

# SUFI EPISTEMOLOGY: IBN 'ARABĪ ON KNOWLEDGE ('ILM)

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## Abstrak

*Makalah ini terdiri daripada tiga bahagian; bahagian pertama membahaskan makna dan hakikat ilmu, manakala bahagian kedua membincangkan tingkatan-tingkatan atau martabat ilmu. Sumber-sumber ilmu serta pencapaiannya dikupas pada bahagian yang ketiga. Semuanya mengikut pandangan Ibn 'Arabi dalam beberapa karya tulisan beliau.*

Representing the majority of Muslim's view, the Creed of al-Nasafi<sup>1</sup> teaches that the causes of knowing (*asbāb al-'ilm*) for human beings are three: the sound senses, the true report, and reason. Yet according to the People of Truth (*Ahl al-Ḥaqq*), it must be noted, inspiration (*al-ilhām*) is not one of the causes of knowing the soundness of a thing. This cautionary remark is apparently

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<sup>1</sup> That is the formal statement of the tenets of Islam (*al-'Aqā'id*) compiled by Abū 'Umar al-Nasafī, who died (in 1177CE) about thirty years after al-Ghazālī. Nasafī's is not only the most popular credal statement but has been the subject of numerous commentaries, the most famous of which is the *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafīyyah* by Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1388CE). On the creed's spread and its reception in the Malay world, see S.M.N. al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the 'Aqā'id of al-Nasafī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Publications Department, 1988).

made in response to the frequent claim made by sufis to a special knowledge not accessible to others. Indeed the sufis quite often disagree on many issues with the philosophers, theologians (*mutakallimūn*) as well as jurists (*fuqahā'*) who tend to ignore, if not altogether reject, mystical approach to knowledge and intuitional method of verification in favour of rationalism and empiricism. This essay attempts to explore and expose a sufi epistemology<sup>2</sup> as it is found in the writings of Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240CE). While focussing on such technical terms as 'spiritual opening' (*fath*), unveiling (*kashf*) and 'tasting' (*dhawq*), I shall also discuss his classification of knowledge as well as the various means of its acquisition.

### Reality of Knowledge

It is without doubt very difficult to describe the reality of knowledge, just as it is not a simple task to explain the relationship between the knower and the act of knowing either. Succinctly put, the problem as to why and how a knowing subject, whether consciously or not, becomes united with or otherwise related to an external object as the thing known remains unresolved. The difficulty is further aggravated by the fact that no single definition of knowledge has ever been agreed upon by scholars. While al-Jurjānī, for instance, defines knowledge (*'ilm*) as the arrival of soul at the meaning of the thing (*wuṣūl al-naḥs ilā ma'nā shay'*),<sup>3</sup> al-Ghazālī holds that knowledge is the recognition of the thing as it is (*ma'rifat al-shay'i 'alā mā huwa bihi*).<sup>4</sup> According to Ibn 'Arabī, however, knowledge is the mental acquisition of [knowing] any subject-matter within the limit of its being as it is (*taḥṣīl al-qalb amran-mā 'ala ḥaddi mā huwa 'alayhi dhālika al-amr*); thus,

<sup>2</sup> My use of this term is almost literal, meaning simply a 'discourse on knowledge'. Nevertheless, I do not in any way regard the Greek *epistēmē* as equal to *'ilm*.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Jurjānī, *Kitāb al-Ta'rīfāt*, (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1985), p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ghazālī, "Kitāb al-'Ilm", chap. in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* with al-'Irāqī's assessment, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1986), vol. I, p. 41. Henceforth cited as *Iḥyā'*.

knowledge is a property (*ṣifat*) which is attributed to the mind through this acquisition; mind is the knower, matter the known.<sup>5</sup>

Ibn 'Arabī rejects the well-known theory put forth by logicians which says that knowledge consists of mental conception (*taṣawwur*) and assent (*taṣḍīq*). Knowledge is neither a mental representation of the object known nor the meaning (*ma'nā*) grasped by knower, says Ibn 'Arabī. For not every thing that is known is conceivable, and not everyone who knows is able to form a concept in his mind.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, conception is the knower's act of imagining, of forming a mental image representing the object known to him. But this mental representation, according to Ibn 'Arabī, is nothing but a state (*ḥālat*) of mind that is temporarily held by the knower's imaginative faculty, even though he does not deny the existence of certain objects of knowledge which transcend and escape the grasp of human faculty of imagination.<sup>7</sup>

So what is the reality of knowledge? Whereas for al-Ghazālī it is none other than certitude (*yaqīn*),<sup>8</sup> for Ibn 'Arabī it is not a simple question; that is why he discusses it while dealing with the secret of predetermination (*sirr al-qadr*), saying that nobody knows the nature of the relationship between knowledge and the known object (*ta'alluq al-'ilm bi-l ma'lūm*) if knowledge is to be understood as a complete comprehension of realities. Yet since the reality of a thing is that which is left in it after the stripping of the traces of its properties (*salb athar al-awṣāf*), therefore we can say

<sup>5</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, new ed. Osman Yahia, (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-'Arabiyyah, 1985), vol. II, p. 82, henceforth cited as *Futūḥāt*. Unless indicated by letter "B" (for Būlāq old edition), further citations thereof refer to Osman Yahia's edition.

<sup>6</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. I, p. 92. Note that 'mind' is here referred to the totality of man's spiritual substance comprising all the inner mental faculties. Cf. S.M.N. al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995), p. 148: "... [that is] the reality or very essence of man [which] ... has many names [i.e. intellect, soul, heart, and spirit]." Hereinafter cited as *Prolegomena*.

<sup>7</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. I, p. 250.

<sup>8</sup> See Mohd Zaidi bin Ismail, "Logic in al-Ghazālī's Theory of Certitude", in *al-Shajarah*, Vol. 1 Nos. 1&2 (1996), p. 98, for a detailed exposition.

that the reality of knowledge consists of both epistemic and ontic all-encompassing (*al-iḥātah 'an kulli wajh*).<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the term *ḥaqīqah* is also often used by Ibn 'Arabi as a synonym for entity (*'ayn*). That is to say, the reality of a thing is its immutable entity (*'ayn thābit*) or the thing as it is known by God. Thus another way of defining 'reality' is to call it the non-manifest dimension of something manifest. For in many passages Ibn 'Arabi does consider God's Names to be realities (*ḥaqā'iq*) as well as the archetypes of all the created things. On this basis we can say that on Ibn 'Arabi's view the reality of knowledge is in fact the divine name Knower (*al-'Alīm*) from which all knowledge spring out, and the reality of life is His name Living (*al-Ḥayy*) and so forth.<sup>10</sup> But let not this ontological discussion of the immutable entities detain us here.<sup>11</sup>

### Levels of Knowledge

Knowledge is classified by Ibn 'Arabi into three levels. First is the knowledge of the intellect (*'ilm al-'aql*), that is, whatever we obtain either necessarily (*darūratan*) or as a result of intellectual inquiry. Apparently he is referring here to that kind of knowledge which comes about through discursive mental processes of conceptual thinking (*fikr*) as well as through theoretical consideration (*naẓr*). The second kind is the knowledge of the spiritual states (*'ilm al-aḥwāl*), which cannot be reached except through tasting, like one's knowledge of the sweetness of honey which is impossible for him and anyone else to attain or verify without himself tasting. The third one is the knowledge of the secrets (*'ilm al-asrār*), that is, the knowledge given by God through the blowing of the Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-quds*) into the hearts of the prophets and the friends (*awliyā'*) of God. Unlike the possessors of the first two sorts, the knower of the last kind, according to Ibn 'Arabi, knows

<sup>9</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. XIII, p. 215 and vol. XII, p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> *Futūḥāt*, B, vol. II, pp. 39 and 563; cf. vol. I, p. 293.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive treatment, see al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, pp. 241-57. Cf. William C. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany-New York: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 83-8.

and exhausts all sciences.<sup>12</sup>

Ibn 'Arabī further distinguishes two ways of acquiring knowledge. In one passage he mentions thinking or reflection (*fikr*) and bestowal (*wahb*). The latter is the divine effusion (*ḥayd ilāhī*) through which the prophets and saints receive their knowledge, because reason has no entrance into them through thinking or reflection, even though they can accept it especially in the case of those having a sound reason who are not overcome by any obfuscation deriving from imagination and reflection (*shubḥah khayāliyyah fikriyyah*). This is because, according to Ibn 'Arabī, thinking is prone to corruption (*fasād*) and hence may yield conjectural and unreliable results (*maẓnūnah la yūthaq bihā*).<sup>13</sup>

In another passage, however, Ibn 'Arabī explains that while it is true that some knowledge is acquired (*kasbī*) and some is given (*wahbī*), there exists only a fine line differentiating the two. For as a matter of fact, he maintains, both kinds of knowledge are ultimately God-given, and the difference lies in the question as to whether or not it is acquired through any cause or by any means. That is why for Ibn 'Arabī knowledge that is obtained through godfearing (*taqwā*), just like that which derives from the effort of reason and senses, is not God-given but rather a fruit of some effort (*iktisāb*). Only that which comes without any means, intermediary, or cause whatsoever is called God-given knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

### Channels of Knowledge

No doubt Ibn 'Arabī too accepts the popular view that human beings know things through their five senses as well as their inner faculties of mind. But the Shaikh remarks that we must recognize the limits imposed on these perceptual senses by such factors as distance, barriers, and weakness which do influence, distort or even impede our way to acquiring correct, sound knowledge.<sup>15</sup> More-

<sup>12</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. I, pp. 138-40.

<sup>13</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. IV, p. 206.

<sup>14</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. IV, pp. 119-22.

<sup>15</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. II, pp. 99 and 343.

over, the process of perception involves not only the five external senses but also the internal ones such as the mental faculties (*al-quwa*) of imagination (*al-mutakhayyilah*), thinking (*al-mufakkirah*), and the rational (*al-'aqliyyah*). According to Ibn 'Arabi, the senses are never mistaken in perceiving the things which are normally related to them, such that if they happen to err, nonetheless, the mistakes belong only to that which passes judgement.<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that Ibn 'Arabi not only divides the activity of the human mind into three kinds; reasoning (*'aql*), thinking (*tafakkur*), and reflection (*nazr*), but he also recognizes the different aspects of human mind, namely reason (*'aql*), heart (*qalb*), and imagination (*khayāl*), even though they all belong to the same entity. In other words, whatever the means by which knowledge is obtained, the knowing subject is still one; for the above distinction is drawn to denote the modalities of knowing, as al-Attas puts it:

It [i.e. the mind] has many names because of its accidental modes or states (*aḥwāl*). Thus when it is involved in intellection and apprehension it is called intellect; when it governs the body it is called soul; yet when it is engaged in receiving intuitive illumination it is called heart; and when it reverts to its own world of the abstract entities it is called spirit.<sup>17</sup>

As shown by its root meaning, the word *'aql* signifies that which ties down and limits the free. It is not mentioned in the Qur'ān except in the verbal forms (*ya'qilūn*, *ta'qilūn*, *na'qilu*). As a human faculty, however, *'aql* almost always implies restriction and confinement in that it is by nature inclined to contain thing in its own realm, thereby creating boundaries for its subject. That is why, Ibn 'Arabi observes, rational thinkers and logicians reduce knowledge about everything into definition (*ḥadd*), and consequently they fail to comprehend that which refuses to be defined and resists delimitation such as the realities of God, spirit, death, etc.

<sup>16</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. II, p. 395.

<sup>17</sup> *Prolegomena*, p. 148. That is, intellect for *'aql*, soul for *nafs*, heart for *qalb*, and spirit for *rūḥ*.

which are beyond the stage of reason (*warā' tawr al-'aql*).<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, the Qur'ān explicitly employs the term *qalb* about 130 times and often attributes understanding and intelligence to the healthy one (*qalb salīm*). Ibn 'Arabī sees the heart as a place of constant change and fluctuation as well as a locus for knowledge rather than for emotions and feelings. The tremendous capacity of the heart places it beyond delimitation (*taqyīd*) characteristic of reason. Unlike reason, the heart is nondelimited (*muṭlaq*), free and absolved from all limitations and constraints. Thus to the extent one verifies the nature and reality of things by means of his heart he can acquire certain, true knowledge about God and all metaphysical entities. One must none the less always ensure the purity and healthiness of the heart so as to prepare it for receiving knowledge from God.<sup>19</sup>

As for imagination, it should not be here understood in the popular sense of the word. When Ibn 'Arabī uses the term 'imagination', he most often has in mind the inter mediary realm ('*ālam al-barzakh*) between the spiritual and corporeal world, which is otherwise called the imaginal world ('*ālam al-khayāl*) - not imaginary one! - or the world of images ('*ālam al-mithāl*). It refers to the place where the bodily and non-bodily existent things can take a shape contrary to its nature or, in Ibn 'Arabī's words, where the opposites are brought together (*al-jam' bayn al-aḍḍād*). This is best exemplified by dreams. For it is in dreaming, which is a function of imagination, that we experience non-physical things - that is, an image of a tiger or an apple - in bodily forms such that we perceive and take them as real, tangible objects. Likewise is the appearance of magical artifacts in a form different from the real one. It is interesting to note that to account for these phenomena Ibn 'Arabī employs expressions like corporealization of the spirits (*tajassud al-arwāḥ*) and spiritualization of corporeal bodies (*tarawḥun al-ajsād*), concerning which he cites this report: the Prophet said, "I saw my Lord in the form of a youth."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol II, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. IV, 322-4; cf. pp. 220-1.

<sup>20</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. II, p. 379.

It is indeed quite difficult to make sense of this issue. But this is not so if we take into account Ibn 'Arabī's distinction of three kinds of knowable things (*ma'lūmāt*): [1] a purely abstract, intangible meaning (*al-ma'nā al-mujarrad 'an al-māddah*) which is perceived by the rational faculties through proofs or a priori, [2] the sensory things that are perceivable by the senses, and [3] the imaginal (not imaginary) things which are perceived either by reason or by the senses. The latest kind are at the same time 'meanings' that assume shape (*tashakkul*) in sensory forms given by the form-giving faculty (*al-quwwah al-muṣawwirah*). The process is then explained as follows. Imagination, now as a mental faculty, takes a 'meaning', namely a shapeless reality of the world of intelligible things and gives to it a sensory form (*ṣūrah maḥsūсах*). This takes place, according to Ibn 'Arabī, despite the fact that in normal circumstances meanings and sensory forms are mutually exclusive since the former belongs to the World of Intelligence and are free of any sort of matter, while sensory forms belong to the external world of corporeal bodies.<sup>21</sup>

Having distinguished four uses of the term 'imagination', namely [1] as a *barzakh* between Being and Nothingness, [2] as that between the spiritual and physical world, [3] between the mind and body, as well as [4] one of the mental faculties of man Ibn 'Arabī declares that "he who does not know the level of imagination has no true knowledge whatsoever [and] if this pillar of true knowledge has not been actualized by the knowers, they have not a whiff of true knowledge."<sup>22</sup> The reason why Ibn 'Arabī calls imagination a *barzakh* is that it is 'the meeting place of the two Seas' - that is, the Sea of Meanings and the Sea of Sensory Things, because in this intermediary world meanings are embodied and sensory things are subtilized such that the entity of every object of knowledge (*'ayn al-ma'lūm*) is 'transformed' or imaginalized in the viewer's eyes.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. II, p. 66. But according to al-Attas, *ma'āni* (sing. *ma'nā*) in this context should be translated as 'ideal realities' as they do have ontological significance (*Prolegomena*, p. 250).

<sup>22</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. II, p. 312.

<sup>23</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. II, p. 361.

### Extraordinary Ways of Knowing

Since the sufis, writes Ibn 'Arabī, “saw the mistakes of those who employ rational consideration, they turned to the path in which there is no confusion so that they might take things from the ‘eye of certitude’ (*'ayn al-yaqīn*) and became qualified by certain knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> This holds true, for instance, in their attempt to comprehend the apparently contrary attributes and Names of God such as the Avenger (*Dhū Intiqām*) and the Forgiving (*al-Ghaffār*), the Life-giver (*al-Muhyī*) and the Slayer (*al-Mumīt*), the Manifest (*al-Zāhir*) and the Non-manifest (*al-Bātin*), etc. In this regard Ibn 'Arabī maintains that true knowledge about God can only come through unveiling that would enable its possessor to reconcile the seemingly contradictory positions of affirming comparability (*tashbīh*) and denying similarity (*tanzīh*). As Ibn 'Arabī sees it, most rational thinkers, by whom of course he means Muslim theologians and philosophers, overemphasized incomparability so much that they could not put the opposite together.

Moreover, part of the reason why the rational thinkers fell into a lopsided view of reality, according to Ibn 'Arabī, is that they ignore the power of the imaginative faculty which alone is capable to perceive the true meaning of the Qur'ānic depictions of similarity like that of God's hands, face, and eyes. For the rational faculty, which is the specific tool by which those thinkers seek to know the nature and reality of things, always tends to negate anything from God which does not appear appropriate to ‘its own definition’ of Divinity. Hence they interpret or explain away (*ta'wīl*) these terms i.e. hands, eyes, etc at the expense of denying God's own assertion of His manifestation (*tajallī*) and commanence (*ma'iyah*). Indeed, in order to understand this issue one must renounce his reason and give himself to spiritual ‘opening’, ‘tasting’, ‘unveiling’, ‘witnessing’<sup>25</sup> etc. But what do the sufis mean by these terms?

One of the most significant way of knowing for Ibn 'Arabī is ‘opening’ (*fath*). The term, the plural of which is *futūḥ* and hence the book's name *Futūḥāt*, is used in technical vocabulary of sufism

<sup>24</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. II, p. 628.

<sup>25</sup> *Futūḥāt*, vol. I, pp. 250-1.

to indicate the spiritual illumination which marks the acquisition of a higher station (*maqām*) in one's spiritual journey (*sulūk*) and normally occurs during a retreat (*khalwah*) as a result of certain period of self-discipline and training (*riyāḍah*).<sup>26</sup> According to Ibn 'Arabī, "someone in whom *fath* preceds' the practice of *riyāḍah* - save in exceptional cases - will not attain to spiritual virility", although in his own special case, Ibn 'Arabī claims he had received such illumination prior to spiritual training, saying that what happened to him was an experience of opening in the state of being snatched out of himself (*wa kāna fathī jadhbah fi tilk al-laḥzah*).<sup>27</sup>

Like the rest of sufi technical terms, *fath* is borrowed from the Qur'ānic verse, "Verily We have granted Thee a clear victory (*fathan mubīnā*)."<sup>28</sup> Although the verb *fataha* has meanings as diverse as 'to open (a gate), to unfold (a book), to stimulate (appetite), to conquer (a land), and to disclose or reveal (a secret),' the derivative noun *fath* in the verse is interestingly qualified by the adjective *mubīn*, which means 'that which explain, make clear, show, illumine or shed light' - an adjective given also to the Qur'ān. Seen in this perspective, the sufis are by all means justified to understand *fath* as illumination rather than conquest or victory - that is, a spiritual opening of the heart by God, the Light (*al-Nūr*) and the Opener (*al-Fattāh*) who 'teaches mankind what they know not.' Indeed this is what Ibn 'Arabī explicitly affirms: "... on the same night of this retreat I received the 'opening' pertaining to the *dhikr* I was practicing; its light revealed to me what had so far been hidden from me (*fa-inkashafa lī bi nūrihi mā kāna 'indī ghayban*)."<sup>29</sup> So important is the notion of 'opening' for Ibn 'Arabī

<sup>26</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, "Iṣṭilāḥ al-Sūfiyyah" in *Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī* (Hyderabad, 1948), p. 11. Hereinafter *Iṣṭilāḥ*.

<sup>27</sup> Reported in Ismā'īl ibn Sawdakin, "Kitāb Wasā'il al-Sā'il", ed. Manfred Priftlich, *Die Terminologie Ibn Arabis im 'Kitāb wasā'il al-sā'il': Text, Übersetzung und Analyse* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau: K. Schwarz Verlag, 1973), cited in Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, tr. Peter Kingsley (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), pp. 36-7.

<sup>28</sup> *Sūrat al-Fath* (48):1.

<sup>29</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. III, p. 488.

that he devotes a special chapter to explicating the term. What comes about during such illumination is none other than true knowledge about the realities and disclosure of secrets.<sup>30</sup>

Another unusual way of acquiring knowledge for the sufis is *dhawq*, which in its etymological sense simply means tasting by tounge. But the sufis, as does Ibn 'Arabī, use the term in a quite different sense. For them it refers to the direct knowledge of something through spiritual 'opening' or 'unveiling'. According to Ibn 'Arabī, however *dhawq* is the first stage of the experience of God's manifestation (*tajallī*), while 'drinking' (*shurb*) is the next stage, followed by 'quenching' (*riyy*).<sup>31</sup> This is because for the sufis water symbolizes knowledge so that - to borrow Ibn Arabī's expression - "the seeker of knowledge is like him who drinks the water of the sea, the more he drinks the thirstier he becomes."<sup>32</sup> That is why even the Prophet was ordered to request from God an increase in knowledge.<sup>33</sup> In short, suffice it to keep in mind Ibn Arabī's declaration that "knowledge comes only through tasting; that is what we call knowledge."<sup>34</sup>

More or less synonymous with spiritual opening is *kashf*, which may be defined as an immediate experiential knowledge of the realities of things - a knowledge that God gives to His servant through manifestation (*tajallī*). Ibn Arabī employs the term *tajallī*

<sup>30</sup> See *Futūḥāt B*, vol. IV, pp. 220-1 (chapter on *Ḥaḍrat al-Faṭḥ*); also vol. IV, pp. 11-2; vol. I, p. 638 and vol. II, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Istīlāḥ*, p. 6. Cf. *Futūḥāt B*, vol. II, p. 133 and p. 548.

<sup>32</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. II, pp. 53-2.

<sup>33</sup> Qur'ān, *Ṣūrat Ṭāḥā* (20): 114.

<sup>34</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. II, p. 473. Al-Attas repostulates this point as follows: "As regards *al-dhawq*, the basic meaning is 'taste' in the sense applicable to both pleasure and pain alike. It refers, in the epistemological context here described, to a kind of intuitive knowledge brought about by a spiritual perception that accompanies the direct experience of verification. The transcendental vision that it entails refers to that of the pure intellect ('*aql mujarrad*); and the spiritual degree of the person in that condition of the intellect is that of the archetypal realities, in which degree the knowers's verification and cognition of the transcendent Reality and Truth is called genuine *dhawq*." See *Prolegomena*, p. 203.

for both divine (theophany) and ordinary manifestations (epiphanies) interchangeably. But 'unveiling' is a bit different from 'tasting' in that *dhawq* is connected more to spiritual states than to entities (*a'yān*), whereas *kashf* is an experience in which the realities of things are revealed. Ibn 'Arabī further distinguishes between unveiling and tasting by saying that while *kashf* is something that one sees outside oneself, *dhawq* is one's own inward experience.<sup>35</sup>

Again it is noticeable that the transitive verb *kashafa* is always followed by such objects as cover (*ghitā'*), veil (*hijāb*), and the invisible (*ghayb*). Clearly therefore what the sufis mean by *kashf* has something to do with the removal of veil and thus seeing what is now standing forth. According to Ibn 'Arabī, 'unveiling' takes place when God illuminates the heart, enabling it to see into the unseen world, not with the physical eyes or sight (*baṣar*) but with the spiritual [in]sight (*baṣīrah*). Among the veils which are lifted from the heart during such event are rust (*rayn*), passion (*shahwah*), and jealousy-envy (*aghyar*).<sup>36</sup> Now just as physical objects are not visible without light so too unveiling cannot occur without the divine light. But the light which comes from God must coincide with the light inside the heart, since excessive radiance in theophany does not give knowledge. Ibn 'Arabī explains why this happens: Since when light is stronger than the light of sight, man perceives it, but he does not perceives [objects] through it [under the light]. That is why the Prophet said concerning God, "His veil is light." Hence unveiling only takes place through a light equivalent to that of the insight. Do you not see that bats only come out

<sup>35</sup> *Futūḥāt* B, vol. II, p. 605.

<sup>36</sup> *Futūḥāt* B, vol. II, p. 241. Cf. al-Attas's exposition: "Al-kashf is akin to the ocular vision. It is the laying bare of something covered. 'Covered' here pertains to what is covered to one's state of being or feeling (*hāl*), or to one's cognition (*ilm* or *'irfān*), or to one's sight or vision (*'ayn*). It is the removal, by God's grace, of the covering from one's state of being, or cognition, or vision that enables one to feel, or to know, or to see the reality-truth. It is certain knowledge based on true verification, direct apprehension, and clear vision, uninterrupted by any distraction." Further, al-Attas maintains that *kashf* is normally followed by another experience called *wujūd* (intuition of existence). See *Prolegomena*, pp. 201-2.

in light that is equivalent to the light of their sight?<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, we sometimes also find another term for 'unveiling' used by the sufis. Al-Ghazālī, for instance, employs both *mukāshafah* and *kashf* to designate 'the lifting of wrap off the heart (*inqishā' al-ghishāwah 'an al-qalb*)' which enables the eye of the heart to know the realities of things and foresee the future.<sup>38</sup> Hence, al-Ghazālī considers the Prophet as the best example of a person to whom the realities of things are revealed (*shakhṣun kushifa bi ḥaqā'iq al-umūr*) and the one who possesses the science of such unveiling ('*ilm al-mukāshafah*).<sup>39</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, on the other hand, views *mukāshafah* as a kind of spiritual 'opening' which, for him, consists of [1] the opening of expression (*fath al-'ibārah*), [2] the opening of sweetness (*fath al-ḥalāwah*), and [3] the opening of revelation (*fath al-mukāshafah*). The first refers to the outward dimension, while the second to the inward dimension.<sup>40</sup> As for the third kind, Ibn 'Arabī says: "[The opening of] unveiling is the cause of knowledge of the Real in the things, [because] the things are like curtains over the Real; when they are lifted, unveiling occurs ..."<sup>41</sup>

In addition to 'opening, tasting, and unveiling', another term which is frequently used by the sufis to describe their knowledge is 'witnessing' (*shuhūd* or *mushāhadah*). If the two can be distinguished from one another, it may be in the sense that *shuhūd* is employed more generally as a synonym for seeing on any level of existence,<sup>42</sup> whereas *mushāhadah* [literally means watching or vision) is more often used as a synonym for 'unveiling'. According to Ibn 'Arabī, however, the sufis define 'witnessing' as the reality

<sup>37</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. III, p. 369.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1994), vol. V, pp. 126-7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 42.

<sup>40</sup> *Iṣṭilāḥ*, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> *Futūḥāt B*, vol. II, p. 496.

<sup>42</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on this, see S.M.N. al-Attas, *The Degrees of Existence* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995).

of certainty without doubt and hesitation (*haqīqat al-yaqīn bilā shakk walā irtiyāb*), which follows unveiling and brings about knowledge about the Real (*al-Haqq*) as well as about the realities without exception as they are in themselves.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Ibn ‘Arabi affirms that ‘witnessing’ is actually a fruit of true fulfillment of one’s servitude (*‘ubūdah*) and servanthood (*‘ubūdiyyah*) which have been realized through the worship (*‘ibādah*) of God. Concerning this he says: “This is what I mean by knowledge of the realities, that is, [witnessing] through unveiling, [for] when man witnesses the realities he cannot oppose the commands of his Master to worship - the commands whose bounds and prescripts he observes both within and outside himself.”<sup>44</sup>

### Postscript

In the preceding pages we have dealt with all relevant points in Ibn ‘Arabi’s theory of knowledge which, in my opinion, would be more than sufficient to represent a sufi epistemology. Although, as we have seen, he appears to be concerned less with empirical knowledge than with knowledge about God, Ibn ‘Arabi’s description of the realities pertaining to such key epistemic notions as ‘opening, unveiling, witnessing and tasting’ unquestionably deserves our consideration. To sum up, it seems justifiable to say that a coherent sufi theory of knowledge like Ibn ‘Arabi’s if fully appreciated and well taken into account, could be a plausible alternative to modern epistemologies. *Allāhu a‘lam.*

<sup>43</sup> *Futūhāt B*, vol. II, p. 495. Cf. al-Attas’s definition of ‘witnessing’ as the trans-empirical vision and intuition of existence by which the heart comes to know directly and [comes] to verify what it knows. Then he goes on describing how it takes place: “Both *shuhūd* and *dhawq* occur when the veil of separate objects and phenomenal forms is removed from the cognitive vision of one who is involved in the *fanā’-baqā’* experience.” See *Prolegomena*, pp. 203 and 201.

<sup>44</sup> *Futūhāt B*, vol. II, p. 308. Cf. vol. I, p. 276.