

AN ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO IBN ARABI'S  
CONCEPTION OF ULTIMATE REALITY

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### Abstract

In my thesis, I aim to develop a systematic and philosophically coherent thesis of ultimate reality for Ibn Arabi. In this pursuit, I adopt the style of analytic philosophy, seeking to employ and utilise some of its methods and theories. The philosophical aspects of Ibn Arabi's doctrine are in dire need of conceptual clarification and systematic analysis with a closer focus on argumentation. The analytic tradition will prove most helpful in this regard.

In my thesis, I begin by tracing Ibn Arabi's related views and concepts as they are dispersed throughout his writings. I then clarify, sharpen and, in many cases, develop these views and concepts into fully constructed forms. Finally, I weave the developed concepts and views into a systematic thesis or set of sub-theses. Where necessary, I provide my own (or borrowed) arguments and concepts to help substantiate and strengthen the structure of Ibn Arabi's thesis.

I propose that Ibn Arabi's various, and sometimes apparently inconsistent, views are best presented in terms of three main concepts: the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), which has long been known as Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*); the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*); and the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). The three concepts neither represent different ultimate realities nor different perspectives of the same ultimate reality. Instead, they represent the same ultimate reality but each one has its own unique scope and encompassment. The three concepts are aimed at encompassing Ibn Arabi's various views and concepts of ultimate reality in a consistent and systematic manner.

*To my parents, Ahmed and Munirah*

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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## 1.1 Ibn Arabi: A Brief Biography

The Islamic mystic Muhyiddin Abu Bakr Mohammed bin Ali Ibn Arabi al-Ta'i al-Hatami (known as Ibn Arabi or Ibn al-Arabi) is among the key influential figures in Islamic history. He was born in 1165 AD (569 AH) in Murcia in al-Andalus, a medieval Islamic territory incorporating at its peak most of modern-day Spain and Portugal.

Ibn Arabi descends from a great Arabic tribe, the Tay'a, in which he seems to take great pride, particularly in being a great grandson of the tribe's most renowned figure Hatam al-Ta'i, who died a few years before the advent of Islam in the seventh century AD. Hatam is well-known in Arabic culture and literature for his legendary hospitality and generosity, two of the most cherished and valued virtues among Arabs historically. Such virtues were vital to the people of the Arabian Peninsula during a time when many of them were forced to travel frequently through the predominantly dry and treeless desert. Thus, Arabs have always taken great honour in hosting guests and travellers passing by, especially those unknown to them. However, Ibn Arabi's grandfather exceeds most in this matter. He has always been considered the ideal of Arabic generosity and hospitality; hence, the well-established phrase 'he is as generous as Hatem' is often employed to praise someone who demonstrates the absolute best of hospitality.

Ibn Arabi grew up in a well-regarded upper-middle class family. His father, Ali, first worked for the ruler of Mercia city, Mohammed bin Sa'id bin Mardanish,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mohammed bin Sa'id bin Mardanish came to power in the time between the al-Murabit and Almohad caliphates.

later moving on to work for the Almohad caliphate.<sup>2</sup> His father's position allowed Ibn Arabi to receive a proper education and to form relationships with some of the key figures of his time, including the famous Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126–1198). As a child, his mother would take him to learn from some of the mystic women with whom she was acquainted. None of the members of his small family was a mystic; however, two of his maternal uncles were spiritual and religious, and Ibn Arabi seemed to admire them. One of the uncles was Yahya bin Yughan, who, according to Ibn Arabi, renounced his kingdom of Tlemcen to dedicate himself to worship and religion.

In the very early stages of his life, Ibn Arabi claimed to have mystical illuminations, which were the reason behind his meeting with Ibn Rushd (Averroes) when he was young.<sup>3</sup> However, in his adolescence and young manhood, for a short while he seemed to engage in a lifestyle more typical of non-devoted young men. During this period, he was – perhaps like many other middle class young men of his time – not particularly concerned with anything beyond the basic religious practices (which are expected of all Muslims). It is also likely that, at this stage, he was not subject to the mystical illuminations that he claimed to have had in his childhood. Afterwards, however, he made the abrupt decision to become a devoted Muslim and to absorb himself fully in mysticism. According to Stephen Hirtenstein, Ibn Arabi made this decision around June 1184, at the age of eighteen (1999, p. 60). He passionately pursued this path until the end of his life.

Ibn Arabi repeatedly asserts that he represents an unusual case with regard to mystical illuminations and religious experience. Mysticism, as Ibn Arabi says, usually

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<sup>2</sup> The Almohad caliphate is a Berber Muslim tribe and movement that ruled some of the North African countries and parts of al-Andalus between 1121 AD and 1269 AD.

<sup>3</sup> I will discuss this meeting and its significance in Chapter Nine.

requires long and systematic religious study, practices and retreats, typically under a master; however, this was not the case with him. He claims that he was suddenly blessed with mystical illuminations, without any prior preparations, which he seems to attribute to his high standing within the mystical hierarchy. Regardless, after having those religious experiences, Ibn Arabi undertook systematic mystical study and practice under a number of mystical masters and teachers, whom he accompanied for various periods of time. These masters include his first mystical master Abu al-Abbas al-'Uryani, Ibn Mujahid and Musa bin Imran al-Mirtali. Further, Abu Madyan, an influential Sufi master at the time, seemed to affect Ibn Arabi greatly as he is often referenced in the writing of Ibn Arabi, despite the two never having met in person. Ibn Arabi's acquaintance with Abu Madyan's heritage was primarily facilitated through Abu Madyan's students, particularly Abu Ya'qub and Yusif al-Kumi (Addas, 1993, p. 60).

Prior to 1201 AD, Ibn Arabi's years were spent between al-Andulus and Morocco, where he met his mystical masters. However, after the death of his parents, he decided to leave the West and head east, where he spent the rest of his life. During his long journey to the East he travelled widely, visiting Tunis, Egypt and Palestine; during these trips, he met a number of friends and wrote some books. In 1202, Ibn Arabi arrived at Makkah, the final destination of his journey to the East, where he married Fatima bint Yunus bin Yusuf Amir al-Haramayn.<sup>4</sup> Some textual evidence indicates that he had two sons with her, both named Mohammed (Ibid., p. 86), and a daughter named Zaynab.

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<sup>4</sup> He seems to have had another wife before Fatima, whom he perhaps married when he was in al-Andalus; her name is Maryam bint Mohammed bin Abdun al-Baji. He might also have had other wives at different times of his life.

In 1204, he began another long journey lasting approximately twelve years, during which he visited many regions and cities of the East and met a number of important people, including the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad, al-Nasir li Din Allah (1158–1225). Here, he also wrote a number of his books and treatises before settling down in Damascus in 1223, where he spent the final years of his life. At the age of seventy-five in 1240 AD (638 AH), Ibn Arabi passed away in Damascus leaving behind him a magnificent and highly controversial legacy.

Ibn Arabi wrote numerous books and treatises. According to one count, the total number of writings is 700, though more than half of these are missing (Chittick, 2007, p. 7). However, two of his works in particular have special significance and value, as they detail his doctrine.<sup>5</sup> One is *Fusus al-Hikam*, which has received considerable attention, even to this day. This book is considered by many to provide a summary of a number of Ibn Arabi's key views and concepts. However, one would find it difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the different aspects of Ibn Arabi's doctrine if one were to rely on this book too much. The other text is *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyyah*, which, I maintain, is Ibn Arabi's most important book. It is a lengthy work that has been printed (in some editions) in nine volumes, and in it Ibn Arabi discusses most of his views and concepts in great detail. He seems to have taken exceptional care with this book in particular, as he spent several years writing it, going on to revise it once more before his death.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout my thesis, I use the phrase 'Ibn Arabi's doctrine' when I refer to Ibn Arabi's overall system, which incorporates all of his theories, views and concepts on a variety of subjects. Further, I use the phrase 'Ibn Arabi's thesis' when I refer to his specific thesis within his overall system. I pay particular attention to his theses of ultimate reality and of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*).

<sup>6</sup> In writing this brief biography I have mainly drawn upon Ibn Arabi's *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyyah* (2011), Addas's *Quest for the Red Sulphur* (1993) and Hirtenstein's *The Unlimited Mercifier* (1999).

## 1.2 Ibn Arabi and Sufism

Sufism is the mystical tradition of Islam. It is a vast tradition that incorporates various, perhaps even incompatible, systems, schools and figures. The roots of the tradition can be traced back to the time of the Prophet Mohammed and the early generations of Muslims. At these early stages, it simply indicated piety, self-discipline and moderate forms of asceticism. The people who could be considered the great grandfathers of Sufism were not clearly distinct from the rest of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed or other later Islamic scholars, and they were certainly not seen as a distinct unified group or sect in and of themselves. They were individuals whose piousness and devoutness attracted the attention and admiration of the rest of the society.

Sufism evolved over the course of time and what was once considered an individual matter came to take on a more systematic and organised form a few centuries later. Thus, around two hundred years after the death of the Prophet Mohammed, there emerged a number of books on Sufism providing guidance on how to achieve self-discipline and piety. This indicates that at that time Sufism had started to become something more systematic. A few centuries later (around 1100 AD 500 AH), we begin to actually see organised Sufi schools and orders (*turuq*), each with its own distinct ways, pedagogies and methods to teach its followers how to achieve piousness and mystical illuminations. Each school or order (*tariqah*) typically required a head or a founder, who would usually have invented some new method of Sufism. At this stage, Sufism became a distinct and independent subject that stood in contrast with other Islamic subjects, especially that of Islamic jurisprudence.

Decades later, a new trend in Sufism emerges, which a number of contemporary scholars see as a form of theosophy (see for example: Landau, 1959;

Corbin, 1983; Arberry, 2008; Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016). This trend takes its mature form in the hands of Ibn Arabi. It seems that the distinguishing mark of this trend is the introduction of the thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), whose foremost advocate and theorist is seen to be Ibn Arabi. Other key figures to whom this trend has been attributed include Ibn al-Faridh (1181–1235), Ibn Sab'in (1217–1269) and al-Afif al-Telem'sani (1213–1291). Contrary to mainstream scholars, however, I maintain that even though the advocates of *wahdat al-wujud* may all agree that existence is one, they differ in their interpretations of this claim. Some affirm pantheism, while others advocate other positions such as acosmism or panentheism.

However, it is not clear whether the theosophy trend (the trend of the *wahdat al-wujud*) should be considered part of Sufism *per se*. While most people in the Sufi schools seem to be mainly in agreement with traditional theism with regard to the metaphysics of existence and its relationship to God, the theosophists have long debated with traditional theists in relation to the details of these issues. For instance, while Sufis maintain a dual reality of God on the one hand and the world on the other, theosophists defend the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). Therefore, theosophists have received harsh criticism from many Islamic theologians and jurisprudence scholars. Yet, despite the philosophical differences between the trend of *wahdat al-wujud* and most of the Sufi orders (*turuq*), the two are similar in practice. Both appeal to and depend upon the same or similar spiritual rituals, such as retreats, prayers and God's remembrance (*dhikr*).<sup>7</sup>

In light of this, I maintain that Ibn Arabi should not be considered a Sufi if one has in mind the common interpretation of most Sufi schools and orders (*turuq*). In

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<sup>7</sup> For Further discussion of Sufism see: W. Stoddart (1976); M. J. Sedgwick (2000); J. Michon and R. Gaetani (2006); A. T. Karamustafa (2007); Ohlander, E. S (2011) and C. W. Ernst (2011).

particular, Ibn Arabi is distinct from many Sufi theologians and jurisprudence scholars, who follow the ways of al-Ghazali (1058–1111). Al-Ghazali is known in Islamic literature as a ‘Sunni Sufi’, the most influential advocate of a form of Sufism that seeks to carefully follow the teachings of the Islamic scriptures. Ibn Arabi, however, could be considered part of Sufism in a loose sense, which encompasses Islamic mysticism in general (including the *wahdat al-wujud* trend).

Ibn Arabi does not seem to consider his doctrine a part of Sufism *per se* (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, pp. 51, 52). For him, Islamic mysticism is a much wider tradition, and Sufism only occupies one level in its hierarchy (a lower level, in fact). In indicating Islamic mysticism in general, Ibn Arabi tends to employ phrases such as sainthood or mysticism (*wilayah*) and calls its members saints or mystics (*awliya*) or the people of Allah (*ahl Allah*). Few Sufis, according to Ibn Arabi, succeed in climbing to the higher level of Islamic mysticism (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 395). Of course, he probably believes that his trend of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) is that which obtains the highest level.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Ibn Arabi seems to think that mysticism or sainthood (*wilayah*) in all religions is ultimately one unified tradition that began with the first Prophet, Adam. According to Ibn Arabi, there are as many mystical sub-traditions as there are prophets (or key prophets). The mystics from all religions throughout history are divided among the prophets’ mystical traditions (or sub-traditions). Thus, he tends to talk about those who follow, for instance, the mystical tradition of Moses, those who follow the mystical tradition of Jesus, and so on. The religion of each prophet is different from his mystical tradition. Belonging to a specific religious tradition does

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<sup>8</sup> I am not sure if considering Ibn Arabi’s doctrine a part of ‘the theosophy trend’ is accurate, as it seems to have its own unique metaphysical and epistemological framework that renders it a special doctrine in its own right, rather than being part of theosophy.

not prevent one from following the mystical tradition of prophets in other religious traditions. A Muslim mystic, for instance, could follow the mystical traditions of any of the previous prophets preceding Mohammed. However, Ibn Arabi places the mystical tradition of the Prophet Mohammed (i.e., the Mohammedian mystical tradition) at the top of all mystical traditions of other prophets.

The Quran affirms that the Prophet Mohammed is the seal of prophets (33:40). Throughout Islamic history, this has been understood to indicate that he is the last prophet who would be sent by God with a new religion. For Ibn Arabi, however, being the seal of prophets also indicates the perfection and summation of all of the prophets that preceded him. Stephen Hirtenstein explains: '[T]here are then two aspects of being a seal: the first is temporal, the conclusion of a series, while the second is atemporal, the completion and fulfilment of a series' (1999, p. 139). 'The seal', according to Ibn Arabi's understanding, is perhaps comparable to the fruit of a tree; it is the last to emerge and is the aim and summation of all stages that precede it (Ibid.).

For Ibn Arabi, as much as Mohammed's religion and prophet-hood is the summation and completion of all religions, so is the Mohammedian mystical tradition (*al-wilayah al-muhammediyyah*) (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 480–481). It, too, completes all mystical traditions of the previous prophets. Furthermore, Ibn Arabi seems to think of himself as the seal of the Mohammedian mystical tradition. Thus, as the Mohammedian mystical tradition sums and completes all of the mystical traditions, and he himself sums and completes the Mohammedian mystical tradition, he may think that he sums and completes the mystical traditions of all prophets (Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 317). Perhaps, then, this is why he sometimes refers to himself as 'the seal of mysticism' without restricting it to *al-wilayah al-muhammediyyah* (Ibid., Vol. 1, p.



370). As the seal of the Mohammedian mystical tradition, all mystics who come after him would belong to the mystical traditions of other prophets, he affirms (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 15). It is interesting that he does not always explicitly affirm that he is the seal of *al-wilayah al-muhammediyyah*. On several occasions he talks about the seal in the third person; he describes him as a man descending from a great Arabic tribe and that he lives in the same era as Ibn Arabi. At one point, Ibn Arabi even claims he has met the seal (Ibid., Vol. 3, pp. 63, 75). This is how Ibn Arabi sees and interprets mysticism and its relationship to Sufism, as well as his place in its hierarchy.

### **1.3 Ibn Arabi and Traditional Sciences**

Ibn Arabi's writings reveal a close relationship to the traditional sciences of his time. He was well trained in the Quran, Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, philosophy and other related sciences and subjects. Though he presents himself solely and constantly as a mystic, his writings, as Chittick notes, comprise a wide range of issues that have little or no connection with mysticism (Chittick, 2007, p. 2). In addition to manifesting his mastery of these subjects, his writings also reflect his novel contributions to them.

He develops unique ways of interpreting the Quranic verses that appear, at times, to ignore the standard rules of *tafsir* (i.e., the science of Quran interpretation), some examples of which I will cite in Chapter Nine. He also develops unique views on the subject of Hadith. For instance, in judging the authenticity and reliability of the sayings that have been attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, Hadith scholars typically refer to four standard judgements: *sahih*, *hasan*, *da'if* or *mudu'a*. *Sahih* means

authentic and reliable. *Hasan* is considered less reliable than the *sahih*, though the saying is considered acceptable and probably authentic. *Da'if* means weak and indicates that the authenticity of the saying is doubtful and cannot be confirmed. Finally, *mudu'a* means fake and indicates a confirmation of the inauthenticity of the saying. There are other classifications, as well as detailed rules and criteria for each type, discussed in an independent subject known as *mustalah al-hadith*.

Ibn Arabi, however, proposes some novel criteria for judging the authenticity of the sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed. For instance, he claims that when a saying is considered weak (*da'if*), according to the standard criteria of *mustalah al-hadith*, a mystic may confirm its authenticity and reliability with reference to some types of religious experience (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 164); accordingly, the saying in question should instead be judged as authentic (*sahih*).

Moreover, in jurisprudence, Ibn Arabi does not seem to adhere to any of the main four jurisprudential schools followed by most Islamic scholars (namely Hanafi, Malki, Shafi and Hanbali); instead, he develops his own school. Hundreds of pages in his most important book, *al-Futuh al-Makkiyyah*, are dedicated to his jurisprudential views.

Ibn Arabi also made some contributions to the foundation of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*). Most Islamic scholars endorse four sources for Islamic jurisprudence: the Quran, the Hadith, the total consensus of Islamic scholars (*ijma*), and analogical deduction (*qiyas*). The term 'analogical deduction' (*qiyas*) refers to the Islamic jurisprudential practice of determining the legal value—e.g., 'prohibited' (*haram*), 'permitted' (*mubah*), etc.—of a given situation that is not addressed in the scriptures by comparing it with a similar situation that *is* addressed. Contrary to the bulk of

mainstream Islamic scholarship, Ibn Arabi rejects analogical deduction (*qiyas*) as a source for Islamic jurisprudence (Ibn Arabi, Vol. 3, pp. 243, 247).

## 1.4 Ibn Arabi and Philosophy

It is widely believed that philosophy inevitably conflicts with mysticism. While the former depends heavily upon logical investigation and reasoning, the latter appears to undermine such methods in favour of subjective and experiential data. According to many scholars, Ibn Arabi was no exception in this regard; Chittick, for example, states that ‘philosophy was not [Ibn Arabi’s] concern’ (1989, p. 3).

However, I posit that the presence of philosophy in Ibn Arabi’s writings takes two forms, and he seems to adopt a different outlook and engagement on each of them. The first is what is known as Islamic (and Greek) philosophy. Islamic philosophy is an umbrella term that incorporates a number of philosophers, including al-Farabi (872–950), Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980–1037), Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126–1198) and several others. These philosophers may be said to have a fairly common underlying metaphysics and epistemology with a common terminology and methodology.<sup>9</sup> This tradition in particular is what Ibn Arabi means when he employs the terms ‘philosophy’ and ‘philosophers’ in his writings, which, in fact, reveals his mastery of the subject, its terminology and methodology.

Contrary to what some may expect, Ibn Arabi thinks highly of philosophers and their discipline; he expresses his admiration for philosophers’ ‘profoundness’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, p. 54). He also places philosophers on a higher level than theologians, since philosophers, he contends, are closer to the truth with regard to the

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<sup>9</sup> For detailed discussion of Islamic philosophy see: O. Leaman (2004, 2009); P. Adamson and R. C. Taylor (2005); S. H. Nasr (2006); R. C. Taylor and L. X. Lopez-Farjeat (2016); P. Adamson (2016) and K. El-rouayheb and S. Schmidtke (2017).

knowledge of God (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 364). However, philosophers, according to Ibn Arabi, still occupy a level below mystics, especially in relation to the knowledge of God (Ibid).

Ibn Arabi nonetheless expresses reservations about Islamic philosophy, most of which are concerned with the epistemological aspects of the discipline. Though he usually endorses reasoning, logic and intellectual investigation as a legitimate method for acquiring knowledge, he condemns the philosophers' tendency to depend solely upon the rational faculty, as well as their tendency to prioritise this faculty over and above other channels of knowledge, such as Islamic scriptures. I will discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter Nine. There seems to be some obscurity, though, in his understanding of what logic, or the rational faculty (*aql*), means. For instance, he suggests that the scriptures should not be interpreted figuratively, even if literal interpretation is logically impossible (*musthil aqlan*). When Ibn Arabi describes something as rationally or logically impossible, he is not necessarily, as one may expect, referring to what infringes the laws of logic; instead, he may attribute this description to anything that theologians and philosophers would resist for philosophical reasons. For example, when commenting on a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammed stating that 'death' will be brought in the afterlife in the shape of a sheep and will be slaughtered, Ibn Arabi states that the prophet's assertion must be endorsed even though it is 'logically (or rationally) impossible' (Ibid., Vol. 4, pp. 331, 332). It is not clear that the content of the prophetic saying is indeed logically impossible *per se*. He seems to mean that theologians and philosophers may choose to

resist the literal meaning of the prophetic saying, which would actually be based not on logic, but on other metaphysical and, most likely, theological grounds.<sup>10</sup>

Second, as mentioned above, in Ibn Arabi's writings the term 'philosophy' was only used to indicate Islamic and Greek philosophy. However, philosophy is not limited to these two particular traditions. If we use the term philosophy, as it is mainly used today, to indicate a wide range of subjects – including metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of religion, and so on – then one could confirm that philosophy has a significant presence in Ibn Arabi's doctrine. His writings contain original and novel contributions to several philosophical subjects.

There are four characteristics of Ibn Arabi's involvement with philosophy in this wider sense. Firstly, he does not develop any systematic theses on any philosophical subject, but rather provides varied, sometimes seemingly incompatible, views and concepts scattered throughout his writings; he may not have always been aware of the underlying connections between them. Nonetheless, one could explore, analyse and synthesise these views and concepts in order to construct novel and philosophically coherent theses on his behalf across the subjects that he addresses.

Secondly, Ibn Arabi was not aware of his contribution to and involvement with philosophy *per se*, as the term 'philosophy' was at the time synonymous with Islamic and Greek philosophy (as mentioned above). This has unintentionally contributed to the originality of Ibn Arabi's doctrine. In constructing his views and concepts, Ibn Arabi did not operate within the metaphysical, epistemological and methodological frameworks of Islamic and Greek philosophy, which were at times unnecessarily limiting. As a result, he provides us with unique and novel

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<sup>10</sup> Ibn Arabi was probably not alone in misconceiving the phrase 'logically impossible' (*mustahil aqlan*), as this phrase has sometimes been used in the traditional Islamic literature to describe things that are not clearly so.

philosophical concepts and views across the fields of metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of religion.

Thirdly, as he was likely unaware of his contribution to philosophy, Ibn Arabi was not particularly concerned with developing philosophical arguments for his views, and where he does attempt to develop them, he has little success.<sup>11</sup>

Fourthly, when discussing his claims and concepts on various subjects, Ibn Arabi constantly attempts to connect them with mysticism, even if the connection is unclear. He always seeks to add a mystical or a religious dimension to virtually any concept on any subject. For instance, as mentioned previously, he undertook lengthy discussions concerning Islamic jurisprudence. However, in doing so he introduced something new to the discussion that was not common in the traditional literature. After examining an issue of jurisprudence, Ibn Arabi tends to add a special comment addressing the mystical dimension of that issue under the title ‘reflection’ (*itbar*). Sometimes the comment provides a mystical explanation that is aimed to settle a disagreement between scholars of jurisprudence. On other occasions, however, the connection between his mystical explanations and the jurisprudential view is unclear (see for instance, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2).

The same may be seen with some of his concepts belonging to philosophical subjects. For instance, in discussing his metaphysical concept of *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*), Ibn Arabi adopts a similar approach. He attempts to connect the concept of *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) to the divine names (*al-asmaa al-ilahiyyah*), sometimes insinuating that divine names cause or produce *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 165). At other times, however, he seems to suggest that the ‘preparedness’ of *merely* possible entities

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Ibn Arabi’s argument against treating existence as a property of the object examined in Chapter Five of this thesis.

(*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) causes the divine names (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 333; Vol. 4, p. 217). Despite the obscurity and apparent inconsistency of Ibn Arabi's statements on the matter, it is clear that he assumes a relationship between the divine names and *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*). The relationship, I postulate, is not a metaphysical one. Rather, it seems to be an attempt by Ibn Arabi to add a religious dimension to some aspects of his metaphysics; it aims to show that there is divinity within every possible thing. As such, sometimes he uses phrases like 'traces of the divine names upon *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*)' to explain the relationship between the two (Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 149).

I believe, however, that many of the subjects Ibn Arabi addresses in his writings, particularly the philosophical ones, should be grasped independently from the mystical dimensions that he sometimes forces on them. In fact, stripping mysticism from his philosophical concepts and views could be sometimes helpful in making them clearer and more coherent without losing any of their intended philosophical substance.

## **1.5 Approaches to Ibn Arabi's Doctrine**

Ibn Arabi is considered one of the most controversial figures in Islamic history and his views continue to polarise Islamic scholars and theologians. Some consider him a great mystic and a friend of Allah, while others consider him a heretic and an infidel. His writings divided even the opinions of Orthodox Islamic scholars (including some jurisprudence scholars and theologians) who, in most cases, are unified in their position on mystics. Indeed, there has been a heated debate surrounding Ibn Arabi's doctrine within the circles of Islamic scholarship, which is evidenced in some of the titles of their works: *Alerting the Stupid to the Infidelity of Ibn Arabi*, and a response

titled *Alerting the Stupid to the Innocence of Ibn Arabi* (the former by Burhan al-din al-Buqa'i (1406–1480) and the latter by Jalal al-Din al-Soyuti (1445–1505), both of whom were key Islamic scholars).

In addition to these theologically critical readings, most of the traditional writings on Ibn Arabi's doctrine are commentaries on his works. Most of these have focused on his *Fusus al-Hikam*, with the aim of explaining Ibn Arabi's views and concepts according to the Sufi dogmas, some of which may have been developed after his time.

Additionally, Ibn Arabi seems to be one of the Islamic figures who attracts the most attention and interest of Western scholarship. Accordingly, there have been numerous writings on Ibn Arabi's doctrine over the past hundred years or so. Focusing on those in the English language,<sup>12</sup> we could divide these writings into four approaches:

**1. The Translations:** Some of the English works on Ibn Arabi are translations of his works. Examples include Ibn Arabi's key work *Fusus al-Hikam*, which has been translated by R. W. J. Austin (1980), and Caner K. Dagli (2004), and *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, which has been translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (1911). In addition, William C. Chittick's two major works on Ibn Arabi, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (1989) and *The Self-Disclosure of God* (1998), comprise mainly translated paragraphs of Ibn Arabi's book *al-Futuh al-Makkiyyah*.

**2. The Explanatory Approach:** Some of the Western works on Ibn Arabi are aimed at introducing and explaining his doctrine to the Western reader. Some of these works attempt to understand Ibn Arabi primarily through his own writings, and through the understanding of the followers of the Akbarian tradition (this is a Sufi

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<sup>12</sup> This includes those originally written in English, as well as some works that have been translated into English from other European languages.



tradition named after Ibn Arabi who is known in some Sufi circles as *al-Shaikh al-Akbar*). Examples of these works include Toshihiko Izutsu's important work *Sufism and Taoism* (1983), Michael Chodkiewicz's *An Ocean Without Shore* (1993) and *The Seal of the Saints* (1993), and William C. Chittick's *Imaginal Worlds* (1994) and *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (2007). It is important, however, to note that the Akbarian tradition has also been reformed and developed by its other key masters. Ibn Arabi's views were explained in some of the above works in light of these later reformulations and developments of the tradition and perhaps in light of other Sufi traditions as well.

**3. The Biographies:** Some of the key Western works on Ibn Arabi are biographies. These include Claude Addas's *Quest For the Red Sulphur* (1993), which is probably the most comprehensive biography of Ibn Arabi, and her other shorter work *Ibn 'Arabi: The Voyage of No Return* (2000) as well as Stephen Hirtenstein's *The Unlimited Mercifier* (1999).

**4. The Philosophical Approach:** Several Western writings seek to understand Ibn Arabi's concepts by employing the methods and terminology of Islamic philosophy and theology, such as Salman H. Bashir's *Ibn al-Arabi's Barzakh* (2004). Another example is A. E. Affifi's pioneering work *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyiddin Ibnul Arabi* (1964) in which he considers Ibn Arabi's doctrine through both Islamic philosophy and Western traditional philosophy. At times Affifi's work appears to be concerned with reducing Ibn Arabi's doctrine to other philosophical and theological schools instead of investigating Ibn Arabi's own original philosophical contribution.

Ibn Arabi's doctrine has also been approached from the viewpoint of continental philosophy. Such approaches include Ian Almond's *Sufism and*

*Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi* (2004) and 'The Meaning of Infinity in Sufi and Deconstructive Hermeneutics: When Is an Empty Text an Infinite One?' (2004).

## **1.6 The Aim of this Thesis and a Chapter Outline**

Above, I mentioned that when using the term 'philosophy' in today's sense, one could confidently say that Ibn Arabi provides novel yet obscure and unsystematic philosophical views and concepts. In my thesis, I aim to develop a systematic and philosophically coherent thesis of ultimate reality for Ibn Arabi by analysing these views and concepts. In this pursuit, I adopt the style of analytic philosophy, seeking to employ and utilise some of its methods and theories. The philosophical aspects of Ibn Arabi's doctrine are in dire need of conceptual clarification and systematic analysis with a closer focus on argumentation. The analytic tradition will prove most helpful in this regard.

In my thesis, I trace Ibn Arabi's related views and concepts as they are dispersed throughout his writings. I then clarify, sharpen and, in many cases, develop these views and concepts into fully constructed forms. Finally, I weave the developed concepts and views into a systematic thesis or set of sub-theses. Where necessary, I provide my own (or borrowed) arguments and concepts to help substantiate and strengthen the structure of his thesis.

Ibn Arabi's doctrine has scarcely been approached analytically; in fact, there has been very little relationship noted between Islamic philosophy, theology and mysticism on the one hand, and analytic philosophy on the other. Apart from al-Ghazali's *kalam* cosmological argument and Ibn Sina's 'floating man' thought experiment, very few aspects of Islamic philosophy have been discussed within the

analytic tradition.<sup>13</sup> I believe that an interaction between the analytic tradition and Islamic philosophy, theology and mysticism would yield interesting philosophical outcomes. To this end, my thesis aims to make a contribution in this direction. In the remainder of this introductory section, I offer summaries of the other eight chapters of the thesis.

In Chapter Two, I examine Ibn Arabi's idiosyncratic style with which he presents the thesis of ultimate reality in relation to four levels of comprehension, to speak to the various understandings of his audience. I argue that Ibn Arabi's style of presentation is highly problematic, since the views of the different levels are, at times, incompatible with one another, and yet Ibn Arabi presents them in the first person, or approvingly. Accordingly, I make some proposals to help designate Ibn Arabi's own views among the distinct levels and traditions he addresses. I argue that the only views that constitute his doctrine are those he attributes to the mystical tradition, or those he presents in a positive light, without attributing them to any particular school. No other views and concepts should be regarded as part of his doctrine, even if he appears to adopt them.

In Chapter Three, I examine two of the prominent approaches to Ibn Arabi's doctrine: one developed by Toshihiko Izutsu, and the other by William C. Chittick. In his interpretive approach, Izutsu proposes that Ibn Arabi's ontology is fully explained by his concept of the divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*). I argue, however, that Izutsu's approach is based upon a misunderstanding of Ibn Arabi's concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) and its role in Ibn Arabi's doctrine. In addition, I examine Chittick's interpretive approach to Ibn Arabi's doctrine. Chittick attempts to reduce Ibn Arabi's ontology to mysticism and epistemology by targeting Ibn Arabi's key

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<sup>13</sup> Ibn Arabi has only been mentioned a few times, usually as an example of an Islamic pantheist (or panentheist) and pluralist.

concept of *wujud*, which has almost unanimously been translated as ‘existence’. Consequently, many parts of Ibn Arabi’s doctrine, particularly his ontology and conception of ultimate reality, have long been considered matters of metaphysics. Chittick, however, argues that Ibn Arabi’s concept of *wujud* might also be translated as ‘finding’ (God through religion and mysticism). Hence, according to Chittick’s interpretation, many parts of Ibn Arabi’s doctrine, which have long been considered metaphysical, would now be considered mystical. I argue that Chittick’s interpretive approach is linguistically problematic and that it is contradicted by Ibn Arabi’s own usage of the term, which in many cases precludes Chittick’s proposed interpretation.

In Chapter Four, I examine a number of apparent inconsistencies in Ibn Arabi’s presentation of his conception of ultimate reality. First, I introduce some of his apparently incompatible views concerning the concept of God in which he seems to defend simultaneously a theistic concept of God and a non-dualistic concept of ultimate reality. According to the former, there is God as a personal Being, as described in the Islamic scriptures. According to the latter, however, there is ultimate reality as sheer and unlimited existence. Second, I examine Ibn Arabi’s inconsistent views concerning the reality of the world. Sometimes he affirms the reality of the world, while at other times he stresses the non-existence of the world. Moreover, at yet other times he claims that the world represents both existence and non-existence. Third, I also address Ibn Arabi’s apparent inconsistency in his discussion of the relationship between God and the world. Sometimes he appears to defend a theistic position in which God is considered to be the absolute Creator and Sustainer of the world. Yet at other times, he explicitly claims that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality. His statements here seem to represent God, not as the Creator *per se*,

but as the ultimate metaphysical ground from which the world cannot be distinguished.

In Chapter Five, I start to develop my own interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality. I propose that Ibn Arabi's various, and sometimes apparently inconsistent, views on the matter are best presented across three main concepts: the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), which has long been seen as Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*); the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*); and the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). The three concepts, in my interpretation, are aimed at encompassing Ibn Arabi's various views and concepts of ultimate reality, some of which are presented in Chapter Three. I go on to critically examine two interpretations of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), namely those developed by Ibn Taymiyyah and Affifi, respectively. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, by maintaining that existence is identical with ultimate reality, Ibn Arabi subscribes to a form of pantheism. According to Izutsu, however, Ibn Arabi defends a form of acosmism. I argue that both interpretations are exegetically problematic.

In Chapter Six, I develop my own interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). According to my interpretation, there are three components that comprise Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*): the first is the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*); the second is the metaphysical nature of the world; and the third is the relationship between ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and the world. The first component incorporates Ibn Arabi's claim that existence is necessary and the ultimate metaphysical state of affairs for reality, as well as his claim that existence is not a property of the object. By establishing that existence is necessary, Ibn Arabi justifies

his identification between ultimate reality and existence. In addition, Ibn Arabi's claim that existence is not something other than the existent object suggests that in his identification of ultimate reality with existence, Ibn Arabi thinks of ultimate reality as an individual existent rather than a sea of being as some of his statements may imply.

The second component – the metaphysical nature of the world – incorporates Ibn Arabi's three metaphysical concepts: possible entities (*al-mumkinat*); the world (*al-a'lam*); and *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*). According to my interpretation, Ibn Arabi maintains that there is no metaphysical difference between what is actual and what is *merely* possible. Actuality and mere possibility, are not intrinsic and metaphysical, but rather relative and, for a considerable part, epistemic.

The third component – the relationship between ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and the world – encompasses the claim that the totality of possible entities should be identified with God's knowledge of the world in order to overcome the apparent duality within existence in Ibn Arabi's ontology. The identification, furthermore, provides a plausible model for representing God's knowledge as perfect, complete and infallible.

In Chapter Seven, I examine four of the potential and actual objections to Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). The first objection was developed by Ibn Taymiyyah and concerns the relationship between God and the world. Ibn Taymiyyah complains that in his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), Ibn Arabi identifies God with the world, which is a form of heresy, and that the relationship between *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and God's knowledge in Ibn Arabi's thesis undermines God's omnipotence and omniscience. The second objection addresses the problem of the one and the many in Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). In presenting an ontology that endorses reality as both

one and many at the same time, Ibn Arabi's thesis runs the risk of becoming incoherent, the objection stresses. In addition, the fact that people only experience existence as many indicates that reality is probably so. The third objection tackles the problem of evil in Ibn Arabi's thesis. It states that, if existence is identical with God, no aspect of it should be vulnerable to evil. The fourth objection addresses the problem of the unfaithfulness of Islam. It states that in his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), Ibn Arabi contradicts established Islamic concepts and beliefs.

In Chapter Eight, I examine the second concept in my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality, the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*). Ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) indicates God in Himself with no reference or relationship to anything else. Contrary to the claims of some of Ibn Arabi's scholars, I argue that the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) is not identical with the Aristotelian concept of substance or Ibn Arabi's own concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). *Dhat* indicates God's own Self, which is only knowable and known to Himself. The only thing that is knowable for people in relation to the Divine Self (*dhat*) is its relationship to the concept of *ilah*.

In Chapter Nine, I examine Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). In Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality, the concept of God (*ilah*) refers to ultimate reality in relation to the world. godness (*uluhah*), according to Ibn Arabi, does not indicate divine nature, but rather a position (with roles) that ultimate reality occupies. The concept of God (*ilah*) implies the existence of the Divine Self (*dhat*) that holds this title and 'that which is godded over', i.e. the world. Similarly, the title 'king' implies the existence of both a kingdom and a person who holds this title. Ibn Arabi provides three channels through which one could obtain knowledge of ultimate

reality as God (*ilah*): the rational faculty; the Islamic scriptures; and religious experiences. Ibn Arabi also advances that ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) is the object of religious belief and practice. Religious concepts of God, according to him, are various portraits and formations, which aim to represent ultimate reality as God (*ilah*), here a metaphysical entity. He argues that only the Islamic concept of God corresponds perfectly to the metaphysical God (*ilah*). However, he defends a form of religious inclusivism according to which holders of inaccurate concepts of God will be forgiven and saved. Yet, on several occasions, Ibn Arabi appears to develop another thesis for religious concepts of God, which seems incompatible with his inclusivism. In this thesis, he maintains a version of aspectual pluralism in which he claims that the religious concepts of God are not different portraits of the metaphysical God (*ilah*), but *actual* manifestations of ultimate reality to different religions.

It is important to note that in this thesis I do not aim to establish that Ibn Arabi's detailed views are correct. All I aim to show is that we can represent his apparently inconsistent views and concepts related to ultimate reality in a systematic, coherent and unified manner.

Before I close this introduction, I would like to mention two points regarding my reference to Ibn Arabi's ultimate reality. First, throughout my thesis, I will use the terms ultimate reality and God interchangeably. I will use the term 'God' specifically, however, when I refer to Ibn Arabi's concept *ilah*, which is clearly an Arabic equivalent of the English word 'God'.

The second is concerned with the use of the pronoun 'He', as opposed to 'It', to address ultimate reality. In Arabic, there are only two singular pronouns: the masculine pronoun *huwa*, which Ibn Arabi uses to refer God, and the feminine



pronoun *hiyya*. *Huwa* is typically translated as ‘he’ and *hiyya* is typically translated as ‘she’. However, the words *huwa* and *hiyya* also incorporate the English pronoun ‘it’ in relevant situations. I avoid using ‘It’ to refer to Ibn Arabi’s ultimate reality because, contrary to what some scholars (e.g., Izutsu) claim, I maintain that Ibn Arabi does not defend an impersonal concept of ultimate reality. It should also be noted that in the Arabic language, gender can be attributed to both objects and words. Even though most Islamic scholars throughout history have refrained from attributing gender (in an ontological, rather than purely grammatical, sense) to Allah, translators of the Quran and other Arabic texts use the masculine pronoun ‘He’ to refer to Allah. Also, Arabic linguists usually consider the words ‘Allah’ and ‘God’ to be masculine from a grammatical point of view. In keeping with the mainstream scholarship, I will use, throughout this thesis, the pronoun ‘He’ to address Ibn Arabi's ultimate reality.

# Chapter 2: The Problem of Ibn Arabi's Presentation of the Conception of Ultimate Reality: Speaking on Different Levels

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## 2.1. Introduction

Ibn Arabi presents one of the most unique and complex conceptions of ultimate reality in Islamic philosophy and mysticism. In great detail he discusses the metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of religion that surrounds the conception. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2007) notes, '[w]ith Ibn 'Arabi we [...] encounter a complete metaphysical and cosmological, as well as psychological and anthropological, doctrine of monumental dimensions' (p. 90). Unfortunately, however, Ibn Arabi's presentation and discussion are ambiguous in many places. It can at times be confusing or even seem contradictory or incoherent. His writings have always been considered one of the most difficult in Islamic literature (Chittick, 2007, p. 1). A. E. Affifi affirms that Ibn Arabi's writing 'generally speaking, may be described as rampant, discursive and badly lacking form and cohesion' (1964, p. xix), while Nasr complains that Ibn Arabi's metaphysical writings are 'highly condensed and elliptical' (2007, p. 90).

In this chapter, I will examine one of the main factors underlying the obscurity of Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality, in particular related to its presentation. In his discussion of ultimate reality, Ibn Arabi occasionally adopts an idiosyncratic form of presentation in which he speaks on different levels in order to meet different levels of comprehension of ultimate reality.

In section 2.2, I introduce Ibn Arabi's unique way of discussing the topic of ultimate reality at different levels. Ibn Arabi places Muslims (as well as Islamic schools and traditions) on four levels according to their ability to comprehend the conception of ultimate reality: common Muslims, theologians, the elite people of Allah, and the highest elite. Correspondingly, Ibn Arabi presents the conception of ultimate reality according to these levels. In section 2.3 I outline two reasons why Ibn Arabi's form of presentation is problematic. The first is that Ibn Arabi presents the different levels from a first-person point of view and (or) in approving language, which makes identifying his own doctrine very difficult. The second is that there is an apparent conflict between the distinct levels of comprehension provided by Ibn Arabi, yet in the text he appears to adopt all of them. In section 2.4 I maintain that Ibn Arabi's inclusive theory offers a philosophical justification for his multi-level presentation. In section 2.5 I propose some guidelines for distinguishing Ibn Arabi's own unique views on ultimate reality from those that belong to the different levels and schools that are presented in his writings.

## **2.2 Four Levels of Discourse**

Ibn Arabi upholds that people (as well as schools and traditions) vary in the way they comprehend the topic of ultimate reality. Accordingly, Ibn Arabi speaks on four different levels in introducing the topic of ultimate reality. The four-level scale is presented in the introduction to Ibn Arabi's monumental book *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*. After introducing what appear to be his own personal Islamic beliefs, Ibn Arabi (2011) says:

This is the creed [*aqidah*] of the common Muslims [the first level] [...]. Then, I will introduce, Allah willing, the creed of the *nashi'ah and shadiah* [the creed of the theologians—the second level] [...]. After that I [will introduce] the creed of the elite people of Allah [the third level] [...]. However, with regard to the creed of the highest elite [the fourth level], it is above all of that. I have scattered the views belonging to this creed [implicitly] in various places within [the pages of] this book. [Because of its profoundness,] most minds fail to comprehend it (Vol. 1, p.65).

It is important to note that the four-level categorisation discussed above is not the only one developed by Ibn Arabi with regard to the different levels of comprehending the conception of ultimate reality. In fact, he talks about other categorisations and offers other, rather unclear, methods of classification. For instance, the categorisation considered here does not seem to include Islamic philosophers, whom Ibn Arabi on other occasions appears to place on a higher level than the theologians regarding some ideas about the concept of God, yet lower than the mystics (Ibid., p. 364). In addition, in the categorisation above, Ibn Arabi divides the mystics into two levels (the third and the fourth); however, in other categorisations, he divides them into three (Ibid., p.100) and sometimes into four different levels (Ibid., p.181). Here I wish to focus on the four-level scale as Ibn Arabi endorses this in the introduction of his book and discusses it in detail. In addition, it is probably the most comprehensive scale and is sufficient in serving the aims of this chapter.

In what follows, I introduce the four levels to show how Ibn Arabi presents the topic of ultimate reality in these terms.

### 2.2.1. The First Level: The Level of Common Muslims

The first level that Ibn Arabi discusses with regard to the conception of God is probably, more or less, identical to the creed of the early generations of Islam—people who have been called, in the Islamic literature, the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*), and their followers; most notably the scholars of Hadith (*muhaddithin*). This level is also thought of as the creed of common and simple Muslims.

The creed of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*) and the scholars of Hadith (*muhaddithin*) is typically distinguished by its unconcern with the theological questions regarding the coherence of some of the aspects of the Islamic concept of God. This school is known for its unconditional acceptance of what is said in the Quran and Hadith about God, and for its adherence to the literal and immediate meanings of the scriptures. For example, divine laughing, divine happiness, and divine descending to the Lowest Heaven every night, along with others are attributes of Allah according to the Quran and Hadith. Advocates of this school hold that one needs to believe in these attributes without the need to know how exactly God laughs or descends to the Lowest Heaven, and without feeling the need to justify or explain the coherence of (and systematic relations among) these attributes. Ibn Arabi claims that the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*) and the scholars of Hadith (*muhaddithin*) maintain *tafwid* in relationship to the divine attributes, in which one ascribes the divine attributes to Allah, yet consign the *howness* (*takyif*) and the exact meanings of the attributes to Him alone. The advocates of *tafwid* uphold that people cannot understand the meanings of these attributes because any meaning we, human beings, could comprehend leads to seeing God as similar to people, and this threatens the incomparability and transcendence of God, which has also been firmly asserted in

the scriptures (Ibn Arabi, 2011, p. 139). I will discuss this theological doctrine further in Chapter Nine.

Ibn Arabi assumes this level in several places in *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*—that is, he speaks from this level himself. We can see this, for instance, when he discusses some of the divine attributes. In these cases, he sometimes espouses the beliefs of common Muslims or the beliefs of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*). In one place, after referring to some of Allah’s attributes as stated in the scriptures, Ibn Arabi says: ‘All of this every Muslim must believe in. And, the mind [i.e. intellect], here, [must] not ask how or why. But rather it surrenders, submits, believes, without indulging in *takyif*’ (Ibid., Vol. 5 p. 85). He then states that ‘this was the way of the righteous predecessors [*al-salaf al-salih*], may Allah, by his grace, make us their successors’ (Ibid., p. 85). It is important to note that here Ibn Arabi appears to advocate the creed of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*) and even prays to Allah to make him their rightful successor.

### **2.2.2. The Second Level: The Level of the Theologians**

The second level, according to the four-level scale, is the level of the theologians. There have been a number of different Islamic theological schools throughout history. The two prominent schools were those of Ash’arite and Mu’tazila.<sup>14</sup> These two schools are known to have endorsed the science of discourse (*ilm al-kalam*), a system of logic and reasoning in which Islamic theologians attempt to defend, justify, and rationalise some Islamic beliefs, primarily the Islamic concept of God.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more discussions of Ash’arite and the Mu’tazila theological schools see: R. M. Frank (1978); O. Leaman (1985); P. Adamson (2003); G. Hourani (2007) and M. Campanini (2012).

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion of *kalam* and Islamic theology in general see: D. B. Macdonald (1903); P. Morewedge (1979); W. Montgomery Watt (1985); W.

Accordingly, they have a different attitude to how to understand the concept of God and divine attributes mentioned above as compared to the first level. I will examine their approaches to the Islamic concept of God and divine attributes further in Chapter Nine.

In presenting the topic of ultimate reality on the level of theologians, Ibn Arabi sometimes appears to adopt some of their theological views, methodology and terminology. In the introduction to *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, for example, he offers a treatise that presents the concept of God according to one of the Islamic theological discourses (probably according to the Ash'arite school), immediately after presenting the concept of God according to the creed of common Muslims (i.e., first level) (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 65–68). In addition, when he addresses in his writings some of the theological debates among the Islamic theological schools, which he frequently does, he occasionally appears to support the views of one school over another; for instance, contrary to the Ash'arite school, he sides with the Mu'tazila school, which claims that the divine attributes are not something additional to the Divine Self (*dhat*) (Ibid., pp. 248–249).

### **2.2.3. The Third Level: The Level of the Elite People of Allah**

Ibn Arabi maintains that the third and fourth levels represent the views of the Islamic mystical tradition. On the third level, he presents the thesis of ultimate reality according to what he calls 'the elite people of Allah' (Ibid., pp. 68–78). Here, he introduces unique views on metaphysics, epistemology and the philosophy of religion with regard to the conception of ultimate reality. In particular, we encounter some of the key concepts in his thesis of ultimate reality, such as the concept of the Divine

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Madelung (1985); J. Pavlin (1996); M. Abdel Haleem (2001); A. J. Wensinck (2008) and O. Leaman (2011).

Self (*dhat*) and the concept of God (*ilah*). Both of these will be examined in detail in Chapters Eight and Nine. We also encounter in this level (or the fourth level) Ibn Arabi's well-known thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). I examine this thesis in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Note, however, that Ibn Arabi discusses many views of the mystical tradition in detail throughout his writings, but it is not easy to determine which views should be ascribed to this level (i.e., the level of the elite people of Allah) as opposed to the fourth level (i.e., the level of the highest elite). The two levels seem to overlap rather frequently.

#### **2.2.4. The Fourth Level: The Level of the Highest Elite**

The views belonging to the fourth level are given in ambiguous language and are dispersed throughout Ibn Arabi's *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (and other works), as Ibn Arabi confirms (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 65). Yet we can arguably detect views presented on this level by identifying passages of his book that are expressed in a typical mystical language or introduce typical mystical ideas. For example, in one of his mystical poems Ibn Arabi states: 'If I say: I am, but a god and He is me, [then] He will be unknown. Because I am ignorant of who I am, and He is me; so, what [should] we do?' (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 526). In another context, he writes: 'If it had not been for the existence of the Real [*al-haqq*] within creation, there would not have been anything' (Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 393). He then comments:

This is the level of unification that no one is [ever] free from, especially the knowers of Allah who know the situation as it is, yet still they [explicitly] state what they know [...] However, the people of reasoning [i.e. philosophers] say this is impossible because the two selves [*dhatayn*] would have been one, which [they claim] is impossible. [However] we [mystics or saints], and



people like us, see [in existence only] one Self [and] not two. (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 6, p. 393).

One should note that, as mentioned above, it is not easy to distinguish the views of the third level from that of the fourth as they frequently overlap. In addition, when it is possible to distinguish the two levels from each other, they, unlike the two first levels, appear in most cases complementary and compatible. It seems though that most of the metaphysical views and concepts belonging to the mystical tradition are presented in the third level, while most of its mystical views and concepts are presented in the fourth level.

### **2.3 A Problematic Style**

Ibn Arabi's multi-level presentation of the topic of ultimate reality can be problematic and even obscure because of two reasons. First, Ibn Arabi tends to present the views of all the levels in first person and (or) in approving language, so much so that one could conclude from isolated quotes that Ibn Arabi belongs to all of the four levels and the schools and traditions he addresses. In fact, some scholars have wrongly concluded that Ibn Arabi belongs to the Ash'arite school, such as the great historian Salah al-Din Khalil ibn Aybak al-Safadi (1297–1363) who states that '[h]e [i.e., Ibn Arabi] introduced his creed [in the introduction of *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*] and I found it from the beginning to the end [to be identical with] Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari's creed' (2000, Vol. 4, p. 125). However, most of the schools which Ibn Arabi might appear to embody (the Ash'arite school included) do not actually represent his own unique views on ultimate reality, as will be explained below. Hence, Ibn Arabi's

adoption of these views in his discussions makes his presentation difficult and misleading.

In addition, in some places, Ibn Arabi does not even mention the fact that he speaks on different levels. Occasionally, he will assume one level or another without mentioning the existence of others, sometimes for practical purposes and at other times for reasons that are less clear. In one place, for example, he asserts that if an Islamic philosopher were to ask him a particular question, he would answer him in a way that suits the philosopher (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 185). After this he states a potential answer to the Islamic philosopher, saying that ‘this is the way to answer such a questioner. As for each questioner, there is an appropriate answer for him [in particular]’ (Ibid., p. 185). We may note that Ibn Arabi considers the level of the person who asks a question when determining the level of discourse he will adopt in his answer to him, and never gives away that his answer, as such, is only *relative* and one among many other possible answers. In another place, Ibn Arabi discusses a matter relating to the topic of ultimate reality and provides a mystical answer. He states that he was asked about the same issue by the mufti of Hijaz (the region that includes Mecca and Medina), but that he gave the mufti a different answer. He explains: ‘We did not tell him [the mystical answer] because he would not have borne it [...] and it would have bewildered him. [...] Therefore, we showed him facets [of the issue] that suited his cognitive abilities’ (Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 217). Again, Ibn Arabi changes the answer to meet the needs and cognitive abilities of the one who asks. Hence, two people might be given two completely different, probably incompatible, answers to the same question; both of which come from Ibn Arabi on different occasions. Each one may thus conclude that the answer given to him represents Ibn Arabi’s own stance on the subject.

It might have been practical for Ibn Arabi to adopt different levels of speech to reach out to different types of audience. But this habit means that his own unique thesis of ultimate reality is at best unclear.

The second reason for seeing Ibn Arabi's method of adopting different levels of discourse as problematic is that the different views that he assumes appear to contradict each other at times. For instance, the Mu'tazilah's doctrine on the concept of God (the second level) contrasts in several respects with the doctrine of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*)— the first level. However, Ibn Arabi does not seem to be concerned with solving these inconsistencies and the reader is left with several contrasting doctrines presented on the different levels. Although he appears at times to favour views of one or more level over the others, this is not always the case and he never says that the others are incorrect. On the contrary, his distinctive habit of adopting the views of all the schools indicates that he actually embraces them.

## **2.4. Ibn Arabi's Justification for Speaking on Different Levels**

Ibn Arabi's justification for his idiosyncratic form of presentation stems from his stance that all Islamic traditions and creeds on ultimate reality are correct in one sense or another. We encountered above the story of the mufti whom Ibn Arabi answers in a way that 'suits the mufti's cognitive abilities', which was different from Ibn Arabi's mystical answer to the same question. He justifies this as follows: '[The given answer] is correct [as well]. There is no facet [when it comes to the beliefs of God] that is not correct (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 7, p. 217). Elsewhere, after a theological discussion of some views on an aspect of the Ash'arite theology, he says:

Our way is not based on this; I mean [not] on objecting to or disputing [the theologians]. Instead, our way [aims] to show [from whence] a school [gets its views] [...] and what was manifested to it, and whether that would affect its salvation or not [...] So, we [the people of Allah] do not occupy ourselves with objecting to any one of the servants of Allah. On the contrary, we might develop excuse[s] for them based on the divine vastness (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 309–310).

Ibn Arabi's tolerance of the views of different traditions with regard to ultimate reality is based upon two underlying aspects of his doctrine, one metaphysical and the other epistemic.

Metaphysically speaking, Ibn Arabi's all-embracing attitude is based upon his view of the divine vastness, which has room for the beliefs of all the Islamic traditions. God is so vast that each of the different Islamic doctrines represented by the different philosophical, theological and mystical schools reflects but only one aspect of Him. Thus, 'there is no facet [when it comes to the beliefs of God] that is not true' (Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 217).

Epistemically speaking, on the other hand, knowing the Real (*al-haqq*)—and knowing in general—for Ibn Arabi depends heavily on the mean or the channel through which knowledge is obtained. Knowledge of ultimate reality hence varies as a consequence of the epistemological differences between the routes to gaining knowledge; the conceptions of Him held by different Islamic schools and traditions partially reflect this variation. I will discuss this issue further in Chapter Nine. So, Ibn Arabi's own underlying metaphysics and epistemology of ultimate reality warrant his tolerance and respect for the validity and truth of all the Islamic schools and sects.

Ibn Arabi's stance here, I maintain, is better interpreted as a form of inclusivism within Islam as a contrast to his intra-inclusivism, which will be introduced in Chapter Nine. In using the phrase 'inclusivism within Islam', I wish to indicate Ibn Arabi's stance towards the different Islamic sects and schools. By 'intra-inclusivism' I mean Ibn Arabi's stance towards other religions and religious traditions.

There are four reasons that Ibn Arabi's stance towards other Islamic schools and sects can be called inclusivism. First, Ibn Arabi displays tolerance and acceptance towards the different Islamic traditions. He seems to believe that salvation can be obtained through any of the Islamic traditions. Second, despite his tolerance towards the different Islamic schools and sects he still prioritises the doctrine of the mystical tradition over any and all other schools. He unequivocally favours the mystical tradition when it comes to the truthfulness and amount of knowledge of God, of which the mystical tradition obtains the highest and most accurate, according to him (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 139–140). Third, despite his occasional endorsement of the views of other Islamic schools, Ibn Arabi always places himself within the mystical tradition, as he introduces himself solely as a mystic or a saint (*wali*). Fourth, besides giving precedence to the mystical tradition, Ibn Arabi occasionally undermines and dismisses the views of other Islamic schools and traditions as inferior to the mystical tradition. He sometimes criticises the theological and philosophical schools openly and rather harshly (see for example, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, p. 120). He dismisses their knowledge of God as defective (Ibid., 2011, Vol. 4, p. 227), and says that it is only true relatively, if at all (Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 309–310). Even the knowledge of a follower of the creed of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*), whose views Ibn Arabi seems to be very tolerant towards, is inferior compared to the

knowledge of mystics (Ibn Arabi, Vol. 1, pp. 139–140). All these four points seems to suggest that Ibn Arabi’s stance is a form of inclusivism.

To sum up, Ibn Arabi belongs to the mystical tradition, which he claims holds the most accurate knowledge of ultimate reality. The knowledge of the other Islamic schools and traditions, though less valuable than the knowledge of the mystical tradition, remains, at least relatively, true.

## **2.5. Ibn Arabi’s Own Doctrine: A Practical Guide**

In the midst of these various levels and schools found in Ibn Arabi’s writings, additional to his problematic style of presentation, one might wonder which of the views and levels is Ibn Arabi’s own. A reader who is not familiar with Ibn Arabi’s way of writing might find it difficult to distinguish his own views on a given subject. In fact, even his experts can feel lost or confused at times. Affifi rightly states that ‘[o]ne has to do so much hunting through other books by Ibnul ‘Arabi besides the *Fusus*, so much analysing and synthesising and gathering relevant points scattered haphazardly amongst masses of trivial or irrelevant details, before one can arrive at anything like a system’ (1964, p. xi). In this section, hence, I propose some guidelines to help in determining Ibn Arabi’s own views on ultimate reality from those of the schools and traditions he appears to endorse (and even occasionally adopt) to help in the endeavour to construct a systematic interpretation of his thesis of ultimate reality.

Once we see that Ibn Arabi is an inclusivist who belongs to the mystical tradition in particular, we are better placed to identify his own views. To begin with, one should consider the views that Ibn Arabi attributes to the mystical tradition as his own. Here, of course, I mean the views of the mystical tradition that he either

develops in approving language or presents as his own in the first person. Among other things, Ibn Arabi calls the mystical tradition ‘the tradition’ or ‘the sect’ (*al-ta’ifah*) (see for example, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 283) and its followers the people of Allah (*ahl Allah*), the mystics or saints (*al-awliya*), or our companions (*ashabuna*) (see for example: Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 421, 230, 395). Furthermore, by the mystical tradition I mean the *main* tradition (i.e., the sainthood tradition, *wilayah*) and not the small mystical sub-sects and groups that he identifies using their unique names.

Occasionally, Ibn Arabi would introduce the view of the mystical tradition on a given issue in opposition to the views of other schools and traditions. For example, he would say that the view of the theologians in this matter is such and such, and the view of the mystics is such and such. In these cases, his own view, of course, should be the one he attributes to the mystics. However, this is not always the case. He sometimes mentions disagreements or differences *within* the mystical tradition, or different levels *within* the mystical tradition. On one occasion he even states that ‘the people of Allah’ (a term he typically uses to indicate the mystics) agree with him on an issue (Ibid., p. 208), which insinuates that his own doctrine is not entirely identical with the tradition of ‘the people of Allah’. So how can we determine his own views on such occasions?

When he highlights some disagreement or exposes differences among the views of the mystics, he tends to add either his endorsement of one view over the others or his independent personal view on the matter. There are some helpful indicators on such occasions. Notably, he tends to use some particular phrases that indicate his own position as opposed to other positions within the mystical tradition. For example, he may use the phrase ‘as for our doctrine’ (*madhhabuna*) or ‘as for us’ to oppose the views of other mystics. Furthermore, when he presents contrasting

views on different levels, all of which attributed to the mystics, his view is most probably the one that belongs to the highest level, as he always places himself (among very few other mystics) at the highest level of mysticism.

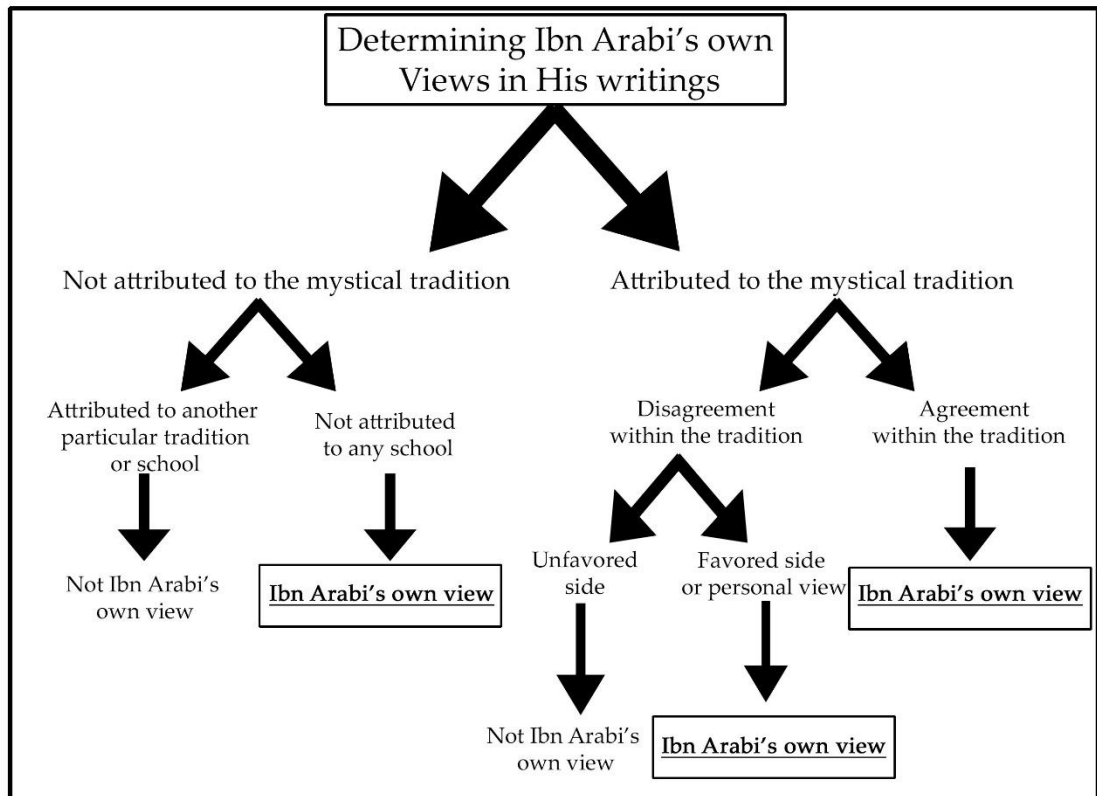
It is important, however, to note that distinguishing Ibn Arabi's own views from the views of other mystics is not always so straightforward. Sometimes he only provides one view and attributes it to the mystical tradition without mentioning any disagreement among the mystics on the matter. The reader might naturally conclude that this view is Ibn Arabi's own (considering that it is *the* view of the mystical tradition). However, Ibn Arabi may consider other views of the mystical tradition on the same matter elsewhere. This challenges even experienced readers. For instance, with regard to the divine attributes, he repeatedly affirms that they are 'relationships' (*nisab*), and attributes this view to the mystical tradition without mentioning any other views held by the mystics on the matter (see for example, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 71). Hence, one might reach the conclusion that Ibn Arabi himself advocates this position. However, on another occasion Ibn Arabi displays dislike for this view and proposes that divine attributes should be called 'divine names' instead, following the scriptures, which never uses the term 'relationships' (*nisab*) (Ibid., Vol. 8, p. 14). Hence, in attempting to identify Ibn Arabi's own views, one should be careful and thorough to make sure that he does not introduce other views belonging to the mystical tradition somewhere else.

Furthermore, Ibn Arabi's inclusivism warrants that, in order to identify his own views, one should dismiss views that belong to other traditions and schools when they differ from the mystical tradition. This remains the case even if he appears to adopt those views. Of course, his tendency to use the first person and approving



language when discussing the views of other schools or traditions is purely for practical reasons, as we have seen.

Finally, there are other views that Ibn Arabi does not explicitly attribute to the mystical tradition or the dismissed schools and sects. Nevertheless, he introduces these views in approving language and defends them as his own in the first person. A good example is his assertion that existence is *not* a property of the object. He defends this position firmly, and yet does not attribute this view to the mystical tradition or to any other school or tradition that he considers (Ibn Arabi, 2009b, pp. 140–141). Thus, it seems reasonable to attribute such views to Ibn Arabi's doctrine. Again, one should be careful, however, in identifying Ibn Arabi's views as such, because he might not attribute a view to a particular school every time he discusses it. Occasionally, he may choose to present a view with no attribution, even though he attributes it to a particular school elsewhere. For instance, in discussing the Ash'arite position on the ontology of the divine attributes (i.e., that the divine attributes are *additional* entities to the Divine Self), he sometimes explicitly attributes this position to the Ash'arite school (see for instance, Ibn Arabi 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 70–71). However, at other times he presents the same position without attributing it to any school in particular (see for instance, *Ibid.*, pp. 213–214). Hence, when one identifies a view that Ibn Arabi does not accredit to any school, before attributing it to Ibn Arabi it should be clear that he does not attribute it to a particular school elsewhere.



## 2.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined Ibn Arabi's idiosyncratic way of speaking on different levels. I introduced the four levels according to which he presents the conception of ultimate reality. They are the level of common Muslims; the level of theologians; the level of the elite people of Allah and the level of the highest elite. I argued that his way of speaking on different levels is highly problematic because the views of the different levels are at times incompatible with each other, and yet he presents all of them from a first-person point of view and (or) in approving language. I also highlighted some potential justifications for Ibn Arabi's mode of presentation. I claimed that his theory of inclusivism towards the different Islamic schools and sects might justify his style. Finally, I proposed that in order to identify Ibn Arabi's own views on any given topic and on the conception of ultimate reality in particular, one

should follow four steps. First, one should begin by considering any view that he attributes to the mystical tradition as Ibn Arabi's own view on the subject. Second, when there is a dispute within the mystical tradition one should look for the views that he endorses or his personal view that he develops with the help of some keywords such as, 'as for our doctrine' (*madhhabuna*) and 'as for us'. Third, unless they are identical with the views of the mystical tradition, one should discard all the views that Ibn Arabi attributes to any other Islamic school or sect. Fourth, where he develops a view from a first-person point of view and (or) in an approving language and never attributes it to any school or tradition, one should consider such views Ibn Arabi's own views.

In the following chapter, I critically examine two prominent approaches to Ibn Arabi's doctrine, those developed by Toshihiko Izutsu and William C. Chittick. In his interpretive approach, Izutsu argues that Ibn Arabi's ontology is entirely explained in terms of his concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*). On the other hand, Chittick attempts to reduce Ibn Arabi's ontology to mysticism and epistemology. I argue, however, that both interpretations are unsuccessful as they are exegetically inaccurate.

# Chapter 3: A Critical Evaluation of Izutsu and Chittick's Overall Approaches to Ibn Arabi's Doctrine

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## 3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined Ibn Arabi's idiosyncratic style when introducing the conception of ultimate reality. As we have seen, Ibn Arabi tends to speak on different levels to represent a variety of understandings of ultimate reality. I argued, however, that of the different schools and levels that he adopts in his writings, only the mystical tradition actually represents Ibn Arabi's own doctrine. He adopts views that belong to the various other schools and levels only for practical purposes. Ibn Arabi's seemingly peculiar style of presentation is philosophically justified by his theory of inclusivism within Islam. Furthermore, towards the end of the last chapter, I proposed some guidelines to help distinguish Ibn Arabi's personal views from those that belong to other schools and traditions found in his writings.

Many scholars throughout history have developed various interpretations of Ibn Arabi's views. This chapter will critically examine two of the prominent contemporary interpretations of Ibn Arabi's doctrine, one developed by Toshihiko Izutsu and the other by William C. Chittick.

Section 3.2 consists of an examination of Izutsu's interpretive approach to Ibn Arabi's doctrine; this interpretation refers primarily to Ibn Arabi's concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*). According to Izutsu, Ibn Arabi's ontology is fully incorporated in terms of this concept (i.e. *tajalli*); everything that exists is divided between the unmanifested Absolute on the one hand and its self-manifestations on the other. However, I argue that Izutsu's understanding of Ibn Arabi's concept of self-

manifestation (*tajalli*), and its relationship to Ibn Arabi's ontology, is inaccurate. I assert that the concept of divine self-manifestation indicates a relationship between two parties rather than a one-sided process. There is an epistemic aspect, essential to the concept, which is noticeably absent from Izutsu's presentation. Furthermore, contrary to Izutsu's claim, Ibn Arabi's ontology cannot be fully incorporated into the concept of self-manifestation (*tajalli*). Thus, considering that he depends almost solely on this concept in his interpretation, Izutsu omits a number of Ibn Arabi's important concepts and theories.

Section 3.3, examines Chittick's main approach to Ibn Arabi's doctrine. Chittick, in his major writings, is reluctant to propose any interpretation of Ibn Arabi and strives to present him as he presents himself. However, one could argue that he has failed to avoid interpretation, as he attempts to reduce Ibn Arabi's ontology to mysticism and epistemology, which seems a form of interpretation. He does this by targeting Ibn Arabi's concept of *wujud*, which is probably the most important and influential concept in Ibn Arabi's doctrine. I argue, however, that Chittick's interpretation is based upon a semantic error and is exegetically problematic. Contrary to Chittick's claim, 'existence' is the literal and everyday meaning of the Arabic term *wujud*, and is the most relevant interpretation with regard to Ibn Arabi's usage of the term.

My focus in this chapter is on the overall interpretive approaches of Izutsu and Chittick. There are a number of other issues within their interpretations that might be considered problematic, and some of these will be addressed in other chapters.

## 3.2 Against Izutsu's Interpretation of Ibn Arabi's Doctrine

### 3.2.1. Izutsu's Interpretive Approach

In his celebrated book *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (1984), Toshihiko Izutsu develops a seminal interpretation of Ibn Arabi's doctrine, focusing on his ontology in particular. Izutsu bases his whole interpretation on Ibn Arabi's concept of 'divine self-manifestation' (*tajalli*). He states:

[T]ajalli [i.e., divine self-manifestation] is the pivotal point of Ibn Arabi's thought. Indeed the concept of *tajalli* is the very basis of his world-view. All his thinking about the ontological structure of the world turns around this axis, and by so doing develops into the grand-scale cosmic system. No part of his world-view is understandable without reference to this central concept. His entire philosophy is, in short, a theory of *tajalli* (p. 152).

Accordingly, he proposes the following structure of Ibn Arabi's ontology. On the one hand, there is the Absolute in its absoluteness, prior to any manifestation. On the other, there are its four self-manifestations: the Absolute manifested as God; the Absolute manifested as Lord; the Absolute manifested as half-spiritual/half-material; and the Absolute manifested as the sensible world (Ibid., p. 20).<sup>16</sup>

Izutsu maintains that the Absolute in its absoluteness is encapsulated by Ibn Arabi's concepts of *dhat* (which Izutsu translates as 'essence'). He describes the Absolute as sheer and unlimited existence, 'Being *qua* Being', unknown and unknowable, the source of all manifestations and the ultimate metaphysical ground of

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<sup>16</sup> Because I am discussing Izutsu's interpretation here, in this section I follow Izutsu in referring to Ibn Arabi's ultimate reality with the pronoun 'it' instead of 'He'.

everything there is (Izutsu, 1984, pp. 20, 23, 25). Its four self-manifestations encompass everything else, including the spiritual and material, the visible and invisible.

For Izutsu, Ibn Arabi's concept of God should not be considered identical with his concept of ultimate reality *per se*, but instead should be seen as a manifestation of ultimate reality. He states:

That is why even God (*Allah*) itself which in Islam generally maintains its uncontested position is given here only a secondary place. As we shall see presently, God is a 'phenomenal', i.e., self-manifesting, form assumed by Something still more primordial, the Absolute Being (Izutsu, 1984, p. 19).

Izutsu maintains that the only significance of ultimate reality manifested as God over the other manifestations is that God as such is a very *early* manifestation. Hence, the manifestation of God is close to the Absolute in its absoluteness when compared to the other manifestations. Izutsu states that '[p]roperly speaking, in the name of Allah [i.e., the concept of God] we should see the self-manifestation (*tajalli*) of this Mystery [the Absolute in its absoluteness] already at work, although, to be sure it is the first beginning of the process' (Ibid., p. 27).

### **3.2.2. Problems with Izutsu's Interpretation**

There are two main problems with Izutsu's interpretive approach to Ibn Arabi's doctrine. The first problem is Izutsu's misunderstanding of Ibn Arabi's concept of divine self-manifestations (*tajalli*) and the second problem concerns the narrowness of Izutsu's interpretive approach to Ibn Arabi's wider doctrine.

Izutsu claims that Ibn Arabi's concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) indicates the phenomenon in which the Absolute leaves its absoluteness and enters into limitation and determination to formulate itself as one of the various limited forms that exist (Izutsu, 1984, p. 152). According to him, all divine self-manifestations (*tajalli*) are no more than various forms of self-determination, irrespective of any other external factor. He states:

*Tajalli* is the process by which the Absolute, which is absolutely unknowable in itself, goes on manifesting itself in ever more concrete forms. Since this self-manifestation of the Absolute can not be actualized except through particular, determined forms, the self-manifestation of the Absolute is nothing other than a self-determination or self-delamination of the Absolute (Ibid., p. 152).

This, I maintain, does not accurately represent Ibn Arabi's own conception of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*). For Ibn Arabi, *tajalli* indicates a relationship rather than a one-sided process (i.e., self-determination); it is the relationship between the ultimate reality that reveals Himself and the one who perceives this revelation. Ibn Arabi explicitly affirms that self-manifestation (*tajalli*) requires two sides (2011, Vol. 2, p. 452). The two sides, I maintain, correspond to two aspects of the divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*); one is ontological, and the other is epistemic. Izutsu's interpretation correctly represents the ontological aspect, which indicates the self-determination of ultimate reality. The epistemic aspect, on the other hand, represents the perception of the divine self-determination. Each of the two aspects are necessary



conditions for any divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*); together, however, they form the sufficient conditions for a divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*).

Hence, Ibn Arabi tends to associate his concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) with another epistemic concept: *shuhud* (or *mushahadah*), which indicates the religious and mystical witnessing of God. It seems that self-manifestation (*tajalli*) and witnessing (*shuhud*) are two sides of the same phenomenon (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 339). The phenomenon in question is both a self-manifestation (when considered from God's perspective) and witnessing (when considered from the human perspective). Whenever there is a self-manifestation (*tajalli*), there is witnessing (*shuhud*), and vice versa. Epistemology, therefore, is essential to the concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) rather than just an accidental outcome of it or a motivation for it. Izutsu seems to fail to recognise this.<sup>17</sup>

It is not accurate, then, to claim, as Izutsu does, that any limited existent (e.g., physical world) is necessarily and unconditionally a divine self-manifestation regardless of all else. It is only a divine self-manifestation if there is someone to witness (*shuhud*) God through it. Limited existents are not divine self-manifestations to anyone who does not witness God through them. That said, considering that ultimate reality is identical to existence, according to Ibn Arabi, He may be witnessed (*shuhud*) in everything, including the physical world. This idea can be illustrated using the following analogy: let us say that a friend of mine is lost in the forest and a search party is formed to find him. During the search, I notice a particular rock under a tree placed in a particular position. Let us say that because of an old game we used

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<sup>17</sup> Izutsu believes that even though divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) is a purely ontological matter, there is an epistemic motivation behind it. The reason for this is that ultimate reality *wants* to be known. He states that '[s]ince, according to the Tradition, the hidden treasure' unveils itself because it 'desires to be known', self-manifestation must mean nothing other than the absolute becoming knowable and known' (1984, p. 32).

to play I know that it is the missing friend who has placed the rock in this way in order to help me find him. Ontologically speaking, this rock is intrinsically a physical item to everyone in the search party. However, epistemically speaking, only I can obtain specific information from seeing this rock. Its epistemic significance is conceived only by me. In other words, my missing friend is *manifesting* himself to me alone through this rock. The rock is not a manifestation of my friend to anyone else in the search party.

A similar thing could be said about the physical world, for instance, in terms of God's self-manifestations (*tajalliat*, *sing.* *tajalli*). Ontologically speaking, the physical world is intrinsically physical to everyone. However, epistemically speaking, and according to Ibn Arabi, God manifests Himself through it to specific people. Witnessing (*mushahadah*) God through the physical world, Ibn Arabi notes, is not very common as it is mostly mystics who witness God through possible entities (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 6, p. 357).

Izutsu fails to acknowledge the epistemic aspect that is necessary for the concept of divine self-manifestation, leaving his interpretation incomplete. Apparently this mistake led Izutsu to his inaccurate representation of Ibn Arabi's doctrine in which he has treated every entity in in Ibn Arabi's ontology as a manifestation.

Even if we ignore the inaccuracy of Izutsu's understanding of Ibn Arabi's concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*), his approach still appears to be problematic. His interpretation attempts to force Ibn Arabi's whole doctrine into his concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*). This causes two difficulties. First, despite great efforts to make his interpretive scheme exhaustive, Izutsu necessarily omits many elements of Ibn Arabi's doctrine. Ibn Arabi's doctrine is far more comprehensive than his concept of self-manifestation (*tajalli*). For instance, Izutsu's

interpretation fails to do justice to Ibn Arabi's theories of the metaphysics of the world. Among many other related topics, Ibn Arabi discusses the metaphysics of *merely* possible entities and actual entities, and he describes the relationships among them and between them and God. This is examined in detail in Chapter Six of this thesis. It is implausible that such topics as these can be examined thoroughly when one maintains that Ibn Arabi's whole ontology is merely that of divine self-manifestations (*tajalli*). It is inconceivable to structure Ibn Arabi's varied ontological views and theories as sub-categories of *tajalli*.

Second, Izutsu seems to include in his interpretation a number of issues which do not clearly belong to the concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) *per se*. For instance, he claims that the theistic concept of God indicates a divine self-manifestation in which ultimate reality manifests itself to itself. This divine self-manifestation means the self-awareness of ultimate reality (Izutsu, 1984, p. 154). This, however, is inaccurate. Ibn Arabi explicitly affirms that a thing cannot manifest itself to itself (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 338). This is in line with my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) presented above. As I have explained, Ibn Arabi emphasises that self-manifestation (*tajalli*) is a relationship that requires two parties. Accordingly, without someone to witness God's self-determination, there cannot be any self-manifestation (*tajalli*). In addition, contrary to Izutsu's claim, Ibn Arabi states that ultimate reality's self-awareness is obtained at the stage of *ahdiyyah*, which Izutsu identifies with the Absolute in its absoluteness prior to any manifestation (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 227). Ultimate reality's self-awareness is therefore not a manifestation according to Izutsu's own interpretation of the concept.

This should not be confused with Ibn Arabi's occasional assertion that God never manifests Himself except to Himself (Ibid., Vol. 8, p. 102). On such occasions,

Ibn Arabi is alluding to his thesis of the oneness of existence (which will be discussed in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven). According to this consideration, Ibn Arabi ignores the diversity and plurality of reality and focuses only upon what he claims to be the unity of existence, which is identical with ultimate reality. In this sense, ultimate reality cannot manifest Himself to anything other than Himself, as He is the whole existence. This is radically different from what Izutsu says about the concept of God as a manifestation.

In short, Izutsu has based his interpretation on a misunderstanding of Ibn Arabi's concept of divine self-manifestations (*tajalli*) and its place in his doctrine. Taking these issues into consideration, I conclude that Izutsu's interpretation of Ibn Arabi's doctrine is unsuccessful.

It may be helpful to mention that the problems surrounding Izutsu's interpretation of Ibn Arabi's doctrine might be due to the fact that it is almost solely based on *Fusus al-Hikam* (and Abdul Razzaq al-Qashani's illustrative comments on the book). Izutsu admits:

In any case, the present work [i.e., *Sufism and Taoism*] consists exclusively of an analysis of the 'Bezels of Wisdom' [*Fusus al-Hikam*] except in a few places where I shall refer to one of the smaller works for elucidation of some of the important points (1984, p. 4).

Although *Fusus al-Hikam* is one of Ibn Arabi's most prominent works, it is relatively short. As mentioned in Chapter One, Ibn Arabi discusses his doctrine extensively in his other works, especially his book *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyyah*. It should be expected

that if one is limited in his interpretation to *Fusus*, key issues from Ibn Arabi's doctrine will be neglected.

This section has focused on Izutsu's overall interpretive approach to Ibn Arabi. There are a number of other issues within his interpretation that may be considered problematic. Some of these will be examined over the course of the following chapters.

### **3.3 Against Chittick's Interpretation of Ibn Arabi's Doctrine**

#### **3.3.1. Chittick's Interpretive Approach**

William C. Chittick is considered one of the leading contemporary scholars of Ibn Arabi. His two major works, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination: The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (1989) and *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (1998) are among the most influential works on Ibn Arabi's doctrine in the English language today.

It is a matter of debate whether Chittick really offers an interpretation of Ibn Arabi's doctrine, especially in the two texts mentioned above. As mentioned in Chapter One, these are primarily translations of parts of Ibn Arabi's major work *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyyah*. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* alone includes translations of more than 600 passages from Ibn Arabi's *al-Futuhāt*, and many Ibn Arabi scholars in the English-speaking world today depend on these two texts as a source for Ibn Arabi's own works.<sup>18</sup> Presenting Ibn Arabi without engaging in any interpretation is actually Chittick's intention, as he explains in the Introduction to *The Sufi Path of*

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<sup>18</sup> Many articles in *JMIAS: Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, for instance depend on parts of Chittick's works as a translation of Ibn Arabi's *al-Futuhāt*.

*Knowledge:*

In writing the book, I tried to avoid any preconceptions as to what Ibn al-‘Arabi should be saying or what he has to offer. Instead, my goal was to translate or ‘carry over’ his teachings as they are actually found, mainly in the *Futuhāt* [i.e., Ibn Arabi’s book, *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyyah*], into a language which does justice to his concerns, not our concerns (p. xx).

As he is attempting to remain faithful to Ibn Arabi’s texts, reading Chittick’s text produces similar difficulties to reading Ibn Arabi directly. Some of these problems include the obscurity and apparent inconsistencies. For instance, in his discussion of the existence of the world, which Ibn Arabi defines as everything other than God, Chittick seems to defend on behalf of Ibn Arabi two inconsistent views on the subject.

On one occasion, Chittick assumes that Ibn Arabi advocates the non-existence of the world. He states: ‘[t]o say that the cosmos is “everything other than God” is to say that it is everything other than *wujud* [i.e., existence]’ (1998, p. 12). He goes on to say that anything in the cosmos could be considered *mawjud* (typically translated as ‘existent’) only if one means that it is ‘found’ (another meaning of the Arabic term *mawjud*).

However, on another occasion Chittick appears to present the opposite view on behalf of Ibn Arabi. He states:

In discussing Being and the various terms that are used to refer to the nonexistent and existent things [...] we need to remind the reader that each thing other than God is a name of God. And since God is Being, every *thing*,

every entity, every possible thing is a name of Being (1989, p. 94)

It seems that the two views are incompatible. On the one hand, Chittick seems to interpret that Ibn Arabi considers everything other than God to be non-existent, while on the other he seems to maintain that Ibn Arabi considers everything to be existent. This may not be totally Chittick's fault as he perhaps endeavours to present Ibn Arabi as Ibn Arabi presents himself, without engaging in any attempt to resolve apparent inconsistencies.

However, Chittick is not always successful in maintaining this objectivity—refraining from interpreting Ibn Arabi's texts. Indeed, he has developed a unique interpretive approach to Ibn Arabi's doctrine. The main feature of this interpretation is his attempt to reduce Ibn Arabi's ontology to mysticism and epistemology. There is no doubt that mysticism and epistemology are major topics in Ibn Arabi's doctrine; however, Chittick does not limit himself to what are clearly, and have long been accepted to be, Ibn Arabi's views regarding mysticism and epistemology. Instead, he asserts that Ibn Arabi is almost solely a mystic and that most of his views and concepts are ultimately mystical and epistemological, even those which have long been accepted to be metaphysical and philosophical. He states:

Despite the hundreds of volumes on ontology that have been inspired by Ibn al-'Arabi's works, his main concern is not with the mental concept of being but with the experience of God's Being, the tasting (*dhawq*) of Being, that 'finding' which is at one and the same time to perceive and to be that which truly is (1989, p. 3).

In order to reduce Ibn Arabi's ontology to mysticism and epistemology, Chittick targets one of the most important concepts in Ibn Arabi's doctrine, namely the concept of *wujud*. This is a pivotal concept that concerns and colours almost every aspect of Ibn Arabi's doctrine, in particular his ontology and conception of ultimate reality. Most of Ibn Arabi's central theories and views are centred on his concept of *wujud*, not least his controversial and well-known thesis of *wahdat al-wujud*. Understanding this concept is crucial in understanding Ibn Arabi's doctrine as a whole.

Ibn Arabi's concept of *wujud* is most frequently translated as 'existence', which is how it is typically understood across Arabic literature. Consequently, many part of Ibn Arabi's ontological doctrine and his conception of ultimate reality seem to centre on the concept of 'existence'. His well-known thesis of *wahdat al-wujud*, for instance, is almost unanimously understood to mean 'the oneness of existence' or 'the oneness of being'. Naturally, Ibn Arabi's fundamental concepts related to *wujud* (existence) are generally considered to be primarily matters of metaphysics.

Chittick, however, proposes a different understanding of Ibn Arabi's key concept of *wujud* and its derivatives. This creates a fundamentally different understanding of Ibn Arabi's doctrine in general. Contrary to what is supposed by mainstream scholarship, he proposes that Ibn Arabi's concept of *wujud* may be more accurately understood as 'finding'. He maintains that 'finding' renders the Arabic term *wujud* perfectly as it is its literal and everyday meaning (Chittick, 2013, p. 916). Describing terms that Ibn Arabi adopts when talking of God, Chittick states:

Probably the most important of these is *wujud*, which is typically translated as 'existence' or 'being' but which literally means 'finding'. If for English



speakers, ‘existence’ has no necessary connection with awareness, this is not the case for Ibn al-‘Arabi. To speak of *wujud* is to speak of finding and what is found (1998, p. xix).

In another context, he states that ‘[i]n a second sense Ibn al-‘Arabi employs the word *wujud* when speaking about the substance or stuff or nature of God Himself. In one word, what is God? He is *wujud*. In this sense “finding” might better convey the sense of the term’ (Chittick, 1989, p. 6)<sup>19</sup>. Further, in his interpretation of Ibn Arabi’s understanding of the modal terms (i.e., necessary, possible, and impossible) he claims that ‘Ibn Arabi would formulate it, in all of the reality, what is it that must be found [i.e., the necessary], what is it that may be found [i.e., the possible], and what is it that cannot be found [i.e., the impossible]?’ (Chittick 2013, p. 917). In addition, he proposes that the same meaning (i.e., finding) should be applied to the derivatives of the term *wujud*. He translates one of God’s names in the Islamic tradition ‘*al-Wajid*’, employed by Ibn Arabi, as ‘the finder’ (Ibid., p. 916). Chittick even dares to suggest that Ibn Arabi’s thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) could be translated instead to the ‘oneness of finding’ (1989, p.4).

Chittick does not refer to or depend on any linguistic sources (e.g., dictionaries) to substantiate his claims about the Arabic term *wujud*. However, Bakri Aladdin (2011), who seems to defend a similar position to that of Chittick with regard to *wujud*, refers to a quote from the Islamic theologian Fakhr al-din al-Razi (1209) to substantiate his view. Al-Razi asserts that the term *wujud* has two meanings: ‘finding’ and ‘existence’. He then claims that ‘finding’ was the first meaning for *wujud*. He argues that without *finding* the object, its *existence* would not be known. He suggests

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<sup>19</sup> Chittick states that Ibn Arabi may use the term *wujud* sometimes to indicate ‘existence’, but not when he is talking about ultimate reality as *wujud* (1989, p. 6).

that this was how the meaning of the Arabic term *wujud* evolved, from initially indicating finding to indicating existence (al-Razi, 1981, Vol. 1, pp. 125–126).

Translating *wujud* to ‘finding’ should not be considered a simple linguistic matter. As mentioned above, the way we understand Ibn Arabi’s concept of *wujud* determines the way we understand Ibn Arabi’s doctrine, or at least the parts of it considered among the most important. Our understanding of Ibn Arabi’s doctrine will be fundamentally different should we understand his concept of *wujud* as ‘finding’. Following Chittick’s proposition, Ibn Arabi’s doctrine would no longer concern the metaphysics of existence as it has long been understood and accepted. Instead, it would centre on ‘finding’ and ‘knowing’ God through mysticism and religion (Chittick, 1989, p. 3). Chittick sometimes even suggests that God is the ‘finding’ in Ibn Arabi’s doctrine (1989, p. 6). This is an obscure claim; it is not clear what he means by God being ‘finding’, or how this relates to Ibn Arabi’s other views concerning finding God through religion and mysticism.

### **3.2.2. Chittick’s Interpretive Approach is Unwarranted**

In light of the above, it seems that Chittick has based his interpretive approach mainly on his claim that ‘existence’ is not the literal meaning for *wujud* and that Ibn Arabi never ignores the literal meaning—finding. From this he aims to undermine the typical interpretation of Ibn Arabi’s term in favour of his proposed interpretation. Before criticising this approach, it is important to recognise that in Arabic there is some overlap in terminology between the terms for ‘finding’ and ‘existence’. This may be clarified through the following three points. The first is that, besides indicating ‘existence’, the Arabic term *wujud* also indicates ‘finding’ in some contexts. The second is that the Arabic term *wujdan* indicates ‘finding’ but not

‘existence’, yet it shares the same root with *wujud*. *Wujdan* is more commonly used than *wujud* in Arabic traditional literature to indicate ‘finding’. The third is that the Arabic term *mawujud* means equally ‘existent’ and ‘found’. The debate now concerns whether, as Chittick claims, ‘finding’, and not ‘existence’, is the literal meaning of the Arabic term *wujud*, and whether ‘finding’ is what Ibn Arabi means when he uses the term.

Unfortunately, Chittick’s understanding of *wujud* is inaccurate, as it is both linguistically incorrect and opposed by Ibn Arabi’s own usage of the term. Linguistically speaking, and contrary to Chittick’s claims, ‘existence’ is both the literal meaning and the everyday usage of the Arabic term *wujud*. To the best of my knowledge, there is no official dictionary definition that considers ‘existence’ to be the metaphoric sense of the Arabic term *wujud*, as Chittick seems to suggest. Regarding al-Razi’s argument above, it is important to note that he is merely attempting to establish which of the two meanings was used first, not claiming that one is literal and the other metaphorical. Thus, even if it succeeds, al-Razi’s argument does not establish Chittick’s implicit claims that ‘existence’ can be treated as a metaphorical meaning for *wujud*. Nonetheless, al-Razi’s argument is not compelling and cannot conclusively determine which of the two meanings came first. It is important to note that al-Razi’s argument is a philosophical justification for his claim rather than a linguistic one. If I were to use the same type of reasoning which al-Razi uses to defend the priority of the meaning ‘finding’ over ‘existence’, I could say that the existence of something precedes the finding of it, and hence, the meaning ‘existence’ should be assumed to precede the meaning ‘finding’ with regard to the Arabic term *wujud*. However, I am not sure that this is a good way to settle the matter as to which meaning came first. There are a number of complex factors that might

affect the evolution of the meaning, and I maintain that such issues should be settled through etymological research rather than philosophical argumentation. Thus, we may safely maintain that Chittick's claims about translating *wujud* to 'existence' are semantically incorrect. The typical translation of *wujud* as 'existence' is indeed accurate. Other linguistic mistakes have been pointed out in Chittick's translations of certain terms employed by Ibn Arabi relating to the Arabic word *wujud*. For instance, Chittick's translation of God's name, '*al-Wajid*', as 'the finder' is inaccurate. *Al-Wajid* literally means 'the rich' and is not derived from the Arabic word '*wujud*', as Chittick seems to think, but instead from the word '*wajid*', which indicates 'wealth'. This is how Arabic dictionaries, and even theological schools, typically understand the divine name '*al-Wajid*'.<sup>20</sup>

Putting Chittick's inaccurate claims regarding the term *wujud* to one side, one may wonder, since 'finding' is one of *wujud*'s meanings, is it possible that Ibn Arabi actually uses *wujud* in his writings in this meaning? If so, could Chittick's epistemic approach still be saved?

Determining which meaning Ibn Arabi intends when using the term *wujud* in his writings is not difficult. By examining the contexts in which he employs the term, one could affirm with almost no doubt that he intends it to mean 'existence' rather than 'finding'. In many contexts, it would hardly be meaningful to interchange *wujud* with 'finding' (or with its derivatives). For instance, on many occasions Ibn Arabi uses the term *wujud* in contrast with non-existence (*adam*); it is far more plausible to acknowledge the contrast between existence and non-existence than between finding God and non-existence. Consequently, despite his claims, Chittick himself almost always translates *wujud* as 'existence', as the context does not frequently allow any

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<sup>20</sup> For more detail and discussion of the meaning of the terms *wujud*, *wujdan*, and *wajid*, please refer to the root *wajad* in *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Mandhur.

other translation. It is also noteworthy that Ibn Arabi follows the standard usage of traditional Arabic literature by employing the Arabic term *wujdan*, instead of *wujud*, when he wishes to indicate ‘finding’, and finding God in particular (see for example, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 443).

Once one demonstrates that Chittick’s claims of Ibn Arabi’s concept of *wujud* is inaccurate and opposed by Ibn Arabi’s own texts, his whole interpretation collapses. Consequently, Ibn Arabi’s ontology can never be reduced to mysticism and epistemology. The aspects of Ibn Arabi’s doctrine that centre on the concept of *wujud* remain, in the end, matters of metaphysics and ontology. Chittick’s reductionist approach to Ibn Arabi’s doctrine is, therefore, unsuccessful.

Similarly in regard to Izutsu’s interpretation, in this section I have only focused on Chittick’s overall approach to Ibn Arabi. There are several other issues within his interpretation that may require further consideration, and some of these are examined in later chapters.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the two most prominent contemporary approaches to Ibn Arabi’s doctrine, one developed by Toshihiko Izutsu and the other by William C. Chittick. In section 3.2, a brief summary was provided of Izutsu’s interpretation, which depends heavily upon Ibn Arabi’s concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*); I argued, however, that Izutsu misconceives this concept. Further, I argued that Izutsu’s interpretive approach is too narrow and therefore fails to incorporate crucial topics in Ibn Arabi’s doctrine. It was concluded, then, that Izutsu’s interpretive approach to Ibn Arabi has been unsuccessful.

In section 3.3, I examined the main interpretive approach that Chittick takes towards Ibn Arabi's doctrine. Chittick attempts to reduce Ibn Arabi's ontology to mysticism and epistemology by targeting Ibn Arabi's concept of *wujud*, which is probably the most important concept in his doctrine. The term *wujud* has widely and almost unanimously been translated to 'existence'. Consequently, many parts of Ibn Arabi's doctrine have long been considered matters of metaphysics and philosophy. However, and contrary to the mainstream of Ibn Arabi scholarship, Chittick suggests that Ibn Arabi's concept of *wujud* might be better translated as 'finding' rather than 'existence', claiming that the former is actually the literal meaning of the Arabic term. By doing so, Chittick seeks to establish that Ibn Arabi's doctrine is almost solely mystical. However, I argued that his interpretation is linguistically problematic and is contradicted by Ibn Arabi's own texts. I concluded, therefore, that Chittick's interpretive approach is also unsuccessful.

In the following chapter, I will examine a number of apparent inconsistencies present in Ibn Arabi's views and concepts of ultimate reality, particularly concerning the concept of God, the reality of the world, and the relationship between God and the world. I will also address some of the approaches upheld by a number of Ibn Arabi's scholars to resolve this problem. I do not aim, in the following chapter, to dismiss Ibn Arabi's thesis as incoherent. Instead, I merely seek to clearly outline and identify Ibn Arabi's apparently incompatible views on the subject, in order to pave the way to my own interpretation of Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality.

# Chapter 4: Ibn Arabi's Apparently Inconsistent Views and Concepts on Ultimate Reality

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## 4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I critically examined two key contemporary overall approaches to Ibn Arabi's doctrine one developed by Toshihiko Izutsu and the other by William C. Chittick. I argued that their analyses were unsuccessful in accurately representing Ibn Arabi's doctrine.

Throughout his writing, Ibn Arabi dispenses various views and concepts regarding the conception of ultimate reality. However, when one gathers and carefully examines these views, a number of inconsistencies seem to arise. In this chapter, I aim to clearly identify this issue in Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality in order to pave the way for my interpretation of his thesis. This will be presented in subsequent chapters and aims to represent these various views and concepts, (among others) in a unified and philosophically coherent manner.

This chapter outlines the seemingly incompatible philosophical positions Ibn Arabi sets forth concerning three central issues: the concept of God, the reality of the world and the relationship between God and the world. In this chapter, I also address critical responses developed by some of Ibn Arabi's scholars to these inconsistencies.

In section 4.2, I outline Ibn Arabi's apparently incompatible views concerning the concept of God. I clarify that he appears to simultaneously advocate a theistic concept of God and an impersonal concept of ultimate reality. According to the former he introduces God as a personal being who is a Hearer and a Seer, following

the Islamic scriptures. According to the latter he appears to introduce God in terms of a sheer and indeterminate existence.

In section 4.3, I introduce Ibn Arabi's inconsistent views with regard to the reality of the world. In his writings, he sometimes accepts the existence of the world and at other times he firmly rejects this view. He also occasionally purports that the world is an intermediate state between existence and non-existence.

In section 4.4, I present some of the apparent inconsistencies in Ibn Arabi's views concerning the relationship between God and the world. Some of his views seem to defend a typically theistic relationship between God and the world in which he introduces God as the absolute Creator and Sustainer of the world. Some of his other views, however, appear to represent a relationship in which the world is considered intrinsic to God's existence. In this approach, he seems to introduce God not as the Creator of the world *per se*, but as the ultimate metaphysical ground of the world.

## **4.2 Ibn Arabi's Apparently Inconsistent Views on the Concept of God**

When examining Ibn Arabi's statements on the concept of God, one will notice that he appears to defend two different and apparently incompatible concepts of deity: a theistic concept of God, and an impersonal concept of ultimate reality.

In his theistic concept, Ibn Arabi presents God as a personal Being. His outlook in these instances represents God in line with the Abrahamic religions, as well as some Eastern religious traditions and philosophies such as Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualist) Vedanta, and Ramanuja (Hick, 2004, pp. 252–53; Fowler, 2012, p. xxvii). What it means for God to be a person, however, is a matter for disagreement among philosophers and theologians. Richard Swinburne (1996), for



example, maintains that by the term ‘person’ he indicates an individual with the ability to act intentionally, namely one who is able to do something and mean to do it (p. 4). Peter van Inwagen (2008), on the other hand, states that he ‘mean[s] a being who may be in the most straightforward and literal sense, *addressed*—a being whom one may call “thou”’ (p. 20).

Throughout his writings, Ibn Arabi appears to adopt the Islamic concept of God in particular. He discusses God as introduced in the Islamic scriptures as a Hearer and a Seer who wills, acts, punishes and forgives, among other attributes. In defence of the Islamic concept, and in accordance with the scriptures, Ibn Arabi says:

No doubt that you agree with me that one must believe in all of the attributes of the Lord, High is He, stated in the authentic sayings of the prophet, God’s prayer, and peace be upon him, such as [divine] happiness [*farah*], [divine] laughter [*dhahik*], [divine] amazement [*ta’jjub*], [divine] joy [*tabshbush*], [divine] wrath and similar others (2011, Vol. 1, p. 303).

However, on other occasions, Ibn Arabi seems to depart significantly from this concept. At these times, he appears to present an impersonal notion of ultimate reality which shares some similarities with many Eastern religions, traditions and philosophies such as Buddhism, Taoism and Advaita Vedanta (O’Grady, 2014, p. 83). According to this concept, God is presented in terms of unlimited, sheer and absolute existence. Ibn Arabi states that ‘there is only an absolute and sheer existence [...] which is the existence of the Real [*al-Haqq*]’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 141), and that ‘[He] who is the absolute existence is surrounding us’ (Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 21). These quotes seem to indicate an impersonal concept of ultimate reality, as a personal God is

perhaps more than an absolute and sheer existence. Indeed, Toshihiko Izutsu (1984), a prominent Ibn Arabi scholar, dedicates a whole book to a comparison of Ibn Arabi's thesis with Taoism, a philosophy which proposes an impersonal concept of ultimate reality. Izutsu stresses that there are essential similarities between the metaphysics of Ibn Arabi's doctrine and Taoism. He claims that 'there can be no denying that Lao-tzu's metaphysics of Tao presents in its abysmal depth of thought a number of striking similarities to Ibn Arabi's conception of Being' (Izutsu, 1984, p. 2). He labels Ibn Arabi's ultimate reality, as we saw in the previous chapter, 'the Absolute in its absoluteness' and considers it a concept shared by Ibn Arabi's doctrine and Taoism (Ibid., p. 1). He introduces the Absolute in its absoluteness as unreachable, unknown and unknowable, and claims that it transcends all conditions, limitations and relations. It is 'the most indeterminate of all indeterminates' (Ibid, pp. 23, 25). He states:

As the epithet 'absolute' indicates, it should not be taken in the sense of a limited and determined existent or existence; it means something beyond all existents that exists in a limited way [...] something lying at the very source of all such existents existentiating them. It is Existence as the ultimate ground of everything (Ibid, p. 25).

Izutsu, thus, espouses that Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality is indeed an impersonal concept of ultimate reality. A. E. Affifi also seems to maintain that Ibn Arabi defends an impersonal concept of ultimate reality. He states: 'It is fundamental to bear in mind that there is a deity of some sort in it [Ibn Arabi's doctrine,] and whatever else this deity may be, it is not the ethical and personal God of religion—no

pantheistic God ever is' (1964, p. 58) This is obviously in stark contrast to Ibn Arabi's discussions of the concept of the personal God as introduced above.

### **4.3 Ibn Arabi's Apparently Inconsistent Views on the Reality of the World**

In addition to his inconsistent views on the concept of God, Ibn Arabi presents apparently incompatible views concerning the reality of the world. In some of his texts, Ibn Arabi affirms that the world exists and he even essentially connects its existence to his concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). He states: '[Otherwise], the world would not have existed, [but] it does [exist], [which means that] the position [of *godness*] has existed [first]' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 94).

On other occasions, however, Ibn Arabi denies the reality of the world and appears to subscribe to some form of acosmism. He dismisses everything other than ultimate reality as non-existent. He emphasises that 'the Real (*al-haqq*) is existence, and creation is nothing' (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 44), and proclaims that '[nothing exists] but Allah, nothing else!' (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 426). In fact, at times he goes as far as to insinuate that the existence of anything other than God is impossible. He writes: 'Oh my God, how could anything other than You know You? [Nay,] is there anything other than You? No, No and No. O my God, I cannot see myself but You. [As] how can I see [...] the impossible?' (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 246).

On other occasions, he introduces a third view in which Ibn Arabi advocates that the world is, in fact, a mixture of existence and non-existence. He claims that 'the world is [...] between existence and non-existence. It is neither a pure existence, nor a mere non-existence' (Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 222). This view appears to be at odds with both

other perspectives. As with his introduction of the concept of God, then, it appears as if Ibn Arabi also is inconsistent in relation to the reality of the world.

#### **4.4 Ibn Arabi's Apparently Inconsistent Views on the Relationship between God and the World**

As he introduces apparently inconsistent views with regard to the concept of God and the reality of the world, one would expect that Ibn Arabi would also have different views concerning the relationship between God and the world.

Ibn Arabi seems to advocate a non-dual reality at times. He espouses that existence is necessarily one and that it is identical to ultimate reality. He explicitly states that 'the essence of existence is one' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 221), going on to argue that 'it is impossible to have two existences' (Ibid., p. 218). These quotes seem to suggest that there cannot be two distinct entities, i.e., God and the world. In fact, he explicitly proclaims that: 'everything you see, that is Allah' (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 235). On another occasion, he says: '[God] is the Seer and the seen [in the world]. The world is his picture, and He is the soul of the world. He is [indeed] the entire Cosmos' (Ibn Arabi, 2009, p. 258). Further, he emphasises that the existence of all that exists is ultimately the existence of the Real [*al-haqq*] Himself (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 93). Indeed, it is interesting to note that some Eastern religious texts defending a non-dualistic relationship between ultimate reality and the world resemble some of Ibn Arabi's key views and ideas. For instance, Shankara (780–820), the Indian philosopher who developed the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, introduces a number of ideas and views concerning ultimate reality that are strikingly similar to those one would encounter when reading Ibn Arabi. In his introduction to Brahman, Shankara states,

Brahman is the reality — the one existence, absolutely independent of human thought or idea. Because of the ignorance of our human minds, the universe seems to be composed of diverse forms. It is Brahman alone. A jar made of clay is not other than clay. It is clay essentially; the form of the jar has no independent existence. What, then, is the jar? Merely an invented name! The form of the jar can never be perceived apart from the clay. What then is the jar? An appearance! The reality is the clay itself [...] ‘The universe is Brahman’ — so says the great seer of the Atharva Veda. The universe, therefore, is nothing but Brahman. It is superimposed upon Him. It has no separate existence, apart from its ground [...] Brahman is supreme. He is the reality—the one without a second [...] He transcends the appearance of the manifold (2007, pp. 171–72).

Throughout his writings, Ibn Arabi also introduces ultimate reality as the metaphysical ground of reality, identical to existence and transcending all the multiplicity and appearances of the world.

On the other hand, however, Ibn Arabi sometimes appears to abandon this non-dualistic thesis. In these cases, he defends a theistic relationship between God and the world. He adopts a position in support of a dual reality where God is on the one side and the world is on the other. He makes a clear distinction between the two; the latter he defines as ‘everything other than Allah’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, p. 99). He confirms: ‘Know, O the devoted mystic, that existence is divided between the worshipper and the worshipped [...] [The worshipper] is the world [...] And the worshipped is [...] Allah; there is nothing else in existence’ (Ibid., pp. 113–14). In this thesis, he also introduces God as the Creator and the Sustainer of the world,

following the Islamic scriptures (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 19). On one occasion, he explains the relationship between God and the world using the metaphor of the shadow, which insinuates a relationship between a cause and that which is caused. He states: ‘[The relationship of] [...] the world, to the Real [*al-haqq*] is like [the relationship of the person’s] shadow to [that] person. [Hence, the world] is the shadow of Allah’ (Ibn Arabi, 2009, p. 228).

Regarding the relationship between God and human beings in particular, Ibn Arabi engages in another apparent inconsistency. Sometimes he embraces the doctrine of the mystical union with God (*ittihad*). He states: ‘This is the level of [mystical] union [with God] [*ittihad*] that no one can avoid; especially, the scholars of Allah [i.e., mystics] who know the situation as it is’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 6, p. 393). Here, he attributes the doctrine of the mystical union with God (*ittihad*) to the mystics, among whom he always places himself. Furthermore, in one of his mystical poems, Ibn Arabi says: ‘you are a worshipper, and also, you are a Lord, and you are a Lord, and also, you are a worshipper’ (2009, p. 202). At one time he bewilderedly states: ‘if I say: I am but a god and He is me, [then] He will be unknown. Because I am ignorant of who I am, and He is me; so, what [should] we do?’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 526).

On other times, however, he firmly rejects any kind of alleged union between God and human beings. He states that ‘the distinction between Allah and creation has occurred from eternity’ (Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 221) and that ‘just as the Lord cannot be a worshipper, the worshipper [as well] cannot be a Lord’ (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 553). He even condemns the proponents of mystical union with God (*ittihad*) on one occasion, calling them ‘the people of deviation’ (*ahl al-ilhad*) (Ibid., Vol. 8, p. 129). These

statements are clearly in stark contrast with his other statements mentioned above that embrace mystical union with God.

The above discussion should, therefore, establish that Ibn Arabi appears to present incompatible views concerning the concept of God, the reality of the world, and the relationship between God and the world. Some of Ibn Arabi's key scholars have noted his apparently inconsistent views and each seems to have a different attitude towards dealing with that inconsistency. Affifi, for instance, addresses the problem by maintaining that Ibn Arabi's doctrine cannot be seen as coherent unless one overlooks Ibn Arabi's constant attempt to reconcile his doctrine with Islam. He proposes hence that one should dismiss Ibn Arabi's theistic concept of God and his views that confirm the reality of the world. He considers Ibn Arabi's non-dualistic and acosmistic views on reality and his impersonal concept of God to be Ibn Arabi's real doctrine. He states: '[Ibn Arabi] also may be said to be a consistent thinker, provided we do not attach too much importance to his *verbal* paradoxes and the way he often tries to reconcile Islamic dogma with philosophical principles' (Affifi, 1964, p. xi).

Izutsu also at times seems puzzled by Ibn Arabi's apparently inconsistent views and seems to lean towards endorsing and prioritising Ibn Arabi's non-dualistic views and concepts. In commenting on one of Ibn Arabi's texts in which Ibn Arabi appears to defend a theistic concept of God, Izutsu states:

It is remarkable that Ibn 'Arabi, in the concluding sentence of the passage just quoted, explicitly identified the absolute Being with Allah, the Living, Omniscient, Omnipotent God of the Qoran [*sic.*]. It indicates that he has moved from the ontological level of discourse with which he began to the religious level of discourse peculiar to the living faith of the believer. As we

have remarked before, the Reality in its absoluteness is, in Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysical-ontological system, an absolutely unknowable Mystery that lies far beyond the reach of human cognition (1983, p. 27).

Apparently, Izutsu presumes that Ibn Arabi’s non-dualistic concept of God is the one that truly represents his thesis; to the extent that he finds it curious that Ibn Arabi in this instance interchanges the theistic concept of God with the non-dualistic concept of ultimate reality.

Rom Landau (1959) furthermore notes the same issue in Ibn Arabi’s writings but claims that Ibn Arabi succeeds in accepting ‘the uncompromising monotheism of the Quran’ and reconciles it with his non-dualism (p. 23). These differing positions among Ibn Arabi’s key scholars on the issue makes it clear that his doctrine, and his conception of ultimate reality in particular, are in dire need of serious philosophical analysis and clarification. It is important to affirm, though, that despite these apparently inconsistent views, I do not maintain that Ibn Arabi’s conception of ultimate reality is philosophically incoherent. In fact, following the majority of Ibn Arabi’s contemporary scholars, I postulate that a potentially original and coherent thesis underlies his perplexing style.<sup>21</sup> In this chapter, I merely sought to reveal the apparent incompatibility within Ibn Arabi’s presentation of ultimate reality as clearly as possible. I have done this in order to facilitate the further philosophical examination in following chapters.

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<sup>21</sup> This is a general judgment. There are some potential inconsistencies within the detail of his thesis, some of which will be examined in chapter six



## Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined a number of Ibn Arabi's key views concerning the conception of ultimate reality. I aimed to establish that in his presentation, Ibn Arabi occasionally appears inconsistent. Firstly, I outlined some of his apparently incompatible views concerning the concept of God, in which he seems to defend simultaneously a theistic personal concept of God and an impersonal concept of ultimate reality. At times, he seems to portray the personal God of the Abrahamic religion; at others he presents ultimate reality in terms of absolute and sheer existence. Secondly, I examined Ibn Arabi's inconsistent views concerning the reality of the world. He sometimes appears to affirm the reality of the world, at other times the non-existence of the world, and yet at others that the world incorporates both existence and non-existence. Thirdly, I introduced Ibn Arabi's apparent inconsistency in his views concerning the relationship between God and the world. Sometimes he appears to defend a theistic doctrine in which God is considered to be the absolute Creator and Sustainer of the world. At other times, he represents God, not as the Creator *per se*, but as the ultimate metaphysical ground from which the world cannot be distinguished. Finally, I addressed the ways some of Ibn Arabi's key scholars adopt to deal with this problem including Affifi, Izutsu and Landau.

The following chapters will constitute my own interpretation of Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality. I seek to present his apparently inconsistent views and concepts on the matter in a unified and philosophically coherent manner. I uphold that Ibn Arabi's thesis is best represented in terms of three main concepts: ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) and ultimate reality as God (*ilah*).

The following chapter marks the beginning of my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), which is known as Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). In the following chapter, I critically examine two of the prominent interpretations of Ibn Arabi's thesis of *wahdat al-wujud*, one developed by Ibn Taymiyyah and the other by Affifi. Ibn Taymiyyah claims that Ibn Arabi advocates pantheism in his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). According to Affifi on the other hand Ibn Arabi's thesis is best interpreted in terms of acosmism. I argue however that both interpretations are unsuccessful as they are exegetically inaccurate.

# Chapter 5: Ibn Arabi's Concept of Ultimate Reality as Existence (*wujud*) (The Thesis of *wahdat al-wujud*) I: Two Interpretations

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## 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I addressed some of the apparent inconsistencies in Ibn Arabi's presentation of his conception of ultimate reality. I outlined a number of incompatible views concerning the concept of God, the reality of the world and the relationship between God and the world. I also introduced some approaches employed by Ibn Arabi's scholars to deal with this problem.

The focus of the current and following chapters is primarily based upon my own interpretation of Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality in which I analyse and develop his various views and concepts on the matter, and, subsequently, weave them into a unified thesis.

In my interpretation, I propose that Ibn Arabi's whole thesis of ultimate reality is best presented across the following three main concepts: (i) the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*); (ii) the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*); and (iii) the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). I maintain that the three concepts do not represent different ultimate realities, nor do they represent different perspectives of the same ultimate reality. In fact, these concepts should be seen to represent different encompassments or scopes of the same ultimate reality. They might be comparable to the pages of a building's blueprint; if one goes through any typical set of blueprints, one will notice that some of the pages contain plans representing the same floor or room, yet each page has a unique encompassment or

scope of the space. One page, for instance, represents the space in terms of the frames plan, while another may represent the same area in terms of the electrical layout. A third may represent it in terms of its foundations. If one examines the three pages, it is clear that they represent the same space, though in different terms. A sum understanding of all pages entails a correct and complete architectural understanding of the space.

This analogy can be applied to the above three notions of ultimate reality as each one represents Ibn Arabi's ultimate reality in its own unique terms. Hence, ultimate reality is represented in terms of existence (*wujud*), in terms of the Divine Self (*dhat*), and in terms of God (*ilah*). Like the pages of a blueprint, they overlap at times but each tells us something different from the other two. It is also true that some of them might be more comprehensive than others or concern different people to different extents, just as the page that represents the floor in terms of its electricity layout concerns an electrician more than a plumber. In order to coherently grasp Ibn Arabi's thesis on ultimate reality, one needs to fully comprehend all three concepts and how they interact to form a united outlook. Failing to do so may lead one to consider Ibn Arabi's thesis contradictory and problematic, as the previous chapter aimed to show.

In my interpretation, I examine these three main concepts and the relationships between them in order to develop a philosophically consistent, and exegetically accurate, representation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality. In this and the following two chapters, the focus is on the first concept, that of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). This may be considered the most fundamental concept in Ibn Arabi's metaphysical system, both in general and in terms of his thesis of ultimate reality. This concept, known as Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat*

*al-wujud*), advocates that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality.<sup>22</sup> Ibn Arabi's claims concerning the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) have always been open to interpretation. In this chapter, hence, I critically examine two of its prominent interpretations. The first was initially developed by Ibn Taymiyyah and interprets Ibn Arabi's thesis in terms of pantheism, in which he critically claims that Ibn Arabi identifies God with the actual world. The second was famously developed by A. E. Affifi who interprets it as a form of acosmism. He claims that in his thesis, Ibn Arabi advances that the only existent is God, and that the world should be dismissed as non-existent. I argue, however, that both interpretations are unsuccessful as they are exegetically inaccurate.

## **5.2 Two Interpretations of Ibn Arabi's Thesis of the Oneness of Existence (*wahdat al-wujud*)**

### **5.2.1. Ibn Taymiyyah's Pantheistic Interpretation**

In his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), Ibn Arabi famously makes two main claims: (i) existence is one; and (ii) it is identical with ultimate reality. He proclaims that 'it is impossible to have two existences' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 218), and that 'the essence of existence is one' (Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 221). In addition, he states that 'the Real (*al-haqq*) is existence' (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 44). He sometimes interchanges the term 'existence' with typical terms usually used to indicate God, such as Allah and the Real (*al-haqq*). He comments on a Quranic verse that says, 'O those who believe' (33: 41), claiming that the verse talks about those who believe in existence (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 238). A typical understanding of the verse is

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<sup>22</sup> In this and the following chapters, I will be using the phrases: 'the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*)' and 'the thesis of oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*)' interchangeably.

that it talks about those who believe in *Allah*, which Ibn Arabi replaces with ‘existence’.

Ibn Arabi’s thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) has long been considered the cornerstone of his entire doctrine. Peter Coates (2002) states that ‘[w]ithout doubt, the key to understanding the entire corpus of Ibn Arabi lies in the central idea of *wahdat al-wujud*—the Oneness of Being. For Ibn Arabi, *wahdat al-wujud* (also translated as the Unity or Oneness of Existence) is an inescapable ontological fact’ (p. 3). Further, William C. Chittick (1994) asserts that ‘Ibn al-Arabi is most often characterised in Islamic texts as the originator of the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, the “Oneness of Being” or “Unity of Existence”’ (p. 15). Although Chittick stresses that Ibn Arabi never uses the term *wahdat al-wujud* in his writings, he insists that Islamic scholars were correct in ascribing the thesis to him (Ibid., p. 16).

Despite being his most important and also perhaps most controversial thesis, Ibn Arabi never provides a systematic and clear presentation of his views concerning the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). As such, the thesis has been rendered open to interpretation.

According to Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Arabi’s thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) is best interpreted as a form of pantheism. In criticising Ibn Arabi’s doctrine, Ibn Taymiyyah writes:

[Ibn Arabi and some other Sufis say] existence is one; [and that], the existence of the creation is the existence of the Creator. They do not confirm [that there are] two existents, one created the other. Nay, they say the Creator is the creation and the creation is the Creator’ (1995, Vol. 2, p. 364).

Throughout history, this has been arguably the most influential interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), even though there is little textual evidence to support it. One example of a statement that might be considered pantheistic, though, is Ibn Arabi's claim that: 'everything you see, that is Allah' (2011, Vol. 3, p. 235). On another occasion, also, Ibn Arabi asserts: '[God] is the Seer and the seen [in the world]. The world is his picture, and He is the soul of the world. He is the entire Cosmos' (Ibn Arabi, 2009, p. 258).

However, these statements could also be interpreted in ways other than pantheism. For instance, one could consider these to be evidence of panentheism instead. At best, the above statements merely affirm that the world is not external to God's existence, a belief shared by several metaphysical doctrines.

More importantly, there are plenty of instances of exegetical evidence that negate Ibn Taymiyyah's pantheistic interpretation, as we have seen in the previous chapter. First, Ibn Arabi frequently posits that existence is actually divided between God and the world. He affirms: '[E]xistence is divided between the worshipper and the worshipped [...] [The worshipper] is the world [...] And the worshipped is [...] Allah' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, pp. 113–14). Contrary to Ibn Taymiyyah's interpretation, Ibn Arabi here clearly distinguishes God from the world. There is a contrast between the Lord on the one hand, and the worshipper (i.e., the world) on the other. Second, Ibn Arabi asserts repeatedly that God is the cause and the Creator of the world (see for example, *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 19). This, of course, postulates a clear distinction between God and the world and is a typically theistic view of the relationship that he occasionally asserts in his writings. Accordingly, and contrary to the claims of Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Arabi explicitly maintains that the Creator is *not* the creation. Third, Ibn Arabi repeatedly defines the world [i.e., creation] as everything

*other than* Allah (see for example, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 174; Vol. 5, p. 99). Hence, the world, according to Ibn Arabi, is by definition *not* God. This fundamentally contradicts pantheism. Thus, Ibn Taymiyyah’s pantheistic interpretation of Ibn Arabi fails to provide any strong and conclusive textual evidence, while an overwhelming number of Ibn Arabi’s statements explicitly negate it. Therefore, the pantheistic interpretation of Ibn Arabi’s thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) is untenable.

It might be worth mentioning that a number of key modern scholars have employed the term ‘pantheism’ to label, somewhat mistakenly, their non-pantheistic interpretations of Ibn Arabi. For instance, A. E. Affifi is well-known for his firm assertion that Ibn Arabi’s ontology is best interpreted in terms of pantheism. He emphasises that ‘[Ibn Arabi] has a definite philosophical doctrine of pantheism, the bearing of which is shown in every part of his system’ (1964, p. xi). He constructs his understanding of Ibn Arabi on this claim and proclaims that ‘Ibnul ‘Arabi’s [i.e., Ibn Arabi’s] theory of reality is a pantheistic one. It is summed up in his own few words “glory be to God who created things, being Himself their essences (*a’yanuha*)”’ (Ibid., p. 54). However, the version of pantheism that Affifi ascribes to Ibn Arabi is not pantheism in its typical sense. Pantheism typically states that God and the world are identical; everything that exists constitutes a divine unity, much like Ibn Taymiyyah’s interpretation of Ibn Arabi. This, however, is not what Affifi meant by pantheism, as I will explain below. However, his loose employment of the term pantheism seems to have unintentionally contributed to the spread of Ibn Taymiyyah’s interpretation.



### 5.2.2. Affifi and Chittick's Acosmistic Interpretation

The second key interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality (*wujud*) is best viewed as a form of acosmism. Acosmism refers to the doctrine that treats the world as non-existent, the only existent being God. Affifi, the key advocate of this interpretation, claims that Ibn Arabi professes that there is only one reality, which is the reality of God. He explains: 'God is the unity behind the multiplicity and the Reality behind the appearance' (Affifi, 1964, p. 21). Everything else, on the other hand, is unreal (Ibid., pp. 10, 21, 54, 58). He elaborates:

There is a form of pantheism which, starting from the assumption that God is an absolute, infinite and eternal being, who is the source and ultimate ground of all that is, was, and will be, gradually assumes a form of acosmism according to which the Phenomenal World is but a passing shadow of the Reality which lies behind it. Everything that is finite and temporal is illusory and unreal (Ibid., p.54).

William C. Chittick also frequently appears to defend a similar acosmistic interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis. He states that '[t]o say that the cosmos is "everything other than God" [which is Ibn Arabi's definition] is to say that it is everything other than *wujud* [i.e., existence]' (Chittick, 1998, p. 12). In addition, in introducing Ibn Arabi's doctrine of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) in particular, he states:

Ibn al-Arabi is known as the founder of the school of the Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*). Though he does not employ the term, the idea permeates

his works. Simply stated, there is only one Being, and all existence is nothing but the manifestation or outward radiance of that One Being. Hence ‘everything other than the One Being’—that is, the whole cosmos in all its spatial and temporal extension—is nonexistent in itself, though it may be considered to exist through Being (1989, p. 79).

One should be careful, however, when dealing with Chittick’s interpretation of Ibn Arabi’s thesis; as mentioned in Chapter Three, he appears sometimes to negate his own position here. However, one could safely confirm that, at least according to this explicit statement, Chittick forms an acosmistic interpretation of Ibn Arabi’s thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*).

The acosmistic interpretation is, indeed, better equipped to represent Ibn Arabi’s own thesis than Ibn Tamiyyah’s pantheistic interpretation, and is arguably the most accepted among Ibn Arabi scholars today. Ibn Arabi explicitly dismisses the world as non-existent a number of times and declares that the only existent is God. He repeatedly states that ‘existence [is nothing] but the essence of the Real (*a’yn al-Haqq*)’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 218) and that ‘there is nothing in existence but Allah’ (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 410).<sup>23</sup> On another occasion, he states: ‘there is nothing but the existence of Allah,’ and hence, ‘every existent other than Allah is a relation not an entity’ (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 461).

However, Ibn Arabi provides other statements which seem to negate such assertions. As previously mentioned when discussing Ibn Taymiyyah’s pantheistic interpretation, Ibn Arabi frequently appears to support a duality within reality and makes claims that the world exists in addition to the existence of God. Unfortunately,

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<sup>23</sup> Frequently, Ibn Arabi interchanges the two terms, Allah and the Real (*al-haqq*) in indicating God.

the acosmistic interpretation does not account for these statements. It seems, thus, that it merely endorses some textual evidence and arbitrarily dismisses others. Therefore, the acosmistic interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) is also unsuccessful.

The main problem with these two interpretations—the pantheistic and the acosmistic—is that they never attempt to comprehensively encompass all of Ibn Arabi's various statements on the matter. They attempt, instead, to force, intentionally or unintentionally, Ibn Arabi's very detailed thesis into a somewhat limited and particular concept. I maintain that Ibn Arabi's doctrine tends to revolt against many pre-established labels and must be approached in a way that appreciates its complexity and originality. In his criticism of pantheistic interpretations of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), Chittick (1989) objects:

Stated in these terms, the 'Oneness of Being' may appear to some people as another brand of 'pantheism'. But in fact, this simplified expression of what the Shaykh [i.e., Ibn Arabi] is talking about cannot begin to do him justice [...] When the Shykh himself explains what he means by the statement that Being is one, he provides one of the most sophisticated and nuanced expressions of the 'profession of God's Unity' (*tawhid*) to be found in Islamic thought (p. 79).

A similar thing could be said of the acosmistic interpretations of Affifi and Chittick. Their reading also fails to appreciate the complexity of Ibn Arabi's thesis and, accordingly, seems to fall into the same mistakes present in the pantheistic interpretation. Both the pantheistic and the acosmistic interpretations of Ibn Arabi's

concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) are I maintain exegetically inaccurate, and, thus, unsuccessful. I develop in the next chapter an alternative interpretation to Ibn Arabi's concept that aims to be exegetically more accurate and philosophically more rigorous.

## Conclusion

This chapter has marked the beginning of my examination of the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). This and two other concepts, the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) and the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*), constitute Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality, according to my interpretation. In this chapter, I critically examined two of the key interpretations of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), those developed by Ibn Taymiyyah and Affifi. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Arabi's thesis represents a form of pantheism. Affifi's interpretation, on the other hand, claims that Ibn Arabi's thesis is best interpreted in terms of acosmism. I argued however that both interpretations are unsuccessful as they are exegetically inaccurate; they fail to include all of Ibn Arabi's statements on the subject.

In the following chapter, I introduce my own interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). I examine the three components that constitute Ibn Arabi's thesis: the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), the metaphysical nature of the world, and the relationship between ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and the world.

# Chapter 6: Ibn Arabi's Concept of Ultimate Reality as Existence (*wujud*) (The Thesis of *wahdat al-wujud*) II: My Interpretation

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## 6.1 Introduction

I began the previous chapter by explaining that Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality consists of three main concepts: ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*); ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*); and ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). Chapters Five, Six and Seven focus on the first concept: ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). This is known as Ibn Arabi's thesis of 'the oneness of existence' (*wahdat al-wujud*), in which he advances that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality.

In the previous chapter, I examined two key interpretations of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), developed by Ibn Taymiyyah and A. E. Affifi. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, in claiming that existence is one and identical to ultimate reality, Ibn Arabi upholds a form of typical pantheism. However, Affifi asserts that Ibn Arabi's thesis is best interpreted in terms of acosmism. I argued that both interpretations are untenable. They contradict explicit statements by Ibn Arabi in which he asserts that the world exists and that it is by definition not God.

In this chapter, I develop my own interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) that aims to be both exegetically comprehensive and accurate, and philosophically coherent. In my interpretation, I seek to reconcile Ibn Arabi's insistence on the reality of the world with his claims that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality.

In this chapter, I investigate and develop three issues, which I take as constitutive of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*): the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*); the metaphysical nature of the world; and, finally, the relationship between the two, ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and the world (presuming Ibn Arabi's claims of the oneness of existence and the reality of the world).

Section 6.2 introduces the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) in which I examine two of Ibn Arabi's metaphysical views concerning existence. The first is his stance concerning the necessity of existence and the impossibility of nothingness, and the second is his objection to treating existence as a property of the object. I argue that both views are uncontroversial and supported by compelling arguments. I also explain that the two views clarify some issues concerning the nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). The necessity of existence provides some grounds for the identification between ultimate reality and existence. In addition, I claim that by rejecting existence as something additional to the object, one could infer that Ibn Arabi may think of ultimate reality as an individual *existent* which manifests existence in its unlimitedness. This is in opposition to scholars who suggest that Ibn Arabi proposes ultimate reality as a sea of being/existence.

Section 6.3 introduces the second component, the metaphysical nature of the world, in which I explain that Ibn Arabi in his thesis does not develop novel views concerning the concept of God as it is often assumed, but instead, for the most part, provides novel views concerning the metaphysical nature of the world.

When examining Ibn Arabi's cosmology, one encounters three main concepts: *al-mumkinat*; *al-a'lam*; and *al-a'yan al-thabitah*. While Ibn Arabi scholars are generally

in agreement that *al-mumkinat* refers to possible entities and *al-a'lam* to the actual realm, there seems to be a lack of clarity with regard to the concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah*. I propose that *al-a'yan al-thabitah* is best understood as indicating *merely* possible entities that are not actual. In addition, according to my interpretation, Ibn Arabi seems to suggest that there is no fundamental metaphysical difference between what is actual (*al-a'lam*) and what is *merely* possible (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*). He seems to defend a theory of relative actuality. I argue that actualisation in Ibn Arabi's view is best understood as a matter of perceiving and perceivability. The amount of possible entities that an individual perceives constitutes his actual realm, while the rest of the possible entities constitute the realm of *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) for him.

Section 6.4 introduces the third component of Ibn Arabi's thesis in which I explain that in defending a theory of relative actuality, Ibn Arabi paves the way for maintaining his claims about the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) and the reality of the world. I argue, then, that by identifying the totality of possible entities with God's knowledge of the world, Ibn Arabi would succeed in maintaining all of his claims.

Finally, section 6.5 explains how my interpretation helps in maintaining a number of Ibn Arabi's apparently incompatible claims about ultimate reality and the world, some of which were introduced in Chapter Three.

## 6.2 The Metaphysical Nature of Ultimate Reality as Existence (*wujud*)

### 6.2.1. The Impossibility of Nothingness and the Necessity of Existence

The first component of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), according to my interpretation, concerns the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). Ibn Arabi introduces two views which I hold to be crucial to understanding his position on the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*): (i) He asserts that existence is necessary and that nothingness is impossible; and (ii) that existence is not a property of the object.

Ibn Arabi repeatedly affirms that existence is necessary and that nothingness is impossible; there can never have been nothingness and we cannot fall into nothingness. Rejecting the possibility of nothingness is a foundation of Ibn Arabi's metaphysics in general and his conception of ultimate reality in particular. His view is not particularly controversial among philosophers throughout history; such a position was stated as early as Parmenides (500 BC) and continues into the thought of key philosophers today (e.g., David Lewis, (1983; 1986) and D. M. Armstrong (1989)). Ibn Arabi, however, never develops an argument for his stance, perhaps because he feels that his position is too obvious to need argumentation. In fact, a number of philosophers tend to dismiss the concept of nothingness as meaningless or philosophically incoherent. Parmenides seeks to demonstrate that nothingness is impossible because the concept itself is meaningless or incoherent. Bertrand Russell expounds Parmenides' argument against nothingness, stating: 'You say there *is* the void; therefore; the void is not nothing; therefore it is not the void' (2005, p. 69). In developing a similar approach to the problem, P. L. Heath (1967) explains the logicians' way of rejecting nothingness:



The logicians, of course, will have nothing of all this. Nothing, they say, is not a thing, nor is it the name of anything, being merely a short way of saying of anything that it is not something else. 'Nothing' means 'not-anything'; appearances to the contrary are due merely to the error of supposing that a grammatical subject must necessarily be a name. (Vol. 5, p. 524)

Armstrong's rejection of nothingness could also be considered part of this approach:

I believe that the idea that there could have been nothing at all is really a superficial idea. It is attractive at a relatively shallow level of reflection. But when we think more deeply about the nature of possibility, then, it seems, it has to be given up (1989, p. 25).

However, I maintain that the apparent incoherence and meaninglessness associated with the concept of nothingness, which the above approach clearly manifests, does not stem necessarily from the concept itself but, in fact, arises because existence is necessary and comprises the only ultimate metaphysical state of affairs. Existence underlies and governs our language, metaphysics and even modal logic to the extent that it does not permit the representation of any non-existential state of affairs (nothingness *par excellence*). This is why we fail to utilise any modality to establish something non-existential, an idea that Parmenides utilises in his argument to dismiss the concept of nothingness. The same applies to language; it cannot refer to nothingness because referentiality in its essence presumes existence. Needless to say, it likely makes little difference which position one takes with regard to the ontology

of meaning or which modal theory one endorses. All metaphysical or linguistic propositions, at some level, would have to treat nothingness as *something* in order to be able to deal with it. It is, hence, useless to attempt to utilise logic, metaphysics or language, all of which presume existence, to determine the possibility or even the meaning of nothingness. The problem is introduced neatly in Leucippus' (370 BC) definition of the void, or 'nothingness', as presented by Russell: 'the void is a not-being, and no part of what it is *is* not being' (1967, p. 68). Or as Ibn Arabi puts it: 'it is impossible that we fall into nothingness because Allah, who is the absolute existence, surrounds us' (2011, Vol. 7, p. 21). Our metaphysics, language and logic can only function through, and occur as part of, existence.

One might ask whether this should be considered some kind of metaphysical incapability on our part rather than a problem with nothingness; one may wish to argue that nothingness may be possible but we fail to grasp or modalise this possibility. Alternatively, in order to avoid the problem of coherence and meaningfulness surrounding the term 'nothingness', one might ask whether there could be other options besides existence in which the metaphysical conditions are completely different.

Even if we ignore the fact that thinking or asking about *other options* is unavoidably an existential question in itself, since we are asking whether there *exists* something other than existence, the problem nevertheless remains. At best, answering such a question is epistemically impossible and is consequently of very little practical value. Considering that our language and logic are essentially tied to existence, we are incapable of knowing anything beyond this metaphysical framework. This question is on a par with asking whether there are other metaphysical options in which logical

rules are inapplicable; for example, the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in his criticism of Alexius Meinong's doctrine, which endorses non-existent objects, Russell states that 'the chief objection [to Meinong's doctrine] is that such objects [i.e., non-existent objects], admittedly, are apt to infringe the law of contradiction' (1905, p. 283).

This might explain why contemporary metaphysicians tend to alter (and limit) the scope of 'nothingness' to include only the absence of concrete objects, which is known among philosophers today as 'metaphysical nothingness' or 'metaphysical nihilism'. Defending the scope of his well-known subtraction argument for the possibility of metaphysical nothingness, Thomas Baldwin states:

It may be objected that, at least as far as the subtraction argument goes, the domain of *w<sub>nil</sub>* [i.e., the nothingness domain] still includes plenty of abstract objects, such as the natural numbers, so that its existence cannot properly be regarded as the possibility of there being nothing at all. This must indeed be conceded; but whatever view one takes about the existence or not of such objects as the natural numbers, the focus of most [...] is on the possibility of there being no 'concrete' objects, in a sense still to be specified. So it is, I think, legitimate to concentrate primarily on this case while remaining, so far as possible, detached from presumptions concerning the existence or not of abstract objects (1996, pp. 232–233).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For the current debate on impossible worlds and non-classical logic, see for example: J. Hintikka (1978); D. Lewis (1986); J.C. Beall and Bas C. van Fraassen (2003); G. Priest (2008); B. Krakauer (2013); D. Nolan (2013); B. Brogaard and J. Salerno (2013); J. Bjerring (2014) and F. Berto (2014).

<sup>25</sup> For further discussions on metaphysical nihilism, see: D. Lewis and S. Lewis (1983); P. Van Inwagen and E. J. Lowe (1996); T. Baldwin (1996); G. Rodriguez-

This kind of nothingness, I maintain, should be dismissed as irrelevant to my discussion of Ibn Arabi's views on nothingness. One can assume that metaphysical nihilism is not what Ibn Arabi and other medieval philosophers likely meant when they referred to nothingness. As they did not limit their concept of nothingness in any way, we should also refrain from doing so. Baldwin and E. J. Lowe (both 1996) seem to disagree; Baldwin maintains that most people are speaking of the absence of only concrete objects when they talk of nothingness (1996, p. 233). In addition, in defence of a similar point, Lowe states:

I do not think that the question that people have actually intended to ask when they ask why anything at all should exist could be answered by pointing out [...] that the number 510 would exist no matter what. If the notion of an abstract object makes sense at all, it seems evident that if everything were an abstract object, if the only objects were abstract objects, there is an obvious and perfectly good sense in which there would be nothing at all (1996, pp. 95–96).

I do not find Baldwin and Lowe's position compelling. Creating a stark division between what is concrete and what is abstract is a modern approach, as many ancient and medieval philosophers may not have noted this essential difference between objects that exist. As such, it is illegitimate to assume that they were actually thinking of the absence of concrete objects when they used the term 'nothingness'. Likewise, even if one agrees with Lowe that they might not have thought of the absence of the

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Pereyra (1997) E. J. Lowe; D. Eford and T. Stoneham (2005, 2009); and G. Coggins (2010).

number 510 *per se* when they thought of nothingness, we cannot conclude from this that they only had concrete objects in mind. It is fair to assume that they were thinking about the absence of *everything* without thinking exactly of a particular kind of object. In fact, it is not impossible that they were knowingly thinking of the absence of some typical abstract objects familiar to them; for instance, Plato's ideas. In addition, it is hardly useful to claim that they were thinking of the absence of only concrete objects when there is still disagreement today as to what it means to say that something is concrete. One philosopher might consider something concrete that which another philosopher considers abstract. Hence, it would be legitimate for a contemporary philosopher to set his own criteria for concreteness and abstractness to determine what he means by nothingness. However, by no means could he say that Ibn Arabi's concept of nothingness follows his own criterion and thereby his own concept of nothingness. I maintain, thus, that Ibn Arabi's concept of nothingness must be kept unconditional; it includes the absence of everything: absolute nothingness.

I now move to examine Ibn Arabi's second view on existence.

### **6.2.2. Existence is not a Property**

A. E. Affifi claims that Ibn Arabi sees existence as a property of the object. He critically explains:

The fundamental error the Ishraqis and Ibnul 'Arabi [i.e. Ibn Arabi] seem to have made is in interpreting the existential proposition '*S* exists' as equivalent to the proposition '*S* has the quality *e*' (*e* = existence), i.e. treating the existential proposition as a predicational one (Affifi, 1964, p. 6).

William C. Chittick also seems to ascribe a version of this view to Ibn Arabi (1989, p. 6). I maintain, however, that Affifi and Chittick are mistaken in attributing this view to Ibn Arabi, as Ibn Arabi unequivocally rejects it. Rather, he states that ‘[t]he illuded [mind] imagines that existence and non-existence are properties of the existent or the non-existent’ (2009b, p. 140). In fact, he explicitly announces that ‘existence is *not* a property of the existent’ (Ibid., p. 142, my italics). Instead, he embraces the idea that existence does not add up to the existent object.

Although Ibn Arabi’s position on the matter seems unequivocal, whether or not existence is a property of the object is a topic of much disagreement among philosophers. Thomas Aquinas and Alexius Meinong, as well as a number of medieval philosophers, support the idea that existence is indeed a property. Aquinas notably offers an argument for treating existence as a property, reasoning that one can have a grasp of something without knowing whether or not it exists. If existence were something essential to the concept, one would be unable to comprehend something without knowing whether or not it exists. Hence, Aquinas concludes that existence is something *additional* to the essence of the object (Aquinas, 2007, Chapter Four).

Other philosophers, including Aristotle, Hume, Kant and many contemporary philosophers affirm, like Ibn Arabi, that existence is *not* a property of the object. In the following paragraphs, I examine three arguments in favour of this view. The first was developed by Ibn Arabi, the second by Immanuel Kant, and the third by Bertrand Russell.

Ibn Arabi argues that an object cannot be described as both having and lacking a property at the same time, and that this is consistent for all properties; for instance, if something is red all over, it cannot be *not* red all over at the same time. Therefore, if existence were a property, the object could not possess and lack existence at the same

time. However, Ibn Arabi argues, this is not the case, as one could be said to possess both existence and non-existence; therefore, he concludes, existence is not a property. Ibn Arabi offers an example to clarify his claim: if Zayd is in the market and not at home, we could say that he *exists* at the market, and does *not exist* at home at the same time. On the other hand, if existence were a property, Zayd would be unable to possess existence and its negation at the same time; i.e., to exist and not to exist (Ibn Arabi, 2009b, p. 141).

One might attempt to object to Ibn Arabi's argument by demonstrating that existence is presented relatively in the example of Zayd. Contrary to Ibn Arabi's claim, an object may in fact possess and lack the same property when considered from a relative point of view. For example, an object is bright if it is placed under a light, while the same object is dim when removed from the light. Ibn Arabi might rebut this objection by arguing that the object *is not* bright and not bright *at the same time*. The condition 'at the same time' has not been met by this counterexample; an object could have a property and its negation but not *at the same time*.

However, Ibn Arabi's argument may still be refuted. To begin with, it is important to explain that properties are typically divided into intrinsic properties and extrinsic properties. Intrinsic properties are essential to the concept of an object. They come from the way the thing is, independently of anything else, such as that a cat is an animal. Extrinsic properties, on the other hand, are not entirely about the object but describe its relation to external reality, such as the property that a cat is owned by me. The perfect duplicate of anything will also be a duplicate of its intrinsic properties but not necessarily of its extrinsic properties if the external surroundings of the duplicate are different from the original object (Lewis, 1983, p. 197).

It may be true that an object may not possess and lack an intrinsic property at the same time; however, this is not the case with regard to extrinsic properties; Mike could be a brother and not a brother at the same time (a brother of Jamal but not a brother of his friend Tom). Also, a person could be tall and short at the same time (he is tall in comparison to his new born son, but short when compared to a giraffe). Hence, contrary to Ibn Arabi's claim, an object may possess and lack the same property *at the same time* if the property is extrinsic and considered from a relative point of view. Returning to the example of Zayd, we can see that he is both an existent (in the market) and a non-existent (in his house). An advocate of the view that existence is a property of the object could say that 'existence' in this example represents an extrinsic property. It is determined by the object's relation to the outside world; hence, like other extrinsic properties an object could have it and lack it at the same time. Therefore, Ibn Arabi's argument against treating existence as a property of the object fails.

Ibn Arabi's failure to provide a compelling argument for his position might not be crucial to him because he does not infer his doctrine primarily from philosophical argumentation. Arguments are only secondary for him, as he relies mainly on other, mostly mystical, sources of knowledge. It is possible that he presents arguments only for the sake of people who depend on rational argumentation to form their opinions. In addition, though his argument is unappealing, he still stands on solid ground; rejecting existence as a property of the object is a powerful position, regardless of Ibn Arabi's argument. There are other compelling arguments that endorse Ibn Arabi's view—namely, rejecting the idea of treating existence as a property of the object.



In his criticism of the ontological argument, Kant objects to treating existence as a property (or a predicate) of the object, as he insists that existence does not add up to the existent. He states:

**Being** is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations in themselves. In the logical use it is merely the copula of a judgement. The proposition **God is omnipotent** contains two concepts that have their objects: God and omnipotence; the little word ‘**is**’, is not a predicate in it, but only that which posits the predicate **in relation** to the subject. Now if I take the subject (God) together with all his predicates (among which omnipotence belongs), and say **God is**, or there is a God, then I add no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit the **object** in relation to my concept. Both must contain exactly the same, and hence when I think this object as given absolutely (through the expression ‘it is’), nothing is thereby added to the concept, which expresses merely its possibility. Thus the actual contains nothing more than the merely possible (A599/ B627).

In explaining his views, Kant goes on to employ the ‘hundred dollars’ example, which claims that a possible hundred dollars does not contain less than an actual hundred dollars. The possible hundred dollars indicates *the concept*, and the actual hundred dollars indicates the object of that concept. Kant affirms that if the object (in this case the actual hundred dollars) contains more than the concept of the hundred dollars, the concept would not be of that object (A599/ B627). However, he warns that:

[I]n my functional condition there is more with a hundred actual dollars than with the mere concept of them (i.e., their possibility). For with actuality the object is not merely included in my concept analytically, but adds synthetically to my concept (A599/ B627).

Interestingly, one could identify parts of Ibn Arabi's writing that allude to a similar idea. He explicitly asserts that the existence of an object does not add anything to that object or its concept. He states: 'Know that existence and non-existence [*al-adam*] are not something additional to the existent [object] or the non-existent [object], but [indeed] the same as the existent [object] or the non-existent [object]' (2009b, p. 140). Kant's argument seems sufficient to establish Ibn Arabi's rejection of treating existence as a property of the object.

The third argument, developed by Bertrand Russell, aims at establishing the problematic consequences of treating existence as a property. Russell argues that if existence were a property of an object, then there would be objects that have the property of existence (i.e. existent objects). However, we would also be committed to asserting that there *are* objects that do not have the property of existence (i.e., non-existent objects), which appears contradictory. In his objection to Meinong, who famously upholds that existence is a property of the object, Russell states:

This theory regards any grammatically correct denoting phrase as standing for an object. Thus 'the present King of France', 'the round square', etc., are supposed to be genuine objects. It is admitted that such objects do not *subsist*, but nevertheless they are supposed to be objects. This is in itself a difficult

view; but the chief objection is that such objects, admittedly, are apt to infringe the law of contradiction. It is contended, for example, that the existent present King of France exists, and also does not exist; that the round square is round, and also not round; etc. But this is intolerable; and if any theory can be found to avoid this result, it is surely to be preferred (1905, pp. 482–83).

Russell's argument is powerful; for one to escape such an argument, one would have to be committed to affirm counter-intuitive propositions, such as that there are non-existent objects.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, I conclude that Ibn Arabi's rejection of treating existence as a property is compelling and to an extent noncontroversial.<sup>27</sup>

### **6.2.3. Ibn Arabi's Views on Existence and the Metaphysical Nature of Ultimate Reality as Existence (*wujud*)**

Establishing these two issues about existence in Ibn Arabi's doctrine is crucial to understanding the first component of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*): the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). Affirming the necessity of existence and the impossibility of nothingness is essential to justify identifying God with existence. If existence is the ultimate and only metaphysical state of affairs there is, then it is justifiably the ultimate reality. Ibn Arabi seems to infer from his claim that existence is necessary and absolute his view that ultimate reality is identical with existence, and not the other way around. Because

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<sup>26</sup> Meinong is an advocate of the view that existence is a property and, consequently, that *there are* non-existent things; see Meinong (1960).

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of considering existence a property of the object see: B. Russell (1904, 1905); T. Aquinas (1965); D. Pears (1967); W. J. Rapaport (1978); J. Haaparanta (1986) and S. Knuuttila; and J. Hintikka (1986).

existence is necessary, it is identical with God; *not*: because existence is identical with God, it is necessary.

Furthermore, by claiming that existence is not something other than the object, Ibn Arabi seems to think of God (who he claims is identical with existence) as an individual rather than a sea of being, as some of his other statements may imply. Understanding this is crucial in order to evaluate Izutsu's interpretation (and similar others) of Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Izutsu interprets Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality in terms of indeterminate existence, something comparable to the conceptions of ultimate reality in Eastern traditions such as Taoism. Such interpretations must now be dismissed as inaccurate in representing Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality.

## 6.3 The Metaphysical Nature of the World

### 6.3.1. *Al-Mumkinat, Al-a'yan Al-thabitah and the World (al-a'lam)*

The second aspect of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) concerns the metaphysical nature of the world. Contrary to what many of his scholars and critics maintain, it seems to me that in his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) Ibn Arabi does not introduce primarily novel views on the metaphysical nature of God. Rather, he presents a novel thesis concerning the metaphysical nature of the world and its relationship to ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). Ibn Arabi maintains that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality because he sees the world, not God, differently.

When examining Ibn Arabi's writings on ontology, we encounter three metaphysical concepts related to his cosmology: *al-mumkinat*; *al-a'yan al-thabitah*; and the world (*al-a'lam*). My focus here is on the metaphysical aspects of these

concepts, which I believe may be grasped independently of the mystical and religious dimensions that Ibn Arabi tends to inscribe on them.

**First: the concept of *al-mumkinat*** (plural, sing: *al-mumkin*) or *al-a'yan al-imkaniyah* may accurately be translated as ‘contingent possible objects’ or ‘contingent possible entities’. A number of scholars define *al-mumkin* as ‘that which is contingent’ (see for example: El-Bizri, 2000, p. 116; Kalin, Ayduz and Dagli, 2014, Vol. 1, p. 361). *Al-mumkinat* incorporate both actual and *merely* possible objects that stand in contrast to the necessary and impossible objects. This term was commonly used among Islamic philosophers and theologians, and Ibn Arabi seems to use it in much the same way it was used by them.

**Second: the concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah*** (*al-a'yan* is a plural term, sing: *al-a'yn*). Ibn Arabi insinuates that he borrowed this concept from the Mu'tazilah theological school (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 350). However, he seems to introduce a unique meaning for the term, and its similarity to the Mu'tazilah technical term is probably, for the most part, phonetical. Yet the concept enters common usage in the Sufi tradition thanks to Ibn Arabi. Nevertheless, there seems to be a lack of clarity with regard to what exactly this concept indicates, particularly in its metaphysical aspect. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that there has been disagreement among contemporary Ibn Arabi scholars in relation to finding an appropriate translation of the term. Some translations include ‘permanent archetypes’ (Izutsu, 1983), ‘fixed prototypes’, ‘latent realities’ (Affifi, 1930; Valiuddin, 1977), ‘immutable essences’ (McAuley, 2012), and ‘immutable entities’ (Chittick, 1994).

Despite the disagreement around its translation, there is a consensus concerning *al-a'yan al-thabitah* among Ibn Arabi scholars: there is a metaphysical connection between *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and actual existents in the world. However,

only a few have attempted to clarify this connection. Izutsu, for example, claims that *al-a'yan al-thabitah* in Ibn Arabi's ontology are identical to that which metaphysicians today call 'universals'. He argues: 'they [*al-a'yan al-thabitah*] are Universals standing over against Particulars. And the relation of the archetypes [i.e., *al-a'yan al-thabitah*] to the world is exactly the ontological relation of Universals to Particulars' (Izutsu, 1983, p. 163). Hence, the relationship of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* to actual objects is similar, according to Izutsu, to the relationship between the colour yellow and yellow objects.

Izutsu's interpretation, I argue, is incorrect. Ibn Arabi never introduces *al-a'yan al-thabitah* as universals or anything akin to them. A universal is typically characterised as being exemplifiable, usually by more than one particular. This is never the case with *al-a'yan al-thabitah*; few would argue that an *a'yn thabitah* could be exemplified, for instance, in the same way as the colour yellow may be exemplified by yellow objects. In fact, apart from being essentially connected to actual objects, it is difficult to find any statement by Ibn Arabi that mentions similarities between *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and universals.

In a relatively early work, *insha al-dawa'ir*, written around 1204 (Hartenstein, 199, p. 268), Ibn Arabi talks about a concept that he calls 'the third thing' (*al-shay al-thalith*). Parts of his discussion of 'the third thing' (*al-shay al-thalith*) admittedly come very close to identifying it with the universals and Plato's ideas. The third thing (*al-shay al-thalith*) might have been the preliminary version of Ibn Arabi's concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah*. However, assuming that the two concepts are related, and considering that his discussion of the third thing (*al-shay al-thalith*) has presumably evolved into another concept—the concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah*—I argue that his views about the third thing (*al-shay al-thalith*) should be dismissed. This is especially

true when those views are incompatible with his presentation of *al-a'yan al-thabitah*, given that the latter is the more mature, and final, concept.

Contrary to Izutsu's understanding, *al-a'yan al-thabitah* are actually 'particulars'. The Arabic word '*a'yan*' literally means 'entities'. The only distinction of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* is that they seem to refer to special kinds of entities or particulars. I propose that *al-a'yan al-thabitah* are, in Ibn Arabi's ontology, comparable to what metaphysicians today call '*merely possible entities*'—contingent entities that are actualisable but *not actual*. Ibn Arabi's metaphysical delineation of the concept, in numerous aspects, corresponds to the way in which many metaphysicians today introduce *merely possible objects*. Ibn Arabi states that there are two kinds of object in the world (or 'the Kingdom of God', in his words). The first kind is termed *al-a'yan al-thabitah*, while the second kind is referred to as the world (*al-a'lam*)—the totality of actual objects. He explains that there is an essential relationship between the two kinds of objects. All actual objects are part of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* before they become *actual*. In addition, while he claims that actual objects are finite and temporal, he asserts that *al-a'yan al-thabitah* are actually infinite and eternal (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 8, p. 53). In addition, Ibn Arabi asserts that *al-a'yan al-thabitah* are part of *al-mumkinat* (possible entities) (Ibid., p. 204). It is agreed that the actual realm—the world (*al-a'lam*)—is one of the two types of *al-mumkinat*, and *al-a'yan al-thabitah* is the other type, as Ibn Arabi confirms. It seems certain, then, that *al-a'yan al-thabitah* correspond to *merely possible entities* which are known to be one of the two kinds of possible entities (*al-mumkinat*).

The metaphysical aspect of Ibn Arabi's concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* was ignored by many of Ibn Arabi's scholars, probably because he was the first to introduce the concept of *merely possible entities* into Islamic philosophy. Typically,

Islamic philosophers and theologians use the term *al-mumkinat* (possible entities) to indicate both actual objects and *merely* possible objects, without explicitly distinguishing between the two.

Besides being exegetically more accurate, Ibn Arabi's views on the concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* become clearer and more coherent if the term is understood as indicating *merely* possible entities. It is noteworthy, too, that some contemporary scholars seem to come close to identifying *al-a'yan al-thabitah* as *merely* possible entities. For instance, William C. Chittick states:

In this context the entities are called 'the possible things' (*mumkinat*) since they may or may not exist in the cosmos. In respect to their own possibility, which is their defining characteristic, their relationship to existence and non-existence is the same. An 'immutable entity' [i.e., *a'yn thabitah*] is a non-existent possible thing. If God 'gives preponderance' (*tarjih*) to the side of existence over nonexistence, it becomes an existent entity, an existent possible thing. Like 'entity' and 'thing' and unlike 'existent', the ontological status of a possible thing has to be specified (1989, p. 12).

In calling *al-a'yan al-thabitah* non-existent, Chittick is quoting the exact words of Ibn Arabi. However, what Ibn Arabi means by 'existence' in such contexts is actuality; *al-a'yan al-thabitah* are non-existent in the sense that they are not actual.<sup>28</sup>

**Third: the concept of the world (*al-a'lam*).** The world (*al-a'lam*) in Ibn Arabi's ontology refers to the actual realm or totality of actual entities.<sup>29</sup> As

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<sup>28</sup> While he uses 'existence' occasionally to indicate actuality, he uses 'stillness' (*thbu't*) to indicate *mere* possibility. Naturally, he tends to contrast the two.



mentioned above, the relationship between *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and the world is comparable to a relationship between contingent (i.e., not necessary) actual objects and *merely* possible objects. According to Ibn Arabi, the world (*al-a'lam*), before becoming actual, was among the infinite *merely* possible entities that he calls '*al-a'yan al-thabitah*'. Ibn Arabi scholars seem to be in agreement on these issues.

### 6.3.2. A Theory of Relative Actuality and Mere Possibility

Ibn Arabi divides all possible entities into two categories: actual and *merely* possible. On the face of it, this is comparable to how contemporary metaphysicians divide possible entities in terms of actuality and mere possibility. However, while mainstream contemporary metaphysicians consider actuality and *mere* possibility to be metaphysically absolute and intrinsic to some objects independent of any observer, Ibn Arabi claims that they are rather relative matters. *Merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) and actual entities (*al-a'lam*) originate from the same metaphysical realm—the realm of possible entities. As Chittick notes: 'The immutable entity (*a'yn thabitah*) and the existent entity (*a'yn mawjudah*) [i.e. actual entity] are the same reality' (1989, p. 84). Although this view is uncommon, theories of relative actuality are not completely unfamiliar to metaphysicians today. David Lewis, for example, is well-known for his assertion that there is no essential metaphysical difference between our actual world and other infinite possible worlds. Actuality, according to Lewis, is indexical depending on the context of utterance. A world is actual to whomever calls it their world. He states:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibn Arabi explicitly uses the term *al-a'lam* (the world) to indicate the actual world. However, he sometimes defines the world as 'everything other than God'. Under this definition, the *merely* possible objects (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) are part of the world as well.

According to the indexical analysis I propose, ‘actual’ (in its primary sense) refers at any world *w* to the world *w*. ‘Actual’ is analogous to ‘present’, an indexical term whose reference varies depending on a different feature of context: ‘present’ refers at any time *t* to the time *t*. ‘Actual’ is analogous also to ‘here’, ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘this’, and ‘aforementioned’ – indexical terms depending for their reference respectively on the place, the speaker, the intended audience, the speaker’s acts of pointing, and the foregoing discourse (1970, pp. 184–85).<sup>30</sup>

However, it seems that while contemporary metaphysicians, Lewis included, consider the distinction between actuality and mere possibility a purely metaphysical notion, Ibn Arabi considers it an epistemic notion. Ibn Arabi accordingly tends to employ an epistemic language in describing actuality (and *mere* possibility), which he presents in terms of *perceiving* and witnessing (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 8, p. 13). According to Ibn Arabi, when a person *perceives* some possible entities, they constitute the actual realm(s) (*al-alam*) for that person. On the other hand, the set of possible entities that he does not perceive constitute the realm of *merely* possible entities (*al-a’yan al-thabitah*) for him. This means that each person has his own actual realm (*al-a’lam*) and a realm of *merely* possible entities (*al-a’yan al-thabitah*). Hence, what is actual to one person may be *merely* possible (*a’yn thabitah*) to another, and vice versa. We may present ‘perceiving’ in Ibn Arabi’s theory of relative actuality as something akin to an epistemic frame that is applied to the metaphysical realm of possible entities.

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<sup>30</sup> For the current debate on actuality see: R. Adams (1974, 1981); D. Lewis (1986); D. M. Armstrong (1986, 1989, 1997); J. Divers (2002); A. Plantinga (2003); P. Bricker, (2008) and L. DeRosset (2009, 2009b).

What is within the frame, in this analogy, is the actual realm, with the rest beyond it representing the realm of *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*).

Some of Ibn Arabi's statements seem to introduce his theory of relative actuality in terms of a thesis comparable to transcendental idealism. Thus, it may be that *the minds of people* distinguish what is actual from what is *merely* possible. Actualisation as such is completely dependent upon people's minds; considering that there is no fundamental metaphysical difference between the two realms, what the mind of the individual perceives (or chooses to perceive) from the metaphysical realm of possible entities becomes converted into an actual entity to him. The rest of possible entities, moreover, would be *merely* possible to him. Hence, regarding the aforementioned metaphor of the epistemic frame, our minds take on the role of these frames. Ibn Arabi might even suggest that we vary in our ability to actualise according to our mystical abilities (we have frames of different sizes). He might also explain that the actual realm is the same to most people; the variation of perceiving (and hence actualisation) might be better seen in terms of classes. That is, 'ordinary people' would have identical frames that allow them to include a particular amount of possible entities; hence, what is 'actual' and '*merely* possible' to ordinary people would be much similar. However, mystics (or each class of mystic) have bigger frames and, therefore, more actual objects. The mechanism of these frames is constituted of our minds and our level in mysticism, Ibn Arabi might propose.

In alluding to the transcendental idealism thesis, Ibn Arabi sometimes considers the actual world to be part of what he calls 'the realm of imagination' (*khayal*) (2009, p. 224; 2011, Vol. 3, p. 470). Within his doctrine, the concept of 'the realm of imagination' is very important, albeit somewhat vague. I am not concerned here with Ibn Arabi's entire epistemological system, to which 'the realm of

imagination' clearly belongs; however, it should be sufficient to say that 'the realm of imagination' seems to indicate a particular *mental* realm. It might be that the distinguishing mark of what belongs to the realm of imagination is that it is mind-dependent (whether or not mind-dependent reality corresponds to something external). Hence, he seems to consider dreams an example of 'the realm of imagination' *par excellence*. As he sometimes refers to the actual world as part of 'the realm of imagination', he may consider the *actual* world to be something that is to living people as dreams are to sleeping people. In fact, he employs a metaphorical saying that he attributes to the Prophet Mohammed which states that 'people [when they are alive in this world] are [ontologically] asleep and they wake up when they die' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 470). Thus, as each has their own dreams that depend solely on their mind, every person should have their own frame of actualisation. In addition, he repeatedly refers to the ability of mystics to see more actual things than ordinary people (in their mystical experiences, for instance). Hence, the mystics' world would typically contain more actual objects than an ordinary person's world. This would be explained by an endorsement of this thesis, especially if we take into account Ibn Arabi's assertion that mystics have far greater cognitive abilities than ordinary people.

There are, however, some difficulties with interpreting Ibn Arabi's theory of relative actuality in terms of transcendental idealism. First, it seems that there is a circularity involved. People are considered to be part of the world; if actualisation depended completely upon the minds of people, as this thesis suggests, we would still have to account for the actualisation of the minds of people, as they are actual things too. One may rebut this by asserting that, in being self-conscious, people make their own minds, which also are contingent possible entities actual. If the individual is self-

conscious, he perceives, and hence actualises, himself in the same way that he would perceive and hence actualise other contingent possible entities. There are some passages from Ibn Arabi's writing that, with a twist, could be employed to support this answer; at one point he claims that the reason why actualisation occurs is so that possible entities may be apparent to *themselves* (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 8, p. 13).

The second problem regarding the thesis of transcendental idealism is that it seems to undermine the theistic doctrine of creation, suggesting that God has no role in bringing the world into actuality. If actualisation is completely dependent upon individuals' minds, this seems to remove God (*ilah*) as necessary to the process. However, for Ibn Arabi, God (*ilah*) has an essential role in creating and sustaining the world, as we will see Chapter Nine. This is a high price that Ibn Arabi would likely be unwilling to pay, as the concept of the theistic God is indispensable to his doctrine.

In addition to these problems, the transcendental idealism thesis seems to be incompatible with another thesis that Ibn Arabi also proposes for his theory of relative actuality. In this second thesis he makes similar claims to those of the theistic doctrine of creation; he affirms that God is the one who makes things actual. If we employ the same metaphors referenced earlier, God is the one who places the frame and we only see within it what He determines for us to see, that is, things that he actualises. The actual and *merely* possible are still in the same metaphysical class. The only difference is that God makes some of them *visible* to us by including them within the frame. Ibn Arabi explains:

God wants the things for themselves, not for Him. As there is not a thing but that with Him are its depositories. [...] Hence, the things [all things] are kept [hidden] with Him. Then, when He wants to create them, He brings them

down from those depositories, and orders them to wear the garment of existence, and thus they appear to themselves (2011, Vol.8, p. 13)

Despite his abstract language and metaphoric expressions, Ibn Arabi here seems to introduce actualisation as something dependent upon God; He is the one who makes things actual. By asserting that things were hidden *with* God, he seems to be alluding to *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) before they are perceived by anyone other than God. In addition, in his claim that God *brings them down from* the depositories and makes them apparent to themselves, he indicates the process of actualisation and God's role in it. Positing that God makes things apparent to themselves is another way of saying that He makes them actual. Sometimes he uses metaphors such as shedding light upon some of the possible entities that are sunk in darkness (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 105). In most occasions, Ibn Arabi introduces actuality according to this thesis.

The second thesis for Ibn Arabi's theory of relative actuality has the advantage of preserving the role of God (*ilah*) in bringing the world into actuality, according to something similar to traditional theism. The idea that God makes some of the possible entities apparent, and thus 'actual', seems similar to the theistic doctrine of creation, which describes the world as being brought into actuality from God's knowledge. In fact, as the above quote shows, Ibn Arabi uses the term 'create' to describe actualisation according to this thesis. However, this thesis also faces a number of difficulties. First, it seems to undermine the role of people's minds in actualisation, as God is the one who makes things actual. Thus, it seems incompatible with his claim that the actual world is part of 'the realm of imagination', which means that it is mind-dependent.

Another related and more serious implication of this thesis is the problem of free will. Let us consider again the analogy of the frame: if God includes only the actual objects within the frame, as this thesis suggests, and people cannot *perceive* anything outside it, then this model seems to preclude human free will. People are restricted to what God has predetermined for them and what He wills to be within the frame. I believe that Ibn Arabi would want to avoid this implication.

Hitherto, we have two incompatible potential theses for actualisation in Ibn Arabi's relative theory of actuality and *mere* possibility. The first sees actualisation as dependent upon the minds of individuals. The second considers God to be the one who actualises things, or makes them visible. Each thesis seems to be supported by some of Ibn Arabi's texts and yet contradicted by others. In fact, one could assume that Ibn Arabi himself was aware that he was divided between the two theses; he states that the world (the totality of actual entities) is 'different reflections in one mirror; nay, it is one reflection in different mirrors' (Ibn Arabi, 2009, p. 155). It may be the case then that he is unsure whether the actual world is different reflections (indicating the first thesis) or one reflection (indicating the second thesis).

To resolve this problem I propose the following model, which aims to incorporate the two theses. I posit that actuality, in Ibn Arabi's theory, should not be seen as solely dependent upon perceiving, but as dependent upon both perceiving *and* perceivability. God determines the realm of perceivable entities and people freely choose from them what to perceive. Let us apply this to the analogy of the epistemic frame. There is a field of all possible entities and God places an epistemic frame (the frame of actualisability) on a certain region of the field to make some possible entities perceivable (and hence actualisable). People then choose to perceive (and hence

actualise) some of the actualisable entities. The totality of what people perceive from the field of actualisable (or perceivable) entities constitutes the actual world for them.

This proposed model should preserve all of Ibn Arabi's principal claims relating to the matter, including the relationship between the concept of God and the world. First, unlike the transcendental idealistic thesis, God has an essential role in actualisation, since He is the one who determines *the realm* of what is perceivable. Accordingly, it renders Ibn Arabi's theory of relative actuality more compatible with theism, which he constantly strives to maintain. Second, unlike the second thesis, it preserves the role of the human mind with regard to actualisation. People's minds will have essential roles in determining the range of what is perceived from the realm of perceivable entities determined by God.

Of course, according to this model, there will be entities that are actualisable but never actualised, as well as entities that are never available for actualisation (outside the actualisability frame); this shares some similarities with the typical view of actuality. From the typical viewpoint of ontology, there are some *merely* possible entities that are available for actualising, such as the choice between writing and going jogging. In addition, there are *merely* possible entities that are not available for actualising on account of restrictions applied to our metaphysical framework, such as the possibility of a human being living without oxygen.

To amend this model to be even more inclusive of Ibn Arabi's views, we could maintain that instead of talking about one epistemic frame applied by God for what is realisable, we could posit that God sets different epistemic frames for different people according to their level in the mystical hierarchy. It is to be expected that these frames overlap; however, some of them may be *bigger* than others. This idea offers a



place for some of Ibn Arabi's claims, mentioned above, that the realm of the actual world might be wider from the perspective of some mystics than that of most people.

### 6.3.3. The Metaphysical Nature of Possible Entities

Hitherto, I have explained that actuality and *mere* possibility have no intrinsic metaphysical reality; they are relative notions dependent for a considerable part upon the individual. Metaphysically speaking, however, there are an infinite number of possible entities. The question now arises about the metaphysical nature of these possible entities, whether they are abstract or concrete.

Even if one ignores the fact that metaphysicians are far from agreeing upon a criterion to differentiate what is abstract from what is concrete (as mentioned above), I do not think that the concrete/abstract categorisation is useful in the case of Ibn Arabi's ontology who holds a relative theory of actuality and mere possibility. To clarify, let us say that I maintain that the criterion for concreteness is temporality; anything that is temporal is concrete, and anything that is not temporal is abstract. Accordingly, *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) would be considered abstract and actual entities—the world (*al-a'lam*) would be considered concrete. This however is problematic. According to my interpretation of Ibn Arabi, some of the possible entities would be *perceived* by some people and hence *appear* to them, in particular, actual. The same entities, however, might not be perceived by other people and hence will remain *merely* possible (*a'yan thabitah*) to them. The same entities would hence be both temporal and atemporal. Following the criterion, this would mean that the same entities are both abstract and concrete. Concreteness and abstractness, however, are supposed to be intrinsic to the entities. Metaphysicians would maintain that it is impossible for an object to be both concrete and abstract. Yet, applying standard criteria to Ibn Arabi's concept of possible entities seems to

lead to this conclusion. Since Ibn Arabi's theory of relative actuality is at least plausible, it is important to note that failing to comply with the binary division of concrete/abstract is not due to a fault in Ibn Arabi's theory. The problem, I maintain, originates from the narrowness of the binary division that fails to extend to incorporate relative actuality. The binary division seems to presume that actuality and *mere* possibility must be absolute.

Interestingly, David Lewis, who shares some similarity with Ibn Arabi in defending a theory of relative actuality, also complains about failing to find the concrete/abstract division useful in expressing his own doctrine. He states:

Because I said that other worlds are of a kind with this world of ours, doubtless you will expect me to say that possible worlds and individuals are concrete, not abstract. But I am reluctant to say that outright. Not because I hold the opposite view; but because it is not all clear to me what philosophers mean when they speak of 'concrete' and 'abstract' in this connection. Perhaps I would agree with it, whatever it means, but still *I do not find it a useful way of explaining myself* (1986, p. 81, my italics).

I also think that it is better for Ibn Arabi's ontology to be viewed apart from the binary division of concrete and abstract. I am not necessarily saying that possible entities in Ibn Arabi's ontology are a third thing (neither abstract nor concrete). My contention is that this binary division as it is does not seem to be suited to perfectly incorporate relative actuality and mere possibility; it does not seem to be helpful in determining the metaphysical nature of possible entities as such.

However, if one insists on determining the metaphysical status of possible entities according to the binary division of concrete and abstract, I would say that the same entity could be both *relatively* concrete and *relatively* abstract. A *perceived* computer is *relatively* concrete, to the one who perceives it, and hence actualises it. The same computer is *relatively* abstract to someone who does not perceive it. The concreteness and abstractness of the computer, in this context, are obviously not intrinsic to the entity but dependent upon the perceiving.

## **6.4 The Relationship between Ultimate Reality as Existence (*wujud*) and the World**

### **6.4.1. Possible Entities and God's Knowledge of the World**

Now we have an understanding of the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), and of the metaphysical nature of the world. The remaining task is to determine the relationship between the two presuming Ibn Arabi's claim that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality.

Ibn Arabi's theory of relative actuality provides a different outlook towards the potential duality of reality in Ibn Arabi's ontology; instead of having a clear distinction between God and the metaphysically intrinsic actual world, which is the typical theistic worldview, the opposition is now between Ibn Arabi's concept of possible entities and God. Still, the coexistence of God and possible entities appears to undermine Ibn Arabi's claims about the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*).

I propose that the way to maintain both the reality of possible entities and Ibn Arabi's claim that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality is to identify the totality of possible entities with God's knowledge of the world. Some of Ibn Arabi's texts insinuate as much (see for instance, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, p. 70). By being

identical with God's knowledge and hence intrinsic to His existence, possible entities do not breach Ibn Arabi's claims of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*).

This proposition shares some similarities with 'theistic activism', a doctrine advanced by Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel (1986) to solve the apparent inconsistency between Platonism and the theistic doctrine of absolute creation, which states that everything, whether abstract or concrete, is ultimately dependent upon God. In their presentation of their proposition, Morris and Menzel state:

God traditionally is thought of as personal. A dominant model of deity is that of mind or active, creative intellect. In line with that model, we suggest, to begin with, that all properties and relations are God's concepts, the products, or perhaps better, the contents of a divine intellectual activity, a causally efficacious or productive sort of divine conceiving [...] [D]ivine concepts are those very properties themselves; and unlike what is assumed in standard Platonism, those properties are not ontologically independent, but rather depend on certain divine activities ( p. 355).

Ibn Arabi however is required to justify the identification between the totality of possible entities and God's knowledge. He does not address this issue at length, but I believe there are plausible reasons for one to uphold the identification of the two. Before I explain my view, it is essential to bear in mind that we do not know all there is to know about the nature of God's knowledge. All I seek to offer hence is that the identification has some merit based on what we know about God's knowledge and the nature of possible entities and that it is not, therefore, a completely unjustified equivocation. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that God's knowledge is

essentially different from human knowledge. God's knowledge is necessary and perfect, while our knowledge is neither necessary nor perfect. Considering that we know of a fundamental difference between the two kinds of knowledge, we should not expect that what we know about our own knowledge must always apply to God's knowledge. At least, we should not reject a plausible claim made about God's knowledge merely on the basis that it is not the case with human knowledge. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that, all things being equal, being compatible with what we know about knowledge is definitely an advantage of any view or proposition.

With this in mind, let us ask the following question: if God's knowledge of the world is complete, perfect and necessarily true, what would be the relationship between the world and God's knowledge of it? There are two main perspectives through which we can represent the relationship. The first approach is to maintain that God's knowledge of the world, like our knowledge of things, is *distinct* from the world. This is comparable to the relationship between my knowledge of my computer and the computer itself. The second way to represent this relationship is to maintain that God's knowledge of the world is identical with the world, as some propose (e.g., Mander, 2000).

The first approach has the advantage of being more intuitive and compatible with our conceptions of human knowledge. The second, however, has the advantage of providing a clear model for the infallibility, perfection and completeness of God's knowledge; unlike in the first approach, it is clear that it is metaphysically impossible for God's knowledge of the world to be fallible, imperfect or incomplete if it is identical with the world itself. In addition, as stated above, the fact that God's knowledge as such may be essentially different from human knowledge should not pose a serious problem. I believe that it is more beneficial to read Ibn Arabi's

ontology through this second perspective.

However, Ibn Arabi should not, like Mander, identify God's knowledge of the world with the *actual* world. This is because God's knowledge is eternal, while the actual world is finite; its existence had a beginning and will have an end. If God's knowledge were identical to the actual world, this would mean that it started to be and will cease to be; this is far from being perfect or complete.

Ibn Arabi, however, would identify God's knowledge with the totality of possible entities instead. When identifying God's knowledge of the world with the totality of possible entities, it is possible to bypass the problem facing Mander's proposition. God's knowledge of the possible entities is a direct knowledge of the world, and yet remains unaffected by the finitude of the actual world. Also, Ibn Arabi's theory of relative actuality and mere possibility will be the most helpful here. As explained above, there is no metaphysical difference between actual entities and *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*); the actual world coming into existence therefore does not impact God's knowledge. The finitude of the actual world is relative and concerns the minds of individuals who *start* to perceive (and hence actualise) some of the possible entities. That is not the case with God, who perceives all of the possible entities from eternity. Moreover, Ibn Arabi maintains that possible entities are eternal, as is typically thought with regard to God's knowledge. By being identical with the totality of possible entities, God's knowledge of the world is perfect, complete and infallible. It is *metaphysically* impossible for anything to escape the possible entities; therefore, in being identical with them it is also *metaphysically* impossible for God's knowledge to be imperfect or to be the subject of error in any sense.

This model seems to manage to represent what we know about God's knowledge of the world (i.e., necessary, perfect and complete), and hence to offer a justification for the identification between the totality of possible entities and God's knowledge in my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis. In fact, it seems to come very close to some of the common sayings among Islamic theologians and scholars about God's knowledge, such as Ibn Taymiyyah's well-known statement: 'God knew [from eternity] what was, is, will be, and what will never be if it had been how it would be' (1995, Vol. 8, 286) Ibn Arabi would describe possible entities in a similar way; they encompass from eternity what was, what will be and what will never be, as well as how they would have been if they had come into actuality.

However, one might wonder whether or not the second model is plausible, as how God's knowledge could be *of* the possible entities when they do not have an externally independent existence from His knowledge. In standard cases, when knowledge is *of* something, the thing is usually considered independent of the knowledge. For example, my computer has an independent existence, distinct from my knowledge of it.

Ibn Arabi would answer that it is not necessary that, in order for knowledge to be *of* something, what is known must be distinct and independent of the knowledge. One's knowledge of his consciousness or pain, for instance, is still *of* something even though it is not *of* something independent and distinct from the knowledge. At least there seems to be some overlap between the knowledge and that which is known in the case of self-consciousness and pain. Therefore, Ibn Arabi could assert that God's knowledge of possible entities is *of* something even though he postulates that they are not independent of His knowledge. In fact, in some of his statements, Ibn Arabi

asserts that God's knowledge of the world is part of His knowledge of Himself; by knowing Himself God knows the world (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 141).

As he identifies the totality of possible entities with God's knowledge of the world, Ibn Arabi seems to come very close to panentheism. In fact, some of contemporary Ibn Arabi scholars defend such interpretation (Sharify-Funk and Dickson, 2014). However, this does not seem to be accurate if we accept the common definition of panentheism. According to this definition, panentheism is the ontological view that the actual universe is subsumed by God. Panentheism, thus, maintains that the actual universe is an ontological entity that is included in God's existence. Ibn Arabi, however, would not accept that. As explained above, actuality according to Ibn Arabi is primarily an epistemic notion. The actual world does not represent absolute metaphysical reality in his ontology. I believe that Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) should be placed somewhere between acosmism and panentheism.

#### **6.4.2. Identifying God's Knowledge with the Totality of Possible Entities and the Problem of God's Foreknowledge**

The problem of God's foreknowledge and free will is one of the oldest challenges for the doctrine of divine omniscience. Most theists would confirm that God has given human beings free will. In addition, they would also uphold that God is omniscient, and hence He has foreknowledge. The two claims appear inconsistent, as God's foreknowledge seems at the first sight to preclude human free will.<sup>31</sup> Endorsing a realist position with regard to human free will is important for theism, for

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<sup>31</sup> For further discussions of the problem of God's foreknowledge and free will see: A. Plantinga (1974); J. Hoffman and G. Rosenkrantz (1980); W. Alston (1985); W. L. Craig (1986); and T. A. Warfield (1997).



philosophical as well as theological reasons. Philosophically, dismissing free will seems a counter-intuitive position that negates personal experiences. In addition, many theists believe that God will reward righteous people for their good deeds and may punish others for their sins. Without free will, the doctrine of reward and punishment would be problematic to many. The debates among philosophers (and theologians) on this problem are longstanding.

Ibn Arabi's views on the doctrine of human free will and God's foreknowledge seem unclear to many. Landau and Affifi claim that Ibn Arabi is a proponent of determinism, albeit a unique version. They claim that it is not the case that God replaces human free will with His own will. Instead, the actions of individuals are predetermined by their own preparedness (*istidad*); i.e., by their own nature or ontological status. Ibn Arabi's concept of preparedness (*istidad*) is obscure but it seems to be related to some kind of ontological status that the individual exemplifies, which predetermines his destiny. Even God, they say, cannot change the preparedness (*istidad*) of any existent. Rom Landau states:

Ibn 'Arabi disagrees with the doctrine of *Jabar* [Islamic theological doctrine of determinism] as a compulsion forced upon man from an outside agent. Yet it was obviously impossible for him to accept free will, for this would have left him no alternative but the opposition of man's will to that of God, and thereby have introduced dualism [...] [F]ree will as ordinarily understood, can have no place in his system (1959, p. 49).

Affifi further asserts that Ibn Arabi's deterministic view should not hold a person responsible for their actions, as much as it should not hold a stone responsible for

reacting to the laws of gravity. Hence, he proposes that Ibn Arabi's form of determinism shares crucial similarities with what he calls 'scientific determinism'. He explains:

All actions, including the so-called volitional actions, are, according to this doctrine, determined by internal and external laws which (modern determinists would say) can all be calculated and accounted for scientifically. Ibnul 'Arabi agrees with the deterministic side of such a theory, but adds: (a) that the so-called scientific laws are nothing but God's Laws, and (b) that God's laws in Man are determined by Man's own nature, and in this lies Man's *moral* obligation (1964, p. 155).

It is fair to say that indeed some of Ibn Arabi's texts allude to determinism. He says: '[The belief] that Allah is the [real] doer of things [i.e., everything], without any contribution from anyone or any apparent cause, is the heart of [true] belief' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 232). However, Ibn Arabi presents other statements in which he seems to resist determinism as understood by Landau and Affifi. He explicitly states that 'the expert mystic [*muhaqiq*] [would] resist determinism because it contradicts human [free] actions' (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 70). One needs to incorporate all of Ibn Arabi's statements on the matter in order to be exegetically faithful, something both Landau and Affifi fail to do.

Another contemporary interpretation of Ibn Arabi's views on the relationship between God's foreknowledge and free will has been developed by Bakri Aladdin (2011). Aladdin rejects Affifi's deterministic interpretation. He claims that Ibn Arabi indeed recognises an incompatibility between God's foreknowledge and human free

will, upholding that the issue cannot be resolved. Ibn Arabi's solution, he argues, is to accept that there is no way around this. He explains:

He [Ibn Arabi] prefers to adopt the idea of 'participation' (*ishtirāk*) in the act by both God and human being. Quranic texts do not resolve the matter in favour of one party, although out of courtesy they do attribute the acts to God, according to the verse: 'Say, all is from God'. Ibn 'Arabi says that 'In acts there must be *ḥaqq* and *khalq*', and in Chapter 350 of the *Futūḥāt* that 'the correct opinion regarding this is that it is linked to both *ḥaqq* and *khalq*, without being exclusive to either side'. This original solution to the issue confirms that Ibn 'Arabi is not a determinist (2011, p. 140).

When one reads Ibn Arabi carefully, it seems that he is indeed puzzled by the issue. He wants to preserve the free will of the individual, following certain parts of the scriptures that appear to ascribe free will to human beings, while at the same time maintaining the other, seemingly deterministic, parts of the scriptures. In fact, some of his texts show clearly his puzzlement and dividedness between embracing determinism or non-determinism (see for instance, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 104).

I believe, however, that Ibn Arabi's thesis could offer a promising solution to the problem of God's foreknowledge and human free will. Thus, Ibn Arabi needs not to be puzzled.

A person's free will, regardless of how significant it is, is ultimately tied to the realm of possible entities (or in fact some of it). In addition, I argued above for the plausibility of the identification between God's knowledge and the totality of possible entities. Hence, as long as possible entities (by which one's actions are limited) do not

undermine one's free will, neither should God's knowledge. Even though God's knowledge is eternal and complete, it is also infinite and unlimited as it is identical with all possible entities, according to my interpretation of Ibn Arabi. Even though a person would have a significant range to choose from, his choice would still be incorporated within the realm of possible entities and, hence, God's knowledge.

Further, if we endorse Ibn Arabi's view that actuality is relative, then the relative actual realms do not have any significance to God's knowledge. Each *relatively* actual world concerns epistemically only the one(s) to whom it is actual. The knowledge that one acquires of the relatively actual world, as such, is a form of knowledge *de se*, similar to my knowledge that *I am* walking (*not* that Nader is walking). Some might claim that knowledge *de se* also pose a potential problem to the doctrine of God's omniscience, but this is not my concern here.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, by identifying God's knowledge with the totality of possible entities, and by upholding a relative theory of actuality and mere possibility, Ibn Arabi's thesis offers a way to maintain God's complete and eternal knowledge of the world without infringing on human free will.

At one point, Ibn Arabi alludes to a similar solution to the problem of free will and God's foreknowledge (2011, Vol. 7, p. 91), which he considers to be revealing of 'the secret of preordainment [*qadar*]' or divine foreknowledge (Ibid., p. 90). He confirms that what he reveals on this issue is the ultimate unveiling [*kashf*] (Ibid., p. 91).

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<sup>32</sup> Knowledge *de se* is the type of knowledge that is only available to the knower. Knowing that I am home might be different from knowing that Nader is home. If, for some reason, I forget my name, I may know that I am home but not that Nader is home. In addition, if I do not know where I am or who I am, and yet I heard someone saying Nader is home, I would know that 'Nader is home' but not that *I am* home. For further discussions of knowledge *de se* and God's Omniscience see: R. Swinburne (1977); E. R. Wierenga (1989, 2002); W. L. Craig (2000); Y. Nagasawa (2003); and S. Torre (2006).

## 6.5 Maintaining Ibn Arabi's Statements

My interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) offers a way of coherently maintaining his claims concerning the oneness of existence and the reality of the world. In holding that there is no metaphysical difference between what is actual and what is *merely* possible, we find a way to eliminate the acute duality of existence represented by the intrinsically actual world and God. Hence, we pave the way to maintaining Ibn Arabi's claim that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality. Then, by identifying possible entities with God's knowledge of the world, we actually maintain Ibn Arabi's claims.

If my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis proves successful, it will also help us to understand a number of his apparently problematic statements regarding the relationship between ultimate reality and the world. As noted in Chapter Four, Ibn Arabi defends four *apparently* incompatible claims: (i) the world does not exist; (ii) the world is identical with God; (iii) the world actually exists and is, by definition, everything other than God; and (iv) the world is a mixture of existence and non-existence.

My interpretation may help to reconcile these four statements. When Ibn Arabi proclaims that the world is non-existent, he seems to refer to the actuality of the world, referring in particular to his view that actuality is not a metaphysically intrinsic reality. According to Ibn Arabi's ontology, the *actual* world does not exist from an independently metaphysical point of view.

In addition, when he identifies the world with God, Ibn Arabi is likely focusing on the fact that the totality of possible entities are identical with God's knowledge and, thus, are intrinsic to his existence. The fact that the actual world is

metaphysically part of the realm of possible entities makes it thus part of God's knowledge and, hence, existence.

Furthermore, with regard to his insistence on the existence of the world, Ibn Arabi appears to be speaking from the perspective of someone who perceives the world as actual. As actuality is a relative reality, Ibn Arabi would accept that the actual world exists to those who *perceive* it as such.

Finally, when Ibn Arabi claims that the world is in an intermediate state that lies between, or combines, existence and non-existence, he seems to hint at the limitedness of possible objects as finite and contingent. He considers limitedness to be a form of non-existence, as will be explored in the following chapter. By being limited, possible objects are affected by non-existence. Ultimate reality that is identical with existence (i.e., exists in the full sense) is necessary and unlimited, and so anything that is not so must have a deficient form of existence.

In addition, my interpretation also preserves another important aspect of Ibn Arabi's doctrine concerning the relationship between God and the world. This is the religious relationship with God, including the acts of worshipping and praying, and many aspects of mysticism. All forms of religious practice would be doomed to suffer if one endorsed pantheism or acosmism; the traditional interpretations of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). With regard to the acosmistic interpretation, it is clear that worshipping is not possible if there is no one to worship, as the only existent is ultimate reality. Worship and prayer are also incompatible with pantheism. Michel P. Levine explains:

[W]orship is an expression of another's superiority [...] There is nothing in pantheism that corresponds to this inferiority/superiority dichotomy taken as

essential to worship. [...] The theist claims that ‘It is necessarily true that God (if He exists) is worthy of worship.’ The pantheist [...] will reject its applicability to the pantheistic Unity [...] Indeed, for the pantheist, it is more likely necessarily false [...] In short the properties that according to theists make God worthy of worship are not constitutive of the Unity, and there are no other proper objects of worship for the pantheists (1994, pp. 317–18).

Of course, Ibn Arabi would categorically reject any doctrine that deprives His ultimate reality of being transcendent or worthy of worship, as this eliminates essential aspects of his doctrine. The existence of the world and some kind of *otherness* of ultimate reality are essential for maintaining any mystical or religious relationship. Many aspects of religion are essentially dependent on the fact that the world exists and that it is *not* God. My interpretation affirms the reality of the possible entities as explained above, and, therefore, makes room for worshipping and mysticism. Yet, at the same time, it avoids undermining Ibn Arabi’s claim that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality.

But what about Ibn Arabi’s mystical poems in which he celebrates forms of personal identification and unity with God? In these poems, he appears to propose that a mystic may become one with God. How, then, can one reconcile such statements with my interpretation of Ibn Arabi’s thesis?

To begin with, while Ibn Arabi’s concept of ultimate reality as existence (his thesis of the oneness of existence—*wahdat al-wujud*) is metaphysical, his statements concerning the personal unity with God are epistemic and mystical. When he and other mystics express views that allude to a personal unity with God, they are usually describing their personal mystical experiences rather than expressing metaphysical

views. The views expressed in such contexts are not necessarily a description of what there is and how it is, but of how certain experiences appear to them. Hence, one is justified on these bases to dismiss such statements as irrelevant to Ibn Arabi's *metaphysical* thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*).

Furthermore, mystics are vulnerable to what is known among Sufis as *shatah*, a state in which a mystic engages in expressing theistically controversial (and probably heretical) views due to the influence of a dense religious experience. Ibn Arabi seems to compare being in *shatah* to being drunk. He quotes al-Shibly, a Muslim mystic: 'Al-Hallaj [another Muslim mystic known for *shatah*] and I drank from the same glass. [However,] while I sobered up, he became drunk, and [consequently] engaged in unruly behaviour [*a'rbadah*] until he got arrested' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 263). Drinking here is figurative, and indicates religious experiences. 'Being drunk and engaging in unruly behaviour' seems to indicate engaging in *shatah* and expressing statements and views that many theists would deem heretical. Ibn Arabi considers *shatah* to be a deficiency and a weakness of the mystic. He sometimes also seems to suggest that *shatah* statements should be dismissed. In his discussion of potentially unacceptable claims made by some mystics, he asserts the following:

Whichever of the people of Allah [i.e., the mystics] stated something different, he stated it as an outcome of *shatah* and not as [his] real [view]. [The *shatah* view stemmed from] the overwhelming [mystical] state that possessed him. It came from the tongue of his state rather than from his own tongue. And when he sobered up [or woke up from this overwhelming state], he said: 'Glory be to Thee! To Thee I turn in repentance' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 203).



Thus, mystics may not mean what they say during *shatah* and may even attempt to retract it after they *wake up* from these dense mystical states, just as someone may regret when sober what they had said when intoxicated. Inasmuch as we should dismiss a drunk person's statements, I uphold that we should also dismiss *shatah* statements. Ibn Arabi actually makes a similar point when he accepts on one occasion al-Shibly's claim over al-Hallaj's on a disagreement between the two; Ibn Arabi's justification is that al-Shibly was sober while al-Hallaj was drunk. Of course, here he is using 'sober' and 'drunk' metaphorically. Mystics, ideally, should have control over themselves when they engage in religious experience; for the mystic to be 'sober' is a sign of perfection, Ibn Arabi affirms (Ibid., p. 26). However, even the great mystics may occasionally engage in *shatah*.

Interestingly, the mystical statements defending personal union with God (*ittihad*) are usually expressed under the influence of mystical experiences, most probably as *shatah*. In fact, al-Hallaj's famous saying: 'there is nothing in my cloak but Allah', which apparently advocates a thesis of personal identification with God, is considered in the Islamic literature an example of *shatah par excellence*. In a statement in which Ibn Arabi defends a thesis of personal identification with God, he merely employs al-Hallaj's aforementioned statement. He says: 'there is nothing in the cloak except what al-Hallaj once said' (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 481). If al-Hallaj's statement is *shatah*, as has long been accepted, then Ibn Arabi's statement should also be considered *shatah*. In fact, I propose that the few statements in which Ibn Arabi defends mystical union with God should all be dismissed as *shatah*, and we should give them little weight in analysing his metaphysical thesis. In general, any of Ibn

Arabi's mystical statements, which are arguably vulnerable to *shatah*, should not be considered a legitimate source for his metaphysical views in relation to ontology.

Finally it seems that my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) seems to have a number of advantages over the interpretations examined in the last chapter. First, it represents Ibn Arabi's texts accurately. It does not dismiss the world as non-existent, as Affifi and Chittick seem to do, nor does it identify ultimate reality with the world, as Ibn Taymiyyah's interpretation does. As demonstrated in previous chapters, both of these claims are negated by some of Ibn Arabi's texts.

Second, my interpretation complements two more of Ibn Arabi's concepts of ultimate reality: the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*), and the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). The latter concept indicates ultimate reality in his relationship to the world (as its Creator and Sustainer). Identifying the world with ultimate reality, or dismissing it as non-existent, leaves no place for the concept of God (*ilah*). Yet this concept plays a very important role, not just in Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality, but also in his metaphysics in general.

Third, Ibn Arabi strives to make his thesis compatible with theism, and with Islam in particular, both of which are incompatible with pantheism and acosmism. By establishing that the novel views and concepts developed by Ibn Arabi in his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) primarily concern the metaphysics of the world and not the concept of God, my interpretation renders Ibn Arabi's thesis more compatible with theism. Even though many theists may disagree with Ibn Arabi concerning his theory of relative actuality and mere possibility, and even perhaps the identification between God's knowledge of the world and the totality of possible entities, they would probably be more tolerant of disagreements around these issues

than of the concept of God (around which, for instance, Ibn Taymiyyah's interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis revolves).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to develop a philosophically coherent interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). I analysed the three components that I maintain constitute Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*): (i) the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*); (ii) the metaphysical nature of the world; and (iii) the relationship between ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and the world.

Firstly, I analysed the first component of Ibn Arabi's thesis: the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). I examined two of Ibn Arabi's most important metaphysical views on existence, both of which are crucial to his concept. The first is his position on the necessity of existence and the impossibility of nothingness. I addressed some potential arguments in favour of his position, concluding that it is indeed tenable. Second, I examined his rejection of the idea that existence is a property of the object. I then outlined three arguments that aim to demonstrate his stance. The first argument was originally developed by Ibn Arabi himself: if existence were a property of the object, then the object cannot simultaneously possess it and lack it. However, it is possible for a thing to be considered existent and non-existent at the same time, at least relatively; therefore, Ibn Arabi concludes, existence is not a property. The second argument was famously proposed by Kant, who argued that existence cannot be a predicate of the object as it differs from all predicates insofar as it does not add up to the concept of the object.

The third argument was developed by Russell, who refuted the idea that existence is a property of the existent by showing that, if this were the case, it would be coherent to claim that there are non-existent objects. By establishing that existence is necessary and the only ultimate metaphysical state of affairs, Ibn Arabi justifies his identification between ultimate reality and existence. In addition, by maintaining that existence is not a property of the object, Ibn Arabi appears to uphold that ultimate reality is an *existent* rather than an indeterminate state of being, as some interpretations of Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality suggest.

Secondly, I turned to the second component of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*): the metaphysical nature of the world. I proposed that in his thesis, Ibn Arabi does not develop a novel concept of God, as has long been assumed. Instead, he seems to develop novel views on the metaphysical nature of the world. In examining Ibn Arabi's cosmology, I introduced three metaphysical concepts: *al-mumkinat*; the world (*al-a'lam*); and *al-a'yan al-thabitah*. *Al-mumkinat* indicates the totality of possible entities. In addition, the world (*al-a'lam*) refers to the actual realm. However, while there is a consensus among Ibn Arabi's scholars concerning the meanings of *al-mumkinat* and the world (*al-a'lam*), the meaning of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* is a matter of some dispute. I hold that *al-a'yan al-thabitah* correspond to what metaphysicians today call *merely* possible entities, which are *not* actual. It was my contention that for Ibn Arabi, actual entities (*al-a'lam*) and *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) originate from the same metaphysical realm. Contrary to the common conception, Ibn Arabi seems to uphold that there is no metaphysical difference between what is actual and what is *merely* possible. Both actual and *merely* possible entities have the same metaphysical reality as possible entities. Actuality and mere possibility, according to him, are not intrinsic

and metaphysical but rather relative and, for a considerable part, epistemic. I proposed that his theory of relative actuality is best represented in terms of perceiving and perceivability.

Thirdly, I developed the third component of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*): the relationship between ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and the world. Despite asserting that actuality is a relative matter, Ibn Arabi's claim that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality has not yet been firmly established. There was a potential incompatibility present when affirming the reality of possible entities while still maintaining that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality. To overcome this problem, I argued that possible entities could be identified with God's knowledge of the world, as some of Ibn Arabi's texts actually suggest. Thus, the apparent duality within existence is resolved.

Finally, I explained how my interpretation coherently maintained Ibn Arabi's claims associated with his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). In addition, I showed how my interpretation clarifies some of Ibn Arabi's supposedly incompatible statements, particularly those introduced in Chapter Three regarding the reality of the world.

In the following chapter, I will examine a number of potential and existing objections to Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) and address some potential responses to them.

# Chapter 7: The Concept of Ultimate Reality as Existence (*wujud*) (the Thesis of *wahdat al-wujud*) III: Potential Objections

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## 7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). The chapter investigated three issues: the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*); the metaphysical nature of the world; and the relationship between ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and the world. In line with Ibn Arabi's views on the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), I argued: (i) that nothingness is impossible and that existence is necessary; and (ii) that existence is not a property of the object but the same as the existent object. By maintaining these views, Ibn Arabi justifies identifying God with existence and also implies the individuation of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). In addition, in outlining Ibn Arabi's views on the metaphysical nature of the world, I introduced Ibn Arabi's concepts of possible entities (*al-mumkinat*), of merely possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) and of the actual realm (*al-a'lam*). With regard to the relationship between ultimate reality and the world, I argued that a theory of relative actuality results in the duality of existence being between God and possible entities. However, to preserve Ibn Arabi's claim that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality, I proposed that he could identify the totality of possible entities with God's knowledge of the world.

The current chapter constitutes the third and final part of my discussion of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). Advancing that existence is

one and identical with ultimate reality (*whahdat al-wujud*) has prompted a number of objections and theistic concerns throughout history. In this chapter, I examine four potential objections to Ibn Arabi's thesis.

In section 7.2, I analyse the objection levelled at Ibn Arabi's depiction of the relationship between God and the world. Ibn Taymiyyah argues that Ibn Arabi's claims concerning *al-a'yan al-thabitah* undermine God's omnipotence and omniscience. I argue, however, that Ibn Taymiyyah's objections are based upon a misunderstanding of Ibn Arabi's concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah*.

In section 7.3, I examine the objection that there is a contradiction in maintaining, as Ibn Arabi does, that reality is both one and many. I argue however that existence in Ibn Arabi's doctrine is 'one' from a metaphysical point of view and 'many' from epistemic points of view; thus, the apparent incompatibility is resolved. I also explore the related complaint that we fail to experience existence as one, and that this undermines Ibn Arabi's thesis. I postulate, however, that an epistemic failure to conceive a metaphysical status (the oneness of existence, for instance) does not undermine the reality of that metaphysical status. In addition, I argue that the limitations of our cognitive abilities dictate that we perceive existence only as limited objects.

In section 7.4, I assess the criticism of Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) pertaining to the problem of evil. Some argue that the presence of evil in the world undermines the thesis that existence is identical with God. If God is identical with existence, they say, then no aspect of existence should include evil. Ibn Arabi stresses, however, that existence, which is identical with ultimate reality, is absolute goodness. The world is limited and finite, and as such is

affected by non-existence, the source of evil. No forms and aspects of non-existence concern ultimate reality, and hence neither does evil.

Section 7.5 addresses Ibn Arabi's apparent unfaithfulness to Islam. In this section, I examine whether or not Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) is unislamic both in a strong and a weak sense.

## **7.2 The First Objection: The Objection from the Relationship between God and the World**

One of the most contentious subjects in Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) is the relationship between God and the world. Ibn Taymiyyah is one such critic of this subject. As we saw in Chapter Five, Ibn Taymiyyah interprets Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) in terms of pantheism. Accordingly, he accuses Ibn Arabi's thesis of being heretical and entailing atheism. He states: '[Ibn Arabi believes] that God is [identical with] Creation [...] What he says implies denying Allah and His divine names and attributes [...] as he affirms only the existence of creation [and not the existence of God]' (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995, Vol. 2, p. 215).

Despite its popularity, the objection that Ibn Arabi's thesis connotes a pantheistic relationship between God and the world is based on a misunderstanding of his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). As argued in Chapter Five, and contrary to the assertions of Ibn Taymiyyah and others, Ibn Arabi does not identify the world with God. In fact, he explicitly and unequivocally affirms that the world is *not* God, as he repeatedly defines it as everything other than God.

Ibn Taymiyyah provides a further version of the first objection to the relationship between God and the world in Ibn Arabi's thesis. Unlike the first version, this objection seems to avoid presuming that, according to Ibn Arabi, the world and



God are identical. He claims that Ibn Arabi's concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* undermines God's omnipotence. Ibn Taymiyyah criticises that according to Ibn Arabi, God's creation is limited to *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and thus God cannot create anything beyond them. However, if God is unable to create anything beyond *al-a'yan al-thabitah*, then his power is immensely limited. As such, Ibn Arabi contradicts the theistic doctrine of God's omnipotence (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995, Vol. 2, p. 212).

According to Ibn Taymiyyah, furthermore, Ibn Arabi's concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* undermines not only God's power but also His knowledge. Firstly, Ibn Arabi holds that God's knowledge of the world is limited to *al-a'yan al-thabitah*, and, hence, it is incompatible with the belief that God's knowledge is infinite and complete. Secondly, by maintaining that *al-a'yan al-thabitah* are the cause of God's knowledge, Ibn Arabi contradicts the theistic belief that God's knowledge is active rather than passive. Theists generally assume that God's knowledge causes the world, rather than being caused by the world. Things exist externally because they existed first in God's knowledge, not the other way around (Ibid., pp. 210–211).

This version of the objection is based in part upon a misunderstanding of Ibn Arabi's concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah*. Ibn Taymiyyah seems to think that the actual world exhausts *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and vice versa. This is incorrect; contrary to the beliefs of Ibn Taymiyyah, the actual world constitutes a very small part of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* (merely possible entities) according to Ibn Arabi. When Ibn Arabi identifies God's knowledge, or power of creation, with merely possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*), he indicates the state prior to any perceiving, and hence actualisation, of any possible entity by people. At that point the realm of merely possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) encompasses all contingent possible entities. Therefore, limiting God's power of creation to *al-a'yan al-thabitah* (merely possible

entities) as such should not be considered an actual limitation, because accordingly God can create any possible thing. This is identical with the theistic doctrine concerning God's power of creation. Aquinas, for instance, states: 'God is called omnipotent because He can do all absolutely possible things' (2007, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 138). The only thing that escapes *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and, hence God's power, is the impossible. Many theists dismiss the impossible as irrelevant to God's omnipotence. In fact, Ibn Taymiyyah himself argues that the inability to create impossible things does not undermine God's omnipotence, because *impossibilia* are mere nothing (1995, Vol. 8, p. 512). Hence, contrary to Ibn Taymiyyah's claim, Ibn Arabi's concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* does not undermine God's omnipotence.

A similar response could also be made in light of Ibn Taymiyyah's claim regarding *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and God's knowledge. *Al-a'yan al-thabitah* do not limit God's knowledge, since, as mentioned above, they incorporate the totality of possible entities. Hence, there is nothing beyond *al-a'yan al-thabitah* that can be known about the world.

It is unclear though what Ibn Taymiyyah means when he talks of rejecting *al-a'yan al-thabitah* as the source of God's knowledge. Yet, there is a potential problem with Ibn Arabi's discourse on God's knowledge of the world, and this might be what Ibn Taymiyyah wishes to indicate. For God to know something, it might seem *prima facie* that His knowledge depends upon what is known, given that, in standard cases, what is known causes the knowledge of it. For example, my knowledge of the glass of water in front of me depends upon, and is caused by, the glass being there. This cannot be applied to God. There is a potential incompatibility with the notion that the actual world came into existence if one accepts that God's knowledge is eternal. This would mean that God had new knowledge when the world came into existence, which

would undermine the completeness of God's eternal knowledge. It seems that Ibn Arabi is required to develop a model that preserves the following: (i) God's knowledge, which is eternal and complete, is *of* the world as knowledge must be *of* something; otherwise the meaning of knowing becomes unclear. (ii) God's knowledge does not depend upon the world; rather, the world depends upon God's knowledge.

Fortunately, Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), according to my interpretation, provides a promising model that seems to meet both of the conditions outlined above. By maintaining that God's knowledge of the world is of possible entities, Ibn Arabi meets the first condition. As he upholds that there is no metaphysical difference between what is actual and what is merely possible, Ibn Arabi maintains that God's knowledge is *of* the world, without committing it to the temporality of the actual world as mentioned in the previous chapter. As actuality is relative insofar as it relates only to the individual to whom the world is actual, the temporality of the actual world is also relative and depends upon the individual to whom it is temporal. As a result, Ibn Arabi avoids the problem of God obtaining new knowledge when the actual world came to be.

However, one might say that if God's knowledge is *of* the eternal possible entities, would that not mean that possible entities do not depend upon God, and that, accordingly, the second condition would not be met? Ibn Arabi would answer in the negative. As discussed in the last chapter; in identifying the totality of possible entities with God's knowledge of the world, the possible entities are ontologically dependent upon God's existence in the same way that one's knowledge is dependent upon his existence. In Ibn Arabi's ontology, possible entities do not have an absolutely independent status. Thus, Ibn Arabi also meets the second condition.

Therefore, Ibn Arabi's thesis according to my interpretation bypasses the first objection.

### **7.3 The Second Objection: The Problem of the One and the Many**

#### **Version 1**

Ibn Arabi states that existence is simultaneously one and many (2011, Vol. 5, p. 407). Some might argue that such claims include an inconsistency. For instance, in his criticism of pantheism, Owen complains that it infringes 'our pervasive sense of individuality or personal distinctness' to affirm that existence is both one and many (1971, p. 74). At times Ibn Arabi appears to be aware of this issue in his thesis, almost celebrating its apparently paradoxical state. In fact, a number of Ibn Arabi scholars accept that his ontology is, in essence, a fusion of contradictions with regard to this issue. In his discussion of the one and the many in Ibn Arabi's ontology, Toshihiko Izutsu states that '[o]nly by a simultaneous affirmation of contradictions can we understand the real nature of the world. [...] Close to the relation between the "inward" and the "outward" is the contradictory relation between the One and the Many' (1983, p. 74).

#### **Response to Version 1**

In some places, Ibn Arabi attempts to resolve the apparent incompatibility of the one and the many in his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). In what follows, I address two of these attempts, neither of which, I argue, succeeds. I then develop my own response to the objection.

First, Ibn Arabi argues that the relationship between the one and the many in his ontology is comparable to the relationship between any natural number and the

number one. Any natural number is ultimately made of many 'one's. Number three, for instance, is no more than the number one duplicated three times. Hence, while one could say that ten thousand is 'many', another one focusing on the number one, of which the ten thousand is composed, could say that it is merely 'one'.

This analogy, I wish to argue, is flawed. Though it may succeed in demonstrating that something could be one and many at the same time, it cannot be applied to Ibn Arabi's ontology. Ibn Arabi's analogy says that the number one is comparable to ultimate reality and other numbers are comparable to existents in the world. Moreover, the number one is a constituent of other natural numbers. However, Ibn Arabi would not want to say that ultimate reality is a constituent of existents. Existents in the world are not God repeated many times in the sense that the number seven is the number one repeated seven times. Ultimate reality is supposed to be identical to the infinite and sheer existence that incorporates limited existents. Therefore, this example is not actually analogous with the one and the many in Ibn Arabi's doctrine.

In the second attempt to resolve the apparent paradox, Ibn Arabi claims that the concept of the one and the many in his ontology is comparable to the one and the many of the human body. The human body may be seen as one (a unified body), or as many (its parts and organs). Ibn Arabi claims that existence is also one when considered as a unified whole and many when we consider its parts: the limited existents. Limited existents constitute unlimited existence, just as parts and organs constitute a human body (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 6, p. 184).

This analogy, however, is also flawed. While the human body is comprised of parts, and its identity could be considered merely the totality of these parts, ultimate reality, in Ibn Arabi's doctrine, is not. God is absolute, unlimited and sheer existence,

and claiming that He is constituted of parts is inconsistent with this definition. In addition, if we take worldly objects to be proper parts of God, their absence (or existence) should affect His existence just as the proper parts of any object would do so. Ibn Arabi would reject such an implication since it undermines the absoluteness of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*).

Therefore, both analogies provided by Ibn Arabi fail to resolve the apparent incompatibility of the one and the many in his thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). I maintain, however, that there is no real contradiction within his doctrine of the one and the many; I believe that my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), developed in the previous chapter, offers a solution.

Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) becomes compatible if we affirm that existence is *one* from a metaphysical perspective, and at the same time *many* from epistemic perspectives. Metaphysically speaking, we have ultimately only one reality: the reality of God. Epistemically speaking, however, existence is many when seen from the different perceptions and actualisations of individuals. In other words, even though existence is ultimately one, people experience it as many. There is no contradiction when Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence is interpreted in this way.

## **Version 2**

One might object to Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) by questioning why we do not experience it as such, assuming that existence is one. We only experience existence as many, as distinct existents. In developing the same objection to pantheism, Owen explains:

Our total experience of both personal and sub-personal entities is pervaded by the conviction that each is an independent form of existence. This conviction is immediately and uniquely present in each person's self-consciousness, whereby each is aware of himself as distinct from (and *therefore* capable of relating himself to) other persons (1971, p. 72).

However, I do not find this objection compelling. The epistemological failure to know a metaphysical status does not necessarily prove the non-existence of that metaphysical status. People throughout history have held arguably inaccurate metaphysical beliefs about existence; their failure to hold correct beliefs has nothing to do with reality itself. The failure to perceive the unity of existence is not enough to prove that it is not there.

Ibn Arabi, furthermore, could maintain that the reason behind this failure to experience existence as one is that, while existence in its oneness is unlimited and infinite, people's minds are limited and finite. Humans therefore apply their own limits to their perception of existence in order to conceive it, and by this means it is conceived as many limited objects, rather than as one unlimited existence. It is as though we are small telescopes only capable of observing minor stars or galaxies, but not the entire universe. However, Ibn Arabi claims, alongside a number of mystics throughout history, that it is possible to realise the oneness of existence through mystical experiences. What is more, he has prescribed ways of attaining such knowledge.

Therefore, the second objection to Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) is also unsuccessful.

## 7.4 The Third Objection: The Objection from Evil

Another objection to Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) is rooted in the presence of defects and evil. The objection rests on the notion that the world is deficient and contains a significant amount of evil and ugliness, while God is holy and good. Any perspective that allows the flawed world and God to overlap serves to undermine God's holiness and goodness. Ibn Taymiyyah alludes to this view in his criticism of Ibn Arabi, arguing that Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) entails identifying God with ugly and disgusting things in the world (1995, Vol. 2, pp. 124, 126).

This objection, I argue, is unsuccessful. It seems to infer that, because the world as a single and limited entity within unlimited existence is deficient, then existence as a whole is deficient. This is invalid as it involves the fallacy of composition. This fallacy is committed when one infers that something is true of the whole because it is true of some or all of its parts. In a response to a similar objection, R. Oakes explains:

This objection succeeds only on the condition that any property which can truly be predicated of an aspect or modification of some individual can truly be predicated of that individual as such. Clearly, however, this is mistaken. My eyes are brown and some of my beliefs are tenuous, but I am neither brown nor tenuous. Hence, that God is (essentially) perfect is in no way incompatible with our existing as aspects or modifications of God (1983, pp. 110–11).



The objection, however, could still be revised as follows: the evil in the world, which is part of existence, undermines the goodness of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) because no part or aspect of ultimate reality should incorporate evil. Any dirt that stains a part of a clean shirt undermines the cleanliness of the whole shirt. A theist may claim that there is a difference between, on the one hand, saying that the world which is distinct from God's existence incorporates evil, and, on the other, saying that the world which is not distinct from God's existence incorporates evil. The former concerns God's actions, while the latter concerns God's essence.

Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), according to my interpretation, seems to offer a plausible response to this issue and, indeed, a promising solution to the problem of evil in general. The response could be considered a version or a variation of the deprivation response to the problem of evil. In his presentation of the deprivation response (or one version of it), John Hick states: 'Evil is [...] loss and lack, a deprivation of good, and instead of having any positive goal or function of its own it tends by its inherently negative character towards nullity and non-existence' (2010, p. 180).

Ibn Arabi likewise advances that existence is pure good and that evil is always associated with the lack of existence rather than with existence itself (2011, Vol. 6, p. 338). Therefore, the evil in the world derives not from the fact that the world exists, but rather from its failure to exist in the full sense. By being contingent, limited and finite, the world's existence is deficient, and it is therefore vulnerable to evil. Ibn Arabi considers contingency, limitedness and finitude to be aspects of non-existence in the world. For anything to exist in the full sense, and hence be free from evil, it has to be unlimited, necessary and infinite. What people consider evil—such as natural disasters, pain and moral evil—stem from those elements of non-existence in the

world (such as its being limited). As long as the world is a combination of existence and non-existence, as Ibn Arabi sometimes describes it, the world will also contain a mixture of goodness and evil.

In addition, as God is identical with existence in its full sense, He has no association or relationship with evil whatsoever. The evil in the world does not come from Him as existence; rather, it arises from the fact that the world is partly distinct from Him by having particular limits that distinguishes it from God.

Therefore, the third objection to Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) is unsuccessful.

## **7.5 The Fourth Objection: The Apparent Unfaithfulness to Islam**

A number of Islamic scholars and theologians throughout history have dismissed Ibn Arabi's doctrine as un-Islamic. Ibn Taymiyyah, for instance, condemns Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) as displaying an infidelity and error (1995, Vol. 2, pp. 122, 127, 128, 129). In addition, A. E. Affifi, a contemporary Ibn Arabi scholar, dismisses the Islamic elements of Ibn Arabi's doctrine as irrelevant. He states:

It was imperative, therefore, that Ibnul 'Arabi, having totally altered the conception of the God of Islam and having replaced it with a fundamentally different one, should have left [...] all the ethical attributes which make God a personality and avoided using language which describes Him as such. However, he does not always do that. He sometimes tries to bring into harmony the two different notions of God, the pantheistic and theistic, with the result that he utterly fails (1964, p. 57).

In fact, Affifi finds Ibn Arabi's doctrine utterly un-Islamic, and goes so far as to say that he finds it *curious* that Ibn Arabi insists on the faith of Islam (Ibid., p. 110).

Ibn Arabi himself, however, seems to think that his doctrine is indeed Islamic. One of the most obvious features of Ibn Arabi's writing is his constant attempt to substantiate his ideas with quotations from Islamic scriptures. His writings include hundreds of Quranic verses and Hadiths, to the extent that William. C. Chittick dares to claim that Ibn Arabi's great book *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyyah*, as well as his other works, are merely commentaries on the Quran (1989, p. xv).

The objection to Ibn Arabi's supposed unfaithfulness to Islam can be understood in two senses—one strong, the other weak. The strong objection maintains that Ibn Arabi explicitly contradicts established Islamic views that are clearly displayed in the Quran. This is probably what Ibn Taymiyyah and other theologians, as well as Affifi, have in mind when they dismiss Ibn Arabi's doctrine as un-Islamic. However, Ibn Taymiyyah's objection is mostly based upon his inaccurate interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) in terms of pantheism. Something similar could be said of Affifi's claims, for he believes that Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) is best interpreted in terms of acosmism and that acosmism contradicts Islam. Again, as established in Chapter Five, Affifi's interpretation can be seen as inaccurate.

Putting these misunderstandings to one side for the moment, one may wonder whether any part of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), according to my interpretation, is vulnerable to a similar objection (namely that of contradicting Islam). One potential issue is Ibn Arabi's unique and original doctrine of creation. According to my interpretation, creation in Ibn Arabi's doctrine is

represented by the epistemic frame that is placed upon a set of possible entities. This epistemic frame makes some of the possible entities available to perceiving and, hence, actualisation (as discussed in detail in the previous chapter). Of course, this is different from the typical theistic thesis that defends a realistic and metaphysically absolute view of actuality and creation. This perhaps is a vulnerable aspect of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*).

The Quran and Hadith speak of God creating the universe. The external realistic interpretation of creation is the apparent interpretation of such Quranic verses and Hadiths. However, in responding to this objection, Ibn Arabi might appeal to his very flexible style of interpretation in approaching such Quranic verses and Hadiths. He might deny that the external realistic interpretation is the only viable interpretation. The soundness of this response depends on whether or not Ibn Arabi's unique ways of interpreting the scriptures are legitimate. I argue against Ibn Arabi's unique style of interpretation in Chapter nine.

The weak sense of the objection takes the following form: Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) is un-Islamic insofar as it is not inferred or obtained from Islamic scriptures. Though Ibn Arabi makes every attempt to base his views upon Islamic scriptures, I admit that a number of his principal views and concepts are not directly inferred from them. Examples of such views include his doctrine

of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* and his theory of relative actuality and mere possibility. To the best of my knowledge, such views are in neither the Quran nor the Hadith. However, this is hardly an objection, since it does not seem to undermine Ibn Arabi's thesis in any sense. Ibn Arabi is not contradicting Islam by seeking knowledge outside the scriptures. His thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-*

*wujud*) mainly concerns purely metaphysical issues rather than religious or Islamic ones. Parts (or perhaps all) of Ibn Arabi's thesis thus have not been discussed or addressed in the Islamic scriptures. It is therefore inappropriate to argue that his views therein are Islamic or indeed un-Islamic, just as one could not describe the topic of modal logic or quantum mechanics as being Islamic or un-Islamic. Indeed, Ibn Arabi is not so different from other theists in this regard. In their detail, many theistic debates concern issues that have never been explicitly addressed in the scriptures.

Before concluding this section it is important to assert that there are other concepts and views in Ibn Arabi's doctrine in general that could be considered un-Islamic in the strong sense, some of which will be addressed in the following chapters. The focus of this section is merely on Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) according to my interpretation.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined four potential objections to Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). The first objection derived from the relationship between God and the world as presented in Ibn Arabi's doctrine. I examined two problems raised by Ibn Taymiyyah against Ibn Arabi's views on the matter. First, Ibn Taymiyyah claims that Ibn Arabi's identification between ultimate reality and the world is a form of infidelity. However, as I have shown, this issue stems from a misunderstanding of Ibn Arabi's concept. Second, Ibn Taymiyyah claims that Ibn Arabi's concept of *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) undermines God's omnipotence and omniscience, as it considers His power and knowledge of the world to be limited to *al-a'yan al-thabitah*. In response, I demonstrated that identifying

God's knowledge and His power of creation with *merely* possible entities (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*) does not undermine God's power or knowledge. There is nothing beyond the totality of possible entities to be created or known, with the exception of impossible objects. Ibn Taymiyyah himself agrees that creating impossible objects does not concern God's omnipotence.

The second objection related to the problem of the one and the many in Ibn Arabi's thesis. I explained that there are two versions of this objection. The first aims to show that Ibn Arabi's thesis is incoherent, as existence cannot be one and many. However, I argued that, in Ibn Arabi's ontology, the one indicates ultimate reality that is identical with existence, while the many is indicative of people's various perceptions, and hence actualisations, of existence. The second form of this objection related to the fact that people fail to experience existence as one; if existence is one, why would people not be able to experience it as such? I argued that the epistemic failure to recognise any metaphysical status, including the oneness of existence, does not undermine that metaphysical status. In addition, Ibn Arabi argues that great mystics have experienced the oneness of existence and has prescribed the means by which one can achieve such an experience.

The third objection attacked Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) in relation to the presence of evil. It stated that if God is identical with existence, no aspect of existence should incorporate evil, and yet the world, which is part of existence, includes a significant amount of evil. In response, I argued that Ibn Arabi's doctrine actually provides a promising solution with regard to this issue and probably to the problem of evil in general. Ibn Arabi claims that goodness is identical with existence and that evil is associated with non-existence. Absolute existence is absolute goodness because it is free from any form of non-existence. The

evil of the world comes from the non-existence affecting it, which takes the form of limitedness, finitude and contingency.

The fourth objection pertained to the problem of Ibn Arabi's unfaithfulness to Islam in his concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). It held that Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) conflicts with established Islamic concepts and beliefs. In response, I argued that Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) might be in conflict with the theistic doctrine of creation. In general, however, Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) is constituted of views and concepts that are not explicitly addressed in the scriptures and, as such, it does not seem appropriate to refer to these as either Islamic or un-Islamic.

In the following chapter, I will examine the second concept of ultimate reality in my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis, namely the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*), which indicates ultimate reality in Himself with no association or relationship with anything else.

# Chapter 8: The Concept of Ultimate Reality as The Divine Self (*dhat*)

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## 8.1 Introduction

In Chapter Five, I explained that Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality is best represented through three concepts: ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) and ultimate reality as God (*ilah*).

The previous three chapters examined the first concept, ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), in which Ibn Arabi claims that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality. In the last chapter, I examined four potential objections to Ibn Arabi's concept. The first objection concerned the relationship between ultimate reality and the world; the second concerned the problem of the one and many in Ibn Arabi's ontology; the third regarded the problem of evil; and the final objection arose from Ibn Arabi's apparent unfaithfulness to Islam.

In this chapter, I move on to examine the second concept of ultimate reality in Ibn Arabi's thesis, that of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*). In section 8.2, I address the meaning of *dhat*. I explain that this concept indicates ultimate reality in Himself with no relationship or association with anything else. In addition, I critically examine the claim made by some key scholars that Ibn Arabi's concept of *dhat* can be identified with the Aristotelian concept of substance. I argue that this correlation is unwarranted. I posit, following the standard technical terminology of Islamic philosophy and theology *and* Ibn Arabi's own texts, that the Arabic term *dhat* is different, albeit comparable, to the Aristotelian concept of substance. I propose that the Arabic term *dhat* is best translated as 'self' and, when it is used in reference to ultimate reality in particular, as 'the Divine Self'. Selfhood, unlike the Aristotelian



concept of substance, indicates the distinctive identity of the individual without committing one to the binary structure of substance and accidents.

In section 8.3, I examine Ibn Arabi's treatment of the knowability of the Divine Self (*dhat*). I maintain that what is knowable about the Divine Self (*dhat*) comes from its relationship to the concept of God (*ilah*).

## **8.2 The Focus and the Meaning of the Concept of Ultimate Reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*)**

As with the other two concepts of Ibn Arabi's thesis (ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and ultimate reality as God (*ilah*)), the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) indicates a unique scope. It encompasses ultimate reality in Himself with no relationship or association with anything else. It signifies the absolute independence of God from anything and everything. Ibn Arabi seems to consider any kind of external relationship or reference a form of dependence. In his discussion of the absolute independence of *dhat*, he tends to appeal to the Quranic verse: 'Allah is surely independent [*ghani*] of all creatures' (3:97). Thus, ultimate reality as *dhat* is not even meant to indicate Him as a Creator or a Lord, as being a Creator implies that He has an external relationship with something else (His creation); hence, as the Divine Self (*dhat*), ultimate reality is independent even of these titles, Ibn Arabi confirms (Ibn Arabi, Vol. 5, pp. 105–106).

Following his assertion that ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) is absolutely independent of everything, Ibn Arabi claims that He does not, as such, concern people's religious belief in God. He explains that one may be able to infer this concept from reflecting upon the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). By no means, however, could one obtain a direct relationship with *dhat*. He explains that 'no religion has considered the oneness [*ahadiyah*] of the Divine Self [*dhat*] explicitly'

(Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 145), and upholds that reflecting upon the metaphysics of the concept of *dhat* is merely a luxury of thinking (*fudhul al-'aql*) (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 436). Ibn Arabi confirms that worshipping and related religious practices concern the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) rather than the Divine Self (*dhat*). This will be examined in the following chapter.

In fact, the term *dhat* is never used in the Quran in association with God. It has been used, however, in some of the prophet's sayings, and perhaps Ibn Arabi borrows the term from this source (see for example: al-Albany, 1988, Hadith: 5202; Ibn Hajar, 2003, Vol. 5, p. 475).

I posit that Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) is most accurately interpreted as a distinct concept. Some of Ibn Arabi's key scholars, however, fail to distinguish it from the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). For instance, when discussing ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), Toshihiko Izutsu states:

The Absolute viewed from this standpoint is called by Ibn 'Arabi *dhat* or 'essence'. The world [*sic*] *dhat* in this context means absolute Being (*wujud mutlaq*), Being *qua* Being, or absolute existence, that is, existence viewed in its unconditional simplicity. As the epithet 'absolute' indicates, it should not be taken in the sense of a limited and determined existent and existence; it means Something beyond all existents that exist in a limited way, Something lying at the very source of all such existents existentiating them. It is Existence as the ultimate ground of everything (1983, p. 25).

William C. Chittick also states the following: ‘By “Being” is meant *wujud* inasmuch as it designates God’s own Reality and Essence [*dhat*]’ (1989, p. 80).

However, this appears to be a mistake. As we saw in the last chapter, the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) incorporates everything that exists, including possible entities. Nothing in existence escapes its scope. Ibn Arabi explicitly states that ‘the existent[s] and existence is nothing but the Real [*al-haqq*] himself’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 7, p. 58). On the other hand, Ibn Arabi unequivocally asserts that the concept of the Divine Self (*dhat*) indicates ultimate reality where He is independent of anything other than Himself and where there is no reference to anything other than Himself, including the possible entities. He explicitly states: ‘the Divine Self (*dhat*) is independent of everything’ (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 171). Ibn Arabi repeatedly and overtly stresses this idea with regard to the Divine Self (*dhat*), and there seems to be no dispute among Ibn Arabi scholars concerning this issue. Therefore, the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) cannot be identical with the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*). While the inclusion of everything (including the possible entities) is essential to the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), the exclusion of everything (including the possible entities) other than ultimate reality is essential to the concept of ultimate reality as *dhat*. A question hence arises: what is *dhat*?

One plausible answer is that *dhat* indicates ultimate reality prior to the existence of the world. At one point, there was only God and nothing else, and at that point God had no relationship or association with anything other than Himself. However, Ibn Arabi would disagree with this interpretation of the concept of *dhat*, arguing that the existence of the world does not change anything with regard to ultimate reality as *dhat*. He states that ‘whatever is confirmed of Him [ultimate

reality] without the world will [still] be confirmed with the world being there' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 476). The scope of ultimate reality as *dhat* appears not to concern anything external to ultimate reality but, instead, something essential to Him.

Izutsu and Chittick, among others, seem to maintain that *dhat* in Ibn Arabi's writing is comparable to the Aristotelian concept of substance (or essence). According to the Aristotelian metaphysics, an object is not constituted of the totality of its material parts, rather there is an intrinsic substance or essence that constitutes the identity of that object; this also forms its accidental attributes into a unity (Erismann, 2012, p. 172). There are several criteria that aim to determine whether something is a substance or not. Among these criteria are: (i) being ontologically basic; (ii) being independent; (iii) being the bearer of properties and the subject of predication; and (iv) being able to exemplify changes (Robinson, 2014). The metaphysical theory of substance and accidents (or accidental attributes) originates from Aristotle's *Categories* and was mainly endorsed by medieval philosophers (including Islamic philosophers and theologians).

Izutsu and Chittick seem to maintain that *dhat* is God's substance or 'essence' and that everything else comprises the accidents (or accidental attributes) of *dhat*. In discussing why it is misleading to translate *a'yn* (another technical term in Ibn Arabi) as 'essence', Chittick aligns 'essence' with *dhat*. He says:

[I]n English the term *essence* is employed to differentiate between the reality of the thing and its phenomenal or accidental appearances. In contrast, the '*ayn* of a thing is no different from what appears to us, and it is not irrelevant here that one of the standard meanings of the term in Arabic and in Ibn

‘Arabi’s vocabulary is ‘identical with.’ [...] The second reason for avoiding ‘essence’ is that we need a word in English to render *dhat* which is rarely synonymous with ‘*ayn*. ‘Essence’ is well established as the English rendering of *dhat*, and it is an appropriate translation (1998, p. 389, note. 9).

Evidently, Chittick defines ‘essence’ in the same way the Aristotelian substance is typically defined; he even endorses the binary relationship between the essence and its accidents.

Izutsu (1984) also builds his whole interpretation of Ibn Arabi’s ontology on a similar understanding of the term *dhat*. He claims that Ibn Arabi’s ontology is constructed using two aspects: the essence (*dhat*) on the one hand, and the manifestations (or phenomena) of the essence (*dhat*) on the other. Like Chittick, Izutsu appears to consider *dhat* to be the equivalent of the Aristotelian substance, and the manifestations of the essence (*dhat*) equivalent to the accidents (or accidental attributes) of the substance in the Aristotelian and medieval metaphysics.

However, I maintain that it is a mistake to equate Ibn Arabi’s concept of *dhat* to the Aristotelian concept of substance as Izutsu and Chittick seem to do. Throughout the history of Islamic philosophy and theology, the Aristotelian concept of essence or substance has generally always been considered the equivalent of the Arabic technical term *jawhar* (see for instance, Morewedge, 2016, p. 16). This seems to be a matter of general agreement in Islamic philosophy and theology, and it is unlikely that either Izutsu or Chittick would debate this issue. In fact, both Izutsu (1964, p.142) and Chittick (1998, pp. 63, 66, 68, 85, and others) translate *jawhar* as ‘substance’.

Although *jawhar* and *dhat* are comparable to an extent, throughout the history of Islamic philosophy and theology, there has always been a distinction between

them. Explaining the relationship between *dhat* and *jawhar* according to the standard terminology of Islamic philosophy and theology, Abu Nasr al-Farabi (872–950) states:

[The term *dhat*] is used to indicate everything *jawhar* signify, as well as things that *jawhar* is not. [...] The *dhat of* something [...] indicates the whatness [or quiddity] of that thing or parts of its whatness. And, in general, it is used to indicate everything that could be the answer [to the question:], what is this thing? (1970, p. 107).

In the book, al-Farabi discusses *dhat* and *jawhar* at considerable length, and confirms the similarities and partial overlapping of the two terms. However, he asserts that they are different. Al-Farabi meant in his book to define the philosophical technical terms according the understanding of mainstream philosophical scholarship. Thus, by identifying *dhat* with *jawhar* (Aristotelian substance), Izutsu and Chittick are contrasting the standard usage of the two terms in Islamic philosophy literature.

Furthermore, identifying *dhat* with Aristotelian substance (*jawhar*) seems to contradict the focus of *dhat* in Ibn Arabi's thesis. As explained above, Ibn Arabi maintains that *dhat* indicates ultimate reality when He has no relationship or association with anything other than Himself. On the other hand, identifying *dhat* with God's substance (*jawhar*) implies that everything else (i.e., the world) is *dhat's* accidents (or accidental attributes), as Izutsu seems to put it. Accordingly, ultimate reality as *dhat* would actually have relationship with something else: the world, as His accident. This is in direct opposition to Ibn Arabi's own views on *dhat*.

I propose that *dhat* is best interpreted as ‘self’ and, in the case of ultimate reality, the Divine Self. My proposition here follows the standard usage of the technical term among Islamic philosophers and theologians as well as Ibn Arabi’s own usage in his discussion of the concept of ultimate reality as *dhat*.

Al-Farabi explains that *dhat* is a technical term typically used by philosophers and theologians, and that the equivalent term for *dhat* in everyday language is the Arabic term *nafs* (1970, p. 110). Al-Farabi’s assertion of a synonymous relationship between *dhat* and *nafs* is also seemingly confirmed by Ibn Arabi, as he frequently interchanges *dhat* and *nafs*. For instance, he says:

Allah commanded us to know His oneness. He did not command us to know his *dhat* [*dhat ih*]. Nay, He forbids us from doing so by saying ‘And Allah warns you of Himself [*nafs’-ahu*]’ [3:28], and the prophet of Allah, peace be upon him, forbids meditating over Allah’s *dhat*, Exalted is He (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 409).

The identification between *dhat* and *nafs* substantiates my proposition, as *nafs* is widely translated as ‘self’. Hence, if *dhat* and *nafs* are equivalent, as confirmed by the common philosophical usage of the two terms and by Ibn Arabi’s own usage, then both should be translated as ‘self’. In addition, unlike the Aristotelian ‘substance’, selfhood indicates one’s essence and distinctive identity, and does not commit one to the binary structure of substance and accidents. In addition, the term ‘self’ seems to have a mental reflective element that is absent from the term ‘substance’; the same thing is found in the Arabic terms *dhat* and *jawhar*. Perhaps this element is what

distinguishes the concept of self (*dhat*) from the Aristotelian substance (*jawhar*). We can clearly talk about an individual's self or God's self, but not a chair's self.

Furthermore, interpreting *dhat* as the Divine Self clearly and accurately presents the scope of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as *dhat*. The scope of *dhat*, as such, identifies God independently of everything else. It concerns merely His own distinctive identity. God's self is also never affected by the existence or non-existence of the world. This complements Ibn Arabi's affirmation that *dhat* encompasses ultimate reality in Himself with no relationship to the world, regardless of its existence or non-existence.

Other writers endorse a similar interpretation, such as Nader El-Bizri (2000, p. 154) and Michael M. J. Fischer (2004, p. 140), both of whom translate *dhat* as the essential self. Even Chittick himself, who identifies *dhat* with the Aristotelian essence or substance, uses 'the Divine Self' to indicate *dhat* on a few occasions (1989, p. 56). Thus, interpreting Ibn Arabi's concept of *dhat* as the Divine Self can be seen to be both technically and exegetically accurate.

### **8.3 Knowing Ultimate Reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*)**

Ibn Arabi scholars seem to be in agreement as to the unknowability of the Divine Self (*dhat*). Izutsu states that *dhat* 'cannot be an object of human knowledge and cognition [...] it is Something unknown and unknowable. It is forever a mystery, the Mystery of mysteries' (1983, p. 21).<sup>33</sup> Chittick also affirms that the Divine Self (*dhat*) is unknown and unknowable (1989, pp. 60, 62).

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<sup>33</sup> In his interpretation of Ibn Arabi, Izutsu coins the concept of 'the Absolute in its absoluteness', which he says is identical with Ibn Arabi's concept of *dhat* as we saw in Chapter Three. This quote is part of his presentation of the concept of the Absolute in its absoluteness.



Both Izutsu and Chittick base their stance on an explicit claim made repeatedly by Ibn Arabi that the Divine Self (*dhat*) is unknown and unknowable (see for instance, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 339). However, Ibn Arabi is inconsistent in reference to knowing the Divine Self (*dhat*). For instance, when it comes to religious experience as the most important channel for obtaining knowledge of God, he states at times that the Divine Self (*dhat*) is not available for religious experiences at all (Ibid., p. 353). Sometimes, however, he seems to claim the opposite by asserting that religious experience could actually provide some knowledge of the Divine Self (*dhat*) (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 248).

It seems that there are aspects of the Divine Self (*dhat*) that are knowable and others that are not. All that may be known about the Divine Self (*dhat*) comes from its relationship to the concept of God (*ilah*). The relationship between the Divine Self (*dhat*) and the concept of God (*ilah*) is similar to the relationship between the title ‘King’ and the person who holds that title. As much as one could infer that there is a person behind the title of ‘the King of Belgium’, for example, one should be able to infer that there is the Divine Self (*dhat*) behind the title of ‘God’ (*ilah*). In addition, what one knows about the King of Belgium is actually part of knowing the person who holds this title. In the same sense, anything that one could know about ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) is also part of knowing ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*). Ibn Arabi states that knowing the concept of God (*ilah*) is actually part of knowing the Divine Self (*ilah*) (Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 27).

On the other hand, we do not and cannot know the *reality* of the Divine Self (*dhat*). The impossibility of knowing the reality of the Divine Self (*dhat*) fits with Ibn Arabi’s other metaphysical and epistemological views. He explains that limitation is necessary for anything to be known by us (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 6, p. 151); our

epistemic capabilities dictate that which is known must be limited. If one considers that the Divine Self (*dhat*) is absolutely unlimited, it is clear that it cannot be known.

Consequently, Ibn Arabi repeatedly affirms that a human relationship with ultimate reality (including knowing Him) is through Him as God (*ilah*). As Ibn Arabi affirms, godness (*uluhah*) prevents us from seeing beyond it, and as the Divine Self (*dhat*) is beyond the title God (*ilah*), it is not available to be known (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 160). This is similar to saying that you have a connection with the king merely as a king but not as a person. As much as the title ‘the King of Belgium’ does not, by itself, reveal the distinctive identity of the king, neither does the title ‘God’ (*ilah*) reveal the distinctive identity of God. Ibn Arabi would argue that *dhat*, and not God (*ilah*), incorporates the distinctive identity of ultimate reality. I will discuss the analogy of the king further in the following chapter.

In discussing what is knowable and unknowable about the Divine Self (*dhat*), Ibn Arabi states:

The knowledge [of Allah] is divided between two things. The First is knowing the Divine Self (*dhat*), and the second is knowing Him as God (*ilah*). When we have searched the logical arguments and listened to the religious scriptures, we have proven the existence of the Divine Self (*dhat*), and Its [relationship to the concept of] God. However, we are [still] ignorant of its reality. [Thus, by knowing *dhat*'s relationship to the concept of God,] we have acquired half of Its knowledge. Furthermore, by knowing that it exists, we have obtained a quarter [more] of its knowledge. The fourth [and last] quarter of the Divine Self's [*dhat*] knowledge, however, is knowing its reality, which we have not obtained and cannot obtain. (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 493).

Here, he maintains that knowledge of the existence of the Divine Self (*dhat*) and its relationship to the concept of God (*ilah*) constitutes three-quarters of the knowledge of the Divine Self (*dhat*). The only thing that is left unknown and unknowable is the reality of the Divine Self (*dhat*).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the second concept in Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality: the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*). I explained that, according to Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality, this concept encompasses ultimate reality in Himself with no relation or association with anything else. In addition, I critically examined a number of interpretations of Ibn Arabi's concept of *dhat* developed by contemporary scholars. Izutsu, and Chittick seem to maintain that the Arabic concept of *dhat* is identical to the Aristotelian concept of essence or substance. I pointed out the possible inaccuracy of this, as the Arabic term *dhat* is considered by Islamic philosophers and theologians to be different from the Aristotelian concept of essence or substance, albeit comparable to an extent. I proposed that *dhat* should be translated as 'self' and, in the case of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as *dhat*, as 'the Divine Self'. I explained that this accurately follows the standard usage of the term in Islamic philosophy and theology, as well as in Ibn Arabi's own texts. In addition, it characterises the concept more accurately as it represents the distinctive identity of ultimate reality without being committed to the binary structure of substance and accidents. I also examined Ibn Arabi's portrayal of the knowability (and unknowability) of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*). I explained that the

relationship between the concept of the Divine Self (*dhat*) and God (*ilah*) is knowable, but that the reality of the Divine Self is unknown and unknowable.

In the following chapter, I will examine the third and final concept in Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality, that of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). I will explain the scope of the concept and its relationship to religion, religious practice and concept(s) of God. I will also explain its relationship to natural theology and to Ibn Arabi's views concerning religious diversity.

# Chapter 9: The Concept of Ultimate Reality as God (*ilah*)

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## 9.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*), which indicates ultimate reality in Himself with no relationship or reference to anything else. I critically examined the dispute over the meaning of *dhat* and its implications. I also analysed Ibn Arabi's views on the knowability of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*).

In this chapter, I introduce the third and final concept in Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality: the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). In section 9.2, I explain the scope of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). Ibn Arabi postulates that the term 'God' indicates a title that ultimate reality holds rather than signifying a proper name for Him (something akin to 'the King'). For Ibn Arabi, the concept of God (*ilah*) designates ultimate reality in His relation to the world as its Creator and Sustainer.

In section 9.3, I examine Ibn Arabi's views with regard to knowledge of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). He explains that ultimate reality as such is known and knowable. He introduces three channels through which one can obtain knowledge of God (*ilah*): the rational faculty; the scriptures; and religious experience. Ibn Arabi evaluates these channels according to their degree and accuracy of knowledge of God (*ilah*).

In section 9.4, I analyse Ibn Arabi's view on the relationship between ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) and religions. He argues that ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) is the concern of religions, religious beliefs and practices. But Ibn Arabi tends to

differentiate between the metaphysical God and religious concepts of Him. Religious concepts of God are constructed by religions *of* ultimate reality as God (*ilah*), here as a metaphysical entity. Further, he states that different religious concepts of God vary in how accurate they are in representing ultimate reality as God (*ilah*), and argues that the Islamic concept is the only correct and accurate representation. However, he also adopts a form of inclusivism with regard to the believers of other religions, whom he says are forgiven as they unknowingly worship the real God.

Because of the disagreements among Islamic theologians over the Islamic concept of God, Ibn Arabi introduces his thesis on the matter. He holds that one should follow the dictates of the Islamic scriptures precisely in this matter, which introduces God by declaring simultaneously the transcendence and incomparability of God (*tanzih*) and the partial similarity between God and his creation (*tashbih*).

In section 9.5, I examine another explanation developed by Ibn Arabi of the relationship between ultimate reality and religion, though one which could seem incompatible with his inclusivism (as presented in section 9.4). In this thesis, Ibn Arabi argues that religious concepts of God are not different notions *of* the metaphysical God (*ilah*) developed by religions, but actually different self-manifestations of ultimate reality, each revealing a different aspect of Him. Accordingly, Ibn Arabi advocates a pluralistic attitude towards the diversity of religions in which he seems to maintain that all religions are equally true and authentic. I posit, however, that Ibn Arabi's pluralistic thesis potentially alienates him from theism in general, and from Islam in particular, a consequence which he constantly seeks to avoid. It also may undermine the potential systematic structure of Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality.

## 9.2 The Scope and the Meaning of the Concept of Ultimate Reality as God (*ilah*)

Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*), as examined in the previous chapter, indicates ultimate reality in Himself with no relationship or reference to anything else. The concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) indicates ultimate reality *in* His relationship with something other than Himself: the world.<sup>34</sup> Ibn Arabi considers the concept of 'God' (*ilah*) not as a proper name for ultimate reality but as a title and position that ultimate reality holds. Consequently, he seems to follow the Islamic scriptures on this issue, which is explicit in differentiating between the term 'God' (*ilah*) and God's name, Allah. The Quran talks about many gods (*a'lihah*) and merely asserts that Allah *is* the real God (*ilah*). Ibn Arabi also introduces the term godness (*uluhah*), which he says is comparable to the position of kingship or sultanship. The concept of godness (*uluhah*) cannot be translated to Godhead, though, as while the latter indicates the divine nature of God, the former indicates a particular position that God occupies. Further, Ibn Arabi affirms that for ultimate reality to be God (*ilah*) there must be that which is 'godded over' (*ma'luh*) (i.e., the world) (2011, Vol. 5, p. 106). As kingship implies the existence of a kingdom, godness (*uluhah*) also implies the existence of the world; it is as meaningless to say that Philippe is a king without a kingdom as it is to call ultimate reality God (*ilah*) without any reference to the world, Ibn Arabi seems to maintain. In addition, in the same way that a man is a king when he has a particular relationship with a kingdom, ultimate reality is God (*ilah*) when He has a relationship with the

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<sup>34</sup> When I use the term 'God' followed by its Arabic equivalent (*ilah*), I mean to indicate this technical term in Ibn Arabi's writing: 'ultimate reality in his relationship with the world', and not to indicate ultimate reality *simpliciter*.

world. William C. Chittick explains this aspect of Ibn Arabi's metaphysical thesis of *ilah* and *ma'luh*:

From this principle arises Ibn al-'Arabi's well-known doctrine of the *ma'luh* or 'divine thrall.' The word is a past participle derived from the same root as *ilah*, 'god.' Literally it means that which is 'godded over,' or the object in respect of which a god is a god (1989, p. 60).

In addition, being the God of the world implies being its cause, Creator and Sustainer, Ibn Arabi seems to uphold.

There is an essential relationship between Ibn Arabi's concept of the Divine Self (*dhat*) and his concept of God (*ilah*). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the relationship between the two concepts is comparable to the relationship between Philippe as a person and Philippe as the King of Belgium. The former is comparable to the Divine Self (*dhat*), while the position 'the King of Belgium' is comparable to the position 'God' (*ilah*). *Dhat* is the Self that occupies the position of godness (*uluhah*). Although in reality there is an overlap, the denotations of the two terms, the Divine Self (*dhat*) and God (*ilah*), are different. This is comparable to the difference between the word 'Philippe' and the phrase 'the King of Belgium'; each has a linguistically different denotation even though the two overlap in reality (Philippe *is* the King of Belgium). When explaining the difference between the concept of the Divine Self (*dhat*) and the concept of God (*ilah*), Ibn Arabi says that 'it is like when we talk about the Sultan as a Sultan rather than as a human being' (2011, Vol. 2, p. 95).



### 9.3 Knowing Ultimate Reality as God (*ilah*)

Ibn Arabi repeats that God (*ilah*) created the world so that the world may know Him (Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 196). Hence, he posits that while ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) is mainly unknown and unknowable, ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) is, to an extent, both knowable and known. He states the following: ‘the world never knew anything about the Real [ultimate reality] except [what is associated with] His title, which is being God [*ilah*]’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 101). Considering that limitation is a necessary condition for anything to be known by a human being, Ibn Arabi explains that by being God (*ilah*), ultimate reality enters into limitation in order for people to know Him (Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 106). The limitation associated with the position of ‘godness’ (*uluhah*) is contrasted with the unlimitedness essential to the Divine Self (*dhat*) (Ibid., p. 105).

One should not, however, be confused by Ibn Arabi’s occasional claim that it is impossible for that which is ‘godded over’ (*ma’luh*) to know God (*ilah*) (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 97). What he means in such instances is perhaps that it is impossible for us to know *what it is like* to be God (*ilah*), as we must become God to gain this type of knowledge. This is metaphysically impossible as we (that which is godded over) are by definition *not* God; as I mentioned in earlier chapters, Ibn Arabi defines the world as everything other than God.

In his thesis of ultimate reality, Ibn Arabi introduces three channels through which one could obtain knowledge of God (*ilah*). They are: the rational faculty; the scriptures; and the religious experience.

**The rational faculty** indicates what people may come to know about God (*ilah*) based on reasoning and logical investigation. This includes all of the metaphysical arguments for the existence of God. The arguments that Ibn Arabi

develops and endorses for ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) are the same as those put forward by theologians and philosophers of religion with reference to God in natural theology. This is partly because Ibn Arabi's concept of God (*ilah*) is almost identical with the theistic concept of God. Hence, the ontological argument, the cosmological argument and the argument(s) from design are applicable to (and employable in) Ibn Arabi's concept of God (*ilah*). For example, Ibn Arabi defends the cosmological argument several times in his writings. The version that he seems to advocate is similar to al-Ghazali's version (i.e., the *kalam* cosmological argument). Ibn Arabi begins his argument by affirming that contingent beings *begin* to exist (*muhdathat*). Anything that *begins* to exist must require a cause for its existence, and all causes need a first cause which does not have a beginning. This beginning-less cause is what we call God (*ilah*) (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 8, p. 209).<sup>35</sup> However, Ibn Arabi does not seem to display a great deal of enthusiasm for metaphysical arguments pertaining to the existence of God. This attitude stems from his tendency to evaluate such arguments epistemically. He even sometimes attempts to reduce the metaphysical arguments to epistemic ones. Occasionally he proposes the argument that there are two things in existence: God and the world. *Knowing* the latter leads one to *knowing* the former (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 140). For Ibn Arabi, the value of an argument is determined by the amount of knowledge it provides about God. He does not seem to think that metaphysical arguments for the existence of God provide much knowledge of Him. The cosmological argument, for instance (if it succeeds), establishes only that there is a Being that causes the universe to be and sustains it. This amount of knowledge does not seem to greatly excite Ibn Arabi. He once complained that if one

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<sup>35</sup> For further discussion of the arguments for the existence of God see: A. Plantinga (1966, 1982); W. L. Rowe (1998); W. L. Craig (2001); R. Swinburne (2004) and Y. Nagasawa (2011). For detailed discussions of al-Ghazali's *kalam* cosmological argument in particular see Craig (1979, 1997) and Craig and Sinclair (2009).

used only philosophical arguments, one would know *of* God but would never be able to *know* God, (which is for him of course the more important issue) (Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 392).<sup>36</sup> Thus, he sometimes undermines metaphysical arguments that require one to take a long journey through a chain of contingent beings (causes) to reach God (the first cause). Instead, Ibn Arabi suggests, one should reflect directly upon God Himself (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 212). In fact, on a few isolated occasions he even seems to recommend that one should abstain from intellectual reflection and investigation altogether and submit totally to the scriptures and religious experience in order to gain knowledge (Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 227).

The rational faculty also has the role of maintaining the coherence of the concept of God, which Ibn Arabi considers part of knowing God. Theistic philosophers of religion have long been concerned with the coherence of the concept of God and, accordingly, deciding what should be applicable and inapplicable to Him. There has been a long debate among Islamic theologians over how to coherently maintain Islamic claims about the concept of God. Questions include, for instance, whether God, as an omnipotent being, is able to do evil, or whether this is precluded by God's absolute goodness.

Ibn Arabi finds that the rational faculty, in its two ways, provides warranted knowledge of God, yet he accuses the knowledge of being limited. He seems to consider knowledge obtained through the rational faculty similar to the knowledge one may gain about a building by limiting oneself to its blueprints. The actual building extends beyond these blueprints. If one's conception of the building is limited to the blueprints, he is still warranted in his knowledge but he is undoubtedly

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<sup>36</sup> Ibn Arabi's phrase could be translated literally as: 'His status [as God], not his essence [*a'ynhu*], is known through theoretical [philosophical] evidences' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, p. 392).

missing a lot. Ibn Arabi continually points out that reasoning and philosophy limit our understanding of God, as His vastness revolts against and extends beyond them. He says that those who wish to truly know God must leave their reasoning behind (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 6, p. 319). Further, he posits that one is not warranted in objecting to an affirmation of God obtained through other channels of knowledge merely on the basis that it undermines reason; it is unjustifiable to prioritise the rational faculty over other channels of knowledge that may have a wider scope (e.g., religious experience).

Ibn Arabi's views on rational investigations with regard to knowing God in particular are implicitly summarised in the dialogue that he has with the great philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in their famous meeting while Ibn Arabi was a young man. Ibn Arabi delineates the story of the meeting in detail. He states:

And so one fine day, I went to Cordova, to the house of Abu'l Walid Ibn Rushd (Averroes). He had expressed the desire to meet me personally, because he had heard of the revelations that God had accorded me in the course of spiritual retirement, and he had made no secret of his astonishment at what he had been told. For this reason my father, who was one of his friends, sent me to his house one day, pretexting some sort of errand, in reality to enable Averroes to have a talk with me. At that time I was still a beardless youth. When I entered, the master arose from his place, received me with signal marks of friendship and consideration, and finally embraced me. Then he said: 'Yes.' and I in turn said: 'Yes.' His joy was great at noting that I had understood. But then taking cognizance of what had called forth his joy, I added: 'No.' Immediately Averroes winced, the color went out of his cheeks, he seemed to doubt his own thought. He asked me this question: What manner

of solution have you found through divine illumination and inspiration? Is it identical with that which we found from speculative reflection? I replied: Yes and no. Between the yes and no, spirits take their flight from their matter and heads are separated from their bodies.’ Averroes turned pale, I saw him tremble; he murmured the ritual phrase ‘There is no power save in God’—for he had understood my allusion (as quoted in Corbin, 1997, pp. 41–42).

This was an astonishing meeting as it paired probably the most important figure in Islamic philosophy with probably the most important figure in Islamic mysticism. Ibn Arabi does not explicitly state what the topic of the dialogue between him and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) was. He seems to leave it intentionally vague. Michael Chodkiewicz asserts that the subject of the discussion between the two was the resurrection of the body (as quoted in Addas, 1993, p. 37, note 17). He claims that the connection is made clear in the pages preceding the passage where Ibn Arabi tells the story. Chodkiewicz, however, does not seem to explain what that connection is. Chodkiewicz’s interpretation, I posit, is inaccurate for two reasons. First, the preceding pages discuss various things, including the creation of human beings (see Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 232–34). The mention of the resurrection comes only in one short sentence within the discussion (Ibid., p. 234). It seems arbitrary to infer the topic from this particular sentence alone. In addition, Ibn Arabi tends to jump from one subject to another in his writings without a clear connection between the subjects. Hence, even if we assume that the preceding pages were in fact discussing the resurrection of the body, unless there is a clear connection between them and the story, it is perfectly possible that Ibn Arabi has moved on from the subject by introducing this story. Second, it is highly unlikely that Ibn Rushd (Averroes) would

refer to such a specific topic (i.e., the resurrection of the body) in this enigmatic way. Ibn Rushd definitely assumed that Ibn Arabi understood what he was referring to; why would he think that Ibn Arabi knew from the word ‘Yes’ that Ibn Rushd was referring to resurrection rather than any other topic? More importantly, how could Ibn Arabi have reckoned that this was what Ibn Rushd (Averroes) meant? This seems highly implausible.

I propose that what Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Ibn Arabi were referring to in their mysterious dialogue was something more general, concerning the outlining of their respective disciplines. They seem to discuss the essential difference between philosophy and mysticism in knowledge, and knowing God in particular. This is a topic that is of great importance for both traditions, yet they have completely different approaches to it. While Ibn Rushd (Averroes), as a philosopher, is known for defending rational investigation, Ibn Arabi, as a mystic, is known for prioritising the other mystical ways of knowledge. It seems that Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who was a religious man, wanted to compare the knowledge that he obtained of God through philosophical investigation with what Ibn Arabi obtained through mysticism. He wanted to discover whether or not the content of the two knowledges are the same; Ibn Arabi replied ‘yes and no’. Ibn Arabi’s answer seems to fit well with his position on the knowledge obtained through the rational faculty. As I explained above, he endorses the rational faculty as a warranted channel for obtaining knowledge of God (*ilah*), yet he affirms that the amount of knowledge obtained is limited and is exceeded by mystical knowledge. I posit that reading the dialogue above in this way makes it clearer and more coherent.

In fact, Ibn Arabi tends to make similar comparisons between philosophy and mysticism in his writing (see for instance, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, p. 149).

Moreover, in his description of his meeting with Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Arabi apparently wanted to demonstrate the superiority of mysticism over philosophy. This is manifested in every aspect of the story, starting from Ibn Arabi's assertion that Ibn Rushd (Averroes) is the one who asked to meet him. Further, he explains in detail how Ibn Rushd (Averroes) received the young mystic with high regard and consideration. Also, he clearly shows that the philosopher is the one who wanted to learn from the mystic and not the other way around. Finally, Ibn Arabi attempts to show the inferiority of the knowledge of the philosopher by saying it is far from similar to the knowledge of mystics.

**The scriptures** refer to any knowledge of God obtained from the Quran and the Hadith. Ibn Arabi celebrates any knowledge that is provided through the scriptures and advocates its unconditional acceptance. He also rejects any form of figurative interpretation of the verses and espouses an acceptance of them without reservation or condition. Islamic theologians and philosophers of religion sometimes provide forms of reinterpretation (*ta'wil*) of the scriptures in order to maintain a philosophically and theologically coherent understanding of them. Ibn Arabi claims, however, that when theologians reinterpret the scriptures for such purposes, they give precedence to their own intellects over the scriptures. This he condemns outright (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, pp. 51, 53–54). Ibn Arabi proposes however that one should endorse the meanings of the Quran and Hadith without reinterpretation (*ta'wil*) (Ibid., Vol. 8, p. 171). However, one must take care with Ibn Arabi claims in such contexts. According to Ibn Arabi, the literal meanings of the scriptures are not necessarily immediate or are able to be inferred from analysing the texts directly. Instead, he often advocates an understanding of the scriptures inspired by religious experiences (Ibid., Vol. 1, pp.

139–140). He once states that mystics appeal in understanding some parts of the scriptures to a special faculty that is beyond the rational faculty (Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 173).

However, I maintain that if the meanings of the texts are inferred from an external source (i.e. religious experience), Ibn Arabi's position is not significantly different from the theological reinterpretation (*ta'wil*) that he condemns. While Ibn Arabi appeals to religious experience to determine the meaning of these texts, theologians appeal to linguistics, philosophy and theology.<sup>37</sup> Hence, both of them indeed give precedence to something over the scriptures. One may even claim that the theologians' appeal to linguistics and philosophy is more systematic and settled than religious experiences, which are greatly subjective and personal.

Ibn Arabi, thus, often introduces completely novel interpretations for the scriptures that are far from the immediate meaning of the text. These sometimes even directly oppose the literal meaning. For instance, the Quran states:

Then seest thou such a one as takes as his god his own vain desire? Allah has, knowing (him as such), left him astray, and sealed his hearing and his heart (and understanding), and put a cover on his sight. Who, then, will guide him after Allah (has withdrawn Guidance)? Will ye not then receive admonition?  
(45: 23)

Obviously this verse condemns one who worships his own desires, as it is understood by probably all Muslim scholars. Ibn Arabi, however, introduces a completely different meaning. For him, the verse praises the person in question; when the Quran states that God 'sealed his hearing and heart', Ibn Arabi believes that this was so that

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<sup>37</sup> I discuss reinterpretation (*ta'wil*) further below.



his heart would then be filled with the belief and remembering of God. His hearing was sealed also to prevent him from hearing any words except the words of Allah. Hence, he maintains that God is not punishing this person, as it first seems, but actually blessing him (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 202).

Ibn Arabi also proposes another meaning for the Arabic word *a'thab*, which unequivocally means 'punishment' and is used frequently in the scriptures to threaten disbelievers. He suggests that this word might in some cases be equivalent to *uthubah*, which means 'purity' and 'sweetness'. Therefore, some parts of the scriptures that many have long believed to be divine threats of 'punishment' could actually be divine promises of 'purity' and 'sweetness' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 202). This alternate definition of *a'thab* does not seem to have any linguistic basis and may be considered an unfounded claim.

There are other similar examples in which Ibn Arabi ignores not just the literal meaning of the scriptures but often any plausible meaning. Affifi hence complains that '[i]n theory Ibnul 'Arabi condemns *ta'wil* (interpretation) but in practice he indulges in a far worse method of understanding the Quran than *ta'wil*. He interprets the Quran in such a way as to fit within his [...] doctrine even at the cost of violating its language and grammar' (1964, p. 192).

**The religious experience** is the third channel through which one may obtain knowledge of God (*ilah*). Ibn Arabi uses many technical terms to indicate various kinds of religious experience. This includes tasting (*dhawq*), witnessing (*shuhud*) and unveiling (*kashf*), amongst others. According to Ibn Arabi, religious experience is the most important channel for obtaining knowledge of God (*ilah*). It is difficult to give an exhaustive description of his thesis on the matter due to the breadth of this topic, to

which he devotes a great deal of attention throughout his writings. I will, however, attempt to give a brief introduction that may suit the purposes of this chapter.

It seems that most of the religious experiences that Ibn Arabi discusses can be categorised into three kinds. The first are those which include sensory experiences of other beings; Ibn Arabi repeatedly talks about his perceptual experiences of God (*ilah*), and of prophets, mystics and other key figures (see for instance, Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 235). He may claim that through these experiences he engages in conversations with those figures. The second type is typical mystical experience; Ibn Arabi on several occasions addresses the mystical experiences of unity with God and of freedom from the individual ego (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 290). It is not clear what type of knowledge Ibn Arabi thinks these experiences may provide though. The third and final category of religious experience consists of particular messages or inspired understanding. For instance, Ibn Arabi tends to interpret the scriptures based on the understanding that he believes has been given to him through a religious experience, and often attempts to settle debates on theological issues or validate some of his unusual views by claiming that he was inspired by religious experiences (see for example, Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 148).

The three kinds of religious experiences occasionally overlap. For instance, Ibn Arabi might introduce a personal religious experience that involves meeting the Prophet Mohammed, who gives him a particular message. For instance, he claims that his book *Fusus al-Hikam* was actually given to him by the prophet Mohammed in a religious experience and that he was asked to share it with others (Ibn Arabi, 2009, pp. 44–45).

Another issue that seems to concern Ibn Arabi with regard to religious experiences is their epistemic value. It is common among mystics to consider the

knowledge obtained from their religious experiences to be true, regardless of whether or not they can support their claim with arguments and evidence. Ibn Arabi is no exception. Like mystics from all traditions, he places religious experience at the highest level when it comes to obtaining knowledge, particularly knowledge of God. The mystics' certainty and trust of religious experiences might be because such experiences are, to them, similar to other direct experiences where one is certain of the knowledge obtained even if it is not possible to provide arguments or clear evidence for it, such as experiencing pain (Donovan, 1979, p. 56).

However, it is important to note that Ibn Arabi thinks that religious experiences vary with regard to the amount and the truthfulness of the knowledge they can provide. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, he places mystics on different levels. The amount and the accuracy of any knowledge obtained from religious experience are typically dependent on the level of the mystic who has the experience (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 140). He affirms that not all knowledge obtained through religious experience must necessarily be true. Consequently, he occasionally addresses disagreement among mystics, and dismisses claims that appear to have been obtained from religious experience (see for example: *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 482; Vol. 5, pp. 316–317). According to Ibn Arabi, the highest level of religious experience, in terms of the truthfulness and accuracy of the knowledge, is what he calls 'unveiling' (*kashf*) (*Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 398). Unveiling (*kashf*), or some form of it, seems to be available only to a small number of elite mystics (*Ibid.*, p. 482). He maintains that this type of religious experience may provide *definitive* knowledge. He seems to consider the certainty of the knowledge obtained from unveiling (*kashf*) to be similar to the certainty of *a priori* knowledge or knowledge of mathematical axioms. This is true at least for the individual who experiences it (*Ibid.*, p. 57), to the extent that the

experiencer will never be able to reject or even question its content, Ibn Arabi confirms (Ibid., p. 482).<sup>38</sup>

## 9.4 The Concept of Ultimate Reality as God (*ilah*) and Religion

### 9.4.1 Religious Concept(s) of God

As we have seen in previous chapters, Ibn Arabi seems to posit that ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) largely concern metaphysics rather than religion. On the other hand, he explicitly introduces ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) as the object of religious belief and worship (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 496).

In his discussion of his concept of God (*ilah*), Ibn Arabi sometimes appears to differentiate between ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) as *a metaphysical entity*, and the religious concept(s) of Him. According to Ibn Arabi, religious concepts of God consist of various formations constructed by religions and religious traditions to depict ultimate reality as God (*ilah*), here a metaphysical entity. Hence, he occasionally contrasts the metaphysical God (*ilah*) with what he calls the ‘god of beliefs’ (i.e., the religious concept(s) of Him) (Ibid., p. 949).<sup>39</sup> He espouses that no one has actually yet worshipped God *simplister* (i.e., the metaphysical God), as people only worship their own concept(s) of Him (Ibid., Vol. 8, p. 195).

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<sup>38</sup> For further discussion of religious experiences see: W. Proudfoot (1985, 1992); J. Runzo and C. K. Ihara (1986); W. P. Alston (1992, 1993); R. W. Hood Jr. (1995); C. F. Davis (1999); G. Griffith-Dickson (2000) and W. James (2012).

<sup>39</sup> In this chapter, I am using the phrase ‘ultimate reality as God’ (*ilah*), and the phrase ‘the metaphysical God’ (*ilah*) interchangeably, because ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) is a metaphysical entity in Ibn Arabi’s doctrine, in contrast with the religious concepts of God, which are mainly epistemic.

In addition, Ibn Arabi evaluates the truthfulness of various religious concepts of God by how accurate they are in corresponding to and representing the metaphysical God (*ilah*). At the top of these religious concepts of God sits the Islamic concept, which Ibn Arabi believes is the only concept that represents the metaphysical God (*ilah*) perfectly and accurately. All other religious concepts of God, however, are inaccurate. He states:

‘We [who uphold the correct religious concept of God—Muslims] match the name Allah with Allah Himself [i.e., the metaphysical God (*ilah*)], and because of that we are called happy knowers, compared to the unhappy ignorants [who uphold incorrect religious concept(s) of God] who do not match the name Allah with Allah Himself’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 539).

Due to disagreement among Muslim theologians and philosophers on several issues concerning the Islamic concept of God, Ibn Arabi introduces his own thesis on the matter. He postulates that, as the principal source of the Islamic concept of God is the scriptures (i.e., the Quran and Hadith), one needs to submit totally to the dictates of the scriptures in constructing the concept of God. If we examine the Quran and Hadith, we find that they introduce God in two ways. Sometimes, they affirm the transcendence of God and explicitly state that there is nothing like unto Him. At other times, however, they confirm that God has some attributes that we humans also have, such as being a Hearer and a Seer, or that He laughs or can be happy.<sup>40</sup> Ibn Arabi calls the former ‘the way of *tanzih*’, and the latter ‘the way of *tashbih*’. In Islamic theology, *tanzih* refers to the declaration of Allah’s incomparability with anything, and *tashbih* indicates the declaration of Allah’s (partial) similarity to his creation. Islamic

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<sup>40</sup> There is also a third way through which the scripture introduces God as an OmniGod, which does not concern the discussion here.

theologians have different attitudes towards dealing with the Quranic verses and Hadiths that adopt *tanzih* and *tashbih*.

Most Islamic theologians embrace the way of *tanzih* in introducing the concept of God and prioritise the Quranic verses and Hadiths that affirm the transcendence and incomparability of God (with anything). Accordingly, they interpret the other verses that insinuate some similarities between God and human beings figuratively through reinterpretation (*ta'wil*). Applying reinterpretation (*ta'wil*) to these verses by the Islamic theological schools was far from arbitrary. Many Arabic words have several meanings (some more prevalent than others). Consequently, if such words are used in a Quranic verse or a Hadith and the immediate meaning appears incompatible with God's transcendence and incomparability, theologians appeal to the other meanings (if context serves). For instance, the scriptures talk about God having a hand (*yad*). In order to avoid undermining God's transcendence and incomparability, which they think possessing hands seems to do, theologians say that *yad* in such contexts should not be taken to indicate 'hand' but, instead, to mean 'ability' (*qudrah*), the second meaning of the word *yad*. This method of reinterpretation (*ta'wil*) is primarily practised in Islamic history by three theological schools: Mu'tazilah; Asha'rite; and Maturidite.

The second attitude seems to endorse the way of *tashbih* and, hence, prioritises the verses that ascribe attributes to God that we humans have over the verses that embrace His transcendence and incomparability. The advocates of this attitude tend to adopt an anthropomorphic approach to divine attributes stated in the scriptures. For example, they maintain that the verses stating that God is a Hearer and a Seer should be understood, more or less, in the same way that we understand that human beings are hearers and seers. This attitude is less common among Muslim theologians; its

followers are known as *Mujassimah* (Anthropomorphists), a term mostly employed with negative connotations.

Ibn Arabi seems to complain that both approaches fail to submit totally to the scriptures, and that neither is warranted in prioritising one way of the scriptures over another (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 437). He therefore proposes that the best way to identify the Islamic concept of God (and thus the perfect religious concept of God) is to embrace, following the ways of Quran and Hadith, both the incomparability of God (with anything) (*tanzih*), and His partial similarity with His creation (*tashbih*). Ibn Arabi seems to think that the simultaneous affirmation of *tanzih* and *tashbih* in the scriptures is not accidental at all, but both intentional and essential to God's concept. In this sense, the aim of the scriptures is to account for the vastness and unlimited nature of God that neither *tanzih* nor *tashbih* alone could account for. Affirming both God's transcendence and His (partial) similarity (with His creation) is a way to make the concept less limited, a supposed advantage for any religious concept of God. The freer a concept is, the more able it becomes to incorporate and represent ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). Ibn Arabi celebrates the Quranic verse that states: 'Naught is as His likeness; and He is the Hearer, the Seer' (42:11). This seems to support his proposition by affirming simultaneously that nothing is like God and also that He is a Hearer and Seer. Ibn Arabi explains that 'whoever defines Him following the divine definition [i.e., Quran], [would define Him by] combining the declaration of Allah's incomparability to anything [*tanzih*] and the declaration of Allah's [partial] similarity with his creation [*tashbih*]' (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, p. 195).

It is essential to note that the declaration of God's partial similarity with His creation (*tashbih*) in Ibn Arabi's thesis is not identical to anthropomorphism which Ibn Arabi firmly rejects (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 140; Vol. 3, p. 362). *Tashbih* means that God

and human beings may share an attribute but not that their attributes are similar *per se*. Even though the Quran attributes hands to God, it does not say that they are similar to human hands. The similarity (*tashbih*) intended in such verses is merely that both have hands (which the scriptures affirm) and *not* that they have *similar* hands (which the scriptures reject). An anthropomorphist interpretation of the divine attributes is imposed upon the scriptures rather than inferred from them (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 73). Ibn Arabi stresses that we should follow the scripture strictly and refrain from imposing any further interpretations (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 362). Because of this, he is exceptionally tolerant towards the doctrine of *tafwid*. As mentioned in Chapter Two, he identifies this doctrine with the view of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*), who were the early generations of Muslims (Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 139; Vol. 5, p. 85). The advocates of *tafwid* argue that one should not dismiss any part of the scriptures concerning God's ontology or prioritise any part over another. Instead, one should endorse everything in them unconditionally, and yet maintain an agnostic approach with regard to the specific meanings of the divine attributes stated therein. Ibn Arabi seems to uphold that the doctrine of *tafwid* is the best among the theological schools in representing the Islamic concept of God. He seems to encourage common Muslims to follow it as it succeeds in preserving the ways of scripture when constructing the Islamic concept of God (Ibid., Vol. 3, pp. 7, 450; Vol. 5, pp. 84–85).

However, although he admits that the doctrine of *tafwid* succeeds in following the scriptures, he seems to maintain that a failure to know the exact meanings of these attributes is a setback for this doctrine (Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 331–332). He thus affirms that some of the elite mystics actually exceed the doctrine of *tafwid* on this issue. Through religious experience, they succeed in knowing the exact meanings of God's attributes, even the more controversial ones such as divine laughter (Ibid., Vol. 1, pp.



139–140; 331–332). It is notable that he never explains these meanings; they seem inexplicable and likely infringe the rules of logic.

#### **9.4.2 Ibn Arabi's Inclusivism**

There are diverse religious traditions in the world, each with its own beliefs about divinity, reality, us, and many other essential issues. These religions and religious traditions appear inconsistent with each other on a number of key issues, sometimes substantially. There are three main philosophical attitudes towards religious diversity: religious exclusivism; religious inclusivism; and religious pluralism.<sup>41</sup> Religious exclusivism is probably the most widespread attitude among believers in all religions. It maintains that there is only one true religion and that all other religions are false. To obtain salvation, hence, one needs to follow the one true religion. Religious inclusivism, on the other hand, is vast and includes several distinct models, which renders it difficult to offer a perfect and all-encompassing definition. Some inclusivists seem to uphold that only one religion is true, though virtuous people can be saved even if they do not know of the true religion (Zagzebski and Miller, 2009, p. 443). Others believe that, while only one religion is completely true, other religions and religious traditions might be partially true (Runzo, 2011, p. 65). Religious pluralism also has several versions but their central belief is that all religions are true and that no religion is superior to the others. Every religion reflects ultimate reality in its own unique way, a pluralist would claim.

Exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism hold a realist position towards the object of religion—ultimate reality. Inclusivism and pluralism, however, agree on the salvation of the followers of all religions. Inclusivism and exclusivism, on the other

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<sup>41</sup> Non-believers may also adopt atheistic or agnostic attitudes.

hand, agree on maintaining a realist attitude towards religious claims and beliefs, and also on prioritising one religion over the others.<sup>42</sup>

According to some of his statements, Ibn Arabi seems to be an inclusivist. While he maintains that there is a correct and accurate religious concept of God (i.e., the God of Islam), he affirms that holders of false religious concepts of God are excused and will be saved in the afterlife.

Ibn Arabi explains that aiming for godness (*uluhah*) is true of every worshipper and worship, including religions with false concepts of God. Worshippers of a false god (a tree, for example) only worship it because they think that the worshipped object is God. Thus, they attribute godness (*uluhah*) to the wrong object. The worshipper, Ibn Arabi claims, is mistaken in his attribution and not in aiming for godness (*uluhah*). Considering there is only one being who exclusively holds the position of godness—the real God—the worshipper’s true aim, though unknowingly, is the real God. Furthermore, since God knows that the worshipper aims for godness (and not treeness for instance), He accepts the worship (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 539). The following analogy may clarify Ibn Arabi’s view further. Let us say that someone goes to a gallery and sees a beautiful painting by an artist called Omar. Let us also say that the visitor loves the painting and wants to compliment the painter on his fine work. He then goes to the guard of the gallery, thinking he is Omar, and compliments him on *his* fine painting. The visitor attributes the painting to the wrong person (i.e., the guard), and consequently pays his compliments to him. Note that the visitor does not care about the guard other than that he thinks that he is the painter. Hence, the compliment is meant for Omar (the painter) even though the visitor pays it

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<sup>42</sup> For further discussion of the philosophical approaches to religious diversity see: H. Netland (1997); P. J. Griffiths (2001); J. Runzo; Basinger (2002); J. Hick (2007); A. Plantinga (2008) and C. Meister (2011).

to someone else. Let us say that Omar was actually standing near the guard and hears the compliment. Considering that Omar has listened to the compliment, it has thus reached its real object. The situation is similar with regard to worshipping anything other than God, following Ibn Arabi's inclusivism. The man who worships a tree or a rock is only worshipping them because he thinks they are the 'being who is worthy of worship'. However, considering that God is omniscient, the worship should reach Him; he knows that the person worships, and that it is intended for the 'being who is worthy of worship', even though he mistakenly directs his worship to something or someone else.

I would finally like to address how Ibn Arabi deals with the Quranic verses and Hadiths that threaten those who worship a false god with punishment in Hell for eternity. The Quran, for example, states: 'indeed, those who disbelieve and commit wrong [or injustice]—never will Allah forgive them, nor will He guide them to a path. Except the path of Hell; they will abide therein forever. And that, for Allah, is [always] easy' (4: 168–169). In order to explain how he could reconcile his inclusivism with such Quranic verses, Ibn Arabi seems to develop three different views.<sup>43</sup>

First, Ibn Arabi sometimes argues that people are to be punished in Hell for worshipping false gods but *not for eternity*. They will be punished only for a limited time. Different versions of this view have also been attributed to several key Islamic theologians such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim (1292–1350), as well as to

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<sup>43</sup> Many Muslim scholars seem to agree on three issues with regard to the situation of the disbelievers of the God of Islam in the afterlife: First, they maintain that anyone who never knows about Islam will be examined in the afterlife, and then that individual will determine his or her destiny. Second, they argue that non-Muslims who insist on rejecting Islam, despite their knowledge of it, might be punished in Hell in the afterlife. Third, they add that God may, for any reason or without reason, pardon whoever He wills to pardon.

some of the Prophet Mohammed's companions (al-Turky, al-Arnaut and Ibn Abi al-izz, 1997, Vol. 2, p. 626). For Ibn Arabi, though, believers in false gods might be kept in Hell for eternity (as the Quran threatens), though their *eternal* stay in Hell is not all a punishment, as staying in Hell and being punished in Hell are two different things. After the due punishment is over, Hell will cease to be a bad place and might even become a blessed and a good place. He seems to think that there will be metaphysical changes to the people in Hell or to Hell itself, through which people in it will find joy there (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 6, p. 171). To support his claim, Ibn Arabi affirms that, even according to the scriptures, Hell is not necessarily a bad place for everyone in it; for instance, the scriptures talk about the Angels of punishment who, of course, would not find it painful to be in Hell (Ibid.).

Still, if those who believe in false gods were not doing something wrong, as Ibn Arabi upholds, why would they be punished at all? Ibn Arabi's answer to this question is rather unconventional. He states that anyone who worships a false god will be punished, not for the sake of the real God (i.e., Allah), but for the sake of the false god that was worshipped. Ibn Arabi seems to think that worshipping a false god is an unjust act and a wrongdoing against that false god. Therefore, God will punish the worshipper so as to restore justice for the false god that he has worshipped (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 539). This justification is not particularly compelling as it is not clear how praying to a false god is an injustice to the false god, and even more so if the false god is unconscious or imaginary. It is not clear that a totem, for instance, has moral rights as such. Therefore, his first soteriological view cannot be compatible with his inclusivism.

Second, Ibn Arabi provides an alternate view elsewhere. He says that even though God threatens disbelievers with the punishment in Hell, He is unlikely to do

so. Ibn Arabi justifies his view by saying that failing to fulfil a threat is a quality of greatness and benevolence and, when one considers that God is omnibenevolent, He may act according to this quality. Ibn Arabi quotes part of an Arabic poem in which the poet describes his own greatness and benevolence, stating: ‘When[ever] I threaten [someone of something bad] [...] I will fail to fulfil my threat’ (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 154). The poet claims that because he is great and benevolent, whenever he threatens a wrongdoer, he shall forgive him and not go through with his threat; so would God, Ibn Arabi claims. This view seems more tenable than the first one but does not seem decisive. His argument here, if it succeeds, establishes that God will *probably* not punish those who believe in false gods but does not guarantee that He will not do so. If God’s threats in the Quran to the disbelievers are just, as Ibn Arabi most probably maintains, God’s benevolence does not necessarily entail that He will not punish them, as fulfilling a just threat is not a breach of benevolence. However, if the holders of false concepts of God are not doing something wrong, as Ibn Arabi claims, they should not be vulnerable to punishment in Hell at all. Therefore, this second view cannot be compatible with Ibn Arabi’s inclusivism either.

Ibn Arabi sometimes adds a further detail for his view here. He says that the Quran follows the ways of Arabs in expressing its views, as is confirmed by the Quran itself (26: 195). Considering that abstaining from fulfilling threats is something common among Arabs, as the above poem demonstrates, so this must be the intention of the Quran as well; namely, that God will abstain from fulfilling the threats of punishment in Hell (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 154).

This further justification, however, is also unconvincing. What a single Arab poet says in one poem cannot be said to be the norm for all Arabs. What the poem demonstrates is that that the poet in particular chooses not to fulfil his threat, and not

that it is a norm for all or most benevolent Arabs to do so. Indeed, despite this poem, Arabs throughout history have taken the Quranic verses of punishment literally even though they believe in God's benevolence. In addition, even if not fulfilling threats is a norm among benevolent Arabs, what the Quran confirms is that it follows the Arabic ways of expression, and not that it follows the Arabic social or ethical norms. In several cases, in fact, the Quran contradicts the Arabic social norms (such as in the case of prohibiting usury (*riba*) and changing some of the Hajj rituals).

Third, in what seems to be a revision of his second view, Ibn Arabi at times confirms that God will *not* punish the holders of incorrect religious concepts of God at all (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 539). He excludes from his assertion, though, disbelievers who never seek the true God or who reject their prophets directly; both resist the truth and insist on enacting wrong deeds, and so they may be punished. In substantiating his view, Ibn Arabi quotes from the Quran: 'my mercy encompasses all things' (7: 156). He also cites a saying that Prophet Mohammed attributes to God: 'my mercy preceded my wrath' (al-Bukhari, 1980, Hadith: 7422). As God's mercy overcomes and precedes His wrath, the punishment, which is an application of God's wrath, will probably be preceded by God's forgiveness, an application of God's mercy. Ibn Arabi also appeals to another saying that he attributes to the Prophet Mohammed, affirming that the seeker of the truth (*mujtahid*) will be rewarded even if he is mistaken (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 539).

I maintain that this third view is more compatible with Ibn Arabi's inclusivism than the others, though perhaps not totally conclusive. One may object that punishment might be the application of justice rather than wrath, and restoring justice need not contradict mercy.

To summarise, Ibn Arabi maintains that the holders of false religious concepts of God are forgiven, as they unknowingly worship God. In addition, God explains that his mercy encompasses everything and that it precedes his wrath, so Ibn Arabi maintains that God will pardon the believers of false gods despite the threats of punishment stated in the scriptures.

Unfortunately, however, Ibn Arabi seems to introduce another position with regard to the relationship between religion and ultimate reality that does not seem compatible with his thesis discussed in this section. I will discuss this issue in the following section.

## **9.5 Ultimate Reality and Religion: Another Thesis**

On several occasions, Ibn Arabi appears to depart from inclusivism and develop instead a pluralistic thesis that explores the relationship between ultimate reality and religion. In this thesis, Ibn Arabi seems to defend some form of aspectual pluralism in particular. Peter Byrne, a prominent advocate of aspectual pluralism, states:

[T]he different systems of religious discourses are descriptive of one and the same reality because that reality has multiple aspects. There are pluriform religious discourses because there is a pluriform religious reality on to which each latches. [... I]t must hold that the one transcendent manifests itself in diverse ways. What religious discourses do is provide some direct cognitive contact with one or other of these manifestations, and thus some indirect contact with the transcendent in itself which is displayed in these manifestations (1995, p. 153).

Ibn Arabi takes a similar stance, as he upholds that ultimate reality manifests Himself in (and to) all religions in an infinite number of ways (2011, Vol. 5, pp. 195–96); every religion, thus, reflects an aspect of Him. He states: ‘People have formed different [beliefs and] creeds of God, and I witness [God] in all of their creeds’ (Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 196). Ibn Arabi’s aspectual pluralism seems incompatible with his inclusivist thesis (introduced in section 9.4) in three ways.

First, Ibn Arabi seems to deny that ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) is the object of religious beliefs and practices. He seems to propose, instead, that religions actually correspond to the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). What people seek in their religious beliefs is not ultimate reality in His relationship with the world as its God (*ilah*), Creator and Sustainer, but actually ultimate reality as identical with existence (*wujud*). In such contexts, then, he tends to focus on the world not as an object with an independent (or semi-independent) identity in contrast to its Creator, but as incorporated within ultimate reality’s existence.

Second, in his pluralistic thesis, Ibn Arabi proposes that religious concepts of God are not different depictions and formations constructed by religions to represent ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) as he states elsewhere. They are, instead, different *actual* manifestations of ultimate reality revealing different aspects of Him (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 5, pp. 195–196). While his inclusivist stance seems to consider religious concepts of God to be mainly dependent upon religions, his pluralistic thesis considers the religious concepts of God to be mainly dependent upon ultimate reality Himself, who manifests Himself to every religion in a particular way. Accordingly, he proposes alternative meanings for the theological terms *tanzih* and *tashbih* discussed above. In his pluralistic stance, *tanzih* and *tashbih* are employed to differentiate between religions rather than the Islamic theological schools. *Tashbih* indicates a



position that claims that ultimate reality is immanent in everything that exists, and is therefore endorsed by religions that *witness* ultimate reality in worldly objects. *Tanzih*, on the other hand, refers to an approach which contends that ultimate reality is transcendent and focuses on the aspects of ultimate reality that extend beyond the world (Ibn Arabi, 2011, Vol. 3, pp. 8–9). The concepts of *tashbih* and *tanzih* in this thesis were not meant to evaluate religions but merely to outline from whence their religious concepts of God came.

Third, likely as an outcome of the two points discussed above, Ibn Arabi seems to imply in this pluralistic thesis that all religions are equal with regard to their truthfulness and authenticity. Contrary to his inclusivist thesis, Ibn Arabi seems to assert in his pluralism that there is not one correct religious concept of God (i.e., the Islamic concept), but, indeed, that all religions and religious concepts of God are equally correct. In one of his famous poems, he states:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks. And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Kaa'ba and the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Quran. I follow the religion of love. Wherever its camel mounts turn, that is my religion and my faith (1911, Poem XI, p. 67).

Hence, he proposes that if one wants to obtain a better understanding of ultimate reality he must seek to see Him through all religions and religious traditions. He states:

The perfect knower knows Him in every picture in which He manifests Himself. The unknower [on the other hand] does not know Him except according to his own creed [and religion], and he would reject Him if He manifests Himself in any other [creed or religion]. Considering that he [i.e., the unknower] ties himself to his own creed [and religion alone], he rejects other people's creeds [and beliefs of God] (Ibn Arabi, 2011 Vol. 5, p. 196).

Ibn Arabi's pluralistic thesis has the advantage of being attributed to 'perfect knowers' (i.e., perfect mystics); throughout his writings, he insists that his aspectual pluralism is only available to the greatest mystics who can *see* reality as it is (see for example, *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 450; Vol. 4, p. 190). As outlined in Chapter Two, Ibn Arabi unequivocally considers himself among the greatest mystics and claims their doctrine and views as his own. Whenever he attributes a view to the great mystics, it usually means that this view is his own personal opinion on the subject.

However, two difficulties may undermine Ibn Arabi's pluralistic thesis. First, it is hardly compatible with Islam, or theism in general. It does not give Islam any superiority over other religious concepts of God. In considering all religions and concepts of God equally true, including paganism, Ibn Arabi explicitly contradicts the Quran and Hadith. One of the strongest emphases in the Quran is that there is only one God (i.e., Allah), and that all other gods are false. It explicitly states 'There is no god except Allah' (3: 63), and 'your god is one God. There is no god [worthy of worship] except Him' (2: 163). Contradicting the Quran and Hadith is a high price that Ibn Arabi appears to work hard not to pay in other parts of his work.

The second difficulty of Ibn Arabi's pluralistic thesis is that it describes a completely different relationship between ultimate reality and the world from his

views discussed in the previous sections. According to his pluralism, Ibn Arabi does not seem to ascribe any role to his concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). In omitting Ibn Arabi's concept of God (*ilah*), however, some of Ibn Arabi's metaphysical views may become unclear, such as his insistence on the metaphysical contrast between God and world. He asserts that ultimate reality is God (*ilah*) only in the sense that He is the Creator, the Lord and the Sustainer of the world.

Unfortunately, I do not have a decisive solution to the inconsistency between Ibn Arabi's pluralistic thesis and his inclusivist thesis. One may propose though that while the inclusivist thesis indicates Ibn Arabi's position as a Muslim, the pluralistic thesis may represent his universal position on the matter, which may apply to all religions. Nevertheless, there still exists an acute incompatibility between his 'Islamic thesis' and his 'universal thesis'. While the former maintains that only one concept is correct and accurate, the latter maintains that all religious concepts are equally correct. In addition, Ibn Arabi can either maintain that religious concepts of God are different concepts constructed by religions in order to depict God, or he can say that those religious concepts are different aspects of God, but he cannot maintain both. One further suggestion is that maybe Ibn Arabi thinks that Muslims should pursue Islamic inclusivism; however, from a trans-religious perspective, pluralism should be pursued. Nonetheless, I think that Ibn Arabi's teaching would be better off without the pluralistic thesis. All of Ibn Arabi's other views and concepts seem to complement one another and comprise a consistent and unified thesis of ultimate reality, which seems at odds with his pluralistic thesis.

Having presented the topic of the religious concepts of God according to Ibn Arabi, my interpretation of his thesis of ultimate reality is now complete: (i) ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) indicates God in Himself with no relationship or

reference to anything else; (ii) ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) indicates ultimate reality in relation to the world; and (iii) ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) indicates ultimate reality as identical with existence, which introduces a deeper metaphysical relationship between God and reality.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). I explained that this concept indicates ultimate reality in His relationship with the world as its God (*ilah*). Ibn Arabi treats godness (*uluhah*) as a position that ultimate reality occupies like kingship or sultanship. He affirms that ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) holds the title God (*ilah*), in the same sense that a person may hold the title 'the King'. In addition, 'that which is godded over' (*ma'luh*) (the world) is necessary for God to be God (*ilah*), in the same way a kingdom is necessary for a king to be a king.

Further, I examined Ibn Arabi's views on knowing ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). He defends three channels through which one can obtain knowledge of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). They are the rational faculty, the scriptures and religious experience. He considers the rational faculty, though, the least significant of these channels.

Furthermore, I examined Ibn Arabi's views on the relationship between ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) and religion. He maintains that ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) is the object of religions, religious beliefs and religious practices. He postulates that religious concepts of God are different depictions constructed by religions and religious traditions in order to represent ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). Hence, Ibn Arabi sometimes contrasts the gods of religions with ultimate reality as God (*ilah*), here a metaphysical entity. Also, he espouses that religions vary in how accurate they

are in representing ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) in their religious concepts of Him. He advocates that the Islamic concept represents the perfect, and only correct, religious concept of God. However, as there have been disagreements among Islamic theologians and philosophers on the exact Islamic concept of God, Ibn Arabi proposes that one should prioritise the ways of the scriptures on the matter. He then posits that, in following the ways of the scriptures, one must declare both the transcendence of God and His incomparability with anything (*tanzih*), and the partial similarity of God with his creation (*tashbih*). Moreover, Ibn Arabi upholds that though there is only one correct religious concept of God, the holders of false religious concepts of God are pardoned because they intend to worship the real God; as He is omniscient, He receives their worship.

I concluded the chapter by addressing a thesis that Ibn Arabi seems to propose for the relationship between ultimate reality and religion that seems incompatible with his inclusivist thesis. According to this thesis, Ibn Arabi seems to maintain a version of aspectual pluralism in which he defends that all religious concepts of God are actual self-manifestations of ultimate reality, each revealing a different aspect of Him. Therefore, all religions and religious traditions are equally true and authentic. There is no superiority of one religion over the others, and the best way for one to gain a better understanding of ultimate reality is to witness Him through all religions and religious traditions. I argued, however, that Ibn Arabi's pluralism alienates his conception of ultimate reality from theism in general, and from Islam in particular. It seems explicitly to contradict Quranic verses and Hadiths. I proposed that his thesis of ultimate reality would be stronger without his pluralism as the rest of his thesis can be seen as unified and coherent; this thesis hardly seems to fit in.

This chapter completes my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality, in which I proposed that Ibn Arabi's thesis is best presented through three concepts: the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) and ultimate reality as God (*ilah*).

# Conclusion

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In my thesis, I have sought to develop a systematic and philosophically coherent conception of ultimate reality for Ibn Arabi. I have done this by analysing, developing and utilising Ibn Arabi's various views and concepts that he offers in his writings.

I began this thesis by providing a brief biography of Ibn Arabi and the historical context of his work. I outlined his relationship and involvement with the traditional scholarship of his time, which included among other subjects philosophy and theology. In addition, as Ibn Arabi introduced himself solely as a mystic, I discussed his outlook on (and relationship to) the Islamic mystical tradition, including the metaphysical trend of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). I also addressed the various approaches to Ibn Arabi's doctrine taken by contemporary scholars. I highlighted that in my thesis, I have endorsed an analytic philosophical approach that seems to be lacking so far in the study of Ibn Arabi.

In Chapter Two, I examined one of the principal factors behind the obscurity of Ibn Arabi's style, particularly in his presentation of his thesis of ultimate reality. Ibn Arabi postulates that people vary in their ability to comprehend the conception of ultimate reality; accordingly, he tends to speak at different levels in order to reach out to the various comprehension abilities of his audience. He thus presents the thesis of ultimate reality according to the understandings of four levels, awarding the highest level to the elite mystics. His idiosyncratic style of presentation is highly confusing, considering that he presents all levels from a first-person perspective and (or) in an approving language, even though the views that belong to the different levels might be incompatible with each other at times. I suggested that his adoption of all these levels stems from an inclusivist stance towards the different Islamic schools and sects

which are represented by the various levels. He appears to believe that each school or sect possesses a single facet of the multi-faceted truth of God. It seems that he justifies his multi-levelled presentation because of this belief. Furthermore, I argued that even though he presents all of the different levels in approving language, only some of the levels represent his own opinions on the matter. Accordingly, I developed detailed guidelines to distinguish Ibn Arabi's own views from the sea of the views that belong to the various levels. In the guidelines, I argued that as he presents himself merely as a mystic, only the views that he attributes to the mystical tradition should be taken to represent his own doctrine. In addition, in cases where he presents views in an approving language and (or) from a first-person perspective without attributing them either to the mystical tradition or to any other school or tradition, I proposed that such views should also be considered part of Ibn Arabi's doctrine. Any other views should be discarded as irrelevant to his doctrine even if he appears to adopt them.

In Chapter Three, I examined two of the key contemporary approaches to Ibn Arabi's doctrine, developed by Toshihiko Izutsu and William C. Chittick. According to Izutsu, Ibn Arabi's ontology is totally encompassed in his concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*). Everything there is, is divided between the unmanifested ultimate reality on the one hand and its self-manifestations on the other. I argued, however, that Izutsu has misunderstood Ibn Arabi's concept of the divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) and its relationship to his ontology and conception of ultimate reality. Contrary to what Izutsu claims, Ibn Arabi's notion of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) indicates a relationship between two parties rather than a one-sided process. Ibn Arabi presents divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) as a relationship between God who reveals Himself and the person who witnesses this revelation. There is an epistemic aspect to Ibn Arabi's concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) that is



absent from Izutsu's interpretation. Accordingly, contrary to what Izutsu postulates, the concept of divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) is not intended to be the fundament of ontology but is aimed at representing a particular relationship between God and the world.

I also examined Chittick's interpretive approach to Ibn Arabi. I argued that he attempts to reduce Ibn Arabi's ontology to epistemology and mysticism. He proposes that Ibn Arabi's key concept of *wujud*, which has long been understood to indicate 'existence', could accurately be translated as 'finding'—the literal meaning of the Arabic term. As a result, the thrust of many aspects of Ibn Arabi's doctrine shifts from being, as long has been assumed, about the metaphysics and philosophy of 'existence' to being about 'finding' God (through religion and mysticism). According to Chittick, even Ibn Arabi's most celebrated metaphysical thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) could actually be a mystical thesis about 'the oneness of finding'. I argued, however, that Chittick's claims are based upon linguistic errors and are also opposed by Ibn Arabi's own usages of the term *wujud*, which in many cases precludes Chittick's proposition. I advanced that 'existence' is in fact the accurate interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of '*wujud*'. Therefore, the parts of Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality associated with *wujud* remain, as has long been assumed, matters of metaphysics.

Chapter Four analysed some of Ibn Arabi's supposed inconsistencies. In gathering Ibn Arabi's various views on ultimate reality, one would realise that Ibn Arabi appears to adopt apparently incompatible theses. At times, he seems to advocate a dual theory of reality in which the world is on one side of reality and God is on the other. In addition, he advances a personal concept of deity that seems to follow the

Islamic scriptures, in which God is believed to be, among other things, a Hearer and a Seer.

On the other hand, he also seems to defend a non-dualistic conception of ultimate reality in which he postulates that existence is one and identical with God. In addition, he affirms the non-existence of anything other than God. At these points in his writing, he appears to endorse an impersonal concept of God, who is defined as a sheer and unlimited existence. In this respect, his conception of ultimate reality appears to share certain views with Eastern traditions such as Taoism and Advaita Vedanta. In Chapter Four, I also looked at some critical responses to the apparent incongruity. Some Ibn Arabi scholars are aware of the apparent incompatibility in Ibn Arabi's presentation of his conception of ultimate reality (e.g., Affifi, Izutsu, Landau) and they display different attitudes towards it. Some seem to accept that Ibn Arabi's doctrine is actually contradictory, while others maintain that one should dismiss Ibn Arabi's theistic views and consider only the non-dualistic concepts and views to be his legitimate thesis.

Chapter Five marked the beginning of my interpretation of Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality. I proposed that Ibn Arabi's fragmented (and sometimes apparently incompatible) views and concepts on ultimate reality are best presented across three main concepts: the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) and the concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). The three concepts are intended to combine to form one systematic thesis of ultimate reality. I explained that the three concepts do not represent different ultimate realities or different perspectives of ultimate reality, but, in fact, represent the same ultimate reality, each concept with its own scope and encompassment that distinguishes it from the other two concepts.

The concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) is the most fundamental and important concept as it incorporates Ibn Arabi's claims that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality which is known as Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). I examined two key interpretations of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*), developed by Ibn Taymiyyah and A. E. Affifi. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Arabi defends a form of typical pantheism by maintaining that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality. According to Affifi, on the other hand, Ibn Arabi defends a form of acosmism. I argued however that both interpretations are exegetically inaccurate. Ibn Arabi explicitly asserts the reality of the world and defines it as everything other than God. These assertions are at odds with the two interpretations.

In Chapter Six, I introduced my own interpretation of Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). In my interpretation, I have sought to develop a systematic thesis that incorporates two essential issues of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). The first is his absolute assertion that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality. The second is his claim that the world is real. In my interpretation, I examined the three constituents of Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*): the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*); the metaphysical nature of the world; and the relationship between ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) and the world.

In introducing the first constituent, I examined two of Ibn Arabi's metaphysical views on existence. The first is his assertion that existence is necessary and that nothingness is impossible. The second is his claim that existence is not a property of the object. I argued that, despite the fact that Ibn Arabi has not developed compelling arguments for the two positions, he is in good company as the two claims

are not very controversial, especially among philosophers today. These two views are important in understanding Ibn Arabi's identification of ultimate reality with existence. As he considers existence to be the absolute and ultimate metaphysical ground, it seems reasonable thus to conclude that existence as such is identical with ultimate reality. In addition, in advocating that existence is not a property of the object but identical with that which exists, Ibn Arabi seems to suggest a particular understanding of the identification between ultimate reality and existence. We may, hence, argue that Ibn Arabi sees ultimate reality not as a sea of being, as some of his statements seem to allude, but actually as an individual *existent* who configures existence in its absolute sense.

My interpretation proposes that in his thesis of the oneness of existence (*whahdat al-wujud*), Ibn Arabi does not develop a novel concept of God, but actually a novel thesis for cosmology and the relationship of God and the world. In examining Ibn Arabi's cosmological views, one encounters three concepts: *al-mumkinat*; *al-a'lam*; and *al-a'yan al-thabitah*. There seems to be agreement among Ibn Arabi's scholars that *al-mumkinat* indicates possible entities and that the world (*al-a'lam*) indicates the actual realm. The concept of *al-a'yan al-thabitah* however seems to be less clear. I proposed that, in Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence, *al-a'yan al-thabitah* correspond to what is known among metaphysicians today as *merely* possible entities (which are not actual). Furthermore, I proposed that Ibn Arabi seems to suggest that there is no essential metaphysical difference between what is actual and what is merely possible. The difference between the two realms is mainly epistemic. What an individual *perceives* from the realm of possible entities constitutes the actual realm for him with the rest being *merely* possible (*a'yan thabitah*) to him. By maintaining that actuality is for a considerable part an epistemic matter, Ibn Arabi

succeeds in upholding the reality of the world without committing himself to an acute contrast between the world and God. However, I argued that it is still necessary to explain the coexistence of possible entities and God, which insinuates a duality of reality. Such a duality would undermine Ibn Arabi's claim that existence is one and identical with ultimate reality. To overcome this problem, I proposed that Ibn Arabi might suggest that the totality of possible entities are actually identical with God's knowledge of the world. As much as one's knowledge is not external to his existence, possible entities also should not be seen as external to God's existence. I also proposed that identifying God's knowledge of the world with possible entities may provide a plausible model for God's knowledge being perfect, complete and infallible; by being identical with the totality of possible entities it is metaphysically impossible for God's knowledge not to be so.

In Chapter Seven, I examined a number of existing and potential objections to Ibn Arabi's concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). The first objection concerns Ibn Arabi's depiction of the relationship between ultimate reality and the world. This objection has two versions. The first asserts that Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) is a form of atheism and heresy as it identifies the world with God. The second version postulates that identifying *al-a'yan al-thabitah* with God's knowledge would undermine God's omnipotence and omniscience. If God cannot do or know anything about the world beyond *al-a'yan al-thabitah* then both His knowledge and power are immensely limited. The second objection raised the problem of the one and many in Ibn Arabi's thesis of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). This objection also has two versions. According to the first, by maintaining that existence is one and many at the same time, Ibn Arabi's doctrine runs the danger of being incoherent. According to the second version of this

objection, if existence is one, people would have experienced it as such; considering that people experience it as many, then it is probably so. The third objection concentrates on the problem of evil. It states that if God is identical with existence, then no part of existence could incorporate or manifest evil, which is apparently not the case. The fourth and final objection relates to the unfaithfulness to Islam. It claims that in maintaining the doctrine of the oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), Ibn Arabi is contradicting Islam.

In Chapter Eight, I examined the second concept in Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality: the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*). According to Ibn Arabi, the Divine Self (*dhat*) designates ultimate reality in Himself with no relationship or reference to anything else. Contrary to what some of Ibn Arabi's scholars seem to believe, I argued that the concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) is not identical to the concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*). While the former signifies ultimate reality in His absolute independence of everything, the latter indicates ultimate reality as identical with existence and encompassing everything there is. In addition, I explained that according to Ibn Arabi, the reality of the Divine Self (*dhat*) is unknown and unknowable, and ultimate reality as such is not the aim or concern of religions or religious concepts of God.

In Chapter Nine, I examined the last concept in Ibn Arabi's thesis of ultimate reality according to my interpretation: ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). This concept indicates ultimate reality in His relationship with the world. Ibn Arabi maintains that the term 'God' does not signify a proper name for ultimate reality but actually a 'title' and a position that ultimate reality occupies. Further, the concept of godness (*uluahah*) implies the role of ultimate reality in the world as its God, Creator and Sustainer. Ibn Arabi advances that the term 'God' is comparable to the term 'King'. As the term

‘King’ implies the existence of a person who holds this title and a kingdom to which this person has a particular relationship with, the term ‘God’ implies that there is a self (i.e., the Divine Self (*dhat*)) that maintains this title, and a world whose ultimate reality is its God. Ibn Arabi explains that people can seek knowledge of ultimate reality only through Him as God (*ilah*), and he proposes three ways to obtain this knowledge: the rational faculty; the Islamic scriptures; and religious experience. He seems to evaluate the rational faculty as the least significant of these three channels and suggests that one should prioritise the other two channels instead. Furthermore, he advocates that ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) is the object of religious worship and beliefs. He seems to see the religious concept(s) of God to be various portraits of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*), who is a metaphysical entity. The best religious concept of God, hence, is the one that depicts ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) perfectly. Accordingly, he advocates that the Islamic concept of God is the only correct religious concept of God as it corresponds perfectly to ultimate reality as God (*ilah*). However, he maintains an inclusivist stance towards the other religious concept(s) of God. He postulates that all religions, whether they have an accurate or a false concept of God, aim for the being who is worthy of worship. Considering that the real God is the *only* being worthy of worship, He is the real aim of every worshipper, and, therefore, He will accept everyone’s worship regardless of his religious concept of Him.

Ibn Arabi, however, seems to develop another thesis for the religious concepts of God that does not seem to be compatible with his inclusivism. In his second thesis, Ibn Arabi appears to defend a form of aspectual pluralism, in which he advances that the various religious concepts of God are different actual self-manifestations of ultimate reality. I argued, however, that Ibn Arabi’s pluralism is incompatible with the

rest of his thesis of ultimate reality, and actually undermines his tireless attempt to make his doctrine compatible with Islam.

Thus, the three concepts in my interpretation of Ibn Arabi represent a systematic thesis of ultimate reality. The concept of ultimate reality as existence (*wujud*) incorporates everything there is. The concept of ultimate reality as the Divine Self (*dhat*) indicates ultimate reality in Himself and excludes everything other than ultimate reality. The concept of ultimate reality as God (*ilah*) designates ultimate reality in His relationship with the world as its Creator and Sustainer. The various and apparently incompatible views that Ibn Arabi develops about ultimate reality would make more sense when they are read according to my interpretation, with each view distinctly belonging to one of the three concepts.

## **Final remarks**

I found that employing the methods, theories and style of analytic philosophy to be the most helpful and fruitful mean of understanding Ibn Arabi's thesis. I recommend the same methodology is followed to approach other aspects of Ibn Arabi's doctrine, particularly the following. (i) In his writings, Ibn Arabi presents very detailed views and concepts on epistemology, particularly on the epistemology of religious experiences. His views seem interesting yet unsystematic and vague and in need of through analysis. (ii) As mentioned in Chapter Seven, Ibn Arabi appears to provide interesting views with regard to the reality of evil and its relationship to God and the world. I believe that his views could be developed into a noteworthy thesis on the problem of evil. Identifying goodness with existence and evil with the lack of existence may also provide a promising basis for an ethical thesis or a theory of well-being. (iii) Ibn Arabi's views on logic and the authority of argumentation also seem



interesting and could be examined and analysed in detail. Some of these issues have been mentioned briefly in the previous chapters.

Indeed, I recommend the same methodology to be followed in approaching other subjects, topics and doctrines in Islamic philosophy, theology and mysticism in general. It could even benefit the analysis of doctrines of other key Muslim figures such as Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (981–1013), Abu al-Ma'ali al-Juwayni (1028–1085), Abu Hamed al-Ghazali (1058–1111), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1150–1210), Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) and many others.

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