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Some reflections on existence and imagination in relation to interreligious dialogue and intercultural philosophy of religion¹

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This article discusses notions of philosophical grammar, existence, imagination and reason in light of religious plurality in modernity and intercultural philosophy of religion. More specifically the first part of the article presents a model that aims to combine a central modern human experience – that there is a plurality of religious and non-religious ‘non-reducible’ ontologies and existential interpretations of them – with an awareness of the possibility of non-reductionist dialogical existential inter-subjectivity, specifically in relation to ontology, philosophy and religion. The second part of the article discusses briefly the definition of modernity as a global condition, and argues that the plurality of worldviews and a Kantian inspired focus on the individual’s courage to use his or her own reason should be seen as central aspects of worldviews in modernity, but without the need necessarily to follow Kant’s ‘universalistic’ approach to individuality. The third part of the article presents some views on ‘existence’ and ‘essence’ and how these notions are related in various ways to notions of imagination in some parts of the Muslim philosophical tradition. The fourth part of the article returns to the issue of how to conceive of what it means to be individual and the relation between the individual, communal reality and ontology.

Keywords: Intercultural philosophy; philosophy of religion; Islamic Philosophy; speculative grammar; ontology; existence; imagination; reason; dialogue; sociology of religion; Ibn Arabi

Introduction

Intercultural philosophy has during the twentieth century for several reasons increasingly become the subject of attention for philosophers worldwide. Besides the obvious point that it is good to become more aware of humankind’s intellectual heritage, this approach to philosophy also has the potential to revitalize the Socratic spirit of philosophy as meeting across different religious and cultural traditions forces philosophers to rethink, question and transform generally established perspectives within what they have considered to be the borderline of their ‘own’ tradition of ontology, epistemology, philosophical anthropology and hermeneutics.

This article discusses some issues related to this development. More specifically, the first part of the article presents a model that aims to combine a central modern human experience – that there is a plurality of religious and non-religious ‘non-reducible’ ontologies and existential interpretations of them – with an awareness of the possibility of non-reductionist dialogical existential inter-subjectivity, specifically in relation to ontology, philosophy and religion. The second part of the article discusses briefly the definition of modernity as a global condition, and argues that the plurality of worldviews and a Kantian inspired focus on the individual’s courage to use his or her own reason should be seen as central aspects of worldviews in modernity, but without the need necessarily to follow Kant’s ‘universalistic’

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approach to individuality. The third part of the article presents some views on ‘existence’ and ‘essence’ and on how these notions are related in various ways to notions of imagination in some parts of the Muslim philosophical tradition. The fourth part of the article returns to the issue of how to conceive of what it means to be individual and the relation between the individual, communal reality and ontology. It suggests that the discussion of how we should conceive of the relation between meaning and modernity could 1) benefit from taking existential perspectives into consideration and 2) combine them with approaches to imagination that not only focus on the role of ‘social imagination’, but also see the imagination that is related to ‘intensification of existence’ as related to ontological and epistemological issues inspired by the way this, as pointed out in part three, has been done in the Muslim philosophical traditions.

Interreligious and non-religious dialogue, world philosophy and modernity

We shall start by looking at some meta-philosophical aspects of the cognitive dimension of religious and philosophical worldviews. We take meta-philosophy to mean the philosophical examination of the practice of philosophizing itself. I use the term meta-philosophy in the context of this article to distinguish between practices of doing philosophy (and here especially philosophy of religion and theologies) and the (meta-)philosophical examination of such practices.

It is obvious that philosophical and theological ideas come in many shapes and forms as interpretations within different cultural, religious and non-religious or areligious views of the world. I will here argue that theological and philosophical reflection on issues related to religion from a meta-philosophical perspective can often be said to be cognitively committed to a relation with what one might call the grammatical ciphers on particular worldviews. Further, I will argue that this commitment also implies an existential dimension.

The notion of grammar has played an important role in modern philosophy. It is well known that the later Wittgenstein took a great interest in ‘philosophical grammar’, but philosophers such as Heidegger and Peirce can also be said to operate with forms of ‘philosophical grammar’ as they are both inspired by the idea of Speculative Grammar as it was developed in the Middle Ages.² These thinkers were called *Modistae* because they claimed that there is an isomorphic relation between *modi significandi*, *modi essendi* and *modi intelligendi*. I will pursue this idea by introducing the notion of existential-grammatical ciphers, but at the same time transform it into a way of thinking which relates to the phenomenon that the sociologist Peter Berger has called ‘inductive theology’, which takes its starting point in human experience, but without losing the relation on the ontological level.

The idea of ciphers is inspired by Jasper’s notion of existential ciphers, but the grammar aspect is also introduced to express the possibility that these existential ciphers are already related to religious and ontological grammars. The *general meaning* of ‘the modes of being’ relates to and constructs and receives its *significance* in relation to a social reality, but the *ontological meaning* is found through the existential-cognitive (modes of intellect) deciphering of the ciphers. The ‘modus intelligendi’ is in this interpretation therefore not only a cognitive but also an existential approach to ‘modes of being’.

One could perhaps say that this does not do justice to the *Modistae*’s idea – they after all claimed that the isomorphic relation between the three modes expressed a particular religious ontology, namely a Christian ontology, while the perspective suggested here might instead be an onto-dialogical perspective. (It might here be relevant to mention in passing that the ideas of the *Modistae* have been developed partly under inspiration from Arab Muslim religious thought [Yacoub, al-Sa’adi, and Kopanski 2009].) Another objection might be that

the notion of ciphers fixates worldviews and that the notion of grammar in modern philosophy takes precedence over the three modes – especially the ontological and cognitive existential modes. The point is, though, that even from a purely grammatical perspective, ‘something’ takes precedence over things.³ Further, ciphers might perhaps be less fixated than, for example ‘mythological sentences’, especially as they are always seen through temporality of existence.⁴ The transformation of the ideas of the *Modistae* suggested here is intended to ensure that a central modern human experience – that there is a plurality of religious and non-religious ‘non-reducible’ ontologies and existential interpretations of them – is integrated into religious and philosophical worldviews. In other words, the approach here is suggested as one of many ways to establish an awareness of the possibility of dialogical existential inter-subjectivity specifically in relation to ontology, philosophy and religion.

Let us exemplify the notion of existential grammatical ciphers. For example, a theologian or religious thinker, if he or she is a Muslim, would have to be able to present an idea about how one should relate to *tawhīd*, while a Christian thinker would have to relate to Trinity. This does not, however, imply any assumptions regarding the form that relation should have. For example, Christian Unitarians may, by definition, see themselves as Christian even though they do not believe in the Trinity, but they will have to ‘relate’ to the Trinity as something they do not believe in their interpretations as self-proclaimed Christians, to explain themselves both to themselves and to ‘other’ Christians, even though ‘other’ Christians might not accept their interpretation of what it means to be Christian. The point is that they have to relate to the Trinity in a way that a Buddhist or a Muslim would not have to do, just as they will not be required to present the same sort of reflection of the cipher of another religion. It should be noted that not only religious thinkers but also non-religious or areligious philosophers implicitly tend to refer to grammatical ciphers, as is the case, for example, with the idea of *freedom* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; in eighteenth-century France it was primarily combined with reason (*ratio*) as a cipher, while in early nineteenth-century Germany it was combined with the notion of ‘spirit’ (*Geist*).

To sum up, I suggest that theologians and philosophers are inclined to think in certain ontological-grammatical contexts, so, in a sense, philosophers are discussing in light of what one might call an onto-dialogical difference between specific grammatical ciphers, which has to be deciphered. The deciphering processes are not only related to the ciphers, but an intellectual deciphering process will also ‘bend back’ in a reflection on itself, evaluating itself as an interpretive strategy in relation to the meaning the deciphering of the cipher reveals; in other words, it is equally importantly a hermeneutic process.

Dialogical opportunity, cognitive legitimacy and existential commitment in modernity

The existential-philosophical deciphering of such ciphers is in some cases done in such a way that it builds bridges between distinctive ontological ciphers, thereby creating new possibilities in the form of spaces for dialogue between (adherents of) different religions and between religious and non-religious worldviews in what could be called onto-dialogical interaction across different religious and philosophical grammars. Such interpretive bridges may take the form of inspirational encounters and conversations between common themes, as was the case, for example, in the debates regarding notions of being, intelligence and imagination in the encounter between Islamic, Jewish and Christian theology and philosophy in the Middle Ages. But it might take a more radical form, when thinkers might challenge traditional exclusivist demarcations regarding what it means to be a believer in a particular religion; this is something that has happened increasingly in the era of modernity in the work, for example, of

thinkers such as Hajime Tanabe, Raimundo Panikkar, Henry Corbin and, to some extent, Mohammed Arkoun.

Such dialogical opportunities and bridges are not only often very complex to grasp intellectually because they frequently counter established ideas and norms, but they also often constitute a challenge to established religious and secular social structures, because they may indicate that the worldviews of the other(s), which have been deemed to be ‘irreconcilable’ with one’s own worldview, might actually be reconcilable at cognitive and existential levels, without necessarily being the same. It is obvious that this can raise the question both of what constitutes the authority of ‘established theoretical views’, and of what legitimacy social-political and economic power structures have insofar as the legitimacy of these structures rests on established theoretical views. This problem of ‘legitimacy’ is related not only to interpretive possibilities at the cognitive level, but also to the status of the *potential individuality* of the interpreter. It is true that not every interpretation of the ciphers in a given grammar (and the blend of these grammars) is of equal quality. However, I will here argue that these differences between interpretations are not only due to differences in the abstract cognitive quality of the interpretation of the ciphers, but also should be seen as related to ideas of what one perhaps might call the ‘existential dignity’ of the individual interpreter. One way of arguing for this dignity is to see the interpreter as a unique existential locus for the actualization of the existential grammar. Alternatively, to speak religiously, that God on the human level of the ‘perception’ of theophany seeks to disclose unique aspects of him/herself through the uniqueness of the individual existent human being.

If this is so, how can the existent individual disclose truth if ‘established’ viewpoints are not primarily seen as ‘absolute’? And if one should see the individual’s ‘truth’ from a cognitive-existential perspective, how can he or she express existential truth in a way that relates it to social reality? A typical religious-existential answer might be that existential truth in itself has a paradoxical character, which also hinders it from being expressed in direct language. Such an answer rightly raises the question of how existential communication is possible. Further, one might also ask what role and status imagination has in the apparition of (paradoxical) existential truth. We will examine these issues by leaving the ‘pure ether’ of intellectual existential-grammatical exchanges and reflecting on how to understand the plurality of modernity in a way that leaves room for the various ‘spiritual’, religious and philosophical ways in which human existence can realize truth or be realized in truth without losing sight of the role cognition and imagination play in this process.

Modernity, plurality, individuality and imagination

The relation between religion and modernity has been a contested issue since Max Weber claimed at the beginning of the twentieth century that the progressive disenchantment of the world is characteristic of modernity.⁵ The answers to questions regarding whether such a disenchantment of the world is actually taking place, or to what degree and where it takes place, and whether this is necessarily a consequence of modernity, very much depend, of course, on how one defines the function, content and scope of modernity. Unfortunately, some definitions of modernity suffer from conceptual inconsistency. For example, since secularization is not necessarily a global process, will a definition of modernity that both describes modernity as a worldwide condition (scope) and at the same time claims that modernity, conceptually speaking, is inevitably dependent on secularization (content) easily lead to a confusion of descriptive and normative aspects (and perhaps also suffer from a confusion of the historical and systematic perspectives)? I will not go more deeply into these discussions here but will instead, without further ado, follow Hakon Yavuz’s attempt to define

modernity in a way that portrays it as a global condition but does not – implicitly or explicitly – introduce normative aspects into the definition. For Yavuz,

modernity is a global condition in which individuals and groups are able to redefine social relations on the basis of *social imagination*. This imagination presupposes a rich repository of tradition, without which traditional societies would lose their inner cohesiveness and viability, the very precursors for modern development. (Yavuz 2003, 23; emphasis added)

Yavuz's definition of modernity not only steers clear of any implicit teleology, but also points to a *social imagination* that 'presupposes a rich *repository of tradition*' as something the individual agent has at his or her interpretive disposal in the agent's coming into social existence in, and as a co-constructor of, a given context. This approach also opens up the possibility of a *plurality* of repositories and a dynamic interplay between them through the individual agent's interpretation of the repositories the agent has 'at hand'. Each individual participates in different repositories and, whether aware of it or not, will at the same time be a co-worker in the continued construction and reconstruction and blending of these repositories.

This raises questions regarding how an individual as an existential 'process-in-context' can participate in a 'truthful', 'authentic' way in the construction not only of 'factual' socially constructed reality but also of the social imaginary, and how we should understand the notion of imagination and its status in this context. It is obvious that the social constructivist position⁶ can give an understanding of how the individual constructs him- or herself in relation to 'objectified' socially constructed reality through externalization and internalization, but social constructivism cannot in itself 'give' an idea of truth as the individual existentially grasps it. Thus the nihilism of social constructivism, which is its great advantage as a 'neutral' descriptive analytical tool, is also its limitation: social constructivism does not explain how objectivity is existentially grasped by concrete subjectivity 'in truth'.

We will take as our starting point Kant's famous dictum that one should have 'the courage to use one's own reason' and see how this can be combined with a notion of imagination. Even though Kant's notions of *individuality* and *reason* have been criticized in many ways (among them, that they rest on too 'universalistic' a notion of reason to leave room for the existent individual), nevertheless, with his focus on the notions of individuality and reason, Kant has expressed some important perspectives for deciphering modernity, which one has to relate to even if one does not necessarily agree with Kant.

Being, existence and the ontological status of the imaginal realm in Islamic philosophy⁷

I will suggest that modernity can be seen as an understanding of self-being-in-the-world-as-existence, which focuses on *that* and *how* it is in the world. This stands in contrast to understandings of the self-being-in-the-world that focus on its *whatness*, its essence or quiddity. This simple distinction enables us to begin to consider existential development in light of philosophical reflections regarding 'Being' and what I will present as an interesting feature in Islamic philosophy, namely how the reflection on Being is connected with reflections on the ontological status of Imagination. I will pursue this from the perspective that I am interested in: how this could inspire further developments in theories of existential human development through human existential exchange.

The different positions in relation to Being taken by thinkers such as Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, Ibn Rushd, Ibn 'Arabi and Mulla Sadra could briefly be described as spanning from Being as the essence of the thing, its 'whatness', to Being as a 'thatness'/'suchness', where essence is in the latter case understood as a mental concept. I will here mention only one problem with understanding Being as essence, because some of the answers to this problem indicate some of the roads Islamic philosophy has taken that might be fruitful to consider in modern theories on

existential human development. The ideas of interpreting Being as essence had an excellent advocate in Ibn Sina, among others. To understand Being as essence means that one thinks that Being's characteristics can be captured in the definition of its essential properties, while the existence of the individual thing is understood as a result of God's action, which moves the thing from potentiality to actuality. Suhrawardi pointed out that one of the problems with this approach is that it is difficult to understand how one could conceive of the individuality of the individual thing through properties of the thing. Another problem is how one differentiates between the accidental and essential qualities of the thing, which of course is necessary in order to grasp the essential being in general.

Now one way of thinking of this might be to understand Being as existence rather than as essence. This would mean that, first of all, it would be simpler to 'explain' individual existence as: this *is* an instantiation of Being, which at the same time has to be known through existence. Such an 'existential solution'⁸ might perhaps be easier for people living in modernity to understand, but this is not as simple as it might seem, for it is here that the idea of Imagination plays an important role in Islamic philosophy for thinkers such as Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi and Mulla Sadra. Ibn Sina had already spoken of Imagination as a faculty that helped to 'store' images abstracted from material life in a 'common sense'. But it was Suhrawardi (who actually held that existence is only a mental concept), and Ibn 'Arabi who suggested that Imagination was not simply a faculty but rather an ontological dimension or realm between the world of sensual material bodies and the world of intellectual entities, which is more 'real' than our normal life-world. Suhrawardi saw this different ontological dimension as constituted in interaction between light and darkness rather than between form and matter (and being was therefore defined by degrees of intensity of light rather than existence), while Imagination for Ibn Arabi is both an important part of his religious spiritual system revolving around the notion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), and also the realm where he openly claimed to receive inspiration from past and long dead holy figures such as Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. By saying this, he also indicated that this realm was the realm connected with individual immortality, and a realm that one who followed this way of thinking could see as the background to why many of the 'stranger stories' in the holy books of the monotheistic religions and in the religions of the world in general should not just be dismissed as psychological phenomena.

Mulla Sadra operates in his ontology system in a manner somewhat like Suhrawardi, with what Corbin has called Mulla Sadra's notion of intensification and degradation of being, but in contrast to Suhrawardi he does so in light of the idea of *aṣālat al-wujūd* (the primacy of existence). This primacy of existence does not exclude descriptions of individual existence, but our descriptions are closely related to the individual being as existence, and not an essence that we can say ontologically precedes existence. Mulla Sadra operates with a notion of constant change in every existence, which makes it impossible to establish a non-changing essential definition of 'any-thing' in existence; it is the act and mode of existence that determine what a thing is. This might sound a bit like modern existential philosophy, but one of the things that distinguishes Mulla Sadra's system is the idea of intensification and degradation. As Corbin writes:

For example, to the metaphysics of essence, the status of man or the status of the body is a constant. But to Mulla Sadra's existential metaphysic, being a man is possible in many degrees, from being a demon with a human face to the sublime condition of being the Perfect Man. What is called the body passes through a multitude of states from being a perishable body in this world to being a subtle or even divine body (*jism ilahi*). These changes always depend on intensifications and attenuations (that is, degradations) in the act of existing. (Corbin 1980, 11–12)

The phenomenology that occurs through acts of existence as intensification and degradations of being is closely related to the imaginal world. As Tom Cheetham has put it:

The phenomenology of intensities of existence corresponds to the qualitative space of the *mundus imaginalis*, because it is only there that these qualitative differences, these intensifications and degradations of being, can occur. They are not visible as such in the world of matter. Even the creations of the powerful *himma* of gnostic master are visible only to other gnostics. Moral and spiritual advances or failures create the worlds in which the soul moves, by virtue of the intensity of existence, the act of Prescience, and the degree of individuation of that soul. This intensification of being is accomplished in the *mundus imaginalis*, through the struggle of the human person with and for the angel of its being. (Cheetham 2003, 91)

It should be obvious by now that the ideas regarding the role of Imagination in relation to ontological-existential issues in Islamic philosophy are interesting to pursue philosophically. The question is now, what role could there be for such an idea of existential development in modernity?

Imagination as an ontological-existential category in modernity

Spiritual, religious and/or existential development is not primarily concerned with confirming the limits of human finite identity, but it challenges these limits and does so using ‘creative imagination’. Imagination can be analysed both from a psychological perspective (where it might break down in the first meeting with ‘facticity’ or ‘material reality’), and from a sociological perspective, where it creatively connects with an already established ‘social repository of tradition’ (Yavuz 2003, 23). What I want to suggest, inspired by the thoughts of Ibn ‘Arabi and especially Mulla Sadra, is that imagination might also be seen in the light of ontology and existence.

If, for example, we follow Cheetham in his Corbin-inspired interpretation of Mulla Sadra, in which, as we have seen, he claims that ‘the phenomenology of intensities of existence corresponds exactly to the qualitative space of the *mundus imaginalis*, because it is only there that these qualitative differences, these intensifications and degradations of being, can occur’ (Cheetham 2003, 91), then this opens up, in principle, the possibility that existence in general can transcend the limits of ‘the secular world’ through an intensification of existence. The important thing here is that the possibility of such an intensification of existence and perhaps/ perhaps-not transcending of secularism emerges from the locus that is existence itself – the new transcendent world is not ‘larger’ than the intensification of existence allows it to be.

I would argue that this existential intensification through an ontological imagination in a modern context could be understood as an extension of Kant’s famous motto for the enlightenment, which in his German translation of the Latin *Sapere aude* becomes ‘Habe Muth dich deines *eigenes* Verstandes zu bedienen’, which in English is often translated as either ‘have courage to use your *own* understanding’ or ‘have courage to use your own reason’. Kant’s German translation emphasizes that it is your own ‘Verstand’ you should use and not what someone else has thought out for you. This is, of course, closely connected with the Enlightenment’s emphasis on combining universal reason with individual political freedom. However, what is interesting is the ambiguity in the way ‘Verstand’ is translated into either ‘understanding’ (which is how ‘Verstand’ is often translated in English versions of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*) or ‘reason’. This is important because, while ‘understanding’ is the primary category in Kant’s epistemology, which is bound to the world of space, time and the 12 categories, ‘reason’ is the primary category when it comes to ethics. The problem is that in neither case is it obvious *who* it is that should use one’s ‘own’ understanding/reason; in theoretical philosophy we ultimately end up with the transcendental ego acting in a

transcendental apperception (which Kant rightly distinguishes from a pure psychological ego) and in ethics it is like Rousseau's general will, which has become internalized, and we act accordingly, following universal principles, and respect the dignity of others as existing reasonable beings, but *not as unique individualities*.

This might perhaps be enough when it comes to political freedom, but both German idealism and existential philosophy, each in its own way, reflected on how one could understand the dignity of the 'individual being in its uniqueness'. Kierkegaard's notion of existential freedom and his famous idea of existential truth as truth for *me* as 'standing out in the nothingness of anxiety', whose subjectivity is both 'true' as 'passionately' transcending 'objectivity' and at the same time 'untrue' as the individual existent human being is not the whole truth, is here of particular interest and might be fruitfully related to Ibn 'Arabi's thoughts. The first point I would like to make here is that Kant's emphasis on using one's *own* understanding/reasoning means that then the notion of truth must be the truth as it presents itself *to me*. This can be seen as Kierkegaard's existential corrective to Kant.

This brings me to my second point, namely that this position is not unproblematic. One problem is that the abyss of anxiety is rather abstract by nature. Further, it is not at all clear how anxiety helps one to establish one's *own* reasoning as one's own *reasoning*. This could perhaps be possible by being open to the notion of the imaginal world as this might point to an *individualized imaginative reason*. In other words, I am inspired by Ibn 'Arabi and Mulla Sadra to suggest that imagination is the glue that ties reason together with individual existence. I thus propose, in a certain contrast to Kant and much post-Kantian philosophy, that existential imagination can have a constitutive and not only a regulative function in relation to epistemology issues, even if – or perhaps especially if – it does not take its material from the sensual world; it is, so to speak, not of this world, even though it functions in it – and also in the social construction of reality.

The approach I suggest here means first of all that human existence should be open to the idea that there might or might not be 'other realms' than the commonly constructed reality, but that it should be left to the individual existence's own interplay between anxiety and creative imagination to decide whether this is something that should be pursued further for that particular existence. In relation to existential development, an interesting question arises as to how one should perceive the relation between a (human) teacher and the learner. Kierkegaard discussed this issue in relation to how to conceive of the relation between student and teacher by reference to Socrates and Jesus, and it is obvious that one could consider this also in terms of prophets and sheikhs; this depends very much on the ciphers one focuses on deciphering, and how one deciphers them. It might here be useful to distinguish between the teaching activities related to the sensual world, and those related to – or even going on *into* – the potential, imaginal world.

This is closely related to debates regarding how one is certain that one is pursuing 'the right path'. Is this not ultimately *only* a subjectivist approach to the truth? This is, of course, a very difficult question, especially if one thinks of the notion of truth suggested by Kierkegaard, as noted above. However, one must distinguish here between having a theory that leaves room for existential truth, and the criteria for recognizing something as true within that theory. The idea of the imaginative realm at least gives space for considering existence imaginatively. Further, an even more important point may be that this problem is a problem not only for 'subjectivist' approaches but also for 'objectivist' approaches, including those that build on 'universal logic' (as we saw in the case of Kant). The reason for this is, of course, as the German idealists were very aware, that if God is thought of as Being (maybe even transcending that notion), then there must be room for both objectivity and subjectivity in relation to truth, as both 'belong' to Being (or to that which is beyond Being).

If one pursues this line of thought, it may be that even social reality can become meaningful in a deeper sense thanks to the individual existence's realization of his or her individualized but still universal intelligence in the imaginal realm, inspired by the way this is presented by, among others, Ibn 'Arabi and Mulla Sadra. This is so because the purely intellectual aspects of the ciphers of a given ontology, and the possible ways these ciphers can interact with ciphers from other ontologies, are disclosed through the 'Imaginatrix' (to use a phrase coined by Corbin – see for example Corbin 1969, 153) as real possibilities – that is individualized possibility. This opens the way for the individual existence's development both in and for itself as a possible understanding of how worldviews of others can interact with the individual's worldview.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the seminar 'Modern Islamic thought at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo, 24–25 May 2011.
2. Derrida is, of course, another example of a philosopher interested in philosophical grammar. For more information regarding the notion of grammatical ciphers, my inspiration from the *Modistae*, the relation between the *Modistae* and Peirce and Heidegger's philosophy and, more generally, the idea of onto-dialogical interaction, see Garsdal (2011, 45–6).
3. Wittgenstein's *On certainty* includes a famous discussion on how we should understand logical and empirical sentences, suggesting that truth is always measured against a background of a special type of sentence, which could be considered to be 'mythological'; that is, sentences that are neither logical sentences nor empirical sentences that we can consequently declare to be true or false. This is not so with 'mythological sentences', which rather should be seen as sentences that set the horizon for our interpretational activities. Wittgenstein writes that the mythology expressed in such sentences 'may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other' (Wittgenstein 1975, §97). This approach opens up the possibility for dynamic radical transformative interpretations of mythological sentences. However – perhaps despite Wittgenstein's intentions – this might also be problematic for 'insiders' of religious beliefs for both cognitive and not least existential reasons, for they could be understood as open to the possibility not only of 'deciphering' mythological sentences regarding, for example, the Qur'an or Christ, but also of dismissing them as mythological sentences – and he thereby begins to relate to issues regarding both ontology and existence as the idea of 'truth' itself becomes unclear – not in the various grammars, but in Wittgenstein's own philosophy. It might be argued that his views explain the possibility of conversion from one religion to another and 'in' and 'out' of religious worldviews in general, but the problem is that Wittgenstein's central notion here is 'grammar' and this makes unclear the role the person's 'existence-in-truth' has in relation to the transformation of mythological sentences that set up ontological 'references'. One could, from a religious worldview, perhaps say that the problem is that it is unclear how mythological sentences are related to the three modes of the *Modistae*. Wittgenstein himself, in another context, makes some remarks regarding the relation between 'system of coordinates', 'system of reference' and 'passion' in a religious belief: 'It appears to me that a religious belief could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of coordinates. Hence although it's belief, it is really a way of living, or a way of judging life. Passionately taking up *this* interpretation. And so instructing in a religious belief would have to be portraying, describing that system of reference and at the same time appealing to conscience' (Wittgenstein 1998, 73e). It should be obvious that the existential commitment to such a system of reference, if this is to be expressed in an interpretation of 'mythological sentences' in an existential moment, may result in tension between the faith such sentences might represent, and the Wittgensteinian take on the dynamic possibilities of change in mythological sentences. However, we will instead focus on something else, namely that when religious faith is characterized as being 'passionate', this might point to an ambiguity regarding the subject of the religious faith, which is somewhat hidden by the English term 'committing oneself'. 'Passion' does etymologically (as, likewise, is the case with Wittgenstein's original German equivalent, *Leidenschaft*) carry a connotation of being both an activity as well as a sort of 'passive' suffering. It can – if we elaborate on Wittgenstein's thought – be said to stand in dialectical tension between being 'a system of coordinates' (*Koordinatensystem*) and a 'system of reference' (*Bezugssystem*) mediated by 'passion'.

In other words, the ‘referential’ aspect grows out of the passion of faith, so that who and what the subject(s) of this passion is/are can only be known within this referential system itself as a ‘system of coordinates’.

4. Even though ciphers ‘install’ a background for ‘discourse’ just as ‘mythological sentences’ do, it is not at all clear that every cipher takes the form of a sentence. One could perhaps think of ciphers such as the ‘Qur’an’, ‘Christ’ or ‘freedom’ as ‘free-floating’ colours – the cipher might be considered as ‘free-floating’ colour before it is ‘connected’ with anything, and when it makes its way into sentences one could perhaps say that the deciphering process of the cipher takes its first step. As soon as one says that ‘Qur’an’, ‘Christ’ or ‘freedom’ is this or that, or combines it with other words into sentences (see below) one could perhaps say that the deciphering process has begun.
5. This is a good example of the way philosophers and theologians across religious (and non-religious) borders debated the notions of disenchantment and secularization in the 1960s, considering the role ‘negativity’ could and should play in religious ontology, in relation both to what has been called ‘god is dead’ theology, and to so-called ‘secular theology’. The debate has become known to a larger audience through the Anglican Bishop John Robinson’s admission that he could not truthfully preach about a theistic God ‘out there’, but the question regarding how one should perceive the dynamics between Being and Nothingness in relation to religion led to interesting theoretical and existential religious-philosophical reflections that were not only discussed in light of Christian theology (Cox, Altizer, Tillich) but also included Jewish Holocaust theology (Rubenstein), modern Mahayana Buddhist philosophy (the Kyoto school) and reflections on the sociology of religion (Peter Berger).
6. Yavuz eloquently illustrates the strength of this social constructivist methodological position and its advantages over essentialist and contextualistic approaches in his analysis of how the Nasqbandi worldview has functioned as a ‘repository of tradition’ for the development of the Nursi and the Gülen movements in new socio-political and economic contexts in Turkey and how this in itself has transformed the social imaginary.
7. This paragraph owes its virtues to the work done by Corbin (1969, 1980), Leaman (1999) and Cheetham (2003) and its vices to me.
8. Another advantage of this position is that it is ultimately not clear that something is if does not have a real possibility of being realized, even though we ascribe qualities to it. On the other hand, this could lead to different Islamic theological problems, notably how to understand individual immortality and how to perceive the creation of the world.

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