

# CONCERNING IBN 'ARABI'S ACCOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOD (MA'RIFA) AL-ḤAQQ

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## **Abstrak**

Tulisan ini mencoba untuk mengungkapkan konsep makrifat yang dikembangkan oleh Ibn 'Arabi (w. 1260), khususnya dalam magnum opusnya, *Fushūsh al-Hikam*, karya akhir yang dianggap sintesis doktrin metafisikanya yang diwakili melalui kebijaksanaan setiap nabi; keunikan mereka diilhami secara ilahi dan lambang persepsi spiritual mereka, mengenai pengetahuan tentang Tuhan. Tulisan ini juga menunjukkan bagaimana peran transformatif dari pesan para nabi selalu melibatkan proses kreatif dalam dialog ilahi-manusia, seruan dan respon, sebagaimana yang berulang kali disebutkan dalam al-Qur'an. Ibn 'Arabi menekankan pentingnya memahami hubungan langsung antara semua ciptaan dan Nama-nama ilahi dan Sifat (*al-asmā' wa-l-sifāt al-ilāhiyyah*), antara penciptaan sebagai manifestasi lahiriah dan kesadaran sebagai spiritual batin (ruh). Segala sesuatu yang ada dan dialami pada kenyataannya adalah manifestasi (*tajallī*) dari Nama-nama ilahi yang berbeda .

**Kata-kata Kunci :** Makrifat, tanda-tanda, diri, kalimat, nabi, entitas permanen, manifestasi diri (*tajallī*)

## **Abstract**

This paper tries to reveal the concept of *ma'rifa* developed by Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1260), especially in his magnum opus, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, the late work considered to be the synthesis of his doctrine of metaphysics represented through the wisdom of each prophet; their uniqueness of divinely inspired and their epitome of spiritual perception, concerning the knowledge of God. It shows the transformative role of the prophet's messages involving in the deeper creative process of divine-human dialogue, calling and response, that is repeatedly mentioned in the

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Qur'an. Ibn 'Arabi emphasized the importance of perceiving the direct relationship between all of creation and the divine Names and Attributes (*al-asmā' wa-l-sifāt al-ilāhiyyah*), between creation as outward manifestation and as inward spiritual awareness (*rūh*). Everything that exists and is experienced in reality is the manifestation (*tajallī*) of different divine Names.

**Keywords :** *Ma'rifa*, signs, self, words, prophet, immutable archetypal individual entity (*'ayn thābita*), divine self-manifestation (*tajallī*)

## Introduction

The search for knowledge—ultimately, knowing God—is one of the most central concerns to Islam. The value of each human being in some way reflects the degree of his knowledge. Thus the Qur'an asks "Are they equal, those who know and those who know not?" (Q.S. 39:9).<sup>2</sup> In fact, every creature knows according to its capacity and its rank<sup>3</sup>. One of the modes of knowledge is through conceptual reasoning. The human analytical and conceptual mind naturally works by seeing things as separate and distinct, often through abstract contrasts and opposites (far-near, west-east, bad-good) and through judgments that are based on those conceptual distinction and oppositions. Indeed the human mind as such is unable to know anything conceptually without taking up some particular positions, without looking out from some definite points of view. So what mostly human beings create through their particular reason and belief is something they regard as ultimately true. In consequence, they tend to consider those whose way of knowing is distinguished or different from them as unbelievers, wrong, heretics, ignorant—a tendency that at worst can lead to extreme forms of conduct.

The other faculty by which we can seek and know is what the Qur'an calls the "heart" (*qalb*), which for later sufis like Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) is held to be the seat of true spiritual knowledge,<sup>4</sup> knowing through letting go

2 This is part of a universal calling to all human beings to seek knowledge.

3 As Ibn 'Arabisaïd, "The servant sees Him in the form of his own belief.", *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, ed. A. Affifi (Lahore: Ashraf Press, 1946), p.120. This *Fuṣūṣ* passage simply paraphrases the famous divine saying (*hadīth qudsi*): "I am with/in My servant's conception of Me" (*anā 'inda zann 'abdī bī*).

4 See the further explanation of this point in chapter IV of this thesis.

of all arbitrary restrictions.<sup>5</sup> From that perspective, the basic task for humans is how to let go of all the (largely unconscious) restrictions, obstacles or veils that may keep us from the truly knowing with the heart.

The different conceptions of our human faculties and ways of knowing, including contrasting approaches to the knowing God, are reflected in different interpretations of the very popular and fundamental Prophetic saying, “*Adam was created in the image of the All-Merciful (God).*” Since that saying implies, along with other Qur’anic verses, that Adam was all-knowing of the divine Names (qualities, attributes), it does not only raise the question of why or how we and other human beings do not “already” know God perfectly, but also suggests that we should have some means that may lead us to know God in harmonious ways that include and reflect all the manifold divine aspects of our humanity. This supposition is clearly indicated in the often quoted *ḥadīth*, “*He who knows his self, knows his Lord (or Teacher/Sustainer: rabb).*” This signifies that when we truly come to know our self, then we also come to know God more deeply, directly or completely. The other sacred *ḥadīth* said “*I was a hidden treasure and I desired (love) to be known; so I created the creatures/people (al-khalq) so that I might be known.*” This suggests that the very purpose God’s creation and of human existence was to be known. From that point of view, the way that creation makes God known is the mystery that human beings need to decipher throughout out life. But there still remains the vital practical question of just how human beings are really capable of knowing God with such profundity.

## Knowing through Unveiling

In approaching Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of what is essential in knowing God, it is important to keep in mind his recurrent distinction between several different basic levels of or modes of “knowing.” His discussions of these key epistemological distinctions often involve references to different corresponding categories of people whose perceptions of reality, including God, are primarily dominated and determined by: (1) their conditioned, often largely unconscious “belief” (*i’tiqād*),<sup>6</sup> often acquired simply through social

5 Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 159.

6 Whenever Ibn ‘Arabi discusses this term (whether in the *Fusus* or elsewhere), he usually stresses the deeper meaning of its Arabic root (‘-q-d, binding, knotting, or tying up),

conformity or *taqlīd*); (2) by their restricted individual intellect (*'aql*); or (3) by various forms of inspired spiritual “knowing” (*ma'rifa*) and divine “informing” (*ta'rīf*).<sup>7</sup> And for Ibn 'Arabi's account these different modes of knowledge, which implies that each human faculty has its own level and specific roles in our knowing of reality, including God.

Ibn 'Arabi employs both two words for knowledge, *'ilm* and *ma'rifa*, and for most part he does not contrast the two. Like many Sufis, he tends to refer to *ma'rifa* when discussing knowledge as distinctly human attribute (since *'ilm* carries so many Qur'anic resonances of God's knowledge). All expressions of knowledge go back to our own understanding and experience. *Ma'rifa* is a special knowledge that is bestowed through “unveiling,”<sup>8</sup> so it is a kind of mystical knowledge. It is using one's conscience and inquiring attentively into one's inner world of experience. In this case, *ma'rifa* is distinguished from *'ilm*, as the latter can refer specifically to knowledge as “acquired” or reached through study, investigation, analysis and synthesis, in which case *ma'rifa* is reserved for the substance of those sorts of knowledge attained through intuition and inner perception. Or we may say that it is simply spiritual knowledge. The opposite of (scientific) knowledge is ignorance (*jahl*), while the opposite of *ma'rifa* is denial or rejection.<sup>9</sup> For Ibn 'Arabi the apparent disagreement or contradiction between the two terms is only the verbal one: it is the self-same knowledge of the divine verities that is in question, whether this be called *ma'rifa* or *'ilm*.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabi shows us that *ma'rifa* is a form of knowledge which can be achieved only through devotion and spiritual practice, and it

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such that this term, in his technical usage, refers to the immense spectrum of “inner knots”—for example, unconscious or unexpressed assumptions, expectations, and habitual mental and psychic patterns—in each person's soul or psyche, which go far beyond the sort of conscious mental attachments or concepts that are usually assorted with the English term “belief.”

7 Morris, *The Reflective Heart*, p. 276.

8 *Kashf*: following earlier Sufis, Ibn 'Arabidraws on a vast repertoire of specific technical terms to refer to particular phenomenological expressions of this broader category of experiential, spiritual awareness.

9 There is an *'ārif* (one who knows), *al-ma'rūf* (what is known), and *ma'rifa* (knowing). In the Qur'an the word *ma'rūf* often appears in opposition to the word *munkar* (denied). In this context *ma'rūf* is associated with what is socially “accepted” as right or good, and *al-munkar* associated with what is socially considered to be bad or forbidden. See Qur'an 9:71, 3:114.

10 See Chittick, *SPK*, p. 149.

is that knowledge to which the Qur'an refers when it says, "Be god-fearing, and God will teach you" (2:282). As he defined it in *Futūḥāt*:

"Know that *ma'rifa* is unique in its place and seeks nothing but the One: so *ma'rifa*, according to the People (of spiritual realization), is a pathway (journey, pilgrimage, process: *mahajja*). For it is only acquired through (right) action, God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and practical spiritual journeying (*sulūk*)—because it is through verified, experientially realized spiritual unveiling (*kashf muhaqqaq*), never subject to doubt, unlike knowledge acquired through intellectual reflection."<sup>11</sup>

It is also the special kind of knowledge that you should follow in traveling within (*sulūk*) the spiritual path, of which Ibn 'Arabi says in the *Fuṣūṣ*:

"This is a special kind of knowledge, which comes from "*the lowest of the low*,"<sup>12</sup> for the feet are the lowest part of an individual. What is below them is lower still, and which is no other than the path. Whosoever knows that the Real is identical with the path knows the affair *as it is*. It is within Him, majestic and exalted is He, that you sojourn and travel since there is nothing that is not He. He is identical with existence, the sojourner and the traveler."<sup>13</sup>

Which is to say that it is through this kind of knowledge, which is the knowledge of unveiling, that we will know the reality of the path, journey, and what we are traveling within. Because the perfection would not be attained if the human being does not go through and experience that reality in all its level or degrees.

When dealing with the processes of both acquiring and communicating knowledge, Ibn 'Arabi shows a clear preference for that intuitive or inspired knowledge which is "unveiled," because of his usual focus on these particular types of knowledge. But unfortunately and misleadingly, Ibn 'Arabi is often

11 Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt*, vol. 2, p. 297. For the translation and the commentary of this passage from chapter 177 (entirely devoted to *ma'rifa*), see James W. Morris, *Discovering "We": Ibn 'Arabi's Explanation of "Whoever Knows Their Self, Knows Their Lord,"* Ibn 'Arabi Symposium lecture, Berkeley, 2006.

12 From Qur'anic verse 95:5.

13 Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 109; Dagli, *Ringstones*, p. 111.

presented as a complete opponent of the rationalist traditions in Islam.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that his supposed “rejection” of reason as a self-subsistent and valid means to acquire divine knowledge is in fact one of the most subtle points in his epistemology. For this reason, it is essential to examine the actual nature of Ibn 'Arabi's “criticism” of acquiring knowledge of God through the usual conceptual rational means. For he did not reject the validity of most knowledge gained through reflection or consideration, but rather claimed that there were certain problems and inherent limitations with acquiring knowledge in this way, and that our primary knowledge of metaphysical and divine realities comes to us in ways that are beyond the scope of what can be acquired through purely rational consideration. In other words, Ibn 'Arabi did not question the validity of discursive and analytical reason in and of itself, as that faculty of reason is actually one of the distinguishing features of man, but rather rejected the possibility of gaining true knowledge of God through conceptual reason alone.

As he frequently emphasizes that the real fundamental doctrinal difference between mystical and non-mystical approaches to knowing God is in the acknowledgment of a dimension of reality which in itself remains invisible or inaccessible to our powers of rational demonstration. Moreover, his own world view asserts that within each human being—in the soul (*nafs*), the heart (*qalb*), or the divine spirit (*rūh*), whatever the terminology—there exists, at least potentially, a unique capacity to know and to reach truths and realities to which the faculty of reason has no access. In such a perspective, knowledge by reasoning is still knowledge, but it is not the loftiest, the true, direct knowing he terms *ma'rifa*.

For Ibn 'Arabi, what is incapable in fact is not intellect as such, but rather the limitations of our human reason (which have to do with our restricted human “estimation” or *wahm*). So if we free our intelligence from the constraints of reason to which it is naturally subject, it may become able to change direction, seek and allow for another source of knowledge, and choose to pursue that path instead. Human intellects, for him, have a limit which they observe as reasoners, not as “acceptors” of divine illumination and inspiration. So if intellectual or philosophical reason is incapable

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14 Overcoming that dangerous misunderstanding, especially as it applied to different Sufi and other spiritual groups and teachers, was one of the main intentions of many of the famous later commentators on the *Fuṣūṣ*, such as the highly influential figures of Qaysari and Jami.

of knowing God in a deep and effective way, and if the intellectual or theological reasoning we ordinarily apply to the Qur'an is incapable of building a doctrinal image without (misleadingly) "interpreting" what does not agree with its logic, then it will not lead us to an adequate or convincing knowledge of God.<sup>15</sup> However, the Shaykh never denies the relative validity (and metaphysical necessity) of *all* limited perspectives, including even the many schools of thought that he rigorously criticizes. What he denies is that any of these specific beliefs and doctrinal positions can embrace the more purely receptive spiritual "position of no positions," which is available only through divine bestowal and unveiling.<sup>16</sup>

While Ibn 'Arabi asserts that unveiling and inspiration (including all revelation) are the highest forms of acquiring true spiritual knowledge, and he is clear that "this is perfect knowledge, which the descended Laws relate to us from God,"<sup>17</sup> he does not reject reflection outright.<sup>18</sup> But in the larger frame of things, divine "informing" and revelation is the strongest way to acquire knowledge—hence the central role of the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* as the most important sources and models for what Ibn 'Arabi considers true spiritual knowing.

In the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, he generally concentrates in more positive terms on his own understanding of how we actually acquire spiritual knowledge, rather than on his rejection or questioning of other methods, although he does include some direct criticism of all those who rely on their limited faculty of reasoning to know God. With regard to knowing God, Ibn 'Arabi asserts that the highest point a man who relies on reason alone can reach is to assert the incomparability of God, and "the man who asserts incomparability [alone] is either ignorant or a man of poor *adab*."<sup>19</sup>

15 Hakim, "Knowledge of God," p. 268-69.

16 Specialists in Ibn 'Arabi's thought (apart from historians of its later influences and reactions against it) have rarely focused on the often hostile positions and critical responses by those Muslim scholars whose outlook and approaches he was so often criticizing. One modern representative of that traditional critical outlook is the Syrian writer Mahmoud al-Ghorab: see his article "Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi Amidst Religions (*adyān*) and Schools of Thought (*madhāhib*)," in Hirtenstein and Tiernan, eds., *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume* (Shaftesbury: Element Books Limited, 1993), p. 200-27.

17 Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 181.

18 For our purposes, "reason," "reflection," and "consideration" will be treated as synonyms.

19 His point here will be explained in greater detail in chapter IV below. This "lack of

The superior form and path of true knowledge (*ma'rifa*), according to Ibn 'Arabi, is ultimately a kind of inspired knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge constantly illustrated and grounded in the flood of remarkable spiritual inspirations he had throughout his life, and this emphasis is well expressed and clear throughout his works. For example, when he said, "the truly faithful person whose faith is perfect is forever divinely supported (*mansūr*), which is why no prophet or saint is ever defeated."<sup>20</sup> To be sure, for Ibn 'Arabi this secret divine support and triumph (*nasr*) flows from the saint's inner realization of pure and unquestioning identification with what is required by the divine Will and purpose, not necessarily from any particular outward worldly "successes."

To put this in context, we shall see how Ibn 'Arabi represented that vision in his works, especially in his *Fuṣūṣ*, where in its Prologue he boldly claimed to have just that kind of visionary, inspired knowledge, as a direct transmitter from the Prophet. Here it is not just in a historical context, but in an immediate spiritual context that he claims himself as the possessor of this "gift" of unveiling, in his introduction to the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*:

"I said, I hear and obey God, His Messenger, and the maan of authority among us, as we have commanded." And so I realized my hope, made my faithful intention, and purified my purpose and resolution to present this book as set out to me by the Messenger of God."<sup>21</sup>

As we know, Ibn 'Arabi is much more explicit here than in the *Futūḥāt* and other works where he tells us that in his writings he never had a set mental purpose as other writers, but rather flashes of divine inspiration used to come upon him and almost overwhelm him, so that he could only put them from his mind by committing to paper what they revealed to him.<sup>22</sup>

This inspired knowledge, which is the unitive knowledge of God by the human being not as an individual but as unified with the divine Source of

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*adab*" refers to the implicit denial, in the rigorous assertion of divine *tanzīh*, of the countless examples of referring to God's many types of "likenesses" (*tashbīh*) to His creatures throughout the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, and all revealed scriptures.

20 James Morris, "The Mahdi's Helpers" (translation of chapter 366 of the *Futūḥāt*) in Michel Chodkiewicz, ed., *The Meccan Revelations*, vol. I (New York: Pir Press, 2002), p. 65-66.

21 Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 47. Dageli, *Ringstone*, p. 1

22 Austin, *Bezels*, p. 13.



intelligence, at this level of gnosis (*ma'rifa*) becomes the subject as well as object of knowledge. That is why he often calls the gnostic or illuminated sage *al-'ārif* (or *al-'ālim*) *billāh*, the “gnostic who knows God *through and with* God” and not simply the gnostic who knows God.<sup>23</sup>

This inspired knowing must be discovered by individual realization, which is the actualization of the soul's potential. Knowledge, for the *'ārif*, is only that illuminated experience by which one becomes aware of the true nature of things. And it is an awareness which is characterized by absolute certainty: “...since it derives from a verified unveiling which is not seized by obfuscation. This contrasts with the knowledge which is actualized through reflective consideration (*al-nazar al-fikri*), which is never safe from obfuscation and bewilderment nor from rejection of that which leads to it.”<sup>24</sup>

This stress on “unveiling” or *kashf* as the privileged mode of knowing is hardly surprising for Ibn 'Arabi, given the fact that his entire life was devoted to this pursuit (or to what it commanded). The notion of unveiling, known as *kashf*, is absolutely central to Ibn 'Arabi's mystical epistemology. In addition to *kashf*, which literally means “unveiling,” he uses a number of other terms to describe this superior cognitive mode, associated with “direct tasting” (*dhawq*), “opening” (*fath*), “insight” (*baṣīra*), “witnessing” (*shuhūd*, *mushāhada*), and “divine [self-]revelation” (*tajalli*). He presents it as the basic epistemological principle of Sufi knowledge and practice, as well as its distinctive hallmark. The importance of *kashf* is highlighted in many passages from his works.

All those terms, if we refer to Qaysari's influential pedagogical summary of the teachings of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, can be returned to one meaning, that is unveiling (*al-kashf*). Therefore for the purpose of clarifying our understanding about unveiling, we can refer to Qaysari. Terminologically, it means knowing the hidden meanings and the real matters behind the veils either, whether discovered in the way of finding (*wujūd<sup>an</sup>*) or in the way of witnessing (*shuhūd<sup>an</sup>*).<sup>25</sup>

23 See S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.14.

24 Chittick, *The Sufi Path*, p. 149, referring to Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. II, p. 297.

25 See Qaysari, *Sharh Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 127.

Though in his works he divides this inner knowledge into many types and degrees, for Ibn 'Arabi the loftiest knowledge or the True Knowledge is above all knowledge of God, through God.

## Knowing God through Divine Signs

We live in this world and we have not any direct access to that Essence, which is infinitely beyond this world. We only can know this world directly. And although this world is—in the Islamic theological term—“other than God,”<sup>26</sup> yet the knowledge of this world is not a waste of time and must have its precise position. And since no knowledge of God can be gained without an intermediary which is itself other than God, so “what is other than God” is as important for our knowledge of God as God Himself.<sup>27</sup> Now according to Qur'an, as we have seen, all things are “signs” of God. They refer to God and point to Him. Indeed according to Ibn 'Arabi, the root of the word 'alam (“world” or cosmos) is *'alāma* (a guidepost or sign for travelers). He says: “We mention the “cosmos” with this word to give knowledge that by it we mean that God has made it all a sign.”<sup>28</sup>

Here we are also told that creation was created *li-ta'lam* – “that you may know” Allah, and that His Command courses inwardly through all the creation, and that His Omnipotence and His Omniscience envelop all things. Because of this, we shall see that for Ibn 'Arabi, knowing creation is *the* way to know God.

Ibn 'Arabi usually employs the term *dalīl* as a synonym for the Qur'anic term *āyāt* (divine signs), and this means that everything in the world and within us is a guide, directive, pointer, indication, signifier, evidence, proof, and denotation of God. It is important that the verses of Qur'an are themselves also referred to individually as signs or *āyāt*, as stressed in a parallel formula from Shabistari that “for the one whose soul experiences God's revelation, the entire world is like the Truth's Book, Most High.”<sup>29</sup>

26 The “other” is the primary object through which knowledge of the divine “One” (*al-wāḥid*) may be gained. However, the “other” is not as radically different from the One as it may first appear, especially because the Creator created man in His image—and for Ibn 'Arabi, likewise created all of creation according to the cosmic spiritual archetype of the “Muhammadan Reality” (“First Intellect,” Prophetic Light, and so on), which is also the “Perfect Human Being” (*insān kāmil*).

27 Chittick, *SPK*, p.147.

28 Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. II, p. 473.

29 Mahmud Shabistari, *Gulshan-i Rāz*, trans. by Robert Abdul Hayy Darr, *The Garden of*

### a.1. The realms of “signs”: Multiple divine “books” and “words”

The signs and verses of God (*āyāt*) are found in the Qur’an, but the Qur’an itself emphasizes that they are also found in the outside world (macrocosm) and within ourselves (microcosm). Thus the philosophers often interpreted the divine signs as being of two kinds, namely the signs on the “horizons” (*al-ayāt al-afaqiyya*) and signs of the soul (*al-ayāt al-anfusiyya*). Their usage refers to the famous Qur’anic verse already mentioned: “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves/their souls, until it is clear to them that He is the Real.” (Q 41:53).

Given these references to the three-fold dimension of these divine signs, there is a fundamental human interpretive, hermeneutical challenge to decipher these signs, to which Qur’an almost alluded, across all these domains. This same verse (and other related Qur’anic passages that Ibn ‘Arabi also frequently cites) clearly seem to presume a fundamental set of “correspondences” or deep set of “likenesses” (*tashbīh* and *amthāl*) connecting across these realms of creation, and connecting each realm back to God. In particular, we are reminded here of the central parallelism between these Signs (*āyāt*) or “Words” as the constituents of :

- (a) Revealed scripture (Qur’an and all the revealed “Books”);
  - (b) All the levels of manifest creation (the signs “on the horizons”);
  - (c) Many inner dimensions of the human soul (the signs “in their souls”);
- and
- (d) Realm of those timeless sacred divine-human “intermediaries” (the divine friends/prophets/messengers (*awliyā’*, *anbiyā’*, and *rusul*) who the Qur’an often calls God’s “Words.”

The Qur’an, in its own terms, is God’s “speech,” directed at human beings—as is the entire process of Creation, what Ibn ‘Arabifamously calls “the Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-Rahmān*). So whatever God says in the Qur’an is an expression of Himself. In the same way, when we speak, we express ourselves. In respect of human, we may forget or be neglectful and unconscious of what we express, but in the respect of the Qur’an there is nothing that is not full of significance, because God speaks with full awareness of what He is saying, and people can come to understand His

speech to the extent of their capacity for understanding. The Qur'an informs people about God, since it is God's purpose and intentional speech directed to them—which helps explain why the Qur'an refers to its own words and sentences as signs (*āyāt*) :

“We have sent down upon them these signs, clear indications, and none denies their truth save the transgressors” (Q 2:99). “These are the signs of the Manifest Book. We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an” (Q 12:1-2). And similarly when God says: “Glory to Him Who made His servant journey one night from the Sacred Place of Worship to the Furthest Place of Worship, whose surroundings We have blessed, so that We might cause him to see of Our signs!” (Q 17: 1).

From this perspective, the word sign can be applied to anything at all in creation, since all things are God's creatures. Especially important, for Ibn 'Arabī as for many other Islamic thinkers, is the insistence in these verses on the coincidence or parallelism connecting the signs “on the horizons”—referring to the worlds that we perceive and know outside us—and the signs in our selves or souls, referring to the domain of inner experience,” within the totality of fully illuminated awareness of the “Perfect Human Being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*).

Now the meanings of the signs shown “within their souls” are normally sought through those spiritual disciplines of contemplation, purification, service, and devotion which were emphasized within Islam by sufis. These signs found within are increasingly subtle theophanies which eventually move beyond familiar forms of sensation, thought and imagination, to a pure, ineffable experience of the creative Presence of the Real, here and in higher domains of existence—and it is safe to say that most of Ibn 'Arabi's own *Futūḥāt* is devoted to an incomparably rich and detailed phenomenology of these signs. In this connection, Shabistari writes, “Nonbeing is a mirror, the world its image. Man is the eye of this image beholding the hidden Essence,”<sup>30</sup> a concept which he borrows from Ibn 'Arabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. Yet we can see the active purpose of that knowledge of the signs within creation in the *fass* of Adam, where he mentioned:

“Since the affair concerning its manifestation in His image, and in order for you to acquire knowledge, God Most High turned our attention, concerning our knowledge of Him, to contemplating the

created, and has said that He will show us His signs within it. He has shown Himself to us through us. We describe Him by no quality without ourselves being that quality.”<sup>31</sup>

This opening passage indicates also the importance of knowing God by what He “says about Himself” through the revelation. By using revelation and the larger metaphysical concept of self-disclosure, Ibn ‘Arabia asserts that God shows Himself to humans through His Signs (including their own souls) in all creation; in the divine “Words” constituted by His messengers, guides and Friends (the ostensible subject of the entire *Fuṣūṣ*); and through all the inspired forms of revelation that they bring, embody, and articulate. This passage demonstrates one of the most important aspects of acquiring knowledge for Ibn ‘Arabi, which is the inherent receptivity or pure “servanthood” (*‘ubūdiyya*) of the recipients of this inspired knowing. By saying that God must “turn our attention” to these signs in all creation, Ibn ‘Arabi always emphasizes the causative, active meaning of the 4<sup>th</sup> verb form *‘arā* as “to make someone see,” not just “to show.”<sup>32</sup> For him, God’s “signs” are already there, in the totality of our experience, but usually “unseen” (*ghāba*), that is to say, not perceived as such. Thus the whole purpose of the spiritual journey is simply to open our spiritual eyes to the reality of “things” as signs, or to recognize the active presence of the divine Names “in our states.” In other respect, it suggests that humans cannot willfully acquire knowledge (simply by their own efforts), and that they must instead prayerfully “seek” it, by way of desiring or thirsting for that knowing to be unveiled to them.

So the world which is other than God comes into the picture precisely to the extent that one must know the other in order to gain knowledge of God. It means that the apparently “other” must be known with a view toward God. All things must be taken back to the One (the reality of *tawhīd*), which is God. Knowledge of other than God, the knowledge of horizons and of our selves, is the essential ground for all our knowledge of God.

Philosophers and theologians have often claimed to deduce the existence of God from the existence of the world, or from the finalities evident in it (arguments from “design”). They also deduce God’s attributes from the attributes of the world, applying different arguments for this purpose.

31 Ibn ‘Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, p.53; Caner K. Dagli, *Ringstones of Wisdom*, p. 11.

32 Morris, “The Spiritual Ascension,” p. 7-8.

Each one of these arguments appeals to different aspects or qualities of the macrocosm or microcosms. For example, from the existence of the good order in the world they deduce the existence of a knowing and intentional Designer. Or from the existence of the motion and change in the world they deduce the existence of an Unmoved Mover. And from the existence of “possible beings” in the world, they deduce the existence of a Necessary Being which is God, and so on. All of these arguments approach our knowledge of God from some aspect of our knowledge of “the horizons.”<sup>33</sup>

From another point of view complementary to the above-mentioned verses mentioned in Qur'an, it is not accidental that the verses of the Qur'an as well as phenomena in nature and events within the soul of man are all called signs (*āyāt*). God displays His “signs” on the horizons—that is, the cosmos and more specifically the world of nature—and within the souls of human beings, until<sup>34</sup> they come to realize that He is the Truth. And it is precisely these signs which are displayed in the Qur'an that point to the foundational inner correspondence between these verses and the phenomena of nature, which Ibn 'Arabi understands as corresponding essentially to all the spiritual meanings manifest in and through nature (and to the higher realms of manifest existence). The Qur'an corresponds in a sense to nature, to God's creation, which is why it so frequently reminds people that when we look at a natural phenomenon we should be reminded of God and His Power and Wisdom (and so many other Names, qualities and intentions). Man should be reminded of the “wonders of creation” and constantly see the “signs” of God upon the horizons. This attitude which is one of the essential commandments of Islam, is tied to the correspondence between the Qur'an and the universe. For the Qur'an repeatedly and forcefully reminds us that we must perceive things not so much for what they are in themselves, but for what they tell us of their Source and all that lies beyond themselves.

However, ordinary people differ from the “Friends of God” and other accomplished spiritual “knowers” in that they miss the significance of these signs simply because they see signs as something disparately mundane,

33 Qasim Kakai, “Know yourself, According to Qur'an and Sunnah: Ibn Arabi's View,” in *Philosophical-Theological Research*, published by SID, vol.9, no. 1, p. 4.

34 Or “so that” (another meaning of the Arabic *hattā* here): that reading actually corresponds more fully to Ibn 'Arabi's far-reaching metaphysical understanding of this verse.

or sometimes they become aware of these signs only if they appear in an unfamiliar form (some extraordinary event), rather than seeking constantly to decipher what is behind the signs or what are these omnipresent signs themselves. Or sometimes they only see the signs as self-sufficient, outer natural phenomena without any further consideration. For example, they will see sky as where the rain is coming from, or all the other phenomena that they sometimes interpret for their own interest and for judging other people and conditions. They only see the signs without knowing that God disclosed Himself as signs. For the spiritual knower, or *'arif*, the signs are no longer “other than God,” but rather express and reveal something Real that is not other than God.

In this respect, according to Ibn 'Arabi, God's signs can be divided— from our purely subjective perspective—into two basic sorts; those that appear constantly such that we do not notice them, and those that impinge our awareness because they break with our concept of normalcy. He calls these two sorts “habitual” (*mu ṭād* or *'āda*) and “non-habitual” signs.

People see the “habitual” signs all the time,<sup>35</sup> but only the knowers and Friends of God properly notice them. We call the exercise and practices needed to know the meaning of what God places as signs in the world an exercise of realized spiritual intelligence. For the act and expression of spiritual discernment, that is learning to “translate from God,” always involves a constant interplay between seeking, then of receptivity and contemplation (“listening”), reflection, appropriate action, and then further observation and reflection on the consequences of that action and the challenges of the next destined situation of testing and learning.

Now what is then to be one of the constant and most unavoidable obstacles to the actual spiritual perception of our experience as divine signs (*āyāt*) is our vast array of unconscious, unexamined, socially reinforced assumptions about what is or is not somehow “spiritual”:

“The usually overwhelming authority and familiarity of our customary, habitual perception of things means that we naturally tend to think that only extra-ordinary, extreme or unusual occurrences and awareness could somehow qualify as being spiritual. And the

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35 Everything God has mentioned in Qur'an as Signs for a people who have intelligence (13:4), who hear (10:67), who understand (6:98), who have faith (6:99), who know (6:97), who have certainty (2:118), and who reflect (13:3).

ways those unconscious, normally invisible veils of embedded custom and habit can be raised by sudden unexpected shifts in our surroundings or circumstances—i.e., dramatic life-changes, illness, and the like, revealing unexpected insights and dramatically different perspectives—is of course a recurrent feature of our spiritual experience.”<sup>36</sup>

So what Ibn 'Arabi is trying to point out is every conscious spiritual journey begins with our somehow being fundamentally “*surprised* by God,” by the freshly awakened realization and discovery of one or another of the divine qualities or Names re-enacted in our experience.

As Ibn 'Arabi stresses especially in the opening chapter of his *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, there is an underlying parallel correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. The cosmos is a vast configuration of divine Letters and Words telling a coherent story, and hence it is also a “revealed Book”. So also the human being is a book, but human beings, by and large, have forgotten or too frequently ignored the story line. Given the fact of that inherent tendency to forgetfulness, the all-Merciful articulates a third Book through precisely the same creative process that brought the first two Books into being. This book is the Book of Revelation, the “Reminder” or the “Remembrance” (*dhikrā*), given to Adam and to all the subsequent prophets, and appearing in its most complete and comprehensive articulation in the Qur'an brought by (and lived and taught through the guiding example of) Muhammad.<sup>37</sup>

Now because there is an essential inner correspondence between the revealed, eventually written Book and the other Books of the micro- and macrocosm, it necessarily appeared in a linguistic form and cultural language appropriate to its intended recipients. To support this idea, Ibn 'Arabioften cites the Qur'anic verse, “*We sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people*” (14:4). We shall see here that for Ibn 'Arabi, as Chodkiewicz has illustrated, the basic intention is to bring out the *meaning* inherent in that divine Speech whose articulation is intended to bring about a deeper human awareness of self, cosmos and God.

In other word, everything that happens tells us something about God's Activity within creation. Signs are found not only in the natural world and

36 Morris, *Reflective Heart*, p. 181-182.

37 William Chittick, *Self-Disclosures of God* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. xxxiv.



historical event, but also inside ourselves and in our interactions with that world of the “horizons.” As the Qur’an says: *In the earth are signs for those having certainty, and in your selves (51:20-21).*<sup>38</sup>

Finally, in the specific sense, the Qur’an refers to its own words as signs, and that term came to be applied technically to each verse-element of the *Sura*. It is important to keep in mind that a sign is put out for people to read, as a “reminder,” since normally people do not set up signs or give indications unless they want to convey a message.

The world is, as it were, an immense book in which those who have eyes to see and ears to hear can recognize God’s signs, and thus be guided by their contemplation to a knowledge of the Creator Himself and of His Attributes. Sensible and spiritual levels meet through and in the signs, so by understanding and interpreting them we may be able to understand the Divine Wisdom and Power and so on, while we can also move on to understand what the Qur’an proclaims, implies and inspires. Through the world of plurality, God teaches by means of comparisons, parables and likeness to draw the human heart beyond the external, peripheral faces of creation.

Ibn ‘Arabi provided a beautiful and even a little bit complicated way to present how these signs are analogous to a mirror. It says that the horizons and man are God’s “mirror,” but the “Whole Human Being” (*al-insān al-kamil*) is the actual reflective element. And God wants to emerge *insān al-kamil* which is His image in horizon and within human. In another verse, God said, “just as there are *signs within your own selves*. Will you not then see?” This analogy of image of the mirror is best presented in the *fass* of Adam in his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. There he states that when each human being comes to truly see God’s image on the horizon and within his self/soul, then He will see *al-Haqq*. Here everything is a matter of seeing (*ru’ya*, which also can mean “dream” or “vision”). God shows and the human being “sees” or rather understands and knows the meaning of what is seen. This discovery of illuminated vision is not a matter of rational understanding, nor of philosophy or theology. It is metaphysical insight and illumination. Hence we can also say that this “seeing” is immediate knowing, and vice versa.

There is no separation between the mirror and the reflection, but the reflective element of the mirror is the crucial definitive element. Seeing the reflection is not the same as simply looking at the mirror. But because the

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38 See as well the following verses: Q. 17: 12 ; Q.36:33 ; Q.30:22; Q.42:32.

mirror and the reflections in it are not separated, both can outwardly appear as one.

In fact, we may say, the mirror serves as “prime matter” (*al-hayūlā al-ūlā*), and without its reflective elements, the mirror simply cannot be concretely definitive. Only together with those reflective elements will the mirror be concrete and actually reflective. When it becomes definitive, it cannot be seen apart from the images it is reflecting. And since the image in this case is the Divine Image—at once of “Adam” (human beings), and of the whole world (as creation)—then it cannot show other than what is reflected of the Divine Image.

In other words, returning to our original verse, all natural outward phenomena and human beings are divine signs. So both can be arguments to manifest the existence and attributes of God, as Ibn 'Arabi said: “Then we derive knowledge of Him through ourselves. We describe Him by no quality without ourselves being that quality, although this is not the case for His Self-sufficient Being (*al-wujūb al-dhātī al-khāss*)”.<sup>39</sup>

After realizing that within human and in the cosmos there are the Divine Image, then without this Image, neither the cosmos nor the human being would have any concrete definition; so it is through this Image that we therefore know God. And also, as both man and the cosmos are both in the image of God, then in knowing the cosmos, man is coming to know himself. Thus, ultimately there is no such thing spiritually as knowledge of “external” things; there is only knowledge of the self. Hence our own selves are the most direct means by which we can come to know God, as in the *ḥadīth* “He who knows himself, knows his Lord”.

In this regard, it should also be kept in mind that Ibn 'Arabi devotes the entire *Fuṣūṣ* to all those prophets (*anbiyā'*)<sup>40</sup> mentioned by name in the Qur'an or *ḥadīth*, while not focusing in any exclusive way on the divine messengers (*rusul*) and to their particular revealed “Books.” For him, the prophets are “signs” directly from God sent to a particular destination or people. They brought or reminded people about divine messages, so that the prophet is most obvious sign of all to reveal God's Presence. Ibn Arabi translated this idea by stating that the prophets are a manifestation of the universal “Most-

39 Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p.53.

40 For Ibn 'Arabi, relying on a Prophetic *ḥadīth* stating that “the *anbiyā'* of the Children of Israel are the *awliyā'* of my people,” the term “prophet” (but not the messengers, *rusul*) is understood here to include the much wider set of all the “Friends of God.”

Beautiful divine Names” (*al-asmā’-al-husnā*), not a manifestation of just a single, particular Divine Name. Therefore the discussion of the prophets, their way of teaching and their life is tantamount to discussing how the Names of God are being manifested in the specifically human universe.

The commentators of the *Fuṣūṣ* likewise focus on the nature of prophethood (*nubuwwa*), seen as identical with *walāya* through their immediately present guidance, particularly as they represent—at least in the titles ascribed to them in the *Fuṣūṣ*—specific divine Names and expressions of divine Wisdom.<sup>41</sup> When we turn to those prophets (*anbiyā’/awliyā’*) who are mentioned in the 27 chapters of the *Fuṣūṣ*, it is clear that they do not bring some totally “new knowledge” as such, either in person or in their respective Books, but rather exemplify and point out the actual reality of *tawhīd*: i.e., the Reality (*Ḥaqq*) that underlies all the manifestations of the Names. So their mission is one of “reminding” (*tanbīhāt*) human souls of what they already know in all their experience (as *ma’rifā*), but which they have momentarily forgotten or ignored or failed to integrate and assimilate, as in the Qur’anic case of the young Moses and his divine teacher Khezr (al-Khidir)

## **a.2 Understanding reality through horizon (*ufūk*) and the self (*anfus*)**

It has been made clear that the Absolute in Itself is humanly unknowable, and thus remains dark mystery. However, that same reality may be expressed somewhat differently and much more positively: that human beings are allowed to know the Absolute only when It becomes manifest at the all-inclusive, cosmic stage of “God” (i.e., as *Allāh*, or the comprehensive reality including all of the divine Names). Therefore Ibn ‘Arabi asserts that the right way of coming to know the Absolute is to know ourselves, since both the manifest “horizons” and the human “selves” are all God’s signs and guides to God. In many Sufi texts, the emphasis is upon developing our knowledge of the self, and for Ibn ‘Arabi, true (spiritual) knowledge of the created world is inaccessible without true knowledge of the self.

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41 For Ibn ‘Arabi, his discussion of each figure in the *Fuṣūṣ* is meant to bring out their actual presence as guides and sources of divine guidance for every seeker, every true knower.

If we refer to what the Prophet primarily means by the word “self” in this particular famous *ḥadīth*, is our being and our essential reality (which the Qur'an calls the inspired divine “spirit” or *rūh*), and not just one of the many other senses of the self, which would include the false self, psychological self, or what we the Qur'an calls the “blaming self,” the “egoistical self,” or that self which is known as the confident or “peaceful” self. Nor did he mean by “self” here one's carnal or basharic ego, that self which favors the pleasures of the flesh and its lowly desires and which tries to command everything. Nor the self that first deceives—making one believe that the dirt and the ugliness is proper, then flagellates itself for the wrong it has done, and then forgets and does it again. Nor did he mean the self-satisfied self. By that self that leads us to discover our “Lord,” he meant one's truth, one's innermost reality.

Ibn 'Arabi asserts that the right way of knowing God is for us to know ourselves. Though this very famous saying on self knowledge has been interpreted by many scholars, it has a very important role for Sufis, especially for Ibn 'Arabi, and he himself approaches it in different ways.

Though this space is not our purpose to elaborate clearly about the self knowledge, however we may look in short on Ibn 'Arabi's perspective, clearly the meaning of the “*nafs*” here is understood to be the “soul,” which is a spiritual, even divine substance beside and beyond the earthly body (thus very close to the Qur'anic account of Adam's *rūh*). Thus the “similarity” between soul and God is emphasized here, and “knowing one's Lord” means our knowing of God's Activities and Attributes, not somehow knowing His unknowable Essence.

In Ibn 'Arabi's mystical approach here focuses on this relation between the soul and its similarity to God in its activities and attributes, so that we may approach God immanently, feeling Him and bringing Him into our life as immediately and constantly as possible, something that Ibn 'Arabi shows through each *fass* with different ways of expression. In most cases Ibn Arabi talks about the “self” instead of the “soul,” and about our experience of its unity with God instead of its less controversial similarity to Him. For him, what the Prophet meant here by *nafs*, is our very existence and reality. So according to Ibn Arabi, “himself” in the *ḥadīth* also means his existence and its Source. He who knows his existence knows his Lord. But according to the theory of oneness of being, there is in reality no existence and no being

that subsists apart from its sustaining relationship (as *marbūb*) to God's being and God's creative Act. So this means that one's existence is not other than God's, and the way of gaining knowledge of God is to come to truly know our existence or our being.<sup>42</sup> Here—in the famous formula that Ibn 'Arabī often repeats—the knower, the known, and the knowledge or act of knowing are all one and the same thing. And this is what the *'arif* actually sees and experiences.

However, as Izutsu points out in discussing Ibn 'Arabī, not all self-knowledge is able to lead us to really knowing God. The ambiguity of this expression (“self-knowledge through knowing God”) also arises in part from Ibn 'Arabī's emphasizing this *ḥadīth* ‘he who knows himself, knows his Lord’ in very different contexts in different chapters of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. So we will find out here just what kind of knowing the self is able to lead human beings to really knowing God.

Now we can say better appreciate what Ibn 'Arabī understands as the intended lesson of the *ḥadīth*: “He who knows himself knows his Lord.” He begins, of course, by emphasizing that each human being's self-knowledge is the absolutely necessary premise for his knowing his Lord, since our knowledge of the Lord can *only* result from His knowledge of Himself. For the word “Lord” (*rabb*), in Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of that term, means the Absolute *insofar as it manifests itself through some definite Name*. It does not refer to that Essence which surpasses all determinations and transcends all relations. Thus the dictum “He who knows himself knows his Lord” does not in any way suggest that the self-knowledge of man will allow man to know the Absolute in its pure Essence. Whatever one may do, and however deep one's experience of “unveiling” may be, the knower is always ontologically restricted to knowing the (infinite) Names that are manifested at the stage of the “Lord” or Sustainer. Herein lies the fundamental limitation even of human spiritual cognition.

## Closing

Ibn 'Arabī, through the phenomena of spiritual witnessing and spiritual unveiling, introduces this peculiar mode of knowledge, the spirit of knowledge, and the power of knowledge. This spiritual unveiling is

42 Kakai, “Know yourself,” p. 7.

likened to “remembering” something which is already true; in Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical framework, everything which man *can* know is already known in and with God.

With regard to our knowing God (*ma'rifa al-Haqq*) through the process and dynamic relationship, it can be summed up that *Ma'rifa al-Haqq* is moving from knowing things as outward or “on the horizons” (*ufuk*), which is outward experience, to the self-awareness of the knowing self (*ma'rifat al-nafs*), which is transformed awareness of the nature of our inner experience. We therefore can gain knowledge of God from the knowledge of ourselves because God created Adam in His image (*'alā ṣūrat al-Rahmān*).

Finally, with regard to the relation between knowing God through knowing the self in practice, through this divine prophetic wisdom (*fass*) outlined throughout the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, realizing the perfect knowing of the Self means understanding and actualizing the all-encompassing reality of our human being (or from our usual perspective, our ultimate spiritual potential) as the Spirit (*rūh*) of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). For Ibn 'Arabi, the clear implication of the Qur'anic account of the twofold creation of Adam is that the Adamic being is a metaphysical kind of “isthmus” conjoining, at least potentially, the spirit of the form and the form of the spirit. So once we awaken to our true nature as Spirit, as the *rūh* of the *insān kāmil*, then we can begin to realize how close we are already with God.

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