

Beyond the Physical World and Sensory Perception: A Philosophical Exploration into the Metaphysical World

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Abstract

This article will address two important subjects in Islamic philosophy that most contemporary modern thinkers (be they philosophers or scientists) have long rejected them as legitimate subjects of any scientific inquiries: firstly, mystical experience, and secondly the metaphysical world. We can see that both subjects lie beyond the physical world and sensory perception. In the first part of this article, I would like to deeply discuss the nature and the reality of mystical experience, while in the second part, I would like to broadly explore the metaphysical world, by first addressing and then moving to analyse two very interesting and seminal works written by arguably two of the most prominent Muslim philosophers, first, *Risālat al-Ṭayr* authored by Ibn Sīnā, and second, *al-Ghurfaḥ al-Gharbiyyah*, written by Suhrawardī. It is clear that both works discuss transcendent voyages into realms beyond our physical world. The purpose of this article is to vividly demonstrate how and why Muslim philosophers, scientists, and mystics substantiate their belief in both realms by establishing a rational argument for their reality or their ontological status.

Keywords: Mystical experience, Metaphysical world, *Risālat al-Ṭayr*, *al-Ghurfaḥ al-Gharbiyyah*, transcendent voyages, ontological status

Introduction

The mystical experience is usually discussed in the context of *taṣawwuf* (Islamic mystical practices), but this time, in accordance with the nature of our investigation, I would like to address it from a philosophical perspective: the reality of mystical experience as human experience. This is an important topic, since some people claim that mystical experiences are not real because “they are highly subjective.” And we know that by this statement, they actually intend to reject the reality of mystical experience as having no objective ontological basis.

In this article, I would like to argue that the mystical experience, like all other human experiences, physical or mental, possesses not only subjective elements but also objective elements. A mystical experience (including religious experience) is real like other human experiences: be they sensory, mental or rational. This article has two parts. In the first part I would like to investigate the mystical experience from an epistemological perspective and argue philosophically that a mystical experience, which goes beyond a sensory perception, can be a legitimate source of knowledge. In the second part, I would like to address the mystical experience from an ontological perspective, in which we demonstrate that mystical experience, rooted in intuition (the heart), can be used to explore metaphysical worlds and reveal their contents and secrets.

Actually, in my view, any human experience has within it subjective and objective aspects. For example, if we send 10 students to a far-away city, they have never visited before, and we want them to report what they have seen in the city, it is highly likely that they will give us different reports from one another. However, we cannot take these existing differences in their reports to mean that they did not go to the city and that they invented the stories out of their imagination. Instead, the differences that emerged were a result of subjective factors involving their perceptions and experiences. It is possible that they visited a particular place in the city together, and yet its impressions upon their minds could be very different. Therefore, even sensory perceptions can be subjective. However, the differences in their reports cannot be taken as evidence that the students did not go to or see the city, or that the city itself did not exist. With this, it is worth highlighting that even if the experience is subjective, this does not necessarily mean that it does not have any ontological basis. We believe that the real does not always refer exclusively to physical entities, but also non-physical. The world that some Sufis have witnessed in their mystical experiences is real, just like our physical world, even though it is not physical.

The Reality of Mystical Experience

Before we deal any further with our main topic, however, it will probably be useful to discuss one of our daily non-physical experiences: dreams. To the best of my knowledge, few people have seriously paid attention to this mental phenomenon we call dreams, despite the fact that we experience these almost every day, and

that a careful investigation of dreams (with the nature of its objects and the characteristic of its world) will, I believe, help us to understand more about the mystical experience itself. As a human experience, a dream, as we know, is certainly subjective. We can even say that the subjectivity of a dream is more obvious than that of the physical one.

Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate later, a dream is not actually entirely subjective, since it does have its objective basis in the dream world itself. Dreams are indeed subjective, in the sense that one has never shared them with someone else, and vice versa. One's dream is fully his/hers, even if in his/her dream he/she meets someone. There is no way from this to conclude that someone who appeared in one's dream really shared it with him/her. Even so, neither can we conclude that the dream does not have any objective ontological basis, because, even when we never share it with anyone, the dream world which each of us have witnessed has some universal and objective characteristics. For example, anyone who dreams will see the objects of dream not with a physical eye, but with a non-physical eye (Kartanegara 2006). Why? Because, when someone is dreaming, his or her physical eyes are closed and therefore cannot see.

In addition, the nature of the object of a dream is also the same and universal for everyone who experiences it. The object takes a physical form or, more precisely, physical image without having any physicality. The proof that it is only a physical image, not the physical substance, can be seen, for example, from the fact that we did not suffer from any physical harm, after having been hit by a truck or a train in our dream. The fact that our body is still sound after having fallen from a very high place in our dream tells us that the dream world is not physical in nature, although it takes up some physical forms. The fact that the dream world is not physical but is still experienced in the same manner by every dreamer shows very significantly that it is objective. For anyone who dreams, the world of dreams has the same and constant basic traits: it has a physical image but it is not itself physical. In addition, although we never share our dreams with others, we know for sure that anyone who dreams can go back to their childhood, a distinctive phenomenon that can never take place in the physical world. Hence, it is evident that the world of dreams is different from the physical world in terms of time and space. But this does not mean that it is not real. The fact that the world of dreams can be experienced in the same way by everyone shows us that, although not physical, it is objective, in the sense that it has a strong, clear and real ontological reality.

Another phenomenon of dreams, which is more relevant to our main topic, is our ability to communicate in principle with any people and in any language (Kartanegara 2006). A Javanese person, who cannot speak Indonesian fluently, for instance, can still communicate conveniently in his or her dream with a foreigner, be it a movie star or a political leader. How is this possible? It is so, because in a

dream we basically communicate with a language of the heart, not verbally. When one of my students said that she could communicate with a spirit (*jinni*), I asked her about the language she spoke. Then she said that she did not use any verbal language, and yet they understood each other. For me, this shows that the language they used is the language of the heart or intuition, and not just any regular, verbal language.

Another interesting aspect of dreams, and probably closer to the mystical experience, is the fact that we can meet people whom we know to have passed away. Although we do not share our dream with anyone, the fact that everyone can meet deceased persons in his or her dream shows that the world of dreams is objective or at least inter subjective. Even so, the dream world cannot be physical, for if it is physical, the dead people appearing in our dream will return to life. Therefore, it is clear to us that the world of dreams, despite its objectivity, is by no means physical, nor is it purely spiritual. It stands in between the physical and non-physical or spiritual worlds which enables the exchange of the objects of these two worlds. This world can present not only physical objects, in forms of images, but also non-physical objects, such as spirits of the deceased, *jinni*, or for certain people, angels. Even so, all the objects presented in it take the imaginal forms (*al-uwar al-mīthāliyyah*), but with no physicality.

A dream can help us understand the mystical experiences claimed sometimes by both Sufis and philosophers. For me, dreams are like a gateway to the mystical world. Therefore, let us now turn from this to the mystical experience itself and its ontological basis, in the form of the mystical world, commonly referred to as *‘ālam al-mīthāl* by Sufis and which has been referred to by William Chittick as the imaginal world (Chittick 1994). For us, the mystical experience is an extra-sensory experience. Therefore, to certain extent, a dream can be considered as a mystical experience, at its lowest level, since it takes place when one is sleeping. In fact, a real mystical experience may occur in a dream. Even Prophet Muhammad says that “a dream is one fortieth of revelation (Rosenthal 1981).” Even so, mystical experiences often happen when we are awake.

Let us take the example of a real mystical experience as reported by Ibn ‘Arabī, a famous Sufi. In his famous work, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, vol. 8, Ibn ‘Arabī describes the mystical experience of a Sufi (without mentioning his or her name), when he enters the imaginal Earth or world (*‘ālam al-mīthāl*) as follows:

Whenever one of us is searching for the way to access to that Earth the first condition to be fulfilled is the practice of mystical gnosis (*ma‘rifah*) and withdrawal from the material body. Then he meets those Forms who stand and keep watching at the entrance to the ways of approach, God having a specially assigned them this task. One of them hastens towards the newcomer clothes him in a robe suitable to his rank, takes him by the hand and walks with him over

that Earth and they do in it as they will. He lingers to look at the divine works of art; every stone, every tree, every village, and every single thing he comes across, he may speak with, if he wishes, as a man converses with a companion. Certainly, they speak different languages, but this earth has the gift, peculiar to it, of conferring on whomsoever enters the ability to understand all the tongues that are spoken there (Corbin 1977).

Let us now analyse briefly the passage quoted above. The first condition to fulfil is *ma'rifah* and self-retreat from the material body. Why *ma'rifah*? It is because in the mystical experience we do not need intellectual reasoning. Cognition through a mystical experience, called *ma'rifah*, is acquired not through rational reasoning, but through the heart or intuition. Hence, only those who have practiced *ma'rifah* will understand it. For instance, how can we talk to a stone, tree, or village and to whatever we saw there? All of these are, of course, beyond our reason to comprehend. Only the heart can understand their language, as in the case of my student who could converse with a *jinni*, without using any verbal language, but the language of heart. In the same work, *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyah*, Ibn 'Arabī describes for us the peculiarity of this world or earth, that is, 'the imaginal world: "In that Earth there are gardens, paradises, animals, minerals — God alone can know how many. Now everything that is to be found on that Earth," he says, "absolutely everything, is alive and speaks, has a life analogous to that of every living being endowed with thought and speech (Corbin 1977)." The statement that "this earth has the gift, peculiar to it, of conferring on 'whomsoever' enters the ability to understand all the tongues that are spoken there" is very important to bear in mind, since it shows the objectivity or, more accurately, inter-subjectivity of the mystical world referred to as the imaginal world (*'ālam al-mīthāl*).

The imaginal world is an important term insofar as the reality of mystical experience and the world is concerned. What does the imaginal world look like? From what we understand from Henry Corbin's great work, *Celestial Earth and Spiritual Body*, we can say that *ālam al-mīthāl* (*imago mundo*) is a world situated between the physical and spiritual worlds. From this vantage point, it can be referred to as *'ālam al-barzakh* (the Isthmus). But the nature of this world very much resembles the world that we experience in our dreams. There, we can see physical images but they are not really physical. This is because in this world what is originally physical will be spiritualised, while the spiritual will be materialised (Corbin 1977)." This is why the second condition to enter this world, after *ma'rifah*, is self-withdrawal from the material body since no material body is allowed to enter. Ibn 'Arabī says, "whoever enters this world he or she should forsake the body, and should enter it with a fine body suitable to the nature of this world (Corbin 1977)." The difference between it and the world of dreams is that not all the things we see in our dreams can speak (since they were not given the intelligence) to us, which is different

from what takes place in the imaginal world. In addition, not all people entering the world of dreams can clearly understand what has happened there, while those who enter the imaginal world will understand everything very clearly. However, like in the world of dreams, in the imaginal world we will see things not through our physical eyes, but through the inner eye, sometimes referred to as the creative imagination (*al-mutkhayyilah*). Finally, the mystical experience taking place in the world of dreams should take place when we are sleeping, while that taking place in the imaginal world occurs when we are awake and conscious.

Now, our question is what exactly is the ontological status of the imaginal world (*‘ālam al-mīthāl*)? Like the dream world (and also the material world), the imaginal world, according to Muslim philosophers and Sufis, also has a firm and real ontological status. In the hierarchy of beings, the imaginal world, sometimes also called *‘ālam al-malakūt*, is situated between the material world, called *‘ālam al-mulūk*, and the spiritual world or *‘ālam al-jabarūt* (Chittick 1989). And like the dream world, it is also experienced by someone subjectively, meaning that when we enter this world, no one shares it with us. However, like in the world of dreams, it is real and objective. Although it is not physical, the imaginal world is objective and has real ontological status. Remember Ibn ‘Arabī’s statement, “whomsoever is allowed to enter this world, he or she will be granted the capability of understanding of whatever language spoken there.” This means, among other things, that, although it is experienced by a particular individual, the nature and peculiarity of this world remain the same to all people who experience it.

By establishing the ontological status of this imaginal world, we can conclude that a mystical experience, like other human experiences, is real, since, despite its subjectivity, it is experienced in a real and objective world. Actually, the reality of mystical experience has indeed been comprehensively studied by the famous American philosopher and psychologist William James in his famous work *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*. Mehdi Hā’irī Yazdī, in his book, *The Principle of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*, states that when Professor James talks about ‘hallucination,’ in this work, he concludes that religious (including mystical) experience, as experienced by famous mystics at different times and places, is not a hallucination, since in their religious experiences we found what James referred to as orderliness and uniformity (Yazdī 1986). This is of great significance for our discussion, because if the mystical experience and world are not real, from where then did this orderliness and uniformity originate? It was probably from this that William James came to conclusion that religious (and in our context mystical) experience is by no means a hallucination (a false belief). It is real and objective like other human experiences.

Therefore, in my view, the mystical experience is real, and although it is subjective in certain respects, it has, as mentioned earlier, a firm and objective ontological basis.

The mystical world, be it imaginal or spiritual, as experienced by philosophers or mystics is as real as the physical world. Therefore, we cannot think of it as merely an illusion or hallucination. Like other experiences, sensory or mental, the mystical experience is real for it is experienced in, and based on, an objective world. The difference being that the mystical experience takes place at a higher level of existence than sensory or intellectual experiences.

Mystical experiences have contributed a great deal, especially to the fields of spirituality and religion. The history of Islam, for example, has been filled with a great number of Muslim mystics, called Sufis, such as al-Bisṭāmī, Junayd al-Baghdādī, Ḥakīm Ṣanā'ī, Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī and others. Their mystical insights have contributed greatly to our understanding of many essential concepts like God, human nature, and a number of mystico-philosophical theories such as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the Unity of Beings), *waḥdat al-shuhūd* (the Unity of Witnesses) *ittiḥād* (the Mystical Union), *maḥabbah* (the Divine Love) and *ma'rifah* (the True Knowledge).

It is important to note, however, that the mystical experience does not belong exclusively to Sufis. We can easily find such mystical or religious experiences among certain Muslim philosophers. Suhrawardī (1976), for example, in his work, *al-Talwihāt*, describes his own mystical experience, which is very interesting and had a strong influence on his philosophical thought. He describes his main work, *ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, as a philosophical work but based on mystical experiences. In this work, he also categorises the seekers of truth or wisdom (*ahl al-Ḥikmah*) into three groups, which demonstrates the importance of mystical experience in building up a comprehensive-holistic philosophy. First, are those who possess profound mystical experiences, but did not have the capability to express them in a discursive language (like many Sufis). Second, are those who possess a sophisticated mastery of discursive language (like the philosophers) but lack profound mystical experience. Third, are those who had profound mystical experiences and also possess the ability to express them in a discursive and logical manner. This last group is, according to Suhrawardī (1999), the highest level of the seeker whom he refers to as *al-muta'allihūn* or the Theosophist. He included Plato himself in this grouping. What is important here is not so much about his claim to being a *al-muta'allih*, but his concession that mystical experiences are an essential and legitimate part of philosophical enquiries. Thus, the mystical experience has been recognised and to certain extent experienced by Muslim philosophers as one a real human experience, just like other human experiences.

The Transcosmic Voyage

In the last section we discussed the mystical experience from an epistemological perspective, where intuition operates within our inner selves as a source of our knowledge. In this section we discuss it from an ontological perspective, where

our intuition, through its mystical experience, can bring us far beyond our physical world to the metaphysical.

Our discussion on the imaginal world (*‘ālam al-mīthāl*) in the previous section has given us a clear indication of the existence of the hierarchy of beings, which in turn will provide us with a more comprehensive picture of Islamic mystico-philosophical cosmological doctrines. As one type of mystical experiences, the transcendent voyage or ‘visionary recital’ in Corbin’s terminology, as illustrated in several narrative works of Muslim philosophers, has been based on the extraordinary nocturnal journey, called *mi‘rāj* (ascension) of our Prophet, Muḥammad (pbuh), from the mosque of Aqṣā in Palestine to the seventh (highest) heaven, where he reached his ultimate destination, *ṣidrat al-muntahā*, the Loth Tree. Despite the popular belief that *mi‘rāj* was a physical journey it has been interpreted by the Sufis and philosophers as a spiritual journey of our Prophet across different layers of the spiritual world. Of course, this extraordinary event has been taken by Sufis and philosophers as the basis of and justification for their cosmological doctrines. For them, the *mi‘rāj*, understood as a spiritual event, is an affirmation of the cosmological structure, which comprises both the physical and non-physical worlds, and at the same time also disproves the assumption that the physical world is the only real world we have.

The event of *mi‘rāj* has become a favourite theme for many Sufis, who in turn discuss their own ‘*mi‘rāj*’, in the sense of spiritual (transcendent) voyage, in their works. Among these works, Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* is probably the most appealing. In this work, ‘Aṭṭār tells us a story of the long journey of birds, symbolising human souls, towards their king called ‘Sīmurgh,’ symbolising God. To reach the King, however, the birds should pass through seven extremely long and tiring valleys. Consequently, not all the birds could reach the goal. Some of them died, some others decided to return home with various pretexts. These seven valleys – valleys of searching, love, gnosis, separation and union, bewilderment, poverty and annihilation – are the symbols of spiritual worlds, ranging from the earthly world to God (‘Aṭṭār 1986). These are like the counterparts to the seven levels of heaven that our Prophet passed through during his *mi‘rāj*. The Sufis may have different names for them or even different numbers thereof. Al-Kashshānī, for example, referred to them by various names borrowed mostly from the Qur’ān: *Ṭabī‘ah*, *kursī*, *‘arsh*, *al-lawḥ al-maḥfuz*, *qalam*, *ṣīfah* and finally *zhāt Allāh* (Murata 1992). But the differences in the name and number of these non-physical worlds does not affect the existence of their hierarchical levels. The hierarchy of spiritual worlds, in turn, has been used by the Sufis and philosophers as the philosophical foundation for their cosmological doctrines. The descriptions of their transcendent voyage or journey do not arise simply from their imaginations, as might be alleged by some. They borrow their ‘empirical’ basis from mystical experiences.

Although the theme of transcosmic journey is one of the most popular among Sufis, this does not mean that philosophers have no interest in them also. I believe Ibn Sīnā likely deeply understood the philosophical significance of our Prophet's mi'rāj. In one of his Persian works entitled *Mi'rāj Nāmāh*, he specifically interpreted the mi'rāj from a philosophical perspective (Heath 1992). More importantly, in his book, *Risālat al-Ṭayr*, which was said to be the inspiration for 'Aṭṭār's work *Mantiq al-Ṭayr*, Ibn Sīnā beautifully describes his own 'mystical experience,' in the form of a transcosmic voyage. Like *Mantiq al-Ṭayr* of 'Aṭṭār, *Risālat al-Ṭayr* was composed by Ibn Sīnā in the form of a narrative or visionary recital, as Henry Corbin puts it. The following are selected passages of Ibn Sīnā's *Risālat al-Ṭayr*, as translated by Henry Corbin:

Know, o brother of Truth that a party of hunters went into the desert. They spread their net, set out their lures, and hid in the thickets. For my part, I was one of the troops of bird. When the hunters saw us, they tried to attract us by whistling so delightfully that they put us in doubt. We look; we saw an agreeable and pleasant place; we knew that our companions were beside us. We felt no uneasiness and no suspicion kept us from setting out. So we hastened to the place, and suddenly we fell into the snares. The meshes closed on our necks, the string entangled our wings, the cords hobbled our feet. Every movement that we tried to make only tightened our bonds the more and made our situation more desperate.

Finally, we gave ourselves up for lost, each of us thought only of his own pain and no longer considered that of his brother. We tried only to discover a ruse to free ourselves. And in the end we forgot what a fall our condition had undergone. In the end we ceased to be conscious of our bonds and the narrowness of our cage, and there sank to rest.

But one day it happened that I was looking out through the meshes of the nets. I saw a company of birds who had freed their heads and wings from the cage and were ready to fly away. Lengths of cord could still be seen tied to their feet, neither too tight to prevent them from flying nor loose enough to allow them a serene and untroubled life. Seeing them, I remember my earlier state. Would that I might die, I thought, from the excess of my grief, would that at the mere sight of their departure my soul might noiselessly slip from its body!

I called and cried to them from the depths of my cage: "Come! Approach! Teach me by what sleight seek deliverance; sympathize with my suffering, for truly I am at the end of my strength," But they remembered the ruses and the impostures of the hunters, my cries only frightened them, and they hastened from me. Then I besought them in the name of the eternal brotherhood, of the stainless fellowship, on the unviolated pact, to trust my words and banish doubt from their hearts. Then they came to me.

When I questioned them concerning their state, they reminded me thus: “We were prisoners of the same suffering as thine, we too have known despair; we too have been made familiar with sorrow, anguish and pain.” Then they applied their treatment to me. The cord fell from my neck, my wings were freed from their bonds; the door of the cage was opened to me. They said: “Profit by thy deliverance!” But again I prayed to them: “Free me also from this hobble that still clings to my foot.” They answered: “Were it in our power, we should have begun by removing those that encumbered our feet. How should the sick cure the sick?” I rose from the cage and flew away with them.

They said: “Far on, straight before thee, is a certain country, thou wilt not be safe from every danger until thou hast crossed all the distance that separates thee from it. Therefore, follow in our track, that we may save thee and lead thee by the night way to the goal thou desirest.”

Our flight led us between the two flanks of a mountain, through a green and fertile valley. We flew pleasantly on, until we had passed all the snares, paying no heed to the whistling of any hunter. Finally, we reached the summit of the first mountain, whence we saw eight other summits, so high that the eye could not reach them. We said to one another: “let us hasten! We shall not be out of danger until we have passed those mountains safe and sound, for in each there is a company that is interested in us. If we heed them, and linger in the charm of those pleasures and the quiet of those places, we shall never arrive.”

With great labor we passed six mountains one after another. [After passing through the seventh mountain] we told [the companions] of the suffering we had endured. They sympathized in them with the utmost solitude. Then they said to us: “Beyond this mountain is a city in which the supreme King resides. If any who are oppressed come to implore his protection and trust themselves wholly to him, the King by his strength and his aid frees them from all injustice and sufferings.”

Relying on what they told us, we determined to reach the city of the King. We came to his court and awaited audience with him. Finally, the order came that the new arrivals were to be brought before him, and we enter his castle. We found ourselves in an enclosure whose vastness no description could compass. When we had crossed it, a curtain was drawn up before us, disclosing a hall so spacious and radiant that it made us forget the first court, or, rather, compared with this, the other seemed of little account. Finally, we reached the King’s oratory. When the last curtain had been drawn and all the King’s beauty shone before our eyes, our hearts were seized with a stupor so great that it prevented us from giving words to our complaints. But he, perceiving our weakness, restored our assurance by his affability, so that we were emboldened to speak and to recite our story to him. Then he said to us: “None can unbind the bond

that fetters your feet save those who tied it. Now will I send them a Messenger to lay it upon them to satisfy you and remove your fetters. Depart, then, happy and satisfied.”

And now, lo! We are on the road, we are journeying in company with the King’s messenger (Corbin 1980).

This is a shorter version of Ibn Sīnā’s *Risālat al-Ṭayr* describing a very interesting transcendent journey of the birds, which symbolises human souls, from this terrestrial world through the celestial realms until they meet their King, symbolising God. If we study it carefully, we can draw some important lessons from Ibn Sīnā’s cosmological doctrines, especially pertaining to the position of man in the universe. First, the birds are used to symbolise the human souls, so that the fettered bird in the cage tells us about the condition of our souls trapped in the cage of the physical world. Therefore, it is clear from Ibn Sīnā’s work that human beings are not simply physical beings but also spiritual ones. This is a clear indication of Plato’s influence on him. Second, the view that the physical world is the only world we have is wrong, since Ibn Sīnā tells us in this work about other non-physical worlds, ‘the eight cosmic mountains’ above us. The fact, that the bird was asked to follow the lead of others to the city of the King, tells us clearly that there exist more real and perfect worlds than this world. This, in turn, serves as Ibn Sīnā’s criticism of the secular worldview. Third, the statement that the bird can fly despite the fetters on its feet, indicates Ibn Sīnā’s conviction that it is possible for us to make a transcendent journey during our lifetime, although not completely free from physical bondage. Fourth, that the bird must fly across several heavens tells us that this world where we live now is not our true point of origin and abode. It is God, attributed in the Qur’ān as “the First and the Last,” who is our true point of origin and place of return. Fifth, the fact that the bird and his companions have travelled across eight meta-cosmic mountains separating him and the King clearly indicates that our terrestrial world is just one of several worlds composed hierarchically, with God at its summit and the physical world at its base. That the physical world is at the base, for us, indicates that the upper metaphysical worlds are more real and beautiful than our world, although they are not physical. In short, it points out the position of our world in the whole cosmic structure. The Last, or sixth, at the summit of the hierarchy, stands the almighty King, whose beauty is all “that thou beholdest in thy heart, without any alloy of ugliness—whatever perfection thou imaginest, untroubled by any defect.” He is the King in whom “all beauty, in the true sense, is realised, and from whom all imperfection, even in the sense of a metaphor, is banished.” He is the truest object of love and the final haven within which every soul longs to harbour.

Nevertheless, *Risālat al-Ṭayr* is by no means the only philosophical work of this kind, for we know of other works, such as *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* by Ibn Ṭufayl of Andalus (Corbin 1980). Ibn Sīnā was just one of the great Muslim philosophers who

composed works of this type. Suhrawardī (d. 1191), the master of Illumination, for example, wrote several works of this type, of which *al-Ghurfah al-Gharbiyyah* (The Occidental Exile) is the most interesting and relevant to our discussion. Compared to *Risālat al-Ṭayr*, *The Occidental Exile* has a different narrative and plot, but its message and doctrine, in principle, are the same. This fact strengthens my argument that the philosophers are just as interested in these narratives as Sufis. Based on their mystical experiences, the works of philosophers notably tell us that the mystical experience is very important for both Sufis and philosophers in the construction of their epistemologies.

Below is a synopsis of *The Occident Exile*:

The story... begins with the fall into captivity. The narrator has fallen in the city of *Qayrawān*, “the city whose people are oppressors” (Qur’an 4:77). He is tossed into the shadows; yet from there, he can discern a high castle, fortified by many towers—this is the mountain of *Qaf*, and the system of nine Heavens, which must be traversed. Then, on the full-moon night, the hoopoe (Solomon’s bird) brings him a message, corresponding to that received by the young Parthian prince. It is from his father, and says: “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. We languish in missing you, yet you have forgotten us. We call you, yet you never set forth. We send you signs, yet you do not understand... if you want to be free, delay no longer your result to set forth on the voyage.” And the message goes on to explain the itinerary he must follow, with the vicissitudes to be expected during the course of the voyage (Corbin 1996).

The voyage culminates at the Source of Life, at the foot of a high mountain which we learn is Sinai—but a visionary, mystical Sinai which is not to be found in geography. Henceforth, he is free of the cosmic crypt. The voyager climbs the mountain, and finds himself in the presence of a magnificent being of light and splendour. He knows that his own spiritual being emanates from this being, whom he greets as his “Father” (Corbin 1996).

The city of *Qayrawān* (Kairouan), Tunisia, has been a part of the world referred to as the *Maghrīb* (The West/Occident). But in the Suhrawardīan system, the term ‘West’ symbolises the material world, while the original city of the narrator, ‘Yaman,’ the ‘East’ (*al-Mashriq*, the Orient), symbolises the spiritual world. When he said in his work that people of the West were evildoers, this probably referred to people in the material world being unjust, oppressive and corrupt. The fact that from the dark well the narrator can see the towers, and from the towers he can see “Yemeni lighting which flashed on the right, Eastern side,” tells us about his vision of the cosmic order, just like Ibn Sīnā’s bird when he, from the peak of highest mountain in this earth, saw other eight meta-cosmic peaks.

The statement “We summoned you, but you did not set forth” tells us that God has given us clear signs and guidance in His holy book, but most of us pay no heed to them, as if they are of no use. For those with sensitive and pure hearts, religion is a strong calling or summons from God almighty for us to return to straight path, the only path which will prevent us, human beings, from falling down into “the dark cosmic hole,” i.e. the material world. It may not be an easy path to travel, since there are many hindrances and challenges facing us, but this divine guidance is the only path, regardless of its condition, which can usher us to our true ultimate goal.

As for the roadmap provided by his father, according to Corbin, this resembles the classical cosmological pattern of the philosophers, although it is not a cosmological lesson. Likewise, the stairs which brought him out of the dark cosmic hole to the towers described in the chaotic-turbulent images also transfigured the ascension of all the cosmographical levels into symbols in Qur’ānic verses. The visionary figure has made himself a hero who acted wholly based on Qur’ānic verses. This, according to Corbin, is a good illustration of how a hermeneutic expert, by transfiguring the material from the revealed text into symbols, becomes itself a voyage of the soul. Here, the exegeses of the text is itself the exodus of the soul from the world of the exile (Corbin 1996).

Finally, I would like to link this section on the spiritual voyage with the previous section on the reality of the mystical experience. If we look at the voyage from an epistemological perspective, this will actually substantiate our arguments for the reality of the mystical experience. Of course, the transc cosmic voyages cannot be a physical or sensory experience. They are a mystical or spiritual experience. I stated in the first section that the reality of mystical experiences can be proven by their uniformity and orderliness. Here in this section on the transc cosmic voyage we find both uniformity and the orderliness of mystical experiences more clearly and explicitly. Uniformity can be seen, for example, from the fact that all the stories discussed (from the *Mi’rāj* of the Prophet to Ibn Sīnā’s *Risalat al-Ṭayr* and Suhrawardī’s *Occidental Exile*) take the voyage as their primary form, while the orderliness of their narratives can be clearly discerned from the stages outlined (of course, featuring different names and numbers) as the narrators describe their journey. This uniformity and orderliness is shared by different authors from different geographical and temporal backgrounds, in describing their voyages. This uniformity and orderliness is very significant in demonstrating that mystical experiences do have strong ontological bases and are not just an utterly subjective experience.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can draw some lessons from the discussion above. Firstly, this physical world is the starting point from where the transc cosmic voyage starts – it is not the final destination or goal, and it is certainly not the only real world,

as claimed by atheists or positivists. From this starting point, a person who wants to free themselves in order to seek out their real self should pass through all of the stages of this trans-cosmic journey until they reach ‘the King,’ ‘the Father’ or God, the true point of origin and place of return for all that exist in this world, including human beings. The journey is described as difficult and tumultuous, but it is, as mentioned earlier, the only way by which we acquire our true freedom.

Second, we can also see the importance of the cosmological and cosmographical doctrines of the philosophers in providing the correct direction or orientation, and also the meaning and purpose of our life. This is because cosmology is essentially the roadmap we should follow to reach our grand ideals, to free our soul from material bondages, to search for our true self and finally to liberate ourselves from our conventional souls, formed by certain ideas developed in our societies, such as ethnicity, nationality, *mazhhāb*, and ideology, so that we may realise fully our true-selves¹ or the universal man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).

Finally, with this I have been able to provide a clearer illustration of the importance of mystical experience and transcendent voyages for both Sufis and Muslim philosophers. Not only Ibn Sīnā and Suhrawardī have written works on this, but many other philosophers have also, such as Mullā Ṣadrā who has given us a comprehensive account in his magnum opus *al-Asfār al-Arba‘ah*² on his own spiritual and intellectual journey.

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¹ The real-self has been described by Reza Arrasteh as a self that transcends the conventional self, see Reza Arasteh, *Rūmī: The Persian: Rebirth in Creativity and Love* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Kashmiri Bazaar, 1965, p. 46 and Mulyadhi Kartanegara, *Jalal al-Din Rumi: Guru Sufi dan Penyair Agung* (Jakarta: Teraju, 2004), pp. 35-36.

² For Mullā Ṣadrā’s spiritual journey, see Henry Corbin, *The Voyage*, p. 120.

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