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The Soul, the *Barzakh*, and Human Transformation in Life and Death

The nature of the soul in life and in death, as well as its moral, ontological, and eschatological transformation is a problem that has exercised Muslim thinkers and generated a range of theological, philosophical, and mystical speculation. Ideas about the malleability and ambiguity of the soul may be said to derive from the Qur'anic references to the *nafs*, but the issue of the nature and existence of the soul in death (and prior to the Day of Resurrection) is not clearly elaborated in scripture. The influence of Greek thought on Muslim theology and philosophy further complicated Muslim debates about the soul. Neither Plato's idea of the separability of the soul from matter, nor Aristotle's view that the soul—which he conceived of as inextricably connected to the material body (unlike intellect)—did not continue to exist after death was consistent with the many Qur'anic references to the existence of souls with their bodies in the hereafter.

For many Muslim thinkers, questions about the nature of the soul's transition to and in death could only be answered with reference to an understanding of the ontological nature of the soul itself. Like Aristotle, many leading Muslim theologians and philosophers understood the soul as a “substance,” and they endeavored to theorize the nature of its “substance” in a way that would be logically consistent with Qur'anic and Islamic ideas of the soul's transitions in both life and death. In this paper, I compare the thought of two major Muslim thinkers on the problem of the soul, its nature, and its transitions: Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1636). Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī was an Andalusian Muslim mystic and metaphysician, who thought about the soul neither as material, nor as purely spiritual, but as a meeting (or *barzakh*) between the two, with its changeability related to its intermediate state. For Mullā Ṣadrā, a Shi'i theologian who creatively synthesized the thought of many earlier Muslim thinkers, including Ibn 'Arabī, the soul is the site of the transformation between the material and spiritual realities of the human being. The soul, he argued, undergoes a continuous process of both epistemological and ontological transformation, which he referred to as “trans-substantial motion” (*al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*), and which allowed him to posit the soul's transformations both in life and in death as part of a seamless process of human becoming.



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