

The Central Point

Qūnawī's Role in the School of Ibn 'Arabī*

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Ibn 'Arabī met Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī's father, Majd al-Dīn Ishāq, in Mecca in the year 1203 and subsequently traveled with him to Anatolia. Sadr al-Dīn was born two years later. A thirteenth-century source tells us that after the death of Majd al-Dīn, Ibn 'Arabī married his widow, thus becoming Sadr al-Dīn's stepfather. Although we have no direct confirmation of this from the writings of Ibn 'Arabī or Qūnawī, we do know that Qūnawī became Ibn 'Arabī's close disciple and was given permission to teach all of his works.¹ Eventually he became a respected scholar

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1. Stephen Hirtenstein informed me that some of the lists of participants at the reading of the autograph manuscript of the *Futūhāt* mention Qūnawī as the *walad* or "son" of Ibn 'Arabī, which is strong evidence in favor of the family relationship. However, the same term can be used for spiritual affiliation, so this is not conclusive evidence. To settle the issue once and for all, we would need an explicit passage from the writings of Ibn 'Arabī, Qūnawī, or someone very close to them. There are certainly suggestive passages, one of which is worth citing here, because it clarifies how Qūnawī viewed his relation with his master. In *al-Nafahāt al-ilāhiyya*, he writes that he had a vision of Ibn 'Arabī on 17 Shawwāl 653/19 November 1255, that is, fifteen years after Ibn 'Arabī's death. During the vision, he asked him to bestow upon him "the witnessing of the self-disclosure of the Essence, after which the perfect human beings have no veil and below which they have no resting place." Ibn 'Arabī replies, "This will be bestowed upon you, though you know that I have sons [*awlād*] and companions [*ashāb*], especially my son Sa'd al-Dīn. Nonetheless, what you have sought has not become possible for any of them. How many sons and companions I killed [*qataltu*] and brought to life [*ahyaytu*]! Those who died died, and those who were killed were killed. And none of them reached this" (*al-Nafahāt al-*

of Hadith and had many disciples on the Sufi path. The initiatic chains that lead back to Ibn 'Arabī go through him. He died in 1274 in Konya, a few months after attending the funeral of his good friend Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī.²

Qūnawī was not nearly as prolific as his master, but he still managed to write six books and a good number of treatises. He was also the teacher of four of the most influential authors in the school – 'Afīf al-Dīn Tilimsānī, Mu'ayyid al-Dīn Jandī, Sa'īd al-Dīn Farghānī, and Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī. By the time of his death, Qūnawī was recognized as a major transmitter of the teachings of al-Shaykh al-Akbar. His main contribution seems to be that he gave Ibn 'Arabī's teachings a structured coherence that largely determined the way they were read by later generations. Although his books are relatively short, they are much more systematic than those of his master and focus on certain key issues that became the linchpins of subsequent discussions.

One reason for Qūnawī's influence was the status of the *Fusūs al-hikam*, which became the main text that was studied in order to gain first-hand access to Ibn 'Arabī's perspective. The two most influential early commentaries on the book were Qūnawī's *Fakk al-khutūm*, which explains the significance of its chapter headings, and the commentary of his disciple Jandī. The latter was in turn the teacher of 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, and Kāshānī the teacher of Dāwūd Qaysarī. In the Arabic-speaking countries,

ilāhiyya, edited by Muhammad Khwājawī [Tehran: Mawlā, 1375/1996], p. 126). Notice that Ibn 'Arabī uses the plural form of the word *walad* (not the singular or dual), implying that he had at least three sons. If he means only physical sons and not spiritual sons, he could have in mind, in addition to the mentioned full son Muhammad Sa'd al-Dīn (618–56 AH), his other full son Muhammad 'Imād al-Dīn (d.667) and his step-son Sadr al-Dīn. As Claude Addas points out, the identity of Sa'd al-Dīn's mother is not known, but if the report of Ibn 'Arabī's marriage to Sadr al-Dīn's mother is correct, Sa'd al-Dīn could be his half brother (*Quest for the Red Sulphur* [Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993], pp. 86, 228).

2. For details on Qūnawī's life and works, see Chittick, "Sadr al-Dīn Kūnawī", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 7, pp. 753–55; also idem, "The School of Ibn 'Arabī", *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. by S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 510–23.

Kāshānī's commentary, which in many places is simply a summary of Jandī's, seems to have been looked upon as the most authoritative, whereas in the rest of the Islamic world, the commentary of choice was more likely to be that of Qaysarī. What is clear is that the commentary tradition leads back to Qūnawī, and that no one studied the *Fusūs* without the help of commentaries (or a teacher conversant with the commentaries). We can conclude that, generally speaking, the *Fusūs* was interpreted not in the light of Ibn 'Arabī's other books such as the *Futūhāt*, but rather in the light of Qūnawī's understanding of the text.

Given Qūnawī's importance in determining the way in which Ibn 'Arabī was read, it is worth looking at the notion of *wahdat al-wujūd* in his writings. People assume that since Ibn 'Arabī spoke for *wahdat al-wujūd*, so also did his disciple Qūnawī. Based on this assumption I wrote an article twenty-five years ago called "Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī on the Oneness of Being."³ It was only later, once I had become more familiar with the historical problems connected with the term *wahdat al-wujūd* and the misunderstandings that have surrounded its use, that I revised my opinion concerning the role that it played in Qūnawī's teachings.

As is clear to anyone who has looked at the sources, the notion that Ibn 'Arabī and his followers believed in *wahdat al-wujūd* was a relatively late development.⁴ It is of course easy to find passages that approximate the expression *wahdat al-wujūd* in the writings of Ibn 'Arabī and some of his early followers. Moreover, it is obvious that Ibn 'Arabī did accept that *wujūd* is one. However, the *wujūd* he is talking about is *al-wujūd al-haqq*, the Real Being, or the Being that is God.⁵ Moreover, if it is true that

3. Published in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1981), pp. 171–184.

4. I have outlined the evolution of the term *wahdat al-wujūd* in "Rūmī and Wahdat al-wujūd", *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, edited by A. Banani, R. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 70–111. For further reflections, see Chittick, "Wahdat al-Shuhūd and Wahdat al-Wudjūd", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 10, pp. 37–9.

5. Let me insert here a parenthetical remark about the translation of the expression *wahdat al-wujūd* into English. If I must translate it, I prefer

“Being is one” (*al-wujūd wāhid*), we can turn this sentence into a nominal phrase, thus giving us the expression “the oneness of being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*). It follows that we are not wrong to say

“Oneness of Being” to the several alternatives. There are a number of reasons for this, some of which are as follows: The word “being” has traditionally been preferred in English to “existence” as a designation for God. The root of the word “existence” implies stepping forth and emerging, making it an appropriate designation for the created world. Moreover, as a Latinism, “existence” is more abstract than “being”, and in Islamic thought, there is nothing whatsoever abstract about *al-wujūd al-haqq*, the Real Being. This Being is the only true reality, and as such it is the most “concrete” of all things. What is in fact “abstract” is the created world, which steps forth from the Real Being and is thus extracted and abstracted from it.

There is also the point that we are more likely to associate sentience and awareness with “being” than with “existence”. Given the prevalence of the scientific world view, “existence” is typically understood as something inert, like matter. Hence qualities such as life and awareness appear as epiphenomena. The connotation of inertness is not nearly as strong in the word “being”. Remember that Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers stress the fact that *wujūd* means not only “to be”, but also “to find” and “to perceive”. To say that *wujūd* is one means that God’s reality is one, God’s finding and perceiving and knowing is one, and that the only reality that always and forever finds and is found is God. Everything else may or may not be found; everything else may or may not find.

If we translate *wahdat al-wujūd* as “the unity of existence”, we are implying that everything that exists is a unified aggregate and that all things are equal in being parts of the same whole. But, as a shorthand for what Ibn ‘Arabī is saying, this is far from the mark. Rather, in shorthand, what *wahdat al-wujūd* might mean for Ibn ‘Arabī and his immediate followers is that the Real Being is One, and everything else is uniquely itself, different from the Real Being and from every other thing. In each unique thing, the Real Being discloses a unique face of its infinite reality while remaining One and Unique in itself. We, on the other hand, remain forever ourselves in our own realities, forever other than the Real Being, while we simultaneously remain conjoined with the Real Being inasmuch as we find and are found. This situation can best be expressed with paradox – such as Ibn ‘Arabī’s “He/not He” (*huwa lā huwa*). A straightforward phrase such as “unity of existence” does not begin to suggest the ambiguity of the cosmic situation, which drives even perfect man to “bewilderment” (*hayra*).

that Ibn ‘Arabī believed in *wahdat al-wujūd*. Fair enough. But, the real issue is this: are we saying anything of significance? The fact is that by defining *wahdat al-wujūd* in the way that I just did – that is, in a way that makes perfect sense in the context of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings – I have divested it of any technical meaning. The phrase simply reiterates the declarative sentence, *al-wujūd wāhid*. There is nothing remarkable about the idea that the Real Being is one. We are simply saying “God is one” in the philosophical and theological language that was current among Muslim intellectuals. We are uttering the first principle of Islamic thought, *tawhīd*, the declaration of God’s unity.

In other words, to say that Ibn ‘Arabī believed in *wahdat al-wujūd* is to state the obvious. All Muslims who understand that *wujūd* means *al-wujūd al-haqq*, the Real Being, know that Being is one; therefore they believe in *wahdat al-wujūd*. To say that Ibn ‘Arabī believed in it is to voice a truism. Why then did the later tradition make such a big issue out of belief in *wahdat al-wujūd*? The answer is that technical senses were ascribed to the expression by later authors, and some of these were problematic, to say the least. Those who criticized the expression had certain meanings in mind, and those who defended the expression typically had other meanings in mind. When any of these authors said that Ibn ‘Arabī believed in *wahdat al-wujūd*, they were attributing to him a doctrine that he did not necessarily hold. This is the key point, and it helps explain why the expression remains controversial. Anyone who says that Ibn ‘Arabī, or someone else, believed in *wahdat al-wujūd* should be prepared to defend his position by defining the specific meaning of *wahdat al-wujūd* that he has in mind. If he claims that for Ibn ‘Arabī, *wahdat al-wujūd* means anything other than “God is one”, he will need to provide solid textual evidence to prove his point.

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One of the characteristics of the writings of Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī is that he is much more inclined than his master to engage in discussion and debate with the philosophical tradition. Unlike Ibn ‘Arabī, Qūnawī had read Avicenna carefully (as well as other

philosophers). This is obvious in his correspondence with Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī, the greatest philosopher-scientist of the day. The topic of the correspondence was the interpretation of Avicenna's basic teachings. Like any good scholar, Qūnawī quotes from Avicenna to prove some of his points. It would have been totally out of character for Ibn 'Arabī to quote from Avicenna – or from any philosopher or theologian. And remember that it is Avicenna who put the discussion of *wujūd* squarely at the heart of Islamic philosophy. It was utterly self-evident to Avicenna and to other philosophers that *wujūd* is one – that is, if we mean by *wujūd* the Necessary *Wujūd*, which in philosophical language is often called “the First Real”, *al-haqq al-awwal*, and which is none other than the God of theology.

Qūnawī uses the expression *wahdat al-wujūd* in two or three passages. In many more passages, he says, “*al-wujūd wāhid*”, that is, “Being is one”. Nowhere, however, does he suggest that there is anything special about *wahdat al-wujūd*. It was not yet a technical term denoting something other than its literal sense. It was a phrase that came up in the normal course of explaining the nature of divine unity in the philosophical vocabulary. It is true that his disciple Farghānī frequently uses the term *wahdat al-wujūd* in his two commentaries on Ibn al-Fārid's *Nazm al-sulūk*, but in his writings it has a specific, technical sense that was not picked up by the later tradition. In short, none of Ibn 'Arabī's early followers considered *wahdat al-wujūd* a label appropriate for summing up his school of thought.

The person who deserves the most credit for turning *wahdat al-wujūd* into the designation for a doctrine seems to be Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328).⁶ He declared that Ibn 'Arabī, Qūnawī, and various other figures – all of whom shared a predilection for using philosophical vocabulary to talk about God – were believers in *wahdat al-wujūd*. And, he tells us, *wahdat al-wujūd* is equivalent to heresy (*ilhād*), atheism (*zindiqa*), and unbelief (*kufri*). In Ibn Taymiyya's usage, to say that someone believes in *wahdat al-wujūd* is to say that he is not a true Muslim. And, I might add, given the way in which Ibn Taymiyya defines the expression, Ibn

6. See Chittick, “Rūmī and *Wahdat al-Wujūd*”.

‘Arabī and Qūnawī would have agreed with him. Anyone who understands *wahdat al-wujūd* to mean what Ibn Taymiyya says it means would indeed be denying *tawhīd*.

As far as I have been able to tell, it is not until ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī, writing in the second half of the ninth/fifteenth century, that Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers are labeled, with praise and approval, as spokesmen for the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, meaning thereby *tawhīd* in philosophical language. Moreover, it is Jāmī who tells us that Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī is the best guide for understanding *wahdat al-wujūd*. In the section on Qūnawī in his *Nafahāt al-uns*, he writes, “He is the assayer [*naqqād*] of the words of the Shaykh [Ibn ‘Arabī]. What the Shaykh meant in the question of *wahdat al-wujūd* will not come to hand in a manner that accords with both reason and the Shariah unless one studies Qūnawī’s verifications and understands them properly.”⁷

After Jāmī, the term *wahdat al-wujūd* gradually became almost equivalent to Ibn ‘Arabī’s name. By the twentieth century, this was the general rule throughout the Islamic world. And of course, both Orientalists and the Ibn ‘Arabī Society have adopted this usage. Today, in both the Islamic world and in the Western secondary literature, people continually make the connection between Ibn ‘Arabī and *wahdat al-wujūd*. But, generally speaking, those who do so make no attempt to define the expression in a way that would accord with Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings. Rather, they simply assume that its meaning is obvious – whether they consider it a good thing, or a bad thing.

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Let me turn back to Qūnawī and the “central point”. What I have in mind is the role of Qūnawī in distilling Ibn ‘Arabī’s works down to certain basic notions that were subsequently considered the crux of his teachings. Certainly, one of these issues is *wujūd*. If we were to look at Ibn ‘Arabī’s works without the lens of Qūnawī and his followers, we would probably not think that

7. *Nafahāt al-uns*, edited by Mahmūd ‘Ābidī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ittilā’āt, 1370/1991), p.555.

wujūd is as central to his project as it appears with the hindsight of the tradition. This has everything to do with the fact that Qūnawī was well versed in philosophy, where *wujūd* was the fundamental issue. He tells us explicitly in his letters to Tūsī that he wanted to harmonize philosophy and the “school of realization” (*mashrab al-tahqīq*), that is, the perspective of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers.⁸ Qūnawī attempted to do this both in his correspondence with Tūsī and in some of his other writings, and to a large degree he was successful. After Qūnawī, most people who read philosophy also studied Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective as a form of philosophical thinking.

However this may be, one does not get the impression from reading Qūnawī that he thinks that *wujūd* – not to mention *wahdat al-wujūd* – is the key issue. Rather, he makes it clear that the central point of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings is the achievement of human perfection. If we were to ask Qūnawī what Ibn ‘Arabī is talking about, he would most likely say that he wants to explain how it is possible to be truly human. Thus, it would be much more appropriate – in terms of Ibn ‘Arabī’s own teachings – to refer to his school of thought as that of human perfection, or as the path to becoming “the perfect human being”, *al-insān al-kāmil*. In this case, the expression is used frequently by Ibn ‘Arabī himself. So also, as I have often said, we would be on much firmer textual ground to call the school that of “realization”, as Qūnawī does.

It is obvious in the *Futūhāt* that achieving human perfection is the basic issue, given that the book is structured around modalities of perfection. Each chapter deals with one or more of the “stations” achieved on the path to God and the manner in which perfect human beings see God and the world. In the same way, there is no special reason to think that the *Fusūs al-hikam* is about *wahdat al-wujūd*. Rather, it also is about the

8. See Chittick, “Mysticism vs. Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History: The al-Tūsī, al-Qūnawī Correspondence”, *Religious Studies* 17 (1981), pp. 87–104. The text has been edited by Gudrun Schubert, *Annäherungen: Der mystisch-philosophische Briefwechsel zwischen Sadr ud-Dīn-i Qūnawī und Nasīr ud-Dīn-i Tūsī* (Beirut: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1995).

stations of human perfection, described in terms of specific prophets and specific divine attributes.

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Ibn ‘Arabī refers to human perfection by several names. Among others he calls it the Muhammadan Station or the station of *tahqīq*, “realization” or “verification”. In his explanations of the Muhammadan Station, however, he often uses another expression that is especially helpful in understanding how he looks upon human nature: “the station of no station” (*maqām lā maqām*).⁹

Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that full human perfection has many stations, each of which represents a perfect and complete modality of being human. But, as a modality, each station is constricted and limited, because it does not embrace the whole of human perfection. Each station is a permanent standing place, which is to say that once someone reaches it, he or she has achieved a permanent, higher mode of presence with God. Each higher station embraces the lower stations without being constricted by them. The highest of all stations is the station that encompasses every modality of human perfection while being simultaneously free of the limitations of the specific stations. The only designation that properly applies to it is that of non-designation.

By achieving human perfection per se, the seeker achieves every modality of perfection. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the “Muhammadan saints” (*al-awliyā’ al-muhammadiyya*)¹⁰ have

9. Or, more correctly perhaps, *maqām lā muqām* or *muqām lā muqām*, since there is a reference here to the Koranic verse, *Yā ahl^a yathrib, lā muqām^a lakum* (33:13).

10. It is perhaps superfluous to remind readers of this journal that Ibn ‘Arabī uses the term *muhammadī* in a specific, technical sense. A Muhammadan is one who has realized, by way of following Muhammad, all the perfections of deed, word, and knowledge embodied in Muhammad, and hence all the perfections of all the prophets. The Muhammadan saint is contrasted with lesser saints, each of whom follows “in the footsteps” (*‘alā qadam*) of one of the 124,000 other prophets. On the Muhammadans and

reached the station of no station. It is they who see with “both eyes”. With one eye they see and realize human perfection as such, and with the other they see the requirements and necessities of the specific moment in life in which they are situated. With one eye, they see the oneness of the Real Being, and with the other they see the manyness of things and the specificity of each. It is this simultaneous vision of the oneness of the Real and the manyness of creation that allows them “to give each thing that has a *haqq* its *haqq*”, as demanded by the well-known hadith.

Giving things their *haqq* – what is rightfully due to them, what is demanded by their truth and their reality, their “right” – is the very definition of *tahqīq* or “realization”. The Muhammadan saints are the *muhaqqiqūn*, the “Realizers”, those who give each created thing exactly what is due to it on the basis of seeing it as a unique self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of the absolute *Haqq*, the absolute truth and reality that is the Real *Wujūd*.¹¹ It is the Realizers alone who fully observe the *huqūq*, the “rights” of God and man.

Perhaps the best way to understand the role of the stations in Ibn ‘Arabī’s view is to think in terms of the divine names in relation to God. Each of God’s names designates an ontological perfection. None of them limits God, because God in himself transcends every name and every attribute. In other words, the One *Wujūd* is utterly “nondelimited” (*mutlaq*) and, as such, indefinable and unknowable. The One *Wujūd* as we know it – that is, God – embraces all names and attributes, none of which limits or constricts him. God in his Essence has “no station”, no designation, no name, no attribute. But God in his self-disclosure occupies every station and assumes every designation, name, and attribute. So also, in his essence, the perfect human being stands in no station, but he is able to occupy every station as appropriate to his daily actuality.

the Station of No Station, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), chapter 20.

11. On *tahqīq*, see the introduction to Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

By definition God possesses all perfections, and by definition human beings are created in God's "form" (*sūra*). Man has the potential to actualize the perfections of divine self-disclosure; once actualized, these are called "stations", that is, "standing places". God possesses all perfections absolutely and discloses himself in keeping with each without in any way limiting his Essence. Human beings have the potential for actualizing all the perfections, but – with the exception of those who achieve the Station of No Station – people are limited, defined and constricted by those attributes that they do in fact actualize. The infinite possibilities embraced by their potential is reflected in the vast diversity of human languages, cultures, religions, societies, literatures, and so on.

Qūnawī discusses human perfection in a much more explicitly philosophical language than does Ibn 'Arabī. He has far less recourse to Koranic verses and sayings of the Prophet, and he focuses instead on unpacking Ibn 'Arabī's main points in the abstract language of scholars and philosophers. He rarely employs the expression Station of No Station, nor does he single it out for the attention that Ibn 'Arabī gives to it. Nonetheless, his many discussions of human perfection throw a good deal of light on the general idea.¹² Especially interesting is a passage that employs one of Ibn 'Arabī's best known technical terms, "fixed entity" (*'ayn thābita*).

You will remember that the fixed entity is a thing's "reality" (*haqīqa*), that is, the thing as known to God. The word "entity", like the philosophical term "quiddity" (*māhiyya*), is contrasted

12. A quick review of most of Qūnawī's works turned up only one mention of the expression: "Then, through the totality of the encompassing guise, there becomes manifest without qualification from the Essential Unseen the mystery of the perfection that is concealed in the Station of No Station; there is no description, no property, and no name" (*Nafahāt*, p. 43). It is worth noting that Qūnawī's disciple Sa'īd al-Dīn Farghānī does not mention the expression in the original Persian text of his lengthy commentary on Ibn al-Fārid's *Nazm al-sulūk*, a book that is based on Qūnawī's lectures, but he does employ the other terms that will be discussed. See Farghānī, *Mashāriq al-darārī*, edited by S.J. Āshtiyānī (Mashhad: Dānishgāh-i Firdawsī, 1357/1978); indexes by W.C. Chittick.

with *wujūd*, which is God in himself.¹³ In and of itself, the fixed entity has no *wujūd*. The entities “exist” only as objects of divine knowledge, not on their own. In an analogous way, our ideas “exist” only through the existence of our minds. God creates the universe by bestowing the color of *wujūd* on the fixed entities. The entities remain nonexistent and fixed in God’s knowledge, yet they appear simultaneously as “existent entities” (*al-a’yān al-mawjūda*), that is, creatures in the world. There is no difference between the fixed entity and the existent entity save the apparent addition of existence to the latter.

Everything other than God has a fixed entity, which is to say that God alone is *wujūd*. Nothing but God exists on its own, which is to say that everything else gains existence only inasmuch as God bestows existence upon it. Qūnawī tells us, however, that perfect man has no fixed entity. How can this be, given that everything other than God has a fixed entity? The answer lies in the fact that perfect man is the realized form of God, and God is the “meaning” (*ma’nā*) whose form is precisely perfect man. Hence perfect man is not “other” than God. Standing in the Station of No Station, he stands in *wujūd* itself, without delimitation. He is not one thing rather than another thing. In his innermost reality, he is none other than *wujūd*, which is no specific thing, so has no entity, because the entity by definition is that which is distinguished from *wujūd*.¹⁴

13. I am not forgetting that Ibn ‘Arabī also uses the word *‘ayn* as equivalent to *wujūd* in respect of the fact that *wujūd* is the entity or reality that embraces all entities and all realities. Thus he commonly speaks of the Real as “the One Entity” (*al-‘ayn al-wāhida*). See, for example, Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, index under “entity, one.”

14. There is of course a well known parallel discussion in Medieval philosophy, according to which God has no “quiddity”, because the question “What is He?” (*quid est*; Arabic *mā huwa*) has no answer other than “He is”. This question demands a definition, but Being has no definition, because it is nondelimited and unknowable; God in his Essence cannot be defined as this or that, in contrast to everything else. Or, to put it differently, God’s quiddity (or essence) is identical with His Being. For created things, being and quiddity are distinct. A thing is always simply what it is, and the answer to the question “What is it?” stays the same; whether or not the thing

In his discussion of achieving perfection, Qūnawī commonly tells us that man must achieve “disengagement” (*tajarrud*). This important technical term is much discussed in both Sufism and philosophy and is defined in a number of ways. For the purpose of understanding the discussion here, we can say that it means the detachment of perception and understanding from the appearance of things and the simultaneous vision of the realities of things at the level of the fixed entities, that is, within God’s own knowledge.

Here then is one of Qūnawī’s explanations of the Station of No Station. The passage is from the very end of *al-Nafahāt al-ilāhiyya* (“The divine inblowings”), the only book in which he describes his visionary experiences in any detail.

The tasting of the perfect human beings has affirmed that everything is in everything. Nothing has any essential stability in something from which it cannot change. On the contrary, everything is on the verge of being transformed into something else... This is the situation of all of *wujūd*... This constant flow is the divine journey from the first, nonmanifest Unseen to the realm of the Visible... No one tastes this journey and reaches its source except he whose essence has come to be nondelimited. Then the bonds are loosened – the contingent properties, states, attributes, stations, configurations, acts, and beliefs – and he is not confined by any of them. By his essence he flows in everything, just as *wujūd* flows in the realities of all things without end or beginning...

When the Real gave me to witness this tremendous place of witnessing [*mashhad*], I saw that its possessor has no fixed entity and no reality. Such is the situation of him who is upon His form. All those other than such a witnesser and his Lord possess fixed entities colored by *wujūd*...

When you witness this, you will know that you perceive each thing only through that thing itself and inasmuch as you are identical with each thing. Thus you are the attribute of every attribute and the quality of every essence. In one respect, your act is the act of every actor. Everything is the differentiation of your essence.

exists, however, is another question, and the answer varies according to circumstances.

In this state you are the common measure of all things; you make their manyness one, and you make their oneness many by the constant variation of your manifestation within them.¹⁵

If we search through Qūnawī's works to find his own preferred designation for the Station of No Station, we might settle on "the Point at the Middle of the Circle of Existence" (*nuqta wasat al-dā'irat al-wujūdiyya*) or "the Exact Middle" (*hāqq al-wasat*).¹⁶ It is true that Ibn 'Arabī often speaks of circles and centers, but I do not think that these specific expressions derive directly from his writings, certainly not as synonyms for the Station of No Station. However this may be, the expressions provide another way of picturing the nature of human perfection.

Notice that Qūnawī uses the word *nuqta*, "point", which is a mathematical term often discussed in Islamic philosophy. A point has no dimensions in itself. It can only be conceptualized in relation to other geometrical figures, such as the line and the surface. As Qūnawī puts it, "The point is an intelligible affair that is not witnessed, even though it is the root of all lines, surfaces, and circles. So, everything becomes manifest from it, but, in respect of itself, it does not become manifest."¹⁷

Ibn 'Arabī and others often employ the word *nuqta* to refer to the divine Essence, which stands beyond all names and attributes. The divine names and attributes are relations (*nisab*) that can only be understood when creatures are taken into account along with the Essence. The geometrical point can represent the Essence, or Nondelimited Being, and the circle

15. *Nafahāt*, pp.263–6.

16. The word *hāqq*, "exact", rarely used by Ibn 'Arabī, derives from the same root as *haqq* (real) and *haqīqa* (reality); it is used emphatically to mean truly and very, and, as a substantive, the middle of something. Both Qūnawī and Farghānī often use the term *hāqq al-wasat*, the exact middle, or the exact center of the middle.

17. *I'jāz al-bayān fī ta'wīl umm al-Qur'ān* (Hyderabad-Deccan: Osmania Oriental Publications Bureau, 1949), p.93; also printed as *al-Tafsīr al-sūfī li'l-Qur'ān*, edited by 'A. Ahmad 'Atā' (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Hadītha, 1969), p.200.

generated from the point can represent all of “existence”, everything that stands forth and emerges from Being.

We should remember, however, that *wujūd* means not only being and existence, but also finding. The circle represents not only the existence of the cosmos, but also the awareness and finding that permeates all things. In speaking of the point at the center of *wujūd*, Qūnawī means not only the point at the center of existence, but also the point at the center of awareness and consciousness. Situated at the Exact Middle, the perfect human being knows all things, both manifest and nonmanifest. Qūnawī writes,

Know that the most perfect and complete knowledge is correspondence [*mudāhāt*] with the knowledge of the Real. No one gains it save him whose essence is empty of every attribute and imprint [*naqsh*] and who settles down in the Exact Middle of the Greatest Point, which brings together all levels and existent things; this is the true equilibrium [*i'tidāl*] that encompasses all the supraformal [*ma'nawī*], spiritual, imaginal, and sensory equilibriums and the relative perfections and degrees that they encompass. [Such a knower] realizes the perfect, divine nondelimitation and the First Entification, concerning which we said that it is the origin of all entifications;¹⁸ his essence becomes like a mirror of all of the Real and creation. Every known thing whatsoever is impressed within his essence and entified within its mirroriness [*mir'ātiyya*] through his essence's entification in itself.¹⁹

According to the school of realization, the goal of human existence is to actualize the divine form in which man was created, or to achieve the Station of No Station, bereft of all

18. “Entification” (*ta'ayyun*) is one of many technical terms Qūnawī makes current among Ibn 'Arabī's followers. Ibn 'Arabī uses the word, but with no special technical significance. In the technical sense, it means to be or to become an entity (*'ayn*), that is, a reality distinct from other realities. The First Entification is God as known to us, who embraces all names and attributes and gives rise to all entities and creatures. Beyond the First Entification stands “Nonentification” (*lā ta'ayyun*), that is, Nondelimited *Wujūd*, or God's Essence.

19. *Nafahāt*, pp. 135–6.

specifying and delimiting attributes. Seekers must turn away from any focus except the central point of reality itself, which is the divine Essence. They must disengage themselves from all qualities, bonds, limitations, and constrictions and stand with Nondelimited *Wujūd*. This is the most difficult of all paths to follow, and travelers will meet various dangers and obstacles at every step, all of which go back to the fact of human all-comprehensiveness (*jam'iyya*).²⁰

As the form of Real *Wujūd*, human beings inherently love the Real along with all its attributes. Man is created in the form of the name that comprehends all divine names, so he is a servant of every divine name, and every divine name is his lord. All creatures manifest one or more of the names, so people are attracted to creatures inasmuch as they disclose the lords. In relation to each lord, man has a trace of servanthood. The key to deliverance is to avoid being attracted by any specific lord, to anything less than the Lord of lords, which is Nondelimited *Wujūd*, or the divine Essence. This is what Qūnawī is discussing in the following passage, which is from his longest book, *I'jāz al-bayān*, a commentary on the Fatihah, the opening chapter of the Koran:

The attractors, my brother, are attracting from every side and every direction. The callers are calling in the language of love, inasmuch as man is loved by all and inasmuch as all are colored by the property of Lordship.

20. Because of this all-comprehensiveness, the human essence is a mirror that reflects all things. In addressing the perfect human being, Qūnawī writes, "What is imaged in your mirror is not fixed, because the things are circumambulating your reality, which is the center of their circle. Your reality is like a spherical, round mirror upon a 'parchment' that is encompassing, 'unrolled', revolving, and circular and comprising all images. The relation of things to it is like the relation of the points on the circumference of a circle to the point from which they arise" (*Miftāh al-ghayb*, edited by M. Khwājawī [Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mawlā, 1374/1995], p. 139). The words "parchment" and "unrolled" derive from Koran 52:3. Compare Ibn 'Arabī's words: "The whole cosmos is 'a book inscribed on a parchment unrolled' [52:2-3], and it is *wujūd*" (*al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya* [Cairo, 1911], vol. 3, p. 455, line 21).

The callers are sent out, in keeping with the attractions and the correlations, for the sake of response and attraction. You are the servant of that to which you respond and are attracted.

In each station, state, and everything else, equilibrium [*i'tidāl*] is the middle. He who inclines away from it deviates [*inhirāf*]. No one deviates except him who is attracted totally or mostly by what is less [than himself].

As for the person for whom the sides of the circle of every station in which he alights or over which he passes are equal, who is fixed in the station's center [*markaz*] and is described as pure potentiality while he is free from the bonds of the properties and tracings and gives of himself to each attractor and caller only its right [*haqq*] and its portion; such a person, in respect of everything other than the portions that become designated from him, remains in the root of his nondelimitation and in the blankness of his effacement [*tals*], without description, designated state, property, or name.²¹

Another passage from the same book contrasts the realization of human all-comprehensiveness and nondelimitation with the normal human situation, in which people are attracted and entranced by physical, imaginal, or spiritual entities, all of which are loci of manifestation for the fixed entities and disclosures of the properties of the lords.

Man is an isthmus [*barzakh*] between the Divine and Engendered Presences. He is a transcript [*nuskha*] that comprehends both [Presences] along with everything that they comprise. There is nothing whatsoever that is not traced out in his level, which is his all-comprehensiveness. What becomes entified through that which is comprised by and included in his transcript of *wujūd* and his level, in every moment, state, configuration, and homestead, is only what is called forth by the property of his correlation with that state, moment, configuration, and homestead, and its inhabitants. Such is the wont of the Real in respect of His connection to the cosmos and the cosmos's connection to Him, as already indicated.

21. *I'jāz*, pp.298–9; *Tafsīr*, p.417.

As long as man is not delivered from the noose of the bonds of partial attributes and engendered properties, his perception will be delimited by the partial attribute that exercises its ruling property over him in the mentioned manner. He will perceive only things that are the counterparts [*muqābil*] of the ruling attribute, or things that are under its scope, nothing more.

If he disengages himself from the properties of the bonds, inclinations, and deviant, one-sided, and partial attractions; and if he ends up at the mentioned all-comprehensive, middle-most station, which is the point of universal counterbalancing [*musāmata*] and the center of the circle that comprehends all the levels of equilibrium – the supraformal, spiritual, imaginal, and sensory which I just discussed – and if he becomes qualified by the state that I explained, then he will stand before the two Presences in the station of supraformal, isthmus-like parallelism [*muhādhāt*]. He will face the two [Presences] in his essence like the point in relation to each part of the circumference. He will be the counterpart of all the divine and engendered realities by means of what he has of them within himself as a transcript of them all. He will perceive, through each individual within his own transcript of *wujūd*, the realities that are his transcript's counterparts in the two Presences. Thereby he will obtain realized knowledge of the realities, roots, and principles of things, because he perceives them in the station of their disengagement. Then he will perceive them according to their totality and all-comprehensiveness through his own totality and all-comprehensiveness.²²

When human beings reach the center of the circle of existence, they perceive things as they truly are, in their state of disengagement and as known to God. Those who do not reach this point see things in terms of their own limitations. As Ibn 'Arabī would say, they worship the gods that they themselves have fashioned with their own two hands. In another passage in *al-Nafahāt al-ilāhiyya*, Qūnawī describes the vision of all things achieved at the central point and contrasts it with the limited viewpoint of those who have not reached perfection:

22. *I'jāz*, pp.43–4; *Tafsīr*, pp.145–6.

I saw that whoever does not come to a halt, or rather take his seat, in the Exact Middle – I mean the middle of the circle of existence and the levels, the station of complete parallelism with the Presence of the Real – has no correct knowledge. On the contrary, in terms of correctness and lack of correctness, the knowledge of those who are outside the point of being the counterpart is related to the knowledge of him who is fixed on the point in the measure of their deviation from the Exact Middle. Some are near, and some nearer; some are far, and some farther.

The master of fixity on the point and the owner of its affair is God's most complete, most general, most inclusive, and most perfect scale, but not only in knowledge; rather, also in beauty and ugliness, nearness to the Real and distance from Him, conformity and opposition, anger and good-pleasure, loss and gain, wretchedness and felicity, and all the rest of the universal and particular, divine and engendered, states and attributes.²³

In his commentary on the Fatihah, Qūnawī speaks of man's relationship to the central point as the determining factor in his destiny. It is precisely the extent to which man coincides with the Exact Middle, which is the perfect form of Being and the Station of No Station, that determines where he will end up in his posthumous state. He writes,

When anyone deviates from this central, middlemost point, which is the point of perfection in the Presence of the Unity of All-Comprehension [*ahadiyyat al-jam'*], then the judgment for or against him accords with his nearness to or distance from this level. Some are near, and some nearer; some far, and some farther. Between the complete deviation specific to satanism and the perfect equilibrium of the divine names become designated the levels of the folk of felicity and wretchedness.²⁴

In still another passage from his commentary on the Fatihah, Qūnawī explains that human beings differ from all other creatures precisely because they do not have a specific station to which they belong, and he cites a Koranic verse that Ibn 'Arabī

23. *Nafahāt*, p. 23.

24. *I'jāz*, p. 300; *Tafsir*, p. 418.

often quotes in the same sort of context. He goes on to point out that deviation from the center occurs because people take as their object of devotion and worship something less than God, that is, a limited station designated by one of the myriad divine names.

Man is not delimited by a station that would confine him as the angels are confined; to this God alludes with His words [quoting the angels], “None of us there is but has a known station” [37:164]. Nor [is he confined] as the natural bodies are confined; concerning this have come divine reports in the tongue of the revealed religions [*sharā’i’i*] and in other tongues.

When the true man frees himself from the bondage of the stations, climbs up, and is delivered by the middlemost, perfect equilibrium from the properties that attract to the sides and from every sort of deviation, then he turns his attention to the Presence of the Essence, which possesses the Unity of the All-Comprehension of all-Comprehension and is described by manifestation and nonmanifestation, firstness and lastness, all-comprehension and differentiation...

However, if man inclines away from the mentioned middle to one side because of an attracting and overwhelming correlation, and if the property of some of the names and levels dominate over him such that he deviates, then he will settle down in the circle of that dominating name. He will become linked to it and depend upon it. He will worship the Real in respect of its level and rely upon it. That name will become his final target and his furthest aspiration. It will be his direction in respect of his state and station, so long as he does not pass beyond it.²⁵

* * *

In conclusion, let me say something about what this school of thought can teach us today. The writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and Qūnawī (and those of numerous other pre-modern authors from many traditions) invite us not so much to a vision of “the unity

25. *I’jāz*, pp.270–71; *Tafsīr*, pp.386–7.

of existence” as to an assumption of human responsibility. What they tell us is that our human duty is to actualize the perfections for which we were created, and this depends upon following the guidance of the Real. The idea that human beings should be perfect – just as, in the words of the Gospel, their Father in heaven is perfect – has long been discarded by our own culture. Nonetheless, given the directions in which the world has been moving for the past century or two, this is no reason to dismiss it.

Once it is understood that the proper human role in the cosmos is to manifest the Divine Essence in a global and plenary fashion, it is easy to see that the main currents of modern thought are designed to keep people as far away from the central point as possible. This is because science, technology, and the other branches of modern learning – not to speak of politics – are grounded in ignorance of human nature. Modern forms of knowledge falsify the human self by defining it in terms of ever more narrowly focused disciplines – biology, neurophysiology, genetics, anthropology, psychology, history, economics, and so on. Modern intellectual currents, the media, and popular culture make people comfortable with the false notion that they belong to fixed stations. Once people lose sight of the nondelimitation of the true human state, they lose the possibility of thinking about perfection, much less achieving it. Modern knowledge tells us who we are not. It can never tell us who we are. Only a perspective rooted in the Station of No Station can show the way to the central point.

