

Does the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Fusus al-Hikam* provide a direct way to reflect upon the epistemological framework of its author?

Phrasing this question for the reader was more challenging than the initial enquiry that I asked of myself. My starting version was akin to, “Wow, am I seeing that ‘*Moses*’ actually highlights Ibn al-Arabi’s theories of knowledge all the way through?”. But that wouldn’t make any sense at this juncture, although I hope that it will by the end.

My first problem to make the focus of my research more ‘user-friendly’ was that depending upon whom you ask, the full title of my ‘*Moses*’, the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Fusus al-Hikam*, can be translated as follows;

[The Bezel of] The Wisdom of Eminence in the Word of Moses,
[The Bezel] From the Sublime Wisdom in the Word of Moses,
The bezel of the wisdom of exaltation exists in the essence of Moses,
The Quintessence of the Wisdom of Eminence as embodied in the Word Moses¹.

Hermeneutics is big-game fishing in the world of Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Arabi al-Ta’i al-Ḥatimi, (Ibn al-Arabi, d.1240)², a man described, somewhat aptly for my analogy, as “an ocean without shore”³.

My second problem was that, as one might imagine, if the chapter of a title is that difficult to render⁴, what is going on in the rest of it? A great deal is the simple answer.

¹(a) Austin, R.W.J., *Ibn Al-Arabi, The Bezels of Wisdom*, Paulist Press (1980) - first complete English translation

(b) Binyamin Abrahamov, *Ibn al-Arabi’s Fusus al Hikam, An Annotated Translation of ‘The Bezels of Wisdom’*, Routledge (2015)

(c) Titus Burckhardt, *The Wisdom of the Prophets*, (translator Angela Culme Seymour), Beshara (1975) - one of the earliest ‘Western’ translations, originally into French

(d) William Chittick, The Chapter Headings of the *Fusus*, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, Vol. II (1984)

² And in islam generally, *ta’wil* (hermeneutics, correct interpretation) appears 17 times in the *Qur’an* itself see Mayam Payami, M., The Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Holy Quran with an Emphasis on Al-Hashr Surah, *International Journal of Philosophy and Social-Psychological Sciences*, Science Arena Publications, Vol 3 (4) 42-45, (2017).

³ Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore, Ibn ‘Arabi, The Book and The Law*, (translator David Streight), SUNY (1993), Cover abstract notes: “Chodkiewicz provides a good deal of documentation for the often heard claim that Ibn Arabi has been the most influential thinker in Islam over the past seven hundred years”

⁴ Ibn al-Arabi presents his own particular interpretive challenges see Qureshi, J.A., *Ibn Arabi and the Akbari Tradition*, *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, Routledge (2021) pp89-101

Due to that fact, I shall dive right in, take you with me, and trust neither of us drown. Any encounter with this notorious, complex, prolific polymath, will engender immediate comprehension as to why he is renowned as such. Further it is these distinctions that provide the burning platform for understanding as much as we can about the man behind it all. If epistemology, in its broadest sense, which is what I am dealing with here, (a quick caveat - this is *not* a paper on analysis of application of particular epistemological theorem), is concerned with the nature and the limits of knowledge, what were the nature and limits of his? And is his framework really reflected in one chapter of a relatively small book?

To fix my argument in the affirmative, there is a firstly potential and preliminary “yes” to every single chapter of the book reflecting the epistemological framework of the author to a greater or lesser degree. The reason is twofold. Firstly, it is a ‘holistic’, in the very literal sense of foundational interconnectivity, work. The *Fusus al-Hikam*, or *Bezels of Wisdom* is a book given, or indeed gifted, nearly eight hundred years ago to Ibn al-Arabi in the totality of its form that it remains to this day:

“When God revealed to me, in my innermost center, what He had deposited in our great progenitor [Muhammad], I recorded in this book only that which he dictated to me, not all I was given, since no book could contain all of it, nor yet the Cosmos as now existing”⁵.

That totality is therefore, by default, a correlative representation, it could not be anything else, due not just to the nature of its ‘birth’ but to Ibn al-Arabi’s iconic fundamental ontology, *al-Wahdat al-Wujud*, the unity of being. This was a posthumous label, and is a doctrine of extensive influence not just in Sufism, but throughout Islam and the world⁶. This will form an element of the argument, but not its totality.

My argument is thus: *Moses* contains references to key principles i.e. a framework, of Ibn al-Arabi’s epistemology, which is essentially one of the primacy of *kashf* (unveiling) as the only way to access *true* knowledge. Divine knowledge both is and is endlessly re-established

⁵ Austin n1 (a) p57

⁶ Chodkiewicz, n2 p1-18

in each moment⁷, *kashf* is the ability to access this ‘imaginal’⁸ plane of true knowledge - the actual reality⁹.

Essential to it is Ibn al-Arabi himself. Of absolute necessity to the validity of my question is an appreciation of his significance, a grasp of the profundity of the book, and the chapter. I begin with insight into all three, of which the man has the greatest share by far. This is not just an introduction. It is perspicacious in its detail of the life of Ibn al-Arabi, because approaching the epistemology that is reflected, whilst lacking understanding of his life or *modus operandi* would yield little, if not nothing.

The second section offers a quick preambulatory note on Moses, the ‘Musa of the Qur’an,’ whom henceforth I shall continue to refer to in the romanised Arabic as Musa. Its inclusion is helpful, but primarily it supports my argument I will then critically engage with a specific section, doctrine (s) and examples from the ‘*chapter on Moses*’, which from this point onward is what I mean when I use the word *Moses* (*in italics*; *Moses* - the chapter, Musa - the prophet). It is not really about *Moses* or indeed Musa, or the book, but neither is it *not about them*, in a loop, it circles back once more to the man, but through *Moses*, and the book within which *Moses* resides.

This circular motion of *kashf*, and Ibn al-Arabi’s understanding of knowledge is a string theme throughout. Further it is within the chapter that through *al wahdat al wujud*, or the unity of being, we find the nature of that knowledge and here too that the very deeply gnostic epistemology of the man, the interplay between *kashf* (unveiling), *ma’rifa* (gnosis), *al’ilm al zahir* (outward knowledge) and *ilm al-ladunni* (divine inner knowledge), is revealed. As Gregory Vandamme observes, “every existing reality is thus implicated in ambiguous ontological correlations”¹⁰, so perhaps there is a subsidiary ‘no’ that co-exists in harmony with the ‘yes’, which has already been hinted at. It is this that I explore in conclusion. That’s the point to say to anyone desperately seeking dichotomy, “look away now”.

⁷ Macdonald, D. B. “Continuous Re-Creation and Atomic Time in Muslim Scholastic Theology.” *Isis*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1927, pp. 326–44

⁸ Not imagination in our standard definition, but as in image-form. For excellent clarity of description see William Chittick’s *The Sufi Path of Love, The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, State University of New York Press (1983) pp248-250

⁹ *Al-Haqq*, the True or the Real, or the Reality is Ibn al-Arabi’s most frequent choice of Islam’s possible names for God. See Chittick on

¹⁰ Gregory Vandamme, *Some Notes on Ibn al-Arabi’s Correlative Propetology*, Brill, (2023) p97

The book, the chapter... but mainly the man

Ibn al-Arabi completed the *Fusus al-Hikam*, the Bezels of Wisdom, in Damascus in 1230. A concise work in comparison to his extraordinary 560 chapter tome, *Futuḥat al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations), it contains the two doctrines for which he is most well-known; *al-Insan al-Kamil* (the Perfect Human)¹¹, and the aforementioned *al-Wahdat al Wujud* (the unity of being)¹². Each of *Fusus*' twenty seven chapters is dedicated to a particular prophet, beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad as *al-Khatim al-Anbiya*¹³ (the Seal of the Prophets). All are structured from the Arabic as, "the *fass* (bezel) of *hikma* (wisdom) of [a spiritual faculty] in the word of [a particular Islamic prophet]";

In the first chapter Ibn al-Arabi states that Adam is "that which the setting is the is to the ring, the setting carries the seal which the King applies to his treasure chests"¹⁴, thus the central trope of a bezel is the setting of a signet ring that fixes, designates and "safeguards"¹⁵ authenticity of content¹⁶. *Hikma* (pl.*Hikam*) is wisdom, which Al-Qaysari (d.1350) an early commentator on Ibn al-Arabi, defines it as,

"knowledge of the realities of things as they are in themselves"¹⁷.

Moses, the twenty-fifth chapter, is the setting of the seal of '*al-hikmat al'uluwiyah*'¹⁸; *uluwiyah* being used to reflect the most profound or elevated, therefore both Burkhardt's 'Sublime Wisdom' and the common 'Wisdom of Eminence' position well¹⁹. *Al-hikmat*

¹¹ "...a key concept of Islamic mysticism. Being coined by Ibn al-'Arabi in his *Fusus al-hikam* in relation to Adam, the idea can be traced back to the early beginnings of Sufism itself" Coeli Fitzpatrick and Adam Walker, *Muhammad in history, thought, and culture : an encyclopedia of the Prophet of God*, ABC-CLIO (2014) p440

¹² "...although Ibn al-'Arabi himself did not use this term", *ibid.*, p446. It was accorded posthumously.

¹³ The Seal [i.e. the last of] the Prophets, Q. 33:40.

¹⁴ Burkhardt, n1 (c) p12

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Austin n1 (a) prefers, "preserves"

¹⁶ There is much scholarly debate around the use of the word 'bezel', some arguing that despite Ibn Arabi's description it refers to holding of a gemstone see Chittick for summary, n1 (d) p6-7

¹⁷ Al-Qaysari, *Sharh fusūs al-hikam*, Tehran, 1299/1881-82, Chittick n1 (d)

¹⁸ Burkhardt, n1 (c) p96

¹⁹ See n1

al'uluwiyah signed, sealed and delivered as it were, in (the word²⁰ [of]) Moses, that is *sublime wisdom as it really is in itself*, made divinely manifest through him.

Ibn al-Arabi represents both a polarising and synthesising force in Sufism, where he was posthumously accorded the title which is still upheld today, that of *al-Shayk al-Akbar* (The Greatest Master). In Islam he has been either equally revered, in his lifetime Ibn al-Arabi was known as Muhyi al-din, 'the reviver of religion'²¹ or insulted and prohibited, e.g. Ibn Abd al Salam's (d.1262) declaration that Ibn al-Arabi was the "*shaykh su*" (master of evil)²². His influence today reaches far wider still²³ and not necessarily with any less controversy - A.E. Afifi calls him a "thoroughgoing pantheist"²⁴ and Michel Chodkiewicz notes that the famous orientalist scholar, Louis Massignon held an "enduring hostility" toward him²⁵. The other side of the coin, or further evidence of Vandamme's persistent ontological ambiguity²⁶ in the man himself, is current revivalist studies, alongside those of other 'mystic philosophers'²⁷ such as Suhrawardi (d. 1191)²⁸, with whom he shared startling views on value of intuited or received knowledge above reason or rational contributions, within *irfan* (primarily Iranian body of theoretical mysticism) supporting the *scientia sacra* of perennialism led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b.1933)²⁹, which continues to receive growing global and pluralist support.

²⁰ Chittick removes the 'of' between the 'word' and 'prophet' on the argument that it is akin to Logos, however the relationship of this word to Muhammad and other prophets is complex and outside of the scope here. Effectively though it is to be read as the fundamental manifestation of all the attributes of the divine name, so it is word as prophet. See n1, (4)

²¹ The moniker of a Muslim leader of religious renewal expected in each century - previously accorded to Al-Ghazali (d.1111),

²² Ibn Taymiyya's (d.1328) reproduction of Ibn Abd al Salam's declaration, Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the later Islamic tradition*, State University of New York Press (1999) p66

²³ See further Stephen Hirtenstein, *Names and Titles of Ibn [al] 'Arabi*

<https://ibnarabisociety.org/names-and-titles-of-ibn-arabi-stephen-hirtenstein/>. Not all his titles were flattering - e.g. the insulting Ibn Aflatun (Son of Plato), *ibid.*, Austin, pxiii, or

²⁴ A E Afifi, *The mystical philosophy of muhyid din-ibn al-arabi*, CUP 1939 p.67

²⁵ See Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints. Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*. (translator Liadain Sherrard), The Islamic Texts Society (1993)

²⁶ n9

²⁷ The question as to whether Ibn al-Arabi can indeed be called both is addressed later.

²⁸ With whom he shared startlingly similar views on the relationship of reason and gnosis considering they are a few decades apart, and at their closest in time, the width of the entire Islamic land stood between them

²⁹ See further Sayed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, SUNY (1993)

Qunawi (d.1274) his step-son, philosopher in his own right coined the term *mashrab al-tahqiq*, (the school of realisation)³⁰ to distinguish ‘Akbarian’³¹ concepts that epitomise the mystical elements of the Islamic sciences³² from *falsafa* (philosophy) and *kalam* (theology). Their uses were not denied³³, but Ibn ‘Arabi’s epistemological primacy was not learning through study or transmission or reason, but through the direct experience of *kashf*.

“Witnessing follows unveiling, or it may be said that it is followed by unveiling”.

Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūhāt*, 2:484³⁴.

His life was littered with visions, of himself, of the cosmos, he was visited by all Prophets. Whatever he received, he transposed hence the extraordinary volume of work. He then reframed such *marifa* (gnostic knowledge) through *kalam*, and to a degree, *falsafa*, albeit enigmatically, holding to a principle that both *aql* (reason or intellect) and *khayal* (imagination in our standard sense and also in image-‘form’ as in the plane of gnosis³⁵) are crucial to building abstractions³⁶. If ‘normalised’ knowledge of God, man and the cosmos is some variously weighted ‘flat’ equation of ‘theology + reason = true knowledge’, Ibn ‘Arabi’s formula is a fluid process, where the *first* stage is enlightenment, to which the intellectual properties of reason and study of theology are applied thereafter. For Ibn ‘Arabi, Man’s reasoning is a gift to be applied second, post-enlightenment as it were: true knowledge comes after, not before. Furthermore this ‘pre-imminent’³⁷ wisdom, as it lives in the imaginal

³⁰ “Qūnawī, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s step-son, is considered to be the greatest expositor of his works and the foremost of his students”, H.Ali Muktar, Introduction, H.Ali Muktar (Ed.s) *The Horizons of Being, The Metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the Muqaddimat al-Qayṣarī*, Brill (2020) p1, see for a comprehensive list of early commentators

³¹ Not a term he would have used, however is a helpful later description adopted from the term ‘al-Shaykh al Akbar’, particularly of common use in the body of Iranian theoretical mysticism known as *irfan*.

³² Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b.1933 -) writes extensively on the ‘desacralisation’ of both knowledge and ancient sciences in general, and *Irfan* in particular. His works are extensive but a sympathetic starting point for this article is Seyed Amir Hossein Asghari, Sufism and Challenges of Modern and Secular Philosophy: Nasr’s Perspective, *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Velî Araştırma Dergisi*, 98 pp 245 -258 DOAJ (2021)

³³ Rosenthal, Franz. “Ibn ‘Arabī between ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Mysticism’: ‘Sūfism and Philosophy Are Neighbors and Visit Each Other’”. Fa-Inna at-Taṣawwuf Wa-t-Tafalsuf Yatajāwarāni Wa-Yatazāwarāni.” *Oriens*, vol. 31, 1988, pp. 1–35

³⁴ Dom Sylvester Houédard, *Notes on the More Than Human Saying*: “Unless you know yourself you cannot know God” MIAS, accessed May 2024

³⁵ William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love, The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, State University of New York Press (1983), pp248-251 n8

³⁶ William Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul, The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World*, Oneworld, 2007 p.71

³⁷ This author’s term. Imminent in the sense of something, ‘about to happen’ God’s knowledge *is* hence ‘pre’; in the Akbarian tradition it is incorrect to say that the knowledge ‘already exists’, knowledge in the imaginal plane has the possibility of immanence (existence) and becomes so upon man’s receptivity - found in the *qalb*. For ‘polishing’ see Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos*, n21, piix

plane, is received in a process of *kashf*, which is experiential by default, the Sufi's also refer to such glimpses as *dhawq* (tasting)³⁸. It occurs not in thinking but through the *qalb* (heart) as a centre of spiritual cognisance as opposed to the beating organ³⁹. Such internally activated knowledge 'from' God 'of' God, Man's reasoning cannot achieve⁴⁰.

He was not a speculative philosopher, although if 'philosopher' is defined as one having the "love of wisdom"⁴¹, he would certainly qualify, he is a mystic.⁴² It would be erroneous to suggest he was unique in this regard, as it is a long tradition in Islamic thought⁴³, yet it is correct to identify him as synthesising Sufi notions that began from the early Love based personal mysticism of Rabi'a (d.801)⁴⁴ through the (sometimes antinomian) ecstasies such as Al-Hallaj (d.922)⁴⁵ and Al-Bistami (d.874) extending 'sober' perspectives instituted by Al-Ghazali (d.1111)⁴⁶, into cosmology, metaphysics and ontology making him one of the singularly most contributive doctrinal authors in the history of Islamic thought.

³⁸ Ref Al G

³⁹ see also n23 above.

⁴⁰ This is very loose description. In the sixth chapter of the Futuhat al Makkiyya Ibn 'Arabi's describes the 'First Intellect' (strong neoplatonic echoes of which there is much academic debate outside the scope here) using the term *aql* (intellect) and also "the spirit of Muhammad," and "the reality of Muhammad" see Fitzpatrick and Walker, n10, p442 suggesting the widest possible interpretation than the English 'intellect' allows - it is an intelligence which allows for insight and intuition. and later where Chittick, uses this most expansive interpretation to equate *qalb* with *aql*, *ibid.*, p71

⁴¹ See further H.Ali Muktar, *Philosophical Sufism, An Introduction to the School of Ibn al-Arabi*, Routledge (2022) p.2

⁴² As Claude Addas observes, "In a sense Ibn 'Arabi arrived at the goal of spiritual realisation straight away... he burned all the stages and in one single leap completed the journey [of the Sufis]..." "Quest for the Red Sulphur, The Life of Ibn 'Arabi, (Peter Kingsley translation), The Islamic Texts Society Golden Palm Series, Cambridge (1993)

⁴³ See F.Hamza, "Locating the 'Esoteric' in Islamic Studies, *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in honour of Andrew Rippon*, ed. Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh, Brill (2016), pp355-366

⁴⁴ Rkia Elaroui Cornell, 'Rabi'a the Lover.' Rabi'a from Narrative to Myth. The Many Faces of Islam's Most Famous Woman Saint, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Oneworld (2019)

⁴⁵ Yusri Mohammed Ramli, Yusri Mohamad, 'Martyrdom of al-hallaj and unity of the existence: The condemners and the commenders', *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 3, (June 2013) pp106-112, Alexander Knysh, A. "Chapter Four The "Intoxicated" Mysticism of Al-Bistāmī and Al-Hallāj". In *Islamic Mysticism*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill (2000)

⁴⁶ Al-Ghazali was noted for his success in preventing the loss of Sufism from mainstream Islam

A note on the Qur'anic Musa and Interpretation

Thanks to being shared across the Abrahamic religions, and the ex-religio fame of the Ten Commandments, most are familiar with some sort of variation of the story of Moses. He is highly venerated in Islam, the prophet mentioned more times than any other including Muhammad, who famously said, “do not give me superiority over Moses”⁴⁷. In Islam the most noticeable variation is the inclusion of Moses’ immortal, other-worldly *sahib* (companion) al-Khidr⁴⁸, and their interactions, which are the subject of extensive allusive exegesis⁴⁹, *al-tafsir al-ishari*, particularly in relation to knowledge, regarding the relationship between *al’ilm al zahir* (outward knowledge) and *ilm al-ladunni*, (divine inner knowledge), and *ta-wil* (the deeper meaning from the literal). Exoterically recognised as highly mystical Qur’anic verses, even at-Tarabi’s (d.923) classical exegetical encyclopaedia description of al-Khidr’s *ilm al-ghayb*, “knowledge of the unseen”, actually provides similes to early Sufi interpretations by al-Sarraj (d.988) and al-Tirmidhi (d.c907)⁵⁰, whose epistemological hierarchies included *hikma* and *ma’rifa*. It is thus further support to the argument that this particular chapter does support Ibn al-Arabi’s epistemological framework; as previously noted he is a synthesis point for the early Sufi thought represented here.

What does Moses reflect?

The chapter begins with Musa’s birth, and ends with Musa’s death which makes it sound as if it is a life story of this prophet. Of course, it is not. I am going to take one passage, the first one of the chapter, the doctrine contained in the middle, and examples scattered throughout to argue it does indeed reflect Ibn al-Arabi’s epistemological framework.

⁴⁷ “The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “Do not give me superiority over Moses, for on the Day of Resurrection all the people will fall unconscious and I will be one of them, but I will be the first to gain consciousness, and will see Moses standing and holding the side of the Throne (of Allah). I will not know whether (Moses) has also fallen unconscious and got up before me, or Allah has exempted him from that stroke” *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 2411, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:2411>

⁴⁸ Q 18:60-82

⁴⁹ See Hugh Halman’s excellent *The Sage of Inner Knowledge: Al-Khidr in Qur’an, Hadith, and Tafsir*, Boivin, M., and Pénicaud, M., (eds.) “Inter-religious Practices and Saint Veneration in the Muslim World, Khidr/Khizr from the Middle East to South Asia”, Routledge (2024)

⁵⁰ Ayub Palmer, 'Sufism.' Brown (ed.) *The Wiley Blackwell Concise Companion to the Hadith*. Blackwell (2020) p273

Musa is the “fusion” of the potentiality of every child killed by the Pharaoh, an “amalgam” of spirits, receiver of a and “everything prepared for each child according to its spiritual receptivity then resided in Musa” which was a “divine favour”⁵¹

(spiritual receptivity and predeterminism)

As stated previously, *Ma'rifa* (gnostic knowledge) is conditionally imminent to the receptacle it is received in, the *qalb*. In the Akbarian tradition it is incorrect to say that the knowledge ‘already exists’, knowledge in the imaginal plane has the possibility of existence (being) and becomes so upon man’s receptivity - found in the *qalb*. The *qalb* that is ready to receive effectively facilitates the birth of the knowledge into existence, hence many Sufis speak of ‘polishing the heart’ in order to create such receptivity⁵². But Ibn al-Arabi did no polishing, his visions began prior to Sufi training. Here we see Musa prepared as a receptacle combining the potentiality of many lives⁵³.

The contingent response of the Divine in the process of its self-manifestation into being, as such presents the doctrines of both *al-Wahdat al-Wujud* and al-insan al-Kamil (The Perfect Human), in this case most specifically in relation to the potentiality of receivable knowledge⁵⁴. This is thus exactly frames Ibn al-Arabi’s auspicious beginnings⁵⁵. Ibn al-Arabi’s works were *all* the result of divine visions and revelations - hence he was the ‘ready receptacle’ or polished heart, and they began in his teens before any formal spiritual training, so there was no ‘polishing’ on his part. As Claude Addas observes;

⁵¹ Abrahamov, n1 (b), p156

⁵² For ‘polishing’ see William Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul, The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World*, Oneworld, 2007 p21

⁵³ Maria di Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi* (Culture and Civilization in the Middle East) Routledge, (2013) esp. Chapter 42 where she positions the distinction inapplicable in Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics - explored in this article as potentiality

⁵⁴ Chapter 3 The Permanent Archetypes and a Comment on the Manifestations of the Names [في الأعيان الثابتة والتنبيه على المظاهر]. In *The Horizons of Being*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill (2020)

⁵⁵ In a famous conversation recorded a 15 year old Ibn al-Arabi engages with the 53 year old philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) as follows: “What solution have you found as a result of mystical illumination and divine inspiration? Does it coincide with what is arrived at by speculative thought?” I replied, “Yes and no. Between the Yea and the Nay the spirits take their flight beyond matter, and the necks detach themselves from their bodies.” At this Ibn Rushd became pale...” Available from many sources as is a translation from Ibn 'Arabi, *Kitab al-Futuh al-Makkiya* (1203-1240). II, p.525 see e.g. Austin, R.W.J., *Ibn Al-Arabi, The Bezels of Wisdom*, Paulist Press (1980) p.2

“In a sense Ibn ‘Arabi arrived at the goal of spiritual realisation straight away... he burned all the stages and in one single leap completed the journey [of the Sufis]... ”⁵⁶

In Musa’s case we see that his spiritual receptivity was created by becoming the spiritual amalgam of the murdered-in-his-name children, thus he too was ready to receive the visions that enabled him to lead his people out of Egypt and was given this receptive capacity as a gift from birth, and did nothing to ‘achieve’ it.

This opening sequence therefore provides the predetermined element of the capacity for knowledge. It is summarised by Ibn al-Arabi in the *Futuhāt*;

“God singles out any of his servants whom He wills [...] He who has no unveiling has no knowledge”. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūhāt*, 1:218.19⁵⁷

Musa is “particularised⁵⁸” by God in an “unprecedented manner⁵⁹”, that is he is given the spiritual “predisposition⁶⁰” of every child that the Pharaoh has murdered in order to prevent his life.

The doctrine (s) within *Moses*

Everything in *Moses* is interrelated⁶¹, and whilst it clearly identifies *al-Insan al-Kamil*, it is ostensibly the cosmology of *al-Wahdat al-Wujud*⁶², provided part way through Musa’s life story that stands out due to its simplicity of expression on the topic of knowledge⁶³, itself astonishing given the many thousands of pages devoted to the topic both by Ibn al-Arabi’s early and modern commentators.

⁵⁶ Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur, The Life of Ibn ‘Arabi*, (Peter Kingsley translation), The Islamic Texts Society Golden Palm Series, Cambridge (1993)

⁵⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p170

⁵⁸ Abrahamov, n1 (b), pp156-7

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “The notions of “relation” (*nisba*) and “correlation” (*munāsaba*) are absolutely central to the ontology of Ibn ‘Arabī Vandamme, G. (2022). "Chapter 6 Some Notes on Ibn ‘Arabī’s Correlative Prophetology". In *Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

⁶² Abrahamov., n1 (b) p161

⁶³ Ibid., p161, 164, 165

Briefly, this doctrine rests on part of the *shahadah* (the profession of faith that is the first pillar of Islam) affirming *la ilaha illa Allah* or there is no God but God. Of the ninety-nine names of God (in the Qur'an, Ibn al-Arabi states they are infinite) one is *al-Haqq*⁶⁴, or the Real or Reality, and the Real is Being or *Wujud*. So as there cannot be anything else but God, for if there were this would contradict the first pillar of God's oneness, and be the unpardonable sin of *shirk*. Therefore, there is no Reality but God. This is not to be confused with pantheism, reality is not God, there is no *reality* but God. What most people see as reality, from the cars in their drives to petty squabbles with the neighbours is not God, God is veiled, and 'we' are effectively in a dream (this is not the same as the Vedantic or Toltec where everything is but a dream), we have a version of reality but it is, again veiled from actual Reality, which is God. If that veil is lifted, even if only momentarily, we then *know* God. We cannot return to not knowing what Reality truly is, even if the veil returns, because we have experienced it. This is what Ibn al-Arabi knows cannot be taught, cannot be reasoned to⁶⁵. The closest analogy one could find is contained within the Sufi principles of Love, which indeed is the motion of all existence within this chapter, that solves the "perplexity" of unity and multiplicity. Until one falls in love, one has no understanding of its experience, and its paradigm shaping influence in how one views the world - totally irrespective of how many romantic poetry one has read or movies one has watched - represented as theories we can only go so far in understanding through reason how we might feel when in love. After falling however, you know what it is, it becomes self-evident. In such sense we are God, because everything is effused from Him (effused, not created nor caused), and effusion occurs through the Divine Names, leading to permanent archetypes⁶⁶... which of course reflect the attributes of God, and are called into existence by the at the moment of Being.

This is the true spectacularity of *Moses*, in a few lines it sets out the role of knowledge in this circular process. Ibn al-Arabi refers to the (weak⁶⁷) hadith, "I was a hidden and unknown

⁶⁴ See n9

⁶⁵ Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*,

⁶⁶ This is not detailed, there are two types of effusion and a stage before the Names. See further Chapter 3 The Permanent Archetypes and a Comment on the Manifestations of the Names [في الأعيان الثابتة والتنبيه على المظاهر الاسمانية]. In *The Horizons of Being*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill (2020)

⁶⁷ Ayub Palmer, 'Sufism.' Brown (ed.) *The Wiley Blackwell Concise Companion to the Hadith*. Blackwell (2020)

treasure and I loved to be known”⁶⁸, and the *known* comes into its own. Knowledge seeking its own perfection - knowing itself as its attributes and itself as their concrete manifestation,

“The form of perfection is manifest through the knowledge of things that come into being and knowledge of the eternal things: the degree of knowledge becomes perfect through both aspects”.

Thus on the ‘grand scale’ we see the principle of God’s knowledge, the Essence of itself, seeing its reflection in the knowledge of things begotten (the cosmos), reflected back to the Essence through the knowledge of cognisant (like Him) beings (people), Ibn al-Arabi’s own epistemology - *aql* and *khayal* in relationship.

Further examples

This, ‘man is the microcosm reflecting the macrocosm’, appears and is reaffirmed throughout *Moses* via his other key doctrine, that of *al-Insan al-Kamil* (The Perfect Human). Perfection is thus achieved by reaching the completion of whatever combination of archetypes an individual receives, relating to the opening sequence of Mose’s birth. Whilst in general the prophets are singled out as Perfect Humans, having achieved their individual completion - although Muhammad is the most perfect⁶⁹ in this chapter ‘perfection’ is established on a very individual level not just for Moses, but Moses’ mother, his sister, the Pharaoh’s daughter, the Pharaoh’s wife, the Pharaoh himself, Al Khidr⁷⁰, Adam, and ultimately the cosmos vying to demonstrate this theme. Thus in *Moses* the explanation concentrates on the completion or perfection of knowledge of the eternal and things brought into being; only when both are achieved is there the movement of Love. As such, knowledge is esteemed at such a level. There is a continuous symbiotic relationship between perfection and knowledge, affirmed by Ibn al-Arabi;

⁶⁸ Abrahamov, n1 (c) p161

⁶⁹ This again is a very high level explanation, but represents the journey throughout the entire book as Muhammad’s spiritual perfection actually precedes establishing Adam, much as the spirits of the children are subsumed to Musa’s beginning.

⁷⁰ Moses’ teaching companion who God asked him to follow, Qur’an 18:60-82

“As a person moves closer to perfection, God gives him discernment among affairs and verifies for him the realities”⁷¹,

which is the very description given of wisdom at the outset.

The chapter is littered with further references to knowledge, inner knowledge, outer knowledge, *kashf*, ignorance, perplexity, being veiled. It talks very much about the levels of interpretation of knowledge linked to perfection, highlighting conversations between Moses and Khidr who are both ignorant of at times their own motives⁷². One of the things that became very clear to me after starting this research is that whilst this is high-level study, the chapter would lend itself easily to a deeper extension, indeed could withstand line-by-line, hence my question of whether the chapter itself provides the opportunity to more deeply understand the Ibn al-Arabi’s epistemological framework. It does indeed, and for me this study represents a beginning, not an end.

Conclusion

There is of course a conclusion however, and for this a return to the nature and limits of knowledge for Ibn al-Arabi.

“It is only through the acquiring of gnosis that the Heart can be made receptive, not only to the particular Lord, but also to the universality of “God,” and ultimately to the Reality Itself”⁷³

Ibn al’Arabi identified himself as *al-Khatim al Awliya al Muhammaddiya*⁷⁴ (the Muhammadan Seal of the Saints)⁷⁵, in an extraordinary vision where he saw himself as the

⁷¹ hittick, *Imaginal Worlds, Ibn Al Arabi and the Problems of Religious Diversity*, SUNY (1994)

⁷² Abrahamov, n1 (b) pp164-166

⁷³ From ‘The Wisdom of the Heart in the Word of Shu’Aib’, Ralph W.J. Austin, *Ibn Al-Arabi, The Bezels of Wisdom*, Paulist Press (1980) p146

⁷⁴ William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds, Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity*, New York University Press, (1994), p6

⁷⁵ See Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints. Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*. (translator Liadain Sherrard), The Islamic Texts Society (1993), esp. chapters 8, p116 and chapter 9, p128 for detailed discussion.

missing “brick” of the Kaaba, a view supported by oral tradition and the records of Jandi (d.1300), Qashari (d.1330) and Qaysari (1350) - three of his earliest disciples and most comprehensive commentators⁷⁶. Developed from al-Tirmidhi’s (d.869) *al-Khatim al-Awliya* (the Seal of the Saints)⁷⁷, it provides the “burning platform” to understand the epistemology of the man.

It is of note that Tirmidhi’s doctrine of the Seal of the Saints⁷⁸ is considered *bida* (innovation), which takes it outside of *fiqh* (canonical law), the basis of *Shari’a* (Islamic law) e.g. it is neither based in Qur’an nor Hadith, hence highly controversial. Yet Ibn ‘Arabi not only expanded this vexatious doctrine, he, quite literally and metaphorically, ‘owned it’. Chodkiewicz writes,

“...Ibn ‘Arabi, in spite of some ambiguous statements, identified himself categorically with the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood. He wrote it; he said it.”⁷⁹

Ending with *al-Khatim al-Anbiya*, Muhammad, the seal of the prophets the conclusion is that, from Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective, he and it (the *Fusus*) encompassed the divine wisdom of Muhammadan lineage, he was the ‘seal of the seal’ indeed recalling the revelation of the Qur’an itself, at the beginning he writes;

“...Of what I witnessed [in the spirit] and, of that, what I recorded in this book as laid down by the Prophet”⁸⁰

Thus, in his view, the ultimate content of the *Fusus al-Hikam* furnishes the entirety of Muhammadan intelligence of, between and within Man and God. There is nothing speculative about it whatsoever. It is not doctrine to be proven right, nor open to rational

⁷⁶ Ibid., p132.

⁷⁷ See Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints. Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi*. (translator Liadain Sherrard), The Islamic Texts Society (1993)

⁷⁸ Jesus

⁷⁹ Ibid, p132

⁸⁰ Austin n34, p58. Binyamin Abramahov writes, “One might get the impression that our author tries to compare himself to Muhammad, who received the whole Qur’an from the angel Jibril” Abramahov, n34, p3

rebuttal. It was never intended for that purpose. It can be taken, or left behind. Understood, contemplated or ignored. There is nothing to fight. As *Moses* or Ibn al-Arabi through Moses, or God through Musa, or Ibn al-Arabi, or indeed if the distinctions are necessary if the ultimate source of wisdom is One, put it in ‘their’ chapter: read, it will meet you where you are. Whether any of us can meet it where it is, is a question for ourselves.

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