

Between Transcendence and Immanence: Husserl and Ibn al-'Arabi on the Imagination

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Abstract

The trajectory of Edmund Husserl's thought on "phantasy" points toward a de-emphasis of both perception and presence as tools for understanding the imagination. I will argue, however, that Husserl's treatment of "phantasy" is ultimately deficient inasmuch as it focuses on the epistemological function of the imagination, while neglecting its ontological significance. As a corrective, I will develop an ontological concept of imagination by drawing on the work of the 12th century Sufi philosopher, Ibn al-'Arabi. It will be shown that the imagination is a constitutive feature of both the world (as the horizon of possibility) and all knowledge of the world (as an intentional relationship); it is both ontologically and epistemologically essential.

Keywords: Imagination, Edmund Husserl, Phantasy, Phenomenology, Ibn al-'Arabi

I. Introduction

IF IMAGINATION IS, AS PAUL Ricoeur put it, "the capacity for letting new worlds shape our understanding of ourselves," then it is an indispensable aspect of religious consciousness.¹ Indeed, medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers were explicit about the role of the imagination in religious practice. So the *Zohar's* commentary on Psalm 31:23 states, "[God] is known and grasped to the degree that one opens the gates of imagination! The capacity to connect with the spirit of wisdom, to imagine in one's heart-

¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics," trans. J. B. Thompson in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 181. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at meetings of the Western North Carolina Community of Continental Philosophers and the International Network in Philosophy of Religion.

mind—this is how God becomes known.”² Similarly, the Sufi philosopher Ibn al-‘Arabi argues that “nothing has truly gained possession of the [Divine] Form except imagination.”³ And Thomas Aquinas claims that the *imaginatio* is one of four inner senses that may “express divine things better than those [images] do which we receive from sensible objects.”⁴ Far from being whimsical, fantastic, or juvenile, the imagination is regarded as a primary way of knowing God, or connecting the transcendent and the immanent—at least when it is used correctly.⁵ Yet the nature and function of the imagination is difficult to discern. It is tempting to think that imagination derives *from* perception; however, the boundaries between perception and imagination are not always clear. We cannot assume that imagination functions primarily to modify stable underlying perceptions, for imagination also affects our basic perceptions. In the Catholic liturgy, for example, the bread and wine is not just imagined to be the body and blood of Christ; it is *perceived* as such. When a worshipper exits the church, she does not *imagine* that the beggar on the corner is a fellow child of God; rather, she *perceives* the beggar as a brother. When she looks at the natural world, she *perceives* it as a creation that demands care and attention. In other words, the boundary between imagination and perception—however we define those terms—is somewhat fuzzy. This raises a significant phenomenological problem: What role does the imagination play in phenomenal constitution?

This question is extremely important for a phenomenological understanding of religious life and practice, but it is far more complicated than it first appears. After decades of phenomenological investigations into “phantasy,” Edmund Husserl cautioned that, “we need to reflect carefully here. Determining the essence of phantasy is a great problem.”⁶ It is not clear to me that Husserl ever settled on a satisfactory understanding of fantasy. Nonetheless, the trajectory of Husserl’s thought is suggestive. In the first section of this essay, I will survey three concepts of imagination based on three theories of consciousness in Husserl’s work: 1) the image theory; 2) the content-apprehension schema; and 3) time consciousness (or absolute consciousness). I will argue that Husserl focuses on the epistemological

² Daniel Chanan Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 66.

³ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, IV 325.2. As quoted in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 115f.

⁴ *Summa Theologia*, 1.12.13. For a concise overview of Aquinas’ concept of *imaginatio*, see F.C. Bauerschmidt, “Imagination and Theology in Thomas Aquinas,” *Louvain Studies* 34 (2009-10): 169-184.

⁵ Medieval thinkers often caution against the misuse of the imagination. After all, we can imagine a just world as easily as an unjust world. For an excellent historical/ genealogical overview of “imagination,” see Richard Kearney, *The Wake of the Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, trans. John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 671.

function of the imagination, while neglecting its ontological significance. In the second section, I will develop an ontological concept of imagination by drawing on the work of the 12th century Sufi philosopher, Ibn al-‘Arabi. Ultimately, imagination is a constitutive feature of both the world (as the horizon of possibility) and all knowledge of the world (as an intentional relationship); it is both ontologically and epistemologically essential.

II. Husserl on fantasy, image theory, and representation

Before examining the evolution of Husserl’s thoughts on fantasy, it will be helpful to get a general sense of the distinction between perception and fantasy. In any act of perception, memory, or anticipation, I am conscious of events as existing now, as having existed in the past, or as coming to exist in the future, respectively. Yet fantasy is wholly different inasmuch as the positing of existence, which is fundamental to perception, memory, and anticipation is not involved. As Husserl puts it, “Phantasying is set in opposition to perceiving and to the intuitive positing of past and future as true; in short to all acts that posit something individual and concrete as existing.”⁷ In fantasy, I do not assume that the fantasy object has ever or will ever exist. If I imagine a blue unicorn, the act of imagining involves an awareness that I am *not* positing the existence of a blue unicorn. Of course, I can fantasize about things that do actually exist—a different arrangement of this room, for example—but even so, the object of my fantasy is present to me as something *different* from my actual perception of existence: “If I make the shift [from perception] into phantasy, I have the *consciousness of passing over* into a null world. What is re-presented is does not exist: it neither exists now nor has existed now will be coming into existence.”⁸ Thus Husserl distinguishes two modes of presentation: “perceptual presentation” and “phantasy presentation.” In both cases, a phenomenon is present to consciousness, but perceptual presentation posits existence while phantasy presentation does not.

Husserl differentiates phantasy presentation from perceptual presentation in two main ways: First, he distinguishes between memory, which reproduces an actual experience “as it were” or as it happened in the past, and phantasy, which produces an experience “as if” it were. In an unmodified memory—that is to say, a memory that does not transform what is

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Ibid., 360. Brough translates *Vergegenwaertigung* as “re-presentation,” while F. Kersten (translator of *Ideas I*) translates it as “presentation.” Neither is entirely satisfactory: “re-presentation” implies a sort of temporal repetition (copy v. original) in a way that *Vergegenwaertigung* does not; “presentation” is a neologism and, as such, is not all that helpful. The Langenscheidt dictionary translates it as ‘visualization,’ but the emphasis on vision is not entirely right either.

remembered—consciousness reproduces a previous experience in the temporal mode of “as it were.” So, for instance, if I remember the experience of driving in the car with my grandfather, that experience is present to me now, but in the temporal mode of “as it were” or “as having happened.” I can also phantasize about that memory: Suppose I imagine that my grandfather drove a red Corvette rather than a white Oldsmobile. In that case, the experience is once again manifest to me, but phantasy adds a new mode of intentionality: the “as-if,” which modifies the temporal mode of the memory. So the experience is now present in the mode of “*as if it were*”—*as if* my grandfather had driven a red Corvette. The same logic applies to future experiences. If I expect the sun to rise tomorrow, that experience is present to me in the mode of “as it will be.” If I phantasize about that expectation (What if the sun turns blue when it rises tomorrow?), the temporal mode shifts to something like “*as if it would be*.” In both cases, phantasy occurs in the mode of “as-if.” As Husserl puts it, “In lively intuition we ‘behold’ centaurs, water nymphs, etc.; they stand before us, depart, present themselves from this side and that, sing and dance, and so on. All, however, in the mode of the ‘as-if’; and this mode saturates all of the temporal modes and with them also content, which is content only in temporal modes.”⁹

The second way that Husserl differentiates phantasy presentation from perceptual presentation has to do with the nature of the experience of phantasy. If I imagine that I am driving with my grandfather in a red Corvette, I am experiencing something—I am thinking, creating a mental image, wondering “what if,” and so forth—but the experience does not rise to the level of normal perceptual experience in which a phenomenal object is *actually given*. One difference between the two experiences is that phantasies are protean, while actual perception is not. That is to say, phantasies can change at any moment, while perception is stable from one moment to the next. Another difference is that phantasy objects have no identity across time and space.¹⁰ The red Corvette I fantasize about cannot be said in any meaningful sense to be identical to the one that you fantasize about, but if we both perceive a red Corvette driving by, then the object of our perceptions is identical. Husserl therefore speaks of fantasy as a “quasi-intuiting” act or “quasi-experience,” in which one is conscious of the fantasy object *as a figment* as opposed to something actual.

Husserl’s notions of “as-if” and “quasi-experience” remain more-or-less consistent throughout his corpus, but the role assigned to fantasy in the

⁹ Ibid. 606.

¹⁰ In his early work, Husserl conflates phantasy and possibility and therefore claims that different phantasy objects can be identical inasmuch as they point to the same possible object. He later distinguishes between phantasy and possibility because possibility gestures toward existence while phantasy has nothing to do with existence. A phantasy can become a possibility if one reflects on the potential existence of the phantasy object, but pure phantasy is not equivalent to possibility. Accordingly, in his later work, Husserl maintains that phantasies have no identity across space and time.

process of constitution varies greatly depending on the concept of consciousness involved. We can discern three theories of consciousness at work in Husserl's explanation of fantasy: first, the "image theory" of consciousness; second, the "content-apprehension schema" of consciousness, and third, "time consciousness" (or "absolute consciousness").¹¹ Let us consider each in turn.

The image theory of consciousness assumes that representations in the mind (e.g., memories, fantasies, and so forth) work much like a painting hanging on a gallery wall. First, there is the image itself—the physical painting on the wall, about which we might say that it "hangs askew, is torn, and so forth."¹² Then there is the *image object*, which is the image that appears on the painting. So, for instance, the *Mona Lisa* is an image that has physical characteristics (e.g., size, type of paint, position on the wall at the Louvre); it also depicts an image of woman, but that image differs from the actual woman in terms of its size, coloring, and so forth. Presumably the actual Lisa was not the same size as the image in the painting! So the *image object* (that is, the depiction) is different from the *image subject* (that is, the depicted thing)—in this case, the actual woman, Lisa Gherardini.

While the physical image and image subject are both real things, Husserl argues the image object is not: "[The] image object is naturally not a part or side of the physical image—not, say, the color distributed on the paper in such and such a way. The semblance thing is a three-dimensional body with color spread over the body; it is not identical with the surface of the paper and its chromatic gradation of tints."¹³ Think of it this way: When we ask whether an image is a good depiction of its subject, we are not asking whether the bare physical matter of the image matches its subject. That would be absurd. The *Mona Lisa* is a two-dimensional painting, after all, while Lisa Gherardini is a three-dimensional flesh-and-blood person. Rather, we are asking whether the *image object* (the depiction) matches the *image subject* (the depicted), but the image object cannot really exist, for only the physical painting and the object depicted exist! In other words, the image object is a construct—an "interpreting act"—that represents the image subject, mediating between what actually appears (the physical image) and what does not (the image subject). Similarly, Husserl argues that fantasy and memory are modes of representational consciousness, in which mental images represent an object that is absent—for instance, a previous experience or non-existent object. Alternately, in perception, the image object and subject coincide in the *present*. On this model, the fundamental

¹¹ Husserl draws a distinction between the image theory and representational theory of consciousness. I would further differentiate between theories of representation that reflect Husserl's earlier static conception of consciousness and those that reflect his later genetic conception of consciousness.

¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 118.

distinction between perception and fantasy “is between presentation and representation.”¹⁴

By 1905, Husserl begins to question the image theory of consciousness. In the case of fantasy, he argues that it would be impossible to distinguish between an image object and an image subject. If I imagine a blue unicorn, for example, the image I have does not represent another reality, like a real blue unicorn or some other depicted object that would serve as an image subject. As Husserl puts it, “We do indeed have an appearance of an object in phantasy presentation, but no an appearance of something present by means of which the appearance of something not present would come about.”¹⁵ In other words, a fantasy does not point beyond itself in the same way that a depicting image does; rather, fantasy objects are available to consciousness in a simple, straightforward manner much like perceptual objects. The difference is that perceptions are objectivated as present while fantasies are objectivated as non-present; both are, however, “ultimate mode[s] of intuitive objectivation.”¹⁶ Husserl concludes that the analogy between consciousness and images cannot accurately account for the nature and function of fantasy. So much for the image theory.

The second theory of consciousness that features in Husserl’s analysis of fantasy is the “content-apprehension schema.”¹⁷ On this view, consciousness consists of “primary contents” (e.g., color-data, tone-data, touch-data) and intentional apprehensions that give form to those contents—“a stuff-stratum and a noetic stratum.”¹⁸ Take, for instance, the perception of my desk. The perception consists of various data, which are immanent sensory contents—color-data like brownness and touch-data like smoothness. These immanent data become “representants” of a phenomenal object through an intentional apprehension, resulting in the intentional object—namely, my desk. On this view, the difference between perception and fantasy has to do with the mode of apprehension applied to various types of contents. When I perceive my desk, “brown” and “smooth” sensations undergo a perceptual apprehension resulting in a perceptual object: my desk. If I were to fantasize about my desk (I wish it had the ability to clean itself off!), then I would re-present those sensory components (phantasms) by means of a “phantasy apprehension,” which would result in a fantasy object.

Husserl eventually rejected the “content-apprehension schema” as part of a broader turn from static phenomenology, which offered a schematic

¹⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁶ Ibid., 93.

¹⁷ The distinction between content of apprehension and apprehension is equivalent to the distinction between *hylē* and *morphē* in *Ideas I*, which Husserl traces back to his earliest work, *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891). See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy I*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 203-207.

¹⁸ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 207.

view of the constitution of phenomenal objects, to genetic phenomenology, which looked in greater detail at the formation of transcendental subjectivity. In the content-apprehension schema, the immanent contents of consciousness are simply there—present and waiting to be animated by a perceptual or phantasy apprehension. Yet the defining feature of phantasy is “non-presence.” How is it that consciousness can bestow upon immanently present contents the characteristic of non-presence? John Brough puts it well: “If I experience the phantasm as an immanent content present and there itself, how could an apprehension render it not present and not there itself? It is simply not tenable that a present phantasm could undergo a ‘discrediting modification’ into something that is not present.”¹⁹ Additionally, the content-apprehension schema cannot explain the origin of the contents of consciousness. How did those contents get there in the first place? Husserl puts the objection as follows:

In the case of perception understood as concrete experience, we do not first of all have a color as content of apprehension and then the characteristic of apprehension that produces the appearance. And likewise in the case of phantasy we do not again have a color as content of apprehension and then a changed apprehension, the apprehension that produces the phantasy appearance. On the contrary: “Consciousness” consists of consciousness through and through, and the sensation as well as the phantasm is already “consciousness.”²⁰

Both contents and apprehensions are aspects of consciousness and, therefore, a new analysis of consciousness is necessary.

The “genetic” phenomenology that emerges in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* and the *Crisis* texts points to a deeper, absolute stratum of conscious life, which *experiences* but is not itself experienced, and which constitutes phenomenal objects but is not itself an object. On this view of consciousness, *all* of the elements of constituting activity (subject, object, content, form, temporality, perception, fantasy, and so forth) are seen as internal components of “absolute” consciousness, the defining feature of which is time consciousness.

Husserl argues that absolute consciousness is essentially a temporal flow, from the now-phase of an experience forward to consciousness of future phases (protention) and backward to the consciousness of past experiences (retention). Every actual experience occurs within the temporal flow of consciousness and involves all three phases: “every phenomenon of original presentation, also involves components of post-presentation [i.e., retention] and fore-presentation [i.e., protention].”²¹ Accordingly, every phenome-

¹⁹ John Brough, translator’s introduction to *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), LX.

²⁰ Husserl, *Phantasy, Image-Consciousness, and Memory*, 265.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 381.

non—every experience, whether perception or fantasy—is suffused with the absence of future and past. It is, therefore, impossible to separate perception from fantasy on the basis of a distinction between presence and absence as if perception were the experience of a *present* object and fantasy were the experience of an *absent* object, for absence colors *every* experience.

The development of time consciousness results in a major shift in Husserl's understanding of consciousness in general and fantasy in particular, both of which he ultimately defines in terms of "impressions" and "reproductions." Husserl identifies impressions as, "experiences in which an originary present, an originary now, becomes constituted, or an originary just-having-been and yet-to-come."²² If, for example, I experience my wife walking through the door, that experience contains a now-phase inasmuch as she is standing before me; a just-having-been phase inasmuch as she came in from outside; and a yet-to-come phase as she walks past me to go somewhere else. All three phases are part of the original experience or impression.

If, in an hour or so, I recall what my wife looked like when she entered the room, that would be a "reproduction," which Husserl defines as "experiences in which things of a like kind do indeed become constituted, but in such a way that what is constituted is also a re-presentation of a now, of a just-past, of a future."²³ Reproduction is a modification of the original impression in which the internal consciousness of the original experience is reproduced and the object of the experience is re-presented. Husserl is clear, however, that reproduction is not the same kind of act as the original impression. If this were the case, then my memory of hearing a symphony would be a literal echo of that symphony! Rather, reproduction modifies the original act of consciousness by transforming it into a re-presentational act (rather than the original presentational act). As Brough puts it:

The consciousness of the reproduced act is also internal consciousness, but of a new kind. It is not the original internal consciousness through which I am aware of an act as present an actually taking place. It is modified internal consciousness through which I reproduce an act that is not actually taking place, that is not there itself.²⁴

In the case of fantasy (rather than memory), the re-presented object is not necessarily something that has been experienced before; rather, fantasy reproduces acts of consciousness in the mode of "as-if."

For our purposes, it is important to recognize the overall trajectory of Husserl's work on phantasy and memory. On the image theory of consciousness, fantasy was defined based on a model of perception that privileged

²² Ibid., 381.

²³ Ibid., 381.

²⁴ John Bough, translator's introduction to *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), LXV.

presence over absence: an absent object (the image subject) could only be known through a present object (the image object.) On the content-apprehension model, perception and fantasy were viewed as fundamentally different based on their contents (sensations v. phantasms) and modes of apprehension, but this model retained the emphasis on presence in that the contents of consciousness are always “there,” ready to be animated. The final model, absolute consciousness, portrayed fantasy as a mode of consciousness, separate from perception, defined by the modification of impressional experience, which always includes both presence and absence. The trajectory of Husserl’s thought is toward a de-emphasis of both perception and presence as tools for understanding the imagination.

While Husserl’s mature understanding of fantasy as internal reproduction is helpful, it is nonetheless problematic. Husserl retains an individualized, Cartesian notion of consciousness, which prevents him from developing the ontological implications of the Absolute in the way that, say, Martin Heidegger or Eugen Fink did. If all consciousness is consciousness, then our experience of the world and our orientation toward Being are aspects of transcendental subjectivity that need to be examined. Accordingly, for Heidegger, “absolute” consciousness leads directly to fundamental ontology: “there must be an intrinsic kinship between primordial transcendence and the understanding-of-being. They must in the end be one and the same.”²⁵ Similarly, Eugen Fink argues that Husserlian phenomenology “unthematically presupposes ‘being.’”²⁶ While Fink’s and Heidegger’s works are beyond the scope of this paper, the question of ontology is crucial. If absolute consciousness implies something about ontology, then Husserl’s analysis of imagination is incomplete to the extent that it leaves the ontological dimension of imagination unexamined.

III. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Ontological Imagination

To address this lacuna in Husserlian thought, let us consider a phenomenologically suggestive account of imagination in the work Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi, the 12th century Muslim philosopher, whose influence on Islam and Sufism in particular has been enormous. While Ibn al-‘Arabi is certainly not a proto-phenomenologist, his ontological concept of imagination may prove helpful.

For Ibn al-‘Arabi, the imagination functions at both microcosmic (individual, personal) and macrocosmic (ontology, creation) levels. At the microcosmic level, imagination has to do with God’s self-disclosure to humans.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 136.

²⁶ Ronald Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology, 1928-1938* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 132.

Ibn al-'Arabi argues that God can take many forms, depending on the expectations and capacities of the one perceiving God: "The Self-discloser [i.e., God], in respect of what He is in Himself, is One in Entity, while the self-disclosures—I mean their forms—are diverse in accordance with the diversity of the preparedness of the loci of self-disclosure. The property of the divine gifts is the same."²⁷ God gives godself to be known according to the "preparedness" of the knower. This "preparedness" or receptivity originates not in the rational faculty, but in the imagination, which alone is capable of connecting the sensible (immanent) world to the divine or transcendent world: "The world of imagination is the embodied lights that signify what is beyond them, for imagination brings intelligible meanings down into sensory molds, like knowledge in the form of milk, the Koran in the form of a cord, and religion in the form of a fetter."²⁸

Although Ibn al-'Arabi's concept of imagination is explicitly Muslim, there are important parallels with Husserl's idea of fantasy. Much like Husserl, Ibn al-'Arabi argues that the imagination modifies sensations into a sort of quasi-experience: "Part of the reality of imagination is that it embodies and gives form to that which is not a body or form, for imagination perceives only in this manner. Hence it is a sensation that is non-manifest and bound between the intelligible and the sensible."²⁹ It is, however, important not to let modern, or Husserlian, concepts of "imagination" restrict our analysis of Ibn al-'Arabi. We tend to regard the imagination as a purely mental, subjective capacity. At the very least, Ibn al-'Arabi reminds us of the broader importance of imagination, for imagination is the human capacity that allows us to hope for a better world (ethics, justice), to desire greater understanding (science, philosophy), and to know God (theology). Imagination is, for Ibn al-'Arabi, the highest capacity of the human intellect, connecting man to God. Moreover, the imagination is not strictly relegated to the human mind. Ibn al-'Arabi speaks of existence itself as an "imaginal act" on God's part; everything apart from God is "imaginal." Consequently, imagination is both epistemological, in that it allows us to know God, and ontological, in that it constitutes the essential connection between factual and counterfactual worlds.

At the macrocosmic or ontological level, imagination is a fundamental feature of existence. On the one hand, there is God, whose existence is necessary (God=Being or "the Real"). On the other hand, there is non-existence. Everything in-between—the existence of the entire cosmos and all knowledge derived from it—exists in a mediated state. Accordingly, Ibn al-'Arabi refers to the cosmos as an isthmus (*barzakh*) connecting God and

²⁷ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, NY: Suny, 1989), 92. On God's transmutation into different forms, see *ibid.*, 337.

²⁸ William Chittick, *The Self-disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 332.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

nothingness. This means that everything exists in a paradoxical relationship to God: The cosmos is God (inasmuch as creation reflects the creator) and is not God (inasmuch as God transcends the world)—existence is “He/not-He.” Annemarie Schimmel puts it well:

God is above all qualities—they are neither He nor other than He—and He manifests Himself only by means of the names, not by his essence. On the plane of essence, He is inconceivable (transcending concepts) and nonexperiential (transcending even non-rational cognition.) That means that in their actual existence the creatures are not identical with God, but only reflections of his attributes.³⁰

The created world is a reflection of God’s attributes, and therefore like God, but also unlike God inasmuch as God’s essence utterly transcends creation. The paradoxical nature of created existence (ὄντος) also has epistemological implications: God cannot be known through rational concepts; even non-rational cognition (namely, the imagination) cannot reach God’s essence.

To explain the idea of “He/not-He,” Ibn al-‘Arabi typically refers to two sources. First, the Quran’s account of God’s action in Muhammad’s victory at the Battle of Badr: “You did not slay them, but God slew them, and thou threwest not when thou threwest, but God threw” (8:17). Second, a hadith about Adam: “While His two hands were closed, God said to Adam, ‘Choose whichever you like.’ Adam replied, ‘I choose the right hand of the Lord, though both hands of my Lord are right and blessed.’ Then God opened it, and within it were Adam and His seed. He said, ‘My Lord, what are these?’ God replied, ‘These are your seed.’”³¹ Ibn al-‘Arabi comments on these two episodes as follows:

Adam was in the hand while he was also outside of it. Such also is the case in this question: When you consider, you will see that the cosmos is with the Real [i.e., God] in this manner. This is a place of bewilderment: He/not-He. “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw.”... Would that I knew who is the middle, the one who stands between the negation—His words “You did not throw”—and the affirmation—His words “But He threw.” He is saying, “You are not you when you are you, but God is you.”³²

In other words, everything that exists apart from God contains within itself the paradox of He/not-He—it is both God and not-God. The paradoxical nature of existence (and God’s relation to existence) cannot be grasped

³⁰ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 267f.

³¹ Tirmidhi, *Tafsir Sura 113*, 3. As quoted in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 114.

³² Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, II 444.13. As quoted in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 114f.

by the rational faculty, which understands meaning “through proofs or a priori,” nor can it be grasped by the senses, which understand through sense perception. Rather, such paradoxes can be grasped only as “imaginal things,” for only the imagination is capable of giving concrete form to contradictory meanings.³³ So, for example, I cannot rationally understand the idea of an entity that is both dead and not dead, and I certainly cannot perceive such a thing in the empirical world, but I am perfectly capable of imagining a zombie. Similarly, I cannot understand He/not-He on the basis of reason or sense perception, but I can imagine it. As Ibn al-‘Arabi puts it, “It is impossible for sense perception or the rational faculty to bring together opposites, but it is not impossible for the imagination... Hence nothing has truly gained possession of the [Divine] Form except imagination.”³⁴ We ultimately encounter God and the world through the imagination.

IV. Conclusion

Finally, let me translate Ibn al-‘Arabi’s ontological concept of imagination into phenomenological terms: The world is the horizon of possibility — every action I might take, every decision I make, every hope I have takes place within the horizon of the world. The object-world exists for me as an actuality (the stuff really out there) but I relate to it in the mode of possibility or freedom, even if my possibilities are constrained by the contours existence. Thus we might characterize being-in-the-world as both actuality and possibility, real and unreal, He/not-He. Furthermore, the possibility inherent in being-in-the-world is intrinsically related to imagination.

Consider, for example, my perception of people outside my office. I can consciously modify that perceptual experience through imagination: I can imagine that they are purple. I can imagine that they are resources to be exploited for my own gain. I can imagine that they are created by God and therefore deserve dignity. Imaginative variation allows me to “try out” different intentionalities in the mode of re-presentation. Some of those fantasies can be modified into possibilities. I cannot make people purple, but I can try to exploit them! The “possibility modification” would shift pure fantasy, which does not posit existence, into the sphere of Being-in-the-world. As Husserl puts it,

³³ There is, of course, a difference between a formal contradiction and a paradox. I take Ibn al-‘Arabi to mean that the imagination can make sense of paradoxes, but it is possible to make a stronger claim: if imagination exceeds Aristotelian logic, then it need not be restrained by the law of non-contradiction. Graham Priest, for instance, argues that paraconsistent (non-Aristotelian) logic allows for belief in some contradictions. See Graham Priest, “What’s So Bad About Contradictions?” in *The Law of Non-Contradiction: New Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23-40.

³⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, IV 325.2. As quoted in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 115f.

What is possible is possibly existent. It can exist; I can “imagine” (make the supposition) that it exists. I can shift at any time from mere phantasying into an act of supposing. But in doing so—this belongs precisely to the sense of supposing—I necessarily apply what is phantasied to my sphere of being (the sphere of what is unmodified, my sphere of belief.)³⁵

Possibility is therefore a modification of imagination.

The macrocosmic or ontological implication is that imagination is the constitutive source of possibility, which is a defining feature of being-in-the-world. At the microcosmic level, imagination allows me to “play” with various intentionalities through representation. Yet, as Husserl reminds us, all consciousness is consciousness: representational and presentational acts are both acts of consciousness. The intentionalities that I develop representationally can be shifted to presentational acts. I can, for instance, imagine that you all are exploitable resources, and I can then perceive you that way and treat you accordingly. The intentional habits and variations that I develop through reproductive imagination affect the very processes of constitution, from their origin in the life-world to their termination in phenomenal objects. Ultimately, imagination is a constitutive feature of both the world (as ὄντος, the horizon of possibility) and my openness to the world (as an intentional relationship); it is epistemologically and ontologically essential. As such, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s valorization of the imagination is not far off: “He who does not know the status of imagination has no knowledge whatsoever.”³⁶

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³⁵ Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, 687.

³⁶ William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 12.

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