

TIME, SPACE, AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF ETHICAL NORMS: THE TEACHINGS OF IBN AL-‘ARABI

William C. Chittick

Introduction

Ibn al-‘Arabi was born in Murcia in present-day Spain in 1165 CE, fifty years after the death of al-Ghazali and 130 years after the death of Ibn Sina. He eventually settled down in Damascus, where he died in 1240. He wrote numerous books, some of them extraordinarily long. All of his writings maintain an exceedingly high level of discourse, which helps make him one of the most difficult of all Muslim authors.

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s name is associated with the expression *wahdat al-wujud*, the “oneness of being” or the “unity of existence”. However, to connect this expression to him is historically inaccurate, and doing so has led to gross oversimplifications and extreme misunderstandings of his writings. What in fact the expression *wahdat al-wujud* meant for those who used it and what it might have meant for Ibn al-‘Arabi, had he used it in his own writings, are complex issues. I have written a good deal about them, so I will not repeat myself here.¹ In any case, *wahdat al-wujud* has little direct bearing on the concept of time and space. I only mention it because, if we want to understand what Ibn al-‘Arabi is saying, we need to put aside any preconceived notions about *wahdat al-wujud*.

Another common idea that needs to be discarded is that Ibn al-‘Arabi was a “Sufi”. Here also we have a complicated historical problem. Although Ibn al-‘Arabi does on occasion mention the word Sufi in a positive light, he does not use it to refer to himself, nor would he be happy to be called by it without serious qualification.

¹ On the general concept, see, Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), chapter one. On the history of the expression and the various meanings that were given to it, see idem, “Rumi and *Wahdat al-wujud*”, in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, edited by A. Banani, R. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 70-111; idem, arts. “*Wahdat al-Shubud*” and “*Wahdat al-Wudjud*”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, forthcoming.

My point in bringing up the issues of Sufism and *wahdat al-wujud* is simply to suggest that anyone who has doubts about Ibn al-‘Arabi because “he was a Sufi”, or because “he believed in *wahdat al-wujud*” should put aside those doubts, at least for the duration of this paper, because neither Sufism nor *wahdat al-wujud* – as these concepts came to be reified in much of later Islamic thinking and especially in modern times – is part of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s self-understanding. Both are labels that were applied to him by later generations, often for reasons having little to do with his own writings. This is not to deny that the words can be defined carefully enough so that they would coincide with Ibn al-‘Arabi’s own thinking on the relevant issues.²

If Ibn al-‘Arabi was not a “Sufi” in the most common meanings of this word, neither was he a philosopher, a theologian, a jurist, a Hadith expert, or a Qur’an commentator – if we use any of these words in a restrictive sense. Rather, Ibn al-‘Arabi was all of the above, because he had mastered all the Islamic sciences. If we still want to have a single descriptive label with which he himself might be happy, the best choice is probably *mubhaqqiq*, that is, “verifier” or “realizer”. Both Ibn al-‘Arabi and his immediately followers frequently refer to their own intellectual position as *tabqiq*, “verification” or “realization”.³

In order to grasp the role of time and space in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thinking, we need to reflect on *tabqiq* as a methodology. The word comes from the same root as *haqq*, which is a verb, a noun, and an adjective carrying the meanings of reality, truth, rightness, properness, appropriateness, and justness. *haqq* is a name of God, and it is also applied to created things. As *haqq*, God is the Real or the Reality, the True or the Truth, the Right or Rectitude, the Proper,

² I have used these two expressions rather loosely in some of my own writings, but in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s case, I have tried to recover the meaning that he would have understood from the terms and to avoid the inappropriate meanings. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), especially chapter one. On some of the problems connected with the word “Sufism”, see Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997); also Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000).

³ On this concept, see Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), index under “realization”; also idem, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, index under “verification”. For one of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s longer discussions of *tabqiq*, see chapter 165 of his *al-Futubat al-Makkiyyah*, translated in *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 96-98.

the Just. When the word is used in relation to creatures, it does not simply mean their “truth” or their “reality”. Rather, it also designates the just and proper demands that creatures make upon human beings. When someone has perceived the *haqq* of a thing, he has perceived not only the truth of the thing, but also what is properly and rightfully due to the thing. Hence, he has understood his own appropriate and just response to the thing. In other words, *haqq* refers not only to the object, but also to the subject. It designates not only the objective truth and the actual reality of a thing, but also the subjective obligation and internal responsibility of those who encounter it.

One of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s several scriptural sources for his discussion of the *haqq* of things is a well-known hadith, which has come in many versions and in most of the standard sources. A typical version reads like this: “Your soul has a *haqq* against you, your Lord has a *haqq* against you, your guest has a *haqq* against you, and your wife has a *haqq* against you. So, give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*.”⁴

“Giving to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*” is the key to the meaning of *tabqiq*. According to Ibn al-‘Arabi, *tabqiq* or “verification/realization” is to recognize the reality, the truth, the rightness, and the properness of things, and, on the basis of this recognition, it is to give to them what is properly due to them.

The first *haqq* that people must recognize is that of God himself, who is the Absolute *haqq*, the basis for every other *haqq*. The only way to “verify” and “realize” God is to begin by perceiving him as the truth and reality that has a rightful claim upon all creatures, a claim that supersedes all other claims. The Qur’an is totally explicit about God’s rightful claim in many verses. Obviously, he is the Creator, so all creatures owe everything that they have to him. But people tend to put other things in place of God. They want to observe the *haqq* of themselves and their families and their possessions without taking God’s *haqq* into account. The Qur’an repeatedly criticizes this attitude, calling it by such names as *kufr* (unbelief), *ẓulm* (wrongdoing), and *fiṣq* (unrighteousness). In one verse, the Book lists all the things that have a

⁴ Wensinck’s *Concordance* (vol. I, p. 486) lists variants of this *hadith* in Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Nasa’i, Ibn Majah, Darimi, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

claim on people, and then it tells us that nothing is rightfully due to any of them if it interferes with what is rightfully due to God. The verse reads:

Say: If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your wives, your clan, your possessions that you have gained, commerce you fear may slacken, and dwellings you love – if these are more beloved to you than God and His Messenger and struggle in His path, then wait till God brings His command. God does not guide unrighteous people”. (9: 24)

So, the first *haqq* that needs to be verified and realized is that of God. This means, among other things, to carry out all human obligations toward God. The first of these obligations is *tawhid*, or the assertion of God’s unity, the first principle of Islamic faith and practice, a principle that is encapsulated in the formula “No god but God”. After *tawhid* comes everything that *tawhid* demands, including the observance of God’s commands as revealed specifically in the Qur’an and generally to the prophets.

As for the *haqq* of things other than God, the key to *tahqiq* in these cases is again provided by the meaning of the word *haqq* itself. The primary Islamic meaning is God, the absolute Truth, the absolutely Real, the absolutely Proper and Right. If each thing has a *haqq*, it is because each thing is created by the Absolute *haqq*. Thereby it receives a relative *haqq*. Here, Ibn al-‘Arabi likes to cite the Qur’anic verse, “Our Lord is He who gave each thing its creation, then guided” (20: 50). God, who is the Absolute *haqq*, has given each thing in the universe a creation and a guidance, and the thing’s creation and guidance are its *haqq*, because they tie it back to the First *haqq*. The thing’s “creation” can be understood as its actual reality, and its “guidance” as the path it must follow to achieve the fullness of what it is to become. In other words, “creation” refers to the fact that each thing has come from God, and “guidance” refers to the fact that God has provided each with a path that it follows in returning to its Creator. Everything except human beings follows its own proper guidance simply by virtue of being a creature. In contrast, human beings – because of certain unique characteristics that give them free will – need to make the right choices if they want to be happy when they return to God. In short, each thing’s creation and guidance situate it in the grand scheme of *tawhid*. Nothing is

unrelated to the Absolute *haqq*. To give things their *haqq*s is first and foremost to understand them in relation to God.

So, the process of *tahqiq* or “verification/realization” is first to discern the *haqq* of things, beginning with those things that are explicitly commanded by the tradition, such as your own self, God, your visitor, and your spouse. Second, and just as important, it means to act in keeping with the demands that things make upon us because God has created them not only as they are, but also with a goal and purpose in their existence.

It is not too difficult to see that discerning the *haqq*s of things is the primary issue in all the Islamic sciences *qua Islamic* sciences. It is intimately bound up with the interpretation of revealed scripture. Scholars who specialized in the transmitted learning (*al-‘ulum al-naqliyyah*) were primarily interested in interpreting the Qur’an and the hadith. But, scholars who specialized in intellectual learning (*al-‘ulum al-‘aqliyyah*) were interested in the interpretation and understanding of *all* things, not just scripture. They did not investigate only the *haqq* of the Qur’an, but also the *haqq* of everything else. This is why the Muslim philosophers and those scholars who specialized in *‘irfan* (“gnosis” or theoretical Sufism) set out to understand the nature of the objective world and the reality of the knowing subject.

In explaining why it is necessary to investigate everything, not just the Qur’an, Ibn al-‘Arabi and others often remind us that revealed scripture comes in three varieties, not just one. The first variety is the oral or written kind given to the prophets, the Qur’an in particular. The second variety is the universe, and the third variety is the human soul. As the Qur’an itself tells us, each of these reveals the *ayat* – the “signs” or “verses” of God – so it is God who is the author of all three books.

One of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s outstanding characteristics is that he synthesizes the transmitted and intellectual learning and pays keen attention to the interpretation of all three scriptures. However, it is not simply explanation of the meaning of the signs that he wants to accomplish. His purpose is always to realize his knowledge by taking the signs all the way back to the Absolute *haqq*. For him, whichever scripture we interpret – the Qur’an, the universe, or our own soul – we are dealing with the same principles, the same realities, and the same ultimate *haqq*. In each case, God

makes demands upon us, and it is our duty as God's creatures to act in keeping with those demands.

In short, the way to verify and realize something – that is, to discern its *haqq* and act accordingly – is to see how it displays the signs of God. This is not an abstract, theoretical enterprise. Rather, it is a spiritual discipline. It is a way of training the soul to find God's names and attributes in all things and to realize God in oneself. The Qur'an says, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2: 115). The goal of *tahqiq* is to see the face of God wherever you turn, in every creature and in oneself, and then to act according to the *haqq* of God's face. If we understand anything in the universe without taking the divine face into account, then we have lost the thing's *haqq*. By losing sight of the thing's *haqq*, we have lost sight of God, and by losing sight of God, we have lost sight of *tawhid*.

II

Let me now turn to the question of how Ibn al-'Arabi understands and employs the words that are commonly used to discuss what we call "time and space". The standard Arabic pairing is *zaman wa makan*. I would translate this not as "time and space" but as "time and place", or "time and location". The Arabic word *makan* does not conjure up the vast empty reaches that are understood from the English word "space". Rather, it implies the fixed and exact locations in which things exist. If we want to find a concept analogous to the modern idea of space in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabi, the best candidate is probably *khala'*, which I would translate as "the Void". However, this is a topic for another occasion.⁵

When Ibn al-'Arabi discusses *zaman* and *makan*, he typically speaks of them as "relations" (*nisab*). By doing so, he means to contrast them with "entities" (*a'yan*), which are real things (though not necessarily existent

⁵ *Khala'*, "void", is the opposite of *mala'*, "plenum". The "plenum" is everything that fills the Void, and the Void is the "place" of the universe. But there is no Void *per se*, because the creative act has filled it up. Thus Ibn al-'Arabi calls the Void "an imagined extension". See Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 60-61, and index. Certainly, our modern concept of "space" is more imagined than real, which is to say that it is precisely a concept that serves to explain "where" the universe is found.

things). He is saying that time and place designate the interrelationships among things, but they themselves are not things. There is nothing out there that can properly be called “time” or “place”. Relations per se do not exist, so it is always difficult to say exactly what they are. We can explain his point in modern terms by saying that time and space are two abstract concepts that do not designate anything in the objective universe. Rather, they refer to how human observers relate things together through their subjective experience. Using the terms tells us as much about ourselves as it tells us about the universe. The two are flimsy hooks on which to hang a theory of the universe, because they do not in fact denote anything out there. They come closer to designating our own minds than the external world.

From Ibn al-‘Arabi’s standpoint, if we want verify the real, objective world and come up with a valid theory of how things hold together, we need to go beyond appearances and surface relationships. We need to penetrate into verities and principles and essences and *haqq*s. Time and space are abstract concepts and insubstantial relationships, which helps explain why Ibn al-‘Arabi – like most other Muslim thinkers – discussed them with only passing interest.⁶ It is far more important to discern what exactly is there, not simply how things appear to us. To discern what is there, we need to address the whole question of what *being there* means. Hence, the intellectual tradition was constantly concerned with the issue of “being”, though it also recognized that we can only understand being in terms of nothingness. The key term here is *wujud*, which plays a central role in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thinking as in the thinking of most Muslim philosophers. For the purposes of this discussion, I translate *wujud* as “existence”, though any translation is problematic, especially in the context of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought.⁷

Existence is the most real and concrete of all entities, because it underlies every object, every subject, every concept, and every relationship. Ultimately, existence is God. As al-Ghazali and others had long since told us,

⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabi was more interested in explaining the nature of time than place, mainly because reflective people find it a truly puzzling concept, as Saint Augustine famously remarked. For one of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s most detailed expositions of the *haqq* of time, see chapter 390 of his *Futubat*, translated in Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 128-31.

⁷ On some of the difficulties with translating *wujud*, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 6 et passim; idem, *Self-Disclosure*, xix-xxi et passim; idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, pp. 15ff.

“There is nothing in existence but God” (*laysa fi'l-wujud illa'llah*), which is to say that true and unsullied existence belongs to God alone, and everything else partakes of nothingness.⁸ What is truly there can only be God, because existence does not belong by essence to anything else. As for time and space, they tell us much more about nonexistence than about existence, because they are abstract and insubstantial relationships.

Of the two concepts, place is easier to understand. For Ibn al-‘Arabi, the basic question in *tabqiq* is always how a thing or a concept is related to the Absolute *haqq*. How then is the concept of place related to God?

One way to grasp this relationship is to reflect on the Arabic word *makan* itself. The grammatical pattern of the word is called *maf‘al*, and it designates a “name of place” (*ism makan*). In other words, the grammatical pattern indicates a location. *Maktab*, for example, originally means a “location of writing”, and it has come to mean a grammar school. *Makan* itself is the most general word in this pattern, so much so that it gives its name to the pattern. This is because the root of the word *makan* is *kawn*, a noun that can be translated as “being”.⁹ Being is a word that embraces all created things. So, the word *makan* means literally “the location of being”, meaning the specific location in which a specific thing exists.

⁸ See Chittick, “Rumi and *Wahdat al-Wujud*”.

⁹ One can argue that this word should be translated in a philosophical context as “becoming” in order to differentiate it from *wujud*, which can then be translated as “Being” with a capital B. “Becoming” would then be existence as we experience it in the world, and “Being” would be the absolute and unchanging reality of God. For several reasons, however I prefer to translate *wujud*, if I must translate it, as “existence”. This is the most common translation among scholars of Islamic thought, and the word allows us to differentiate clearly between “existence” and its past participle “existent” (*manjud*), which designates any specific being, whether God or anything other than God (though in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s usage, it most commonly means “existent things”, that is, anything that God has brought into existence by saying “Be” to it. Moreover, Ibn al-‘Arabi is constantly trying to recover the Koranic meaning of words in his writings, and he frequently reminds us that “Be”! – the *fiat lux* that gives existence to the cosmos – is a “word of existence”, by which he means to say that it means “Enter into existence!” (see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 88, 204, 393n13). Hence, to translate *kawn* as “becoming” introduces a meaning to the word that Ibn al-‘Arabi himself does not make explicit, though it may help Westerners to understand what he is getting at. In my writings on Ibn al-‘Arabi, I have normally translated *kawn* as “engendered existence”, to indicate that the type of existence that is at issue is that relating to the realm of *kawn wa fasad*, “generation and corruption”.

In the Qur'an, *kawn* or “being” plays an important role in the discussion of creation. When God desires to create something, “He says ‘Be’, so it comes to be” (*qala kun fa-yakun*). In other words, God gives *kawn* to the thing, and *kawn* is its specific being. Once the thing has *kawn*, the word *makan* can designate where the thing’s being is found relative to the being of other things. Typically, *makan* is used for the corporeal world, because spiritual beings do not have physical locations.¹⁰ Nor, with even greater reason, does God have a location or place.

Note that the word *kawn* is almost never used for the “being” of God. Instead, the word *wujud* is used. In this case, *wujud* designates God’s very reality, his absolute existence, his necessary being that cannot not be. In contrast, *kawn* is a being that is acquired by things when God creates them out of nothingness. The very use of the word *makan* or “place” tells us that something has acquired being in the universe. Indeed, the universe as a whole is often called simply *al-kawn*, that is, “the being.”

Since *makan* designates the place and locatedness of something in the visible world, the concept involves a certain fixity. But, things are not in fact fixed, and both their being and their place change. As soon as we mention “change”, time enters the picture. The word *zaman* or “time” designates change and movement within the realm of *kawn*. It refers to changing relationships in the appearance of *kawn*. *Kawn* can never be fixed and stable, because permanence and stability are attributes of God, not of creation. They

¹⁰ As for things that dwell in the “imaginal world”, they stand halfway between the spiritual and corporeal realms. Ibn al-‘Arabi describes them as possessing the characteristics of both spirit and body. Thus, imaginal things are perceived by the senses, but the senses need to be sufficiently disengaged from physical objects in order to do so, and typically this takes place only in dreams. After death, the hold of the corporeal organs is broken, and at that point the sensory powers of the soul are enormously intensified. As a result, people perceive sensory things in the imaginal realm with extreme clarity. As the Qur’an says, speaking about death, “We have removed from you your covering, so your eyesight today is piercing” (50: 22). Inasmuch as imaginal things dwell in a sensory domain, they have places, but inasmuch as they pertain to the spiritual domain, they are placeless. Where, after all, do our dreams take place? Or, if one wants to be a scientific reductionist and answer this question by saying, “In the brain”, then where do people experience the delights and torments of the postmortem realm called the “grave” (*qabr*) and the “isthmus” (*barzakab*)? For an introduction to the role of the imaginal realm, see Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, especially chapters 5-7.

belong to *wujud*, not to *kawn*. So, “time” is simply a name that we give to the ongoing changes that occur in the face of *kawn*.

Ibn al-‘Arabi points out that both time and place are demanded by the realm of *kawn wa fasad*, or “being and corruption”, an expression that is applied philosophically to everything that can have a place.¹¹ Its common English equivalent is “generation and corruption”. “Generation” here means simply “coming to be”. It designates the being that results when God says “Be” to a thing. In contrast, “corruption” denotes the disappearance of things. As we saw, to speak of “being” is to speak of place, because *kawn* needs *makan*. Similarly, to speak of “corruption” is to speak of change, and the relationship among the changes is called “time”.

God of course is untouched by time, just as he is untouched by place. This is what is meant by words like *qadim* and *sarmadi*, both of which mean eternal or outside of time or beyond time. In contrast to “eternal”, which is strictly an attribute of God, “temporal” (*zamani*) refers to the changing relationships of created things.

How then are eternity and time related? Is the relationship between God and the world a fixed relationship of eternity or a changing relationship of time? This question is one version of the central issue in *tawhid*: “How is the many related to the One?” It has always posed major difficulties for theologians and philosophers. One of the several ways in which Ibn al-‘Arabi answers it is in terms of the word *dabr*, which I would translate as “Aeon”.¹²

¹¹ Which is to say that purely spiritual beings, although they appear as the result of “Be”! do not undergo corruption. Their non-corrupting status is maintained by God, of course. It does not belong to them by their very essences. There is a great deal of discussion in the intellectual tradition about their exact status.

¹² I have also translated it as “Time” with a capital T, and scholars have used other translations as well. “Aeon” (a word derived from the Greek) is certainly appropriate in the Western context, given that St. Thomas makes its Latin equivalent, *aeuum*, an intermediary stage between eternity and time. Meister Eckhart, who follows St. Thomas in this, offers us a statement that could be a translation of the words of Ibn al-‘Arabi or several other Muslim philosophers: “Eternity [refers to] the divine existence; ‘aeon’ to the existence of unchangeable created things; and time to the existence of changeable things” (*Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, edited by B. McGinn, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, p. 72). Ibn al-‘Arabi often calls the “unchangeable created things” the “fixed entities” (*al-a‘yan al-*

Dahr is often considered a name of God, and Ibn al-‘Arabi treats it as such. In some passages he says that the word is synonymous with *zaman* – that Aeon and time are the same thing. In many other passages, however, he differentiates between the two. Certainly, God as Aeon is not identical with the time that we experience, because God is eternal and unchanging, and time is constantly in movement. So, Aeon is God’s name inasmuch as he gives rise to the changing conditions of the universe, conditions that we call “time”. In Ibn al-‘Arabi’s view, it is precisely this divine name that designates the relationship between eternity and time.¹³ To gain an insight into how this relationship works, we can look at various ways in which the Qur’an talks about God.

In one verse the Qur’an mentions “the Days of God” (*Ayyam Allah*) (14: 5). Ibn al-‘Arabi takes this as a reference to the prefiguration of temporal differentiation within the divine reality. In other words, it is the Days of God that give birth to the unfolding temporal cycles of our world. Ibn al-‘Arabi says all these Days belong to the name Aeon, which designates God as the principle of time. Just as God’s attribute of Knowledge is the root (*asl*) of all knowledge and awareness in the universe, and just as his Compassion is the root of all compassion, so also God as Aeon is the root of time.

Ibn al-‘Arabi points out that God has several days of differing length, and that these are related to various divine names. Thus, the Qur’an says that the angels and the Spirit rise up to God in a day whose length is fifty thousand of our years, and it relates this fifty-thousand-year day to the divine name *dbu’l-ma‘arij*, “the Possessor of the Stairways” (70: 3-40). The Qur’an also speaks of a one-thousand-year day (32: 5), and Ibn al-‘Arabi explains that this is connected to the name *rabb*, “Lord”. In addition, Ibn al-‘Arabi mentions several other days of varying length, all of them related to specific divine names and attributes.

thabitah), and he makes clear that he means by them what the philosophers mean when they discuss “quiddities” (*mahiyyat*), a word that is frequently translated into English as “essences” in opposition to “existence”.

¹³ Note that for Ibn al-‘Arabi, the terms *ism* (name), *sifah* (attribute), and *nisbah* (relation, relationship) are synonyms when applied to God. God’s “names and attributes” are his “relationships.” See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 33-36.

The most all-embracing of the Days of God is what Ibn al-‘Arabi calls the “Day of the Essence” (*yanm al-dhat*). He finds a reference to it in the Qur’anic verse, “Each day He is upon some task” (55: 29). God’s Essence, denoted by the pronoun “He” (*huwa*), is the absolute, real existence (*al-wujud al-mutlaq al-haqq*) of God himself, which is eternal and unchanging. So, the “day” of the Essence pertains to the Absolute Reality that is eternal and beyond time. One might conclude that it is the longest of all divine days. However, Ibn al-‘Arabi points out that, humanly speaking, it is the shortest of all days. This is because, in our terms, its length is one instant, and that one instant is the present moment. There is no time shorter than the present moment, which is defined precisely as the instant that cannot be divided into parts. But, this shortest of divine days in fact lasts forever. We never leave the present moment, because we never leave the presence of God. If, as the Qur’an puts it, “He is with you wherever you are” (57: 4), then he is also with us “whenever” we are.

To come back to the divine name Aeon, Ibn al-‘Arabi says that it designates God inasmuch as he is the possessor of days. Every “day” (*yanm*) is divided into night and daytime (*layl wa nahar*). When Ibn al-‘Arabi writes, “The Aeon is nothing but daytime and night”,¹⁴ he means the daytimes and nights of the Days of God, not of our worldly days. “Daytime” is when the properties and traces of a divine name become manifest, and “night” is when the properties and traces stay hidden. Each of the “Days of God” has cycles of manifestation and nonmanifestation, or cycles of display and concealment. It is these cycles that explain all the changes that occur throughout the universe for all time.

As for the day and night time of the indivisible Day of the Essence, it is the fact that God is forever present and absent, or the fact that what prevents us from seeing God’s face is precisely the face of God before our eyes. As Ibn al-‘Arabi says in a short invocation that expresses the paradox of

¹⁴ *al-Futubat al-makkiyyah* (Cairo, 1911), volume IV, p. 87, line 18.

this situation, “Glory be to Him who veils Himself in His manifestation and becomes manifest in His veil!”¹⁵

In several passages, Ibn al-‘Arabi tells us that the specific characteristic of the divine name Aeon is *tabannul*, that is, constant change and transformation. So, inasmuch as God is the Aeon, he brings about transformation and alteration in the universe, which never stops moving and changing. Change is so basic to creation that, as Ibn al-‘Arabi frequently reminds us, God’s signs never repeat themselves, whether in time or in place.¹⁶ At each moment, every sign of God – every creature in its momentary reality – is unique, because it manifests God’s own uniqueness. Nothing is ever the same as anything else, and no moment of anything is ever repeated. Each creature at each moment has a unique *haqq*, and the final goal of verification is to perceive and act upon all these instantaneous, never-repeating *haqq*s, in every time and in every place, just as God perceives and acts upon these *haqq*s in the Day of the Essence.

If every creature is constantly changing, do creatures have nothing permanent? Do we and other things not have a real and fixed identity? Ibn al-‘Arabi answers this question by having recourse, once again, to the divine names. We know that God is both omniscient and eternal. It follows that God knows all things for all eternity. “Not a leaf falls”, says the Qur’an, “but He knows it” (6: 59). So, all things are permanent in the knowledge of God. They do, in fact, have fixed identities, and we can be sure that our persons are eternal in the presence of God’s eternal knowledge. However, everything within the corporeal universe, which is the domain of *kawn wa fasad*, “being and corruption”, undergoes change and disappearance, which is to say that all things experience time.

We can sum up this very brief discussion of the *haqq* of time and space in terms of two specific names of God – Speaker and Aeon. As Speaker, *al-qa’il*, God says *kun* – “Be”! – in the Day of the Essence, so he is always recreating *kawn* and *makan*. And as Aeon, *al-dahr*, he manifests his

¹⁵ Ibid., III 547.12. The “paradox of the veil” is a common theme not only in Ibn al-‘Arabi (see *Self-Disclosure*, Chapters 3-4), but also in Sufi literature. See Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, Chapter 10.

¹⁶ See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Chapter Six.

names and attributes through the diversity of his Days, whose daytimes and nights display and conceal the never-ending signs of God.

III

This brief summary of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s view of time and place should help make clear that the perspective of *tahqiq* demands a radically different standpoint from that which infuses modern thinking – whether we are talking about science, cosmology, philosophy, sociology, political ideology, or even theology. The contrast between *tahqiq* and modern thought is so stark that it might be imagined that there is no relationship between what Ibn al-‘Arabi is saying and what modern thinkers are saying. In one sense, this is true. However, from another point of view, *tahqiq* can be applied to every form of modern learning. If we try to do so, we might gain an insight into some of the difficulties inherent to contemporary theories of reality, which themselves are constantly being modified by the changing circumstances of historical becoming – the never-ending, never-repeating display of God’s signs.

Remember first that for Ibn al-‘Arabi, it is impossible to know things properly and truly if we do not combine the knowledge of the objective reality of things with that of the rightful demands that things make on the knowing subject. This is precisely *tahqiq*. If we break things out of the context of the divine signs – which are the divine faces or the divine *haqq*s – then we have disassociated things from God. By doing so, we have negated *tawhid*, because we have put God on one side and, on the other side, things, which are no longer signs but simply “objects” without any *haqq*.

From the standpoint of *tahqiq*, every knowledge that is not built on finding the *haqq* of things and acting in accordance with these *haqq*s is not in fact knowledge. The Prophet said, “Knowledge without deed is a tree without fruit”. There is no reason to limit “knowledge” (*ilm*) here to transmitted knowledge, and there is no reason to extend “deed” (*amal*) to include every sort of activity whatsoever. Rather, “knowledge” designates true and proper knowledge, and “deed” designates right and proper activity, or what the Qur’an calls “wholesome deeds” (*a‘mal salih*). Knowledge and deed of this sort can only be achieved by recognizing and acting upon the *haqq*s of things, and this means that knowledge must embrace both the

objective reality of the thing and the demand that the thing makes on the knowing subject.

So, in the perspective of *tabqiq*, any knowledge not built on recognizing both the objective and the subjective reality of things is in fact ignorance. It purports to explain things, but what it ignores is far more significant and far more real than what it takes into account. What it ignores is precisely the *haqq* that gives divine, cosmic, and human significance to all things.

One of the many implications of the perspective of *tabqiq* is found in the issue of morality and ethics. Since this alone is a complex problem, let me limit my concluding remarks to suggesting what *tabqiq* might tell us about the place of ethics in modern thought.

Modern thinking in all its forms investigates objects, relationships, and concepts while, at the same time, stripping them of their *haqq*s. This means that the issue of right activity is relegated to the human observer, the side of the subject, and it is negated from the side of the object. The object itself is largely thought to be indifferent, unless it be a human being. Nowadays, of course, ecologists and others are striving mightily to give rights to non-human creatures as well, but “hard science” cannot take this seriously. Despite the critiques of numerous philosophers and thinkers, the predominant view among practicing scientists and popular scientism¹⁷ has been and continues to be that “objective knowledge” is value-free.

From the standpoint of *tabqiq*, to talk in these terms is to abuse the words “subject” and “object” (which, by the way, have no real equivalents in Arabic). If the word “objective” is to have any real significance, then it must designate knowledge that is rooted in the actual reality of things. The “actual reality of things” is incomprehensible without the knowledge of the Ultimate Reality, the Unique *haqq*, the Origin (*mabda'*) and Returning Place (*ma'ad*) of all things, the Absolute Object who is also the Absolute Subject. In God, subject and object converge, because they are two sides of the same absolute Existence. In Ibn al-‘Arabi’s terms, one might say that the divine root (*al-asl*

¹⁷ By “popular scientism” I mean the prevalent belief that science provides the only true and reliable knowledge about things, objects, and reality itself.

al-ilahi) of all subjectivity is the fact that God is the “Knower” (*‘alim*), and the divine root of all objectivity is the fact that God’s “object of knowledge” (*ma‘lum*) is himself along with the realities of everything that has existed and will exist in whatever mode throughout all time and all space.

So, finding the *haqq* of things is to find both the objective reality of the things and the subjective demands that the things make upon us. We cannot disassociate object from subject and then maintain that the known thing has no divine rights, that it makes no claims upon me as a human subject. No, all things have rights and all things have claims. Anyone who wants to investigate “objective” truth must at the same time investigate “subjective” truth. Not to do so is to ignore the *haqq* of both the thing and the human subject, *haqq*s that are rooted in the Absolute *haqq*. It is, in other words, to ignore *tawhid*, which is God’s first claim upon us. To ignore *tawhid* is to fall into *shirk*, or “associating” other principles with God, that is, other *haqq*s with the Absolute *haqq*. As the Qur’an Koran makes explicit, *shirk* is the one sin that God will not forgive. This teaching alone should be more than enough to give pause to modern-day Muslim scientists, given that their science neither begins nor ends with God.

Modern thought has no access to the *haqq*s of things, so talk of ethics and morality typically goes on in terms of self-interest and social stability. But what is this “self” whose interest we are trying to discern, and what is the *haqq* of society? If we do not know the *haqq* of the human self, we are left with a discussion of ethics in terms of a definition of self-interest based on a misunderstanding of human reality and human becoming. And without knowledge of the *haqq*s of the human selves who make up the society, the *haqq* of society can never be known. Yet, the modern disciplines constantly split reality into fragments, insisting that true knowledge comes from fragmentation and partition (i.e., “specialization”), from separating things out of their overall cosmic and human context – not to mention the divine context, which is rejected out of hand.

It goes without saying that the modern discussions of human nature and of ethics never give the slightest thought to the fact that human beings are made in the image of the Absolute *haqq*, or the fact that their innate, created disposition (*fitrah*) embraces a knowledge of all the names taught by God to Adam, that is, the realities of all things. Nor do the modern

discussions ever take into account the sure criterion of the ultimate significance of all human reality and all human becoming, that is, *ma'ad*, the “return” to God after death, which is the third principle of Islamic faith. *Ma'ad* is a topic that was discussed constantly by the Muslim “scientists”, the great representatives of the Islamic intellectual tradition. *Tabqiq* demands that we understand that God gave each thing its creation *and* its guidance. Without understanding the final goal of becoming, there is no possible way to understand the significance of the created realm.

The fact that ethics cannot possibly be integrated into modern science would be sufficient proof for Ibn al-‘Arabi that science is fundamentally flawed and ultimately *batil*. *Batil* is the Qur’anic opposite of *haqq*. It can be translated as “unreal, vain, null, void”. Modern science is *batil* not only because it ignores the *haqq*s of things, but also because it cannot possibly not ignore the *haqq*s of things. If it did not ignore them, it would betray its own methodology and cease being worthy of the name “science”. By definition, scientific research is cut off from anything beyond the realm of “being and corruption”, or the realm of time and space. This is why scientists and cosmologists in modern times have so often talked about time and space not as if they were insubstantial relationships, but rather as if they were real things or absolute principles.

In short, modern science specifically and modern learning in general cannot allow for the objectivity of ethical and moral standards. Today’s critical methodologies can never acknowledge that people – much less animals, plants, and inanimate objects – have *haqq*s that belong to the actual stuff of reality. It follows that such modern learning is incompatible with *tabqiq*, that is, with giving things their *haqq*s.

This incompatibility is one of the keys to the disastrous policies of many Muslim countries in the twentieth century. A good number of the Muslim intellectuals who have played influential roles in recent times have taken the position that science and technology are value-free, that is, neutral in relation to ethics and morality, even though this position is patently absurd. Its absurdity is proved not only by the viewpoint of the Islamic intellectual tradition, but also by numerous contemporary critics of science and technology in the modern West.

Nonetheless, many Muslim thinkers continue to maintain that when the Prophet made the search for knowledge incumbent upon Muslims, he meant that they have the moral duty to ignore anything but the superficialities of the transmitted learning of Islam, to pretend that there has never been an intellectual tradition, and then to go out and devote their intellectual energies to “real knowledge”, by which they mean science, medicine, and engineering. We frequently hear from the modern ideologues that Muslims will keep their morality, but they will have science and technological progress as well. It is thought that the way people think about scientific issues is unrelated to how they understand *tawhid*. As long as Muslims say, “God is one”, everything will be fine.

Nonetheless, the idea that knowledge of objects can be disengaged from knowledge of the knowing subject, not to mention knowledge of God, goes against every principle of Islamic thought, beginning with *tawhid*. Only ignorance of the Islamic worldview could lead Muslims to think this way. This, of course, helps explain why the Islamist movements of today are largely opposed to the intellectual tradition, which is precisely the form of Islamic learning that explains the Islamic worldview in holistic, rational, and logical terms. If people were begin to think logically instead of ideologically and emotionally, they would no longer fall prey to the utopianism of modern politics.

Let me conclude by summarizing the relevance of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s perspective to contemporary concerns: Modern thought is the study of the ocean’s waves and the simultaneous rejection of the reality of the ocean. By self-imposed methodological constraints, modern thinking deals only with the surface of reality, which is the realm of “time and space”, known traditionally as the domain of “being and corruption”. Today, scientists and scholars of all stripes think – or at least they practice their professional disciplines as if – there is no such thing as the ocean. The very methodology of scientific and critical inquiry demands the rejection of the *haqq*s of things. By rejecting the *haqq* of individual things, scholars and scientists reject the Absolute *haqq*, the Absolute Existence, the eternal, fixed reality of God. Just as studying the waves will never allow us to know the depths of the ocean, so also studying things without regard to their *haqq*s will never allow us to know the depths of the universe and ourselves.