

The Container and the Contained

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'Make me a sanctuary so that I can reside among them.' (*Exodus* 25:8)

Did not the sea make friends with Noah and Moses? (Jalāl al-Din Rūmī)¹

The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it. (Abu'l-Qāsim al-Junayd)²

The Point and the Seed

The religious language of Judaism talks of the tabernacle (*mishkân*) as the receptacle of the Divine Immanence or Presence (*Shekhinah*; literally, "indwelling"). According to Midrash, God concentrated His *Shekhinah* in the Holiest of Holies 'as though His whole power were concentrated and contracted in a single point'³. In the Vedantic tradition this principal point is called the *bindu* and is identical with the Self (*Ātman*).⁴ Alain Daniélou calls the *bindu* the "Point-Limit" and describes it as the 'determinant of space from which manifestation begins' and 'the centre of the universe'.⁵ The phrase, "Point Limit" alerts us to the idea that the principal point defines the limits of manifestation; it is, to use Pascal's terminology, the "infinitely small" and the "infinitely large". As Shaikh al-'Alawī says, 'Everything is enveloped in the Unity of Knowledge, symbolised by the Point.'⁶ The Point-Limit is adequately symbolised by the "spatial point" where

¹ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I, 2137 (Gupta (tr.), Agra: M. G. Publishers 1997, p.194).

² Al-Junayd, cited in Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1921, p.159.

³ *Ex. Rabba* XXV, 10; *Lev. Rabba* XXIII, 24, cited in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p.410, n.43.

⁴ Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India: Hindu Polytheism*, New York: Inner Traditions, 1985, p.50.

⁵ Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India*, 1985, p.203 & p.229.

⁶ From 'Le Prototype unique', in *Etudes Trad.*, 1938, p.300, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.778.

René Guénon observes that ‘Space itself presupposes the point.’⁷ Moreover, he remarks that ‘the geometric point is quantitatively nil and does not occupy any space, though it is the principle by which space in its entirety is produced, since space is but the development of its intrinsic virtualities.’⁸ As Meister Eckhart says, ‘a point has no quantity of magnitude and does not lengthen the line of which it is the principle.’⁹ Similarly, Guénon observes that ‘though arithmetical unity is the smallest of numbers if one regards it as situated in the midst of their multiplicity, yet in principle it is the greatest, since it virtually contains them all and produces the whole series simply by the indefinite repetition of itself.’¹⁰ For Proclus, ‘Every multitude somehow participates in the One.’ This is again found in the famous Sufic formula: ‘Unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in Unity’¹¹.

From one perspective the Point-Limit alludes to the Unmanifested or that which is beyond Being. As Frithjof Schuon remarks, ‘One can represent Absolute Reality, or the Essence, or Beyond-Being, by the point; it would doubtless be less inadequate to represent it by the void, but the void is not properly speaking a figure, and if we give the Essence a name, we can with the same justification, and the same risk, represent it by a sign; the simplest and thus the most essential sign is the point.’¹² From a more limited and, in a sense, a more precise perspective the point symbolises the principle of Being.

Being has a direct analogy with the Absolute. In this sense, the All-Possibility of the Absolute has its direct correlation with ontological All-Possibility or Potentiality. By inverse analogy, the realisation of Potentiality represents the paradoxical limitation of the Infinite by the indefinite, where ‘to say manifestation is to say limitation’¹³. Ontological All-Possibility is both a reflection of Divine All-Possibility and itself *a* possibility plucked from the Infinite to be planted in the Infinite. In this second sense it is

⁷ Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, London: Luzac, 1975, p.77; see Ch.16.

⁸ Guénon, *Man and his Becoming According To The Vedānta*, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1981, pp.41-2.

⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Par. Gen.*, 20. See also Albert the Great, *On Indivisible Lines* 5-6; Euclid, *Geometry*.

¹⁰ Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.42. Each number is composed of “units” or “ones”; see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 10.1 (1053a30); Aquinas Ia.11.1.ad1.

¹¹ Cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.776.

¹² Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1981, p.65.

¹³ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1989, p.35.

acceptable to say that ontological All-Possibility is, *in essence*, identical with All-Possibility. In fact, it is by virtue of this identity that Potentiality on the one hand brings forth manifestation and, on the other hand, provides the opportunity or “potential” for deliverance from manifestation. Being is here the interface, the Islamic *barzakh*, between the Infinite Unmanifested and the indefinite manifested, facilitating both creation and return to the Uncreated. From another perspective and to use the symbolism of Kabbalah, Being is the *reshimu*, the existential seed, which is a luminous “residue” of *En-Sof* or the Infinite. As Lama Anagarika Govinda observes, the word *bindu* also implies a seed.¹⁴ Guénon observes that, in the Hindu tradition, ‘The Divine Principle which resides at the centre of the being is represented ... as a grain or seed (*dhātu*), as a germ (*bijā*), because in a way it is in this being only virtually so long as “Union”¹⁵ has not actually been realised.’¹⁶ This qualification relates to the idea of the full realisation of the seed, which is its “return” to the Unmanifested.

The entire existence of the being resides in the “seed germ”, which is to say with the *Rāma-pūrva-tāpinī Upanishad*, that the Universe is contained in its “seed”. Similarly, Sri Ramana Maharshi says: ‘The entire Universe is condensed in the body, and the entire body in the Heart. Thus the heart is the nucleus of the whole Universe.’¹⁷ Again, according to the famous *hadīth qudsī*: ‘My earth and My heaven contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me.’¹⁸ The Centre contains the circumference; the heart contains the existence of the human; the tabernacle contains the Temple, and by extension and analogy, the Temple contains the Cosmos. Being is the Cosmic Seed, simultaneously the first point, the Centre and the receptacle of onto-cosmological existence.

¹⁴ Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1969, p.116. He also says that *bindu* means point, dot, zero, drop, germ, seed, semen, etc.

¹⁵ Schuon: ‘Union’ (*yoga*): the Subject (*Atmā*) becomes object (the Veda, the *Dharma*) in order that the object (the objectified subject, man) may be able to become the (absolute) Subject’ (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987, p.109). On Union as “Deliverance” see Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, Chs.22 & 23.

¹⁶ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.300.

¹⁷ Ramana Maharshi, *Talks With Sri Ramana Maharshi Vol.3*, 1955, p.247, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.826.

¹⁸ Cited in Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Lubbu-l-Lubb*, (tr.) Bursevi, Roxburgh: Beshara Publications, 1981, pp.16; 42.

The seed as “container of the Universe” is found with the Christian symbolism of the “mustard seed”: ‘The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air can come and shelter in its branches’ (Mt.13:31-32; Mk.4:30-32; Lk.13:18-19).¹⁹ In Chinese mythology, *Sumeru*, the Cosmic Mountain, and thus *imago mundi*, is also found contained within a mustard seed.²⁰ The *Chāndogya Upanishad* describes the *Ātman* in terms familiar to the Christian mustard seed: ‘This *Ātman*, which dwells in the heart, is smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of barely, smaller than a grain of mustard, smaller than a grain of millet, smaller than the germ which is in the grain of millet; this *Ātman*, which dwells in the heart, is also greater than the earth [the sphere of gross manifestation], greater than the atmosphere [the sphere of subtle manifestation], greater than the sky [the sphere of formless manifestation], greater than all the worlds together [that is, beyond all manifestation, being the unconditioned].’²¹

Being unaffected by the conditions of change, of which it is the principle, the Divine Seed is indestructible. In the words of Origen: ‘Because God himself has sowed and planted and given life to this seed, even though it may be overgrown and hidden, it will never be destroyed or extinguished completely, it will glow and shine, gleam and burn and it will never cease to turn toward God.’²²

Guénon sees the symbolism of the “seed” as analogous to that of the “*yod* in the heart”.²³ The *yod*, as Guénon observes, is the letter from which all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are formed. ‘The *yod* in the heart is therefore the Principle residing at the centre, be it from the macrocosmic point of view, at the “Centre of the World” which is the “Holy Palace” of the Kabbalah, or from the microcosmic point of view in every

¹⁹ See Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.41, n.1; ‘The Mustard Seed’, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Ch.74.

²⁰ *His-yu Chi*, see Yu, *The Journey West Vol.1*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.180, & n.3.

²¹ *Chāndogya Upanishad* 3.14.3. (The inserted comments are Guénon’s, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.41).

²² Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 13.4.

²³ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Ch.73.

being, virtually at least, at his centre, which is always symbolised by the heart in the different traditional doctrines, and which is man's innermost point, the point of contact with the Divine.²⁴ A similar use of the symbolism of letters exists in the Islamic tradition. According to two *hadīth qudsī*: 'All that is in the revealed Books is in the Qur'an, and all that is in the Qur'an is in the *Fātihah*,²⁵ and all that is in the *Fātihah* is in *Bismi 'Llāhi 'r-Rahmāni 'r-Rahīm*', and, 'All that is in *Bismi 'Llāhi 'r-Rahmāni 'r-Rahīm* is in the letter *Bā*, which is itself contained in the point that is beneath it.'²⁶ There is a similar tradition in Kabbalah where it is said that all that is in the Torah is in the word *Berashith* (the first word of *Genesis*, generally translated into English as "In the Beginning"), and all that is in *Berashith* is in the letter *beth*, and the spoken *beth* (the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet) is in the unspoken *aleph* (the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet). It is interesting to compare these traditions, for in the first case the Essence is symbolised by a point and in the second by the ineffable void.²⁷ Again, in the classic Russian spiritual tale, *Rasskatz strannika (The Pilgrim's Tale)*, the Pilgrim says, 'The Gospel and the Jesus Prayer [*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*] are one and the same thing ... For the divine name of Jesus contains in itself all Gospel truths.'²⁸ Boehme: 'In the sweet name, Jesus Christ, the whole process is contained.'²⁹ Thus Schuon says, 'It is in the Divine Name that there takes place the mysterious meeting of the created and the Uncreate, the contingent and the Absolute, the finite and the Infinite.'³⁰

The symbolism of the Divine Name or Word as the "seed" is echoed universally.³¹ Jesus teaches that 'The seed is the word of God.'³² This is the *logos spermatikos* of the

²⁴ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.297.

²⁵ The *Fātihah* is the first Sūrah of the Qur'an (literally "the Opening").

²⁶ Cited in Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p.148. These traditions are quoted by al-Jilī at the beginning of his commentary on them, *Al-Kahf wa 'r-Raqīm*.

²⁷ On this symbolism of letters see Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 1971, Ch.7.

²⁸ *The Pilgrim's Tale*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999, p.75.

²⁹ Boehme, *Signatura Rerum*, VII.14.

³⁰ Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993, p.145.

³¹ For numerous examples of this kind see Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, pp.1031-1037.

³² Meister Eckhart says that the "beginning"—"In the beginning is the Word"—"is preexistent in it (the Word) as a seed is in principle (*in principium*, both "beginning" and "principle")" (*Comm. Jn. 4*; see *Meister*

Greek Fathers. In the Hindu tradition the Word-Seed is the sacred *Om*, the ‘primordial sound of timeless reality’³³, which “imperishable syllable” is the “whole world” and also “the Self (*Ātman*) indeed.”³⁴ *Om* is the essence of the *Veda*.³⁵ The *Dictionary of Symbols* describes the *Veda* as the ‘seed and potential evolution of future cycles.’³⁶ According to Hindu tradition, during the cataclysm that separates this *Mahā-Yuga* from the previous one, the *Veda* was enclosed in a state of envelopment in the conch (*shankha*), a homologue of the Ark and one of the chief attributes of *Viśnu*.³⁷ This notion of the Word-Seed is explicit in the symbolism of the Ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant. In the latter this is none other than the Testimony, the tablets of stone upon which God inscribed the Decalogue (Ex.31:18; 32:15; 34:29), the Word of God made writ, or “made flesh” if you will.³⁸ The Ark of Noah contains the Word of God by way of Noah’s son, *Shem*, whose name means “name” and more precisely, the “Name of God”.

To talk of the seed is to talk of impetus towards growth, which is to say, towards manifestation. Thus the perfection of the ontological seed includes *in divinis* the impetus towards the imperfection of the manifest world. This is prefigured in the paradox of the Relative as a dimension of the Infinitude of the Absolute. To use an analogous symbolism, the Garden of Eden must contain the serpent. As Marco Pallis remarks, ‘The perfection of a paradise without the presence of the serpent would be the perfection, not of paradise, but of God Himself. It would be, in Sufic terms, “the paradise of the Essence”.’³⁹



Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defence, (tr.) Colledge and McGinn, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981, p.123).

³³ Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 1969, p.47.

³⁴ See *Mandukya Upanishad* 1, 8-12.

³⁵ *Chāndogya Upanishad* 1.1.1-3; *Bṛihad-Ārayaka Upanishad* 5.1.1.

³⁶ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1996, p.229.

³⁷ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.107.

³⁸ ‘Inside the ark you will put the Testimony which I am about to give you’ (Ex.25:16). The word translated as “Testimony”, ‘*eduwth* (עֲדוּת) is derived from the primitive root ‘*uwd* (וּד) meaning “to duplicate”, which leads one to recall that God created man “in the image”.

³⁹ Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980, p.39.

Immanence and Transcendence

The Divine Immanence is, in effect, its own receptacle, in a similar manner to which it might be said that a word is the receptacle of its meaning, while at the same time being identical with it. Divine Immanence, or the Divine Presence, is identical with Being, which is both its own principle and effect. In turn, Being gives rise to the distinction, recognised by Plato among others, between Being and becoming.⁴⁰

Immanence implies Transcendence or Beyond Being.⁴¹ The Divine Reality *per se* may be signalled by the term “The Absolute”. A simple overview of the station of Immanence in the context of the Absolute can be expressed thus:

Transcendence = Beyond-Being
 Immanence = Being
 Being “contains” becoming
 becoming = the play of cosmic existence

The existential world is a mode or level of the Divine Immanence. Immanence is itself “contained” or prefigured by the Divine Transcendence. Guénon explains this distinction in terms of Universal (Transcendent) and Individual (Immanent) Existence.⁴²

Universal -The Unmanifested
 -Formless Manifestation

Individual -Formal Manifestation
 -Subtle state

⁴⁰ *Timaeus* 27d-28a.

⁴¹ “Beyond Being” is also Platonic (*Republic* 7.6.509b), although it is more usually associated with Plotinus (for example, *Enneads* 4.3.17; 6.9.11).

⁴² Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.34.

-Gross state

Guénon is quick to clarify that ‘all that is manifested, even at this higher level [Formless Manifestation], is necessarily conditioned, that is to say, relative.’⁴³ In this sense Formless Manifestation is an aspect of Immanence.

The Unmanifested contains the possibility of Manifestation *in divinis*, this being Formless Manifestation; this gives rise to Formal Manifestation, which, at the level of cosmic existence, gives rise to the Subtle (psychic) and the Gross (corporeal) states. Transcendence, which contains Immanence, is itself embraced by the Divine Totality (the Absolute). Schuon describes this thus: ‘The Absolute by definition contains the Infinite—the common content being Perfection or the Good—and the Infinite in its turn gives rise, at the degree of that “lesser Absolute” that is Being, to ontological All-Possibility. Being cannot not include efficient Possibility, because it cannot prevent the *Absolute* from including the Infinite.’⁴⁴

Two difficulties arise with the use of the term “Being”. Firstly, there can be confusion between two distinct usages of the term “Being”. On the one hand Being corresponds to the Supreme Principle and is identical in this usage with the Absolute, and is therefore, somewhat paradoxically, Beyond-Being or Transcendence. On the other hand Being is sometimes taken as referring especially, if not exclusively, to the level of Manifestation or to Immanence. This is the distinction in the Hindu tradition of *nirguna Brahman* (unqualified *Brahman*) and *saguna Brahman* (qualified *Brahman*).

The second difficulty arises inasmuch as the term “Being” is used to refer to an exclusive category of the onto-cosmological chain. We have said that Being is synonymous with Immanence and that Immanence is Individual Existence and that this is Formal Manifestation; we have qualified this last identification by noting that Immanence includes Formless Manifestation. However, from a certain point of view, Being, while

⁴³ Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.33.

⁴⁴ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.38.

not itself the Absolute, is nevertheless of the Divine realm, and thus it might be said that in no way can it be identified as part of Manifestation. Here the term “Being” is used to classify the unmanifested ontological principle or cause. Manifestation is consequently the cosmological effect. Being is thus distinct from Manifestation as the category cause is distinct from the category effect. Yet, from another point of view, cause and effect may be identified in the context of the wholeness of a thing itself; in this sense, Being embraces both its unmanifested principle and its manifested realisation.

Being is both Transcendent and Immanent, both “uncreated” and “created”, to use the language of the Christian doctrine of the *Logos* or Intellect. Here it is the case that Being is an interface—a *barzakh*—between these two “domains”. Being is Transcendent inasmuch as it corresponds to, or is prefigured in, the Supreme Principle and it is Immanent inasmuch as it is the principle of onto-cosmological existence. Here the distinction between Immanence and Transcendence occasionally becomes blurred. As Schuon remarks,

When we speak of transcendence, we understand in general objective transcendence, that of the Principle, which is above us as it is above the world; and when we speak of immanence, we understand generally speaking subjective immanence, that of the Self, which is within us. It is important to mention that there is also a subjective transcendence, that of the Self within us inasmuch as it transcends ego; and likewise there is also an objective immanence, that of the Principle in so far as it is immanent in the world, and not in so far as it excludes it and annihilates it by its transcendence. ... One finds here an application of the Taoist *Yin-Yang*: transcendence necessarily comprises immanence, and immanence just as necessarily comprises transcendence. For the Transcendent, by virtue of its infinity, projects existence and thereby necessitates immanence; and the Immanent, by virtue of its absoluteness, necessarily remains transcendent in relation to existence.⁴⁵



The Receptacle

To talk of the receptacle of Immanence implies two related notions: that of “container” and that of “receiving”. In the first case, Immanence is a possibility of the Infinite and is

⁴⁵ Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, p.236.

thus “contained” by the Infinite.⁴⁶ The Infinite is identical with Transcendence. Thus one can say that Transcendence is the container of Immanence. Transcendence cannot “receive” Immanence, which it already possesses *in divinis*; rather Immanence flows forth from Transcendence according to the Scholastic maxim *bonum diffusivum sui*, “the Good diffuses itself”. It does not flow “out” of Transcendence, for this flowing forth remains a possibility of the Infinite, even if it is now, so to speak, an actualised or realised possibility. Schuon cites Ibn al-‘Arabī: ‘According to *Risālat al-Ahadiyah*, “He [the Absolute; *Brahman*] sent His ipseity [the Self; *Ātman*] by Himself from Himself to Himself’.⁴⁷ God (Infinite and Transcendent) sends forth His Ipseity (Immanence) by Himself (as a possibility of His Infinitude) from Himself (from the Infinite) to Himself (to the Infinite). This flowing forth of Immanence—which is simultaneously a “withdrawal”, in the sense of the kabbalistic doctrine of *tsimtsum*,⁴⁸ of Transcendence—is received *a priori* by Being. Between Immanence and Transcendence there is both discontinuity and continuity. Discontinuity for the container surpasses the contained in extent; continuity for Being is essentially identical with Transcendence.

In the case of Being the container and the contained are identical.⁴⁹ The container of Being is Substance, inasmuch as Being is manifested through or “in” Substance; from another perspective, Being contains Substance, inasmuch as Substance is prefigured in Being. In turn, Substance, as Schuon remarks, ‘has two containers, space and time, of which the first is positive and the second negative’⁵⁰. Space and time are contained in Being *in divinis*, prefigured by the Infinite and the Eternal. They are “received” and

⁴⁶ In discussing the possibilities of the human individuality, Guénon remarks that, ‘Taken literally, the relationship of container to contained is a spatial relationship; but here it should be only taken figuratively, for what is in question is neither extended nor situated in space’ (*The Multiple States of the Being*, New York: Sophia Perennis, 2001, p.41, n.1). In discussing the Infinite we are discussing Possibility as such, and thus the same proviso applies.

⁴⁷ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1965, p.97, n.2. The insertions are mine. The *Risālat al-Ahadiyah* or ‘The Epistle of the Unity’ is a treatise probably by Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī.

⁴⁸ See my ‘Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation: Christ’s *kenosis* in light of the Judaic doctrine of *tsimtsum* and the Islamic doctrine of *fana*’: *The Essential Sophia*, (ed.) Nasr & O’Brien, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2006, pp.58-77.

⁴⁹ Ibn al-Arabī: ‘So the world is both carrier (*hāmīl*) and carried (*mahmūl*). As carried it is form (*sūra*), body (*jism*), and active (*fā’il*); as carried it is meaning (*ma’nā*), spirit (*rūh*), and passive (*munfa’il*)’ (*al-Futūhāt al-Makkiya Vol.1*, (tr.) Chittick & Morris, New York: Pir Press, 2002, p.52).

⁵⁰ Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1990, p.97.

made manifest by cosmological existence, of which they are the defining conditions. Space and time do not “contain” cosmological existence in the sense of being “beyond”; instead they are the receptacle of cosmological existence.⁵¹

The *Mundaka Upaniṣad* describes these ideas through the symbolism of the spider and its web: ‘a spider spreads and withdraws (its thread) ... so out of the Immutable does the phenomenal universe arise.’⁵² The spider contains the thread and is identical with the thread; the web receives the thread and is identical with the thread; but between the spider and the web there is distinction. Ibn al-‘Arabī offers a similar metaphor in his *Diwan of Shashtarī*: “We are like the silkworm, our obstacles are the result of our own work”, an allusion to the worm which creates its own prison by surrounding itself with its own thread’⁵³.

The Absolute is like a sea (Infinite; Beyond-Being) within which there is a glass of water, which here stands for Being. The glass is itself an illusion (*Māyā*), its substance being also water; here one might consider the glass as formed of ice, which in substance, if not in state, is still water, and this is to recognise that illusion is a state and not a substance.⁵⁴ The water in the glass and the water of the sea are identical in essential substance (*ousia*) but not in extent. One might say that there is a difference or discontinuity in extent of substance but an identity or continuity of essence. The sea is “beyond” the water of the cup in its extent; at the same time it contains and intimately identifies with the water of the cup so that they are not other than each other or, better to say, there is only the Sea.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Plato’s “receptacle” or “nurse” of becoming (*Timaeus*, 49a; 52).

⁵² *Mundaka Upaniṣad*, 1.1.7.

⁵³ This tentative English translation comes from a paper delivered in French by Jaafar Kansoussi at the Ibn ‘Arabi Society’s Nineteenth Annual Symposium (2002). He kindly directed me to his French translation of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s, *Diwan of Shashtari*, p.74.

⁵⁴ Al-Jīlī: ‘In parable, the creation is like ice, and it is Thou who art gushing water. The ice is not, if we realised it, other than its water, and is not in this condition other than by the contingent laws. But the ice will melt and its condition will dissolve, the liquid condition will establish itself, certainly’ (*al-insān al-kamīl*, (tr.) Burckhardt, Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1983, pp.28-29).

⁵⁵ This extended analogy comes from my essay ‘The Logic of Mystery & the Necessity of Faith’ in *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2004, 123-145.

The relationship of Transcendence and Immanence is one of identity and distinction. Schuon: ‘That we are conformed to God,—“made in His image,”—this is certain; otherwise we should not exist. That we are contrary to God, this is also certain; otherwise we should not be different from God. Without analogy with God we should be nothing. Without opposition to God we should be God.’⁵⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabi: ‘God says, *There is naught like unto Him*, asserting His transcendence, and He says, *He is the Hearing, the Seeing*,⁵⁷ implying comparison [Relativity and Immanence].’⁵⁸ ‘The Father is greater than I’ (Jn.14:28), but, at the same time, ‘The Father and I are one’ (Jn.10.30).⁵⁹

Identity means that the Cosmos is not other than God. Thus, in his chapter on Noah, Ibn al-‘Arabi says, ‘the Reality never withdraws from the forms of the Cosmos in any fundamental sense, since the Cosmos, in its reality, is implicit in the definition of the Divinity’⁶⁰. This recalls Meister Eckhart: ‘if there were anything empty under heaven, whatever it might be, great or small, the heavens would either draw it up to themselves or else, bending down, would fill it themselves’⁶¹. The essential identity of the Cosmos with God, however, must not be mistaken for the limitation of God to the Cosmos. To say, as Schuon does, that ‘if the relative did not exist, the Absolute would not be the Absolute’⁶² does not mean that the Absolute is limited to the Relative. This leads to the error of pantheism. Schuon: ‘If God is conceived as primordial Unity, that is, as pure Essence, nothing could be substantially identical with Him; to qualify essential identity as pantheistic is both to deny the relativity of things and to attribute an autonomous reality to them in relation to Being or Existence, as if there could be two realities essentially distinct, or two Unities or Unicities.’⁶³ In the words of the Rabbis: ‘God is the dwelling place of the universe; the universe is not the dwelling place of God.’⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.167.

⁵⁷ Qur’an, 42:11.

⁵⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusûs al-hikam*, (tr.) Austin, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980, p.75.

⁵⁹ On the interplay of the hypostases see Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1982, pp.41-42.

⁶⁰ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusûs*, 1980, p.74. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, says ‘He [God] did not create and depart, but the things that are from Him are in Him’ (4.12.18).

⁶¹ Meister Eckhart, *Sermon 4 (Meister Eckhart Sermons & Treatises Vol.1)*, (tr.) Walshe, Dorset: Element Books, 1987, p.44).

⁶² Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.108.

⁶³ Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 1993, p.41.

⁶⁴ Cited in Radhakrishnan, *Selected Writings on Philosophy, Religion and Culture*, 1970, p.146.

If the creature submits to you,
It is the Reality Who submits.
And if the Reality submits to you,
The created may not follow Him in that.
Therefore realise what we say,
For all I say is true.
There is no created being
But is endowed with speech.
Nor is there aught created, seen by the eye,
But is essentially the Reality.
Indeed, He is hidden therein,
Its forms being merely containers.

(Ibn al-‘Arabi)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Ibn al-‘Arabi, Fusūs*, 1980, p.130.