, knower from known, self from other, can in many ways be said to constitute the central problem against which the whole of modern Western philosophy, since at least Descartes, has struggled.

6. ⁹⁹⁷ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1995),

⁹⁹⁸ CRE, 33.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Beginning from the Cartesian premise of a bifurcated cosmos comprised of two substances, namely, the “thinking substance” (*res cogitans*) and the “extended substance” (*res extensa*), the split-vision of modernism has become blind to the qualitative unity of things: their order, their harmony, their beauty.⁹⁹⁹

While the word “science” is today understood as essentially synonymous with the method of experimental induction and empirical verification, its etymological meaning and traditional use among the mystical ontologies surveyed in this study is of a radically different sort. For these mystico-speculative traditions, knowledge (*scientia*) is seen as a vast hierarchic system with manifold levels and degrees, the highest of which is the intuitive, trans-dual perception of reality in its sheer realness. It is at this level of knowledge—what each tradition refers to analogously as “wisdom” or “enlightenment”—that the manifold of phenomena is disclosed as the reciprocally permeating aspects of oneness itself.

It is in this way that the concept of existence as simultaneously one and manifold does not simply supplant the “lower” with the “higher”, or “reason” with “intellect”, which would only be a kind reductivism-in-reverse.¹⁰⁰⁰ The oneness of the manifold, precisely as a non-dual apprehension of existence *qua* existence, is able to reintegrate and reconcile all the lower levels of knowledge within the field of their ultimate unity.

⁹⁹⁹ All three of these meanings being implied by the word *kósmos*.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Gai Eaton, *King of the Castle: Choice and Responsibility in the Modern World* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2012), 155.

Mutual Understanding

Finally, it is my argument that the mystical ontologies of the East and the West provide a basis for a mutual understanding among religions. By “mutual understanding” I mean something more than mere “toleration”, however. A willingness to allow “the other” to exist should be the unstated presupposition of interreligious and cross-civilizational dialogue, not its goal. If toleration is a virtue, it is a purely negative one. To tolerate another is to “put up with” them; to “suffer” their existence and refrain from harassing “what are or appear to be other ways of thinking than our own”.¹⁰⁰¹ We tolerate only what we deem inferior to us and our way of life, turning “the other” into a thing to be pitied rather than understood.

Every religion constitutes its own spiritual universe. It would be no less absurd to demand that the so-called “great” religions of the world, i.e., those which have so resonated with the human spirit as to spill beyond all geographical and chronological boundaries, to demonstrate their validity before the court of scholarly opinion, than it would to demand a human being to justify their inviolable dignity before the same. Either their humanity *is* their dignity, or they have no dignity to prove. It is the same with religions. Their presence *is* their legitimacy. To quote Radhakrishnan,

¹⁰⁰¹ Ananda Coomaraswamy, “Paths That Lead to the Same Summit: Some Observations on Comparative Religion“, in *The Bugbear of Literacy* (London: Perennial Books, 1979), 45.

“The claim of any religion to validity is the fact that only through it have its followers become what they are.”¹⁰⁰²

Such a perspective entails the abandonment of several long-held assumptions in the field of religious studies. First of all, it requires that Western scholarship abandon its rather provincial habit of viewing its own civilization by analogy to an “ocean” in relation to which all other civilizations are viewed as so many flowing “rivers” *in via*.¹⁰⁰³ On this reading, the value of all other traditions are judged on the basis of the degree to which they can be said to approximate and anticipate the supposedly “more advanced” and “developed” modes of Western science, technology, philosophy, and religion. In the end, what this amounts to is nothing less than a “philosophical imperialism” or “metaphysical colonialism”, one which presumes that “we [i.e., Western culture] are the manufacturers of philosophical ideas and foreign realms merely supply raw material for our own exploitation and development.”¹⁰⁰⁴ Within the framework of such a view, any potential emergence of a mutual understanding among diverse religious philosophies is of necessity foreclosed.

¹⁰⁰² Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions & Western Thought* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 311.

¹⁰⁰³ This is the analogy employed by perhaps the greatest Western sinologist of the twentieth century, Joseph Needham, in collaboration with Lu Gwei-Djen, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 5: Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part II: Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Magisteries of Gold and Immortality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), xxviii: “My collaborators and I have long been accustomed to use the image of the ancient and medieval sciences of all the peoples and cultures as rivers flowing into the ocean of modern science.”

¹⁰⁰⁴ Thomas P. Kasulis, “The Incomparable Philosopher: Dōgen on How to Read the *Shōbōgenzō*”, in *Dōgen Studies*, ed. William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 86.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

Equally essential is the need for Eastern scholarship to abandon its own inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Western world by recollecting the bounty of its own intellectual and spiritual heritage. This recollection is as much for the benefit of the East as it is for the West, in that “Oriental doctrines can fulfill that most fundamental and urgent task of reminding the West of truths that have existed within its own tradition but which have become so completely forgotten that it appears to many as if they had never existed”, as Nasr reminds us.¹⁰⁰⁵

Conceived in this way, the task of comparative philosophy implies a readiness on the part of the interpreter not only to learn about other religions, but, even more, to be taught by them,¹⁰⁰⁶ thereby opening up a dimension of “sophianic” analysis that is receptive to the presence of “wisdom” (*Sophía*) in other religious “worlds”, without the need to forfeit one’s convictions or to appropriate what is, strictly speaking, “other”. Here the command to “plunder the Egyptians” (*spolia Aegyptorium*) is rendered superfluous, in that there is no need to steal what one already possesses. Nothing is strange to the lover of wisdom. Which is why Zhuangzi could say that “Heaven and Earth and I came into existence together, and all things with me are one”,¹⁰⁰⁷ or why Ibn ‘Arabī could identify the heart (*qalb*) as that which encompasses everything, even God, and, as such, is able to

¹⁰⁰⁵ See Nasr, *Plight of Modern Man*, 33.

¹⁰⁰⁶ See Reza Shah-Kazemi, “Civilizational Dialogue and Sufism”, in *Universal Dimensions of Islam: Studies in Comparative Religion*, ed. Patrick Laude (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2011), 79.

¹⁰⁰⁷ CT, II, 49.

THE ONENESS OF THE MANIFOLD

assume all forms, becoming a pasture for gazelles, a cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols, and tables for the Torah and the Qu'rān.¹⁰⁰⁸ As a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet of Islam declares: “Wisdom is the lost camel (*ḍālla*) of the faithful; they have a right to it wherever they may find it.” Or in the words of Christ: “Wisdom (*Sophía*) is vindicated by all her children” (Mt. 11:9).

¹⁰⁰⁸ See *The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, trans. R.A. Nicholson (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), 52.

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