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CHAPTER 8

Ibn ʻArabī on the Benefit of Knowledge

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Ibn ʻArabī (d. 1240) is arguably the most influential Muslim intellectual of the past seven hundred years. Although he founded no formal school, a series of important authors considered themselves his followers, and many more were inspired by him or felt compelled to deal with the issues that he and his followers raised in their writings. The most famous of these issues is "The Oneness of Being" (*wahdat al-wujūd*) though many others could be cited, such as the Perfect Human Being and the Five Divine Presences.[1] At the heart of each lies the question of the nature and significance of knowledge, a question to which Ibn ʻArabī constantly returns.[2]

In his discussions of knowledge, Ibn ʻArabī typically uses the term *ʻilm*, not its near synonym *maʻrifa,* which in the context of Sufi writings is often translated as "gnosis." In general, he considers *ʻilm* the broader and higher term, not least because the Quran attributes *ʻilm*, but not *maʻrifa*, to God. Nonetheless, he usually follows the general usage of the Sufis in employing the term *ʻārif* (the "gnostic," the one who possesses *maʻrifa*) to designate the highest ranking knowers. The gnostics are those who have achieved the knowledge designated by the famous *hadīth*, "He who knows [*ʻarafa*] himself knows [*ʻarafa*] his Lord."[3] According to Ibn ʻArabī, there is no goal beyond knowledge:

[1] See Chittick, "Ibn ʻArabī and his School," in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, edited by S. H. Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp. 49-79; idem, "Ibn ʻArabī," in *History of Islamic Philosophy,* edited by S. H. Nasr and O. Leaman (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 497-509; idem, "The School of Ibn ʻArabī," in ibid., pp. 510-23.

[2] Ibn ʻArabī's focus on knowledge is not unrelated to the fact that his writings are essentially commentaries on the Quran, which constantly stresses its importance. See Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

[3] On occasion Ibn ʻArabī contrasts *ʻilm* and *maʻrifa,* but the distinction between the two terms plays no major role in his writings. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʻArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 147-49. For a detailed discussion of some of Ibn ʻArabī's views on various aspects of knowledge, see ibid., especially Chapters 9-14.

> There is no level more eminent [*ashraf*] than the level of knowledge (III 448.7).[4]

> There is no eminence higher than the eminence of knowledge, and there is no state above the state of understanding [*fahm*] from God (IV 129.14).

> There is no blessing [*niʿma*] greater than the blessing of knowledge, even though God's blessings cannot be counted (II 620.9).

> The most excellent [*afdal*] thing through which God has shown munificence to His servants is knowledge. When God bestows knowledge on someone, He has granted him the most eminent of attributes and the greatest of gifts (III 361.16).

> God said, commanding His Prophet—upon him be blessings and peace—"Say: 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge'," [Quran 20:114] for it is the most eminent attribute and the most surpassing [*anzah*] quality (II 117.13).

> 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 (II 612.9).

Given the extraordinary importance that Ibn ʿArabī accords to knowledge and the vast extent of his literary corpus, it is beyond the scope of this article even to begin a survey of his views on its nature and significance. Instead I will try to suggest his understanding of knowledge's "benefit" (*naf*). I have in mind the famous *hadīth*, "I seek refuge in God from a knowledge that has no benefit." According to another well known *hadīth*, "Seeking knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim." What then is the benefit to be gained by seeking it, and what sorts of knowledge have no benefit and should be avoided?

Ibn ʿArabī agrees with the standard view that there is nothing clearer or more self-evident than knowledge, so it cannot be defined in the technical sense of the term "definition" (*hadd*). Nonetheless, he sometimes offers brief, descriptive definitions, often with a view to those offered by other scholars. Thus, he says, "Knowledge is simply the perception [*idrāk*] of the essence [*dhāt*] of the sought object [*matlūb*] as it is in itself, whether it be an existence or a nonex-

[4] Citations in the text are to the volume number, page, and line of the 1911 Cairo edition of Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūhāt at-makkiyya*.

istence; a negation or an affirmation; an impossibility, a permissibility, or a necessity" (IV 315.11). In a similar way, he says, "Knowledge is not knowledge until it is attached to what the object of knowledge [*ma'lūm*] is in itself" (IV 119.21).

It would not be unfair to say that Ibn 'Arabī's writings are an attempt to expose the full range of the "objects of knowledge" available to human beings—not exhaustively, of course, but inasmuch as these may be "beneficial." After all, as Ibn 'Arabī says, "The knowledges[5] are not sought for themselves; they are sought only for the sake of that to which they attach,"[6] that is, for the sake of their object. Thus we must ask which object or objects of knowledge, once known, are useful and profitable for human beings. In Islamic terms, benefit must be defined by ultimate issues, not by the passing phenomena of this world. Beneficial knowledge can only be that which profits man at his final homecoming, which is the return to God. Any knowledge that does not yield benefit in these terms—whether directly or indirectly—is not Quranic knowledge, so it is not Islamic knowledge, and, one might argue, it is beneath human dignity to devote oneself to it. Although acquiring various sorts of knowledge may be unavoidable on the social and individual levels, one should actively strive to avoid searching after any knowledge that does not prepare oneself for the greater knowledge. As the well known formula puts it, secondary knowledge should only be sought *bi-qadr al-hāja,* "in the measure of need." To devote oneself exclusively or even mainly to the secondary knowledges would be blatant ingratitude toward God (*kufr*), because it would be to ignore the evidence of human nature and God's explicit instructions through the prophets. As Ibn 'Arabī expresses it,

> Human beings have no eminence save in their knowledge of God. As for their knowledge of other than God, this is a diversion [*'ulāla*] through which veiled human beings divert themselves. The right thinking man [*al-munsif*] has no aspiration save toward knowledge of Him (IV 129-5).

In a letter addressed to the famous theologian and Quranic commentator, Fakhr al-Din Rāzī, Ibn 'Arabī suggests in somewhat more detail the benefit of knowledge, and he distinguishes knowledge that is

[5] Although the word "knowledges" is awkward in English, it is perhaps preferable to "sciences," which would suggest that Arabic, like English, makes a distinction between knowledge and science.

[6] *Dhakhā'ir al-a'l'āq*, edited by M. Abd al-Rahmin al-Kurdi (Cairo, 1968), p. 191.

truly important and imperative from the various types of knowledge with which the ignorant and the veiled (and most theologians) divert themselves. By asserting that genuinely worthwhile knowledge comes only by way of "bestowal" (*wahb*) and "witnessing" (*mushāhada*), he wants to say that genuine knowledge is not of the sort that can be gained by reading books. It cannot be acquired merely by human efforts (*iktisābī*). Rather, it must be bestowed by divine specification (*ikhtisāsi*). Or, to use a pair of terms that becomes common in later texts, true knowledge of things is not *husūlī* ("acquired," or gained by learning), but rather *hudūri* ("presential," or gained by presence with God). Ibn ʿArabī often cites Quranic verses that encourage people to prepare themselves to receive the God-given knowledge, such as 2:282, which stresses the importance of *taqwā*, "godwariness" or "piety": "Be wary of God, and God will teach you." He writes to Rāzī,

> The intelligent person should not seek any knowledge save that through which his essence is perfected and which is carried along with him wherever he may be taken. This is nothing but knowledge of God in respect of bestowal and witnessing. After all, you need your knowledge of medicine, for example, only in the world of diseases and illnesses. When you are taken to a world in which there is no illness or sickness, whom will you treat with this knowledge? . . . So also is knowledge of geometry. You need it in the world of spatial area. When you are taken elsewhere, you will leave it behind in its world, for the soul goes forward untrammeled, without taking anything along with it.
>
> Such is occupation with every knowledge that the soul leaves behind when it is taken to the afterworld. Hence, the intelligent person should not partake of knowledge except that of it which is touched by imperative need [*al-hājat al-darūriyya*]. He should struggle to acquire what is taken along with him when he is taken. This is none other than two knowledges specifically—knowledge of God, and knowledge of the homesteads of the afterworld [*mawātin al-ākhira*] and what is required by its stations, so that he may walk there as he walks in his own home and not deny anything whatsoever.[7]

[7] *Risālat al-Shaykh ila'l-imām al-Rāzī*, pp. 6-7, in *Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī* (Hyderabad-Deccan: The Dāiratu'l-Maʿārifi'l-Osmania, 1948). Ibn ʿArabī is alluding here to a long *hadīth* found in the *Sahīh* of Muslim that describes, among other things, how people will deny God when He appears to them on the Day of Resurrection. They will continue to deny Him until He appears to them in a form that they recognize as coinciding with their own beliefs. Ibn ʿArabī cites from this *hadīth* in the continuation of the passage from his letter to Rāzī: "After all, he should be one of the folk of recognition [*'irfān*], not one of the folk of denial [*nukrān*]. Those homesteads [in

One may ask here about knowledge of the statutes or rulings (*ahkām*) of the *Sharī'ah*. Is such knowledge imperative? The answer is, "In the measure of need." Like most other knowledges, knowledge of the *Sharī'ah* has no benefit once a person reaches the next world. Ibn 'Arabī often reminds us that *taklīf*—God's "burdening" the soul by prescribing for it the *Sharī'ah*—is cut off at death. In the posthumous realms, everyone will worship God with an essential worship, not with the secondary and accidental worship that is characteristic of believers in this world and which depends on knowledge of the *Sharī'ah*. Hence *Sharī'ite* knowledge is important to the extent that it is useful in guiding the individual in his worship and service of God in this world, but it has no use in the next world. One should learn it here only to the degree of imperative need. Ibn 'Arabī explains this point as follows, concluding once again by insisting on the priority that must be given to knowledge of God and the afterworld:

> The need of the soul for knowledge is greater than the constitution's need for the food that keeps it wholesome. Knowledge is of two sorts: The first knowledge is needed in the same way that food is needed. Hence it is necessary to exercise moderation, to limit oneself to the measure of need. This is knowledge of the *Sharī'ah*'s rulings. One should not consider these rulings except in the measure that one's need touches on them at the moment, for their ruling property pertains only to acts that occur in this world. So take from 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 lead its knower to be prepared for what is proper to each homestead. This is because on that day the Real Himself will make demands through lifting the veils. That is "the Day of Differentiation" [Quran 37:21]. It is necessary for intelligent human beings to be "upon insight" [12:108] in their affairs and to be prepared to answer for themselves and for others in the

the afterworld] are homesteads for making distinct, not homesteads of commingling that would give rise to error. When he gains this station of making distinct, he will be delivered from the party of that group who say, when their Lord discloses Himself to them, 'We seek refuge in God from you. You are not our Lord. We will wait until our Lord comes.' Then, when He comes to them in the form in which they recognize Him, they will acknowledge Him. So how great is their bewilderment." For other examples of his explanation of this *hadīth*'s significance see Chittick, *Sufi Path,* index of *hadīths* under "He transmutes," as well as idem, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), index of *hadīths* under "Is there between you."

> homesteads within which they know that answers will be demanded from them (I 581.29).

Ibn ʿArabī offers many arguments to support his position on the priority that must be given to knowledge of God and the afterworld. These arguments are rooted in ontology, theology, anthropology, and psychology—taking all of these in the senses demanded by the traditional Islamic sciences.

Ibn ʿArabī's most basic argument can perhaps be called "anthropological," in that it is rooted in an understanding of what it means to be human. The axiom here is that "God created Adam in His own form," or, to cite the Quran, that "He taught Adam the names, all of them" (2:30). Given that human beings represent the "form" (*sūra*) of a "meaning" (*maʿnā*) that is God, or that they have been given knowledge of *all* things, the human soul is in principle infinite, which is to say that, although it has a beginning, it has no end (*la nihāya lah*). Only this can explain its everlastingness in the world to come. God—who is the meaning made manifest by the human form—creates a cosmos, which is typically defined as "everything other than God" (*mā siwā Allāh*). Understood in this sense, the cosmos can have no final boundaries, for God is eternally the Creator. It follows that man's knowledge of the cosmos, like his knowledge of its Creator, can have no final limit. Moreover, knowledge of the universe is itself knowledge of God, a point that Ibn ʿArabī sees already implicit in the Arabic language. Thus he writes, "We refer to the 'cosmos,' [*ʿālam*] with this word to give 'knowledge' [*ʿilm*] that by it we mean that He has made it a 'mark' [*ʿālāma*]" (II 473.33).[8]

Knowledge of the cosmos, however, can also be the greatest veil on the path to God, because the more man focuses on signs and marks without recognizing what they signify, the more he is overcome by the darkness that prevents him from seeing things as they are. From this point of view, any knowledge of the universe that does not recognize the divine workings and acknowledge the signs of God for what they are does not deserve the name "knowledge." Rather, it is a diversion, a veil, and an ignorance dressed as knowledge.

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[8] On this point, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, Chapter 1.

The universe is the domain of "possibility" (*imkān*). As such, it is contrasted with the domain of Necessity, which is God Himself; and with impossibility, which is sheer nonexistence. With God, all things are possible. As the Quran says repeatedly, "God is powerful over everything," so the realm of possibility has no end. Hence, as Ibn 'Arabī puts it, "Knowledge of the possible realm is an all-embracing ocean of knowledge that has magnificent waves within which ships flounder. It is an ocean that has no shore save its two sides," (III 275.15) which are Necessity and impossibility, or the Essence of God and absolute nothingness.

Trying to know things in terms of other things is like trying to pinpoint a wave in the ocean. Nor can Necessity be known in itself, for none knows God as God knows God save God. And absolute nothingness is also unknowable, for there is nothing there to be known. This helps explain Ibn 'Arabī's radically agnostic attitude toward true and final knowledge of anything. "It is impossible for anything other than God to gain knowledge of the cosmos, of the human being in himself, or of the self of anything in itself" (III 557.4). We know things not in themselves but in relation to other things or in relation to God, and we come to know God only relationally (which is why Ibn 'Arabī calls the divine names and attributes "relations," *nisab*). Only God has direct, unmediated knowledge of Himself and of things in themselves.

Given the impossibility of true knowledge without God's help and without recognizing how the objects of knowledge relate to God, it should come as no surprise that one of Ibn 'Arabī's frequent themes is the inadequacy of human reason (*'aql*) as an instrument with which to grasp the realities of things. Every knowledge gained through reason or any other created mode of knowing is defined and constricted by the limitations of everything other than God. Man can understand things only inasmuch as his native ability, circumstances, upbringing, and training allows him to. The theories and thoughts of those who try to know things without recognizing the manner in which things act as signs and marks of God illustrate little but human incapacity.

In effect, as Ibn 'Arabī tells us repeatedly, man can know things only in the measure of himself, and this is especially true concerning knowledge of God, who lies infinitely beyond the range of created things. In the last analysis, we can only know ourselves.

> The thing knows nothing but itself, and nothing knows anything except from itself (III 282-34).

> God knows the created thing and He knows that to which it goes back. But the created thing knows nothing of its own states save what it has at the moment (IV 110.8).[9]

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One of Ibn 'Arabī's many arguments to show the futility of independent human efforts to achieve real knowledge is based on the concept of *taqlīd*, "imitation" or "following authority," a term well-known in jurisprudence (*fiqh*). All knowledge comes from outside the soul's essence. We acquire knowledge from teachers, books, the media, scientists, and our own senses and faculties. All knowledge derives from other than our own intellective essence, and we have no choice but to follow the other's authority. The only rational course is to follow God, who alone knows, given that we can know nothing for certain without God's help. Ibn 'Arabī writes, for example,

> Knowledge is not correct for anyone who does not know things through his own essence. Anyone who knows something through something added to his own essence is following the authority of that added thing in what it gives to him. But nothing in existence knows things through its own essence other than the One. As for anything other than the One, its knowledge of things and non-things is a following of authority. Since it has been affirmed that other than God cannot have knowledge of a thing without following authority, let us follow God's authority, especially in knowledge of Him (II 298.2).

God-given, reliable knowledge is provided by the prophets, but here we run up against the same difficulty, given that prophetic knowledge can only be understood in the measure of our own capacity. Of course, faith is a gift that can remove doubts, but faith is not the furthest limit of human possibility. Beyond faith is found the direct knowledge of "bestowal and witnessing." Ibn 'Arabī points to a Quranic verse that mentions God's questioning His messengers on the Day of Resurrec-

[9] As Ibn 'Arabī often puts it, the God or gods that people worship—and everyone without exception is a worshipper of some god—is only the God that they understand, not God as He is in Himself. No one can truly understand God except God Himself. Hence everyone worships a God fabricated by his own belief, and from this standpoint—there are, of course, other standpoints—all human beings without exception are idol-worshipers. See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, Chapter 19, and idem, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), Chapter 9.

tion. They respond by saying that they have no knowledge. For Ibn ʻArabī, this is a general rule that applies to all human beings.

> The day God will gather the messengers and say, "What response did you receive?" They will say, "We have no knowledge; Thou art the Ever-knowing of the absent things" [5:109]. No one has any knowledge save those whom God has taught. Other than this divine path in teaching, there is nothing but the predominance of conjecture, coincidence with knowledge, or being convinced by fantasy. As for knowledge, all the paths that convey to knowledge are assailed by doubts. The pure soul that God acquaints with these doubts will never be confident of having certitude by gaining knowledge, save through the divine path, and that is His words, "If you are wary of God, He will assign you a discrimination," [8:29] and His words, "He created the human being, He taught him the clarification" [55:3-4]—He clarifies what is in Himself (IV 80.33).

In short, only real knowledge, which is true knowledge of the Real, is beneficial. It alone is worthy of human aspiration. Every other sort of knowledge must be subservient to it. And this real knowledge cannot be acquired without following God's authority. What then is Ibn ʻArabī's goal in his writing? In brief, it is to explain the truth and reality of each created thing as it stands in relation to its Creator on the basis of real knowledge, and to explain the benefit of knowing this. He is not concerned with explaining the way in which things are interrelated outside the divine context. That is the goal of other forms of knowledge, none of which has any real benefit apart from the service it can render to the primary knowledge, and each of which necessarily reads the book of the universe in terms of its own limited perspective.

In Ibn ʻArabī's view, no modality of knowing and no standpoint allows for transcending its own limitations save the one standpoint that recognizes the relative validity of each but does not become bound and restricted by any. He sometimes calls this standpoint "the standpoint of no standpoint" (*maqām lā maqām*). He also calls it *tahqīq* or "realization." Although he has been called the great spokesman for *wahdat al-wujūd,* he himself never employs this expression, and few if any of the many understandings of this controversial term that appear in later Islamic history provide adequate presentations of what in fact he does say about *wahda, wujūd,* and the relation between the two.

If we want to use Ibn ʻArabī's own terminology to represent his own theoretical position, we can do no better than *tahqīq*. He often

calls the greatest of the Muslim sages *muhaqqiqūn,* those who practice *tahqīq*. His followers, such as Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, refer to their own activity as *tahqīq* and their position as *mashrah al-muhaqqiqīn* ("the viewpoint of the realizers"). For them, *tahqīq* is a methodology that is rooted in knowledge of things as they are, that is, knowledge of their very essences, which is knowledge of the things as they are known to God, a knowledge that can only be attained through God's guidance and bestowal.

The word *tahqīq* is a verbal form deriving from the root *h.q.q,* from which we have two words of great importance for the Islamic sciences—*haqīqa* and *haqq*. *Haqīqa* means "reality" and "truth." Although not employed in the Quran, it is used in the *hadīth* literature and comes to play a major role in the Islamic sciences in general as well as in Ibn 'Arabī's writings. The metaphysical, philosophical, and theological significance of the word is suggested by the English translation. As soon as we pose questions like "What is reality?", "What is truth?", "What is the reality of a thing?", we fall into the most difficult of theoretical issues.

If we take the meaning of the word *haqīqa* into account in trying to understand the meaning of *tahqīq*, we can say that the word means "to search out reality," or "to discover the truth." This helps explain why in contemporary Persian *tahqīq* is used to mean "scientific research," while in Egyptian Arabic it commonly means "interrogation."

In order to grasp the sense of the word *tahqīq* as Ibn 'Arabī and others use the term, it may be more useful to look at the word *haqq,* which is employed 250 times in the Quran. *Haqq* is a noun and an adjective that means truth and true, reality and real, propriety and proper, appropriateness and appropriate, rightness and right. When used as a name of God, it means the Real, the Truth, the Right. It is commonly employed as a virtual synonym for the name God (*Allāh*).

In a common usage of the term, *haqq*, or the "Real," is juxtaposed with *khalq*, "creation." These are the two basic realities (*haqīqa*). The status of *haqq*, the Real, is perfectly clear, because "There is no god but God," which is to say that there is nothing real, true, right, proper, and appropriate in the full senses of these terms save God. The Necessary Being of God, which makes Itself known through everything that exists, is not simply "that which truly is," but also that which is right, worthy, fitting, and appropriate.

This leaves us with the question of how to deal with *khalq*. If God alone is *haqq* in a strict sense, where exactly do creation and created things stand? The question is especially significant because of the

manner in which the Quran, in a dozen verses, juxtaposes a second term with *haqq*. This is *bātil* which means unreal, wrong, inappropriate, null, void, absurd. Although the later literature pairs both *khalq* and *bātil* with *haqq,* the distinction between these two terms is fundamental. *Bātil* is totally other than *haqq*—it is the negation of *haqq*. In contrast, although *khalq* is not the same as *haqq*, it is also not completely different, for it is certainly not unreal, wrong, vain, and null. "We did not create the heavens, the earth, and what is between the two as *bātil*" (Quran 38:27).

The exact status of *khalq* is the first question of Islamic philosophy and much of Islamic theology and Sufism. It is precisely the question of reality (*haqīqa*) or quiddity (*māhiyya*): "What is it?"[10] In Ibn 'Arabī's view, no clear and categorical answer to this question can be given. Creation's status is always ambiguous, because it always hangs between *haqq* and *bātil*, God and nothingness, real and unreal, right and wrong, proper and improper, appropriate and inappropriate. Nonetheless, creation needs to be investigated. We cannot avoid asking "What are we?" As creatures, we need to know our status in relation to our Creator. To the extent that we can answer the question of what we are, or where we stand in relation to God, we come to understand our purpose in being here.

In short, the basic questions that face us in our humanity can be reduced to two: "What (*mā*)?" and "Why (*limā*)?" What are we, and why are we here? What is our actual situation, and what do we need to do with it to achieve our purpose? The process of asking these questions, answering them, and then putting the answers into practice is called *tahqīq*, "realization."

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As with most of Ibn 'Arabī's technical terminology, the meaning that he gives to *tahqīq* is rooted in the Quran and the *Hadīth*. One Quranic verse plays an especially important role: "He has given each thing its

[10] Whether or not this question applies properly to God is an important theological and philosophical issue. According to Ibn 'Arabī, to ask it concerning God is to be ignorant of Him and should not be allowed. See *Futūhāt,* Chapter 256 (translated in Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 213-14). That God has no "whatness" or quiddity (*māhiyya*) other than *wujūd* itself, and that *wujūd* is not a proper answer to the question of whatness (which demands a definition), is a well-known theological and philosophical position, and it is referred to in Sufi works as early as Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjūb*. See my *Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 202-3.

creation, then guided" (20:50). Here we have the beginnings of an answer to the questions, "What?" and "Why?"

What are we? Are we *haqq* or *bātil*, real or unreal, appropriate or inappropriate? The answer is given by the first clause of the verse, "He has given each thing its creation," which is to say that the *haqq* has determined and bestowed the *khalq,* so the divine determination erases the unreality and falseness that dominate over created things when they are isolated from the Real. As the Quran puts it, "The *haqq* has come and the *bātil* has vanished" (17:41). The Absolute *Haqq* has defined, determined, and given existence to the creature.

Why are we here? The answer is provided by the second: "Then guided." We are here to follow guidance and engage in right thought and appropriate activity. Right and worthy thought and activity is called "worship" (*ʿibāda*), that is, being a "servant" (*ʿabd*) of the Lord who created us. As God says in the Quran, "I created jinn and mankind only to worship Me" (51:56). Worshiping and serving God—that is, putting oneself in harmony with the Absolute *Haqq* by observing the *haqq* that is present in all things—is the means whereby human beings achieve their purpose in creation.

Muslim theologians commonly say that God has two commands (*amr*). One is called the "creative" or "engendering" command (*al-amr al-takwīnī*). It is God's saying to a thing, "Be" (*kun*), and everything in the universe without exception follows this command, because it is the very being that gives reality to the thing. In view of this command, every creature is *haqq,* which is to say that it is real, right, true, and appropriate. "We created the heavens and the earth and what is between them only through the *haqq*" (15:85). The second command is called the "prescriptive" or "burdening" command (*al-amr al-taklīfī*). It is the means whereby God says, "Do this and don't do that." It reveals right knowledge, right speech, and right activity.

In view of the first command, every creature is *haqq*. In view of the second command, which is addressed specifically to human beings, everyone must act in keeping with the *haqq* of things and strive to avoid the *bātil* in things. The engendering command tells us what we are, and the prescriptive tells us why we are here.

The relation of God's guidance with the term *haqq* is suggested by a *hadīth* that also plays a basic role in Ibn ʿArabī's understanding of *tahqīq*. The *hadīth* has several versions, probably because the Prophet repeated the words in slightly different forms on a variety of occasions. Certainly it sets down an everyday guiding principle for people concerned with the truth and the right. In a typical version, it reads,

"Your soul has a *haqq* against you, your Lord has a *haqq* against you, your guest has a *haqq* against you, and your spouse has a *haqq* against you; so give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*."

In terms of the first question, "What are we?", this *hadith* explains that we are *haqq* and that we have *haqqs* pertaining to us, which is to say we and everything else has a proper situation, a correct mode of being, an appropriate manner of displaying the Real. All things do so because "God has given each thing its creation," and thereby He has established not only the *khalq* of a thing, but also its *haqq*.

In terms of the second question, "Why are we here?", the *hadīth* tells us, "Give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*." We are here to act correctly. This demands that everything we do, say, and think be right, true, appropriate, worthy, and real. Things have *haqqs* "against" (*'alā*) us, so we will be asked about these *haqqs* and we will need to "respond." Each *haqq* against us represents our "responsibility." Our own *haqq* is our "right."

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Given that only human beings were taught *all* the names by God, they alone have the capacity to recognize and realize the *haqq* of everything in existence. From Ibn 'Arabī's standpoint, man was created in the form of the Absolute *Haqq,* so he corresponds and correlates with all of *khalq,* that is, with "everything other than the Real," the sum total of forms that are disclosed by the Meaning that is God. Man has the capacity to know the true names of all things, and knowing the true name of a thing is tantamount to knowing its *haqq,* which is not only its truth and reality, but also the rightful and appropriate claim that it has upon us and our responsibility toward it. All of creation makes demands upon man, because he is created in God's form and has been appointed His vicegerent (*khalifa*). He has the God-given duty, woven into his original created nature (*fitra*), to recognize the *haqq* of things and to act accordingly. It is this *haqq* that must be known if his knowledge is to be true, right, worthy, and appropriate, for this *haqq* is identical with the *khalq* that God has established.

In short, beneficial knowledge is knowledge of the what and the why of ourselves and of things. In order to know a thing truly and benefit from the knowledge, we need to know what it is—its reality (*haqīqa*), which is nothing but its *khalq* and its *haqq*—and we need to know how we should respond to it. What exactly does it demand from us, rightly, truly, and appropriately? To put this into a formula,

tahqīq means knowing the *haqīqa* of God and things and acting according to their *haqq*: Realization is to know things as they truly are and act appropriately in every circumstance.

* * *

Given that all things manifest the Absolute *Haqq* and each possesses a relative *haqq,* and given that man will be held responsible for the *haqqs* that pertain to him, he needs a scale by which to judge the extent of his own responsibility and learn how to deal with the *haqqs*. He cannot possibly know the *haqq* of things by his own lights or his own rational investigation of the world and the soul, because the relative *haqq* of created things is determined and defined by the Absolute *Haqq,* and the Absolute *Haqq* is unknowable except in the measure in which God chooses to reveal Himself. Hence the scale can only come through the prophets, who are precisely the means by which the *Haqq* has chosen to make Himself known. The Quran is the means that clarifies the *haqq* for Muslims: "With the *haqq* We have sent it down, and with the *haqq* it has come down" (17:105).

One can conclude that for Ibn ʿArabī, the fundamental divine command—a command whereby the question, "What should we do?" is answered most directly—is expressed in the *hadīth* of the *haqqs* by the sentence, "Give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*." Giving things their *haqqs* is the very definition of the human task in the cosmos, and it is precisely the meaning of *tahqīq*.

Once man recognizes that the Absolute *Haqq* is God and that the *haqq* of all things depends utterly on God, he has to employ the divine scale to recognize the realities and the *haqqs* of the things. The first thing in the domain of *khalq* whose reality and *haqq* must be understood is the human self or soul (*nafs*). Notice that the *hadīth* begins, "Your soul has a *haqq* against you, your Lord has a *haqq* against you," and then goes on to mention others. The order is not irrelevant. Without knowing oneself, one cannot know one's Lord. God and everything in the universe have *haqqs* against us, but in order to give each thing its *haqq,* we first must know who we are. Otherwise, we will not be able to discern which of the *haqqs* pertain to us.

On the *Sharīʿah* level, determining the *haqqs* is relatively straightforward, because it demands recognizing only that we are addressed by the Law, though observing the *haqq* of the relevant rulings may not be an easy task. But the *Sharīʿah* pertains only to a small portion of reality. What about the rest of existence? When God said, "I am

placing in the earth a vicegerent" (2:30), did He mean that His chosen vicegerents have only to obey a few commands and prohibitions, there being no need to know Him, or the universe, or themselves? When He said, "God burdens a soul only to its capacity" (2:286), did He mean that one is free to define one's own capacity by one's understanding of biology, psychology, history, and politics? How can one decide what this "burdening" entails unless one knows the capacity of one's own soul? If Ibn 'Arabī and many other Muslim sages are correct—and if we simply grasp the implications of everlasting life—a human soul is "an ocean without shore," an endless unfolding. Dealing with the *haqq* of such a reality demands more than what is given in our philosophies, to say nothing of our sciences.

To put this discussion in a slightly different way, the issue of who we are pertains not only to anthropology, psychology, and ethics, but even more deeply to ontology and cosmology. To give ourselves our *haqq*, we must know who it is of whom we are the *khalq*. Here Ibn 'Arabī displays his talents as a *muhaqqiq,* a "realizer," because he plumbs the depths of the subtle mysteries of Being and Its relations with the human soul. It is from these contexts that his followers derived teachings that came to be called *wahdat al-wujūd*, and it is here that he speaks in great detail about the "perfect human being," who is the fully realized form of God. *Tahqīq* becomes a term that designates the station of those who have achieved, by divine solicitude (*'ināya*), the full possibilities of human knowledge and existence. The *muhaqqiqs* have recognized the *haqq* in exactly the manner in which God has established it. Through giving each thing that has a *haqq* its *haqq*, the *muhaqqiqs* also give God, who has given each thing its creation, His *haqq*, and thus achieve, to the extent humanly possible, the fullness of God-given knowledge and God-given reality.

* * *

In this exceedingly brief and inadequate presentation of some of Ibn 'Arabī's basic views on the benefit of knowledge, let me focus a bit more on what might be learned from him today. A point that he constantly highlights and that many people tend to forget is the question of putting limits on the pursuit of knowledge. Is it possible to maintain that certain forms of knowledge should be avoided? In the case of Muslims, for example, how should scholars who happen to be Muslims define the "Islamicity" of knowledge, which is presumably established in terms of standards set down by the Quran and the

Sunnah? Is it sufficient to be a Muslim for the pursuit of, let us say, medicine, engineering, or physics, to be an "Islamic" project? How does any person of religious faith justify engagement with a scientific or academic discipline that is effectively cut off from transcendent principles?

By the standards of *tahqīq*, the vast majority of disciplines in a modern university fail to address the *haqq* of the objects under study. In other words, the knowledge that is sought, rather than unveiling the nature of things, obscures it. Ibn 'Arabī calls such disciplines "diversions" and "pastimes" for the heedless. Naturally, many religious people who occupy themselves with contemporary fields of learning would like to think that they are indeed involved in a legitimate, divinely approved task. No doubt there is plenty of room for discussion, but without seeking help from the great sages of the past who have devoted their minds and hearts to meditation on these issues, we may go on deceiving ourselves. As the Quran puts it, "Shall We tell you who will be the greatest losers in their works? Those whose striving goes astray in this life, while they think that they are doing good deeds" (Quran 18:104).

Ibn 'Arabī's methodology of *tahqīq* is focused on the clarification of the basic modes of knowing the absolute and relative *haqqs* and on the delineation of the duties and responsibilities that these modes of knowing establish. From his standpoint, any knowledge that does not focus on the manner in which God knows, creates, and guides is not in fact knowledge, but ignorance masquerading as knowledge. Such knowledge does entail the cognitive activity called "knowing," but it is not true knowledge, because it does not situate the known objects in reality—which is defined by the Real. Rather, it sets up artificial and illusory boundaries that allow people to feel happy that they are occupied with tasks that have no real and appropriate benefit.

The *haqq* and *haqīqa* of things can only be known through divine guidance, because the essence of things is known only to the Absolute *Haqq*. This knowledge may come indirectly, through the prophets, or directly, through "bestowal and witnessing." Ibn 'Arabī and many others take the position that the direct witnessing will not be bestowed without the knowledge provided by the prophets, and prophetic knowledge cannot properly be understood without bestowal and witnessing. In the end, everything depends upon divine guidance.

The *muhaqqiq* puts all things in their proper places. He recognizes their *haqīqa* and their *haqq*. In one respect, his *tahqīq* is identical with the "standpoint of no standpoint." Standing with the absolute and non-

delimited *Haqq,* he sees that "God has given everything its creation" and that the creation of each thing is its *haqq*. He accepts the legitimacy of all things exactly as they are, because they are nothing but *haqq*. Simultaneously, he gives the *Sharī'ah* and reason their *haqqs,* which is to say that he acknowledges right and wrong ways of doing things and right and wrong ways of knowing things. In his human essence, made in God's form, he is not tied down to any specific standpoint, but, in his theory and practice, he follows reason and the *Sharī'ah*.[11]

Without *tahqīq,* one is left with specific, defined, and limiting standpoints. These may be established on the basis of divine guidance (e.g., revealed religions, the *Sharī'ah*), and they may be established by human efforts that take no heed of such guidance. In the latter case, Ibn 'Arabī would claim, they do not deserve the name *'ilm,* which, like everything else, has a *haqq*. Nonetheless, such "knowledge" is the warp and weft of the modern world, the backbone of science, technology, business, finance, government, the military, and the "information age" in general.

Taking help from Ibn 'Arabī we might briefly analyze the contemporary scene among Muslims (and, *mutatis mutandis,* to followers of other religions) as follows: Generally speaking, the community leaders and scholars have continued to recognize the fundamental desirability of knowledge. However, they have lost touch with the Islamic criteria for judging its legitimacy. Their idea of *tahqīq* is to give everything its *haqq* as defined by the relevant field of modern science or political ideology. They have no idea of the traditional standards by which the various forms of knowledge need to be ranked in terms of usefulness and benefit. It would not occur to them that engineering and medicine—not to mention sociology and political science—meet none of the basic criteria of beneficialness. They have accepted uncritically the idols worshipped in today's world—care, communication, consumption, identity, information, standard of living, management, resource—and have not a clue that these are empty categories that function to eradicate traditional contexts and manipulate individuals and society to various ill-defined ends.[12] They have no inkling that the great Muslim intellectuals of the past would have looked with

[11] See *Futūhāt*, II 605.13, translated in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p. 10; and, with more context, in idem, *Sufi Path*, p. 243.

[12] I have in mind here the cutting critique of the goals of modern society leveled by the linguist Uwe Poerksen, who has illustrated that the language used in discussing

contempt upon what passes for "scholarship" and "science" in the modern context, and if they do have such an inkling, they have no language with which to express it other than dogmatism and slogans.

In no way am I suggesting that the great Muslims of the past would have denied the limited and relative legitimacy of modern forms of knowledge. Light is always light. However, light may become so diffuse that nothing can be seen but darkness. Somewhere the line has to be drawn so that we can recognize that *bātil* has come, and *haqq* has vanished. In fact, once knowledge is cut off from its roots in God, it quickly turns into its opposite.

As soon as we take into account the fact that God created man in His own image, it becomes clear that the modern sciences and academic disciplines are of such limited benefit that encouraging people to study them is akin to *kufr* (ingratitude to God, unbelief). No doubt the argument will be made that such sciences, in today's world, fit into the category of *fard al-kifāya* (incumbent upon the community). This, however, is a difficult argument to sustain once one has gained even a superficial awareness of the full scope of the divine *haqq* against human beings.

The benefit of studying Ibn ʿArabī and others like him lies precisely in coming to understand something of the full scope of human possibility, which is explicated by the prophetic messages and demanded by our own God-given nature. Today religious believers of all sorts have been cut off from the deeper teachings of their traditions. Human possibility is now defined by modern disciplines, political ideology, and the most superficial readings of sacred texts. Most religious people have no criteria by which to judge the impoverishment of the human situation and the dead-ends that are held up today as worthy of aspiration. It is only through coming to see the great revelatory sources of the traditions through the eyes of the sages of the past that the true depths of modern losses can be judged. Then there will be hope that the search for knowledge can once again become the primary goal, and seeking the *haqq* of knowledge—in the sense demanded by a divinely oriented *tahqīq*—will be seen to be incumbent on every human being.

these goals is nothing but a game of smoke and mirrors, concealing a much deeper and thoroughly sinister agenda. See his *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995). For a good survey of the contradictions and illusions hidden in modern, political discourse, see Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

Ibn ʻArabī on the Benefit of Knowledge
by William C. Chittick

Features in

The Essential Sophia
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