

Ibn ‘Arabī on Proximity and Distance

Chapters 260 and 261 of the *Futūḥāt**

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This paper will offer a reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings on the important Sufi concepts of *qurb* (proximity) and *bu‘d* (distance), as laid out in chapters 260 and 261 of his monumental *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (*The Meccan Illuminations*). In these relatively brief chapters Ibn ‘Arabī engages his predecessors’ meditations upon these concepts, while offering his own unique interpretations of their meaning and significance. The *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* plays a crucial role in Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings here, as do a number of key Qur’ānic passages.

IBN ‘ARABĪ ON PROXIMITY

Ibn ‘Arabī devotes chapter 260 of the *Futūḥāt* to proximity. The full title of the chapter is indeed elusive: “On knowing proximity which is [referred to as] the performance of acts of obedience, [and] which may be understood as the proximity of *the distance of two bow-lengths* (the bows forming into a circle) or *nearer* [Q.53:9].”¹ In the title itself Ibn ‘Arabī provides a key to understanding the exposition of proximity that is to follow.

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1. Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-‘Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, n.d.), II.258. As Michel Chodkiewicz notes in the introduction to volume two of the very important collection of translations from the *Futūḥāt* (*The Meccan Revelations*, vol. II, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz, trans. Cyrille Chodkiewicz and Denis Gril, trans. from the original French by David Streight (New York: Pir Press, 2004), p. 9), Ibn ‘Arabī will return to the theme of the two bow-lengths in chapters 427 (IV.39–40) and 439 (IV.51–3) of the *Futūḥāt*. However, Ibn ‘Arabī’s treatment of this topic in these chapters is beyond

Proximity is, from one perspective, the result of religious devotions, which is to say that one may draw nearer to God by virtue of carrying out those acts which He has prescribed in the Law. Yet, proximity may also be understood as that which brings two “bows” or arcs together, each of which are “separate” and “opposite” at one point. “The distance of two bow-lengths” alludes to the famous verse in *Sūrat al-najm*, which recounts the Prophet’s *mi’rāj*, or ascension. The Qur’ānic verse specifies neither who was brought near, nor to whom he was brought near, and the *sīra* and *ḥadīth* literature provide additional bits of information to help solve the puzzle.

While there may be differences of opinion as to what the opening verses of *Sūrat al-najm* mean, even when the information provided in the *sīra* and *ḥadīth* literature is taken into consideration, the Sufis agree for the most part that these verses refer to the Prophet’s encounter with God.² “The distance of

the scope of this paper, as are his other discussions concerning his technical notion of the *maqām al-qurba*, elucidated in the *Futūḥāt* (i.e. chapters 73 and 161, both of which have been analyzed and partially translated by Cyrille Chodkiewicz in the aforementioned volume, *The Meccan Revelations*, pp.229–42), and in his short treatise entitled *Kitāb al-qurba*, to be found in *Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī*, ed. Maḥmūd Ghurāb (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 1997), pp.88–95. For Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings on the *maqām al-qurba*, see also Michel Chodkiewicz’s *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), passim. In this paper I have confined myself to an analysis of Ibn ‘Arabī’s treatment of the *aḥwāl* of *qurb* and *bu’d* respectively, which should, at any rate, be studied independent of his teachings on *qurba* in such a preliminary analysis as the one being offered here. It should also be noted that, taken as a whole, William Chittick has translated more than a quarter of chapters 260 and 261 of the *Futūḥāt* in his *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp.151–52; 319; 330; 365–66, and in his article “Ethical Standards and the Vision of Oneness: The Case of Ibn al-‘Arabī”, in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies*, ed. R.H. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p.374. Although Chittick’s translations helped me figure out several difficult passages, all the translations from the *Futūḥāt* in this paper are my own.

2. For early Sufi teachings on the Prophet’s Night Journey and Ascension,

two bow-lengths” is said to denote the proximity between the encounterer and the Encountered, between subject and Object. If this encounter was “or nearer” (*aw adnā*), it is either because the meeting between the encounterer and the Encountered was more intimate than human language can describe, or because the situation of proximity itself breaks down the barriers between the two referents such that the encounter of proximity is nothing but a union between the two. When two arcs are made to face one another an oval or oblong circle is formed, resulting in a unification of two opposites. When this happens the points on the circle which distinguish the coming together of the two opposites can no longer be determined. A perfect oval or oblong circle is so whole that even if the two sides which form it were brought together, they would no longer be opposites; they would be united. They would be “nearer”. Without elaborating on the unique and creative ways in which the Sufi tradition has meditated upon this symbol, it will suffice to say that in the very title of this chapter, Ibn 'Arabī gives us an idea of where he wants to take his discussion on proximity. Although the chapter will say nothing more about the image of proximity being “the distance of two bow-lengths”, the Shaykh’s expositions on the nature of proximity and its relationship between the Divine and the human will show that this is indeed a specific type of proximity he has in mind, and is not open to everyone.

PROXIMITY AND THE PERPETUAL SELF-DISCLOSURES OF THE REAL

The Shaykh begins the chapter on proximity by explaining what he means by this technical Sufi expression. While his opening statements in this chapter undoubtedly assume the truth of the definitions of proximity given by his illustrious predecessors, his treatment of the topic is unmistakably more nuanced from the outset:

see Fredrick Colby (trans. and ed.), *The Subtleties of the Ascension: Early Mystical Sayings on Muhammad’s Heavenly Journey* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2006).

God says, *We are closer to him than the jugular vein* [Q.50:16]. He described Himself in terms of proximity to His servants. What is sought by “proximity” is nothing but its being an attribute of the servant such that he is characterized by proximity to the Real in the way that the Real is characterized by proximity to him.³

Ibn ‘Arabī’s opening statements reveal proximity as a reciprocal relationship between the Divine and the human. All beautiful and noble character traits proceed from the Divine. “Proximity” therefore marks a certain characteristic of God. When the Prophet said “Take on the character traits of God”,⁴ with respect to proximity this would mean that our proximity to God presupposes God’s proximity to us. Ibn ‘Arabī returns to this point later on in the chapter. In the following passage, it can clearly be seen that the Shaykh’s understanding of God’s perpetual self-disclosures in all things colours his exposition of “proximity”. Slightly towards the end of chapter 260 he describes the situation of proximity as being the self-disclosures of the Real in all things, whether they are material or immaterial:

We say that that Real is not absent from being with every servant whenever He discloses Himself to him such that He becomes manifest to him in matter or in something other than matter. If He discloses Himself to him in matter that is a form, proximity will follow that matter in the congregation (*majlis*) of witnessing and the presence of vision. If He manifests Himself to him in something other than matter, it is proximity of place and proximity of rank, such as the proximity of the vizier, the judge, and the governor [to the king].⁵

In this passage Ibn ‘Arabī speaks of the ways in which proximity is experienced. It is, however, only the gnostics who can witness God in the multiple forms of creation, and who can therefore experience that proximity which is characteristic of all existence.

3. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II.258.

4. For this teaching in Ibn ‘Arabī, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp.283–88.

5. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II.560.

This point is clarified in an earlier passage, where Ibn 'Arabī begins by quoting the Qur'ānic verse, *And He is with you wherever you may be* [Q.57:4]:

It is just as He says, *And He is with you wherever you may be*. The Men (*al-rijāl*) always seek to be with the Real in whatever form He discloses Himself. And He perpetually discloses Himself in the forms of His servants. The servant is with Him perpetually wherever He discloses Himself just as the servant is perpetually characterized by "locatedness" (*ayniyya*). So God is perpetually with him in whatever location he may be. Now the "locatedness" of the Real is in whatever form He discloses Himself. The gnostics perpetually witness proximity because they never cease witnessing these forms in themselves and other than themselves. There is nothing but the self-disclosure of the Real.⁶

Since God describes Himself in the Qur'ān both as being closer to man than his very life vein and with His creatures wherever they may be, Ibn 'Arabī understands this proximity to be nothing but a reference to the entire "situation" of existence. God's "location" is where He is to be found. Where He is to be found, He is surely "proximate". Hence, God is proximate everywhere, since He discloses Himself everywhere. God continually and perpetually reveals Himself through His infinite self-disclosures to their respective loci of manifestation, which are nothing but the existentiations of the objects of God's knowledge, that is, of the immutable entities (*al-a'yān al-thābita*). In other words, the loci of manifestation are the "things" which make up reality. Since they are nothing but receptacles for the divine names, God is to be found "in" them. He is thus proximate to them since they only exist by virtue of His self-disclosures to them. Since this process happens continuously, the things in the universe are where God is to be "found". The gnostics are therefore perpetually with Him wherever He is to be found, which is everywhere. As for those who are not gnostics, it can be surmised that they are distant from God insofar as they do not witness Him everywhere.

6. Ibid., II.558.

TYPES OF PROXIMITY

While Ibn ‘Arabī defines proximity in ways which are truly unique to his metaphysical worldview, he also devotes a good deal of time to responding to the earlier definitions of proximity articulated by his Sufi predecessors. Like the Sufis before him, the Shaykh understands proximity to be “the performance of acts of obedience”.⁷ Presumably, it is in the very fulfilment of the acts prescribed by God that proximity to God comes about. Indeed, the *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* says that the servant does not approach God with anything more beloved to Him than that which He has made incumbent upon him. Obeying God’s command therefore entails proximity to Him because fulfilling His requests brings about His love for us, and we are resultantly drawn nearer to Him in loving obedience to His commands. Ibn ‘Arabī, as we shall see, understands proximity in the truest sense of the term to be just this. But he makes it quite clear that proximity through obeying God does not necessarily lead one to proximity to God. Some people who worship God are rather “proximate” to their ultimate felicity in Paradise, escaping damnation in the next life.⁸ This type of proximity, Ibn ‘Arabī reminds us, is “the proximity of the masses (*qurb al-‘amma*)”⁹ because God is worshipped in order to attain the felicities of the next world.¹⁰ From this perspective, every moment on earth punctuated by the performance of religious devotions entails “proximity” since the worshipper comes closer to his ultimate felicity. This is an important point to keep in mind when reading Ibn ‘Arabī’s typical

7. For early Sufi definitions of proximity as being “the performance of acts of obedience”, see al-Shiblī’s saying in Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Kalābādhī, *Al-ta’arruf li-madhab ahl al-taṣawwuf*, ed. Maḥmūd Nawāwī (Cairo: Makatabat al-Kulliyat al-Azhariyya, 1969), p. 127; Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma’ fi al-taṣawwuf*, ed. Kāmil Muṣṭafā al-Hindāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2001), p. 53; Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risālat al-Qushayriyya*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-‘Aṭā’ (Damascus: Maktabat Abī Ḥanīfa, 2000), p. 157.

8. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II.558.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

way of describing the function of the names in the cosmos in relation to this notion of proximity:

If it were not for the divine names and their ruling properties in the engendered things (*aḥkāmuhā fī al-akwān*), the properties of “proximity” and “distance” would not be manifest in the cosmos. For at each moment every servant must be proximate to a divine name and distant from another divine name which does not have a ruling property over him at that moment. If the ruling property of the name which presides over him at the moment and which is characterized by proximity to him grants the servant escape from misery and the attainment of felicity, that is the sought-after proximity according to the Folk.¹¹

Ibn 'Arabī consequently identifies three types of proximity. The first type is what he calls proximity through knowing God by way of rational consideration (*naẓar*).¹² He notes that one could either be right or wrong in this endeavour.¹³ The diligent one (*mujtahid*) is nonetheless rewarded, in keeping with the Prophet's saying that the one who gives a correct legal opinion receives two rewards, whereas the person who gives an incorrect legal opinion receives one reward.¹⁴ The other type of proximity is to know God's oneness and divinity through witnessing (*shuhūd*), which we treated in the previous section. The third type of proximity is proximity through performing acts which are mandatory and ones which are recommended, both inwardly and outwardly.¹⁵ It is the third type of proximity, that is, proximity through actions, with which Ibn 'Arabī is most concerned.

Although the Shaykh speaks in the beginning of this chapter of proximity through the performance of acts of religious devotion as being proximity to felicity, he goes on to discuss another aspect of this type of proximity. It is here that he demonstrates how proximity through the performance of religious actions also

11. *Ibid.*, II.558–59; see also II.560.

12. *Ibid.*, II.559.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

entails proximity to God. Yet an “action” for Ibn ‘Arabī need not necessarily be “good” in order for it to bring one nearer to God. All actions – both good and evil – are preceded by the “act of faith”, which itself entails proximity:

As for proximity through actions, it refers to outward knowledge which is what is connected to the bodily limbs – and inward knowledge – which is what is connected to the soul. The most general of inward actions is faith in God and what comes from it by way of the teaching of the Messenger, not knowledge of that. The “act” of faith (*‘amal al-īmān*) permeates all actions and relinquishments, for no believer pursues an act of disobedience, be it outward or inward, except that there is proximity to God in it because of his faith that it was an act of disobedience. The believer never commits an evil action without his mixing a righteous action with it.¹⁶

Ibn ‘Arabī states here that proximity to God is even a natural outcome of a believer’s evil deeds. Although a believer’s actions may be evil, he nonetheless believes in their evil status. Such actions are, therefore, both evil and righteous at one and the same time. In keeping with Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the fundamental principiality of God’s mercy, the evil act of the believer not only entails proximity to God, but it actually opens up for him the possibility to increase in proximity after repenting to Him.¹⁷

Ibn ‘Arabī places a great deal of emphasis on not only the “act” of faith, but also the “act” itself, whether it be the performance of something mandatory or supererogatory. A religious action can only be a means to attaining proximity because the entire act is in place in order to gain proximity to God. Whereas one may believe that an action is wrong and nonetheless perform it and yet still be characterized by proximity despite the performance of the evil act, the performance of a pious act will bring the servant that much closer to God.¹⁸

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid. For Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of repentance, see Atif Khalil, “Ibn ‘Arabī on the Three Conditions of *Tawba*”. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17/4 (2006): 403–16.

18. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II.559.

QURB AL-FARĀ'ID AND QURB AL-NAWĀFIL

Earlier in this chapter Ibn 'Arabī quotes one version of the famous *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* where God says that those seeking proximity to Him (*al-mutaqarrabūn*) approach Him with nothing *more beloved* to Him than their performing what He has made incumbent upon them. Ibn 'Arabī's citation of the *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* ends as follows, "The servant continues to draw close to Me by performing supererogatory acts of worship until I love him. And when I love him, I "become" his hearing, sight, hand, and helper."¹⁹ In connection with his discussion on the *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* Ibn 'Arabī makes a fundamental distinction between two types of proximity. There is the *qurb al-farā'id* (proximity through obligatory works) and the *qurb al-nawāfil* (proximity through supererogatory

19. Ibid. As Michel Chodkiewicz has recently shown, the second *faṣl* or section of the six *fuṣūl* of Ibn 'Arabī's *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (the *faṣl al-mu'āmalāt*, corresponding to chapters 74–188 of the *Futūḥāt*), is entirely based on al-Qushayrī's (d.465/1072–73) arrangement of the *Maqāmāt* in the *Risāla*. See Michel Chodkiewicz, "Mi'rāj al-kalima de la *Risāla* Qushayriyya aux *Futūḥāt Makkiyya*", in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought (Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt)*, ed. Todd Lawson (London and New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005), pp. 248–61. However, the chapters devoted to *qurb* and *bu'd* (chapters 260 and 261) belong to the third *faṣl* (the *faṣl al-aḥwāl*). It can be noted that, like al-Qushayrī (cf. n. 7 above), Ibn 'Arabī deals with the question of proximity as being the performance of religious obligations. And he draws upon the *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* in his discussion of proximity, as does al-Qushayrī in his *Risāla* (op. cit., pp. 157–58). In fact, amongst all of the early manuals of Sufism, the *Risāla* seems to be the only one to do this. It would be safe to conclude, therefore, that at least in his treatment of the state of proximity in chapter 260 of the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn 'Arabī had al-Qushayrī's chapter on *qurb* and *bu'd* from the *Risāla* in mind and was further elucidating al-Qushayrī's silences concerning the true state of proximity. This is not to suggest that in chapter 260 of the *Futūḥāt* Ibn 'Arabī is simply "commenting" upon al-Qushayrī's chapter in the *Risāla*. This, as Chodkiewicz (op. cit., p. 251) cautions with respect to the second *faṣl* of the *Futūḥāt* and the section devoted to the *Maqāmāt* in the *Risāla*, is far from being the case. Rather, it is to point out how closely associated Ibn 'Arabī's teachings are with the Sufi tradition which preceded him.

works). In the following passage he states that the *qurb al-farā'id* comes about through the observance of the acts commanded by God, which is preceded by the fundamental obligation of faith in Him:

The validating condition for the acceptance of every obligatory act is the obligation of faith. Then the servant may draw near by carrying out the obligatory acts. Whoever acquires its fruits, he will “become” a hearing and sight for the Real. The Real [will then] will by his will, without his knowing that his will is God’s will for the thing to occur. But if he knows, then he is not a possessor of this station. This is the scale of the performance of obligatory acts, which is the most beloved thing through which one gains proximity to God.²⁰

Then Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to explain the nature of the *qurb al-nawāfil*:

As for the proximity [which is referred to as proximity through] supererogatory acts, God also loves this, and God’s love requires that the Real “become” the servant’s hearing and sight. This is its [i.e. love’s] scale in the proximity of supererogatory acts. When the levels of love are distinguished in the lover, the latter is called “lover” and “more beloved”.²¹

As the first of the above two passages reveals, it is through the performance of obligatory acts that one may draw closer to God. The *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* states clearly that there is nothing more beloved to God than “fulfilling what I have made obligatory upon him.” Thus, by performing what God has made obligatory, one attains a level of proximity to God which cannot be attained in any other way. And, unlike the last part of the *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* which states that after performing the supererogatory acts God will “become” the servant’s hearing, sight, and hand, in the performance of those acts which God has made obligatory upon the servant, it is actually the servant who will “become” God’s hearing, sight, and hand. As paradoxical as this may seem, there is a

20. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II.559.

21. *Ibid.*

very good reason for why Ibn 'Arabī says this. Before venturing there, we must look at Ibn 'Arabī's teachings on distance, which are intimately related to the foregoing discussion. We will then be in a better position to understand his distinction between the *qurb al-farā'id* and the *qurb al-nawāfil*.

IBN 'ARABĪ ON DISTANCE

Ibn 'Arabī begins chapter 261 of the *Futūḥāt*, simply entitled "On knowing distance", by observing that "distance" varies in accordance with changes in states. More importantly, he says that distance comes about when proximity is not a quality of the servant, this being essential because God Himself, as Ibn 'Arabī explained in chapter 260 of the *Futūḥāt*, is characterized by proximity. If the quality of proximity is not present "distance" is present.²² Ibn 'Arabī then directly addresses the definition of distance provided by his Sufi predecessors, hinting at his unique understanding of this concept:

What they have affirmed distance to be is, without doubt, distance. It is just that we add matters to its definition, about which the community was ignorant because they were unaware of that about which we speak. For they did not speak of it in relation to knowing distance [as such], and instead had it enter into the discussion on proximity by saying that proximity is union (*ijtimā'*) and distance is separation (*iftirāq*), and that what relates to union does not relate to separation, thus taking distance to be other than proximity.²³

Distance is a complex concept for Ibn 'Arabī. On the one hand it is the opposite of proximity but on the other hand it is the "situation" of the slave, since he is distant from God by his very nature. When an Arabic trilateral root structure is manipulated by reversing the consonants of which it is comprised, closely connected semantic fields of meaning are created, as is seen in the trilateral structures '-L-M, signifying "knowledge" and the structure '-M-L, signifying "action". Although Ibn 'Arabī does not

22. *Ibid.*, II.561.

23. *Ibid.*

draw attention to this fact in this chapter, it is worth noting that the word for “servant” in Arabic is derived from the root ‘-B-D. When the first two consonants of this root are reversed, we come up with the root for distance, B-‘-D. There is, therefore, an important relationship between distance from God and being a servant of God. The definition of proximity as being the fulfilment of acts of obedience is valid. Yet the very state of being obedient to God, of therefore being His slave, also entails distance:

The servant is not a master of the one whose servant he is. There is nothing more distant than the servant’s distance from his master. Servanthood is not on account of the state of proximity. The servant is only “near” his master by virtue of his *knowledge* that he is the master’s servant. His knowledge that he is the master’s servant is not servanthood itself. Servanthood necessitates distance from the master, whereas *knowledge* of one’s servanthood necessitates proximity to the master.²⁴

Ibn ‘Arabī states explicitly that the fact of one’s servanthood entails some type of distance from God. In serving God, that is, in the act of servanthood, there must always be distance between the performer and the one for whom the service is performed. Yet in order to approach God distance must be relinquished. How can this be attained? Ibn ‘Arabī sees a solution in Abū Yazīd Bastāmī’s (d. ca. 261/874) famous encounter with God:

The Real said to him in his heart, “O Abū Yazīd, approach Me through that which I do not have: lowliness and poverty.” He negated these two qualities – lowliness and poverty – from Himself. What is negated from Him is the quality of distance from Him.²⁵

By approaching God with what He does not have, that is, by realizing one’s ontological poverty, one may relinquish that distance characteristic of servanthood which itself implies some notion of duality. Ibn ‘Arabī further remarks on Abū Yazīd’s encounter:

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

Abū Yazīd said to his Lord on another occasion, “How may I approach you?”, to which the Real replied, “Leave yourself and come!” When he left himself, he relinquished the ruling property of his servanthood (*'ubūdiyya*), since servanthood is itself distance from masterhood (*sayyāda*). The servant was distant from the Master and thus sought from Him, in lowliness and poverty, proximity to Him through servanthood, and sought from Him, in leaving his self, proximity to Him by taking on the character traits of God, which is what constitutes “union”.²⁶

Here, Ibn 'Arabī seems to acknowledge that a type of proximity is still implied in servanthood, which, as we shall shortly see, appears to correspond to the *qurb al-nawāfil*. Yet insofar as God is doing the act there can be no question of “servanthood”. This is precisely what the *qurb al-farā'id* entails: the servant “becomes” God’s hearing, sight, and hand because the servant is “not”. We saw above that Ibn 'Arabī said that the servant’s knowledge of his servanthood is not actually servanthood. He also said that if the servant knows that God’s will is actually his will in the *qurb al-farā'id*, he will not have attained its station. This is because in *knowing* one’s servanthood one is not “distant” as such, but one is still not faithfully fulfilling the *qurb al-farā'id*. To know of one’s servanthood is to be “aware” of one’s self, which, although not distance according to Ibn 'Arabī, nonetheless does not entail that pure state of proximity where the servant “becomes” God’s hearing, sight, and hand. In a footnote to his translation of one of the *Mawāqif* of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'irī (d.1300/1883), Michel Chodkiewicz explains the difference between the *qurb al-farā'id* and the *qurb al-nawāfil*:

If, in the *qurb al-nawāfil* (obtained by the practice of supererogatory acts, where by definition the will of the creature plays a part), Allāh hears, sees ... in the place of the servant, correlatively, in the *qurb al-farā'id* (which the creature attains by manifesting his absolute servitude – that is to say, his radical ontological indigence – by the accomplishment of obligatory acts, where his own will is totally

26. Ibid.

extinguished), *it is, on the contrary, the servant who “becomes” the hearing, the sight and hand of Allāh.*²⁷

Ibn ‘Arabī also said that the *qurb al-farā’id* entails God willing through the believer. This is because, in fulfilling what God has made obligatory upon him, the servant actually does not have a will. It is God who has willed for him to fulfil his obligation towards Him, and, therefore, He wills in place of the servant, and the servant, by virtue of no longer having a will, “becomes” God’s hearing, sight, and hand, for God is the true actor. In the *qurb al-nawāfil*, the reason God “becomes” his hearing, sight, and hand is because He acts out a reality that has always been the case,²⁸ but in which the servant has some “extra” role to play. Insofar as this extra role played by the servant is his servanthood, his proximity to God through the *nawāfil* is also distance. That is, in the *qurb al-nawāfil* – which comes about through the performance of those acts which are not mandatory – he “wills” to perform. This is why Ibn ‘Arabī insists that the *qurb al-farā’id* is “more beloved” to God than the *qurb al-nawāfil*:

God has attributed “more beloved” to Himself in His saying, “[My servant does not approach Me] with anything more beloved to Me than performing what I have made obligatory upon him.” Concerning supererogatory acts, He said, “[My servant continues to draw close to Me by performing supererogatory acts of worship until] I love him”, without giving it superiority [i.e. to the performance of obligatory actions].²⁹

Elsewhere in the *Futūḥāt* Ibn ‘Arabī identifies the *farā’id* with the ascending realization and the *nawāfil* with the descending realization.³⁰ If the *qurb al-farā’id* corresponds to the ascent and the *qurb al-nawāfil* corresponds to the descent, then we can

27. Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Spiritual Writings of Amir ‘Abd El Kader* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 209, n. 84.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II.559.

30. See Chodkiewicz, *The Spiritual Writings of Amir ‘Abd El Kader*, p. 209, n. 84.

understand why Ibn 'Arabī referred to the “arc of *qurb*” in the very title of chapter 260: the arc of proximity is the infinite interplay between the servant's proximity and distance. Although his servanthood allows him to approach the Real, it is likewise that very thing which keeps him distant from Him. Yet, by approaching God through the performance of obligatory actions, one “ascends” to the Real to the point of proximity to Him, so long as one is unaware of his ascent, for his awareness of his ascent would also be a type of distance. In other words, an acknowledgment of one's proximity to the Real presupposes some type of knowledge of this fact, which necessarily entails distance. Some of the early Sufis, such as Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899) and al-Niffarī (d. 354/965), understood the highest stage of proximity to be silence.³¹ Although Ibn 'Arabī does not explicitly say this here, it would seem that the *qurb al-farā'id* entails silence insofar as the servant does not know of his situation in the performance of the *farā'id*; that is, insofar as God wills through him, and he “becomes” God's hearing, sight, etc. To the extent that the servant is “silent” in his ontological poverty in the *farā'id*, he is proximate to God, or, rather, He is proximate to Himself.

31. Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz, *Kitāb al-Ṣifāt*, translated in Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1970), p. 264; Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī, *The Mawāqif and Mukhāṭabāt of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī*, ed. and trans. A.J. Arberry (London: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 3.