The notion of parallel worlds is a central theme in Ismāʿīlī literature and constitutes an essential element in all the different Ismāʿīlī teachings. According to this notion, reality is comprised of various corresponding dimensions: man, the microcosm, corresponds to the universe, the macrocosm; the hierarchy of the friends of God—the prophets and their legatees, the imāms and the members of the daʿwa organization—corresponds to the structure of the cosmos, in its upper, spiritual realm as well as in its lower, corporeal one; the hierarchy of the friends of God and the cosmos are both paralleled by the numbers and the letters of the alphabet; human speech is analogous to Divine speech; and, finally, a tripartite correspondence exists between man, the Divine holy book and the universe at large. The Ismāʿīlī believer is required to interpret and decipher the external-manifest aspect of reality (the ẓāhir), in accordance with this intricate network of parallel worlds. Passing continuously from one world to the other, his ultimate goal is to penetrate the inner-hidden dimension of reality (the bāṭin). Having reached this goal, the Ismāʿīlī adherent becomes a true believer in the unity of God (tawḥīd) and fully realizes the supreme-Divine nature of His friends, the awliyāʾ. Certain elements in this complex worldview are shared by both Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-ʿArabī, and will therefore be the focus of the discussion in this chapter.

### Microcosm-Macrocosm

**Common Themes and their Distinct Treatment in Ismāʿīlī Literature**

The comparison between man, the microcosm (al-ʿalām al-ṣaghīr, “the small world”), and the universe at large, the macrocosm (al-ʿālam al-kabīr, “the big world”, or al-insān al-kabīr, “the big man”), is a prevalent motif

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1. See below pp. 189–212.
4. See above chapter 1.
in Ismāʿīlī literature. Naturally, this motif is not unique to the Ismāʿīlī tradition, but is rather common to many other religious and philosophical systems, western as well as eastern, ancient and modern alike. The microcosm-macrocosm analogy is also found in medieval Arabic philosophy. It appears in the Neoplatonic *Theology of Aristotle* and in the writings of various philosophers such as al-Kindī, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā (Avicenna). These philosophers and the Ismāʿīlī authors ultimately derived their notions regarding the microcosm-macrocosm analogy from the pre-Islamic heritage. In what way, then, is the Ismāʿīlī tradition unique in its treatment of this ancient, universal theme?

To begin with, as I mentioned above, in the Ismāʿīlī tradition, the correspondence between man and the universe is seen as just one relationship among many in the complex network of cosmic correspondences. This network likewise consists of the hierarchy of the *awliyāʾ*, the numbers, the letters of the alphabet, the Divine holy book and so forth. Furthermore, in Ismāʿīlī writings, the microcosm-macrocosm analogy is emphasized and developed much more so than in the works of Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindī, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā. In fact, this analogy, and the notion of parallel worlds in general, are of crucial importance for the Ismāʿīlī faith itself. According to the Ismāʿīlī worldview, the three-way relationship between God, the friend of God and the common believer began prior to creation, and it unfolds not only in the terrestrial-horizontal framework of human history, but also along the hierarchal-vertical axis which connects the world of man to the upper, spiritual realm. Man is thus inevitably linked to the universe at large and to the various worlds that lie beyond the corporeal, sub-lunar world. In addition, the numerous comparisons drawn in Ismāʿīlī literature between the *awliyāʾ* hierarchy and the macro-

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6 For the history of the microcosm-macrocosm analogy in western culture, see Conger, *Theories*; Allers, *Microcosmus*; El-Bizri, *Microcosm/macrocosm analogy* 5–12. Regarding Philo of Alexandria in this context, see also Winston, *Logos* 17–8. For the Hermetic tradition, see also Drijvers, *Baraḏišan* 199–200; and, concerning Zoroastrianism, see Schaeder, *Islamische Lehre* 205. For a phenomenological comparison between Western philosophy and Islamic thought as regards the microcosm-macrocosm analogy, see Tymieniecka, *Islamic Philosophy*. As for Eastern traditions, one may mention, for example, the importance of this analogy in the Upaniṣads; see Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* lii–lvi (in the Introduction).


8 See the references in the last two notes.

9 See above pp. 143–56.