THE OBJECTIVE OF METAPHYSICS IN IBN SAB'ĪN'S: ANSWERS TO THE SICILIAN QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

'Abd al-Ḥaqq Ibn Fatḥ Ibn Sab'īn's (1217-1270)[106] followers called him *Quṭb al-Dīn*, that is, "Pole of the Religion." Yet most reports about him by pre-modern Muslim scholars, hagiographers and Sufis are derogatory. Why was this Andalusian mystic and philosopher, who was hailed by Pope Gregory IX (d. 1241) as "the living Muslim with the greatest knowledge of God,"[107] portrayed as a bitter and despicable philosopher by so many of his critics? If, as some claim, his thought was trite, unworthy of attention and "unoriginal,"[108] why would Frederic II von Hohenstaufen (r. 1215-1250), the Christian monarch of Sicily, turn to Ibn Sab'īn for answers to timeless philosophical questions? Did he merit the grand title of *Quṭb al-Dīn*, or was he merely an ill-famed heretic? In short, who was Ibn Sab'īn?

Ibn Sab'īn has recently received renewed scholarly attention by Vincent Cornell[109] and Anna Akasoy.[110] On the whole, however, his works have yet to be examined in detail, and as a result, he remains a largely misunderstood and

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106 His full name is: 'Abd al-Ĥaqq Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn Mohammad Ibn Nasr Ibn Fatĥ Ibn Sab'īn al-'Akkī. See Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khatīb, *Al-Iḥāta fī Akhbār Gharnātah*, Vol. 4, p. 31, Maktaba al-Khānijī. Cairo, 1977.

107 Ibid. Pp. 34-35.

108 M. A. F. Mehren, "Correspondance du Philosophe Soufi Ibn Sab'īn Abd Oul-Haqq avec L'Empereur Frédéric II de Hohenstaufen," *Journal Asiatique*, p. 342. Paris, 1879.

109 See Vincent J. Cornell's two articles to which I am greatly indebted: "The Way of the Axial Intellect, The Islamic Hermeticism of Ibn Sab'īn," Journal of *The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society*, Vol. XXII, 1997. (Henceforth "*The Way of the Axial Intellect*") And: *The All-Comprehensive Circle (al-Iḥāta): Soul, Intellect, and the Oneness of Existence in the Doctrine of Ibn Sab'in* to be published by Edinburgh University Press. (Henceforth *The All-Comprehensive Circle*).

110 Anna Ayse Akasoy, *Philosophie und Mystik in der Späten Almhadenzeit Die Sizilianishen Fragen des Ibn Sab'in*. Herder Verlan. Freiburg, 2005.

misrepresented figure in Islamic thought. The only way to assess this mystic philosopher and to truly understand him is by studying his writings. [111]As a step toward judging this notorious tree by its fruits, this paper will examine certain relevant aspects of Ibn Sab'īn's doctrine as seen through his exposition of the prerequisites and the supreme objective of metaphysics (*al-'ilm al-ilāhī*) in *al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliya*, or "The Answers to the Sicilian Questions."[112] This dialogue between the mystic and the King of Sicily[113] is one of Ibn Sab'īn's earliest works, and illustrates certain key

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[111] Ibn Sab'īn's most famous works are:

- *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliya* (Answers to the Sicilian Questions) This work is published in two different editions. See 'Abd al-Haqq ibn Sab'īn, *Correspondance Philosophique avec L'Empereur Frederic II de Hohenstaufen*, Serefettin Yaltkaya, ed., Études Orientales. Paris, 1941, and idem, *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliya*, Istanbul, 1943. See also, Louis Massignon, *Recueil des Textes inédites Relatifs à la Mystique en Pays d'Islam*,, pp. 123-34. Paris, 1929.
- *Budd al-'Ārif wa 'Aqīdat al-Muhaqqiq al-Muqarrab al-Kāshif wa Tarīq al-Sālik al-Mutabattil al-'Ākif* (The Prerequisite of the Gnostic, the Doctrine of the Proficient Seer and Intimate of God, and the Way of the Pure Seeker and Devotee), George Kattourah, ed., Dār al-Andalus & Dār al-Kindī. Beirut, 1978.
- Ibn Sab'īn has also written a number of treatises, many of which have been compiled in *Rasā'il Ibn Sab'īn*, (The Treatises of Ibn Sab'īn) 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Badawī, ed. Cairo, 1965.
- There are also a number of Ibn Sab'īn's manuscripts in various libraries. For details, see Vincent Cornell's *The Way of the Axial Intellect* pp.51-53.

[112] I am fully aware of the summary and incomplete nature of some of my observations, and hope that they will be understood as a challenge to further more serious discussions of an unduly neglected figure in Islamic history.

[113] Anna Akasoy remarks that Ibn Sab'īn's *Answers to the Sicilian Questions* were probably not triggered by a real inquiry from Frederick II, and that they might have been a literal fiction created by Ibn Sab'īn. This doubt seems somewhat undue since such exchanges occurred with relative frequency during the thirteenth century. Moreover, the noted Egyptian scholar Maḥmūd 'Alī Makkī has pointed out that Ibn Sab'īn's hometown, Murcia, was a great center of inter-religious dialogue that was fostered by king Alfonso X. (See Makkī's article *Maqāmāt al-Harīri wa I'jāz al-Qurān fi Ḥiwār Masiḥī Islāmi fi al-Andalus* p. 145. This article was presented at a conference in Morocco in 1994, and can be located in *Khizāna Al-Malik Fahd Ibn 'Abd Al-'Azīz*, Casablanca.) It is also telling that an entire treatise on optics ensued in response to Frederick II's questions by Ibn Sab'īn's Egyptian contemporary, Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al 'Abbās al-Sanhājī Al-Qarāfī (d. 1285), who was both a Malikite jurist and an optician. Al-Qarāfī's treatise, entitled *Kitāb al-Istibṣār fimā Tudrikuhu al-Abṣār*, that is, "The revelation of what the eyes may perceive," includes an extensive discussion of the causes of the colors and of the circular shape of the rainbow. The manuscript can be found in *Al-Khizana al-'Ammah* in Tetouan, Morocco. See also Aydin M. Sayili, "Al-Qarāfī and His Explanation of the

intellectual trends in the late Almohad Arab West.[114] More importantly, this text also reveals important dimensions of the author's worldview which was shaped not only by Sufi doctrines, but also by Hellenistic and Hermetic teachings. Before dealing in more detail with *The Answers to the Sicilian Questions*, however, let us look at Ibn Sab'īn and his critics more closely.

Ibn Sab'īn has been accused– among many things– of disregard for the Prophet Mohammad and Islamic Law.[115] In his famous *fatwa* on Sufism, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) calls Ibn Sab'īn a radical monist (*sāḥib al-waḥda*) and charges him with "overt heresy, unwarranted innovations, and the most extravagant of detestable interpretations of orthodox doctrine."[116] Other detractors, such as 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Bādisī (*ca.* 1311) attack Ibn Sab'īn on a personal level, calling him a plagiarizer of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's works, a deviant who tried to merge Sufism and philosophy, and an arrogant man who "believed that no one before him had understood Sufism correctly."[117]

Many accusations of this sort are invalidated by Ibn Sab'īn's own writings, and suggest that some of our author's critics were not even familiar with his works. For example, Ibn Sab'īn's alleged dismissal of the *Sharī'a* and disregard for Muhammad is contrasted by his reverent prayers on behalf of the Prophet.[118] In one letter, Ibn Sab'īn implores his disciples to diligently

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Rainbow," *Isis*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 16-26, 1940. (*Isis* is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.).

[114] See *Philosophie und Mystik in der Späten Almhadenzeit Die Sizilianishen Fragen des Ibn Sab'in*.

[115] Shams al-Dīn Mohammad al-Dhahbī, *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, Vol. 17 pp. 89. Maktaba al-Tawfīqiya. Cairo, 2002. See also: Samīḥ 'Ātif al-Zīn, *Ibn Sab'īn*, Pp. 16-21. Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī. Lebanon, 1988.

[116] Ibn Khaldūn, *La Voie et la Loi, ou Le Maitre et le Juriste: Shifā' al-Sa'il li-Tahdhib al-Masa'il* (Cure for the Questionner in Elucidating the Issues) pp. 183-4, 189, 252, Reé Rérez, trans, Sindbad. Paris, 1991. Ironically, Ibn Khaldūn himself was accused of heresy for being tolerant of Sufis and for his philosophical leaning. He was killed in prison whilst awaiting a formal verdict.

[117] 'Abd al-Ĥaqq Ibn Ismā'īl al-Bādisī, *Al-Maqsad al-Sharīf wa-l-Manza' al-Latīf fi al-Ta'rīf bi Sulaĥā' al-Rif*, p. 32-36, Sa'īd Aĥmad A'rāb, ed., second edition, al-Matba'a al-Malakiyya. Rabat, 1993.

[118] *Al-Ibāta fi Akhbār Gharnāta*, Vol. 4, Pp. 35-6. See also: Abū al-Wafā al-Ghanīmī al-Taftazānī's *Ibn Sab'in wa Falsafatuhu al-Sufiyya* p. 269, Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī. Beirut, 1973.

observe the *Sharí'a* and the *Sunna* of the Prophet.[119] Moreover, a close analysis of al-Bādisī's disapproval of Ibn Sab'īn's famous work, *Budd al-'Ārif*, that is, "The Prerequisite of the Gnostic," [120]clearly reveals that the critic never read his object of criticism.[121] "This empty polemic," explains Cornell, "is typical of the *ad hominem* arguments against Ibn Sab'īn that one finds in Islamic texts. In many cases, 'scare' tactics are used to prevent the reader from ever approaching Ibn Sab'īn's writings in the first place."[122]

Largely as a result of these defamations, modern western scholars such as Henry Corbin and Louis Massignon have called Ibn Sab'īn, respectively, a "bold and tormented philosopher,"[123] and "a bitter and tormented spirit."[124] Others, such as the noted Spanish scholar Miguel Asín Palacios, mistakenly present him as the student and mirror of the great mystic who was born one generation before Ibn Sab'īn, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabi.[125] At first glance, this assertion seems tenable: both traveled the same North African routes, frequented the same towns in Andalusia and North Africa, and believed in the overriding ontological "Unity of Existence," *waḥdat al-wujūd*.[126]

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[119] See for example *Wasiyyat Ibn Sab'īn li Aṣḥābih* in *Rasā'il Ibn Sab'īn* pp. 312-315, 'Abd al-Rahmān Badawī, ed.

[120] Cornell has translated *Budd al-'Ārif* as "The Prerequisite of the Gnostic" and most recently as "The Idol of the Gnostic."

[121] *The Way of the Axial Intellect*, p. 47. It must be admitted, however, that Ibn Sab'īn's writings are abstruse. This is attested by the notable fourteenth century Sufi scholar Ibn 'Abbād al-Rundī, who relates deferentially that he spent seventy days and nights striving to understand *Budd al-'Ārif* to no avail. See Ibn 'Abbād, *Lettres de Direction Spirituelle, Collection Majeur: Al-Rasā'il al-Kubrā*, Kenneth L. Honerkamp, ed., Dar el-Machreq Sarl. Beirut, 2005.

[122] *The Way of the Axial Intellect*, p. 47. In *'Udat al-Murīd al-Sādiq*, Ahmad Zarrūq says that "the feeble-minded" should avoid the Ibn Sab'īn's writings. See: Idrīs 'Azzūzī, *Al-Shaykh Ahmad Zarrūq: Ārā'uhu al-Islāḥiyah, Taḥqīq wa Dirāsa li-Kitābih 'Udat al-Murīd Al-Sādiq'* p. 516 Matba'a Fidālah, 1998.

[123] Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Liadain Sherrard and Philip Sherrard, trans., p. 264. London, 1993.

[124] Louis Massignon and Aldophe Faure, 'Ibn Sab'īn', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. 2 (3), p. 921.

[125] Ángel González Palencia, *Historia de la Literatura Arábigo-Espanola*, 2nd ed. Madrid 1945. Hussein Mu'nis trans., *Tarīkh Al-Fikr Al-Andalūsī* p. 24 Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriya. Cairo, 1955.

[126] According to Vincent Cornell, Ibn Sab'īn may have been the first Muslim thinker to use the term *waḥdat al-wujūd*. See *The All-Comprehensive Circle*, p. 34.

However, neither figure mentions the other in their writings, nor is there evidence of the two great mystics ever having met or having read each other's works. Moreover, a comparison of their doctrines reveals significant differences between the two. For example, while expounding on his esoteric doctrines, Ibn 'Arabi clearly laid a greater emphasis than Ibn Sab'īn on Islamic formulations and used Qur'ānic terminology with greater frequency. Furthermore, Cornell writes, "Ibn Sab'īn goes out on the doctrinal limb by taking the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* literally. The text of *Kitāb al-Iḥāta* makes it clear that for him, Existence really is one, and the One, while not limited by Existence, is more than just the Maker or Producer of Existence."[127] Thus it is reasonable to postulate in passing that Ibn Sab'īn's conception of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is more radical than that of Ibn 'Arabi.

The life of Ibn Sab'īn:

Biographical reports on Ibn Sab'īn are nearly as conflicting and puzzling as the above mentioned allegations. He was born into a prominent Murcian family around 1217 in Ricote, a town bordering the Segura River, north-west of Murcia. Ibn Sab'īn traces his lineage to the Prophet Mohammad through 'Alī Ibn Abī Tālib.[128] Ibn Sab'īn received a thorough Andalusian education in Murcia, acquiring extensive knowledge of Arabic, the Islamic sciences, Greek philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, the natural sciences, literature, and Christian and Jewish theology. [129]He was reported to be an outstanding calligrapher and a man of great virtue and patience, enduring hardship and having deep knowledge of prophetic traditions.[130] One of his biographers, Ibn Al-Khaṭīb, relates that as a young man, he was "royally arrayed, self-assured, and upright."[131] His deep knowledge of medicine and alchemy was

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127 *The All-Comprehensive Circle*, p. 44

128 Others say that he was of Visigoth origin, but this assertion is much less likely.

129 Ibid, p. 148.

130 In fact, a small amount of his poetry has survived, and continues to be chanted in Moroccan Zawiyas such as the *Zawiya Siddiqiya* of Tangier. I interviewed members of the Andalusian music group *Ensemble Ibn 'Arabi* who told me that they chanted Ibn Sab'īn's poetry in 1997.

131 *Al-Iḥāta fī Akhbār Gharnāta*, Vol 4, p. 387.

highly respected as well, and he even treated a head injury of Abū Numay Ibn Abī Sa'īd, the Sharīf of Mecca (r. 1254-301).

Although fortune first favored him, Ibn Sab'īn's lofty days in Murcia ended in his early-twenties when his overt declarations of the Oneness of Existence and statements such as "I am He, and He is I"[132] earned him the ire of influential jurists (*fuqahā'*). He fled to Sabta where, according to certain reports, he was initiated into Sufism by Isĥāq Ibn al-Mar'a Ibn al-Dahhāq. In this town on the tip of North Africa, he had a large following, especially among the poor, and led an ascetic life while enjoying the protection of the Sabta governor, Ibn Khalās (r. 1238-46). It was during this period that the young and brilliant thinker was put in charge of answering Frederick II von Hohenstaufen's (r. 1254-1301) philosophical questions.

In Sabta, Ibn Sab'īn also authored *Budd al-'Ārif*, or "The Prerequisite of the Gnostic" which was addressed to a jurist rather than to one of his Sufi followers. In this book, Ibn Sab'īn expounds on his spiritual method and the importance of reason, and he provides a critique of the epistemologies of the Islamic world at the time.[133] However, after his patron was replaced by 'Alī al-Sa'īd (r. 1242-8), he was again forced to flee the aspersions and threats of both the jurists and the Sufis who found his doctrine to be too radical. Ibn Sab'īn left with his disciples for the maritime town of Bijāya– in modern day Algeria– stopping on his way at Bādis. In a catalogue of scholars who lived in Bijāya during the thirteenth century, Aḥmad al-Ghubrīnī praises Ibn Sab'īn and says that he was devoted to the Sacred Mosque of Mecca and made the *Hajj* pilgrimage every year where he was "sought out like no one else."[134] In Bijāya, Ibn Sab'īn also met the famous Sufi poet Abū al-Ĥasan al-Shushtarī (1213-1269) who, recognizing the mystic's eminence, became his faithful disciple. Al-Shushtarī, who was some four years older than his master,

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[132] Samīĥ 'Ātif al-Zīn, *Ibn Sab'īn*, p. 12.

[133] See *The Way of the Axial Intellect*, p. 62.

[134] Abū al-'Abbās Aĥmad al-Ghubrīnī, *'Unwān al-Dirāya fi man 'Urifa min al-'Ulamā' fi al-Mi'a al-Sabi'a bi Bijāya*, p. 209, ed. Rābiĥ Būnār, al-Sharika al-Wataniyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī'. Algiers, 1970.

dedicated three poems to him in which he refers to himself as "Ibn Sab'īn's slave" and describes him as "the magnet of souls" (*maqnāṭīs al-nufūs*)[135].

As Ibn Sab'īn's drove of disciples swelled, so did his reputation as a heretic and a sophist. He was exiled to Tunis, and thence to Egypt, and finally settled in Mecca. Ibn al-Kathīr relates somewhat bitterly that Ibn Sab'īn was able to captivate the mind of Mecca's governor, the Sharīf Abū Numay Ibn Abī Sa'īd (r. 1254-1301), and lived peacefully as his protégé.

There are various reports about Ibn Sab'īn's death. Some allege that he fled to India where he ended his days[136]. Ibn Shākir, however, relates in his *Fawāt al-Wafāyāt*: "I heard that Ibn Sab'īn committed suicide in Mecca by slitting his wrists."[137] Regarding his alleged suicide, al-Bādisī and some of Ibn Sab'īn's disciples report that Ibn Sab'īn did not commit this act rather, he lived out his days as an adviser to Abū Numay Ibn Abī Sa'īd, and was poisoned by political enemies. His alleged suicide seems untenable firstly because it was related by one of Ibn Sab'īn's foes, and secondly because suicide is wholly contrary to both Islamic law and Ibn Sab'īn's philosophical beliefs.

Aspects of Ibn Sab'īn's Metaphysics as seen through *The Answers to the Sicilian Questions*:

When studying *The Answers to the Sicilian Questions*, one may very well ask why Frederick II, a Christian monarch of German and Norman origin who expelled the Muslims from Sicily, would seek the wisdom of a Muslim philosopher? To begin with, Frederick II descended from the famous so-called "turbaned kings" of Sicily, and was greatly attracted to Islamic thought, culture and science. Despite his resentment of Muslim presence within Sicily,

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135 Samīĥ 'Ātif al-Zīn, *Ibn Sab'īn*, p. 46.

136 See Idrīs 'Azzūzī's *Al-Shaykh Aĥmad Zarrūq: Ārā'uhu al-Islāĥiyah, Taĥqīq wa Dirāsa li-Kitābih 'Udat al-Murīd al-Sādiq'*, p. 277. For more biographical information on Ibn Sab'īn, see Ibn Khathīr, *Al-Bidāyā wa al-Nihāya* Vol. 13, p. 261 Maktaba Al-Ma'ārif. Beirut, 1966. Ibn Al-Mulaqan, *Tabaqāt al-Awliyā'*, p. 442 Dār al-Ma'rifa li al-Tibā'a wa al-Nashr, 1986. Ibn 'Imād Al-Ĥanbalī, *Shadharāt ad-Dahan li-Akhbār min Dhahab*, Maktaba al-Muqaddisī. Cairo, 1940.

137 Ibn Shākir Al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafāyāt*, Vol XXI, p. 517. Muhyī al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ĥamid, Cairo, 1951.

the monarch adopted Islamic Arab attire, hired Muslim counselors, patronized scholars from Syria and Baghdad, and had an extraordinary command of Arabic and a deep knowledge of Islamic philosophy. Of all the Arabized Norman Sicilians, Frederick II was particularly drawn to scientific and philosophical discussions, acquiring the title of *Stupor Mundi* or "Wonder of the World" during his lifetime. In fact, Thomas Aquinas was educated at his court, and it is through Frederick II that Michael Scot made several translations of Ibn Rushd, or Averroes into Latin.

Frederick II sent out four questions to scholars in many parts of the Muslim world, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. These questions addressed topics that were being debated by philosophers of the period: the eternity of the world; the prerequisites and object of metaphysics; the categories of existence; and the nature of the soul, in addition to an appendix inquiring about the points of divergence between Aristotle and his commentator Alexander of Aphrodisiac. Not satisfied with the responses of scholars from the East, the monarch turned to scholars from North Africa and Andalusia, and he was referred to Ibn Sabʿīn. Frederick II sent a letter to the Almohad ruler Abū Muhammad al-Rashīd (r. 1232– 1242) who passed on the message to Sabta's governor Ibn Kẖalās with instructions to depute the young mystic. While waiting for the answers, the emperor sent out a shipment of gifts to Ibn Sabʿīn, who turned them down: "I will answer your questions for God's sake and for the triumph of Islam." He added the following Qur'anic verse: "Say: I ask of you no fee therefore, save loving kindness among kinsfolk."[138]

One of the salient features of Ibn Sabʿīn's responses to Frederick II's question of the prerequisites and object of metaphysics– as well as his writings in general– is his insistence on the supremacy of the "Intellectual-Principle" (*al-ʿaql*).[139] This doctrine is rooted in Hermetic teachings which assert that the Intellectual-Principle is the Primary Cause of existence, and that this universal Substance (*jawhar*) underlies or penetrates all things. In some of Ibn Sabʿīn's writings, the Intellectual-Principle is described as "the

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[138] M. A. F. Mehren, *Correspondance du Philosophe Soufi Ibn Sab'in Abd Oul-Haqq avec l'Empereur Frédéric II De Hohenstaufen*, p. 345. Qur'an 42:23, Mamaduke Pickthall, trans.
[139] *The All-comprehensive Circle*, p. 36.

foundational attribute of the universe and the axis around which the existential order revolves" (*uss ṣifat al-'ālam*, *wa-al-quṭb alladhī yadūru 'alayhi al-tadbīr*).[140]

Like other Hermetists, Ibn Sab'īn proclaimed that the essence of the human Intellect is derived from the Intellectual-Principle. The human Intellect, however, cannot be reduced to the rational faculty and discursive thought. Rather, it is a "supra-rational" or intuitive organ within man, and, as he says in his discourse, the only faculty which "is capable of grasping the other-worldly realities." [141]Ibn Sab'īn considers the human Intellect to be man's *raison d' être* and "the necessary prerequisite to human perfection [which] completes the meaning of being human."[142] The author corroborates his doctrine of the Intellect by citing a hadīth that is often referred to by Sufis and Muslim philosophers alike: "the first thing that God created was the Intellect."[143]

Ibn Sab'īn also asserts that the Intellect "emanates from God," a notion which has clear parallels in the writings attributed to Hermes:

> The Intellect (*nous*) derives from the substance (*ousia*) of God, in so far as one may speak of God having a substance; of what nature this substance is, God alone can know exactly. The Intellect is not a part of the substance of God, but radiates from the latter as light shines forth from the sun. In human beings, this Intellect is God…[144]

This idea of the supremacy of the human Intellect– by virtue of its link with the Intellect-Principle– is by no means unique to Hermeticism. However, there is no doubt that it is emphasized and expounded with

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[140] Ibn Sab'īn, *Budd al-'Ārif* p. 182 (As cited by Vincent Cornell in *The Way of the Axial Intellect* p. 64).
[141] *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliya*, p. 36.
[142] Ibid, p. 25.
[143] Ibid, p. 34. Despite its popularity, this tradition is not to be found in the major ĥadīth collections.
[144] *Corpus Hermeticum*, translated by A.-J. Festugière, Paris, 'Les Belles Lettres', 1945. Chapter entitled: *D'Hermès Trismégiste: Sur l'intellect commun, à Tat*. Trans. Titus Burckhardt.

distinctive clarity in the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus,[145] as well as followers of such teachings like Ibn Sab'īn.

When judging Ibn Sab'īn's intellectual affiliations, pre-modern and contemporary scholars often overlook his own claims. In his introduction to *Budd al-'Ārif*, Ibn Sab'īn professes himself to be a follower of the "Impeccable Teacher" Hermes Trismegistus: "I petitioned God to propagate [through me] the wisdom (*al-ḥikma)* that Hermes Trismegistus (*al-harāmisa*) revealed in the earliest ages."[146] Furthermore, in a poem of his disciple al-Shushtarī, Hermes is considered to be the patron of both Sufi and Greek sages. Therefore, no understanding of Ibn Sab'īn will be complete without examining the influence of Hermeticism on his thought. In fact, this point is corroborated by Ibn Khaldūn who describes Ricote, Ibn Sab'īn's birthplace, as a center of Hermeticism in Andalusia.[147]

Here it will be useful to make a short digression in order that the reader may obtain, if not a complete view, at least some glimpses of the Hermetic tradition in Andalusia. Hermeticism in medieval Spain– and Europe– was followed by eminent Muslim, Christian and Jewish mystics.[148] In late

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[145] *Corpus Hermeticum* (chapter on Poimandres) describes how the Universal Intellect revealed itself to Hermes: '…with these words, He looked me long in the face, so that I trembled before his gaze. Then, as He raised His head again, I saw how in my own spirit (*nous*) the light which consists of a numberless number of possibilities, became an infinite All, while the fire, surrounded and so contained by an almighty power, had attained its immobile position: such is what I was able to grasp rationally of this vision…while I was so completely out of myself, He spoke again: thou hast now, in the intellect (*nous*), seen the prototype, the origin, and the never-ending beginning…" As cited in Titus Burckhardt's *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, Fons Vitae. Kentucky, 1997.

[146] *Budd al-'Ārif*, pp. 29-30, Vincent Cornell, trans.

[147] *La Voie et la Loi,* pp. 279-80.

[148] - Muslim Hermetists: Among the Sufi Hermetists we find Abū 'Abdallāh al-Shūdhī of Seville, Ibn Mutarrif the Blind of Murcia, Muhammad Ibn Aĥlā of Lorca and al-Ĥājj Yāsīn al-Maghribī. In *La Voie et la Loi*, (pp. 279-80) Ibn Khaldūn notes that "a large group of people from eastern Spain and the Ricote valley" were followers of Hermeticism.

- Christian Hermetists: A number of Christians of the Middle Ages, including Saint Albert the Great, considered the writings of the Corpus Hermeticum as the pre-Christian "seeds" of the Logos.

- Jewish Hermetists: Cornell points that "some scholars believe that Hermetic doctrines can also be found in *Kitāb al-Hidāya ilā Farā'id al-Qulūb* (Guide to the Duties of Hearts), by the

antiquity, Hermes was understood to be a wise Egyptian sage and priest, and was identified as the god Thoth. Hermes was also associated with the Islamic prophet Idrīs, and the Jewish prophet Enoch.[149] Interestingly, many Muslims also identified the Hermetic tradition with that of the Sabians mentioned in the Qur'an, and Hermetic doctrines were therefore seen as compatible with Qur'anic teachings.[150] Regardless of inevitable historical discrepancies, it is important to understand that the Hermetic tradition, which persisted throughout all ages and extended into the Christian and Islamic worlds, was seen by figures such as Ibn Sab'īn as a "primordial revelation" (*al-ḥikma al-qadīma*) underlying the three Abrahamic religions. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assert, as certain scholars have done, that this understanding of the Hermetic heritage opened the door to genuine inter-religious dialogue. However, despite the importance of understanding the interactions between the three Abrahamic religions in medieval Spain, information on this subject remains surprisingly scanty.[151]

Aside from its philosophical and intellectual aspects, Hermeticism in Andalusia is more noted for its development and practice of the various "occult sciences" such as alchemy, astrology, and magic. When trying to understand figures such as Ibn Sab'īn, this "occult" side of Hermeticism

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Jewish mystic Baĥya Ibn Paqūda…The presence of Hermetic teachings among the Jews of Spain is further attested by Moese Maimonides, who, in a letter to his translator Samuel Ibn Tibbon, calls it an 'ancient philosophy' that interferes with Aristotle's more rigorous and intellectually satisfying system of thought." (*The Way of the axial Intellect* p. 58)

149 See Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *Islamic Life and Thought*, p. 103, ABC International Group, Inc. Chicago 2001.

150 *The Way of the Axial Intellect* p. 54

151 According to Steven M. Wasserstrom "the figure of Hermes stood for a trans-confessional wisdom, a universal revelation, which doctrine further endorsed Muslim study of Jewish works." Furthermore, it provided "an elite interconfessionalism in which terminology and mythical constructs are shared across religious boundaries." See Wasserstrom's "Jewish-Muslim Relations in the Context of Andalusian Emigration," unpublished paper for the conference "Christians, Muslims and Jews in Medieval and Early Modern Spain: Interaction and Cultural Change," Notre Dame University, South Bend, Indiana, February 1994. This stands in sharp contrast with Chris Lowney's assertion that "Uncomfortable necessity, rather than some higher-minded ideal of tolerance, first spurred the accommodation that scholars hail as Spain's era of *convivencia* "common life" (See Chris Lowney's *A Vanished World Medieval Spain's Golden Age of Enlightenment*, p. 189, Free Press. New York, 2005).

cannot be neglected, since Ibn Sabʿīn himself was reported to be a practitioner of theurgy and alchemy. He also had a great attraction to *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*, or the science of letters, which has its counterpart in the Kabalistic tradition. *ʿIlm al-ḥurūf* aims primarily at decoding the symbolic meanings of the various disconnected letters in the opening of numerous chapters of the Qur'an.

After this parenthesis about the complex Hermetic tradition, we may now return to the second part of *The Answers to the Sicilian Questions*. In the outset of his discourse, Ibn Sabʿīn distinguishes between the Greek and the Sufic definitions of the science of metaphysics. "Know that the science of metaphysics (*al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*) for the [Greek] ancients meant the contemplation of [both] the reality which transcends the visible order and the ultimate causes of human existence…"[152] For the Sufis, however, "This supreme science, which is called metaphysics, is divided into two categories: the first is knowledge of the Divine Unity of God Exalted, and the second is knowledge of God's Attributes, such as His Omnipotence, Wisdom [and] Power."[153] In other words, Sufi metaphysics consists both of an in-depth understanding of the Islamic doctrine of divine Unity, *tawḥīd*, and insight into how the Divine attributes are reflected in the cosmos.

Ibn Sabʿīn then explains how Sufis view the objective of metaphysics in light of the other sciences.

> The objective of metaphysics is the perfection of man, the attainment of true happiness, and the full development of the Intellect....[By contrast] the other branches of human science seek to refine the human intelligence […] and to point to the Path that leads to an exclusive conception of God, who is the First Principle of existence.[154]

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[152] *Al-Kalām ʿalā al-Masāʾil al-Siqilliya*, p. 25
[153] Ibid, p. 36.
[154] Ibid, p. 25.

Metaphysics, in Ibn Sabʿīn's view, is the supreme science, while the other sciences serve as its basis.[155]

Having defined metaphysics and its objective in general terms, Ibn Sabʿīn explains how the Greeks understood its goal. He clarifies that "the Sufis regard total union with God as the objective of metaphysics"[156] In other words, they regard the total realization of God's Absolute Unity, which absorbs all objects of knowledge unto Itself as the supreme objective of this divine science. The author considers this Sufi understanding of metaphysics to be superior to that of the Greeks, because to truly know the Divine is to die in it, so that it may be born in us. This identification with the Divine must be total because if "the goal of the gnostic and lover of God is to attain His object of knowledge and love, then he has not reached it if anything lies between him and his beloved."[157]

While, on the one hand, these "other-worldly realities" are grasped by focusing the intelligence on the realities that "transcend the world," Ibn Sabʿīn believes that "the science of metaphysics resides in the soul."[158] Therefore, the process of spiritual realization is nothing more than awakening or actualizing the latent knowledge we bear "within" ourselves. Here, one clearly sees the influence of the Platonic doctrine of *Anamnesis*– or literally: a lifting up of the mind– on Ibn Sabʿīn's thought.[159]

Nevertheless, the seeker of truth must master certain sciences before obtaining direct knowledge and realization of God. Ibn Sabʿīn devotes a surprising portion of his discourse explaining the various necessary branches of knowledge, and lists nine categories of logic that must be mastered before

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[155] At the same time, this order is reversed because for Ibn Sabʿīn, the metaphysical principles manifest themselves and trickle down, as it were, from the highest to the lowest levels of reality.

[156] Ibid, p. 26.

[157] Ibid, p. 26.

[158] Ibid, p. 45.

[159] Full, or even adequate illustration of this subject is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth pointing out Vincent Cornell's remark that the Platonic and Neo-Platonic texts that most clearly parallel Ibn Sabʿīn's thought are libellus II, Krater (libellus IV), and libelli V-VII, VII (Peri Psychis), IX, X (Kleis, 'The Key'), and XI of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

seeking divine inspiration. Why study logic? Because, according to Ibn Sabʿīn, by identifying the diverse premises, forms of analogy and demonstration, we come to a full understanding of the soul. Here again, Ibn Sabʿīn cites a hadīth that is often quoted by Sufis: "He who knows himself knows his Lord." (*man ʿarafa nafsahu faqad ʿarafa rabbahu*)

Like Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 1191), Ibn Sabʿīn used logic as a means toward spiritual realization. Although Ibn Sabʿīn certainly emphasizes logic more than many other mystics, he is far from being a rationalist in the modern sense of the term.[160] A full exposition of Ibn Sabʿīn's understanding of logic is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that for Ibn Sabʿīn, logic has an intuitive element that points to the transcendent. Furthermore, he renders Aristotle's theories into what Philip Merlan coins "Neoaristotelianism."[161] Ibn Sabʿīn was in fact very critical of philosophers and strictly Aristotelian thinkers such as Ibn Rushd.[162] He even describes such philosophers as contradicting revelation, and ranks the value of their knowledge below Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*.[163] In short, he contended that Aristotelian philosophers generally failed to understand the importance of the Intellect, which is inextricably linked to the universal Intellect-Principle and thus the very basis of creation.[164]

Having emphasized the importance of mastering logic, Ibn Sabʿīn states that according to the Islamic revelation:

> The preliminaries of metaphysics [can be divided into both] theoretical and practical components. The basis of metaphysics is the Mighty Book,

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160 See *The Way of the Axial Intellect*, p. 62.

161 As cited by Cornell. See Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, and Metaconsciousness*, pp. 2-20.

162 In *Budd al-ʿArif* (p.143) Ibn Sabʿīn is very critical of Ibn Rush and other Muslim philosophers. He impugns Ibn Rush for being too "obsessed with Aristotle' (*maftūn bi-Aristu*): "If he heard that [Aristotle] had said that a person could be standing and sitting at the same time, he would believe it and would have transmitted it." At the same time, Ibn Sabʿīn was very fond of Al-Farābī whom he calls: 'the lord of philosophers of Islam, their imam, and their spokesman."(See *The Way of the Axial Intellect* p. 58).

163 Ibid, p. 98.

164 *The Way of the Axial Intellect*, p. 71.

> [that is,] the Qur'an, and the *Sunna* [or practices] of the Prophet. In addition, faith and sound conviction are indispensable preconditions."[165]

This assertion once again clearly puts into question the claims of detractors who accuse Ibn Sabʿīn of dismissing the Islamic *Sharīʿa* and the *Sunna* of the Prophet.

Having emphasized the importance of not only mastering logic, but also conforming to religious norms, Ibn Sabʿīn mentions that the spiritual path consists of:

> Meditation, invocation of the Divine Name which is the channel of celestial graces, repressing sensual desires, conforming human actions to the truth revealed in the heart, purification of the soul through the invocation of God, orienting all of man's actions toward his ultimate goal… and spiritual ardor.[166]

Ibn Sabʿīn's spiritual practices in this treatise seem to conform to mainstream Sufism. However, he is speaking as a Platonic philosopher and therefore emphasizes, perhaps more than other Sufis, that spiritual practices are primarily a means of awakening knowledge that is latent in the heart.

The author then discusses the various stages that the seeker goes through as he approaches God.[167] "In the beginning [of the spiritual path,] the servant [of God] yearns for a Referent that has no likeness (*mushār laysa kamithlihi shay'*). Then he demands to reach this Referent…"[168] Ibn Sabʿīn explains that as the aspirant advances spiritually, he comes to understand that all things are derived from the exalted Object of his quest, and that "the world is only real through the grace of his Referent."[169] Realizing that all the preliminary knowledge that he had acquired amounts to naught,

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165 *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliya*, p. 37.
166 Ibid, p. 27.
167 See M. A. F. Mehren, *Correspondance du Philosophe Soufi Ibn Sab'in Abd Oul-Haqq avec L'Empereur Frédéric II De Hohenstaufen*, p. 386-90.
168 *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliya*, p. 42.
169 Ibid, p. 42-3.

> Reality as such speaks [to him]: 'Everything is bound to perish, save His [eternal] Self.'[170] The spiritual traveler has been revived and inspired by God. The first thing he utters is 'He is The First and The Last, The Visible and The Hidden, He is The Omniscient'[171]

Ibn Sabʿīn adds that "the man who sees with [the Eyes of] God says: 'I see nothing but God!'"[172] He clarifies that such a statement can only be uttered by one who has renounced the world, his soul, and speculation itself. At such a station, man realizes that ultimately "there is no multiplicity"[173] and that "there is no true life except the Absolute [life]" (*lā ḥayāt ḥaqīqatan illā al-muṭlaqah*).[174]

For Ibn Sabʿīn, the spiritual path consists of dissolving all things that pose themselves as real– most notably the sense of individuality– since God is the only Absolute Reality. This ego-centered mirage of individuality, which instinctively regards itself as an autonomous reality, dissolves as the seeker approaches the Real. Furthermore, it is clear from this discourse that the ego and worldly matters are not transient simply because they are destined to perish. Rather, phenomena of this world are perishing here and now; they have never been real. Thus for the advanced Sufi, the world becomes transparent: in its appearances he sees the reflection of God. This corroborates with other Sufi teachings, suggesting that not all of that our author's doctrines fall outside mainstream Sufism.

For Ibn Sabʿīn, the end of the spiritual journey is a pure beatific vision of the Divine which "cannot be contained in books."[175] One must know this state experientially in order to understand it, since it is something which "no [physical] eye has seen, no [physical] ear has heard, and no heart has desired."[176] Ibn Sabʿīn adds a common analogy often cited by Sufis that if

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[170] Qur'an verse 28:88, Mamaduke Pickthall, trans.
[171] *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliya*, p. 43. Qur'an 58:3, Mamaduke Pickthall, trans.
[172] Ibid, p. 43-4.
[173] Ibid, p. 42-3.
[174] Ibid, p. 44.
[175] Ibid, p. 41.
[176] Ibid, p. 41. This is from a ĥadīth describing paradise.

one were to describe the pleasure of sexual intercourse to a child, it would be impossible. He adds that:

> If it is impossible to describe natural phenomena, then how could he describe a different level of reality?... Know that not a single philosopher, Sufi, Ash'arite theologian, or dialectician is capable of describing this condition nor of indicating Its character or Its Essence. Only by delving into the mystical science (*'ilm as-safar*) and plumbing its depths can one grasp it."[177]

In other words, forms imply boundaries and therefore limitation. Consequently, no form, including words, can adequately describe God[178] or successfully portray the supreme station of spiritual Union with Him.

One of Ibn Sab'īn's concluding thoughts is that, if on the one hand, the soul only attains divine knowledge through meditation and by exerting the will, on the other hand, there are certain chosen people who reach the Truth without initial instruction or meditation: these are the Prophets and the elects of God. Moreover, while man marches along the spiritual path by means of his will, it is ultimately God who decides, since He is the source of all blessings and guidance. "There is no attainment without [the grace of] God. He is the Giver, the Delayer, the Inspirer, the Bestower, the Guide, the Benefactor, 'He is Allah, [other] than Whom there is no other God.'"[179]

Or again, the will plays an essential role in the unfolding of our destiny on the human plane. However, on a higher metaphysical plane, it is God who ultimately decides. Ibn Sab'īn stops at the threshold of this timeless debate between predestination and free will, and suggests that if the monarch sought to truly ascend the spiritual path, that he come study at his feet. He adds rather sarcastically, as if to humble the monarch, that the commonplace metaphysical topics mentioned in his treatise are not worthy of the attention of a sage of the author's caliber. Moreover, Ibn Sab'īn says that in his province, there are souls as sharp as swords who would chide him for

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[177] Ibid, p. 41-2.
[178] One of the "Ninety-nine Divine Names" is *al-Wāsi'*, that is, "The All-Embracing."
[179] Ibid, p. 45. Qur'an 59:22, Mamaduke Pickthall, trans.

bothering to address such trivial matters! Although there is no evidence to suggest that Frederick II ever met Ibn Sab'īn or sent other questions, it is reported that the monarch expressed his appreciation for the philosopher's insights by sending a lavish load of gifts, which Ibn Sab'īn once again turned down.

So who was Ibn Sab'īn? Perhaps the closest description of him would be that he was Hermetic philosopher who was attached to Islam and Sufism. Yet, he is not easily classified under a specific intellectual school because, unlike the *Shaykh al-akbar* who relied almost exclusively on primary Islamic sources such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Sab'īn drew heavily from Greek thought, the teachings of Hermeticism, logic and mystical dialogue to develop an emanationist and monistic worldview that was centered on the Intellectual-Principle. In the vein of Suhrawardi, Baba Afdal and Mulla Sadra, Ibn Sab'īn saw certain philosophical schools– and the Hermetic corpus– as originating from the "niche of prophecy" and therefore in harmony with the Qur'an and *Sunna*, but at the same time he ultimately sought to transcend theology, philosophy, religion and even Sufism. Because of being overshadowed by Ibn 'Arabi, and due to his infamy and his conspicuously non-denominational writings, he remains among the least understood and most disparaged figures in Islamic history.

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