

## Absolute Hiddenness in Ibn 'Arabi's Mystical School and Withdrawal of Being in Heidegger's Thought: A Comparison through the Platonic Agathon

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**Abstract:** This intercultural study attempts to find a bridge between Heidegger's criticism of metaphysics as Ontotheology, his search for overcoming it in his later thinking about the hiddenness of Being itself, and Ibn 'Arabi's mystical doctrine of unity of Being – which is likewise characterized as the absolute hiddenness—through a return to their common ground in Platonic negative theology. Heidegger's interpretation of Plato's allegory of the Sun and the role of the Good beyond Being, and the unsaid correspondence between Heidegger's "Being itself" and the Neoplatonic "One" build the bridge to the analysis of absoluteness as absolute hiddenness in Islamic mysticism. Through this interpretation, the Islamic philosophical tradition could be faced with Heidegger's accusation of Ontotheology, potentially discovering possibilities for a philosophically relevant dialogue with Heidegger's thought.

**Keywords:** hiddenness, agathon, mysticism, ontotheology

Comparative studies on Heidegger's thought and Islamic mysticism, especially the school of Ibn 'Arabi and his doctrine of "unity of Being" (*wahdat al-wujūd*) have already a tradition of research, especially in Heidegger-studies in the Islamic world. The interpretation of Heidegger's thought in terms of Islamic Mysticism is specifically common in Iranian Heidegger-studies since the French philosopher and orientalist Henry Corbin conducted his comparative studies.<sup>1</sup> In my opinion, this way of interpreting

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<sup>1</sup> See Felix Herkert, "Heidegger und Corbin. Ansätze zu einer Verhältnisbestimmung," in *Heidegger Studien*, 36 (2020), 215-252. Herkert specifically investigates here—among other

Heidegger has to be critically confronted with the fact that Heidegger's radical criticism of metaphysics deliberately avoids all elements of the metaphysical and theological tradition which he characterizes as Ontotheology. Heidegger himself did not pay attention to the tradition of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, despite his familiarity with Corbin's works and despite his expertise in medieval philosophy which contains a deep relation to Islamic philosophy. Heidegger's philosophical dialogue with the Far East and in contrast, his avoidance and ignorance of the philosophical tradition of the Middle East should be connected to his criticism of metaphysics as Ontotheology, because the philosophical thought in the Middle East has the same roots in ancient Greek philosophy and Abrahamic monotheism. Therefore, we can say that in Heidegger's view, Islamic philosophy belongs to the same occidental "History of Being" and has its historical position in medieval philosophy; thus it cannot be considered as a possibility for a fruitful philosophical dialogue in order to "overcome" metaphysics.

Therefore, and in my view, every intercultural study about Heidegger and Middle Eastern philosophical thought must face the task of explaining how the accusation of Ontotheology concerning Islamic philosophy could be overcome. Only in this case, the tradition of philosophical thought in the Middle East could disclose possibilities for a philosophically relevant, and not merely a historical-philological, discussion with Heidegger's thought.

I attempt to open the way for this philosophical dialogue by returning to Plato's *agathon* (ἀγαθόν, the Good) as ground for the totality of beings, but which itself is "beyond Being" (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας)<sup>2</sup> and moreover, is considered as the "yoke"<sup>3</sup> which bonds together Being and Thinking. Heidegger's earlier interpretation of Plato's allegory of the Sun and the correspondence between this allegory and Heidegger's later thinking

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approaches – the influence of Heidegger's criticism of metaphysics on Corbin's critical thought about the essence of monotheism with regard to Corbin's text "The Paradox of Monotheism." According to this text of Corbin, Herkert explains the necessity of the "esoteric," i.e., the mystical tradition of Platonic negative theology for the ontological conception of the one God in all monotheistic religions in order to overcome the self-destructive, naive and "exoteric" understanding of God as the highest being, which necessarily results in the self-negating form of monotheism as pantheism. The distinction between these two conceptions of the monotheistic God in Corbin's thought refers to Heidegger's theory of the ontological difference and his critique of metaphysics as Ontotheology.

<sup>2</sup> Platon, *Der Staat*, Platon. *Werke in Acht Bänden. Griechisch und Deutsch*, vierter Band, arr. by Dietrich Kurz, trans. by Friedrich Schleiermacher, ed. by Gunther Eigler (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2019), 509B.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 508A.

about “the Clearing” (*Lichtung*) and its “hiddenness” (*Verbergung*, λήθη)<sup>4</sup> could be regarded as a horizon for an interpretation of “absolute hiddenness” (*al-ghayb al-mutlaq*) in Islamic mysticism, which likewise corresponds in its own way with Plato’s agathon and his allegory of the Sun. The mystical school of Ibn ‘Arabi is fundamentally influenced by the Platonic light-metaphor and Neoplatonic metaphysics of the One as the absolute transcendent divine principle and its manifestation in the totality of beings. In order to discover the possibility of a philosophical discussion between this mystical school and Heidegger’s conception of “hiddenness” and “withdrawal” (*Entzug*) of “Being itself” (*das Sein selbst*) we attempt to explain Heidegger’s criticism of Ontotheology and his later conception of “the Clearing” (*Lichtung*) in the light of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato’s allegory of the Sun as the absolute One, interpreted in terms of the Platonic “beyond Being.” Subsequently, we approach the fundamental significance of the conceptual analysis of “the Absolute” as “the absolute Hiddenness” in the mystical school of Ibn ‘Arabi. This interpretation embraces Heidegger’s criticism of Ontotheology as well as the mysticism of Ibn ‘Arabi in the common ground of a radical Platonic negative theology which is expressed in both theories of absolute hiddenness in Ibn ‘Arabi’s mysticism and the withdrawal of Being in Heidegger’s philosophy

### **Ontotheology and Withdrawal of Being itself beyond the Being of beings**

In Heidegger’s view, Ontotheology reveals the “constitution” of metaphysics as such in its whole history. “Western metaphysics, however, since its beginning with the Greeks has eminently been both ontology and theology, ... The wholeness of this whole is the unity of all beings that unifies as the generative ground. ... Metaphysics is onto-theo-logy.”<sup>5</sup> The “ontotheological constitution of metaphysics” can be defined briefly as reduction of the Being of beings to a highest being which is the ground of all beings. The highest being – as Heidegger calls it “the being-est” (*das Seiendste*,

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<sup>4</sup> See among others for example chapter 4 in Mark A. Ralkowski, *Heidegger’s Platonism* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 62-94. See also Robert J. Dostal, “Beyond Being: Heidegger’s Plato,” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 23, no. 1 (1985), 71-98; and chapter 2 in Cathrine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 33-69.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik” (1956/57) in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 11: *Identität und Differenz*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 63. In the English translation: Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. and with an introduction by Joan Stambough (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 54.

όντως ὄν)—is understood as the ground from where the Being of beings is explained as their presence. “Metaphysics thinks the Being of beings as such, as a whole. Metaphysics thinks the Being of beings both in the ground-giving unity of what is most general, what is indifferently valid everywhere, and also in the unity of the all that accounts for the ground, that is, of the All-Highest.”<sup>6</sup>

The ground as “the All-Highest” posits the Being of beings in different forms, but in all forms of its position, the main conception of a positing ground for the Being remains in metaphysics. The positing act of the ground should ground the Parmenidean “sameness” (το αὐτό, *Selbigkeit*) of Thinking (νοεῖν) and Being (εἶναι) as their identity through the reduction of Being to the grounding-act of Thinking, articulated as Self-thinking (νόησις νοήσεως) from Aristotle to Hegel. The self-relating or self-unifying act of self-thinking grounds the pure activity (*actus purus*) as Being and is identical with it, or to be precise, the act of self-thinking as self-presence grounds—or is already—the identity of Thinking and Being.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, according to Heidegger’s own thoughts about this identity, the event of “belonging together” (*Zusammengehören*) and “sameness” between Thinking and Being goes beyond both of them and is prior to them,<sup>8</sup> i.e., prior to presence; but in the ontotheological conception, this priority is denied in its transcendence and is referred again to Thinking itself as the ground. In his later thought, Heidegger calls this process “Rescendence.”<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, in Heidegger’s conception of Ontotheology, the “unity of Being” has two meanings of “the unifying One” (*das einende Eine*): first, the universality of the Being in general which embraces the totality of beings; secondly, the ground as the first and highest being, i.e., “the beingest” which grounds this unity in its thinkableness qua its positedness by Thinking. “Being becomes present as logos in the sense of ground .... The same logos, as the gathering of what unifies, is the εἶν (the One). This εἶν, however, is twofold. For one thing, it is the unifying One in the sense of what is everywhere primal and thus most universal; and at the same time it is the unifying One in the sense of the All-Highest (Zeus).”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 76. In the English translation, 58.

<sup>7</sup> See Heidegger’s interpretation of this fragment of Parmenides: Martin Heidegger, “Moirai,” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 7: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 235-261.

<sup>8</sup> See Heidegger’s essay “Der Satz der Identität (1957)” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 11: *Identität und Differenz*, 33-50.

<sup>9</sup> See Heidegger’s essay “Zur Seinsfrage,” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 9: *Wegmarken*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 398.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, “Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik,” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 11, 75. In the English translation, 69.

We can say that Heidegger's criticism of Ontotheology targets exactly the very reduction of the unity of Being to the unifying and grounding act of the One in the sense of the highest being as God. Thus, in Heidegger's view, metaphysics as ontology is identical with theology, since the understanding of the Being of beings is reduced to the grounding-act of the highest being as the "first cause." Heidegger writes: "Being shows itself in the nature of the ground. Accordingly, the matter of thinking, Being as the ground, is thought out fully only when the ground is represented as the first ground. The original matter of thinking presents itself as the first cause, the *causa prima* that corresponds to the reason-giving path back to the *ultima ratio*, the final accounting. The Being of beings is represented fundamentally, in the sense of the ground, only as *causa sui*. This is the metaphysical concept of God."<sup>11</sup>

Regarding Plato and the whole metaphysics as Platonism, Heidegger expresses his critique emphatically at the end of his essay *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*: "This highest and first cause is named by Plato and correspondingly by Aristotle το θεϊον, the divine. ... Metaphysic has been theological. In this case theology means the interpretation of the 'cause' of beings as God and the transferring of being onto this cause, which contains being in itself and dispenses being from out of itself, because it is the being-est of beings."<sup>12</sup> Heidegger continues more explicitly and critically: "No attempt to ground the essence of unhiddenness in "reason," "spirit," "thinking," "logos" or in any kind of "subjectivity" can ever rescue the essence of unhiddenness. In all such attempts what is to be grounded—the essence of unhiddenness itself—is not yet adequately sought out. What always get "clarified" is merely some essential consequence of the uncomprehended essence of unhiddenness."<sup>13</sup>

Heidegger's "overcoming" of metaphysics could be understood as the attempt to search for a *third One* regarding the unity and sameness of Thinking and Being in a prior horizon which is neither the One as the highest being as Thinking nor the One as Being of beings in the sense of unhiddenness itself, but rather "the essence of unhiddenness," which will be characterized as hiddenness. Heidegger asks for the essence and origin of the Being of beings as their unhiddenness and their presence. We can say that Heidegger seeks beyond the two metaphysical conceptions of the Being as the twofold meaning of the One, a prior horizon that lets Being be differed from beings in their appearance and unhiddenness. Metaphysics "represents beings in

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<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, "Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik," 77. In the English translation, 59-60.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, "Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit," in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 9: *Wegmarken*, 235-236. In the English translation: Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," trans. by Thomas Sheehan, in *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180-181.

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, "Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit," 182.

respect of what differs in the difference, and without heeding the difference as difference. What differs shows itself as the Being of beings in general, and as the Being of beings in the Highest.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Heidegger’s thought after his so-called turn, the event of difference as such is “the Being itself” (*das Sein selbst, das Seyn*) which is prior to the Being of beings (as Beingness, *Seiendheit*) in general. Regarding the Being of beings as presence and unhiddenness (*ἀλήθεια*), “Being itself” is the hiddenness (*Verbergung*) in the sense of “harboring” (*Bergen*) of the origin of truth in itself. The Hiddenness can only be characterized in a negative and privative way as the withdrawal of Being itself. If we try to comprehend the hiddenness positively, we can merely find Heidegger’s metaphorical speaking about “the Clearing” (*Lichtung*) which reveals the brightness and light of the unhiddenness as the Being of beings and simultaneously withdraws itself in its priority to each kind of appearance and presence. “What is first required is an appreciation of the “positive” in the “privative” essence of *ἀλήθεια*. The positive must first be experienced as the fundamental trait of Being itself. First of all, what must break in upon us is that exigency whereby we are compelled to question not just beings in their Being but first of all Being itself (that is, the difference).”<sup>15</sup>

Hence, Heidegger’s later basic concepts like the Clearing, the event, the difference as such and the Being itself as the origin of the light of unhiddenness clearly refer to Plato’s *agathon* in the allegory of the Sun in *Republic*—the *agathon* which goes “beyond Being” and makes both knowledge (Thinking) and Being possible. Despite Heidegger’s later identification of Plato’s *agathon* with the highest being and the Aristotelian “*to theion*” in the essay *Plato’s Doctrine of Truth*, in his lectures before his so-called “turn” (until the lecture in 1932).<sup>16</sup> Heidegger explicitly refers several times to Plato’s metaphor of the sun in order to explain his own questioning about the meaning of Being and the origin of truth as unhiddenness. For example, in the lecture *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1927) Heidegger begins his interpretation of Plato’s allegory of the Sun as follows: “In our attempt to get beyond Being to the light from which and in which it itself comes into the brightness of an understanding, we are moving within one of Plato’s fundamental problems.”<sup>17</sup> Heidegger uses even the Platonic term

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 11, 76. In the English translation, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 9, 238. In the English translation, 182.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 34: *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit: Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet*. WS 1931/32, ed. by Hermann Mörchen (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1988). See Heidegger’s interpretation of the idea of the Good in the second chapter of this lecture, 95-116.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 24: *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 399-400. The

“*epekeina*” (beyond) in his lectures to characterize the horizon of meaning of the Being in his own sense.<sup>18</sup>

In the lecture “The Essence of Truth. On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus” (1931/32), Heidegger clearly interprets Plato’s *agathon* and its *epekeina* as his own questioning concerning the origin of unhiddenness and Being in a way that it is characteristic for his later thought after his turn.<sup>19</sup> He emphasizes here that *agathon* as “*epekeina*” must be likewise “beyond unhiddenness” (*Unverborgenheit*).<sup>20</sup> He says:

The Good, the *agathon*, is therefore the enablement of Being as such and of unhiddenness as such. Or better, what Plato calls the Good is that which empowers Being and unhiddenness to their own essence, i.e. what is prior to everything else .... The *agathon* can only be understood in this sense. *Empowerment* of Being; not an existing good (a value), but what is *prior to* and *for* all Being and every truth. ... It is just what we are interrogating in our questioning concerning Being and unhiddenness.”<sup>21</sup> Heidegger refers to Plato’s sentence that *agathon* is the “master, in that it grants (*gewährt*) unhiddenness and nous,<sup>22</sup>

and then says about *agathon*:

This is all that Plato says concerning the highest idea. But it is enough, indeed more than enough, for whoever understands. To understand the little that Plato does say

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English translation: Martin Heidegger, *The basic problems of phenomenology*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (Indiana University Press, 1982), 282-283.

<sup>18</sup> See for example the lecture: Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 26: *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik. Im Ausgang von Leibnitz*, ed. by Klaus Held (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978), 237, 246.

<sup>19</sup> In the lectures *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 24 and *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 26, Heidegger appropriates Plato’s *agathon* and its *epekeina* in his interpretation as his own fundamental ontological understanding of the timeliness of Dasein which projects the world. Referring to this earlier interpretation and to the later essay *Plato’s Doctrine of Truth*, Werner Beierwaltes criticizes Heidegger’s understanding of the Platonic *epekeina*, but Beierwaltes never refers to Heidegger’s most detailed interpretation of Plato’s *agathon* in the lecture 1931/32. In my view, this lecture makes a revision of Beierwaltes’ critical approach necessary. See Werner Beierwaltes, “EPEKEINA, Eine Anmerkung zu Heideggers Platon-Rezeption”, in *Fussnoten zu Plato* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2011), 371-388.

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, 108.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 109. In the English translation, 79.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 109. In the English translation, 79.

is nothing less than to really *ask* the question concerning the essence of Being and truth.<sup>23</sup>

What is sought “beyond Being” can be neither one of the beings, not even the highest one, nor the Being of beings in general; it transcends both of them in its absolute transcendence and priority. In Heidegger’s later thought after his turn, the horizon of “beyond Being” absolutely transcends conceptual and positive thinkableness, for it is beyond presence and appearance and therefore, ineffable. As Heidegger emphasizes, philosophy arrives here at its borders and for this reason, Plato speaks about *agathon* exclusively in a metaphoric way<sup>24</sup>; a way of speaking that Heidegger would later adopt himself in his “Thinking” in distinction from “philosophy.” Heidegger warns us about the “danger that we may hypostatize it (the essence of unhiddenness) into a fantastical world-essence (*Weltwesen*).”<sup>25</sup> Beyond Being cannot be a being in the world or as the highest being prior to world, as Heidegger says in his *Letter on Humanism*: “What is Being? It “is” It itself. The thinking that is to come must learn to experience that and to say it. “Being”—that is not God and not a cosmic ground (*ein Weltgrund*). Being is essentially farther than all beings and is yet nearer to the human being than every being.”<sup>26</sup>

The absolute transcendence of Plato’s *agathon*, i.e., the culmination of the Platonic metaphysics in the absolute priority of *agathon* beyond Being, is interpreted by Plotinus and in Neoplatonism as a new and additional level of the One which transcends the Parmenidean One as Being in general and the Aristotelian One as the highest being in the sense of Self-thinking. Plotinus relates Plato’s *agathon* and its transcendence “beyond Being” to Plato’s absolute simple One (the One itself: τὸ αὐτὸ ἓν) in the dialogue *Parmenides*.<sup>27</sup> The absolute unity of the simple “One” is characterized there as an exclusively negative concept which avoids every positive determination, because every determination means a limitation and thus is conditioned by a kind of plurality. The Neoplatonic One is called “τὸ ἐπέκειννα,” “the Beyond”

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 24, 402.ne

<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Hegel und die Griechen,” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 9: *Wegmarken*, 442. In the English translation, 334.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Heidegger, „Brief über den Humanismus,” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 9: *Wegmarken*, 331. In the English translation, 252. Werner Beierwaltes cites these sentences and characterizes them as a preparing negative theology. See Werner Beierwaltes, “Heideggers Gelassenheit,” in: *Fussnoten zu Plato*, 392.

<sup>27</sup> See the chapter “Plotins Interpretation der Prinzipientheorie Platons” in: Jens Halfwassen, *Auf den Spuren des Einen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 149-164; and his detailed study: Jens Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen. Untersuchungen zu Platon und Plotin* (München: K. G. Saur, 2006), 183-219.

as such.<sup>28</sup> As the absolute “Beyond,” i.e., transcendence, it is the origin of the unity and sameness of νοεῖν (Thinking) and εἶναι (Being), which is in Neoplatonism the first “emanation” of the absolute One. The identity of *nous* and *einai* is the self-unifying One as self-differentiation and self-mediation.<sup>29</sup> There is no positive and conceptual way to determine the absolute One, because it is prior to every thinkableness, which always requires a form of unity in plurality, and because it is beyond every thinkable determination. The radical negative theology and its tradition in both western and Islamic Neoplatonic philosophy, and specifically mysticism, is based on this additional conception of the One, which we may call *the third One*, with regard to Heidegger’s conception of Ontotheology and the twofold meaning of Being as the One. The Neoplatonic absolute transcendence and absolute unity in its absolute negativity and unavailability could be expressed in Heideggerian terminology as “the abyss” (*Abgrund*).<sup>30</sup> The similarity to Heidegger’s way of expressing the event of Being itself could be easily observed since Plotinus says about the absolute One that it “is originally It itself and beyond Being It itself.”<sup>31</sup>

We can see that Heidegger’s attempt to overcome Ontotheology discovers a deep relation to the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato’s *agathon* (the Good) and hen (the One), in contrast to the Aristotelian interpretation of the One and its tradition of positive theology as Ontotheology which seeks the origin of the unity of Being in the absolute presence of self-thinking as the absolute divine intellect, which results—in Heidegger’s conception of the History of Being—in Hegel’s absolute subjectivity as absolute spirit. Heidegger himself nowhere refers positively to Neoplatonism in his own thought<sup>32</sup> and even tries to incorporate the Platonic *agathon* into his later

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<sup>28</sup> See the detailed references to the Enneads of Plotinus in Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen. Untersuchungen zu Platon und Plotin*, 63.

<sup>29</sup> See the chapter “IIV.1. Der Geist als Identität von Denken und Sein,” in Jens Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus* (München: C.H. Beck 2004), 59-64.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 11, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Plotin, *Schriften in deutscher Übersetzung*, trans. by Richard Harder, ed. by Richard Harder, Rudolf Beutler und Willy Theiler, Teilband 2 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2020), VI 8, 14, 42.

<sup>32</sup> See in this connection among others the critical essay of Klaus Kremer, “Zur ontologischen Differenz. Plotin und Heidegger,” in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* (1989) Bd. 43, 673-694. See also Werner Beierwaltes, *Das wahre Selbst* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2001), 120-122; and the detailed essay of Beierwaltes about Heidegger and Neoplatonism: “EPEKEINA, Eine Anmerkung zu Heideggers Platon-Rezeption,” in *Fussnoten zu Plato*, 371-388. Beierwaltes shows the indirect reception of the Neoplatonistic thought by Heidegger through Meister Eckhart and German mysticism. See Werner Beierwaltes, “Heideggers Gelassenheit,” in *Fussnoten zu Plato*, 403-423. Even Heidegger’s famous distinction between “the God of Philosophy” and “the divine God” (*der göttliche Gott*) in his essay “Die ontotheo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik” (see Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 11, 77) could be

schematic conception of the “History of Being” as Ontotheology; this leads to his peculiar attempt to completely ignore the Platonic “beyond Being” in his later interpretation of Plato’s agathon in the essay *Plato’s Doctrine of Truth* and his other works despite his earlier detailed interpretations concerning the central role of the concept “epekeina” in Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, in his whole thinking, Heidegger already uses the main Neoplatonic concept regarding each relation to the Platonic One beyond Being, that is “Ekstasis,” and his term “Ek-sistence,” for human being. For Heidegger, Thinking must remain “ecstatic” to Being itself, if it shall not become ontotheological in the nihilistic “Rescendence” of a self-relating Thinking which posits the Being of beings for itself.

### Absolute Hiddenness in Ibn Arabi’s Mystical School

In contrast to the Peripatetic philosophy in Islamic tradition, Islamic mysticism is primarily characterized by the doctrine of the “Unity of Being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*).<sup>34</sup> Islamic monotheism is thereby radically interpreted and experienced as the unity of Being as such. This unity is not the Parmenidean One, because it doesn’t deny absolutely the plurality of beings, but rather it includes in itself the plurality of beings as its internal relations and manifestations; it is not even the Hegelian totality of all determinations, but rather the Platonic One which is beyond Being and beings, and simultaneously not distinct from them. The mystical One is thus with regard to all beings at the same time absolutely immanent and transcendent, i.e. distinct and indistinct from beings. In order not to misunderstand this doctrine as an absurd contradiction we must approach the analysis of the concept of “absolute” and absoluteness of the unity of Being in the school of Ibn ‘Arabi. The great mystic, disciple and stepson of Ibn ‘Arabi, Sadr ad-Dīn Qūnawī attempted to explain the intellectual meaning and necessity of Ibn

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referred to Eckhart’s distinction between the God as the highest being which is the Trinitarian unity and the “Godhood” (*Gottheit*) which is the simple One as Being itself (*esse*) beyond God in its Neoplatonic sense. Eckhart calls this level of absolute unity “the divine God” (*der göttliche Gott*). See John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 106.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Dostal emphasizes in his insightful essay about Heidegger’s interpretation of the Platonic “beyond Being” that Heidegger’s ignorance of the “epekeina tes ousias” in *Plato’s Doctrine of Truth* “frustrates any reader of the *Republic*.” See Robert J. Dostal, “Beyond Being: Heidegger’s Plato,” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 23, no. 1(1985), 82.

<sup>34</sup> In this paper, I cannot present a detailed introduction to Islamic mysticism and philosophy. Among others, see the following general investigation of William Chittick concerning the school of Ibn ‘Arabi and its relation with the tradition of Islamic philosophy in general: William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabi” and “The School of Ibn ‘Arabi”, in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. by S. H. Nasr and O. Leaman (London: Routledge 1996), 497–523.

'Arabi's doctrine of the unity of Being through a philosophical and conceptual analysis of absoluteness as such which could express the intellectual necessity of the basic mystical experience of unity as such.<sup>35</sup>

The concept of the "absolute" (Latin: *absolutum*, Arabic: *muṭlaq*) dates back to the Platonic agathon in *Republic*<sup>36</sup> as the "unconditioned origin" (ἀνυπόθετος ἀρχή) and to Anaximander's ἄπειρον which is also a negative concept.<sup>37</sup> We can say that Qūnawī and the following mystics belonging to this school attempt to disclose the very meaning of this negativity of absoluteness. They explain that we can think the essence of the unity of Being as the essence of the Absolute or Godhood at different levels. Before we discuss the levels of the Absolute, we can compare them with the different levels of the unity as such. According to Platonic metaphysics, four levels of unity can be distinguished from each other: 1. The numeric unity of every individual being in the sense of material beings as the appearances of their ideas (ἐν καὶ πολλά); 2. The general or essential unity of the ideas (ἐν ὄν); 3. The all-embracing and self-expanding unity of the whole as the totality of all ideas (ἐν πάντα); and 4. The absolute unity which goes beyond each kind of plurality, even the internal plurality of the totality (ἐν αὐτό).<sup>38</sup>

In accordance with these four levels of unity (ἐν) we can find in the school of Ibn 'Arabi these four levels of the absolute Being as different aspects of the one Being. The Absolute as the absolute One in its Platonic and Neoplatonic sense is expressed in this mystical school (like the speculative mystical school of Meister Eckhart in Christian medieval philosophy, which is formulated in the famous sentence of Eckhart "Esse est Deus"<sup>39</sup>) as the Being itself. The Being (al-wujūd) is understood here as the absolute indifference which has no determination and at the same time can have all determinations in itself. It is necessary to notice that this meaning of Being corresponds with the Neoplatonic "beyond Being," because the Being in the Neoplatonic sense (οὐσία or εἶναι) is identical with nous as the second hypostasis which includes the determination of self-reflection and self-mediation. Thus, the Neoplatonic Being corresponds with the other meaning of Being in the school of Ibn 'Arabi which is identical with the manifestation

<sup>35</sup> In order to understand the basic role of Qūnawī in the mystical school of Ibn 'Arabi, especially in order to follow the origins of the doctrine of unity of Being see William C. Chittick, "The Central Point: Qūnawī's Role in the School of Ibn 'Arabi," in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 35 (2004), 25–45. See also William C. Chittick, "Sadr Al-Din Qūnawī on the Oneness of Being," in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 21, no. 2 (1981), 171–184.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Der Staat*, 511B6

<sup>37</sup> See the chapter "Platons Metaphysik des Einen" in Halfwassen, *Auf den Spuren des Einen*, 94–96.

<sup>38</sup> See Jens Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen*, 187–192.

<sup>39</sup> See the chapter "Being is God" in the following book John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 103–108.

as such. Considering Plato's allegory of the Sun, we can say that the Sun itself refers to the Neoplatonic One and to the Being in the school of Ibn 'Arabi, but the light of the Sun is interpreted as the nous or Being in Neoplatonism and as the manifestation of the Being in Islamic mysticism. The different applications of the concept of Being in Neoplatonism and Islamic mysticism is important, though they share the same monistic view. The difference is based on different understandings of the relation between the Being and determination. Like Plato, Plotinus conceives the Being only as the determination of ideas or as the totality of all ideas as a whole. The Being as such without any determination is unthinkable for him. Because of this, according to him the absolute—and also unthinkable—unity as the simple One—which has no determinations—is beyond Being.<sup>40</sup> This absolute and simple One is called in Islamic mysticism the Being itself or "the Being as Being" (*wujūd bimā huwa wujūd*) and it is different from the metaphysical Being as "the Being of beings," which goes back to determined Being in the sense of *ousia* or Being in Neoplatonism. For the mystics, *ousia*, i.e., the determined Being of beings is identical with the manifestation of the Being itself.

In this sense, Sā'in ud-Dīn Turkah, the famous mystic and commentator of Ibn 'Arabi writes about the absolute unity of the Being:<sup>41</sup>

The Being is obviously the true One, and it exists by itself; it is the One that except it everything is pure nothingness. But this One has modes ... that it manifests itself in them and in accordance with them. Every kind of understanding (of the one Being) obtains only these modes (of manifestations); because that One as such cannot be thought and understood.<sup>42</sup>

Now we can consider the four aspects or levels of the absolute one Being. At the first level, we conceive this unity of the Absolute as the one Being which embraces in itself each determination in the sense that it is reflected in itself and thereby it manifests itself to itself. We can say that this level of absoluteness has the meaning of the Aristotelian *noesis* in its Neoplatonic interpretation of the nous.<sup>43</sup> The Absolute is here understood as the absolute intellect which includes in its self-reflection, self-mediation and

<sup>40</sup> See Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen*, 394-396.

<sup>41</sup> All citations from texts of Islamic mystics in this paper are translated from the original Arabic into English by the author.

<sup>42</sup> Sā'in ud-Dīn Turkah, *tahdīd ul-qawā'id*, ed. by Jalāloddīn Aštīānī (Tehran: wezārat e farhang, 1981), 302.

<sup>43</sup> See Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus*, 64-84.

self-manifestation every internal aspect or determination of itself. The absolute reflects itself for example as the absolute power or science. Regarding each self-manifestation, it relates itself in its absoluteness to a self-determination. This kind of internal relation of the Absolute to each mode or determination of itself is the meaning of the divine “name” (*ism*) in the mystical school of Ibn ‘Arabi.<sup>44</sup> In the school of Ibn ‘Arabi this level and meaning of absoluteness is called—regarding the philosophical terminology of Ibn Sinā<sup>45</sup>—the unity of Being “conditioned by thing” (*bišart šay’*)<sup>46</sup>; thereby it means the unity of the Absolute which relates itself to each determination of itself. “Thing” means here the divine “name.” The Absolute is obviously in this sense still conditioned, although the condition is not understood as an external limitation, but as self-determination. The unity of Being at this level is called in the school of Ibn ‘Arabi the “oneness” (*wāḥidiyyah*).<sup>47</sup> The level of oneness determines itself with each “name” or mode of the Absolute.

The second level of unity negates the very self-determination and self-manifestation of the Absolute. This level is called in the school of Ibn ‘Arabi the Being “conditioned by negation” (*bišart lā*) and conceives the Absolute in its “uniqueness” (*aḥadiyyah*),<sup>48</sup> which means that the unity or absoluteness of the Absolute must be regarded as the negation of all determinations and limitations. Now we can conceive the divine unity accordingly first as its immanent presence in each determination (conditioned by thing) and second, in its transcendence beyond beings as the All-Highest (conditioned by negation); but these two levels are obviously “conditioned” and still not absolutely absolute. Therefore, they cannot disclose the true and ultimate absolute unity of Being in itself.

Absoluteness is thought at the next level of unity as “the unconditioned” (*lā bišart*),<sup>49</sup> which means beyond both conditions that unity is either conditioned by singularity of each name and determination or is detached from it as uniqueness. The “unconditioned” unity in this sense

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<sup>44</sup> The mystic Dawūd Qeīṣarī defines the mystical concept of the divine name in his classic *commentary* on Ibn ‘Arabi’s magnum opus *fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam* as follows: “The essence (of God) in relation with a certain attribute and a manifestation of his manifestations is called the name”. Dawūd Qeīṣarī, *ṣarḥ fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam*, edited by Jalāloddīn Aṣṭiānī (Tehran: ‘elmī va farhangī, 1996), 44.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Sina explains the aspects of the universal (the essence) in its unconditionedness and absoluteness in the first chapter of the fifth investigation in his work *Aṣ-ṣifā’, al-ilāhiyyāt*: Ibn Sīnā, *aṣ-ṣifā’, al-ilāhiyyāt*, edited by Sa’id Zāyid, (Qum: maktaba Ayatullah al-Mar’asī, 1984), 199-208. The meaning of unconditionedness refers here to the universality of essence as such. Qūnawī applies it to the unity of Being as the essence of God.

<sup>46</sup> See Dawūd Qeīṣarī, *ṣarḥ fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

embraces therefore singularity of each determination and universality at the same time. In the mystical school of Ibn 'Arabi, this level of unity of the Being as totality is called "the universal and expanding Being" (*al-wujūd al-ām al-munbasit*) which reveals the all-embracing manifestation of the Absolute with regard to all beings.<sup>50</sup> The Absolute as "the expanding Being" means the manifestation of the absolute Being in all beings.

This manifestation refers to the specific universality of the Being in distinction to all ontic universals; in Heidegger's terminology we can call it "the ontological universality."<sup>51</sup> For the mystics, the Absolute as totality means the manifestation or appearance as such, therefore it expands itself and, in this way, embraces all beings as beings as their Beingness in the sense of their presence and appearance. However, this level of unity of Being is not yet the intended One in Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of unity of Being, because he essentially distinguishes "the expanding Being" (the Being of beings or Beingness) from the Being in its absolute unity (Being itself). The expanding Being is just the appearance and manifestation of the Being itself.

Qūnawī argues that the level of unconditioned unity is still conditioned and not absolute in its true sense, because the unconditioned unity is itself a positive determination against limitation. This very contrast to limitation is again a condition. In other words, the unconditioned unity is conditioned to be expanded to all beings as their totality and is not yet absolute and free from this condition. Hence, the ultimate absoluteness must transcend the contrast between limitation and totality, i.e., it must be even unbounded and unconditioned from the condition of unconditionedness as such. This is the absolute transcendence from every condition and positive determination. It is the absoluteness in its true sense and thus, the ultimate level of absolute unity which is called "the unconditioned in terms of the origin of division" (*lā bišarṭ maqṣamī*) in the mystical school of Ibn 'Arabi; "division" refers here to the duality of limitation and absoluteness. This unity is neither ontic nor ontological in the sense of the unity of Being as totality or universality of Beingness; it goes rather "beyond Being" and can be characterized therefore only in a negative way. Qūnawī was the first thinker in the Islamic tradition who analyzed the mystical doctrine of the unity of Being in this conceptual argumentation about the true meaning of absoluteness. Qūnawī explains how we can think the true absoluteness of the one Being as follows:

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2001), 264. Also, Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 3: *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1991), 111.

Thinking about the absoluteness of the True (*al-ḥaqq*, i.e. the essence of Godhood) requires that the absoluteness is thought in the sense of a negative attribute, not in the sense that it is an absoluteness that its opposite is limitation, but it is the absoluteness from both of the known unity and plurality, and also absoluteness from being restricted in absoluteness and limitation, and from being restricted in the way that it must either gather these attributes or be separated from them. Therefore, it is correct that the Absolute has all these attributes, and simultaneously it is also correct that it doesn't have them. The relation of all those attributes and other attributes to it, and the negation of this relation to it, is equal.<sup>52</sup>

The core of the mystical doctrine of unity of Being is this understanding of "the Absolute" as absolute indifference that is totally transcendent to, and at the same time immanent in, all beings, which are its appearance and manifestation. Ibn 'Arabi and his followers call it "the Being as Being" and distinguish it from the Being of beings as their manifestation and appearance, which belongs to the level of the expanding Being. They emphasize that the true Absolute has, *stricto sensu*, no name and the concept "Being" has solely a didactical role in order to indicate the absolute level which has no determination. Qūnawī explains in which sense the Absolute is called "the Being":

It is the Being because it is the True (*al-ḥaqq*) and it has in this aspect ... no plurality in itself, no combination, no attribute, no name, no definition and no proposition, but rather it is simple Being; and if we say He is Being, then it is in order to make it understandable, not in the sense that the Being is a true name for it.<sup>53</sup>

Like Plato in the dialogue *Parmenides* and like Plotinus, Qūnawī negates even the unity as a determination for the Absolute. The absolute One cannot be determined even as something that is determined to be one. It includes again a limitation and thus, plurality, because it must be

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<sup>52</sup> Sadr ad-Dīn Qūnawī, *risalah an-nuṣūṣ*, ed. by Jalāloddīn Aṣṭiānī (Tehran: naṣr e dānešgāhī, 1992), 7.

<sup>53</sup> Sadr ad-Dīn Qūnawī, *miftāḥ ul-ghayb*, ed. by 'Aṣim Ibrāhīm Al-Kiālī (Beirut: dār ul-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2010) 22.

“something” that has the unity as its attribute.<sup>54</sup> Qūnawī writes: “The True is the pure Being, so that no conflict (plurality) is in it, and it is the One, as the true unity, so that no plurality can be thought against it”;<sup>55</sup> and then he negates the unity as a determination for the Absolute as following: “If we say the unity, that is because of its veneration, incomparability and in order to make it understandable, and not because of the indication of the concept of unity in a way that it is represented by veiled minds.”<sup>56</sup>

The ultimate Absolute which is unconditioned by manifestation and appearance, and which is the origin of them, can only be characterized as “hiddenness” (*ghayb*)—as the unknowable, unthinkable and ineffable truth of the essence of Godhood. As Qūnawī writes: “The True regarding its absoluteness and encompassment is not called by any name.”<sup>57</sup> He reasons the impossibility of any knowledge about the Absolute: “The lack of knowledge about this essence means the lack of knowledge on it, (if we think it) separated from its manifestations, steps and determinations; because such a knowledge is impossible and because in this aspect there is absolutely no relation between God and any other thing.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the meaning of absolute hiddenness is based on the priority of the Absolute to every manifestation as self-determination of the Absolute. The negation of all relations means here that the absolute constitutes by itself all relations and therefore is prior to them. We can compare the mystical conception of hiddenness through the Platonic allegory of the Sun with Heidegger’s “withdrawal” of the Being itself. “The Being itself” must withdraw and hide itself, in order to make the unhiddenness and disclosedness of “the Being of beings” possible. The Being itself makes the unhiddenness and appearance possible by differing between beings and the Being of beings as their appearance. The origin of this differing or the event of the difference as such indicates the horizon of the priority of the hiddenness which constitutes unhiddenness. Heidegger calls it “the Clearing” (*Lichtung*).<sup>59</sup> For him, the hiddenness or the Clearing has the central role of the ultimate origin for the most original and the last event as the facticity of the initial fact and “thatness”: “That” beings appear.

In the mystical sense—which is based on the Platonic and Neoplatonic negative theology—unhiddenness and appearance require

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<sup>54</sup> See Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen*, 396-399.

<sup>55</sup> Sadr ad-Din Qunawi, *risalah an-nuṣūṣ*, 69.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Sadr ad-Din Qūnawī, *miftāḥ ul-ghayb*, 36.

<sup>59</sup> See Heidegger’s essay “Das Ende der Philosophie und die Aufgabe des Denkens,” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 14Z; Also, Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007), 79-90.

plurality and determination, and in contrast, unity as such is hidden, that means that it is prior to appearance as such and prior to the Being of beings and consequently, it is *nothingness* in the sense of “beyond Being.”

Qūnawī characterizes the absolute hiddenness in the following words: “The first step of mystical steps is the hiddenness which lets all determinations fall; the pure absoluteness, absolute from being limited and absolute, and from each kind of being included in a positive or negative character. ... There is no expression for this level.”<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine of unity of Being and its absolute hiddenness keeps the horizon of transcendence regarding the Godhood in its essential withdrawal and avoids its transformation into the positive determination of the highest being or its identification with the totality of beings. In the light of Heidegger’s criticism of metaphysics as Ontotheology, in the “History of Being” this transformation has led to the nihilistic “Rescendence.” We can say that the absolute hiddenness in its mystical sense remains beyond Being and Thinking and is the origin of them and their belonging together; therefore, it keeps Thinking *open* and *ecstatic* to the horizon of Being, which remains unavailable for the self-positing and domination of any kind of subjectivity. The mystical unity of Being is the origin of appearance as such and constitutes a specific relation to human being which could be interpreted in a further study in the light of the phenomenological correlation. The radical negative theology could be the common ground and the necessary bridge for such intercultural studies between Heidegger and the Islamic philosophical and mystical tradition.

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<sup>60</sup> Sadr ad-Dīn Qūnawī, *I’jāz ul-bayān fi tafsīr umm ul-qur’an*, ed. Jalāloddīn Aštīānī (Qum: daftar e tablīghāt e eslāmī, 2002), 116.

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