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Further discussion on "Oneness of Being"- a comparative study of the "Oneness of Being" and the "Oneness of witnessing"

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Abstract. The theory of existence is one of the core issues that must be discussed in religious philosophy, and Islamic philosophy is no exception. If the earlier Islamic philosophers, represented by the Ikhwan al-Safa, were often influenced by Greek philosophy and sought to address this issue through reason, later Sufis, represented by Ibn Arabi, placed more emphasis on the intuitive role of "revelation," believing that only "revelation" could lead to a direct mystical understanding of the First Existence. Among these ideas, the most representative are Ibn Arabi's "Oneness of Being" and Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi's "Oneness of witnessing." As core theories of Sufi philosophy, the introduction and comparison of these two forms of monism have remained enduring subjects of discussion, though most discussions tend to lack depth. Therefore, the author intends to conduct a more in-depth comparative study of these two monisms, using the relationship between tazahhud (transcendence) and tashbih (immanence) as the main thread. This study aims to restore the original form of the "Oneness of Being," and further demonstrate that the differences between the two are not a vast divide. On the contrary, it could be argued that Suhrawardi's "Oneness of witnessing" (in an epistemological sense) is a clarification and return to the "Oneness of Being."

Keywords: Sufism, Oneness of Being, Oneness of witnessing, theory of existence, epistemology

1. Introduction - The semantic philosophy of "Tanzih" and "Tashbih"

First, the concepts of "Tanzih" and "Tashbih" must be clarified. "Tanzih" is the transliteration of the Arabic term tanzih (in Latin transliteration) [1], which can be translated into English as "incomparability," meaning "transcendence" [2]. It aims to explain the supreme transcendence of God. "Tashbih" is the transliteration of the Arabic term tashbih (in Latin transliteration), which can be translated into English as "similarity," meaning "similarity" or "immanence." Additionally, it is important to note that "similarity" is often interpreted as "anthropomorphism," where human attributes are used to define God's attributes. This would make the concept of "human" the basis for the concept of "God." However, in the first chapter of The Wisdom Jewel in the words of Allah in The Words of Adam, Ibn Arabi wrote: "All the noble names in the divine forms appear in the structure of the human being, thus through this existence, the human acquires a rank that encompasses and integrates" [3]. This suggests that human attributes originate from Allah, and the concept of Allah is more fundamental than the concept of humans. Therefore, "similarity" should be understood as "divinization," as William Chittick states: "In contrast, the Qur'an depicts humanity as 'divinizing,' for every discussion begins with Allah, who is the only, indisputable truth and reality" [4]. Hence, further explanation of "immanence" means that human nature necessarily contains God's attributes, or in other words, God's attributes are inherent in human nature. To reduce semantic ambiguity, the meanings of "transcendence" for "Tanzih" and "immanence" for "Tashbih" are adopted in this paper.

At the dawn of Islamic philosophy, the theological school of Kalam, which is part of Islamic "Scholastic Philosophy," had already begun to explore the relationship between "transcendence" and "immanence." Whether the Mutazilites or the Ash'arites, at a fundamental level, they were all staunch monotheists, emphasizing the "transcendence" of God. They believed that God, aside from His essence, had no anthropomorphized virtues, and adding additional virtues to God's essence would undermine His oneness and lead to polytheism. The representative of Pythagorean philosophy, Razi, firmly opposed the idea that God had "Tanzih." He "refuted the Islamic concept of monotheism because this monotheism does not allow any eternal entities, such as the soul, or prime matter, or space, or time, to coexist with God" [5]. The Jingcheng Tongshe school advocated that God is the supreme existence ("Tanzih"), from which spiritual, soul, and the eight fundamental substances flow. Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, in their efforts to balance religion and reason, had to emphasize that while God is the sole existence, He is eternally connected to the world. Ansari

firmly opposed the idea of a beginningless world, believing that the world is the product of God's will and power. Suhrawardi's philosophy of illumination defined God as "the supreme light," asserting that "the ontological status of all existent beings depends on their proximity to the 'supreme light' and the extent to which they are illuminated."

In conclusion, the reason for briefly outlining the basic philosophical viewpoints of the two main schools regarding "Tanzih" and "Tashbih" is to sketch the thread that runs through Islamic philosophy concerning the relationship between "Tanzih" and "Tashbih." This naturally leads to the discussion of how these two monisms address this relationship. Moreover, although previous studies have touched on this issue, it is clear that it has not been the central focus. It has been relegated to metaphysical discussions alongside logic, ethics, and other disciplines. In contrast, compared to its previous elusive presence within the context of Islamic philosophy, this thread has now become the framework supporting the two monistic doctrines that explore ontological issues.

2. From "Existence" to "Monism"

Before introducing the two types of "Monism," it is essential to briefly outline the issue of "existence" in Islamic philosophy. Since Farabi first explicitly raised the issue of "existence," discussions on this topic reached their zenith in the philosophy of Avicenna (Ibn Sina). According to Avicenna, "existence" is an "accident" of "essence," but this holds true only in terms of logic and grammar. If, following the approach of later philosophers such as Ibn Rushd and Thomas Aquinas, Avicenna's view of the relationship between "existence" and "essence" is extended to the level of objective and external reality, the contradictory conclusion may arise that something "must exist before it becomes existent" [6]. Avicenna emphasized that "existence" is a special "accident" because it points to an objective reality that differs from the general accidents that refer to other things. However, he did not clarify the structure of this objective reality. Later philosophers resolved this issue left by Avicenna by swapping the roles of "existence" and "essence," treating "existence" as the subject, with "essence" serving as the predicate. "Essence" is "what something is"; it defines "existence" as a real entity. As Taketoshi Iizuka noted, this represents the fundamental structure of Islamic metaphysics: existence precedes essence. The later developments of "Oneness of Being" and "Oneness of witnessing" are both based on this concept.

Due to the significance of the "Oneness of Being" doctrine and its profound influence on later Islamic philosophy, it has become a major subject of study within Islamic philosophical research. Although experts on Al-Arabi assert that Al-Arabi himself did not use this term, and that it was actually introduced by his opponent Ibn Taymiyyah [7], there is no doubt that Al-Arabi is considered the founder of "Oneness of Being." If the "Oneness of Being" is considered a building, it can be said that this building was constructed through the efforts of many individuals (such as Al-Arabi, the Al-Arabi school, Mulla Sadra, etc.), including its critics.

The theoretical content of "Oneness of Being" can be summarized as follows: First, only God is the absolute existence, and the complex world of phenomena is merely an expression of God's self-existence; second, although the world of phenomena does not exist in an absolute sense, it is not "nothing" because, as the form in which the absolute manifests, it is real; third, to understand absolute existence, one must transcend everyday experiences, abandon the dichotomy of subject and object, and reach a state of self-conscious dissolution through "annihilation," "conjunction," and "eternity," ultimately uniting with the divine and attaining a complete understanding of God (existence).

It is precisely because of the dissolution of the boundary between the world of phenomena and the world of absolute existence that Al-Arabi was later considered by some scholars to be a pantheist. This led to the formation of two opposing camps: one supporting Al-Arabi and the other opposing him. However, the attitude of Ahmad Sirhindi toward Al-Arabi is more complex, and cannot simply be categorized into one of the two opposing camps.

Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624), an Indian from Sirhind, is also known as the "Imam of the Rabani," claiming to be of sacred lineage. Sirhindi strongly emphasized the independence of Islam and opposed the religious syncretism promoted by Emperor Akbar of the Mughal Empire. In Sirhindi's view, while the Sufi path is important, it must serve Islamic law (Shari'ah); otherwise, it could lead to personal spiritual confusion and, at worst, cause social and moral chaos. Sirhindi opposed "Oneness of Being" with his own "Oneness of witnessing," believing that the emergence of "Oneness of Being" was a result of placing intuitive experiences above Islamic law. He sought to correct this deviation and realign people's faith with the correct path. Some scholars believe that the difference between "Oneness of Being" and "Oneness of witnessing" lies in the following: one argues that nothing exists besides God, while the other acknowledges that things exist apart from God; the former blurs the distinction between God and the universe, while the latter maintains a clear distinction [8]. In my view, this perspective oversimplifies "Oneness of Being," treating it merely as a philosophical position that affirms the existence of God alone. Sirhindi argued that only in a "state of witnessing" does nothing exist except God; however, the existence of things apart from God is undeniable. It is unreasonable to claim that something does not exist simply because it is unseen, just as the existence of a planet in the universe cannot be denied merely because it is not visible. In fact, rather than saying Sirhindi opposed "Oneness of Being," it would be more accurate to say his efforts were actually a defense of "Oneness of Being." This is because Al-Arabi did not believe that all things are identical to God. For example, he said, "You are charged with duty, while He (the Lord) is not" [9], emphasizing the "otherness" of absolute existence. The view that equates "Oneness of Being" with pantheism often arises from a failure to distinguish between "Oneness of Being" and "absolute monism." In other words, Al-Arabi's and Sirhindi's views on existence are not in extreme binary opposition. Therefore, in addition to examining their basic positions—whether they emphasize "tanzih" (transcendence) or "tashbih" (immanence)—it is also essential to consider the relationship between ontology and epistemology in their monist theories.

3. Comparison and analysis of the two "Monisms"

From an epistemological perspective, analyzing Ibn Arabi's views on the relationship between "Tanzih" (transcendence) and "Tashbih" (immanence) not only helps identify the origins of his standpoint but also connects his ideas to the Qur'an, Hadith, and the Sufi tradition. Ibn Arabi introduces two major epistemological concepts, "reason" and "imagination," to explain the differences between the perspectives of philosophers and Sufis.

Ibn Arabi believes that philosophers' way of knowing God is rational, and reason inherently has the ability to establish distinctions and differences. This epistemological model sets up a contrast between the subject and the object. However, in Ibn Arabi's view, relying on reason alone prevents the subject from comprehending "being itself" or God, because as an unbounded "being," how can it be placed in the position of an object for contemplation? Does this not transform "being itself" into "the being"? Therefore, Ibn Arabi argues that the opposition between subject and object must be abandoned, and through "annihilation" and "the annihilation of annihilation," the subject must completely merge with "being itself." By transforming into "being itself," one can introspect and thereby come to understand "being itself."

In contrast, Sufis know God through imagination, accepting the descent of the spiritual world's significance (which can also be understood as the divine presence). In this process, the distance between the individual and God is eliminated. In the sixth chapter of The Pearl of Wisdom, titled "The Essence of Divine Wisdom in the Words of Allah to Adam," Ibn Arabi distinguishes between two types of imaginative activity. Lower imaginative activity is "almost entirely controlled by the senses and cannot accept meaning" [10]. The sensory forms in this imagination come from the external visible world. Higher imaginative activity, on the other hand, derives its sensory forms from the divine descent. This is a state of encountering God, and it is the very state that Sufis seek. In this state, the Sufi is endowed with imagination, which becomes the ladder leading them closer to God.

Thus, philosophers like Mulla Sadra and others observe God from a distance, seeing more of the surface distinctions between God and all things, that is, "Tanzih"; while Sufis, being close to God, perceive more of the inherent unity between God and all things, that is, "Tashbih." Distance generates awe, while closeness generates love. This difference in attitude toward God is why philosophers emphasize transcendence while Sufis emphasize immanence. The reason for the superiority of closeness to awe is because, whether in the Qur'an or Hadith, it is affirmed that God's love surpasses His wrath. For example, in the Qur'an, "When those who believe in Our signs come to you, say, 'Peace be upon you. Your Lord has prescribed mercy for Himself. He will forgive whoever of you does wrong out of ignorance, and then repents and corrects himself. Indeed, He is Forgiving and Merciful.'" (6:54), and in the Hadith, "My mercy surpasses My wrath." These affirmations show that the Sufis' love for God is not baseless; it is a truth confirmed by "Kitab" (the sacred scripture). This shows the divine presence of God with humanity. The summary of the above discussion is: imagination bridges the gap between the individual and God, inspiring one to realize the inherent unity between God and all things. This proximity generates love, and this love is an unshakable truth. Starting from love, it produces closeness, leading one to perceive "Tashbih." Ultimately, both love and imagination work to bridge the distance between the individual and God, and this bridging is the source that nurtures "Tashbih."

Compared to Ibn Arabi, his fellow Sufi, Ahmad Sirhindi, places more emphasis on the practical and rational. It is under the influence of this epistemological model that Sirhindi acknowledges only the state in which Sufis, in their intoxicated state, witness that there is nothing else but God. However, in the practical world, things are far from the same. Clearly, Sirhindi represents the type of individual Ibn Arabi views as observing God from a distance, emphasizing the distinction and difference between God and all things.

From the above comparison, it may seem easy to conclude that Ibn Arabi's position on "wahdat al-wujūd" (Unity of Being) is rooted in "Tashbih," while Sirhindi's position on "wahdat al-shuhūd" (Unity of Witnessing) is rooted in "Tanzih." However, in my view, the fundamental stance of both is "Tanzih." Ibn Arabi's interpretation of "wahdat al-wujūd" and his "monism of being" are conclusions drawn from his mystical experience. This is because love removes the distance between God and the universe, making one "feel" that God and the cosmos are unified. But if one acknowledges this theory while in a conscious state, it would violate the principle of God's unique unity. In all of Ibn Arabi's known works, he never denies this point, and later accusations of his pantheism are unfounded.

To further clarify the inherent consistency between "monism of being" and "Oneness of witnessing," this issue can be approached through a linguistic analysis of "waḥdat al-wujūd" and Mulla Sadra's distinction between two kinds of "being," namely the "concept of being" and the "reality of being."

4. The inherent consistency between "Oneness of Being" and "Oneness of witnessing"

Since the term "Oneness of Being" is a translation of the Arabic phrase waḥdat al-wujūd, to better understand its meaning, it is essential to return to its original linguistic context and conduct a linguistic examination. As a component of this compound term, waḥdat in Arabic carries multiple meanings such as unity, singularity, uniqueness, and oneness, which correspond to terms like oneness, unity, union, and uniqueness in English.

Next, attention shifts to al-wujūd, the second part of the compound term. It is a noun derived from the Arabic roots wajada or wujida, meaning "to find" or "to exist." In contemporary usage, wujūd is predominantly understood as "existence," often overshadowing its epistemological connotations such as "awareness" and "discovery." According to Islamic scholar Bakri Aladdin,

the primary meaning of wujūd should be "awareness" or "discovery." He argues that if a person is not aware of something, they would not know of its existence. Moreover, Aladdin's research shows that there is a close relationship between wujūd and wajd. Prior to Al-Arabi, Sufis such as Junayd and Hallaj defined wajd as a "state of ecstasy," in which the subject's self-awareness is completely dissolved, or alternatively, the subject experiences the sensation of becoming "the existence itself." This may be why Junayd associated wujūd with the concept of "taste" (dhawq). Regarding the relationship between wujūd and wajd, Hallaj saw wajd as a transient state—a powerful, fiery emotion that easily dissipates—whereas wujūd is a more lasting, real existence in the heart.

The studies mentioned above highlight an important observation: when approaching the concept of "Oneness of Being," there is often an excessive focus on the ontological meaning of wujūd as "existence," while the epistemological aspects of "discovery," which may constitute an equally significant dimension of this concept, are frequently overlooked. Misunderstandings and criticisms from later philosophers toward Al-Arabi often stem from their failure to consider the "discovery" aspect of wujūd.

Thus, it becomes evident that approaching the two forms of "monism" from an epistemological perspective may align more closely with their original intent. This brings us to the philosopher Mulla Sadra. As a representative figure of the Al-Arabi school, Sadra not only inherited Al-Arabi's views on "existence," but also offered a unique perspective on "Oneness of Being" through his distinctive philosophy. In Sadra's view, "existence" can be divided into "the concept of existence" and "the reality of existence." Like Al-Arabi, Sadra believed that the "existence itself," or the "reality of existence," is unknowable; it cannot be contained within the vessel of the human mind. What is known is only the "concept of existence," which is the product of human intellect striving to comprehend "existence." As such, it represents a distorted form of existence.

5. Conclusion

The ontological meaning of "Oneness of Being" is based on Al-Arabi's epistemology rather than reality itself. In other words, "Oneness of Being" is the result of knowledge, not the truth of reality. The primary existence itself transcends all things; in Al-Arabi's triple division of existence, the primary existence is eternal and beyond linguistic description or intellectual conception. It is the unconditioned absolute, independent of all other things, existing purely by its own nature. It is the ultimate source of all things. The opposition between "Oneness of Being" and "Oneness of witnessing" that appears in later discourse often arises because people focus solely on the surface-level ontological aspects—specifically, the idea that the two forms of "monism" have fundamentally different positions on ṭazāḥ (distinction) and tašābih (similarity)—without addressing the deeper epistemological implications of "Oneness of Being." An analysis of the etymology of "Oneness of Being" and a review of the latest research findings suggest that referring to it as "Monism of Discovery" might offer a clearer understanding of its full meaning. This would also highlight that emphasizing "oneness" at the level of consciousness, as seen in "Oneness of witnessing," serves to clarify and return to "Oneness of Being," rather than subverting or opposing it.

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