

INTELLECT AND IMAGINATION
IN IBN 'ARABĪ'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL
EPISTEMOLOGY*

Adīb Nāyif Diyāb

The knowledge of paranormal states is possible, and is said to be acquired through the activity of imagination. This power, in Ibn 'Arabī's point of view, is the essential cognitive faculty in Man belonging of course to his spirit. In the present study we shall attempt to explore the scope of cognition in Man and take a look at the functions of intellect and sensation as well as Ibn 'Arabī's conception of the imaginative faculty. The Sufi concept of sign, a technical term for the by-products of imagination, will also be of utmost interest to this particular theme.

Two brief expositions dealing with certain aspects of Ibn 'Arabī's theory of imagination are found in the works of A. 'Affīfī¹ and Henri Corbin.² There have appeared quite a number of more recent studies on Ibn 'Arabī, but unfortunately they all seem to neglect the emphasis we have in mind in this essay.³ For example, 'Affīfī pointed out the ambiguity in Ibn 'Arabī's usage of the term '*khayāl*', but he neglected some significant features

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¹ *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Dīn-Ibnul 'Arabī* (Cambridge: At The University Press, 1939), 129-132.

² *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. R. Manheim (London, 1969), 216-220.

³ Among these we may enumerate the publications of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society, which has contributed significantly to our understanding of Ibn 'Arabī's mystical philosophy. We must also mention the vast works of William C. Chittick, e.g. *Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination: The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

of this concept; features that would have enabled him to present Ibn 'Arabī's view as a crucial and original theory in the history of Islamic thought. The most important feature that I have in mind in this particular context is the relationship between imagination and figurative symbols. This point, I think, is crucial for an understanding of the two concepts of *khayāl* (imagination) and *ishārah* (sign or allusion). The title of Corbin's work suggests that he intended to make up for this deficiency in 'Affifi, but his discussion is found to deal mainly with the totality of Ibn 'Arabī's experience and metaphysics paying little attention to his anthropology. In fact only five pages are devoted to this specific topic which do not venture beyond 'Affifi's scheme. Corbin however complains:

There is incoherence, as has been claimed, in Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine of the imagination, but there is an extreme complexity to reckon with. The 'field' encompassed in the 'science of the Imagination' is so vast that it is difficult to enumerate all its sectors.⁴

The vastness of the field does not justify, on the other hand, the subsumption of the concept of "love" under the domain of imagination as in the case of a recent study by M. Qāsim.⁵ Nor can support be found for the tendency to streamline Ibn 'Arabī's views to the modern branch of methodology.⁶ Such generalizations are made in Qāsim's work, which also neglects the symbolic functioning of imagination. The critique of the above would oblige the present study to re-examine Ibn 'Arabī's views on the question of imagination and at the same time seek fresh data that clarify what is obscure in the issue.

To begin with a technical difficulty, Ibn 'Arabī uses the term *khayāl* to refer to at least three different notions:

⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁵ *Al-Khayāl fī Madhhab M. Ibn 'Arabī* (Cairo, 1969), especially see Chap. 3, 38-56.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, Chap. 4, 57-78.