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Realized Knowledge According to Ibn al-‘Arabī

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Ibn al-‘Arabī is at once the most influential and the most controversial Muslim thinker to appear over the past 800 years. The Sufi tradition looks back at him as ‘the greatest master’ (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), by which is meant that he was the foremost expositor of the inner teachings of Islam. Though modern scholarship is rightly skeptical about grandiose titles, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this specific title is not completely out of line. On the quantitative side, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s massive *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (‘The Meccan Openings’) provides more text than most prolific authors wrote in a lifetime. Scores of his books and treatises have been published, and manuscripts of several hundred other works are scattered in libraries.

‘Greatness,’ however, is not to be judged by bigness, so we clearly need to look at the contents of all those pages. It is on the qualitative side of things that Ibn al-‘Arabī truly shines, not least because of his extraordinary erudition, consistently high level of discourse, constantly shifting perspectives, and diversity of styles, factors that contribute to making him one of the most difficult of authors. One might suspect that his works are difficult because he wrote unnecessarily complicated rehashes of earlier works. In fact, we are dealing with an approach to Islamic learning that is reminiscent of all that went before but also remarkably original, so much so that he has no real predecessors. Certainly, there were important authors during the previous century who also expressed philosophical, theological, juridical, and Sufi teachings with theoretical sophistication, but compared even to the greatest of these, such as Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī represents a radical break.

Ghazālī speaks for much of the early Sufi tradition when he tells us that ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*) – that is, the unmediated knowledge that God bestows on His special friends – should not be set down in books (though he does not always follow his own advice). Ibn

al-‘Arabī sweeps this prohibition aside and spreads out the fruit of unveiling for all to see. It should not be imagined for a moment, however, that in setting down his ‘unveilings, witnessings, and tastings,’ he is simply providing tantalizing glimpses of a spiritual realm in the manner of a mystic visionary. In fact, the majority of his writings are argued out with a rational precision that puts him into the mainstream of Islamic scholarship.

After his death in 1240, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings quickly spread throughout the Islamic world, and they kept on spreading wherever Islam went, from West Africa and the Balkans to Indonesia and China. The reason for this was certainly not that the masters of the various forms of rational discourse that shaped the Muslim elite were overawed by his mystical credentials. Rather, they were convinced by the soundness of his arguments and the breadth of his learning. They paid attention to him because he offered powerful proofs, both transmitted and intellectual, to demonstrate the correctness of his views. Many of these later scholars adopted his basic perspectives and a good deal of his terminology, and many also criticized some of his teachings or made sweeping condemnations. But no reputable scholar could simply ignore him.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines and perspectives were not limited to the elite audience that one might expect. They also seeped down into the nooks and crannies of Islamic culture. This happened in many ways, not least by means of the widespread reach of the Sufi orders, which played an important role in shaping society all over the Islamic world. Many of the orders claimed Ibn al-‘Arabī as one of their intellectual and spiritual forebears. This is not to say that he was widely read by the Sufis. In fact, the vast majority of them were not scholars and did not have the requisite training to undertake a study of his writings. But Sufis with an intellectual calling – those who often ended up as masters and teachers – spoke a language that was largely fashioned by him and his immediate followers. In addition, his influence spread by means of the enormously popular poetry of languages like Persian, Turkish, and Urdu. Many of the great poets were trained in Sufi learning and employed concepts and perspectives drawn from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s school of thought.

Partly because of his pervasive influence and widespread recognition of his name, Ibn al-‘Arabī came to be targeted by

reformers and modernists from the second half of the 19th century. He and Sufism were chosen as convenient emblems for every perceived shortcoming of Islamic society, battling for its survival in the face of colonialism. As for the early Orientalists, most of them dismissed Ibn al-‘Arabī as incoherent, but later work, beginning with the ground-breaking studies of Henry Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu, gave him academic respectability.

Whatever scholars may think of his writings, no one can deny that he represents a watershed in Islamic history and a major determining force in the course of later Islamic civilization. Those who still believe in the civilizing mission of the West and the supremacy of scientific rationality over all other forms of knowing may think that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s pervasive influence is sufficient proof against him. Others may find him a refreshing voice, offering perspectives that throw light on the human situation in any time and any place. This may help explain the recent comeback of interest in his writings throughout the Islamic world, especially among young people disillusioned by the disastrous consequences of trying to put into practice various forms of modern ideology (Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ being one of the most recent).

KNOWLEDGE

It is difficult to overestimate the importance that Ibn al-‘Arabī gives to knowledge. When I published my first book on Ibn al-‘Arabī, I called it *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, partly to highlight the central importance of the theme of proper knowing to his writings. This is not simply theoretical knowledge, but rather knowledge put into practice. In a typical passage about knowledge, he writes, ‘Knowledge is the cause of deliverance.... How eminent is the rank of knowledge! This is why God did not command His Prophet to seek increase in anything except knowledge,’¹ referring of course to the verse, ‘Say: “My Lord, increase me in knowledge!”’ (Q.20:114).

It should be obvious that Ibn al-‘Arabī does not mean just any sort of knowledge. Engineering, medicine, and quantum mechanics do not count. Like scholars and teachers in every field of learning, he

1. *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), 2.612.9 (i.e., volume 2, p.612, line 9).

talks about priorities. His priorities are based on an understanding of the overall human situation in both this world and, much more importantly, the next world (the realm that is always left out of modern learning). He encourages people to acquire knowledge that is beneficial to the human soul in its long-term becoming. Beneficial knowledge intensifies human consciousness and awareness of the Real (*al-ḥaqīqa*), and harmful knowledge (something like what we know as ‘information’) scatters and disperses the soul. In a typical passage, he differentiates between two sorts of knowledge, having in mind religious learning discussed in the Islamic context.

Knowledge is of two sorts: The first knowledge is needed in the same way that food is needed, so it is necessary to exercise moderation and to limit oneself in the measure of need. This is knowledge of the rulings [*aḥkām*] of the Shari‘a. One should not consider these rulings except in the measure that one’s need of the moment touches upon them, for their ruling property pertains only to acts that occur in this world. You should partake of this knowledge only in the measure of your activity.

The second knowledge, which has no limit at which one can come to a halt, is knowledge that pertains to God and the homesteads of the resurrection. Knowledge of the resurrection’s homesteads will prepare its knower for what is proper to each homestead.²

Implicit in this discussion is the distinction between the two sorts of knowledge that are commonly called ‘transmitted’ (*naqlī*) and ‘intellectual’ (*‘aqlī*). Acquisition of transmitted knowledge depends entirely on hearsay, while acquisition of intellectual knowledge depends upon discovery within oneself. Transmitted knowledge includes language, grammar, scripture, and all information and learning that we receive from our environment; thus it makes up the vast bulk of what people think they know. Intellectual knowledge includes fields like mathematics and metaphysics which, though grounded in transmitted knowledge, cannot be understood without discovering their truth within oneself.

As Ibn al-‘Arabī points out in the just-quoted passage, the transmitted knowledge of the Shari‘a, which is the subject of the science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), has a limited usefulness. The reason

2. *Fut.*1.581.29.

for this is simply that it addresses the lesser and restricted side of our being, which is our activity in this present world. In contrast, intellectual knowledge, the highest form of which is knowledge of God, has no limits. It opens up both to the Infinite Reality that is God and to the ‘homesteads’ (*mawāṭin*) of the resurrection. These homesteads are the never-ending abodes of human becoming in the posthumous realms. They are prefigured in this world by what are typically called the stations (*maqāmāt*) on the path to God. In the Sufi depiction, the travelers must actualize a series of stations, each of which represents a moral and spiritual perfection that will remain with them forever. The ultimate goal, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s formulation, is to achieve the Station of No Station (*maqām lā maqām*), which embraces all lower stations without being restricted to any of them while allowing for the full vision of God in the afterworld.

One of the few letters we have from Ibn al-‘Arabī is addressed to the famous scholar Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī.³ In it Ibn al-‘Arabī explains the necessity of focusing on intellectual knowledge and limiting one’s efforts in acquiring transmitted knowledge, though he does not use this specific terminology:

The intelligent person should not seek any knowledge except that through which his essence is perfected and that which transfers along with him wherever he is transferred. This is nothing but knowledge of God in respect of bestowal and witnessing.

‘Transferal’ (*intiḳāl*) here refers to the change of states that takes place when one dies and moves on to the *barzakh*, the resurrection, and the endless realms of the afterlife. ‘Bestowal’ (*wahb*) refers to the fact that realized knowledge of God cannot be guaranteed by one’s own effort but must be given by God. ‘Witnessing’ (*shuhūd*) means that such knowledge is face-to-face vision of the reality of things. Ibn al-‘Arabī continues the letter by explaining why the usual sorts of transmitted and intellectual knowledges should not be the goal of learning:

You need knowledge of medicine, for example, only in the world of diseases and illnesses. When you are transferred to a world in which

3. See Mohammed Rustom, ‘Ibn ‘Arabī’s Letter to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: A Study and Translation,’ *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 25, no. 2 (2014), 113–37.

there is no illness or sickness, whom will you treat with that knowledge? ... So also is knowledge of geometry. You need it in the world of area. When you are transferred, you will leave it behind in its world, for the soul moves on untrammelled, not taking anything along with it.

Such is occupation with every knowledge that the soul leaves behind when it is transferred to the afterworld. Hence, the intelligent person should not partake of any knowledge save that which is touched by imperative need. He should struggle to acquire what is transferred along with him when he is transferred. This is none other than two knowledges specifically – knowledge of God and knowledge of the homesteads of the afterworld and the requirements of its stations, so that he may walk there as he walks in his own home and not deny anything whatsoever. He should be one of the folk of recognition [*‘irfān*], not the folk of denial [*nukrān*].⁴

In this last sentence Ibn al-‘Arabī is referring to a long hadith in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim whose importance he has already highlighted in the letter. The hadith describes the scene on the day of resurrection when God discloses Himself to each group, but they all deny Him. He keeps on undergoing self-transmutation (*taḥawwul*), so the forms in which He appears change constantly. The groups continue to deny Him until He shows Himself to them in the form (*ṣūra*) of their own specific belief, that is, the form in which they recognize Him. Only then do they acknowledge Him. As Ibn al-‘Arabī often tells us, the goal of realization is to transcend the ‘knots’ (*‘uqda*) that tie us to specific beliefs (*i‘tiqād*) about God. Thereby we can learn to recognize God in every form in which He discloses Himself, here or in the afterlife, denying Him in no form whatsoever. In terms of following in the footsteps of the Prophet, each of the ascending stations on the path to God provides a standpoint in terms of which God can be known, but each delimits Him to certain attributes and qualities. The only station that allows for full and total recognition of God is the Station of No Station, which Ibn al-‘Arabī also calls ‘the Muhammadan Station,’ because Muhammad was its possessor to perfection. The one who stands in this station recognizes God in every form in which He appears and, since the universe and the self

4. ‘Risālat al-Shaykh ilā’l-imām al-Rāzī’ in *Rasā’il Ibn al-‘Arabī* (Hyderabad-Deccan, 1948), 6.

are nothing but God’s self-disclosure (*tajallī*), he recognizes God in all things. This is one of the implications of the famous saying, ‘He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord.’⁵

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

When Ibn al-‘Arabī talks about knowledge of God, he does not mean catechisms and creeds, nor does he mean the text of the Quran. He means actually knowing God, first-hand, through witnessing and realization. Moreover, when he talks about God, he does not have in view any sort of limited, dogmatic definition, but rather the unknowable Reality that discloses Itself in all things. This Reality is the foundation of all reality, and it is called by many names – such as the ‘ninety-nine’ of the Hadith literature and the many other names that are applied to the Necessary Being in various schools of thought, not to mention the diverse religions. For Ibn al-‘Arabī unmediated knowledge of God becomes the wellspring for knowledge of everything. In religious terms such knowledge embraces not only the first principle of Islamic faith, *tawḥīd*, but also knowledge of the other two principles, prophecy (*nubuwwa*) and the Return to God (*ma‘ād*). In other words, it provides the foundation for knowing the three basic intellectual sciences: metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual anthropology, or, to put it differently, knowledge of the Ultimate Reality, knowledge of the cosmos, and knowledge of the human soul in the stages of its becoming and transferal.

To understand how Ibn al-‘Arabī looks upon things, we need to keep in mind that he speaks from the point of view of realization, especially in the *Futūḥāt*. This means that he is not a compiler of lore; rather, he is exposing what he sees, what he witnesses. He is not talking about God as he has heard about Him, but participating in the root consciousness of the human self that is somehow no different from God’s awareness of Himself and the world.

The overall picture of realized knowledge as Ibn al-‘Arabī presents it can be summarized like this: From one standpoint, God

5. For a few examples of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussions of the hadith of God’s self-transmutation and its relevance to recognition, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, 1989), 38, 336–40.

is infinitely beyond understanding, and the only proper response to Him is silence. From another standpoint, He discloses Himself to creation, and He does so in two basic ways: First, He discloses His undisclosability, and thereby we come to know that we cannot know Him. Second, He discloses himself through scripture, the universe, and the human soul. To the degree that He does so, people can and do come to know Him, but only to the extent of their own capacity to understand.

Ibn al-‘Arabī calls the modality of awareness that discerns God’s undisclosability ‘intellect’ or reason (*‘aql*) and he calls the modality of understanding that grasps God’s self-disclosures ‘imagination’ (*khayāl*). He refers to fully actualized and realized imagination as ‘unveiling,’ which is of course one of the most common terms in Sufi texts for the unmediated and privileged knowledge of God that the Sufis strive to acquire.

Unveiling allows the seeker to recognize the Divine Reality in the images through which It discloses Itself, and these images are the universe in its entirety, embracing all time and space and all dimensions of reality, such as the spiritual (or intellectual) world and the corporeal (or sensory) world. In other words, unveiling allows people to discern the ‘face’ (*wajh*) of God in all of the cosmos (*‘ālam*), which is defined as ‘everything other than God’ (*mā siwa’llāh*). It provides experiential knowledge of the meaning of the Quranic verse, ‘Wherever you turn, there is the face of God’ (Q.2:115).

Reason has the natural and innate function of pushing God far away. Left to its own devices, it will abstract God from the world and leave it bereft of His presence. In contrast, imagination has the ability to perceive God’s appearance in the created realm. Reason discerns God as absent, but imagination and unveiling see Him as present. When reason grasps God’s distance and inaccessibility, it ‘asserts His incomparability’ (*tanzīh*), that is, it declares God’s transcendence. When imagination sees God present in all things, it ‘asserts His similarity’ (*tashbīh*), that is, it acknowledges His immanence. Long before Ibn al-‘Arabī, asserting God’s incomparability (or transcendence) had been normative for most versions of Islamic theology, and asserting His similarity (or immanence) was often found in Sufi expressions of Islamic teachings, especially poetry. Ibn

al-‘Arabī’s contribution here was to stress the need to keep a balance between the two ways of understanding God. People do this by seeing with ‘the two eyes’ of the heart, that is, reason and imagination. If we fail to see God, the world, and ourselves with the full vision of both eyes, we will not be able to see things as they truly are. The beating of the heart symbolizes the constant shift from one eye to the other.

According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the specific characteristic of our humanity is not that we are rational animals, but that we are made in the divine form. To be a divine form is to be a self-disclosure of God within which every divine name – that is, every real quality found in the cosmos, every attribute of the absolutely Real – can become manifest and known. The human form is both different from God (incomparable) and identical with Him (similar). Those who achieve realization differ from ordinary human beings in the clarity of the vision of the two eyes of their hearts and the appropriateness of their activity. They have realized the form in which they were created, so they grasp the realities of things in proper balance and respond to every situation as God Himself would respond were He to assume human form.

On the issue of realization Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Sufis generally differ from the philosophers in the question of the role of prophecy. Knowledge of the intellectual sciences does not depend upon the prophets, since mathematics and astronomy, for example, are accessible to the unaided human intellect. In contrast, knowledge of the transmitted sciences depends upon hearsay, which is to say that the Quran, Hadith, juridical rulings, and so on cannot be discovered by the independent activity of the mind. The philosophical tradition considers metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual anthropology intellectual issues that should be the objects of realization. Seekers should not accept knowledge on the basis of hearsay, but must strive to realize this knowledge for themselves. Ibn al-‘Arabī agrees, but he also maintains that the prophets provide access to various forms of intellectual knowledge that are not accessible without their help, such as knowledge of the ‘homesteads of the resurrection.’ These cannot be known through philosophical methodology.

In chapter 167 of the *Futūḥāt* on ‘the alchemy of felicity’ (*kīmiyā al-sa‘āda*) Ibn al-‘Arabī describes two sorts of *mi‘rāj* or ascent to

God. One is that of the *ahl al-nazar*, the folk of (rational) consideration, such as philosophers. The other is that of followers of prophets. He details the knowledge that the *ahl al-nazar* achieve when they reach each of the heavens during their ascents in the direction of God. He also describes the additional knowledge that is achieved by the followers of prophets, who are the recognizers and realizers.⁶ The chapter expresses in the form of a visionary narrative that realization is the goal of both philosophers and Sufis, but it also shows Ibn al-‘Arabi’s belief that full and integral realization can only come through following the Sunna. In effect, he holds that philosophers are able to realize only the vision of one eye, the eye of intellect, which can access many varieties of knowledge without prophetic help, but they cannot realize the knowledge that comes by way of the eye of imagination and unveiling.

REALIZED KNOWLEDGE

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s listeners and readers were ulama, not the common people. It was the ulama who investigated the sciences, whether transmitted or intellectual. In his view, the ulama generally put far too much stress on reason. He acknowledges repeatedly that the eye of reason provides an indispensable guide on the path of religion and realization, but he insists that the eye of imagination and unveiling must also be opened with the help of prophetic guidance. This helps explain why he decries the inadequacies of merely rational approaches to understanding. His basic principle here is that ‘None knows God but God.’ No one can adequately grasp the nature of reality except God, for reality is simply the self-disclosure of the infinite Reality of God. Human beings, without divine help, are incapable of knowing anything as it truly is.

In one passage, Ibn al-‘Arabi poses the problem like this: ‘Knowledge of the possible realm is an all-embracing ocean of knowledge that has magnificent waves within which ships founder. It is an ocean that has no shore except its two sides.’⁷ The ‘possible

6. See the translation of this chapter by Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Alchemy of Human Happiness. Chapter 167 of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Meccan Illuminations* (Oxford, 2017).

7. *Fut.*3.275.15.

realm’ is of course the entire universe, everything other than the Necessary Existence, which is God. This realm stands between two shores, one of which is the Necessary in Himself and the other of which is absolute nothingness. The ships of intellect founder in this ocean because trying to know some things in terms of other things is like attempting to pinpoint waves in the ocean. The shore of Necessity remains inaccessible, because none knows God but God. And the shore of absolute nothingness is likewise inaccessible, because there is nothing there to be known. That leaves us lost in the middle, in the ocean of ambiguity. Hence, as he puts it, ‘It is impossible for anything other than God to gain by itself knowledge of the cosmos, of the human being himself, or of the self of anything.’⁸

In other words, the knowledge that people can acquire by their own efforts is a knowledge that situates a few limited things in relation to a few other limited things, useful only for shortsighted goals. Only God has direct, unmediated knowledge of Himself and things as they are in themselves – not simply in relation to others. God can bestow upon others direct knowledge of Himself or the things, but even then, none knows God but God. What in fact happens is that God becomes the hearing through which the servant hears and the intelligence through which he knows. Here of course I am referring to the famous *ḥadīth qudsī* that Ibn al-‘Arabī and other Sufis frequently quote: ‘When I love My servant, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees,’ and so on.

Every knowledge gained by rational thought or by any other human mode of knowing is obscured by created limitations. People can understand only inasmuch as their native ability, circumstances, upbringing, and training allow them to. They know in the measure of their own selves, which is to say that, in the last analysis, they know only themselves.

Ibn al-‘Arabī demonstrates the futility of independent human effort to achieve real knowledge in many ways. He points out, for example, that all knowledge comes from outside the knowing self by means of *taqlīd*, imitation or following the authority of others. But the purpose of seeking knowledge is to know the realities with an unmediated knowledge within oneself, not to quote what others

8. *Fut.*3.557.4.

claim to know. As Ibn al-‘Arabī puts it, ‘Knowledge is not correct for anyone who does not know things through his own essence. Anyone who knows something through something added to his essence is following the authority of that added thing in what it gives to him.’⁹

Ibn al-‘Arabī holds that only real knowledge is beneficial in the true sense, that is, as an aid in preparing for death and the Return to God that inevitably stand before us. Real knowledge can only be knowledge of Real Existence, not unreal or relative existence. The full achievement of such real knowledge is precisely what he calls realization. It entails transcending the limitations of all modes of knowing save the one mode that recognizes the relative validity of each while not being bound or restricted by any. This is the Station of No Station or the Standpoint of No Standpoint.

Let me say a bit more about the word *taḥqīq*. Clearly it derives from the word *ḥaqq*, which means real, true, proper, appropriate, right, and just. As a Quranic divine name, it means the Real, the Truth, the Right. It is commonly juxtaposed with *khalq*, ‘creation.’ Thus, there are two basic realities (*ḥaqqīqa*), *ḥaqq* and *khalq*, or the Real and creation. The status of *ḥaqq* is perfectly clear, because ‘There is no god but God,’ which is to say that there is nothing real, true, right, proper, appropriate, and just in the full senses of the words but God. It is the status of *khalq* that raises questions.

In investigating the status of created things, we should remember that a second term, *bāṭil*, is also juxtaposed with *ḥaqq*. *Bāṭil* means unreal, false, null, void, and absurd. The Quran contrasts the two terms in a dozen verses, such as, ‘The *ḥaqq* has come and the *bāṭil* has vanished’ (Q.17:81). For the intellectual tradition, the first designation of *ḥaqq* is the Necessary Reality of God, and all possible things are unreal in themselves. As Avicenna puts it in a discussion of *ḥaqq* in his Metaphysics, ‘The Necessary Existence by Its essence is the Real constantly, and the possible existence is real through something else, but unreal through itself. Hence everything other than the One Necessary Existence is unreal in itself.’¹⁰ In his book on the divine names, Ghazālī distinguishes between *ḥaqq* and *bāṭil* like this:

9. *Fut.*2.298.2.

10. Ibn Sinā, *al-Ilāhiyyāt min al-shifā’/The Metaphysics of The Healing*, text and translation by Michael E. Marmura (Provo, 2005), 38–9 (my translation).

The Real stands counter to the unreal, and ‘things become clear through their opposites.’ Everything about which a report is given is either absolutely unreal, Absolutely Real, or real in one respect and unreal in another respect. The impossible by essence is the absolutely unreal. The necessary by essence is the Absolutely Real. And the possible by essence ... is real in one respect and unreal in another.... By this you will recognize that the Absolutely Real is the true existence by its essence, and from it every real thing takes its reality.¹¹

Although both *khalq* and *bāṭil* are opposites of *ḥaqq*, the two are clearly not synonymous. *Bāṭil* is totally other than *ḥaqq*, the negation of *ḥaqq*. But creation, though not the same as the Real, is also not completely different, since it is certainly not entirely unreal, false, vain, and null. As Ghazālī just said, possible things are ‘real in one respect and unreal in another.’

The actual status of created things is the first issue in Islamic philosophy: ‘What is it?’ This is the question of quiddity or essence (*māhiyya* – ‘what-is-it-ness’), and it can be posed for everything in the cosmos, given that each thing, inasmuch as it is this thing and not that thing, remains distinct from the Absolutely Real, the Necessary Existence, which has given rise to it.

In short, the status of *khalq* is ambiguous because it hangs between *ḥaqq* and *bāṭil*, God and nothingness, real and unreal, right and wrong, proper and improper, appropriate and inappropriate. Each of us is a creature, so each of us needs to understand the status of our created nature in order to live appropriately in the realm of possible existence. We cannot avoid asking ourselves what and who we are and whether there is anything we can do to improve our status. If we talk of improvement, then we need standards by which to judge better and worse, and to have standards that address the reality of our situation, we need to know the distinction between the real and the unreal. Only then can we establish priorities in life that accord with the *ḥaqq* of things, not the *bāṭil*.

One of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s several scriptural sources for discussion of the *ḥaqq* that becomes manifest in the created realm is a well-known hadith, which has come in many versions and in most of the standard sources, a typical version of which reads like this: ‘Your

11. Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣal al-asnā*, ed. Fadlou Shehadi (Beirut, 1971), 137.

soul has a *ḥaqq* against you, your Lord has a *ḥaqq* against you, your guest has a *ḥaqq* against you, and your wife has a *ḥaqq* against you. So, give to each that has a *ḥaqq* its *ḥaqq*.' 'Giving to each that has a *ḥaqq* its *ḥaqq*' provides a key to the meaning of *tahqīq*. Realization is to recognize the reality, truth, rightness, and properness of things, and, on the basis of this recognition, to give things their *ḥaqq*, that is, what is rightfully due to them. So realization has two necessary sides: knowing the truth (*ḥaqq*) and acting in keeping with the rightful demands of the truth upon us (the 'rightful demand' being precisely the *ḥaqq* of the situation).

Only human beings were taught *all* the names, so they alone are able to recognize and realize the *ḥaqq* of everything in existence. Every created thing has its own *ḥaqq*. The *ḥaqq* of God's vicegerents demands that they recognize the *ḥaqq* of all things and act accordingly. When they deal with people, objects, and situations, they need to address their *ḥaqq*s, which are identical with the created nature that God has given to each of them. That created nature is not only what is there, it is also what is right and worthy, so the very existence of a thing lays moral and ethical responsibilities on human beings.

On the Shari'a level, discerning *ḥaqq*s is relatively straightforward. It demands that people recognize that they are addressed by the revealed law and that they need to observe the law to the best of their abilities. But the Shari'a pertains to only a small portion of reality. Made in the image of God and taught all the names, the soul has the capacity to know itself, the cosmos, and its Lord. These are precisely the three basic realms investigated by the intellectual sciences: spiritual anthropology, cosmology, and metaphysics.

For Ibn al-'Arabī, realization is to know all these realms first-hand and to give each encountered creature, each *khalq*, its *ḥaqq* – what is rightfully due to it. If he calls realization the Station of No Station, it is partly because the person who stands in it must constantly shift his perspective to deal with the *ḥaqq*s that he faces. In each situation the realizer (*muḥaqqiq*) needs to take the appropriate stand and act accordingly. Ibn al-'Arabī writes, for example, that when the master of realization takes the standpoint of the Shari'a, he judges on its basis. When he stands in the stations of reason and the rational sciences, he discerns and distinguishes according to the appropriate

standards. Both reason and the Shari‘a accept some things and reject others, because each has a specific, limited, and constraining *ḥaqq*. The Shari‘a tells us what is right and wrong. Reason tells us that two and two are four, that contradictories do not meet, that God transcends the world. The realizer acknowledges the truth of the judgment of both the Shari‘a and reason and acts accordingly. But, says Ibn al-‘Arabī, when the realizer takes the standpoint of the divine unveiling, he sees that everything in the universe – the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the right and the wrong – manifests a divine face. From this standpoint, the realizer is given to see things as they truly are. Then he recognizes the legitimacy and the *ḥaqq* of everything that exists. He accepts everything and denies nothing, thus preparing himself for the homesteads of the resurrection. At the same time he acts in keeping with the Shari‘a and reason, as is demanded by their *ḥaqqs*.¹²

Ibn al-‘Arabī summarizes his views on realization in a short chapter of the *Futūḥāt* by that name. Notice that he defines realization here as the station where the servant becomes the beloved of God, referring to the hadith, ‘When I love My servant, I am his hearing,’ etc.

Realization is true knowledge of the *ḥaqq* demanded by the essence of each thing. The person gives it its full due in knowledge.... One precondition for the companion of this station is that the Real should be his hearing, his eyesight, his hand, his leg, and all the faculties that he puts to use. Hence he has free activity only through a *ḥaqq*, in a *ḥaqq*, and for a *ḥaqq*. This description belongs only to a beloved. He is not beloved until he is given proximity [to God]...

When the Real is someone’s hearing, doubt does not enter in upon him in what he hears. Rather, he knows what he hears, who hears, through whom is heard, and what is required by the thing heard. He acts in keeping with that, for his hearing makes no errors. In the same way, when the Real is his eyesight, he knows through whom he sees and what he sees. Doubt does not enter into his consideration, error into his senses, or bewilderment into his rational faculty, for he belongs to God through God. So also is the case of all his movements and stillnesses – a realizer’s movements that derive from realization...

12. *Fut.*2.605.13.

God shows the realizer affairs as established by the divine wisdom. He who has been given this knowledge has been given what is necessary for each of God's creatures.... What is desired from realization is knowledge of what is rightly demanded by each affair, whether it be nonexistent or existent. The realizer even gives the unreal [*bāṭil*] its *ḥaqq* and does not take it beyond its locus.¹³

THE CONTINUING STRESS ON *TAḤQĪQ*

Given the vast influence of Ibn al-‘Arabī on later authors and the centrality of realization to his perspective, one would expect that a concern for achieving *taḥqīq* remained as an important formative value in Islamic civilization. I think that this is indeed the case, and it is not simply because of the influence of Ibn al-‘Arabī. His role, as in so many other issues, was simply to formulate explicitly the underlying orientation of the basic Islamic sources.

In the intellectual sciences the fact that realization remained the goal should not be surprising. The manner to achieve it is central to the methodologies of both philosophy and theoretical Sufism (*‘irfān* as it is often called in later times). But it is my contention that the quest for realization provided an underlying impulse to Muslim society throughout the later period, an impulse to turn away from rote-learning and blind obedience to religious authority, not with the aim of rejecting religion, but with the goal of reaching to the heart of things, the truth and reality – the *ḥaqq* – of the human situation. This impulse was embodied in what can be called Sufism in its broadest sense, that is, a general tendency among Muslims and the Islamic sources to stress the inner over the outer, the spiritual over the bodily, the unseen over the visible, meaning over form, substance over accident, and the next world over this world.

One can illustrate the way in which the Sufi orientation in Islam and the awareness of the importance of realization rather than imitation, *taḥqīq* rather than *taqlīd*, retained its vitality in many ways. One of the most obvious of these is in the realm of poetry. From one point of view, poetry might seem diametrically opposed to the rationality of the ‘intellectual’ sciences, but I think

13. *Fut.*2.267.17.

this has to do with our preconceptions about reason, not the role that ‘*aql*’ actually played in Islamic civilization. To conclude these brief remarks on realization, let me say a little bit about how Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective helps us understand the role of poetry in Islamic culture.

The abstract, rational approach of the Islamic sciences, whether transmitted or intellectual, tends to conceal the mythic side of the Quranic message. Like all great mythic texts, the Quran is full of imagery and symbolism that can often be appreciated better by intuition, imagination, and artistic taste than by rational analysis. Poetry shares in this mythic realm, which is nothing but the realm of imagination, the eye of the heart that complements intellect. Like scripture, poetry is essentially oral and participatory. It is meant to be recited, sung, and applied to one’s daily situations. It is sufficient to contrast the picture of God presented to us by Rumi’s poetry with that offered by any treatise on Kalam to grasp the stark contrast between the rational and imaginal depiction of the Quranic message.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s whole project was aimed at establishing a delicate balance between imagination and reason. He saw jurisprudence, philosophy, and Kalam as one-sidedly rationalistic, just as he saw much of Sufism as insufficiently attentive to the rational dimensions of human consciousness. But the bulk of his criticism was directed at the *ulama*, the guides of the community, whom he saw as immersed in imitative knowledge and worldly ambition. He told his readers that *tahqīq* is the purpose of human existence, and in order to give things their *ḥaqq*, one has to transcend *taqlīd* and see things with both eyes.

Ibn al-‘Arabī took the position that the imaginal mode of perception, which is enhanced by poetry and myth, allows us to taste the very presence of the *ḥaqq* in beauty, sound, rhythm, balance, harmony, and love. He considered this imaginal knowledge every bit as important as the rational knowledge that allows us to stand back from things, to reflect upon them, and to discern right from wrong. Both sorts of knowledge must be fully actualized to give things their *ḥaqq*s.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s message was not lost on the following generations of scholars. And if anyone left as great an impression as he did on the later tradition of Persianate Islam, it was probably Rumi.

It is difficult to imagine a learned Muslim familiar with Rumi's teachings and not sensitive to the mythic import of Shams-i Tabrizi. As portrayed in Rumi's poetry and the hagiographical accounts, Shams appeared as contemptuous of the pretensions of scholarship and the conventions of society, and utterly focused on the *ḥaqq* of every situation. Even if Muslim intellectuals could have ignored Ibn al-ʿArabī's injunctions to keep their two eyes in balance, they could hardly have ignored Rumi's pointed teachings about the subservience of knowledge to love. Love is the driving force that brings about the union of lover and beloved, the station where God becomes the hearing and eyesight of His beloved. This is precisely the precondition for *tahqīq*, as Ibn al-ʿArabī insisted in his chapter with this name.

Poetry, in short, sustains the vision of *tahqīq*, just as *tahqīq* enlivens the poetical tradition. In contrast, rationality divorced from imagination marginalizes myth and empties the world of *ḥaqq*. It is no accident that none of the great rational authorities of Islam were significant poets.

One final word: If the Islamic tradition devalued the one-sided rationality of the modern West, which led to the development of science and ideology, this was precisely because such rationality was perceived as blind to the real world, that is, to the *ḥaqq*s of things. Things' *ḥaqq*s are not simply their truth and their reality, but also their rights and responsibilities.

What has happened in modern times is exemplified by the modern sense of the word *tahqīq* in Persian, that is, 'research.' Yes, *tahqīq* as the Islamic intellectual tradition understood it demanded searching out the truth and reality of things, but simultaneously it demanded assuming responsibility toward the things whose truth you understand. Understanding the truth (*ḥaqq*) of things is also to understand their rights (*ḥaqq*) and to assume responsibility toward them. This basic principle of *tahqīq* in pre-modern Islamic thought has been utterly forgotten in modern times.

Through their attention to *tahqīq* – knowing things as they are and acting in accordance with the moral and spiritual demands that things make upon us – Muslim intellectuals kept alive the understanding that knowledge of the world cannot be disengaged from knowledge of the self and knowledge of God. The goal of

learning remained the training of the soul, the polishing of the heart, and the development of beautiful character traits (*maḥāsīn al-akhlāq*) in keeping with the most beautiful stature (*aḥsan taqwīm*) in which Adam was created. The same intellectual tradition that nurtured the study of the universe also nurtured the study of the soul, thus preventing the stark bifurcation that occurred between subject and object in the West.¹⁴

14. For more on realization in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings, see especially Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany, 1998). On the broad implications of distinguishing between *taḥqīq* and *taqlīd*, see Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Oxford, 2007).