

## **Precise Determination of Truth**

## Time, Space, and the Objectivity of Ethical Norms in the Teachings of Ibn al-`Arabi

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Ibn al-`Arabi was born in Murcia in present-day Spain in 1165, or 50 years after the death of al-Ghazâlî and 130 years after the death of Ibn Sînâ. He eventually settled 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-wujûd*, 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-wujûd* meant for those who used it and what it might have meant for Ibn al-`Arabi if he had used it in his own writings are complex issues. I have written a great deal about them, so I will not repeat myself here.<sup>1</sup> In any

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<sup>1</sup> On the general concept, see, Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-`Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), Chapter One. On the history of the expression and the various meanings that were given to it, see Chittick, "Rûmî and *wahdat al-wujûd*", in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rûmî*, ed. A. Banani, R. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 70-111; "*wahdat al-shuhûd*" and "*wahdat al-wujûd*" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new editionn., vol. 10, pp. 37-39.

case, *wahdat al-wujûd* has little direct bearing on the concept of time and space. I mention it only because, if we want to understand what Ibn al-`Arabî is saying, we need to put aside any preconceived notions about *wahdat al-wujûd*.

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

My point in bringing up the issues of Sufism and *wahdat al-wujûd* is simply to suggest that anyone who has doubts about Ibn al-`Arabî because “He was a Sufi,” or because “He believed in *wahdat al-wujûd*” should put aside those doubts, at least for the duration of this chapter, because neither Sufism nor *wahdat al-wujûd* is part of Ibn al-`Arabî’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.

If Ibn al-`Arabî was not a Sufi in the common meaning 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-`Arabî 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, I think we have to choose *muhaqqiq*, that is, a “verifier” or “realizer.” Both Ibn al-`Arabî and his immediate followers frequently refer to their own intellectual position as *tahqîq* (“verification” or “realization”).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On this concept, see William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabî's Cosmology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), index under “realization;”; *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabî's Metaphysics of*

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In order to grasp the role of time and space in Ibn al-`Arabî's thinking, we need to reflect on *tahqîq* as a methodology. The word comes from the same root as *haqq*, which is an adjective meaning real, true, right, proper, and just; and a noun meaning reality, truth, rightness, properness, and justness. *Haqq* is a name of God and is also applied to created things. As *Haqq*, God is the Real, the True, the Right, the Proper, and 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 we have perceived the *haqq* of a thing, we have perceived not only its truth, but also what is rightfully due to it. Hence, we have understood our own proper 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-`Arabî's several scriptural sources for his discussion of the *haqq* of things is a well-known hadith, which occurs in many versions and in most of the standard sources. A typical version is as follows: "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*."

Giving to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq* is the key to the meaning of *tahqîq*. According to Ibn al-`Arabî, *tahqîq* 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.

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*Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), index under "verification." For one of Ibn al-`Arabî's longer discussions of *tahqîq*, see Chapter 165 of his *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, translated in *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 96-98.

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 they have to him. Nevertheless, people tend to put other things in place of God. They want to observe the *haqq* of themselves 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”), *zulm* (“wrongdoing”), and *fisq* (“unrighteousness”). In a typical verse, the Book lists all the things that have a claim on people, and then it tells us that none of them has any claim whatsoever if it interferes with what is properly due to God:

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 *tawhîd*, 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 *tawhîd* comes everything that *tawhîd* demands, including following God’s commands. Hence God’s truth, rightness, and reality demand the observance of religion as revealed through His prophets.

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As for the *haqq* of things other than God, the key to *tahqîq* 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-`Arabî likes to cite the Qur'anic verse (20:50): "Our Lord is He who gave each thing its creation, then guided [it]." 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 are its link with the First *Haqq*. The thing's "creation" can be understood as its actual reality, and its "guidance" as the path that it must follow to achieve the fullness of what it is. 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 *tawhîd*. Nothing is unrelated to the Absolute *Haqq*. To give things their *haqq* is first and foremost to understand them in relation to God.

So, the process of *tahqîq* or "verification/realization" requires that we first 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* of things is the primary issue in all the Islamic sciences *qua* Islamic sciences. It is closely linked to the interpretation of revealed

scripture. Scholars who specialized in the transmitted learning (*al-`ulûm al-naqliyya*) were primarily interested in interpreting the Qur'an and the Hadith. However, scholars who specialized in intellectual learning (*al-`ulûm al-`aqliyya*) were interested in the interpretation and understanding of all things, not just scripture. They investigated not only the *haqq* of revealed scripture, but also the *haqq* of everything else. This is why the Muslim philosophers and those scholars who specialized in “`irfân” (“gnosis” or theoretical Sufism) also 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 written scripture, Ibn al-`Arabî 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 scriptures is written with the *âyât* - the “signs” or “verses” - and it is God who is the author of all three books.

One of Ibn al-`Arabî'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 an explanation of the meaning of the signs that he wants to accomplish. His purpose is always to realize his knowledge by tracing the signs all the way back to the Absolute *Haqq*. For him, no matter which 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,

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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. "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (Qur'an, 2:115). The goal of *tahqîq* is to see the face of God wherever you turn, in each thing and in every creature, and then to act according to the *haqq* of God's face. If we understand anything in the universe or in our own selves 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 *tawhîd*.

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Let me now turn to the question of how Ibn al-`Arabî understands and employs the words that are commonly used to discuss what we call "time and space." The standard Arabic pairing is *zamân wa makân*. I would translate this not as "time and space" but as "time and place," or "time and location." The Arabic word *makân* 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, the best candidate is probably *khala'*, which I would translate as "the Void."<sup>3</sup> However, this is a topic for another occasion.

When Ibn al-`Arabî discusses *zamân* and *makân*, he typically speaks of them as "relations" (*nisab*). By doing so, he means to contrast them with "entities" (*a`yân*), which are real things. He is saying that time and place designate the interrelationships among real 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. His point is that time and space are two abstract concepts that do not designate anything in the objective

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<sup>3</sup> For a brief explanation of Ibn al-`Arabî's use of the term, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 60-61, and index.



universe. Rather, they refer to how human observers relate things to one another from their subjective experience. Using the terms tells us as much about ourselves as it tells us about the universe. Moreover, the two are flimsy hooks on which to hang a theory of the universe, because they do not in fact denote what is there.

From Ibn al-`Arabî's standpoint, if we want to verify the real, objective world and produce a valid theory of how things hold together, we need to go beyond appearances and surface relationships. We need to penetrate verities, principles and *huquq*. Time and space are abstract concepts and insubstantial relationships, which helps explain why Ibn al-`Arabî - like most other Muslim thinkers - discussed them with only passing interest.<sup>4</sup> 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 could understand being only in terms of nothingness.

Being is the most real and concrete of all entities, because it underlies every object, every subject, every concept, and every relationship. Ultimately, being is God, and as al-Ghazâlî and others had long since told us, "There is nothing in existence but God" (*laysa fi al-wujûd illa Allah*), which is to say that true and unsullied being belongs to God alone, and everything else partakes of nothingness.<sup>5</sup> What is truly there can be only God, because being does not belong essentially to anything else, only accidentally. As

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn al-`Arabî 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-`Arabî's most detailed expositions of the *haqq* of time, see Chapter 390 of his *Futûhât*, translated in Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 128-31.

<sup>5</sup> See Chittick, "Rûmî and *wahdat al-wujûd*."

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for time and space, they tell us much more about nothingness than about being, because of their abstractness and insubstantiality.

Of the two concepts, place is easier to understand. For Ibn al-`Arabî, the basic question in *tahqîq* 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 *makân* itself. The grammatical pattern of the word is called *maf'al*, and it designates a “name of a place” (*ism makân*). In other words, the grammatical pattern indicates a location. *Maktab*, for example, originally mean a “location of writing,” and it has come to mean a grammar school. *Makân* 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 *makân* is *kawn*, a noun that can be translated as “being.” “Being” is a word that embraces all created things. So, the word *makân* means literally “the location of being.” Everything in the visible world has a “place,” that is, a location for its being.

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” (*qâla kun fa yakûn*). In other words, God gives *kawn* to the thing, and *kawn* is its specific being. Once the thing has *kawn*, the word *makân* can designate where its being is found relative to the being of other things. Typically, *makân* is used for the visible world, because invisible, spiritual beings do not have a physical location. 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 *wujûd* is used. In this case, *wujûd* 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 *makân* 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 *makân* designates the place and locatedness of something in the visible world, the concept implies a certain fixity. However, 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 *zamân* 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. Permanence belongs to *wujûd*, 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-`Arabî points out that both time and place are demanded by the realm of *kawn wa fasâd*, or “being and corruption,” an expression that is applied philosophically to the whole universe. 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 *makân*. 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 *qadîm* and *al-sarmadî*, both of which mean eternal or outside of time or beyond time. In contrast to “eternal,” which is strictly an attribute of God, “temporal” (*zamânî*) refers to the changing relationships of created things.

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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 *tawhîd*: “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-`Arabî answers it is in terms of the word *dahr*, which can be translated as “Aeon,” or as “Time” with a capital T.

*Al-dahr* is often considered a name of God, and Ibn al-`Arabî treats it as such. In some passages he says that the word is synonymous with *zamân* - 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-`Arabî’s view, it is precisely this divine name that designates the relationship between eternity and time. To gain an insight into how this relationship works, we can look at the various ways in which the Qur’an talks about God.

In one verse the Qur’an mentions “the Days of God” (*ayyâm Allah*). Ibn al-`Arabî 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-`Arabî says that these Days belong to the name Aeon, which designates God as the principle and root of time. He points out that God has several Days of differing length, and that these are related to various divine names. Thus, the Qur’an (70:4) says that the angels and the Spirit rise 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, “the *Dhu al-Ma`ârij* Possessor of the Stairways.” The Qur’an (32:5) also speaks of a one-thousand-year day, and Ibn al-`Arabî explains that it is connected to the name *Rabb*, “Lord.” In addition, Ibn al-

`Arabî mentions several other divine days of varying length, all of them related to specific divine names and attributes.

The most all-embracing of the Days of God is that which Ibn al-`Arabî calls the “Day of the Essence” (*yawm al-dhât*). He finds a reference to it in the Qur’an (55:29): “Each day He is upon some task”. God’s Essence, denoted by the pronoun “He” (*Huwa*), is the absolute, real existence (*al-wujûd 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-`Arabî points out that, humanly speaking, it is the shortest of all God’s 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. Yet, 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 (57:4) puts it, “He is with you wherever you are,” then He is also with us “whenever” we are.

To come back to the divine name Aeon, Ibn al-`Arabî says that it designates God inasmuch as He is the possessor of days. Every “day” (*yawm*) is divided into night and daytime (*layl wa nahâr*). When Ibn al-`Arabî writes, “The Aeon is nothing but daytime and night,”<sup>6</sup> 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 they stay hidden. Each of the “Days of God” has cycles of manifestation and non-manifestation, or 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 nighttime of the indivisible Day of the Essence, it is the fact that God is forever

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<sup>6</sup> *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* (Cairo: 1911), vol. 4, p. 87, line18.

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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-`Arabî says in a short invocation that expresses the paradox of this situation, "Glory be to Him who veils Himself in His manifestation and becomes manifest in His veil!"<sup>7</sup>

In several passages, Ibn al-`Arabî tells us that the specific characteristic of the divine name Aeon is *tahawwul*, 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-`Arabî frequently reminds us, God's signs never repeat themselves, whether in time or in place.<sup>8</sup> 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 *huquq*, in every time and in every place, just as God perceives and acts upon these *huquq* 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-`Arabî 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. The Qur'an (6:59) says: "Not a leaf falls, but He knows it". So, all things are permanent in the knowledge of God. They do, in fact, have fixed identities, and we can be sure that our

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3: 547.12. The paradox of the veil is a common theme not only in Ibn al-`Arabî (see *Self-Disclosure*, Chapters 3--4), but also in Sufi literature. See William Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2000), Chapter 10.

<sup>8</sup> See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, SYNY: 1989), Chapter Six.

persons are eternal in the presence of God's eternal knowledge. However, everything within the created universe, which is the domain of *kawn wa fasâd*, "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-qâ'il*, God says "*kun*" - "Be!" - in the Day of the Essence, so He is always recreating *kawn* and *makân*. And as Aeon, *al-Dahr*, He manifests his names and attributes in the diversity of His Days, whose daytimes and nights display and conceal the never-ending signs of God.

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This brief summary of Ibn al-`Arabî's view of time and place should help make clear that the perspective of *tahqîq* 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 *tahqîq* and modern thought is so stark that it might be imagined that there is no relationship between the discourse of Ibn al-`Arabî and that of modern thinkers. In one sense, this is true. However, from another point of view, *tahqîq* 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 in contemporary theories of reality, theories which themselves are constantly being modified by the changing circumstances of historical becoming: the never-ending, never-repeating display of God's signs.

We should remember first that according to Ibn al-`Arabî, 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.

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This is precisely *tahqîq*. If we remove things from the context of the divine signs - which are the divine faces or the divine *huquq* - then we have disassociated things from God. By doing so, we have negated *tawhîd* 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 *tahqîq*, every knowledge that is not built on finding the *huquq* of things and acting in accordance with them 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 not to extend “deed” (*amal*) to include every sort of activity. Rather, “knowledge” designates true and proper knowledge, and “deed” designates right and proper activity, or what the Qur’an calls “wholesome deeds” (*amal sâlih*). Knowledge and deeds of this sort can be achieved only by recognizing and acting upon the *huquq* 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, from the perspective of *tahqîq*, any knowledge not built on recognizing both the objective and the subjective reality of things is in fact ignorance. Although it purports to explain things, what it ignores is far more significant and far more real than what it takes into account. What it ignores is precisely the *huquq* that give divine, cosmic, and human significance to all things.

One of the many implications of the perspective of *tahqîq* is found in the issue of morality and ethics. Since this alone is a complex problem, let me limit my concluding remarks by suggesting what *tahqîq* 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 *huquq*. 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. The predominant view among practicing scientists and popular scientism<sup>9</sup> has been and continues to be that “objective knowledge” is value-free.

From the standpoint of *tahqîq*, 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 which is rooted in the reality of things. The “reality of things” is the One Real Existence, the Unique *Haqq*, the Absolute Object who is also the Absolute Subject. In God, subject and object converge, because they are two sides of the same reality. In Ibn al-`Arabî’s terms, the divine root (*al-asl al-ilâhî*) 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`lûm*) is Himself along with the realities of all things that have 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 dissociate object from subject and then maintain that the known thing has no divine rights, that it makes no claims upon us as human subjects. No, all things have rights and all things have claims. Anyone who wants to investigate the “objective” truth must at the same time investigate the “subjective” truth. Not to do so is to ignore the *haqq* of both the thing and the

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<sup>9</sup> By “popular scientism” I mean the prevalent belief that science provides the only true and reliable knowledge about things, objects, and reality itself.

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human subject, *huquq* that are rooted in the Absolute *Haqq*. It is, in other words, to ignore *tawhîd*, which is God's first claim upon us. To ignore *tawhîd* is to fall into *shirk*, or "associating" other principles with God, that is, other *huquq* with the Absolute *Haqq*. As the Qur'an makes explicit, *shirk* is the one sin that God will not forgive. This teaching alone should be more than enough to make modern Muslim scientists pause for thought, given that their science neither begins nor ends with God.

Modern thought has no access to the *huquq* of things, so talk of ethics and morality is typically based on 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. Therefore, without a knowledge of the *huquq* of the human selves who constitute 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 (that is, "specialization"), from separating things from 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 discussion of human nature and ethics never gives 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`âd*, the "return" to God after death, which is the third principle of Islamic faith. *Ma`âd* is a topic that was discussed constantly by the Muslim "scientists," the great representatives of the Islamic intellectual tradition. *Tahqîq* 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-`Arabî that science is fundamentally flawed and ultimately *bâtil*. *Bâtil* is the Qur'anic opposite of *haqq*. It can be translated as "unreal, vain, null, void." Modern science is *bâtil* not only because it ignores the *huquq* of things, but also because it cannot avoid ignoring the *huquq* 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 *huquq* that belong to the actual stuff of reality. It follows that such modern learning is incompatible with *tahqîq*, that is, with giving things their *huquq*.

This incompatibility is one of the keys to the disastrous policies of many Muslim countries in the twentieth century. Muslim intellectuals who have played influential roles in modern 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.

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None the less, 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 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 think about reality itself.

The idea that the knowledge of objects can be disengaged from the knowledge of the knowing subject, not to mention the knowledge of God, contradicts every principle of Islamic thought, beginning with *tawhîd*. Only ignorance of the Islamic worldview could lead Muslims to think in 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 to 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-`Arabî’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 *huquq* of things. By rejecting the *haqq* of individual things,

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scholars and scientists reject the Absolute *Huquq*, 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 *huquq* will never allow us to know the depths of the universe and ourselves.