The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual

Edited by
INGOLF U. DALFERTH and
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Religion in Philosophy and Theology
122

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Claremont Studies
in the Philosophy of Religion,
Conference 2018

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Ingolf U. Dalferth and
Raymond E. Perrier

Mohr Siebeck

Ingolf U. Dalferth, born 1948; 1977 Promotion; 1982 Habilitation; Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology, Symbolism and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Zurich; Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Claremont Graduate University in California.

Raymond E. Perrier, born 1988; 2018 awarded PhD in Religion at Claremont Graduate University; 2019 Adjunct Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Hinds Community College; 2021 Senior Instructional Content Developer at Prime Power Services, Inc.

ISBN 978-3-16-161523-8 / eISBN 978-3-16-161587-0
DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-161587-0
ISSN 1616-346X / eISSN 2568-7425 (Religion in Philosophy and Theology)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at *http://dnb.dnb.de*.

The book was typeset and printed on non-aging paper by Laupp & Göbel in Gomaringen and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

Preface

The theme of 39th Philosophy of Religion Conference in Claremont in 2018 was *The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual*. The topic was chosen because while we talk a lot about plurality, diversity, multiplicity and variety, we sometimes forget the importance of the opposite ideas of uniqueness, singularity, and individuality. They are challenging ideas, for a number of reasons. In the horizon of Western thought, despite all postmodern attempts to pluralize and relativize the subject, one still cannot talk seriously about God in philosophical and theological contexts without making God's uniqueness the subject of discussion. And quite correspondingly, despite all constructivist attempts to conceptualize cosmic singularity and human identity in plural terms, one cannot avoid taking into account the concrete individuality and singularity of complexly determinable individuals. The focus on divine uniqueness, cosmic singularity and human individuality therefore determines the debates documented in this volume.

We are grateful to the *Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum* (Hamburg) who has again generously provided eight conference grants to enable doctoral students and post-docs to take part in the conference and present their work on the theme of the conference. Five of those papers are published here along with the other contributions to the conference. We could not do what we do without its support. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Claremont Graduate University, Pomona College, and Claremont McKenna College and the assistance of the Collegium Helveticum in Zurich in handling the *Forum Humanum* competition. We are indebted to the contributors to this volume, to Mohr Siebeck who has accepted the manuscript for publication, and to Marlene A. Block (Redlands) and Trevor Kimball (San Luis Obispo) who helped to get the manuscript ready for publication.

Ingolf U. Dalferth
Raymond E. Perrier

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Introduction: The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual

Ingolf U. Dalferth

1. Framing the Discourse

D. Z. Phillips used to tell a story about a meeting of the University's Philosophical Society in Swansea/Wales where a young philosopher gave a paper on individuals in which he extensively belabored the point that as singular individuals we are absolutely different from others because our individuality marks us off from everybody else. Rush Rees, who as a student at the University of Rochester was expelled for insolent questions, listened patiently but then opened the discussion by asking the speaker: "Yes indeed, each of us is a unique individual. But this is what we all share, isn't it?"

There seems to be something paradoxical about terms like 'unique', 'singular' or 'individual' that we can use to mark us off from everything else and at the same time to state what is true of all of us. They function differently from concepts or sortal terms like 'human' or 'student' that we use to ascribe (sets of) first-order attributes to us or to others. We cannot construe *uniqueness* as class-membership, for example, because this results in confusion or even paradox. So how can we talk meaningfully about the unique, the singular and the individual, which – after all – are not the same? Is the classical distinction between transcendental and categorical terms enough to point a way towards a good answer?

Moreover, whereas individuality is discussed ubiquitously, uniqueness is rarely explored in depth. Singularity discourses, on the other hand, have multiplied in recent years. Besides longstanding debates in philosophy and theology, the past decades have seen a growing number of singularity discussions in a variety of fields. There are discipline specific debates in mathematics, system theory, cosmology and physics. Mathematics studies singularity as a value at which a function is not defined. Algebraic geometry investigates singular points that manifolds may acquire by a number of different routes. In system theory singularity refers to a large effect caused by a small change. Cosmology explores space-time regions where gravitational forces produce singularities such as black holes. And in physics a mechanical singularity is the position of a mechanism whose subsequent behavior cannot be predicted.

This idea has been taken up and elaborated by computer-related technology. In the study of exponential revolutions in the wake of Moore's law, singularity has become a major topic of technological research. Singularities are points or events of no return, or rather interpretations of events of no return, that completely and definitively change a situation because the rules and laws that govern a particular set of phenomena are annulled so that no reliable predictions about future behavior or developments on the basis of previous behavior or probability calculations are possible anymore. Thus, the Singularity University at the NASA Research Park in Silicon Valley focuses on emerging technologies (nanotechnology, artificial intelligence) that are expected to fundamentally change and reshape the economy and society over the next decades. Each year the progress made in artificial intelligence is discussed and assessed at the Singularity Summit of the Machine Intelligence Research Institute. In particular, there has been a controversial debate for some time about the possibility or even likelihood of an imminent technological singularity when artificial intelligence will have become greater and more powerful than any human intelligence. The creation of self-regulating thinking machines or human/machine combinations that are significantly more powerful and intelligent than we are today is said to end human history as we know it and will open up a future nobody can foretell. As Ray Kurzweil put it who estimates that the Singularity will occur around 2045: "There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine."[1] Just as we cannot imagine what humanity looked like before we developed the capacity for language and linguistic communication, so we cannot imagine what human life will look like when we become completely embedded in the networks of information and communications technology (ICT) and controlled by artificial intelligence that affects and directs our capacities, wishes, motivations, interests, and decisions.[2]

This raises interesting questions for philosophy and theology. If singularity marks the beginning of the end of humanity as we know it, can the idea still be used to understand becoming a singular individual to be one of the highest human achievements? And if singularity becomes problematic as a human virtue, can it still meaningfully be defended as a divine attribute? No doubt, philosophy, theology and technology use the terms 'singularity', 'singular' and 'the singular' in different senses. But will it still be possible to strive for ethical singularity after technological singularity? What could it possibly mean to become truly human as a singular individual when machine intelligence has superseded human intelligence?[3] Is there anything the debate about techno-

[1] R. Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 9.

[2] Cf. R. Hanson, *The Age of Em: Work, Love and Life when Robots Rule the Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[3] Cf. J. Kobek, *I hate the Internet: A Novel* (Los Angeles: We Heard You Like Books, 2016).

logical singularity can learn from philosophical studies about singular individuals or from theological debates about the unique or from hermeneutical explorations of ways of speaking about the unique, the singular and the individual?

2. Singularity

In Philosophy, singularity has been an important topic for some time. Plotinus' transcendent *Hen* or One, Scotus' *thisness*, Leibniz's monads, Schleiermacher's individuals, Kierkegaard's singular individual or Hartshorne's universal individual are all contributions to this debate. Plotinus' transcendent One is not the first of a series but that without which there wouldn't be any series of anything. Scotus' *thisness* is the non-repeatable feature that individuates uniquely. Leibniz' monads are irreducibly simple microcosmic mirrors of the universe. For Schleiermacher individuality is not an ontological given, but the highest ethical value to which humans ought to aspire. For Kierkegaard, too, singularity is an achievement term. We are all part of a multitude, and we become singular only by moving beyond the limitations imposed on us as particulars of the specific multitude to which we belong. And in metaphysics and philosophical theology Charles Hartshorne argues that if there is no god but God, then God is unique, not only in the sense of being the only one worthy to be worshiped, but in a sense that makes it impossible for us to comprehend God conceptually.

The reason for this is not only due to God's uniqueness, but also to our limits. Conceptual thinking is a powerful tool for orienting ourselves in the world. But all conceptual thinking simplifies, and all our conceptual schemes and distinctions flounder when it comes to thinking the utterly simple, individual, singular, or unique. Whatever we mean by them, they seem to slip through the cracks of our networks of terms and escape our distinctions. This not only has epistemological implications, but also ethical and hermeneutical ones. If only God is unique, then uniqueness is nothing for which we could strive. Our aim can at best be to become singular individuals. In one sense we are all unique by being different from everybody else. Others can replace us in our professional functions and social roles, but not as individual persons. As persons we are all different from each other, but none of us will ever be unique in the sense of being utterly unlike anything else. Isn't the unique not merely distinct from everything else in some respect or another, but something that does not share anything with anything else? But how can anything be radically different from everything else and still be a reality for us? How can we meaningfully communicate about the unique, the singular, the utterly simple and the strictly individual?

Since the beginning of modernity, the debate has focused on ontological, epistemological and ethical issues. Leibniz' monads are microcosmic mirrors of

the universe of irreducible simplicity. Each monad is a basic center of force, subject to its own laws, an eternal and completely determined individual distinguished from all other monads. The totality of its distinctions from everything else in the universe constitutes its unmistakable identity. But this is fully known only to God whereas we can know it only by approximation.

Schleiermacher turned this into an ethical project for human beings. Individuality is not an ontological given, but something to be achieved. It is the highest ethical value to which humans ought to aspire. The distinctiveness of an individual cannot be reduced to the particularity of a general essence. We are human and each human being represents humanity in his or her own particular way. But in order to achieve a true individuality we must not merely live as particular human beings but acquire a distinctive individuality, that is to say, become a unique microcosmos of the universe, different from all others and related to all others in a unique way.

Kierkegaard used this view of singularity to rethink the idea of the self. He requested no other inscription on his grave than *that single individual*. For him, singularity was an achievement term. All humans have the potential to become single individuals but not all actually do. We are all part of a crowd, and we become singular only by moving beyond the limitations imposed on us as particulars of the specific crowd or multitude to which we belong. In working out this view Kierkegaard systematically distinguished between *particular* and *general*, *individual* and *universal*, *singular individual* and *selfish individual*. The first marks the difference between one and the many in the sphere of the external relations or the world, the second the difference between the finite and the infinite in the sphere of the God-relation, the third the difference between living as a self in the world by being true to the God-relation or not. None of these relations and their corresponding distinctions can exist on their own or in isolation from the others. But they must be distinguished in order to avoid confusion by mistaking the God-relation for a case of the world-relation (as in theistic metaphysics) or of the self-relation (as in transcendental metaphysics), and vice versa.

3. Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Individuality

In metaphysics and philosophical theology, we find Charles Hartshorne arguing in a similar way:

> "Is God then not a 'particular' individual? No, certainly not; he is the universal individual. What do I mean here by 'individual'? I mean the unity of a sequence of concrete states of consciousness each connected with the others in the most truly ideal way by omniscient memory and steadfastness of purpose. This is plainly analogous to 'individual' in the everyday sense, except that this individual, being universal in his role, is unique and

without competitor. Being non-localized, he occupies no place from which he excludes other beings, as each of us does at every moment. There is no function exercised by God which any other being could take over in his stead. He is the sole non-competitive, non-exclusive, conscious agent – in his necessary essence quite a general as being itself, but in his contingent actuality containing all the exclusive particularity and concreteness of the real."[4]

Hartshorne restates in his own way classical philosophical and theological convictions. If there is no god but God, then God is unique. If God is unique, then God is strictly singular. If God is strictly singular, then God is not only the only one worthy to be worshiped, but essentially simple, not merely in the negative sense of not being complex, but in the positive sense of being so lucid that nothing is easier to comprehend than God. Not all agree. There are those who deny divine uniqueness and/or divine singularity and/or divine simplicity. Some draw anti-Trinitarian conclusions from belief in divine singularity, others insist that divine uniqueness can only properly be understood in Trinitarian terms, and again others find belief in divine simplicity to be incompatible with belief in God. God is not easier to comprehend than anything else, but greater than anything we can comprehend. If it were so easy to comprehend God, then why do so few comprehend anything at all about God and why do so many insist that God is above all comprehension? Even if it was true that even the devil knows that God exists, would he know what he knows when he knows this?

The problem may not (only) be on God's side, but (also) on ours. We think not merely in concepts, but conceptual thinking is a powerful capacity for orienting ourselves in the world. It facilitates orientation in complex situations by blinding out some aspects and focusing on others. It may miss what is important in a given situation, and it might have been better if we had reduced its complexity differently. But all conceptual thinking simplifies. It abstracts some aspects from a given experiential manifold and combines them into a general structure that can be exemplified by more than one particular. Just as conceptual generality is the outcome of a generalizing procedure, so experiential particularity is the result of an exemplifying process. The difference between generality and particularity is not the only conceptual distinction we use. We distinguish between the particular and the general, but also between the individual and the universal, the concrete and the abstract, the complex and the simple, the actual and the potential. How do these distinctions differ from each other and cohere with each other? Ideas are not concepts, concepts are not individuals, individuals may or may not be abstract, not all possibilities can

[4] C. Hartshorne, "Metaphysics and the Modality of Existential Judgments," in *The Relevance of Whitehead*, ed. I. Leclerc (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), 107–121, (http://www.anthonyflood.com/hartshornemodality.html).

become actual, and while reality is complex, it does not follow that it is also simple in some respect. However, all our conceptual schemes and distinction founder when it comes to thinking the simple, the singular, or the unique. Whatever we mean by them, they seem to slip through the cracks of our networks of terms and escape our distinctions.

4. The Unique and the Simple

If we want to make any progress here, we must pay attention to the discourses, fields of study and forms of life in which these terms and ideas are used. Where and why do we speak of the unique, the singular, or the simple? We debate about simple living styles, hold the simplest theory to be the most likely to be true, and criticize what some say to be much too simple to be true to the complexity of the case under discussion. We use the term 'simple' in descriptive and evaluative ways, and we do so in everyday, moral and religious situations as much as in epistemological and metaphysical contexts. Similarly with the terms 'singular' and 'unique'. For Hartshorne, only God is unique, and uniqueness is nothing for which we could or should strive. Our aim can at best be to become singular individuals. In one sense we are all unique by being different from everybody else. Others can replace us in our professional functions and social roles, but not as individual persons. As persons we are all different from each other, but none of us will ever be unique in the sense of being utterly unlike anything else. The unique is not merely distinct from everything else in some respect or other, but something that does not share anything with anything else. Some hold that this is not even true of God. If God were utterly and completely different from us, there would be no possibility to relate to God or even to talk about God. How can anything be radically different from everything else and still be a reality for us? If total otherness prevailed, we couldn't distinguish the utterly unique from nothing or secure that we are not merely gesturing with words when we talk in this way. How can we meaningfully communicate about the unique, if there is nothing it shares with anything else that can be expressed by a positive or negative conceptual or predicative determination? Is talking about the unique a way of undoing its uniqueness? But then how can we distinguish between the unique and nothing at all? How we can talk in a meaningful way about the unique, the singular, and the utterly simple and individual? And if we can, will technological singularity decisively change this situation, or should we rather re-think what we can expect and not expect from technological singularity in the light of divine uniqueness and human singularity?

These are some of the questions that need to be explored. The singularity debates pose epistemological, hermeneutical, metaphysical, ethical, and theo-

logical problems that we may ignore, but cannot avoid. The book is organized in the following way. In the first part we concentrate on problems posed by the uniqueness of God, in the second on questions raised by singularity and comparability, in the third on issues of concrete human individuality and ethical formation. We begin with exploring some influential contributions to our topic in the medieval period: The debate about the essence of God's names in Islam and Scotus' account of *thisness*. We then move on to discuss the topic from more contemporary Jewish, Christian (Trinitarian) and Islamic perspectives that engage in distinctly different ways with the philosophical issues and theological challenges of uniqueness, singularity and individuality. In the second part we discuss the problem from the post-modern perspectives of recent Continental philosophy and North American event metaphysics and delve into issues of cosmic comparability and incomparability and mystical loneliness. In the third part we turn to classical modernity and its construal of individuality in the traditions of Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel and Kierkegaard and look into some of the ethical and practical issues that are intrinsic to our topic.

I. Divine Uniqueness

On the Essence of God's Names in Islam

Ayat Agah

1. The Nature of God's Existence and Singularity in the Qur'an

There is a familiar argument in Islamic philosophy against the possibility of the existence of two necessary divine beings. According to this argument, God is a necessary being and there can only be one such divine being. Within Islam, the argument seems to have originated in the works of al-Farabi but was mainly developed and defended by Ibn Sina and then reconstructed and further developed by al-Ghazali, Suhrawardi, and Ibn Kammuna.[1] The details of the argument and its development are interesting and complex, but I mention it here not to discuss its complex details. Rather, my particular interest lies in its general relevance to the language of God's names and attributes in the Qur'an, as well as to the discussion regarding the relation between God's essence and God's existence in the philosophers mentioned above.[2] I argue that clarity concerning God's singularity and incomparability in Islam is best achieved in investigations of the nature of God's names in the Qur'an and in the manner in which God's existence is understood relative to God's essence. Philosophizing about these topics should not be undertaken independently of the language of the Qur'an.

One of the important references to God's singularity and incomparability in the Qur'an can be found in the following four verses of *Surah* 112: "*qul huwa Allāhu aḥad, Allāhu aṣ-ṣamad, lam yalid walam yūlad, walam yakun lahu*

[1] This section was developed from a response I made to A. Alwishah's paper at the 2018 Philosophy of Religion Annual Conference at Claremont Graduate University: "The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual: The Debate about the Non-Comparable." Alwishah's paper was entitled "Suhrawardī and Ibn Kammūna on the Impossibility of Having Two Necessary Existents" and is published as a chapter under the same title in *Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies: Essays in Memory of Hossein Ziai*, eds. A. Gheissari, A. Alwishah, and J. Wallbridge (Leiden and Boson: Brill, 2017), 113–34. My discussion here does not delve into the details of Alwishah's argument or into the history of the argument against the existence of two divine necessary beings. Rather, I develop some ideas in my original response that touch on the relation between God's essence and existence, on the one hand, and on the ramification of a discussion of that relation for the question of God's singularity, incomparability, and unknowability.

[2] But see Ahmed Alwishah for a detailed analysis of this development in his "Suhrawardī and Ibn Kammūna on the Impossibility of Having Two Necessary Existents".

kufuwan aḥad" – "Say, He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all; He begetteth not nor was begotten; and there is none comparable unto Him."[3] Two additional and equally important references are 17:111 and 3:18. In *Surah* 17, *ayah* (verse) 111, God is praised as not having a partner in dominion and no weakness necessitating a protector. *Surah* 3, *ayah* 18 states: "God bears witness that there is no god but Him, as do the angels and those who have knowledge. He upholds justice. There is no god but Him, the Almighty, the All Wise."[4] As I explain next, these references to God, and by implication to God's nature, or essence, are not descriptive in the scientific sense of the word 'description', but they are descriptive in religious and moral senses.

To say that God is the One who neither begets nor is born (112:3) is to suggest a singularity on God's part, but it is the kind of singularity that is tied to certain religious and moral characteristics. It is not an accident, for example, that the reference to God's singularity in 112:3 is accompanied by a reference to God as *aṣ-ṣamad* or as "the eternally Besought of all" (112:2). The seeking of an eternal God by all is a moral seeking, not a scientific seeking. Furthermore, since the term *aṣ-ṣamad* could also be translated as "the eternal refuge," this strengthens the suggestion that God's singularity is religious and moral in nature rather than scientific. After all, the eternity of God in this context is an eternity of providing refuge to the world. In other contexts, this eternity could be something different, albeit still not scientific, but here it is tied to the identity of God as an eternal source of refuge, the one sought for help as we also learn from *Surah* 1, verse 5: "Thee (alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help."

In fact, the reference to God as *aṣ-ṣamad*, "the eternal refuge," is one of God's names and, to relate this fact to the essence-existence debate, one could say that in naming God so, eternal refuge, or being eternally besought, is part of God's essence. My point here is that, in Qur'anic terms, God could not not be an eternal refuge. Other Qur'anic references, including 3:18 above, give support for this reading, and, furthermore, the incomparability of God could be understood here to mean that no other being gives the kind of refuge that God does. Human beings might give refuge to other human beings, for example, but not eternally or consistently, so. The question then is whether or not these and other similar references to God in the Qur'an are taken into consideration in the philosophical debates over the impossibility of two necessary existents and over the relation between God's essence and existence in Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, Suhrawardi, and Ibn Kammuna. The language of faith in Islam seems to be absent from the philosophical debates about God's necessary existence.

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[3] Translation by M. Pickthall, https://quran.com/112, last accessed June 13, 2021.

[4] Translation by A. Haleem. https://quran.com/3, last accessed June 13, 2021. Unless mentioned otherwise, all additional translation from the Qur'an is by Pickthall.

To give one more example, when the testament of faith in Islam – "There is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger" – is juxtaposed with 3:18, it becomes clear that God's singularity is linked to maintaining and sustaining creation in a just manner. In other words, in taking refuge in the one and only God, the world is sustained and maintained in a just way, and the latter is not an arbitrary act on God's part. If God acts otherwise, then God's existence and essence are separate and, if so, then God's existence is arbitrary and cannot be necessary. God's necessary existence is that which makes God's essence what it is and, from this Qur'anic perspective, Ibn Sina is correct to not separate God's essence and existence.

Al-Ghazali disagreed with some aspects of Ibn Sina's argument about the impossibility of two necessary existents but he seems to have agreed that God's existence is not separate from God's essence.[5] He rejected the idea that God's existence is superadded to God's essence, for example, suggesting that such argument makes God's essence the cause of God's existence or at least that God's essence precedes God's existence.[6] Suhrawardi argues that God's existence is superadded to God's essence, but he does not think this implies what al-Ghazali thinks it does, namely that essence precedes existence.[7] As I explain next, my reading of how God's names are presented in the Qur'an lead me to think that al-Ghazali is correct and Suhrawardi wrong about the relation between God's essence and existence.

In the Qur'an, God's names cannot be understood to be superadded to God's essence because they define or constitute that essence even when the Qur'an presents God as a being beyond human comparisons, knowledge, and reach. When we read in 42:11, for example, that God is "the Creator of the heavens and earth" who multiplied the number of both humans and animals on earth, and that "There is nothing like Him: He is the All Hearing, the All Seeing," the name of God as the creator (originator) cannot be understood to mean something added to God's essence as a result of an arbitrary form of creation. After all, the further reference that there is nothing "like Him" suggests a necessary link between God's essence and God's name as the Creator who is all-seeing and all-hearing. If it were possible for the God of Islam to be otherwise, i. e., not to be the all-seeing and all-hearing creator, then many other things associated with that God would be lost – e.g, God as the just sustainer of the world as a result of seeing and hearing all things, or as the eternal refuge, or as the one with eternal compassion, etc.

As we learn from 16:3, God created the heavens and the earth *bilḥaqqi* – "in truth" or "in justice" – so that "... He is far above whatever they join with

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[5] Alwishah, "Suhrawardī and Ibn Kammūna," 118–120.
[6] Ibid., 120.
[7] Ibid., 124.

Him!" Since one of God's names is also *al-ḥaqq* – the Truth, or Justice – this creates a sense of coherence in regards to the link between God the creator and God the sustainer of truth/justice. Furthermore, if we make creation and the maintenance of justice arbitrary and non-essential to God's essence then justice and truth also become arbitrary, which is not the case according to the Qur'an. The names/attributes of God as creator and sustainer of truth and justice are not contingent attributes but ones that form the very essence of God.

As I mentioned above, language regarding God's existence should not be taken in a scientific sense but in a moral-religious sense. It is a language that describes and expresses the religious magnificence of God and, as such, it does not put God's essence beyond God's various modes of religious and moral existence. To superadd God's existence onto God's essence in the way that Suhrawardi does is to assume a metaphysical God that is said to exist apart from the attributes of compassion, mercy, creativity, sustainability, mightiness, wisdom, knowledge, and so on – attributes that manifest how the God of Islam, Allah, exists in the first place. Suhrawardi turns the God of Islam into the God of philosophers.

In spite of Ibn Sina's insights into the inseparability of God's essence and existence, the language he uses when speaking of God's essence reflects, as in Suhrawardi's case, an endorsement of a philosophical God rather than the religious God of Islam. For example, he speaks of lack in composition or multiplicity in the necessary existent God without relating it to Qur'anic references to God's oneness and singularity.[8] Ironically, Suhrawardi and Ibn Kammuna uphold the same description of God whereas what we want to know is how this language of composition and multiplicity relate to the God of the Qur'an in the first place. The issue is not so much the use of the language of composition and multiplicity but what is meant by it. Of course, if what is meant by this language is the moral oneness of a God – i.e., a God whose moral attributes cohere to suggest a benevolent being who is steadfast in being the eternal refuge and who is eternally compassionate and merciful, then the language is appropriate. But it is not clear that this is how the language is meant in Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, and Ibn Kammuna because their philosophical treatments display a quantitative rather than a qualitative flavor. For example, when Ibn Sina explains what a necessary existent is, he states that such divine being admits no composition in the sense that that being cannot be divided in quantity or explained via explanatory expressions.[9] But why should these issues be relevant to God's necessity when what is at stake, as suggested in 3:18 and 112:2, is justice and refuge?

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[8] Alwishah, "Suhrawardī and Ibn Kammūna," 118.
[9] Ibid., 119.

In a *ḥadith qudsī* – a narrative that is attributed to the voice of God – God is presented as a treasure that loves to be known and a being who creates thinking, perceiving, and reflective human beings who can discover God. The emphasis is put on discovering God through acts of virtue that abide by God's commands, not through theoretical proofs and evidence that appeal solely to the mind. There are signs of God's existence and presence everywhere, as the Qur'an proclaims, but, as Fazlur Rahman rightly states, the "'reflecting', 'pondering', or 'heeding'" that the Qur'an calls for, from both believers or non-believers, "has nothing to do with devising formal proofs for God's existence or 'inferring' God's existence."[10]

Discovering God occurs, rather, by "'lifting the veil' from the mind," as Rahman puts it.[11] This is a lifting of the veil between the individual and the divine, overcoming the barriers to knowing God's existence, which is a common theme in Islamic forms of mysticism. But this is not a theoretical matter. Rather, the Socratic idea that virtue is knowledge comes to mind here. That is, it is through virtuous living and thinking in accordance with God's call for goodness, mercy, compassion, etc., that the veil between God and humans is lifted and as a result of which Muslims come to see God as one essence with a multiplicity of religious and moral attributes/names. Put differently, it is in living out the attributes of God, which are represented through the *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*, the beautiful names of God, that Muslims come to know necessary existence of God. Here, the names of God are "beautiful" in a moral sense, as I explain later.

As Sa'ddiya Shaikh reminds us, God's qualities or attributes, commonly, albeit reductively, are referred to as the ninety-nine names of God[12], which "reside within His state of unity (*tawḥid*) and creation occurs through a manifestation of these attributes from the original state of oneness."[13] Shaikh highlights Ibn Arabi's stance that the divine names are not "fixed entities" but act as a connecting force, a *barzakh*, or isthmus, between creation and Creator.[14] The following insight from Sachiko Murata echoes Shaikh's point about the names of God and summarizes the earlier point about the coherent nature of God's attributes in relation to God's essence. She, too, uses the metaphor of God as a hidden treasure from the aforementioned *ḥadith qudsī*:

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[10] F. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989), 11.

[11] Ibid.

[12] In contrast to the common reference to "the ninety-names" of Allah, *Dua Jawshan al-Kabīr* (The Great Armor) contains roughly one thousand names and attributes of Allah. https://www.duas.org/mobile/ramadan-dua-jawshan-kabeer.html.html. Last accessed 5/15/2021.

[13] S. Shaikh, "In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 77, no. 4 (2009): 802.

[14] Ibid., 802.

On the divine level, the undifferentiation of the names [of God] is represented by the Hidden Treasure, locked and sealed. But we know that the jewels are in God, waiting to manifest their properties. It is this level of reality that is designated by the name Allah, the "all-comprehensive name" (*al-ism al-jāmi'*). This name refers both to God as such, without regard to the names, and to God as possessing all the names. Each name refers to Allah. Each denotes the single Essence (*al-dhāt*), other than which there is no true reality. But each denotes that Essence in terms of a specific relationship that the Essence assumes with created things. Only the name Allah denotes that reality as embracing all relationships and non-relationships.[15]

Although philosophical reflection might be necessary to make sense of the idea of a necessary being who is one rather than many, and whose multiple forms of moral existence are unified in one essence, it is through lived experience as a result of seeing divine signs that the reality of that being is discovered. While this line of thinking can be associated with the practice of mystics, the Qur'an makes it clear that this mode of praxis is not exclusively for those on a mystical path, namely Sufism, but is a call to all believers. Qur'an 7:180 reads "The most beautiful names belong to Allah: so call on him by them …" and Qur'an 17:110 offers the imperative, "Say: 'Call upon Allah, or call upon Rahman: by whatever name ye call upon Him, (it is well): for to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names'."[16]

The Qur'an calls individuals to know God through the names/attributes of God. If we take this form of knowledge as religious and moral knowledge, rather than an abstract, theoretical knowledge – i. e., knowledge that does not have practical ramifications in people's lives – then the direction for demonstrating the unity of God's essence and existence is through living out God's names and attributes. Verse 33:35 of the Qur'an reflects this in its account of "believing men and women" who are devout and patient, who offer charity and fast, and who "remember Allah." The word for remembering God is the same word for the act of invoking the names of God as part of a meditative practice, dhikr. In his description of this act of invocation, Seyyed Hossein Nasr refers to dhikr as "the prayer of the heart" and as "the act of God Himself within us" – i. e., the one invoking God's name becomes God's instrument for invoking "His own sacred name."[17] I elaborate on this call to live out the names of God in the next section.

A case could be made that certain divine attributes are more dominant than others in the Qur'an and in the daily lives of Muslims. For example, the

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[15] S. Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 34.

[16] Translation by A. Y. Ali, *The Qur'an*, https://quran.com/17 and https://quran.com/7, last accessed June 13, 2021.

[17] S. H. Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2008), 100–101.

attributes of *raḥmān* and *raḥīm*, "compassionate" and "merciful," are repeatedly mentioned in both the Qur'an and in invocations by Muslims in the five daily prayers. In fact, the attribute of mercy is inscribed for Allah by Allah: "And when those who believe in Our revelations come to you, say, 'Peace be with you', your Lord hath prescribed mercy for Himself. [...] And Allah is truly all-forgiving and all-merciful" (6:54).[18]

But this does not constitute any acknowledgment that God's essence and existence are different from one another or that God's existence as a compassionate and a merciful being characterize God's essence more than other attributes. As Murata reminds us, when the attribute of 'wrathful' is ascribed to God, "it is not distinct from any other name."[19] Perhaps one could say here that God's essential attributes of compassion and mercy are simply more easily discovered than other attributes. After all, God is a paradigm of existence for believers, i. e., in terms of how they are to act in the world. The question that needs further investigation here is how this last point – about God being a paradigm of imitation for action by the believers – fits in the claim that God is unknowable and non-comparable. The answer requires a lot of unpacking, but it is not clear how the path of arguing against two or more necessary divine existents, or, for that matter, how endorsing theoretical forms of knowledge,[20] could help.

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[18] Interestingly, these attributes are also emphasized in feminist Islamic scholarship to uphold a theology that promotes gender equality. The work of Asma Barlas comes to mind here. She takes up Toshihiko Izutsu's notion that God never engages in *zulm* (injustice) and never acts "in such a way as to transgress the proper limit and encroach upon the right of some other person," to argue that God's mercy and compassion would not allow for misogyny. See A. Barlas, *'Believing Women in Islam:' Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 14.

[19] S. Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 81.

[20] One example of theoretical knowledge in Islam can be found in Sajjad Rizvi's "Towards a Typology of Inquiry." In this article, he uses as a lens for analysis, a description of philosophy from Mulla Sadra, that claims the following:

"Philosophy is the perfecting of the human soul through the cognition of the realities of existents as they truly are, and through judgements about their being ascertained through demonstrations, and not understood by conjecture or adherence to authority, to the measure of human capacity. One may say the philosopher understands the cosmos as an intellectual order [a macrocosm] according to human ability so that he may acquire a resemblance to the Creator." In contrast to this definition, Shabbir Akhtar argues that "Muslims have not produced a philosophical defence of the rationality of Islamic theism in the modern world," but instead continue to offer what he describes as a "neo-orthodox fideistic dismissal of the claims of secular reason." Although Akhtar's claim is more of an attack on secular reason rather than a relocation of reason in Islam to a fideistic way of life, it is closer to the idea that religious knowledge is not philosophical knowledge than Rizvi's idea of knowledge. See S. Rizvi, "Towards a Typology of philosophical Inquiry in the Ithnā ʿAshariyy tradition," *International Journal of Shiʿi Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2006): 189–206. See S. Akhtar, *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2008), 337–338.

2. Naming God's Unknowability and Incomparability in Islam

Towards the end of the last section, I brought up the question as to how to reconcile the claim that God is the paradigm of moral imitation by humans with the further claim that God is unknowable and incomparable. I also claimed that God's essence is mediated through God's existence, but how can this be reconciled with the idea of God's unknowability?

The Qur'anic idea that there is nothing like God – "Nothing is like Him" (42:11), and "none is comparable unto Him" (112:4) – has to be put in context for us to make sense of it. The same goes for God's unknowability or to claims that to know God fully is to limit God. The claim that to fully know God is to limit God is made by Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib who states in Sermon 1 of *Nahjul Balagha* that God cannot be contained or defined, and that to say our knowledge of God is full is to confine God.[21] As I suggested above, whereas human beings can exercise acts of justice and mercy and compassion, they cannot do so from an eternal perspective – that is, consistently so. They may strive to do so, but, by definition, God is eternally just and a refuge for the entire creation. If God is meant to be entirely unknowable and beyond all comparisons whatsoever, then it would be difficult to make any language about God meaningful. What would the language about God's knowledge and hearing in 49:1, God's omnipresence in 57:4, and God being nearer to us than our jugular veins in 50:16 mean?[22]

Similarly, if we limit ourselves to philosophizing in a traditional way – and argue, for example, that whereas we and every other contingent being are temporal and mortal, with limited knowledge, God is eternal, immortal, and all-knowing, so that God is incomparable to any temporal and mortal being or thing – this does not get us very far in understanding the unknowability and incomparability of God. After all, the language of temporality, mortality, immortality, and eternity is very ambiguous without further contexts because this kind of language has applications both within religion and outside of religion. These applications cannot be the same because what is at stake in religion, including Islam, is the soul of a human being and how that soul carries itself in life and vis-a-vis God. Mathematical and other scientific applications

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[21] Ali ibn Abi Talib, "Sermon 1," in *Nahjul Balāgha: Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Imam Ali* (Qum, Iran: Centre of Islamic Studies, 1987), 120.

[22] "Believers, do not push yourselves forward in the presence of God and His Messenger – be mindful of God: He hears and knows all –" (Qur'an 49:1). "It was He who created the heavens and earth in six Days and then established Himself on the throne. He knows what enters the earth and what comes out of it; what descends from the sky and what ascends to it. He is with you wherever you are; He sees all that you do;" (Qur'an 57:4). "We created man – We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein –" (Qur'an 50:16).

of concepts related to temporality, mortality, knowability, and incomparability do not address the moral nature of the soul.

I cannot be certain that these considerations were part of Imam Ali's reasons for claiming that to know God fully is to contain God. But he also states in the same sermon mentioned above that the foremost in religion is knowing God, so he clearly does not mean we cannot know a lot about God. But he also cannot mean that we do not know God in a quantifiable way since this kind of knowledge is irrelevant to a non-physical being and cannot put limits on God. Rather, what I think is consistent with his vision of God's unknowability and incomparability is the idea that God's essence could manifest itself in ways we have not yet experienced, whether on an individualized level or a socio-communal level. The idea here is that we cannot always anticipate how mercy, compassion, friendship, and love – which are all attributes of God – might be manifested in particular situations in our lives.

Kenneth Cragg offers an interesting perspective that sheds light on the nature of religious language in Islam, particularly when it comes to knowing God and comparing the divine nature to anything that exists. In *Qur'an and the West*, he addresses the philosophical skepticism about the validity of religious language due to the fear that it might construct reality in a way that does not describe it as it is in itself.[23] Regarding Islam, this would translate to skepticism about whether the names of Allah, or other cognitive references to Allah, refer to an actual being who is out there. Cragg mentions the need to acknowledge "the sharp Kantian dilemma of how language could credibly relate to what lay beyond the range of the sense of experience from which he said the mind alone drew its knowledge" due to the fact that the mind itself is "the place and the agent of the ordering of sense experience."[24] But what is Cragg's answer to this kind of philosophical skepticism? Can his response help shed light on the idea of God's incomparability and knowability?

Addressing first the Qur'anic distinction between verses/revelations that are categorical and explicit, on the one hand, and verses/revelations that are metaphorical and allegorical, on the other hand, he states that the Qur'an does not encourage reading into its revelations meanings that are not suggested by it.[25] Rather, the distinction shows that the Qur'an is aware of how language could lead to multiple interpretations and that it discourages ones that are made in bad faith.[26] What is needed, therefore, is interpretation through good

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[23] K. Cragg, *Qur'an and the West* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 79–83.

[24] Ibid., 79.

[25] K. Cragg, *Qur'an and the West*, 81.

[26] According to the Qur'an (3:7), in light of some of its verses being allegorical and some being clear, there are those who will sow doubt based on a seeming lack of clarity and those who rely on their faith in the face of ambiguity.