

THE TRANSCENDENT ETHICS OF *TARBIYA*: IBRAHIM NIASSE'S *MAQĀMĀT AL-DĪN AL-THALĀTH*

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Highest virtue is not virtuous and that is why it is virtuous. — Lao Tzu¹

Virtues, I take leave of you for evermore. Now shall mine heart be more free and more in peace than it hath been before . . . Oh I was then your servant, but now I am delivered out of your thralldom. — Marguerite Porete²

[The final outcome of the knower (‘ārīf)] is when he is just as he was where he was before he was — Dhū’l Nūn al-Miṣrī³

A 2012 Pew Charitable Trust study found that Sufism is more popular in West Africa than any other region in the world,⁴ and this fact is due in large part to the efforts of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1395/1975), the founder of the largest branch of the Tijāniyya, the most popular Sufi order in Sub-Saharan Africa. Current estimates put membership of Niasse’s branch of the Tijānī order, called the Fayḍa, between the tens of millions to 100 million,⁵ making it one of the largest Sufi movements

1. Lao Tzu, *Lao-Tzu: Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang Tui Texts*, trans. by Robert Henricks (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 7.

2. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, translated by M. N. (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1927), 12.

3. Mohammed Rustom, “The Sufi Teachings of Dhū’l-Nūn,” *Sacred Web* 24 (2009), 74.

4. With 92% of Senegalese Muslims, 55% of Chadian Muslims, 47% of Nigerien Muslims, and 37% of Nigerian and Ghanaian Muslims reporting that they belong to a Sufi order. See Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity,” accessed April 28th, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-1-religious-affiliation/>.

5. Ibrahim Niasse [Shaykh Ibrāhīm Inyās], *The Removal of Confusion Concerning the Flood of the Sainly Seal Aḥmad al-Tijānī*, trans. Zachary Wright, Muhtar Holland, and Abdullahi Okene (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), vi.

in the world. The popularity of this movement is largely due to Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's unique spiritual training, or *tarbiya*,⁶ which is supposed to bring disciples to the realization of *ma'rifat Allāh*, direct knowledge of God, much more rapidly and with less difficulty than other methods. While the exact process and litanies of this method are kept secret, Niasse has described the process in several works, one of the most influential of which is entitled "The Three Stations of Religion" (*Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth*). Based on an earlier Tijānī manual of spiritual training (the Mauritanian Tijānī scholar, Ibn Anbūja's (d. 1283/1867) *Mizāb al-raḥma*, which is in turn based on the Andalusian scholar Muḥammad al-Anṣārī al-Sāḥilī's (d. 754/1353) *Bughyat al-sālik fī ashraf al-masālik*),⁷ it describes the stations (*maqāmāt*) on the spiritual path to *ma'rifa* according to the ternary of the hadith of Gabriel: *Islām*, *Īmān*, and *Iḥsān*. Niasse further divides each station (*maqām*) into three stages (*manāzil*), yielding the following nine stages (*manāzil*): *Islām*: repentance, integrity, reverence; *Īmān*: sincerity, pure devotion, serenity; *Iḥsān*: observing, witnessing, and knowledge. Each of these nine stages is divided according to its meaning and nature for the masses (*al-ʿawāmm*), the elite (*al-khāṣṣa*), and the elite of the elite (*khāṣṣat al-khāṣṣa*). The stages from serenity onwards are only for the elite.

In this short treatise, Niasse describes the state of consciousness and behavior corresponding to each stage, characterizes each with a verse or verses of the Qur'an, and associates each stage with a particular ontological/cosmological presence (*ḥaḍra*). The path to *ma'rifa* is described in terms in which the ethical, existential, and epistemological are intimately intertwined until they are completely inseparable in the attainment of *ma'rifa*—a station which admits of no division or duality. In this article, I will briefly discuss the relationship between ethics, epistemology, and ontology in Sufi practice and theory before turning to the particular genre of *maqāmāt* literature to which Niasse's work belongs and its unique perspective on ethics, then presenting a translation of the work. I will conclude with a brief discussion of Tijānī (and broader Sufi) *ma'rifa*-based moral epistemology, contrasting the ethical paradigm exemplified in Niasse's treatise with contemporary academic ethical paradigms.

Ethics, Epistemology, and Ontology in Sufism and Philosophy

One of the more difficult aspects of studying and translating Sufi ethical works in the contemporary academic context is the way in which these Sufi works combine and even unite discussions of epistemology, ontology, and ethics, which are usually considered separately in contemporary academic discourses. *Ma'rifa*, the direct knowledge of God, which is the subject of most Sufi discourse, is described

6. For more on the history and controversies surrounding *tarbiya* in West African Sufism, see Niasse, *The Removal of Confusion*, 1–16, 89–98, and 151–168, and Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67–94.

7. See Rüdiger Seesemann, "A New Dawn for Sufism? Spiritual Training in the Mirror of Nineteenth Century Literature," in Chih, Rachida, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, and Rüdiger Seesemann, eds. *Sufism, Literary Production, and Printing in the Nineteenth Century* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2015), 279–298, and Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood*, 67–94.

as existential and sometimes even as a mode of being (or Being itself),⁸ as well as having ethical and moral prerequisites and concomitants. Ethical perfection is typically described as a prerequisite of *ma'rifa* or as being identical with or a result of *ma'rifa* itself.⁹ This stands in sharp contrast to modern academic discussions about knowledge in which knowledge of certain facts (such as the practices of the meat industry or the environmental cost of certain goods or activities) may affect and influence one's ethical life, but forms of knowledge are rarely, if ever, described as having ethical prerequisites (e.g., being cruel or a jerk does not prevent one from learning mathematics, logic, or philosophy (even ethics)).

However, within Sufi discourse and practice, the tight connection and ultimate inseparability of knowledge, being, and ethics is perhaps best summed up in the following aphorism of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), which plays with the semantic range of the Arabic root, *w-j-d*: “Know that Being [*wujūd*], amongst the Folk, is finding/consciousness [*wijdān*] of the Real in ecstasy [*wajd*].”¹⁰ In other words, since *ma'rifa* is existential knowledge, it is a mode of being—in fact, it is an ideal mode of being—and since virtue is defined as the perfection of the human mode of being and the source of felicity (*sa'āda*), this blissful, noetic, and ethically ideal mode of being is identified with the being/consciousness of the Real Itself. *Ma'rifa* is not just knowledge of God; it is, in a sense, God's knowledge,¹¹ and thus requires the annihilation of the knowing subject and the realization of its conformity to or identity with the Divine Reality. Elsewhere in his *Fūtūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn al-ʿArabī, like al-Ghazālī and numerous Sufi authors both before and after him, equates the descriptions of attaining human perfection through realization (*tahaqquq*) with “assuming the traits of the Divine Names” (*takhalluq bi-akhlāq/asmā' Allāh*), and the more philosophical concept of “becoming similar to the God” (*tashabbuh bi'llāh*):

This is why the philosophers allude to the fact that the servant's desired goal is becoming similar (*tashabbuh*) to the God, while the Sufis say concerning the same thing, “assuming the traits [*takhalluq*] of the names.” The expressions are different, but the meaning is one. We beseech and implore God that He not veil us from our servitude when we assume the traits of the divine names!¹²

As this quote suggests, this perspective was not foreign to the world of ancient philosophy, whose various schools characterized their goal of wisdom (*sophia*) as an ideal human state that combined knowledge, virtue (*aretê*),¹³ and happiness (*eudaimonia*). As Pierre Hadot writes:

Thus, philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to

8. William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 3 and 148–149.

9. *Ibid.*, 380–381.

10. Quoted in William Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 212. Annemarie Schimmel writes, “In the overwhelming happiness of having found Him, man may be enraptured in ecstatic bliss. Nwiya has proposed . . . calling this state ‘instasy’ instead of ‘ecstasy’ since the mystic is not carried out of himself but rather into the depths of himself into the ‘ocean of the soul,’ as the poets might say.” See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 178.

11. This is why a possessor of *ma'rifa* is known as a “knower by God” (*ʿarif bi'llah*) instead of a “knower of God” since “only God knows God.”

12. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 326.

13. The semantic range of the Greek *aretê* is also somewhat similar to that of the Arabic *iḥsān*.

achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us “be” in a different way. . . . Wisdom, then, was a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness. . . . Although their methodologies differ, we find in all philosophical schools the same awareness of the power of the human self to free itself from everything which is alien to it, even if, as in the case of the Skeptics, it does so via the mere refusal to make any decision.¹⁴

The strong equation, in Plato’s Socratic dialogues (particularly the *Charmides*, *Meno*, *Gorgias*, *Euthydemus*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Laws*, and *Apology*) of knowledge and virtue, can be understood in a similar way.¹⁵ Wisdom, as an ideal mode of being, knowing, and life, unites ethics, epistemology, and ontology. According to Hadot, ancient philosophical texts, like Sufi works, tended to place a premium on the practice of philosophy over philosophical discourse. As Aristotle argued (and the Neo-Platonists and Islamic philosophers repeated), the purpose of ethics is to become good, not merely to know about “goodness”; but in becoming “good,” new vistas of knowledge and divine contemplation open up to a sound intellect unimpaired by passions or base attachments.¹⁶ As Hadot writes,

But philosophy itself—that is, the philosophical way of life — is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act, which consists in *living* logic, physics, and ethics. In this case, we no longer study logical theory—that is, the theory of speaking and thinking well — we simply think and speak well. We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate the cosmos. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way.¹⁷

Given this “practical” nature of ancient philosophy and Sufism alike, it is important to recognize that texts from these traditions emerge from typically in-person and oral or epistolary teaching and training contexts and that these texts were and are used *ritually* in order to cultivate a particular mode of being, instead of merely as a doctrinal exposition or discussion of the ethical life. They were and are intended to be used more like a GPS than an atlas. Turning to Hadot again, we find:

14. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 265–266.

15. See Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Virtue is Knowledge: The Moral Foundations of Socratic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 5–11.

16. As he writes in *The Nichomachean Ethics*, “But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue. If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything. This would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him. It would be strange, then, if he were to choose not the life of his self but that of something else. And what we said before will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest.” (Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 195–196.). Moreover, in both Aristotle and Sufi accounts, the sweetness of all that is morally good and the repugnance of all that is morally bad becomes innately or even intuitively clear. See Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 159.

17. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 267.

We can immediately foresee the consequences of this distinction, formulated by the Stoics but admitted by the majority of philosophers, concerning the relationship between theory and practice. An Epicurean saying puts it clearly: “Vain is the word of that philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man.” Philosophical theories are in the service of the philosophical life. That is why, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, they were reduced to a theoretical, systematic, highly concentrated nucleus, capable of exercising a strong psychological effect, and easy enough to handle so that it might always be kept close at hand (*procheiron*). Philosophical discourse was not systematic because it wanted to provide a total, systematic explanation of the whole of reality. Rather, it was systematic in order that it might provide the mind with a small number of principles, tightly linked together, which derived greater persuasive force and mnemonic effectiveness precisely from such systematization. Such sayings summed up, sometimes in striking form, the essential dogmas, so that the student might easily relocate himself within the fundamental disposition in which he was to live.¹⁸

Much of Sufi literature shares in this characterization, as its systemization serves the similar functions of enhancing the persuasive force, mnemonic effectiveness, and reorientation of the reader, listener, or reciter of the text.

Sufi Ethical Texts in Context: The *Maqāmāt* Genre

This dynamic can especially be observed in the *Maqāmāt* genre of Sufi literature, to which Niasse’s *Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth* belongs. Often written in terse, aphoristic, or rhymed prose or poetry with more expansive prose commentaries,¹⁹ this genre of literature divided up the Sufi path to spiritual and ethical perfection into various fleeting states (*aḥwāl*) and more permanent stages (*manāzil*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) of spiritual–ethical–epistemic development. Typically, these works describe in detail the virtues or inner dispositions (*akhlāq*), comportment (*adab*), psycho-spiritual states (*aḥwāl*), and forms of knowledge (*ma‘ārif*) that characterize and are appropriate for those occupying each station, with reference to verses of the Qur’an, ḥadīth, sayings of Sufi masters, and reference to the author’s own experiences and those of his disciples and colleagues. One of the earliest genres, or tropes, of Sufi literature, the *maqāmāt* appear in the writings of Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/810), Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830), al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī (d. 234/874), and especially, Dhū’l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 248/861), who, according to the early Sufi hagiographer, al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), was the first to classify “the order of the states and the stations of the folk of sanctity.”²⁰ They feature prominently in the next generation of Sufi “classics”: Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s (d. 386/996) *Qūt al-qulūb* [The nourishment of hearts], Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj’s

18. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 267.

19. Such as ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī’s (d. 481/1089) classic of the genre, *Manāzil al-sā‘irīn*, which is written in rhymed prose.

20. See Khalil, *Repentance*, 80.

(d. 378/988) *Kitāb al-ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* [The book of acquaintance with the path of the Sufis], several of al-Sulamī's works including *Jawāmi' ādāb al-ṣūfiyya* [A collection of Sufi modes of conduct] and *Mas'alāt darajāt al-ṣādiqīn fī'l-taṣawwuf* [The degrees of the Righteous in Sufism],²¹ al-Qushayrī's (d. 465/1072) *al-Risāla*, al-Hujwārī's (d. 469/1077) *Kashf al-mahjūb* [Unveiling of the veiled], and especially 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī's (d. 481/1089) *Ṣad Maydān* [One hundred plains] and *Manāzil al-sā'irīn* [Stages of the travelers]. This genre of Sufi literature has remained popular, featuring prominently in the works of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ruzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209), Shihāb al-Dīn 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), and virtually all major later Sufi authors.²² These classics continue to be studied, taught, and commented upon, and new works in this genre (such as Niasse's) continue to be produced to the present day. But how are these texts used?

Typically, these texts describe their own schemas as somewhat heuristic; for example, Anṣārī states in the introduction to his *Manāzil al-sā'irīn*, "A few devoted seekers wanted to learn about the stages (*manāzil*) of the people who take the journey towards God . . . So I wrote this book in chapters and sections . . . and arranged these stages into one hundred stations (*maqāmāt*), and divided the book into ten sections."²³ Most of the *maqāmāt* literature appears to describe a linear progression of permanent stations, typically beginning with the station of *tawba* (repentance) and ending with that of *maḥabba* (love) or *ma'rifa* (knowledge), achieved by the efforts of *sulūk* (spiritual wayfaring/discipline), with each subsequent station including and building upon those that came before. However, in his introduction to his *Manāzil*, al-Anṣārī quotes Junayd (d. 297/910) to explain that, "the servant may be transported from one state to a higher one, though a remnant of the previous state may remain in him whereby he would oversee the previous state and rectify it."²⁴ Furthermore, in the same introduction, al-Anṣārī mentions that different spiritual wayfarers may go through the stations in different orders depending on their constitution, conditions, and determination.²⁵ So while, at first glance, much of the *maqāmāt* literature may seem to describe the path to ethical perfection as an almost mechanical, step-by-step process, these stations and their structure should not be taken as a literal description of temporal development, but rather as descriptions of related modes of ethical perfection. Indeed, a closer look at the *maqāmāt* genre reveals that its portrayal of the spiritual path is significantly more nuanced and complex than such a linear reading would suggest, especially in expansive works like Ibn al-'Arabī's massive *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, but also in shorter works like al-Sulamī's *Darajāt*.

21. Kenneth Honerkamp, "A Sufi Itinerary of Tenth Century Nishapur Based on a Treatise by Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 17, no. 1 (2006): 43–67.

22. For a summary of later (8th–14th / 14th–20th) *maqāmāt* and related Sufi literature, see J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 151–161.

23. See Mukhtar Ali, "The 'Doctrine of Love' in 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī's *Manāzil al-sā'irīn* with Critical Paraphrase of 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī's Commentary," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016), 142, and 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī, *Stations of the Sufi Path*, trans. Nahid Angha (Cambridge, UK: Archetype, 2010), 50.

24. Ali, "The 'Doctrine of Love' in 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī's *Manāzil al-sā'irīn*," 143.

25. *Ibid.*

Thus the systematization and structure of *maqāmāt* literature functions to orient and frame Sufi ritual practices and onto-epistemo-ethical development within the context of the Qur'an, hadith and other canonical literature, serving as an encouragement and enticement for novices; a diagnostic guide for initiates seeking orientation, understanding, and discursive expressions of their own experiences; and a discursive tool for masters seeking to help guide their disciples towards the goal of the Sufi path. In my own research among Ibrahim Niasse's branch of the Tijāniyya in Senegal in 2013–2014, I noticed that the schemas represented in Niasse's works (of which *Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth* is but one) were used not only by disciples to describe their evolution and experiences during and after the often-bewildering process of *tarbiya*, but that these schemas were also used by masters to assign different spiritual exercises such as invocations (*adhkār*) and recitations of verses of poetry to disciples depending on the *maqām* or *ḥaḍra* (presence) or *daraja* (level) they were perceived to be occupying at the time. Thus, while it is important not to conflate such heuristic discursive descriptions of the Sufi path with the individual experiences of initiates, these kinds of texts can sometimes not only describe, but also structure Sufi ritual practice and ethical development. Most importantly, however, such *maqāmāt* texts are not meant to develop a merely theoretical notion of ethics, but rather to facilitate the existential journey through these various stations towards ethical perfection.

Another nearly ubiquitous feature of the *maqāmāt* genre is that traversing these various stations and stages is described as following in the footsteps of the Prophet, with the verse, *If you love God, then follow me, God will love you* (3:31), being frequently cited in this regard. The *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* is often cited alongside this verse to describe this state of “belovedness” as the end or goal of the path: “The most beloved things with which My servant draws nearer to Me is what I have enjoined upon him; and My servant keeps drawing nearer to Me through performing supererogatory devotions until I love him, and when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his leg with which he walks . . .”²⁶ Thus, the tremendous character (*khuluq ‘azīm* (68:4)) of the Prophet, which is the model and end of the Sufi path of ethical perfection, is equated with the Divine characteristics (*akhlāq Allah*), especially in the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī.²⁷ A fascinating concomitant of this transcendent characterization of the end of the Sufi path of ethical perfection is that it is often described in apophatic terms, which sometimes turn the linear structure of the *maqāmāt* back upon itself to form a circle. For example, in al-Sulamī's *Darajāt*, the “final” station of *ma‘rifā* is “marked by a return to the initial stages of the journey after the journeyer has traversed all the stations a first time.”²⁸ At the end of his *Ṣad Maydān* [Hundred fields], al-Anṣārī writes, “These one hundred fields are all drowned in the field of love (*maḥabbat*); the one-hundred and first field is love: ‘He loves them and they love Him’ (Q 5:54).

26. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 787.

27. Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Banner of Praise,” trans. Cecilia Twinch, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 21 (1997): 45–58.

28. Honerkamp, “A Sufi Itinerary of Tenth Century Nishapur,” 53.

‘Say: “If you love God”’ (Q 3:31). Love is three stations: the first is truthfulness, the middle drunkenness, and the last nonbeing.”²⁹ To Dhū’l Nūn is also attributed the saying, “[The first step taken by the gnostic] is bewilderment, then poverty, then union, and then bewilderment again.”³⁰

The Station of No Station

This circular, apophatic description of the end of the Sufi path is a central theme of the tremendously influential writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī, who calls this transcendence of all stations the “station of no station” (*maqām lā maqām*). Deriving this term from the Qur’anic verse, *O People of Yathrib, you have no station (lā muqām), so return!* (33:13),³¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī explains that each station, by virtue of being one station and not another, is limited, and thus true perfection can only be attained by transcending all stations to become nondelimited, just as the Real is nondelimited:

The highest of all human beings are those who have no station. The reason for this is that the stations determine the properties of those who stand within them, but without doubt, the highest of all groups themselves determine the properties. They are not determined by properties. They are the divine ones (*al-ilāhiyyūn*), since the Real is identical with them, and He is “the strongest of those who determine properties” (95:8). This belongs to no human being except only the Muḥammadans . . . Hence the possessors of stations are those whose aspirations (*himma*) have become limited to certain goals and ends. When they reach those goals, they find in their hearts other, new goals, and these goals which they have reached become the beginning stages for other goals. Hence the goals determine their properties, since they seek them, and such is their situation forever. But the Muḥammadan has no such property and witnesses no goal. His vastness is the vastness of the Real, and the Real has no goal in Himself which His Being might ultimately reach. The Real is witnessed by the Muḥammadan, so he has no ultimate goal in his witnessing . . .³²

Occupying this “station of no station,” the Muḥammadans are those who best follow in the footsteps of their namesake and are best characterized by the Divine attributes of “vastness” and “nondelimitation.” Thus, the path of these Muḥammadans is not a linear one of progressive knowledge, but rather a continuous circular orbit of “bewilderment” (*ḥayra*) since they have no particular goal toward which they are striving, as their goal is the omnipresent Real. As Ibn al-‘Arabī writes in his *Ringstones of Wisdom*:

That is the bewilderment [*ḥayra*] of the Muḥammadan
 “Lord, increase me in bewilderment in you . . .”
 For the bewildered one has a round [*dawr*]
 and a circular motion around the axis

29. Ali, “The ‘Doctrine of Love’ in ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī’s *Manāzil al-sā’irīn*,” 144.

30. Mohammed Rustom, “The Sufi Teachings of Dhu’l-Nun,” *Sacred Web* 24 (2009): 73.

31. He also equates it with the “Praiseworthy Station” (*al-maqām al-maḥmūd*) of 17:79. See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 376-379.

32. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 376.

which he never leaves
 But the master of the long path
 tends away from what he aims for
 seeking what he is already in
 A master of fantasies which are his goal

 He has a “from” and a “to”
 and what is between them

 But the master of the circular movement
 has no starting point
 that “from” should take him over

 and no goal that he should be ruled by “to”

 He has the more complete existence
 And is given the totality of the words and wisdoms.³³

To give a tangible analogy, if we liken each station to a color, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, the goal is not to achieve the color violet (the highest frequency), since even this station is limited by being one color and not another. Instead, the “highest station” and best goal is to become transparent—to become capable of taking on all colors (or stations), being limited by none of them, and transforming with them at every instant. Ibn al-‘Arabī describes the dynamic perfection of the “station of no station” playing on the Arabic root (*q-l-b*) of the word for heart (*qalb*) and fluctuate (*taqallub*):

The most all-inclusive specification is that a person not be delimited by a station whereby he is distinguished. So the Muḥammadan is only distinguished by the fact that he has no station specifically. His station is that of no station. The meaning of this is as follows: A man may be dominated by his state so that he knows only by means of it, is attributed to it, and is designated by it. But the relationship of the stations to the Muḥammadan is the same as the relationship of the names to God. He does not become designated by a station which is attributed to him. On the contrary, in every breath, in every moment, and in every state he takes the form which is required by that breath, moment, and state. Hence his delimitation does not last. For the divine properties are diverse at every moment, and he is diverse in accordance with their diversity. God is “each day upon some task” (55:29), and so also is the Muḥammadan. This is indicated by God’s words, “Surely in that there is a reminder for him who has a heart” (50:37). He did not say “rational faculty,” which would delimit the person. The “heart” only has this name because of its fluctuation in states and affairs continuously and with each breath.³⁴

Ibn al-‘Arabī also describes this dynamic state of perfection as “destitution” since the Muḥammadan is completely transparent and passive before the Divine, and its epistemic dimension as “bewilderment” (*ḥayra*) since it is formless, not fixed, and undefinable. In several places, Ibn al-‘Arabī equates this bewilderment (*ḥayra*) with

33. Quoted in Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 101–102.

34. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 377.

the highest knowledge of God,³⁵ since the Real is so transcendent that it can neither be defined, delimited, represented, reached, or exhausted, but It also transcends this transcendence, taking on all definitions, delimitations, representations, and so forth. Similarly, the Muḥammadan possessor of the “station of no station” transcends all stations and states by taking them all on or flowing through all of them, being neither delimited by them nor their absence. Ibn al-ʿArabī writes,

The bewilderment of the gnostic in the Divine Side is the greatest of bewilderments, since he stands outside of restriction and delimitation . . . He possesses all forms, yet no form delimits him. That is why the Messenger of God used to say, “God, increase my bewilderment in Thee!” For this is the highest station, the clearest vision, the nearest rank, the most brilliant locus of manifestation, and the most exemplary path . . .³⁶

Ibn al-ʿArabī’s successor and stepson, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), describes his own experience of the bewilderment of the “station of no station” in the following way:

The tasting of the perfect human beings has affirmed that everything is in everything. Nothing has any essential stability in something from which it cannot change. On the contrary, everything is on the verge of being transformed into something else . . . This is the situation of all of *wujūd* [being/consciousness] . . . This constant flow is the divine journey from the first, nonmanifest Unseen to the realm of the Visible . . . No one tastes this journey and reaches its source except he whose essence has come to be nondelimited. Then the bonds are loosened—the contingent properties, states, attributes, stations, configurations, acts, and beliefs—and he is not confined by any of them. By his essence he flows in everything, just as *wujūd* [being/consciousness] flows in the realities of all things without end or beginning . . . When the Real gave me to witness this tremendous place of witnessing, I saw that its possessor has no fixed entity and no reality.³⁷

Thus, the linear progression of a hierarchy of stations of ethical perfection, which the *maqāmāt* literature seems to present at first blush, is transcended and complicated by Ibn al-ʿArabī’s formulation of the “station of no station” of the bewildered Muḥammadans.³⁸ In one form or another, this “station of no station” is found in much of the *maqāmāt* literature, both before and after Ibn al-ʿArabī, such as Niasse’s treatise.

35. In fact, Ibn al-ʿArabī declares that, “It is the purpose of Divine Guidance to lead humankind to bewilderment (*ḥayra*), so that they learn that the Divine Order Itself is entirely bewilderment”; Ibn al-ʿArabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, trans. Caner Dagli (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2004), 256.

36. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 381. The passage concludes, “One of the Sufis said, ‘Whatever you imagine within yourself or give form to in your imagination, God is different from that.’ He is both right and wrong. He makes manifest and he veils. Another one said, ‘God is not proven by any proof, nor conceived of by any rational faculties. Rational faculties reach Him not with their reflective powers, and gnostic sciences fail to call Him down with their invocations.’ For when He is invoked, He is invoked through Him. And through Him He is reflected upon and conceived of. He is the rational faculty of the rational thinkers, the reflection of the reflectors, the invocation of the invokers, the proof of the provers. Were He to come out of a thing, it would cease to be. And were He to be within a thing, it would cease to be.”

37. William Chittick, “The Central Point: Qūnawī’s Role in the School of Ibn ʿArabī,” *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society* 35 (2004), 40.

38. In fact, one could extend Ibn al-ʿArabī’s identification of the Sufi “characterization by Divine traits” (*takhalluq bi akhlāq/asmāʾ Allāh*) with the philosophical “similarity to the God” (*tashabbuh biʾllāh*) to include “bewilderment in God” (*tahayyur fiʾllāh*): *Takhalluq* = *tashshabuh* = *tahayyur*. In fact, this Akbarī bewilderment bears some resemblance with the Socratic ignorance and *aporia* (*ḥayra* and *aporia* are also linguistically similar), and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s anti-systematic dialectic of bewilderment is also similar in some ways to Plato’s aporetic dialogues.

Transcendent Ethics: The Virtue of no Virtues

Ibn al-ʿArabī was far from the first or only author to describe the goal of the Sufi path and the perfection of the human state in such ways. The Shaykh al-Akbar frequently quotes sayings of the early Sufis Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī and Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) to indicate that they had attained this “station of no station.” For example, he writes, “The people of perfection have realized all stations and states and passed beyond these to the station above both majesty and beauty, so they have no attribute and no description. It was said to Abū Yazīd, ‘How are you this morning?’ He replied, ‘I have no morning and no evening; morning and evening belong to him who becomes delimited by attributes, and I have no attributes.’”³⁹ Several sayings of Dhūʿl-Nūn al-Miṣrī have also been interpreted in this regard such as the previously cited, “[The first step taken by the gnostic] is bewilderment, then poverty, then union, and then bewilderment again”; “[The final outcome of the gnostic] is when he is just as he was where he was before he was”; and “the gnostic does not adhere to a single state—he only adheres to his Lord in every state.”⁴⁰ In the *Sirr al-Asrār* [Secret of secrets], ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166) (or more likely, Yūsuf al-Kūrānī (d. 768/1367)⁴¹) writes, “the one who reaches the limits of this path has neither form nor shape nor colour.”⁴² Al-Buṣīrī’s *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* declares, “For the virtue of the Messenger of God has no limit, so it cannot be expressed by the mouth of any speaker,”⁴³ and Ibn al-Fāriq’s (d. 632/1235) *Nazm al-sulūk* is even more explicit:

Let all names and allusions fall from me, stop stammering such
nonsense
They are only marks of the shape I fashioned
For my arrival is my parting, my nearness, being far;
My loving, my loathing, my beginning, my end. . .
I have no attribute; that is a stamp, as a name is a brand
But if you must, speak of me allusively or with metaphor⁴⁴

As Chittick notes, Ibn al-ʿArabī defines perfection as “being removed from attributes and effects,”⁴⁵ and this negative definition of ethical perfection is not unique to Sufism, but can also be found in the similarly Abrahamic–Neoplatonic mysticism of Meister Eckhart (d. 1328) and especially his older contemporary, Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), whose *Mirror of Simple Souls* controversially advanced a similar transcendence or abandonment of the virtues for the superior non-virtue of “love” and/or “humility”—nothingness before, and annihilation in,

39. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 376.

40. Rustom, “The Sufi Teachings of Dhūʿl-Nūn,” 74.

41. See Ahmed El Shamsy, “Returning to God through His Names: Cosmology and Dhikr in a Fourteenth-Century Sufi Treatise,” in *Essays in Islamic Philology, History, and Philosophy*, eds. William Granara, Roy P. Mottahedeh, Wheeler M. Thackston, and Alireza Korangy (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2016), 204–28.

42. ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, *The Secret of Secrets*, translated by Shaykh Tosun Bayrak (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 69.

43. Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad al-Buṣīrī, *The Mantle Adorned: Imam al-Būṣīrī’s Burda*, trans. Abdal Hakim Murad (London: The Quilliam Press, 2009), 61. The translation is mine.

44. Emil Homerin, *Umar ibn al-Fārid: Sufi Verse, Sainly Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 165, 167.

45. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 375.

God. As is the case of most Sufi literature, Porete's "virtue of no virtue" is not an incitement to immorality, but rather a call to go beyond the idolatry of the virtues and the individual human self to realize one's nothingness and transparency before God.⁴⁶ For Porete (as for many Sufis and Neoplatonist philosophers), the ordinary cultivation of the virtues is but a preparatory step for their transcendence.⁴⁷ She writes, "So may not the virtues be against virtues, but above them. If this may not be then were God subject to his virtues, and the virtues should be against the soul; but they have being from our Lord, for the profit of the [soul]."⁴⁸ Similar perspectives can also be found in the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu*; for example, "Therefore I say, the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame."⁴⁹

This perspective of transcendent ethics or the "virtue of no virtue" is assumed and posited by many later Sufi ethical texts, such as Niasse's *Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth*, and differs markedly from the kind of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics advanced by the likes of Anscombe, Williams, MacIntyre, and Nussbaum. While both transcendent ethics and neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics are primarily concerned with the *telos* of human flourishing,⁵⁰ the conceptions of the human and the broader metaphysics assumed in these approaches differ markedly. Approaches of transcendent ethics (ranging from the very different contexts of Taoism to Hellenic/Roman Neoplatonism, Christian mysticism, and Sufism) appear to share a view of human flourishing characterized by contemplative union with God, the One, or the Tao in which the greatest virtue and felicity is to be found not in cultivating particular virtues or a balance of character traits, but rather transcending all of them (and ordinary, individual identity and traits) to be transparent before or united with the

46. See David Kangas, "Dangerous Joy: Marguerite Porete's Good-bye to the Virtues," *The Journal of Religion* 91, no. 3 (2011): 299–319 and Danielle DuBois, "Natural and Supernatural Virtues in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*," *Journal of Medieval History* 43, no. 2 (2017): 174–192. In Porete's own words:

First: when a soul giveth herself to perfection she laboureth busily day and night to get virtues, by counsel of reason, and striveth with vices at every thought, at every word and deed that she perceiveth cometh of them, and busily searcheth [out] vices, them to destroy. Thus the virtues be mistresses, and every virtue maketh her to war with its contrary, the which be vices. Many sharp pains and bitterness of conscience feeleth this soul in this war. And these pains and passions be not only in the exercise of the spirit, by putting away vices in getting of virtues, but they be also of bodily exercise by commandments of virtues and by counsel of reason; to fast and wake, and to do penance in many sundry wises, and forsake all her own pleasures and all lusts and likings; and in the beginning of all this, it is oftentimes full sharp and full hard. But this she did all by commandments of virtues that were first ladies and mistresses of this soul. And she was subject to them all the while that she felt this pain and war within herself. But so long one may bite on the bitter bark of the nut, that at last one shall come to the sweet kernel. Right so, ghostly to understand, it fareth by those souls that be come to peace. They have so long striven with vices and wrought by virtues, that they may come to the nut kernel, that is, to the love of God, which is sweetness. And when the soul hath deeply tasted this love, so that this love of God worketh and hath his usages in her soul, then the soul is wondrous light and gladsome, and that is no marvel, for the sweet taste of love driveth out from the soul all pains and bitterness and all doubts and dreads. Then is she mistress and lady over the virtues, for she hath them all within herself, ready at her commandment, without bitterness or painfulness of feeling to the soul. And then this soul taketh leave of virtues [in respect] of the thralldom and painful travail of them that she had before, and now she is lady and sovereign, and they be subjects. When the soul wrought by commandment of virtues, then the virtues were ladies and she subject. And now that the virtues work by commandment of this soul, they be subjects to this soul, and this soul is lady over virtues. And thus it is meant that this soul taketh leave of virtues. (Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. M. N. (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1927), 12–13).

Porete's account bears a resemblance to Ibn al-'Arabi's previously cited description of the Muḥammadans determining the stations and not being determined by them.

47. For example, Plotinus writes of civic virtue as a kind of preparation for the higher virtues of purification, contemplation, and identity with the Divine Intellect. As he writes, the concern of the wise is "not to be out of sin, but to be God" (Enneads I 2.6.2–3) (see Giannis Stamatellos, "Plotinus: Virtue Ethics," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/plot-v-e/#SH4d>>, accessed April 14, 2020).

48. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 228.

49. Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

50. Although, strictly speaking, the former posits a *telos* of no *telos*, a goal of abandoning all goals.

Real, or God, or the Tao, which both transcends and flows through all virtues and all things. It is not to do good things with one's hand or to think good thoughts, but rather for God to be one's hand, thoughts, and thinker.⁵¹ As Ibrāhīm Niasse writes in his *Removal of Confusion*,

The heart has become the abode of the Manifest Truth, and God is his tongue with which he speaks. If such a person remembering [God in this way] were to strike a blow, God becomes his hand with which he strikes, and if he hears, God is his ear with which he hears. The Most High who is remembered has taken possession of the heart, so He controls it. He has taken possession of the limbs of the body, so He uses them for what is pleasing to Him. He has taken possession of the servant's character traits, so He operates them however He wills for the sake of His pleasure.⁵²

In the famous parable of the Greek and Chinese painters found in al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-ʿArabī, and Rūmī, it is to be the polished mirror (having no qualities itself) instead of the beautifully painted wall.⁵³ This is the depiction of the end and perfection of the Sufi path of ethical perfection in much of the *maqāmāt* literature, such as Niasse's short treatise, "The Three Stations of Religion," to which we will now turn.

Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, this short treatise is one of the most popular and influential descriptions of the process of *tarbiya* as practiced by Ibrāhīm Niasse's branch of the Tijāniya. As described in this text and others as well as interviews with disciples,⁵⁴ this process of *tarbiya* consists of a set of litanies (*awrād*) and invocations (*adhkār*) which Tijānī disciples practice (in addition to the ordinary Tijānī *wird* and *wazīfa* (daily litanies), the five daily prayers and other obligations of the *sharīʿa*) with the authorization and transmission (*talqīn*—literally "implantation") from and under the supervision and guidance of a qualified

51. To use another metaphor, Aristotelian virtue ethics often speaks about the cultivation of virtue like exercising to get a set of "six-pack" abs, something that is present in *potentia*, but takes intentional, disciplined exercise in order to actualize. Whereas in much of Sufi ethics, God is the possessor of all virtues, including real existence and agency, such that in the process of the "cultivation" of virtue, the agent, the acted upon, and the virtues are nothing other than God. In Aristotelian ethics, the moral agent acquires virtues, whereas in much of Sufi ethics, God "acquires" the moral agent, which never had any existence apart from God in the first place. Much as a "possessor" of *maʿrifā* is called a "knower by God" (*ʿārif bi-llāh*) instead of "a knower of God" in the Sufi tradition (because only God knows God) from an ethical standpoint, Sufi ethics means to be "good by God" because only God is good, and ultimately, only God is. Or in the language of the famous ḥadīth of *nawāfil*, "God is the virtue by which the Sufi is virtuous." However, this perspective does not negate the relative reality of the perspectives of personal and collective struggles and efforts to combat vices and practice virtues, which are also often discussed in Sufi literature; it rather provides an important metaphysical framework for these struggles and a perspective to which such efforts are hoped to lead.

52. Niasse, *The Removal of Confusion*, 47–48.

53. As the story goes, a certain king held a competition between Greek and Chinese artisans to see who could better decorate a room, with a curtain dividing the room into the two halves on which they were to work. The Greeks set about painting the most beautiful of compositions on their side of the room, but the Chinese artisans simply polished the walls of their side (Rumi reverses the nationalities of the artisans in his version). When time was up, the king marveled at the realistic paintings and decorations of the Greek side, but saw nothing on the Chinese side of the room. The Chinese artisans told the king to lift the curtain, and on those polished surfaces, the king saw all that the Greeks had painted in an even more beautiful form, and moreover, within those walls, he saw his form and those of the artisans, and the royal wonder increased. See Muhyiddīn Ibn al-ʿArabī, *The Alchemy of Human Happiness*, trans. Stephen Hiretstein (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2017), 116.

54. See Oludamini Ogunnaiké, *Deep Knowledge: Ways of Knowing in Ifa and Sufism, Two West African Intellectual Traditions* (College Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2020); Zachary Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niasse* (Boston: Brill, 2015); Joseph Hill, *Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); and Seesemann, *The Divine Flood*.

spiritual master (*shaykh murabbi*) who has already undergone the process himself. *Tarbiya* is supposed to lead the disciple to spiritual, noetic, ontological, and ethical maturity through the attainment of *maʿrifa*, direct, existential knowledge of the Real, in which the Real is both the knower and the known. Drawing on a long tradition of similar works,⁵⁵ Shaykh Ibrahim’s “Three Stations of Religion” describes the ternary from the ḥadīth of Jibrīl—*Islām*, *Īmān*, and *Iḥsān*—as three consecutive stations (*maqāmāt*) of the spiritual path. He further divides each station (*maqām*) into three stages, yielding nine stages: *Islām*: repentance, integrity, reverence; *Īmān*: sincerity, pure devotion, serenity; *Iḥsān*: observing, witnessing, and Knowledge. Each of these nine stages is divided according to its meaning and nature for the masses (*al-ʿawāmm*), the elite (*al-khāṣṣa*), and the elite of the elite (*khāṣṣat al-khāṣṣa*). The stages from serenity onwards are only for the elite. However, these divisions between common and elite are not fixed; in fact, the text implies and oral commentaries confirm that this schema involves a kind of spiraling motion in which the disciple can go through the stages of the masses, then the stages of the elite, and then the stages of the elite of the elite. The work describes ever-increasing stages of ethical, noetic, and existential perfection, culminating in the transcendence of all such stages in an apophatic description that joins together the last (*maʿrifa*) and first (*tawba*) stages. In its portrayal of the spiritual path as following in the footsteps of the Prophet, structural integration of ḥadīth and Qurʾanic verses, its spiraling and circular structure, and apophatic description of the “final” stage of *maʿrifa*, this dense work illustrates many of the features discussed in the previous sections. It is important to remember, however, that these distinctions are largely descriptive and heuristic, and that some disciples do not experience *tarbiya* as a gradual step-by-step process. While the initiating shaykhs will give disciples different instructions at different stages in the process, *tarbiya* appears to be more like the blooming of a flower or the cooking of rice than the construction of an Ikea chair. The “Three Stations of Religion” was written as a letter in response to a request from a disciple to outline the stages of the spiritual path. Below is a translation of the entire text.

55. As previously noted, Seesemann has demonstrated that Niasse’s treatise is a creative synthesis of an earlier Tijāni work, Ibn Anbūja’s *Mizāb al-raḥmah*, which is in turn largely based on a fourteenth-century work by the Andalusian scholar Muḥammad al-Anṣārī al-Sāhili. A similar schema can be found in Ibn ʿAjība’s *Book of Ascension to the Essential Truths of Sufism* (and in his commentary (*Īqāz al-himam*) on the *Wisdoms of Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh*). ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī’s *Manāzil al-sāʿirīn* also divides each station into three degrees, or levels (the generality, the elite, and the elite of the elite). Seesemann takes this work of Niasse’s as being constitutive of the method or process of *tarbiya*, writing, “Drawing on earlier models within and outside the Tijāni tradition (most notably the Andalusian fourteenth-century mystic Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad al-Sāhili), Niasse devised a method of spiritual training (*tarbiya*) . . .” (Rüdiger Seesemann, “Sufism in West Africa,” *Religion Compass* 4, no. 10 (2010), 611). However, I contend that this work is not a particular program of spiritual training, but rather one description amongst many of the process of this transformation. While Niasse’s description in “The Three Stations of Religion” is indirectly derived from the description given Sāhili’s work, these descriptions should not be confused with the process itself, which can be, and is, divided up into several different conceptual schemas.

The Three Stations of Religion

In the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate. The blessings of God and peace be upon our Lord Muḥammad and his family and companions.

All praise to God, the Peace (*al-Salām*), the Believer (*al-Muʾmin*), the Excellent (*Muḥsin*)⁵⁶—He is the King (*al-Mālik*), the Repenter (*al-Tawwāb*), the Compassionate (*al-Raḥīm*), the Watcher (*al-Raqīb*), the Guardian (*al-Muḥaymin*)—and greetings of peace upon the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*), the conscientious (*al-taqī*), the pure (*al-naqī*), the truthful (*al-ṣādiq*), the purely devoted (*al-mukhlis*), he who is perfumed by a magnificent character, the observer (*al-murāqib*), the witness (*al-mushāhid*), the source of the most perfect divine knowledge (*maʿrifā*), the slave, and the master to whom is attributed the attributes of the Supreme Master.⁵⁷ May the complete favor (*riḍwān*) of God be on the helper of the Truth by the Truth, the guide along the straight path, and upon his family in accordance with the reality of his rank and his tremendous degree.

I came upon your noble letter and sound discourse, O beloved [. . .] ʿUmar ibn Mālik [. . .], and I came upon your question regarding the three stations of religion and their stages, and the reality of these descriptions. And you have mentioned that the Sayyid, the Knower (*ʿarif biʾllāh*), ʿUbayda ibn Anbūja has discussed this in the *Mizāb*, but that after a long study of it, you didn't find anything convincing, so I will respond to you from what occurs to my mind . . .

And he said: “There is no god but God” (*Lā ilāha illāʾllāh*) makes up the three stations of religion: *Islām*, and *Īmān*, and *Iḥsān*. And *Islām* (Submission) is saying “There is no god but God,” *Īmān* (Faith) is knowing “There is no god but God,” and *Iḥsān* (Excellence) is the flowing of “There is no god but God” through the appropriate channels, and it is that which is said in a spiritual state, and the speech is God's. It is the noble word, the word of repentance (*tawba*), the word of reverence (*taqwā*), the word of excellence (*iḥsān*), the word of unity (*tawḥīd*), the word of goodness (*tība*). It has three levels, the first of which is the level of *Islām* (Submission), and it is establishing the appropriate speech and rulings in the earthly plane (*ḥaḍrat al-nāsūt*). The second level is the knowledge of it [“There is no god but God”], and it is the station of *Īmān* (Faith). The third level is that which is the speech of God, and this is the station of *Iḥsān* (Excellence). And these stations differ [from one point of view] and they do not differ insofar as they all revolve around “There is no god but God.”

But as for their own distinct stages, the first stage of *Islām* is *tawba* (repentance), and it is to abandon being ungrateful (*kufīr*)⁵⁸ for blessings. For each blessing, the blessed should thank and acknowledge the bestower of blessing; the opposite of

56. Here the author is foreshadowing the description of the three stations of *Islām*, *Īmān*, and *Iḥsān* with these three Divine Names.

57. Here the author is foreshadowing the nine stages of *tawba*, *istiḳāma*, *taqwā*, *ikhlās*, *ṣidq*, *tumaʾnīna*, *murāqaba*, *mushāhada*, and *maʿrifā* through these appellations of God and the Prophet, explaining that the Prophet's attributes are those of God.

58. The root *k-f-r* literally means to cover over, and *kufīr*, translated as disbelief in other contexts, is contrasted to *Īmān*, faith or belief.

thankfulness is ungratefulness (*kufr*). And the Sufi scholars say, it [repentance] is leaving behind every base trait for every resplendent trait. I say that in the case of the masses, the base [trait] is abandoning the obligatory and committing the forbidden (*ḥarām*) acts, and in the case of the elite, it is leaving the preferable (*mustahabb*) [acts] and committing disliked (*makrūh*) acts, and in the case of the elite of the elite, it is turning away from the [Divine] Presence, and this is forgetfulness. And this repentance (*tawba*) [of the elite of the elite] is the reality of repentance (*tawba*), because its reality is slaying of the *nafs* (carnal soul/ego) as God says, *Repent unto your Creator and slay your selves* (2:54). It is not seen, and it is not seeing your soul as really having any state or station, and that is the repentance from repentance (*al-tawba min al-tawba*). *Verily God loves the repenters* (2:222).

The second stage is integrity (*istiḳāma*), and it is traveling along the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaḳīm*) in ten qualities which God has numbered in Surat al-An‘ām: *Say: Come, I will recite that which your Lord has forbidden for you: That you ascribe no thing as partner unto Him and that you are virtuous to parents, and that you slay not your children out of fear of poverty—We provide for you and for them—and that you do not approach indecencies, whether open or concealed. And that you slay not the life which God hath made sacred, save in the course of justice. This He has commanded you, in order that you may understand. And approach not the wealth of the orphan, except in the best manner, till he reach maturity. Give full measure and full weight, in justice. We task no soul beyond its capacity. And if you give your word, do justice thereunto, even though it be (against) a kinsman; and fulfill the covenant of God. This He has commanded you that haply you may remember. And this is My straight path, so follow it* (6:151–3). The straight path is thus described, meaning that it is the appropriate actions that characterize it. The first of these is not associating anything with God, and the lack of ingratitude (*kufr*), and not killing a soul which God has forbidden, and not killing children out of fear of poverty, and leaving lewdness, apparent and hidden, and so forth.

And integrity (*istiḳāma*) is being established on the straight path, and this is the integrity of the masses. And the integrity (*istiḳāma*) of the elite is traveling on the straight path which is the Messenger of God, [which is] annihilation in him, loving him, and adopting his character outwardly and inwardly, and remembering and invoking blessings on and praying for him fervently and constantly—this is integrity. And the integrity (*istiḳāma*) of the elite of the elite is that there remains neither reticence nor grief, as God says, *Those who say: ‘Our Lord is God,’ and afterward have integrity, the angels descend upon them, saying: ‘Fear not, nor grieve, but hear good tidings of the paradise which ye are promised’* (41:30).

And the third stage [of *Islām*] is reverence (*taqwā*), and it is conforming to the commands (of God) and distancing oneself from His prohibitions outwardly and inwardly, in secret and openly. It is the greater part of integrity insofar as the commands are obligatory, recommended, prohibited, and forbidden, and the like. Conforming to the commands absolutely and avoiding the prohibitions absolutely, this is the reverence (*taqwā*) of the masses. And for the elite, it is that they remember Him, and do not forget Him; and thank Him and are not ungrateful to Him, and they

obey Him, and do not disobey Him. God says, *O you who believe, revere God as He should be revered* (3:102), and this is the level of the elite. Likewise, God says, *so revere of God as best you can* (64:16) and this is the level of the common. And the reverence (*taqwā*) of the elite of the elite is the absence of any thoughts other than God in the mind, even for a moment. As the knower (*al-‘arīf*) said:

If a desire other than you
Occurred to my mind inadvertently
I would consider it
As my apostasy⁵⁹

But this is the state of the knower (*‘arīf*) and the station of the unique, comprehensive pole (*quṭb*), and this is the versification of the speech of his state. However, that state is not necessary for the knower (*‘arīf*), and this reverence (*taqwā*) is what is alluded to in God’s saying, “Very God loves the reverent (*muttaqīn*)” (3:76).

The second station of religion is the level of Faith (*īmān*). Its first stage is sincerity (*ṣidq*) and it is righteous action out of obedience for God’s sake; God says, *It is not righteousness that you turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believes in God and the Last Day, the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets; and gives wealth, for His sake, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and performs the prayer and gives alms. And those who keep their oaths when they pledge them, and those who are patient in misfortune and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere* (2:177). This is the sincerity of the masses. The sincerity of the elite is sincerity in loving the Divine Essence, in that union with It is more beloved to him than everything in existence, Its Name is more beloved to him than any other name, and both of them are more beloved to him than all speech, and Its pleasure is more beloved to him than all pleasure, and Its beloved is more beloved to him than his beloved. This is the sincerity of the elite. God says, “*Be with the sincere*” (9:119). The possessor of this station does not fix his mind on the love of anything other than God, and *that is the bounty of God, which he gives to whomsoever He wills, and God is the possessor of bounty supreme* (62:4). The sincerity of the elite of the elite is the confirmation (*taṣḍīq*) of everything that the Prophetic presence received from the Divine, in terms of knowledge, spiritual states, mysteries, comportment (*adab*), rights, and functions, for whosoever’s sincerity attains this level, his is the title of the truly sincere (*ṣiddīq*).⁶⁰

The second [stage of *īmān*] is pure devotion (*ikhhlās*) and it is performing all the commands [only] for the sake of God, the Generous, and likewise leaving the prohibitions. And wherever hypocrisy, concern for reputation, or self-satisfaction is found in a soul, that person is not truly devoted. And this is the pure devotion of the masses, and the pure devotion of the elite is not for the sake of reward nor out of fear of punishment, nor for the sake of arriving at a spiritual station, rather it is acting out of servitude (*‘ubūdiyya*) and longing. Servitude is acting for no reason

59. A verse of Ibn al-Fārid.

60. This was the title of the first caliph and close friend of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, as well as a Qur’anic category of the best of the saints, second only to the Prophets and Messengers as described in 4:69: *And he who obeys God and the Messenger, they are with those whom God has favored: the prophets, the sincere (ṣiddīqīn), the martyrs, and the righteous. What lovely companions they are.*

other than that God is deserving of worship. You are the servant, and only service is befitting for you, so do it for this reason. Don't see yourself as being deserving of anything in addition to the witnessing of blessings. It is simply witnessing actions that are from God to you. He created you and connected you to grace and blessing. The pure devotion of the elite of the elite is leaving aside all other than God in dealings with the Real, and you yourself are other than God, so therefore you see that actions are from God to God and by God, and you have no entrance to this and no exit [from it]. "God loves the purely devoted (*mukhlisīn*)."

The third [stage of *īmān*] is serenity (*ṭuma'nīna*). It is tranquility of the heart by God, independence through God, and certainty by God, in that nothing remains of the heart's turning towards what benefits the soul or harms it. Rather it casts itself, peacefully, in the hands of God. The tongue of this state says, "My God, on you I rely." This is serenity (*ṭuma'nīna*) and none possess it except for the elite. And the serenity of the elite of the elite is their certain knowledge that God alone exists, so there is no repose except in Him, and no return except to Him, and He says, "O serene soul, return to your Lord" (89:27).

The third station of the stations of religion is *Ihsān* (excellence/perfection/beauty). Its first stage is watchfulness (*murāqaba*), and it is being perpetually present with God, and knowing that He is aware of the totality of the servant. This fact never leaves his mind because he sees the reality from behind a fine veil, and he understands with the understanding of taste (*dhawq*).

The possessor of this station may speak in such a way that one who has not attained perfect discrimination may think that he has arrived [at the end of the spiritual path], but he has not [yet] arrived. Rather, he sees the reality from behind a fine veil, and he understands knowledge with the comprehension of tasting, not witnessing (*mushāhada*). This is the watchfulness (*murāqaba*) of the elite before witnessing. And the watchfulness (*murāqaba*) after witnessing (*mushāhada*) is the watchfulness (*murāqaba*) of the elite of the elite. And the watchfulness (*murāqaba*) of the breaths⁶¹ is a station among the stations of the spiritual heroes (*rijāl*),⁶² and it is the result of Knowledge (*ma'rifa*).

The second stage (of *Ihsān*) is witnessing (*mushāhada*), and it is vision of the Truth/the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) by the Truth/the Real as it is without doubt or uncertainty

61. The breaths (*anfās*) is a technical term in Sufism which simultaneously alludes to the verbal creative act through which God perpetually recreates the cosmos (The Breath of the Merciful, *nafas al-Rahmān*) and the subtle states of the most accomplished Sufis who are perpetually aware of their (and the entire cosmos's) reabsorption and recreation through these breaths. In his Sufi lexicon, Ibn 'Ajība writes, "al-Qushayrī says, by breath (*nafas*), the Sufis mean the repose which hearts find in the subtle emanations of the unseen. Someone who is granted a breath is at a higher level than someone granted a state (*ḥāl*) or a moment (*waqt*). We could say that the one granted moments is at the beginning [of the way], the one granted breaths is at its end, and the one granted states is intermediary, [or that] 'moments' are for people of the heart, 'states' are for people of the spirit, and 'breaths' for people of the innermost being (*sirr*). A breath, then, is more delicate than a moment. Keeping moments from being wasted is for devotees and ascetics, keeping breaths from being wasted is for gnostics who have reached the goal, and making use of states is for aspirants." (Ibn 'Ajība, *The Book of Ascension to the Essential Truths of Sufism: A Lexicon of Sufic Terminology*, trans. Mohamed Fouad Aresmouk and Michael Fitzgerald (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2012), 64–5.

62. While this term literally means "men," it does not refer to gender, but rather significant spiritual achievement. 'Attar famously wrote that on the Day of Judgement, God will call for the men (*al-rijāl*) to stand forth, and the first to step forward will be Mary, the mother of Jesus. For more on this notion, see Joseph Hill, "All Women are Guides: Sufi Leadership and Womanhood among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40, no. 4 (2010): 375–412.

or fantasy. There only remains the Truth by the Truth, in the Truth, and not one hair of the slave remains in existence. None arrive at this station except that he has been annihilated from his soul and from other and otherness, and on the tongue of this state it is said:

Nothing remains except God, and nothing other than Him
And so, there is no connection, and nothing is separated⁶³

As here there is no name, no description, and no limit. This vision occurs without any “how” or “definition” or “unification” or “direction” or “comparison” or “beginning” or “union” or “separation.” There is no invocation (*dhikr*) or invoker (*dhākir*) or invoked (*madhkūr*). *The Truth has come and the false has vanished, verily the falsehood is ever vanishing* (17:81). And this level is close to that of the opening (*fath*), but what comes before this is not the opening—it is the door to Knowledge (*maʿrifa*), but it is not Knowledge. Every Knower (*ʿārif*) is open [has achieved *fath*], but the opposite is not true.

The third stage [of *Ihsān*] is Knowledge (*maʿrifa*), and it is the spirit being deeply rooted and firmly established in the presence of witnessing (*mushāhada*) with complete annihilation and subsistence through God. So the knower (*al-ʿārif*) among the Sufis is he who sees the other [in and by] the Essence—that is, he witnesses the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) in the other. For me, the Knower [*al-ʿārif*] is he who is annihilated in the Essence once, and in the Attribute twice or three times, and annihilated in the Name once. He confirms the existence of these three realities, and he confirms the Names by the Name.⁶⁴ And this stage is extremely difficult to reach [literally, “it tears livers to shreds, and neither wealth nor children are of any avail in obtaining this.”] The possessor of this station is perfectly awake and aware of God and His rulings and His commandments and satisfied with the unfolding of His decrees. For the one who is perfectly satisfied and is satisfying, it is appropriate that he address his soul with the saying *Enter among my servants, enter into My garden* (89:29–30).⁶⁵ And Knowledge (*maʿrifa*) is the last of the stations of religion, and repentance (*tawba*) is its first. However, the reality of repentance is the absence of repentance and that is only achieved through Knowledge (*maʿrifa*). In this regard, our shaykh, the seal, al-Tijānī (may God be pleased with him and us) used to say that, “by God, I have not reached the station of repentance.” He, may God be pleased with him, meant that he had repented from seeing repentance. So long as the slave regards himself as repentant [in *tawba*], he has not reached the station of repentance.

This concludes the summary explanation of the stages, and if we were to continue

63. A variant of a verse found in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, likely composed by Ibn al-ʿArabī himself: *fa lam yabqa illā al-ḥaqq lam yabqa kāʿin / fa mā thamma mawṣūl fa mā thamma bāʿin*.

64. See Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh’s *ḥikam*, no. 250: “The finding/existence (*wujūd*) of His traces points to the finding/existence of His names. The finding/existence of His names points to the establishment (*thubūt*) of His attributes. The establishment of His attributes points to His Essence since it is impossible for an attribute to subsist by itself. For the enraptured ones (*arbāb al-jadh*), the perfection of His Essence is unveiled to them; then, He makes them witness His attributes. Then, He returns them to attachment to His names. Then, He makes them witness His traces. And it is the reverse for the wayfarers (*al-sālikūn*). So the end of the wayfarers is the beginning of the enraptured ones. And the beginning of the wayfarers is the end of the enraptured ones, but not in the same sense. So, perhaps the two groups may meet on the path, these ascending and those descending.” (Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī, *Kitāb al-ḥikam* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Azhariyya lil-Turāth, 2011), 148).

65. The full context of this verse is as follows: *O you serene soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing, enter amongst my servants, enter into My garden* (89:27–30).

with this, it would require a whole book. As discussed above, the reality of the stations are *Islām*, *Īmān*, and *Iḥsān*. *Islām* is saying “There is no god but God” (*Lā ilāha illāʾllāh*), and *Īmān* is so know there is no god but God (47:19), and *Iḥsān* is Say: “Allāh” [and leave them to their vain prattle] (6:91) or Say: He is God, the One, God the Eternally Self-Sufficient, He neither begets nor is begotten, and none is like unto Him (112)—but none will grasp their meaning save the wise (29:43).

These are the nine stages of religion, and if you meditate upon them you will find the essence of the stations in the realities, and that they correspond to the nine Presences (*Ḥaḍarāt*), and they are the same. For if you enter the pretemporal Presence (*al-ḥaḍra al-azaliyya*), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī]; and if you arrive at the Muḥammadan Presence (*al-ḥaḍra al-Muḥammadiyya*), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī]; and if you arrive at the Aḥmādī Presence (*al-ḥaḍra al-Aḥmadiyya*), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī], and so the Presences are nine: three within three, just as the stages [of religion] are nine: three within three. The presence of the shaykh is the station of *Islām*, the presence of the Messenger is the station of *Īmān*, and the Presence of God is the station of *Iḥsān*. *And verily unto your Lord is the final end* (53:42). Peace.

P.S.

The reality of the repentance of repentance (*ḥaqīqat al-tawba min al-tawba*) is that God is *the Repenter, the Merciful* (*al-Tawwāb al-Raḥīm*—2:128, 2:160, 4:64, 49:12). The reality of integrity is subsistence (*baqāʾ*) after annihilation (*fanāʾ*): *for God ordains what he wills* (5:1). The reality of reverence (*taqwā*) is the absence of the occurrence of any thought other [than God], even for a moment, *that is because God is the Real* (22:62). The reality of sincerity (*ṣidq*) is singularity of facing towards Him for *everything is perishing save his face* (28:88), *His is whatsoever is in the Heavens and whatsoever is in the Earth—Behold! To God all affairs are journeying* (42:53); *His is the sovereignty and His is the praise* (64:1). The reality of serenity (*tumaʾnīna*) is not wishing for the cessation of what is or the existence of what is not: *God knows and you do not know* (2:216); *He is not questioned about what He does* (21:23). The reality of watchfulness (*murāqaba*) is the perpetual attachment of the heart to God (89:14): *truly your Lord is ever watchful; You are not engaged in anything, nor do you recite any of the Qurʾan, nor do you do any action, but that We are a witness over you when you are engaged therein* (10:61); *We did indeed create man, and We know what his soul whispers to him and We are closer to him than his jugular vein* (50:16); *Have you not considered that God knows whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth; there is no secret counsel of three but he is their fourth [nor of five, but he is their sixth, nor less than, nor more, but the He is with them wherever they are. Then on the Day of Resurrection He will inform them of what they did. Truly God is knower of all things]* (58:7); *He knows what lies within the breasts* (57:6). The reality of witnessing (*mushāhada*) is the actual vision of the Real: *for wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God* (2:115). The reality of Knowledge (*maʾrifa*) is the witnessing of the Essential Perfection: *There is nothing like unto Him* (42:11).

This concludes what he dictated to the aforementioned [. . .]. All praise is due to God in every state, and the blessings and peace of God upon our Lord Muḥammad and upon his family and companions.⁶⁶

Conclusion

Niasse's short text provides an excellent example of contemporary (twentieth-century) Sufi *maqāmāt* literature that synthesizes many features of the classical tradition into a highly concentrated and allusive account of the Sufi path to ethical perfection. Studies of works such as this one should, hopefully, put to rest Trimmingham's lingering theses of the "decline" of "mystical" Sufism into "ethical-ascetic" Sufism and the distinction between the two in his otherwise useful account of the *maqāmāt* and other schemas of spiritual development in Sufi literature.⁶⁷ Moreover, studies of such Sufi texts in contemporary contexts can shed light on the important and involved relationship between ethical texts and ethical practice in Sufism. But perhaps most interestingly, the transcendent ethics of *ma'rifa* developed in this work (like that of much Sufi literature) unites moral, ontological, and epistemological development into an inseparable unity that ultimately identifies with the Real itself. As such, it cannot be equated to or described by the academic categories of deontological, virtue, or consequentialist ethics as typically understood. For example, while in the early stages of the masses and the elite, "The Three Stations of Religion" seems to present a kind of *sharī'a*-based deontic ethics. The later stages transcend such characterizations in descriptions such as that of the pure devotion (*ikhlāṣ*) of the elite of the elite as "leaving aside all other than God in dealings with the Real, and you yourself are other than God, so therefore you see that actions are from God to God and by God, and you have no entrance to this and no exit [from it]." Moreover, against a consequentialist paradigm, Niasse writes that "pure devotion is not for the sake of reward nor fear of punishment, nor for the sake of arriving at a spiritual station." And in contrast to typical paradigms of virtue ethics, Niasse describes the higher stages of the "elite of the elite" in terms such as, "not one hair of the slave remains in existence . . . as here there is no name, no description, and no limit" and "it is not seeing your soul as really having any state or station."

66. Shaykh Ibrāhīm Inyās, *Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth in Sa'ādat al-anām* (Cairo: al-Sharika al-Dawliyya 2006), 123–130.

67. Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 151–161. While some Sufis such as Aḥmad al-Zarrūq (d. 899/1493) and 'Uthman ibn Fūdī (d. 1232/1817) did draw a distinction between the ethical Sufism of character refinement (*taṣawwuf al-takhalluq*) which they identify with the writings and ascetic traditions of al-Ghazālī and al-Muḥasibī, and metaphysical Sufism of realization (*tahaqquq*) which they identify with Abu'l-Ḥasan al-Shadhilī, this distinction had more to do with method (typically characterized as asceticism (*zuhd*) as opposed to gratitude (*shukr*)), and if anything, the latter form of Sufism only seemed to increase in prominence in the post-classical period. See 'Uthman ibn Fūdī, *Fath al-baṣā'ir li-tahqīq waḍ'ī 'ulūm al-bawātin wa'l-zawāhir*, ed. and trans. Muhammad Shareef (Sudan: Sankore Institute of Islamic-African Studies International, 1996), 11.

This fact is important to remember, as certain other studies of Sufi ethics tend to treat these contemporary categories of philosophical ethical theories as universals⁶⁸ instead of particulars with their own cultural history—one could easily imagine that were the geo-political structure different, we could be arguing about whether Kant, Hume, or Nietzsche were more Ash‘arī or Mu‘tazilī, or perhaps describe them as Mohist, Xunzian, Confucian, or Taoist.

In any event, texts such as Niasse’s “The Three Stations of Religion” were and continue to be used to describe, prescribe, and inscribe onto-epistemo-ethical transformations within Sufi communities. While these discursive accounts should not be conflated with the states and stations they describe, their ritual use makes them more than mere maps, representations, or descriptions of paths to ethical perfection. These works do not stand outside of these processes of ethical development, but rather emerge from the pens and mouths of Sufi masters actively engaged in this endless evolution of perpetual transformation, and are actively used by Sufis of all levels of experience in paradoxically pursuing the ever present Prophetic “station of no station.”

68. For example, the otherwise excellent monographs of Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God*, and Cyrus Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017). The following erroneous pronouncement is typical of less-detailed studies, “Sufi ethical thought is primarily teleological, and so the quality of an act may be seen to lie in its effect. It is not that one is an observant Muslim so as to be obedient to God, but one cultivates virtue to rise in station to the *unio mystica*. Obedience is not only a deontological good, but it is also a technique that produces spiritual progress. The good that which produces spiritual results”; Kevin Reinhart, “The Ethics of Muslims: Islamic and Islamicate Ethics” in *A Bibliographic Guide to the Comparative Study of Ethics*, John Carman and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 523. This consequentialist reading of Sufi ethics is directly contradicted by Niasse’s treatise as well as much of the classical tradition of Ibn al-‘Arabī, Rūmī, al-Anṣārī, and others.

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