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Asceticism as Renouncing and Embracing the World in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Radical Metaphysics

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Abstract: Asceticism or renunciation (*zuhd*) is generally viewed as turning away from the world and all it has to offer in order to connect to the divine. The well-known mystical theorist, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), adds a denotation of asceticism to this conventional definition. Ibn ‘Arabī argues that the impetus for the creation of the cosmos was the divine wish to be known by something other than Itself. As the fulfilment of this wish, the universe is nothing but a manifestation of the cataphatic aspect of God described as His ‘most beautiful Names’ (*al-Asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) in the Qur’an, which is not God as He truly is in His apophatic essence that can never be comprehended, much less manifested. This means that there are two forms of asceticism or connecting to the divine: one is to assert God’s transcendence and His true apophatic nature by renouncing the world, while the other is to emphasise His comparability by embracing the world as a manifestation of God’s most beautiful Names. Ibn ‘Arabī presents the world-renouncing form of asceticism through the chapter of Prophet Idrīs in his most popular work, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, and he presents the world-embracing form of asceticism through the chapter of Prophet Ilyās. He then combines both forms of asceticism in the chapter of Prophet Muḥammad.

Keywords: Sufism; Ibn ‘Arabī; asceticism (*zuhd*); divine Names; *Fuṣūṣ*



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1. Introduction

This paper explores the concept of asceticism or renunciation (*zuhd*) in the works of Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240). It demonstrates that Ibn ‘Arabī first expands the denotation of asceticism to include not just the physical world, but all realms of existence. In other words, to be an ascetic one must abstain from all levels of existence. Prophet Idrīs (Enoch) emblematises this form of asceticism. However, this is not the only form of asceticism, says Ibn ‘Arabī. Since all things are loci of divine manifestation, one must also embrace the world to achieve divine proximity. This, too, is a form of asceticism. Prophet Ilyās (Elias) is the archetype for this type of asceticism. Finally, as the reality of Prophet Muḥammad encompasses the reality of all other prophets, he displays both forms of asceticism—his renunciation of the world through his love of prayer (*salah*) and his attachment to the world through his love of women and perfume. Ibn ‘Arabī thus expands the concept of asceticism in Islamic thought because no longer is it just abstaining from the physical world; it is abstaining from all levels of existence *and* embracing all of them. This duality is the result of the duality of the transcendence and comparability of God: His absolute essence is transcendent and so all things besides Him must be renounced, but all things are nothing but loci of manifestation of His divine Names and so they must be embraced. By interrogating this dual aspect of asceticism in Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics, this study achieves two aims: (1) it makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of what constitutes asceticism in Islamic thought and why the world is portrayed as times as something to be despised and at others as something to be loved, and (2) it illuminates how Ibn ‘Arabī’s conception of the world as divine manifestation plays out in all facets of his thought. Therefore, it fills two lacunae in current scholarship: what asceticism means

for Ibn ‘Arabī, and more broadly, how asceticism is understood in Islamic mysticism more generally. Ibn ‘Arabī is a particularly useful subject for such an investigation not only because he advances a novel signification of asceticism, but also because of the incredible influence he exerted.

Ibn ‘Arabī has been the subject of the sustained Western gaze for many decades now, and his popularity sees no signs of abating (Chittick 1992b; Knysh 1999). The copious quantity of scholarship he has inspired is the result of the truly unique synthesis of Hellenistic philosophy, Qur’anic exegesis, *ḥadīth* literature, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalām*), cosmology, and many other fields. It is because Ibn ‘Arabī was a Sufi thinker (Chittick 1989) as well as a philosopher (Landau 2008, pp. 17–66; Dagli 2016, chp. 1), an exegete (who wrote over a hundred volumes on Qur’anic commentary, Mahā’imī 2007, p. 40), a jurist (Ghurāb 1981; Winkel 1996; Lala 2022c), a theologian (Takeshita 1982; Chittick 1989, pp. 31–76), and a *ḥadīth* specialist (Brown 2017, p. 190), who was influenced by the rationalistic trends of Neoplatonism, in addition to some aspects of Aristotelianism, and cosmological and theological concepts more generally (Hodgson 1974, vol. 2, p. 239), that his output, especially his principal works, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* and *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, have garnered extraordinary scholarly interest by researchers looking into any one of the aforementioned disciplines (Hirtenstein 1999; Corbin 2008). The purpose of the present study, as stated, is to shed light on how Ibn ‘Arabī expands the idea of asceticism to include not just renouncing the world, but also embracing it.

2. Methodology

In order to fully appreciate the concept of asceticism as Ibn ‘Arabī conceives of it, one must situate the concept in the framework of his emanational metaphysics. Only then can all the nuances contained within the idea of asceticism truly be comprehended. This is because one must comprehend the reality of the cosmos, as Ibn ‘Arabī understands it, before one can ascertain what sort of relationship one should have with it. However, before this can be attempted, the linguistic denotations of the term must be explained since it is known that Ibn ‘Arabī is extremely particular about adhering to the significations of terms, and he extracts all possible connotations of key words (Morris 1987a, p. 107). Therefore, this study proceeds from the linguistic analysis of the term ‘asceticism’ (*zuhd*) in the same way as Ibn ‘Arabī, who takes as his point of departure the *prima facie* signification of each term before he reveals the true reality of it, which always conforms to the literal meaning, if in an unexpected way. After this, how the term is deployed in the Qur’an, the exegetical tradition, and prophetic literature (*ḥadīth*) can be elucidated. This is because Ibn ‘Arabī’s entire metaphysics ultimately goes back to the Qur’an, or less frequently, the *ḥadīths* (Nettler 2012, pp. 13–14). Thus, the methodology of this study mirrors Ibn ‘Arabī’s own *modus operandi* when he seeks to elucidate the deeper meaning of terms. Only subsequent to conducting these preliminary analyses can the manner in which Ibn ‘Arabī draws on these linguistic and religious traditions to propound his own conception of asceticism be elaborated. This is achieved by first delineating the various denotations of asceticism for Ibn ‘Arabī, and then exploring how the concept of asceticism features in his works. The principal work that is considered is *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as it presents Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas in a condensed form (Abū Zayd 2002, p. 135). By following Ibn ‘Arabī’s own methodology, all the denotations of the term ‘asceticism’ emerge organically. We therefore first turn our attention to asceticism in Arabic lexicons.

3. Asceticism in Arabic Lexicons

The well-known lexicographer, Abu’l-Faḍl ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311?), begins his entry on the term ‘asceticism’ (*zuhd*) by observing that it is ‘that which is contrary to desiring, or coveting the world’ (*al-raghba wa’l-hirṣ ‘ala’l-dunyā*) (Ibn Manẓūr 2000, p. 1876). This, then, is the most basic definition of asceticism: it is not wanting any of the worldly pleasures. The basic meaning, as Toshihiko Izutsu identifies, is the meaning that is immediately associated with the term, irrespective of the context. This is in contradistinction to the ‘relational

meaning' that is derived from the usage of the term in a specific semantic field, which then imbues the term with additional connotations (Izutsu 1998, p. 19; 2002, pp. 24–41). Edward Lane writes that *zuhd* denotes abstaining 'from something that would gratify the passions or senses' or to not desire it (Lane 2003, vol. 3, p. 1260). In other words, he adds the denotation that asceticism could mean that someone desires something because it would 'gratify the passions or senses' but abstains from it anyway, or it could mean simply not desiring it. It thus seems that both these denotations—to not desire worldly things, and to abstain from them even if one desires them—are the basic meanings of *zuhd*. This distinction becomes significant in mystical literature (see below).

Ibn Manẓūr also refers to men or women who eat little (Ibn Manẓūr 2000, p. 1876), which would align with the meaning of refraining from something whilst desiring it. A further denotation that Ibn Manẓūr adds is that words of the same root are applied to things that are thought to be base or paltry (*ḥaqīr*) (Ibn Manẓūr 2000, p. 1876). This means that people turn away from these things as they do not attach any value to them, either because the quantity is paltry, or because the thing itself is deemed to be base (even if the quantity is plentiful). As an example of the former, he mentions a man who 'does not want his wealth because it is too little'. For the latter, he tells of people who are 'base or lowly' (*la'īm*) or 'ignoble' (Ibn Manẓūr 2000, pp. 1876–77). The following conclusions about the meanings of *zuhd* and terms associated with it can thus be drawn:

1. The basic meaning is to not desire the pleasures of the world;
2. A second basic meaning is to abstain from the world even if it is desired;
3. It is to abstain from something because it is deemed to be *quantitatively* insignificant;
4. It is to abstain from something because it is deemed to be *qualitatively* insignificant;
5. It is used to denote either the perception of something (i.e., deeming something to be quantitatively or qualitatively insignificant), or to an action (i.e., not eating too much), or to both (i.e., eating little because it is deemed to be unimportant).

These, then, are the linguistic denotations of the term. We must now explore how the term is employed in the Qur'an.

4. Asceticism in the Qur'an

Terms deriving from linguistic root of *zuhd*, *z—h—d*, appear only once in the Qur'an. We are told that the people who found Yūsuf (Joseph) at the bottom of a well '*sold him for a paltry sum, a few silver coins (darāhim ma'dūda), and they did not attach any value to him (kānū fihi min al-zāhidīn)*' (Qur'an 12:20). The Mu'tazilite exegete, renowned for his linguistic commentary of the Qur'an, Abu'l-Qāsim al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) (Ibrahim and Ibrahim 1980, p. 102), writes in his exegesis of this verse that the term '*zāhidīn*' means that 'they had no interest in what they had, so they sold him for an insignificant amount' (Al-Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 2, p. 453). He cites the early commentary authority, 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687), who is 'by far the most prominent exegete (*mufasssīr*) of the Quran from the first generation of Muslims' (Berg 2011, p. 260), as saying that they sold him for just twenty silver coins (Al-Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 2, p. 453). The Kufan exegete, Suddī (d. 128/745), puts the figure at twenty-two (Al-Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 2, p. 453). This means that because they deemed Yūsuf to be insignificant, that led to the action of selling him for a trifling sum. Zamakhsharī elaborates that they could have sold him for petty cash because they were afraid those responsible for him would come and take him. If that was the case, then it was not that they thought he was unimportant, but they did not pay attention to the price because they wanted to get any amount they could for him. Finally, Zamakhsharī countenances the possibility that it refers to the travellers who purchased Yūsuf from his brothers since the verb *sharā* denotes both selling and buying (Lane 2003, vol. 4, p. 1544). Therefore, the meaning would be that they bought Yūsuf for a small sum because they thought he was an escaped slave (Al-Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 2, p. 453). It was due to his perceived ignoble act of escaping that he was deemed to be base, which is why they bought him for an insignificant price.

The Ash'arite theologian and exegete, whose commentary exerted a powerful influence on the tradition, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) (Griffel 2007, pp. 322–32), believes that the term '*zāhidīn*' refer to Yūsuf's brothers. This means that they sold him to travellers for a tiny amount because they did not attach any value to him (Al-Rāzī 1999, vol. 18, pp. 433–34). He adds that the basic meaning of *zuhd* is '*qilla*', which refers to both quantitative insignificance, i.e., 'fewness', or qualitative insignificance, i.e., 'inconsiderableness' (Al-Rāzī 1999, vol. 18, p. 434). He sums up the three possible interpretations of *zāhidīn* in this verse by saying that either (1) Yūsuf's brothers sold him because they attached no importance to him, or (2) the travelling caravan sold him for a small sum because they just found him so they did not attach any importance to him, or because they thought those responsible for Yūsuf would come for him and they wanted to get something for him, or (3) the people who purchased him only offered a paltry amount for him because they did not think he was worth very much (Al-Rāzī 1999, vol. 18, p. 434).

In arguably the most influential mystical commentary of the Qur'an, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072?) (Nguyen and Ingalls 2013) puts forward the idea that *zāhidīn* means not knowing the true value of something and to deem it to be worth less than it is out of ignorance (Al-Qushayrī n.d., vol. 2, p. 175). Zamakhsharī, Rāzī, and Qushayrī's commentaries of the Qur'anic usage of the term, thus, broadly correlates with the linguistic denotations of it. However, they do not include the first two meanings of renunciation from the world, either due to not desiring it or despite the desire for it, because the term is only employed in the Qur'an in the context of perceptions about and transactions relating to Yūsuf. The first two denotations, nevertheless, take centre stage in the prophetic traditions (*ḥadīths*).

5. Asceticism in *ḥadīth* Literature

The *ḥadīths* on *zuhd* emphasise turning away from the world and not desiring it because it is quantitatively and qualitatively insignificant compared to the hereafter, and so the believer is urged to have the correct conception of the world and act indifferent to it. All the significations of asceticism are thus adopted in *ḥadīth* literature. A quick survey of the main compilations of *ḥadīth* shows that there is a marked emphasis on 'renouncing the world' (*zuhd fi'l-dunyā*). There are numerous benefits listed by Prophet Muḥammad for doing this, of which the principal ones are:

1. God alleviating the misfortunes (*muṣībāt*) encountered in the world (Al-Iṣfahānī 1974, vol. 1, p. 74; Al-Qudā'ī 1986, vol. 1, p. 226; Al-Bajalī 1991, vol. 1, p. 27);
2. God teaching the ascetic knowledge that they could not have learned about (Al-Iṣfahānī 1974, vol. 1, p. 72; Ibn Shāhīn 2004, p. 107);
3. God granting the ascetic wisdom in their heart (Al-Iṣfahānī 1974, vol. 3, p. 191; Al-Bayhaqī 2003, vol. 13, p. 120).

The alleviation of misfortunes for the ascetic is the most cited benefit in the compilations. This benefit is also widely reported from the fourth Caliph, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) (Al-Dīnawarī 1999, vol. 2, p. 144; Al-Shajarī 2001, vol. 1, p. 345). After this, the bestowal of esoteric knowledge that cannot be acquired through learning is most popular. Finally, the conferment of wisdom, which is closely related to esoteric knowledge, is mentioned. Other benefits mentioned in compilations of *ḥadīth* that are not directly attributed to Prophet Muḥammad include:

1. Having the knowledge of the unseen uncovered for the ascetic (Al-Iṣfahānī 1974, vol. 1, p. 71)
2. The opening of the door to joy and happiness (*rawḥ*) in the hereafter for the ascetic (Al-Iṣfahānī 1974, vol. 9, p. 274).

Since the first reason, again, refers to esoteric knowledge that cannot be gained through regular means, and the second is related to the alleviation of misfortunes, they may be subsumed under the first two reasons mentioned above. This means that if the *ḥadīth* corpus is scrutinised generally, the two central advantages of renouncing the world are: alleviation

of misfortunes and acquisition of esoteric knowledge. These two primary benefits are preserved by Ibn ‘Arabī in his works. Prior to investigating how the Sufi does this, however, it behoves us to acquaint ourselves with Ibn ‘Arabī’s definition of *zuhd*.

6. Asceticism According to Ibn ‘Arabī

6.1. Ibn ‘Arabī’s Conception of Asceticism

Ibn ‘Arabī addresses the first two linguistic denotations of asceticism in his *magnum opus*, *Al-Futuhāt al-makkiyya*:

[The term] ‘asceticism’ (*zuhd*) can only be applied to property (*milik*) and the pursuit (*ṭalab*) for it, so refraining from pursuing [it] is asceticism because our companions [i.e., the Sufis] differ about the pauper (*faqīr*) who does not have any property: is it proper for the term ‘ascetic’ to be applied to them, or do they have no part (*lā qadam lah*) in this rank [of asceticism]? Our position is that a pauper is in a position to have the desire for worldly things and can take great pains (*ta‘ammala*) to attain it, even if they do not succeed. Thus, to forsake this endeavour and pursuit, and to not desire it, that is without doubt asceticism. (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 177)

Ibn ‘Arabī adheres to the original linguistic denotation of *zuhd* when he writes that it means to not covet worldly things. He differentiates between the ascetic and the pauper, observing that the pauper could well covet worldly things, but just be unable to attain them. This, according to him, would not qualify them as an ascetic because he maintains that the condition of not coveting the world is key. In other words, not every poor person is an ascetic. Asceticism, primarily, then, refers to the lack of desire for and forsaking the pursuit of worldly things, according to Ibn ‘Arabī. He therefore applies the outer-inner (*ẓāhir-bāṭin*) duality to his delineation of *zuhd*. Asceticism is not connected with the outer (*ẓāhir*) aspect of not possessing material things; it concerns the inner (*bāṭin*) aspect of a person because what matters is whether worldly things are coveted and pursued (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 553; Lala 2021).

Ibn ‘Arabī underscores this when he writes that there are disparate kinds of asceticism:

These matters are of two types: a type that applies to the outer (*ẓāhir*) aspect and the inner (*bāṭin*) aspect of a person, such as piety (*wara’*) and repentance (*tawba*), and a type whose perfection (*kamāl*) lies in the inner aspect of a person, then if the outer aspect follows, there is no harm in that, such as asceticism (*zuhd*) and trust in God (*tawakkul*). But in the path to God, the Exalted, there is no station that pertains to the outer aspect alone and not the inner aspect. (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 1, p. 97)

Ibn ‘Arabī explains that the matters pertaining to spirituality either relate to the outer and inner aspects of a person, or just to the inner aspect, but never just to the outer aspect. As examples of the former, he cites piety (*wara’*) and repentance.¹ This is because ‘piety’ refers to abstaining from sins or prohibited things (*taḥarruj*) (Ibn Manẓūr 2000, p. 4814) and repentance refers to asking for forgiveness after doing wrong. Therefore, in both cases, there is an inner aspect, either fear of displeasing God for the former, or feeling sorry for having disobeyed God for the latter, that leads to the outer aspect, which is abstaining from prohibited things, or asking for forgiveness, respectively.

Ibn ‘Arabī then cites asceticism and trust in God (*tawakkul*) as instances of the inner aspect of a person. He adds that this may be followed by the outer aspect, that is, actions that emanate from the inner aspect, but that is not necessary. Ibn ‘Arabī thus implies that asceticism is not renouncing worldly things, but renouncing the pursuit of worldly things as one does not desire them. He acknowledges that the latter often leads to the former, but that is not a necessary condition for it, so it is possible for an ascetic to be wealthy because they have wealth even though they did not pursue it nor do they have any desire for it. The same is true for the person who trusts in God: they may or may not have possessions because they have implicit trust in God and are content with whatever situation they find

themselves in. It is in this sense that trust in God and asceticism are intimately related; indeed, Kinberg observes that ‘*zuhd* is based on trust in God, or *tawakkul*’ (Kinberg 1985, p. 33).

The meaning of renouncing the pursuit of the world was absent from the Qur’anic usage of the term; nevertheless, it featured prominently in *ḥadīth* literature, and Ibn ‘Arabī focusses on this aspect of the term. Indeed, as Ibn Manẓūr’s entry reveals, renouncing the world due to not desiring it became the basic meaning of the term. It was this meaning that became the primary signification of the term from the second half of the second/eighth century, and it was the defining trait of a group known as the ascetics (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, pp. 552–53). Arthur Arberry observes that the ascetics were the forbears of the Sufis, but were only distinguished by their renunciation of the world and did not have any of the theoretical aspects of the movement that came afterwards (Arberry 1972, p. 33). Christopher Melchert affirms that the ascetic tradition was what later developed into the Sufi tradition (Melchert 1996; 2002, p. 407; 2020, pp. 177–88).

By Ibn ‘Arabī’s time, there was extensive theory that had built up around the concept of asceticism (*zuhd*) (Kinberg 1985), and the Sufi combines the idea of ‘abstaining from’ implicit in the term with his cosmology. Ibn ‘Arabī explains that since *zuhd* means to abstain from, it could refer to different things depending on the realm of existence that one was referring to. Although quite ambiguous about these planes of existence himself, his followers expatiated on and formally declared five planes of existence (Chittick 1982). Ibn ‘Arabī writes,

In the realm of dominion (‘*ālam al-mulk*), in terms of being ‘a Muslim’, *zuhd* refers to existents (*akwān*), so it is the furthest veil (*ḥijāb*). And in the realm of power (‘*ālam al-jabarūt*), in terms of being ‘a believer’ (*mu’min*), *zuhd* refers to the self, so it is the closest veil. And in the realm of sovereignty (‘*ālam al-malakūt*), in terms of being ‘one who has achieved excellence’ (*muḥsin*), *zuhd* refers to everything that is not God. (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 178)

Ibn ‘Arabī expands the primary denotation of *zuhd* from abstaining from the sensible world to abstaining from different realms of existence depending on the rank of a person. The realms he identifies are: (1) the realm of dominion (‘*ālam al-mulk*), which he defines simply as ‘the seen realm’ (‘*ālam al-shahāda*); (2) the realm of power (‘*ālam al-jabarūt*), which he says is the highest realm, or ‘the realm of exaltedness’ (‘*ālam al-‘aẓama*), according to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, but which ‘according to most people (*al-aktharīn*) is the middle realm’; and (3) ‘the realm of sovereignty’ (‘*ālam al-malakūt*), which is ‘the unseen realm’ (‘*ālam al-ghayb*) (Ibn ‘Arabī 1997, p. 540). It is noteworthy that Ibn ‘Arabī sides with the majority in designating the realm of power (‘*ālam al-jabarūt*) the middle realm between the seen and unseen realms. He remains faithful to the same tripartite classification that is related extensively in *ḥadīth* literature, in which the levels of faith are said to progress from mere submission (*islām*) to true belief (*īmān*) and culminate in achievement of religious excellence (*iḥsān*) (Ibn Mājah n.d., vol. 1, p. 24; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj n.d., vol. 1, p. 36; Al-Tirmidhī 1975, vol. 5, p. 6; Ibn Rāḥwayh 1991, vol. 1, p. 209; Ibn Ḥanbal 2001, vol. 1, p. 434; Al-Bukhārī 2002, vol. 1, p. 19; Ibn Khuzayma 2003, vol. 2, p. 1070; Abū Dāwūd 2009, vol. 7, p. 81).

Ibn ‘Arabī explains that at the lowest level, *zuhd* refers to merely turning away from other existents because the person does not value material things. He describes this as ‘the furthest veil’ because it is the veil of all physical things besides oneself, or the veil of the Other. This naturally refers to the physical world. The middling rank is that of the true believer who renounces themselves. This means that the person does not pay any attention to any of their desires, not just the desire for material things. This is the middle realm between the seen and unseen worlds because humankind combines the seen and unseen realms since aspects of it are connected to the unseen, such as the soul (*rūḥ*), whilst others, like the senses, are connected to the seen world (Nakamura 1994). It is for this reason that Ibn ‘Arabī describes this as ‘the closest veil’ because it is the veil of the self. Finally, the most exalted rank is that of religious excellence in which the spiritual adept renounces everything that is not God. This realm pertains to the unseen world.²

If Ibn ‘Arabī expands the denotation of *zuhd* to accommodate his cosmology, he reverses it completely to correlate with his theological metaphysics more generally. In the *Futūḥāt*, he explains that the primary signification of renouncing and turning away from the world, and to not have any desire for it, is only if the aspirant on the Sufi path has not had spiritual unveiling, for ‘if the covering (*ghīṭā*) from the eye of their heart is removed, they would not renounce it, nor would it behoove them to renounce it’ (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 178). Asceticism, therefore, would be blameworthy for the Sufi adept whose spiritual unveiling allows them to see ‘the reality’ (*ḥaqīqa*) of things as they truly are, says Ibn ‘Arabī (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 178). This is because Ibn ‘Arabī affirms that the sensible world—indeed, every plane of existence—is nothing but a manifestation of God’s ‘most beautiful Names’ (*Asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) that are delineated in the Qur’an (Qur’an 7:180). At the very beginning of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī explicates that the ‘desire’ of God to see His most beautiful Names in something else was the reason for the creation of all realms of existence (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 48). All things that exist are thus loci of manifestation of the divine Names of God. On this issue in the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn ‘Arabī is characteristically more prolix (Abū Zayd 2002, p. 135):

[God said,] ‘I was a treasure that was not known, and I wanted to be known. I thus created the creation and made Myself known to them (*ta’arraft ilayhim*), so that they would know Me’. . . . And God existed when there was nothing with Him, and the knowledge of the universe was from His knowledge of Himself, so what became manifest in creation was only what was in Himself. It is as if He was only an inner (*bāṭin*) aspect and He became manifest (*ẓāhir*) through the universe. (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 399)

Since it was just what God ‘was in Himself’ that ‘became manifest’ in the universe, it means that the universe is the outer aspect of God, and God is the inner reality of the universe. If that is the case, then to renounce the world is to renounce God Himself, which is why it does not behoove the Sufi adept, who is cognisant of this inner reality, to renounce the world. Ibn ‘Arabī takes great pains to underscore that God, as manifested in the universe, is not God as He is in His absoluteness (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 54), to borrow Izutsu’s phrase (Izutsu 1983, pp. 23–38). Nevertheless, as a manifestation of His divine Names, the world is ‘divine’, and so the Sufi adept, far from renouncing the world, embraces it in their bid to achieve proximity to the divine. To make his point even more pellucidly, Ibn ‘Arabī remarks that ‘surely God does not renounce the creation’ (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 178), but that is not for the reason that non-elite Sufis think, namely, that He is ever-willing to turn to His creation in forgiveness and so, no matter their transgressions, He never renounces them. Instead, says Ibn ‘Arabī, it is because ‘there is nothing there [in creation] except God’ (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 178). As all things are a manifestation of God’s divine Names, God does not renounce them because to renounce them would be to renounce Himself. Likewise, the advanced Sufi who has realised this does not just embrace the world, but they consider not forsaking it ‘to be an obligation (*mafrūḍ*)’ (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 178).

The duality of renouncing the world, if it is seen as something other than the divine, and embracing it, if it is seen as a manifestation of the divine, is perceptible in Ibn ‘Arabī’s works generally. But it is most perspicuously emblematised in the example of Idrīs (Enoch) and Ilyās (Elias): one person who lived two separate lives, one in which he renounced the world, and the other in which he embraced it. We shall attend to Idrīs, the ascetic, first.

6.2. The Asceticism of Idrīs

The Prophet Idrīs is only mentioned twice by name in the Qur’an (Qur’an 19:56–57; 21:85–86). God declares that He raised Idrīs to ‘an elevated place (*makān ‘aliyy*)’ (Qur’an 19:57). Most exegetes take this to mean that God raised the spiritual rank of Idrīs (Al-Ṭabarī 2005, vol. 18, p. 212). Ibn ‘Arabī, nevertheless, talks about two different kinds of elevation in the chapter he devotes to Idrīs in which, like all the chapters of the *Fuṣūṣ*, he reveals the hidden wisdom behind this prophet (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 75–80). He begins the chapter by declaring, ‘Elevation (*al-‘uluww*) is attributed to two things: the elevation of place (*‘uluww*

makān) and the elevation of position (*'uluww makāna*)' (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 75). These two types of elevation are attained in different ways, as Dawūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), one of the most popular and authoritative early commentators of the *Fuṣūṣ* (Chittick 1984, p. 1; Rustom 2005, pp. 54–56), points out,

When ascetics (*zuḥḥād*) and assiduous worshippers (*'ubbād*), who do not have any knowledge about the realities (*ḥaqā'iq*) or any gnosis (*ma'rifa*), found out that the elevation of position is only through knowledge and true spiritual unveiling, and their spirits began to fear and they thought that they would not have any share of that elevation, God mentioned in His Word, after saying, '*And God is with you, and He will not dupe you . . .*', that God will not diminish your deeds, so you will have the elevation of place according to your actions. The elevation of position is therefore only through knowledge and the elevation of place through actions, for position is for the soul just as place is for the body; knowledge is the spirit of action, and action is its body. . . . And whoever combines them will have two elevations. (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 545)

While the elevation of position is only gained through knowledge, the elevation of place is attained by practice and asceticism. In this chapter, Ibn 'Arabī explains just how important orthopraxy is in the path of the gnostic because the elevation of place that was granted to Idrīs was not on account of his knowledge, but due to his asceticism. Josef van Ess notes that actions were always emphasised in Islam because 'orthopraxy is more important than orthodoxy. At the level of action, in the liturgy and in daily life, details counted a great deal' (Van Ess 2006, p. 16). And this was certainly true for Ibn 'Arabī who was known for his punctilious adherence to the formal aspects of religion (Chittick 1992a, pp. xii–xiii; Addas 1993; De Cillis 2014, p. 169). Nūr al-Dīn al-Jāmī (d. 898/1492), who was 'a pre-eminent poet-theologian of the school of Ibn 'Arabī' (Rizvi 2006, p. 59), known for his fidelity to Ibn 'Arabī's writings (Chittick 1984, p. 1), elaborates that

People are characterised by elevation in two ways because they either have knowledge about God, the Exalted, or they act for His sake, so some of them ascend the ranks of knowledge, like the gnostics (*'arīfīn*), and others climb the stages of actions, like the worshippers and the ascetics. Others still, combine both things, like those who have achieved perfection. Actions, which are righteous and sincere, are associated with an elevated place, that is, they result in an elevated place, like the ranks of paradise. And knowledge of God is associated with an elevated position because it necessitates elevation in the ranks of closeness (*qurb*) to God, the Exalted. This is because position is associated with the soul (*rūḥ*) whereas place is associated with the body (*jism*) (Al-Jāmī 2005, p. 96).

Since religion pertains to the soul and the body, says Jāmī, there are two conduits to rise through the ranks. The path of the soul is via knowledge, and this grants the person an elevated position because they end up being close to God through their knowledge of Him. The path of the body is through actions, like worship and asceticism, and the person reaches an elevated place, which is a high rank in paradise. Those who combine both of these are the ones 'who have achieved perfection'.

In this chapter, Ibn 'Arabī focusses mainly on the elevation of place through the body. Idrīs was given this form of elevation due to his extreme asceticism, as one of the principal formalisers of Ibn 'Arabī's mystical worldview, Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 736/1335?) (Lala 2019), spells out when he says that Idrīs was known for his superhuman feats of renunciation, such as not eating or sleeping for sixteen years because he 'shook off his mortal coil and mingled with the angels' (Al-Qāshānī 1892, p. 60). Later commentators of the *Fuṣūṣ* also emphasise the extreme asceticism of Idrīs citing the same examples, such as Qāshānī's student, Qayṣarī (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 542), and a major proponent of the philosophical type of interpretation of Ibn 'Arabī (Chittick 1992b, pp. 226–27), 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Mahā'imī (d. 835/1432) (Mahā'imī 2007, p. 174), as well as the Ḥanafī

commentator of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Muṣṭafā ibn Sulaymān Bālī Zādeh (d. 1069/1659) (Bālī Zādeh 2003, p. 74), among others.

Commentators of this chapter generally agree that the reason Ibn ‘Arabī designates the hidden wisdom of Idrīs as being that of holiness (*quddūsiyya*) is because Idrīs was distinguished by his insistence on divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) in much the same way as Prophet Nūḥ. Ibn ‘Arabī’s successor, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), who was the only person given official sanction by the Sufi to teach the *Fuṣūṣ* (Todd 2014, p. 17), writes in his commentary of this chapter that the term ‘holiness’ means that God is completely free from any trace of contingency and this is why it follows the chapter of Nūḥ, who also underscored the transcendence of God (Al-Qūnawī 2013, p. 22). The early modern follower of Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731), who was a key figure in many Islamic sciences during that period (Akkach 2012; Sukkar 2014), gives the following explanation for the association of Idrīs with holiness:

Idrīs, peace be upon him, was only distinguished by the wisdom of holiness because God, the Exalted, raised him to an elevated place, and that was the place of holiness (*makān al-taqdīs*) on the plane of the Holy Spirit, so he followed in the footsteps of Nūḥ, peace be upon him, in vehemently asserting the transcendence of God, the Mighty, the High. (Nābulusī 2008, vol. 1, p. 219)

Nābulusī suggests that the wisdom of holiness associated with Idrīs is not on account of God’s holiness that Idrīs emphasised, but because he was granted the ‘place of holiness’. Nevertheless, he was only given this rank because of his insistence of the transcendence of God. Therefore, there is a consensus that Idrīs’ wisdom is due to his accentuation of divine transcendence. Idrīs highlighted the transcendence of God through his asceticism and renunciation from the world, to the extent that he did not eat or sleep for sixteen years, as mentioned above. Indeed, there has always been a connection between italicising divine transcendence and asceticism. Melchert observes that the ascetics were ‘used to emphasizing divine transcendence’ (Melchert 2001, p. 360). This is because if God is completely transcendent of anything in the world, then the world as a whole is a distraction from one’s relationship with God. Yet, if Idrīs’ wisdom was underscoring God’s transcendence through asceticism by renouncing the world and having nothing to do with it, when he returned as Ilyās, his asceticism was transformed into a love for the world.

6.3. The Asceticism of Ilyās

There is a difference of opinion among exegetes of the Qur’an as to whether Idrīs and Ilyās are the same person. Ṭabarī gives both opinions, but says he favours the one that suggests they were different people because there are many centuries separating them (Al-Ṭabarī 2005, vol. 11, p. 509). He elaborates that Ilyās was the cousin of Prophet Mūsā whereas Idrīs was the grandfather of Prophet Nūḥ. Ṭabarī argues that this means Idrīs and Ilyās could not be the same person because Mūsā was a descendent of Nūḥ, so the grandfather of Nūḥ could not, at the same time, be a descendent of his own grandson (Al-Ṭabarī 2005, vol. 11, p. 509). The exegete and ḥadīth specialist, Abū Muḥammad al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122), agrees with Ṭabarī’s reasoning (Al-Baghawī 2014, vol. 3, p. 165). The important Ḥanafī scholar, Abū’l-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983?), who wrote influential works on numerous Islamic sciences (Haron 1994), thinks that Ilyās was not a cousin of Mūsā, but a descendent of Prophet Ismā‘īl (Al-Samarqandī n.d., vol. 1, p. 465).

Ibn ‘Arabī is far more unequivocal about the identity of Ilyās, echoing the opinion of the well-known companion of Prophet Muḥammad, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/653?), who suggested that Idrīs and Ilyās are one person with two names in the same way as Ya‘qūb, who also had the name Isrā‘īl (Al-Ṭabarī 2005, vol. 11, p. 509). Accordingly, Ibn ‘Arabī begins the chapter on Ilyās with the declaration, ‘Ilyās, he is Idrīs, who was a prophet before Nūḥ, God raised him to an elevated place’ (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 181). His resolution to the issue of the centuries separating Idrīs and Ilyās is to clarify that it follows the same pattern as Prophet ‘Īsā, who came before Prophet Muḥammad, but was raised up by God and will return centuries later as a follower of Prophet Muḥammad (Poston 2010). Ibn

‘Arabī thus writes, ‘he [Idrīs] was a prophet before Nūḥ then he was raised up (*rufi’a*) and sent down as a messenger [Ilyās] after that’ (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 186). Qayṣarī is explicit about this when he says,

His [Idrīs’ second] coming is like the [second] coming of ‘Isā, peace be upon both of them, and he was first [on Earth] before Nūḥ because he was his grandfather, . . . and he was [called] Idrīs, peace be upon him. And it should not be thought that this was by way of transmigration. (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1053)

Qayṣarī highlights the impossibility of Platonic transmigration by declaring that it was Idrīs himself who returned in the same body as Ilyās, in the same way as ‘Isā will return in the same body towards the end of days.³ The proof of this, argues Qayṣarī, is that Prophet Muḥammad met all the prophets on the Night of Ascension (*Laylat al-mi’rāj*), and he saw that Idrīs and Ilyās were one and the same person (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1052; Morris 1987b, p. 648, ft. 112).

Ibn ‘Arabī says that God revealed the wisdom of Idrīs or Ilyās twice (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 186), but it was different each time. This means that asceticism was represented twice but the form of asceticism that Idrīs displayed was not the one demonstrated by Ilyās. Indeed, this is the reason most commentators believe the wisdom associated with Ilyās is that of ‘intimacy’ (*īnās*) (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 181) because his asceticism—when it was renouncing the world and the body—allowed him to interact with and have spiritual intimacy with angels, and when his asceticism was embracing the world and his body, it allowed him to interact with and to have intimacy with humans. Qūnawī alludes to this in his commentary of this chapter when he says,

This wisdom is only associated with the attribute of intimacy because of the essential quality (*al-ṣifa al-dhātiyya*) in which God moulded Ilyās so that he could associate with angels and humans through it. (Al-Qūnawī 2013, p. 107)

This ‘essential quality’ was his asceticism that, in its renunciation of the world and the body, forged spiritual bonds with angels, and in its embracing the world and the body, cultivated relationships with humans. Qāshānī adds that it was on account of this ability to renounce the body and embrace it that he had intimate friends from among the angels and humans (Al-Qāshānī 1892, p. 227). Qayṣarī, in characteristic fashion, provides more detail on the general points made by his predecessors,

Know that Ilyās, peace be upon him, due to his spiritual constitution (*mizāj rūḥānī*), connected with the constitution of angelic forms (*mizāj ṣuwar malakiyya*), and due to his bodily constitution (*mizāj jismānī*), he connected with the constitution of human forms (*mizāj ṣuwar bashariyya*). He thus had intimate connections with the angels through his spiritual form . . . and he had intimate connections with humans through his physical form. (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1051)

Due to the fact that he was created with both aspects—spirituality and physicality—when he focussed on spirituality through renunciation of the world and the body, and he did not eat or sleep for sixteen years, he associated with angels. When he embraced the world and his physical body, and sought pleasure in it and through it because the world and his body are loci of manifestation of the divine Names, he associated with humans.

If asceticism through renouncing the body and the world to focus on God as an entity completely dissociated from the self and the world is emphasising His transcendence, then embracing the body and the world because they are loci of divine manifestation is emphasising divine comparability (*tashbīḥ*), as Bālī Zādeh makes clear,

Know that since Ilyās, peace be upon him, had an intimate connection with angels and mingled with them through his spiritual constitution, and he had an intimate connection with humans through his elemental constitution (*mizāj ‘unṣarī*). He [Ibn ‘Arabī] presented the wisdom of intimacy through his logos, and he explained in this chapter transcendence (*tanẓīḥ*) and comparability (*tashbīḥ*): his [Ilyās’ adherence to] transcendence was [emphasised] through his angelicity

(*malakiyya*), and his [adherence to] comparability was [emphasised] through his humanity (*bashariyya*). (Bālī Zādeh 2003, p. 261)

Bālī Zādeh explicitly identifies the asceticism of Idrīs, when he renounced the world and the demands of his own body, as a means of underscoring divine transcendence. Conversely, embracing the world and the demands of the body because they are manifestations of the divine is a means of underscoring divine comparability. Bālī Zādeh also juxtaposes the spiritual constitution of Idrīs with the elemental constitution of Ilyās because the body is made of the four elements that constitute the sublunar world, as Mu‘ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 700/1300?), the renowned student of Qūnawī (Hājī Khalīfa 1941, vol. 2, p. 1261; Kaḥḥālā 1993, p. 943), points out in his commentary of this chapter (Al-Jandī 2007, p. 272).

Similarly, Jāmī refers to the ‘physical reality’ (*ḥaqīqa jismāniyya*) of Ilyās (Al-Jāmī 2005, p. 165), as opposed to the spiritual reality of Idrīs, thereby highlighting the connection between the body and the soul, and how embracing the demands of the body is a form of asceticism in the same way as forsaking its demands can be. This is why, adds Nābulusī, the wisdom of Idrīs is only half of the truth acquired through gnosis (*ma‘rifā*), with the other half being attained through the wisdom of Ilyās (Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, p. 279). Mahā‘imī is more explicit, proclaiming that the half-wisdom of Idrīs is the wisdom of divine transcendence and the half-wisdom of Ilyās that completes it is the wisdom of divine comparability (Mahā‘imī 2007, p. 579). Elsewhere, he says that ‘certain knowledge’ (*‘ilm yaqīn*) of ‘the comprehensive reality’ (*al-ḥaqīqa al-jāmi‘a*) is gained through: (1) Ilyās’ intimate connection to ‘the lower realm’ (*al-‘ālam al-suflī*), which refers to the physical world and his asceticism through celebration of the demands of the body; (2) his connection to the ‘upper’ (*‘ulwī*) realm [as Idrīs], which is an allusion to his asceticism through renunciation of the body so that he became a disembodied intellect that mingled with the angels; and (3) combining these two facets (Mahā‘imī 2007, p. 558). True knowledge of the nature of God, then, can only be acquired through asserting His comparability by embracing His divine Names in the universe and through the body itself, and through asserting His transcendence by renouncing the world and the body.

Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to elucidate that God ‘let him [Ilyās] descend from the determination (*ḥukm*) of his intellect to the determination of his desire (*shahwa*), and He let him be an absolute animal (*ḥayawān muṭlaq*) (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 186). This means that after renouncing the body, Ilyās fulfilled all the demands of the body, or his desire (*shahwa*), as his body was a manifestation of all the divine Names, and partaking of the world as a means of partaking of the divinity that it represents, is a form of asceticism. It is for this reason that God combined both prophethood (*nubuwwa*) and messengerhood (*risāla*) in Ilyās, as opposed to just the prophethood (*nubuwwa*) of Idrīs (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1076). Jāmī states that when Ibn ‘Arabī mentions Ilyās following his desire, he refers to his association with the earth, in contradistinction to his association with the heavens that is intimated by the intellect (Al-Jāmī 2009, p. 449). In other words, as an animal that partakes of the world and follows the demands of the body, Ilyās expresses his asceticism through glorifying the divine Names of which these things are a manifestation. And as a disembodied intellect that is in the heavens with the angels, Idrīs expresses his asceticism through renunciation of the demands of the body and rejecting the physical world.

Nābulusī clarifies that Ilyās’ fulfilling his desire (*shahwa*) needs to be qualified. Since the only reason Ilyās was doing this was to express his love for the divine and to gain proximity to the divine through appreciating the divine Names that constitute the cosmos, he only followed the desires that were in accordance with the divine Wish (*mashī‘a*); thus, he did not violate any divine decrees and just fulfilled his desires with things that were morally neutral (*mubāḥ*) (Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, p. 307). Qayṣarī elaborates that being an ‘absolute animal’ (*ḥayawān muṭlaq*) simply means that Ilyās became an animal in the sense that ‘his intellect did not jostle for control in the execution of things, instead he was guided to what came from divine compassion in the rank of animality (*maqām al-ḥayawāniyya*)’ (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1076). Ilyās was therefore only an ‘absolute animal’ in the sense that it was his compassion, as a recipient of divine compassion, that dictated his actions instead of his

intellect. It is in this sense that Ḥakīm argues embracing the world can be said to represent a higher rank than renouncing it because asserting the transcendence of God through renunciation only causes a dissociation from God, whereas asserting the comparability of God through embracing the world forges a connection to Him (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 203).

The foregoing has demonstrated that Idrīs' renouncing of the world and the body to emphasise God's transcendence and Ilyās' embracing of the world and the body to emphasise God's comparability are both facets of their asceticism. If that is the case, then both these facets should be reflected in Prophet Muḥammad, who is the undifferentiated form of all the prophets who came before him (Lala 2023). It is for this reason that Ibn 'Arabī presents Prophet Muḥammad's asceticism through his renunciation of the world via prayer (salah) and his asceticism through embracing the world via his love for women and perfume.

6.4. The Asceticism of Prophet Muḥammad

It is widely reported in compilations of *ḥadīth* that Prophet Muḥammad said, 'Women and perfume (*tīb*) have been made beloved to me (*ḥubbib ilayy*), and my delight [*lit.* the delight of my eye (*qurraṭ 'aynī*)] is in prayer (salah)' (Al-Ṭabarānī n.d., vol. 6, p. 54; 'Abd al-Razzāq 1983, vol. 4, p. 321; Abū Ya'lā 1984, vol. 6, p. 199; Al-Nasā'ī 1986, vol. 7, p. 61; Al-Bazzār 1988–2009, vol. 13, p. 296; Ḥakīm 1990, vol. 2, p. 174; Abū 'Awāna 1998, vol. 3, p. 14; Al-Kalābādhi 1999, p. 25; Ibn Ḥanbal 2001, vol. 19, p. 305). Ibn 'Arabī draws on this tradition to reveal the hidden wisdom behind the logos of Prophet Muḥammad. Indeed, as Ralph Austin observes, the entire chapter is 'an extended commentary' of this tradition (Austin 1980, p. 269). Ibn 'Arabī shows that Prophet Muḥammad alludes to the world-renouncing asceticism of Idrīs through his connection to prayer, and to the world-embracing asceticism of Ilyās through his connection to women and perfume. This means that prayer emphasises the transcendence of God because it is through renunciation of the world that God's transcendence is demonstrated. Analogously, the association with women primarily, and perfume secondarily, underscores God's comparability through the divine Names because it is only by embracing the world that God's comparability can be grasped.

6.4.1. Asceticism through Prayer (Salah)

Ibn 'Arabī asserts that prayer highlights God's transcendence in his commentary of Q24:41, which states 'Everyone knows their own prayer (salah) to God, and their glorification (*tasbīḥ*) of Him'. He writes that this means

Everyone knows their own rank (*rutba*) in coming late in worshipping their Lord, and [they know] their glorification through which the preparedness (*isti'dād*) conveys the transcendence (*tanzīl*) of God. (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 225)

In this ambiguous explanation, Ibn 'Arabī refers to the fact that humankind 'comes late' when it comes to worshipping God because our prayers to God come after His 'prayers' to us, which, as Qayṣarī clarifies, 'is His perfecting us, and creating us with the qualities of beauty (*al-ṣifāt al-jamāliyya*) and majesty (*jalāliyya*), and His purifying us from the filth of defects (*danas al-naqā'is*) and the rust of the veils of contingency (*rayn al-ḥujub al-imkāniyya*)' (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1193).

This means that we can only worship God after He creates us. So after God's 'prayer' to us, that is, His creating us and imbuing in us His qualities of beauty and majesty, which in turn are based on His divine Names of beauty, such as 'The Compassionate' (*Al-Raḥmān*) and 'The Merciful' (*Al-Raḥīm*), and His Names of majesty, like 'The Avenger' (*Al-Muntaqīm*) and 'The One Who Compels' (*Al-Jabbār*) (Harris 1989), we pray to Him. Therefore, we are manifestations of His divine Names. Despite this, however, our 'preparedness conveys the transcendence of God' through prayer and glorification.

Qayṣarī explains that the dichotomy here is between the inner (*bāṭin*) meaning of what Ibn 'Arabī says, and what the outer (*ẓāhir*) meaning is (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, pp. 1193–94; Lala 2022b). Ibn 'Arabī states that through prayer, we underscore the transcendence of God, since we worship Him as the truly unique God, Who is completely beyond our

comprehension, in accordance with our preparedness. But our very existence alludes to God's comparability because we are created according to His divine Names and in His form. Jāmī makes it clear that our preparedness is our 'innate' (*fiṭrī*) and our 'original' (*aṣlī*) essence that affirms the transcendence of God through prayer (Al-Jāmī 2009, p. 533), but that does not detract from the fact that we are loci of divine manifestation.

Ibn 'Arabī explicates that the only reason Prophet Muḥammad declared his delight was in prayer was that he could dissociate from the world and concentrate on God alone. Thus, prayer 'is a secret conversation (*munājā*) between God and His servant' (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 222). He goes on to elaborate a little later that 'because it is a secret conversation, it is therefore a remembrance (*dhikr*), so whoever remembers God keeps company with God, and God keeps company with them' (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 223). Prayer, then, is the most powerful conduit for renouncing the world and focusing on the transcendent essence of God that is not expressed in the world or even comprehended by humankind. Nābulusī clarifies that God is always with all His servants because He is omnipresent, but it is the servant who is unaware of the presence of God except when they enter the secret conversation with God in prayer and leave the world behind (Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, p. 456).

Ibn 'Arabī affirms that only prayer that entails complete and total renunciation from the world and unadulterated connection with God is the one that imparts delight,

So consider the loftiness of the rank of prayer and where it ends up taking the one who offers it. Yet those who do not obtain the position of 'viewing' God (*ru'ya*) in prayer have not reached its utmost degree (*ghāya*) and so it cannot be the source of their delight because they do not see Him with Whom they are having a secret conversation. (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 223)

It is only the sole focus on God and the absolute renunciation of the world that imparts true delight in prayer because the person who prays in this way has established a true connection with God to the extent that they 'see' Him. Mahā'imī points out that Ibn 'Arabī naturally does not refer to seeing God literally since that is not possible in the phenomenal world, but it is a vision 'with the heart' (*qalbiyya*) and a 'spiritual' (*rūḥāniyya*) vision that precludes the intrusion of any other thought (Mahā'imī 2007, p. 711). Ibn 'Arabī alludes to this when he adds that 'On account of this, worship prohibits being occupied with things other than prayer, for as long as it persists' (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 224). In other words, because the person is completely focussed on God and has totally renounced the world, they have absolutely no preoccupation with what occurs therein. Nābulusī elaborates that total focus on God means that not only is the person not preoccupied with things that happen in the world, but they are likewise not preoccupied with any other forms of worship since they are just 'with' God (Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, p. 459). Ibn 'Arabī describes the prayer in which total renunciation from the world occurs as the prayer of the Perfect Man (*Al-Insān al-kāmil*) (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 224).⁴

The reason Prophet Muḥammad deliberately uses the phrase 'delight of my eye' (*qurraṭ 'aynī*) to describe prayer, says Ibn 'Arabī, is that the term *qurra* 'is derived from *istiqrār* (settledness), thus, the eye is only with Him when they (i.e., the servants) have a vision of Him', so they do not look at any thing, or any entity that is not a thing along with Him (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 225). Ibn 'Arabī shows his unique literalism (Morris 1987a; Sands 2006, p. 41) in deriving the term 'delight' (*qurra*) from form X of the root *q—r—r*, which denotes to be with (Lane 2003, vol. 7, p. 2500). This means that the eye of the servant is only with God and does not wander to anything else. Taking a leaf from his master's book, Qayṣarī also entertains the possibility that it means the eye is cooled by it (which is another denotation of *qurra*, Lane 2003, vol. 7, p. 2499) because the inner state (*bāṭin*) of a person is soothed and cooled by looking at the beloved, as opposed to the hot grief and instability that the eye of the one who is deprived of looking at the beloved suffers (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1190). Ibn 'Arabī writes that the servant who prays in this way does 'not look at any thing, or any entity that is not a thing' instead focussing only on God. While all commentators agree that Ibn 'Arabī is speaking about absolute focus on God to the exclusion of all other things, they differ about what Ibn 'Arabī refers to specifically. Bālī Zādeh believes this refers to

what ‘exists in the extramental world’ (*maʿwūd fiʿl-khārij*), or that which ‘does not exist in the extramental world’ (*maʿdūm fiʿl-khārij*) (Bālī Zādeh 2003, p. 324). Jāmī remarks along the same lines that it either refers to seeing God in a locus of manifestation in the physical world, like Mūsā who saw Him in a fire, or in loci of manifestations that are spiritual and essential (Al-Jāmī 2009, p. 531). Mahāʿimī, on the other hand, thinks it refers to seeing God in a locus of manifestation in this world, or as He truly is in the Hereafter (Mahāʿimī 2007, p. 717). Nābulusī offers a more mundane interpretation explaining that a servant who focusses on God alone renounces the world completely and does not divert their attention from God, irrespective of whether there is a reason for not looking at God or not (Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, p. 462).

The foregoing demonstrates that prayer represents the most powerful conduit for renouncing the world, which is why Prophet Muḥammad loved it so much as it gave him a way to focus absolutely on God and assert His transcendence because, even though the universe is a locus of manifestation of the divine Names, nothing can represent God as He truly is in His essence. In contradistinction to prayer, which causes a separation from the divine Names as the world to focus on the transcendent essence of God alone, women and perfume are intermediaries through which the divine Names of God can be fully apprehended in the world. Of these, women are the most perspicuous loci of manifestation of the divine Names (Lala 2022a).

6.4.2. Asceticism through Women

Ibn ʿArabī categorically rejects that Prophet Muḥammad was referring to the physical beauty of women when he remarked that women had been made beloved to him. He clarifies that a man who merely loves a woman for her physical beauty does not see that her form is the clearest manifestation of God’s divine Names (Ibn ʿArabī 2002, p. 218). This means that all he witnesses in her is a means of satisfying the base urges of his own animality (Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, pp. 440–41). A man who does this is certainly not an ascetic because he is taking pleasure in that which is other than God and he does not seek an association with God through the world. Ibn ʿArabī explains that a man of this nature ‘is ignorant of his own self’ (Ibn ʿArabī 2002, p. 218) because he does not realise that the only reason he has an affinity for women is because they are loci of divine manifestation in the same way as he is, so it is their essential complementarity that is drawing them to one another. If he fails to see this in women, that it is only because he has failed to see it in himself (Ibn ʿArabī 2002, pp. 214–15). It is for this reason that Prophet Muḥammad loved women, because his love for women was an expression of his love for God. Ibn ʿArabī declares that ‘whoever loves women in this way, then it is divine love (*ḥubb ilāhī*)’ (Ibn ʿArabī 2002, p. 218). Nābulusī adds that it is only the Perfect Man who loves in this way because his love for women is an exteriorisation of his love for God (Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, p. 440). In the same vein, Mahāʿimī notes that for a man like this, his love for women is created from the love of God and it returns to love for Him (Mahāʿimī 2007, p. 696). Prophet Muḥammad’s love for women was, therefore, a form of asceticism because it was a means of establishing a connection to God through His divine Names in the same way as his love for prayer was a means of establishing a connection to God through emphasising His transcendence.

Ibn ʿArabī explicates that the love and affection (*ḥanīn*) Prophet Muḥammad had for women was the type of love and ‘affection of the whole for the part’ (Ibn ʿArabī 2002, p. 215). This is because Prophet Muḥammad is the undifferentiated product of God’s creative outpouring that brought about existence (Lala 2023), as such, all things, including women, are differentiated parts of the whole that is the Prophet. Ibn ʿArabī goes as far as affirming that this is the same reason God loves humankind because He breathed His spirit into it and so He also has affection for it (Ibn ʿArabī 2002, p. 215). Jāmī is explicit about this when he writes that through the divine act of breathing His spirit into Ādam, God ‘established a connection of the whole to the part, between Him and His servant’ (Al-Jāmī 2009, p. 511).

This means that a man loves a woman because in her he can see a representation of the divine Names that is his own reality, which, in turn, allows him to connect with the divine Names (Al-Jāmī 2009, pp. 509–10). It is only in materiality that God can ever be witnessed, says Ibn ‘Arabī, even though God is ‘independent’ (*ghani*) of all things’ (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 217). Ibn ‘Arabī thus creates a parallel between God’s connection to the world through seeing His divine Names manifested in the Other (humankind), and a man’s connection to a woman through seeing his essence manifested in the Other (woman). If God connects to humankind through this manifestation of His divine Names, men connect to God through a contemplation of the divine Names in women. This is asceticism by embracing the world as a manifestation of the divine Names; specifically, the most pellucid manifestation of the divine Names in the sensible world: women, because ‘witnessing God in women is the greatest (*a’zam*) and most perfect (*akmal*) form of witnessing’ (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 217).

Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to elaborate that because the Names of God are manifested in all aspects of a woman, a man thus desires to have physical union with her because in this act the physical and the spiritual aspects are united. He clarifies that the pleasure a man feels in this act of union is nothing but the pleasure of connecting to the clearest manifestation of the divine in body and spirit (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 217). It is in this way that the pleasures of the world and the gratification of desires become expressions of asceticism as they are transformed into vehicles for connecting to God and forsaking their mundane realities. Adherence to the mundane realities is classified by Ibn ‘Arabī as the epitome of ignorance (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 218). Of these divine pleasures of the world if their true realities are grasped, the next one Ibn ‘Arabī mentions is perfume.

6.4.3. Asceticism through Perfume

Ibn ‘Arabī classifies the divine pleasure derived from perfume as being secondary to the divine pleasure derived from women, as mentioned above. He writes,

As for the wisdom of perfume (*ḥikmat al-ṭīb*), and why he [Prophet Muḥammad] put it after women, [it is because] in women are the fragrances of creation, and the most pleasant perfume is the embrace of the beloved (*‘ināq al-ḥabīb*). (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 220)

Women are passive objects of divine contemplation, but they are also active conduits of divine manifestation (Lala 2022a). They are passive because they remind men of their own essence as loci of divine manifestation, not only through their physical form and spiritual essence, but also through their aroma that comes from the divine creative breath (Flaquer 2011). Yet in their acceptance and transmission of this divine creative breath, they are active participants in the dissemination of the ‘fragrance of creation’. Qayṣarī expatiates on this by observing that women are given the ‘rank of motherliness’ (*rutbat al-umūma*) through which they produce offspring and

the person of spiritual unveiling (*ṣāhib al-kashf*) can smell the fragrance of their existence in them, and they are able to attain the ‘spiritual tasting’ (*dhawq*) that is associated with this smell . . . and this is the most delightful of all fragrances (*aladhdh al-rawā’ih*). (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1179)

The spiritual elite can smell the divine creative breath in women on account of which they are given ‘the rank of motherliness’ and produce offspring. This makes them active disseminators of the divine creative breath, but they are simultaneously passive because, as focussed loci of divine manifestation, they allow men to clearly observe the divine in them.

However, even though women are innate disseminators of the divine creative breath, they vary in their own manifestation of the divine Names in the same way as men. Ibn ‘Arabī points this out in his commentary of Q24:26 where he again showcases his commitment to linguistic literalism,

Vile women (*al-khabīthāt*) are for vile men (*al-khabīthīn*), and vile men are for vile women. And good women (*al-ṭayyibāt*) are for good men (*al-ṭayyibīn*), and good men are for good women.

Taking the terms *'al-khabīthāt'* and *'al-ṭayyibāt'* literally, Ibn 'Arabī notes that this means vile-smelling women are for vile-smelling men and sweet-smelling women are for sweet-smelling men (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 221). The reason for this, as Mahā'imī explains, is that the act of breathing is an effusion of the spirit through the body because the spirit is blown into the body by God. There is therefore a reciprocal effusion in each breath that is the consequence of the initial infusion of the spirit. The vile smell exuding from evil women and men is because of their impure spirits. Conversely, the sweet smell emanating from pious women and men is due to the purity of their spirits (Mahā'imī 2007, p. 705). Even though women have the sweet smell of the divine creative breath, their own benightedness exudes this vile smell in the same way as it does for men. These are the people who do not go beyond the exoteric in the sensible world. They do not see all existents in the world as separate loci of manifestation of the divine Names, and humans as microcosmic loci of all the divine Names. The pleasures they feel in the world are the sensual pleasures of their own animality as Jāmī observed, as opposed to the divine pleasure that is experienced by the spiritual elite who see the divine Names manifested everywhere and in everything. The latter group, therefore, connect to God through the world. The pleasure they experience through material things in the world is a manifestation of their asceticism; for the former group, it is the opposite.

Ibn 'Arabī shows that Prophet Muḥammad demonstrates his asceticism by asserting the transcendence of God through renouncing the world in prayer and forging a connection only with God to the exclusion of all material things in sensible reality. However, in embracing the world through loving women and perfume, Prophet Muḥammad simultaneously demonstrates his asceticism through asserting the comparability of God because all things, especially women (and perfume, which is subordinated to women) are focussed loci of divine manifestation.

7. Conclusions

Ibn 'Arabī defines asceticism in two ways. The first definition is to renounce the world and connect to God because all things in the world only detract from a relationship with God. This is because the absolute essence of God is completely transcendent of all things that exist in the world. Therefore, in order to associate with God, one must dissociate from the world. The other definition, nevertheless, is antithetical to this. Ibn 'Arabī argues that because the world is a manifestation of God's divine Names, all things in reality are divine. In order to connect to the divine, then, one must embrace the world. In this way, a person expresses their asceticism by asserting God's comparability and connecting to Him through the world. Ibn 'Arabī presents the conventional form of asceticism as renouncing the world in the chapter of Idrīs of the *Fuṣūṣ*. But when Idrīs returns to earth as Ilyās, this world-renouncing asceticism is transformed into a world-embracing asceticism that emphasises God's comparability. Finally, as Ibn 'Arabī believes that the reality of all things is contained within the reality of Prophet Muḥammad, he exhibits both types of asceticism: he asserts God's transcendence by renouncing the world through his love for prayer, and he asserts God's comparability by embracing the world through his love for women and perfume.

8. Further Study

Ibn 'Arabī's conception of asceticism has been explained in this paper. Further studies could build on this in two ways: (1) interrogate the concept of asceticism amongst the followers of Ibn 'Arabī because we know that many of his followers were not merely commentators of his works, but original thinkers in their own right (Morris 1987a), and (2) provide a more general overview of how asceticism developed in the Sufi tradition. In both cases, this study would be useful. In the first case, Ibn 'Arabī's delineation of asceticism would be the basis upon which his followers build their own idea of asceticism. In the second, Ibn 'Arabī's dual definition of asceticism would be one point in the evolution of the term in the Sufi tradition.

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Notes

- ¹ Leah Kinberg explores the relationship between *zuhd* and *wara'* in 'What is Meant by *Zuhd*' (Kinberg 1985, pp. 41–43).
- ² It is observed that there are significant parallels between Ibn 'Arabī's categorisation of these realms and that of his eminent predecessor, Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). Although, as Kojiro Nakamura notes, 'Ghazālī's *malakūt* corresponds to the *jabarūt* and *malakūt* of Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arabī taken together' but 'the *mulk* is the same for them all' (Nakamura 1994, p. 44). Nevertheless, the significant influence Ghazālī's cosmology had on Ibn 'Arabī supports Franz Rosenthal's assertion that Ibn 'Arabī was generally heavily affected by Ghazālī's thought (Rosenthal 1988).
- ³ Many scholars affirm that Plato subscribes to metempsychosis because the idea is prominent in his dialogues. Nevertheless, Erland Ehnmark has doubts about whether Plato really believed in the idea because he often seems to deride it as just a myth (Ehnmark 1957).
- ⁴ The concept of the Perfect Man is extremely significant in Ibn 'Arabī's theological system. However, it lies beyond the scope of this study. Extensive detail on the concept of the Perfect Man is provided by 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 812/1408?) (Jīlī 1997). Nevertheless, Fitzroy Morrissey demonstrates that Jīlī departs from Ibn 'Arabī's own presentation of the idea (Morrissey 2020).

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