

Contributions to Hermeneutics 10

Sylvain Camilleri  
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# The “Veil of Glory”: Perplexity (*ḥayra*) and Revelation in the Qur’ānic Hermeneutics of Ibn ‘Arabī



Gregory Vandamme

## 1 Introduction

All the works of Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240)<sup>1</sup> could be considered as one immense commentary on the Qur’ān, approached from every perspective at hand: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Linguistics, Poetry, and even what one might call “Mythology.”<sup>2</sup> The assertion of such a unique aim for his vast and eclectic production seems reductive in view of the diversity of topics and styles found in the Shaykh al-Akbar’s oeuvre. However, if we take his own instructions seriously, it appears clearly that we must read his works in parallel with the Qur’ān: “Everything we talk about—in my gatherings and my writings—comes from the Presence of the

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<sup>1</sup>For a succinct but profound overview on Ibn ‘Arabī’s life and thought, see Claude Addas, *Ibn Arabī et le voyage sans retour* (Paris: Points, 1996), and William C. Chittick *Ibn ‘Arabī: Heir to the prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005). Both authors also wrote what are to this day the most important scientific biography, Claude Addas, *Ibn ‘Arabī ou la quête du soufre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), and doctrinal synthesis, William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), and *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998). We must also mention the excellent book by James W. Morris, *The Reflective Heart. Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Meccan Illuminations* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>See the “mythic dialectic” analysed in Michael A. Sells, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Garden among the Flames: A Reevaluation,” *History of Religions* 23, no. 4 (1984), 287–315, and Michael Ebstein, “‘In Truth You Are the Polytheist!’: Mythic Elements in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Teachings on the Divine Names,” *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 6 (2018), 359–387.

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G. Vandamme (✉)

Institut supérieur de philosophie (Centre De Wulf-Mansion), Université catholique de Louvain/F.N.R.S., Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium  
e-mail: [gregory.vandamme@uclouvain.be](mailto:gregory.vandamme@uclouvain.be)

Qur'ān and its treasures.”<sup>3</sup> It remains nonetheless that we must first understand *what* the Qur'ān is according to Ibn 'Arabī, in order to better understand *how* he comments on it.

In this chapter, I will discuss Ibn 'Arabī's view on the nature of the Qur'ānic text, as it appears through its relation to the central notion of “perplexity” (*ḥayra*).<sup>4</sup> My aim is to show how the Shaykh al-Akbar uses this notion to define the peculiar nature of the Qur'ānic language and its very purpose, and to discuss the epistemological and hermeneutical outcomes stemming from this approach. This will finally allow us to consider ultimately why he advocates a “literalist” reading of the Qur'ān, as opposed to an “interpretative” approach, precisely in order to preserve its perplexing aspect. After a brief introduction to the notion of *ḥayra* and its importance in defining both the originality and the continuity between Ibn 'Arabī and the tradition that precedes him, I will focus on two passages in which this notion is directly linked to the nature of the Qur'ān. The first is taken from the *K. al-Isfār 'an natā'ij al-asfār* (“The Book of Uncovering the Results of the Journeys”), a rather brief writing from Ibn 'Arabī's youth,<sup>5</sup> and the second from his major work, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (“The Meccan Conquests”).<sup>6</sup> Both passages will illustrate how the Qur'ān, Human Being, and Cosmos are related to each other, and how, in Ibn 'Arabī's view, this correlation in which they appear inseparable is the object of an “apprehension”—rather than a “comprehension”—wherein the experience of *ḥayra* brought by Revelation is to play a key role.

## 2 About *Ḥayra*

The notion of “*ḥayra*” carries a very ambivalent meaning, and even a very brief history of its use before Ibn 'Arabī would largely exceed the limits of this paper. It is probably sufficient to mention that the word can mean “perplexity”,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), III, 334. From now on cited: *Fut.* vol., pages.

<sup>4</sup> Even though it will often be translated here as “perplexity” and its verbal derivatives, I will keep the Arabic “*ḥayra*” to designate the notion in itself, in order to preserve its ambivalence.

<sup>5</sup> See Ibn 'Arabī, *K. al-Isfār 'an natā'ij al-asfār. Le dévoilement des effets du voyage*, ed. and trans. Denis Gril (Combas: L'éclat, 1994), XI–XII. Angela Jaffray considers it to be a later work, see Ibn 'Arabī, *The Secrets of Voyaging. K. al-Isfār 'an natā'ij al-asfār*, trans. Angela Jaffray (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2016), 25–27.

<sup>6</sup> The term “*futūḥāt*” has been usually rendered as “illuminations” or “spiritual openings”, but we should probably not understate its clear allusion to the genre of the “*futūḥ*”, chronicles of the Arabo-Islamic conquests, such as Al-Baladhūri's famous *Futūḥ al-buldān*. But, unlike those chronicles describing the expansion of Islam from Mecca, Ibn 'Arabī's *Futūḥāt* recount the conquest of “Mecca” itself, that is a metaphor for an inner conquest of the heart of Islam. Henry Corbin, who relies on a commentary on the title by 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492), translates it as: “Les Conquêtes spirituelles de La Mekke.” See *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi* (Paris: Entrelacs, 2006), 351.

“bewilderment”, or even “upheaval” and “confusion.” *Ḥayra* is used in a quite negative way in the Qur’ān, where it appears as a *hapax legomenon*, describing the state of “one bewildered (*ḥayrān*), seduced by Satans on earth” (Q 6:71). It is mentioned in a more positive sense in the traditions collected by al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971), where Ibn ‘Abbās is quoted comparing the reflection on the Divine *qadar* (God’s foreordination of all things) with the observation of the sun: “The more we look at it, the more our glance is in perplexity (*taḥayyur*).”<sup>7</sup>

The word has subsequently been used in a different acceptation according to the school of thought in which it was employed. For al-Jāhiz (d. 255/868) and other proponents of the Mu‘tazila, *ḥayra* was widely used with the meaning of “confusion,” most often to show contempt for the tenants of anthropomorphic interpretations of the Qur’ān.<sup>8</sup> Such a meaning, describing deficient cognition as opposed to clear reasoning, is also found later in the works of the philosophers, the most famous example being the title of Maimonides (d. 1204) *K. Dalālat al-ḥā’irīn* (“The Guide for the Perplexed”),<sup>9</sup> a book which aims precisely at escaping from perplexity through rational examination.

Inversely, we find a very different use of the term in the early Sufi tradition. A seminal figure such as Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/856) is quoted affirming: “The most knowledgeable man about God is the most perplexed about Him.”<sup>10</sup> In the next generation, the influential Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) and Junayd (d. 298/910) also made use of the notion in a positive manner. The first one is said to have declared: “The ultimate goal of spiritual knowledge (*‘irfān*) is twofold: consternation (*dahash*) and perplexity (*ḥayra*),”<sup>11</sup> while the second regularly taught his disciples to seek for spiritual realisation in *ḥayra*, rather than in clear reasoning.<sup>12</sup>

As for Ibn ‘Arabī, he seems to draw from this Sufi tradition by making extensive use of the term, presenting *ḥayra* as the most perfect state of spiritual realisation.<sup>13</sup> Besides, he expands its use to different domains beyond that of spiritual epistemology found in previous Sufi sources. The notion appears to be in relation with many of the core doctrines of his thought, as for example in his spiritual anthropology where he associates *ḥayra* with the Caliphate of the Perfect Human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*)—i.e., his function as deputy of God on earth, an allusion to Qur’ān 2:30—, as we will see further on. Yet Ibn ‘Arabī also uses the term with a clearly negative meaning, related for example to the limits of rational inquiry or the confusion of

<sup>7</sup> Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘jam al-kabīr* (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, n.d.), X, 318–319, n°10607.

<sup>8</sup> See Paul Heck, *Skepticism in Classical Islam. Moments of Confusion* (London & New-York: Routledge, 2014), 29–47.

<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Davies, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides’ ‘Guide for the Perplexed’* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2011).

<sup>10</sup> See Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-qushayriyya*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd & Maḥmūd b. al-Sharīf (Cairo: Dār al-Sha‘b, 1989), 513.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 308. See also Paul Heck, *Skepticism in Classical Islam*, 47–51, and Junayd, *Enseignement spirituel*, trans. Roger Deladrière (Paris: Actes Sud, 1995), 150.

<sup>13</sup> See *Fut.* II, 212, or II, 661.

those who do not follow the guidance of God.<sup>14</sup> By doing so, he probably tries to preserve the ambiguity of the term, in order to stress its ambivalence that proves to be particularly useful for evoking the paradoxical nature of reality that he is so keen to point out.

The notion of *ḥayra* thus appears to be a hidden key to understanding the thought of the Shaykh al-Akbar in its entirety. Hidden, because it is nowhere presented as a doctrine in itself, unlike Ibn ‘Arabī’s more famous notions such as *wujūd*, *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*, or *barzakh*. Yet, it is clearly used with a very precise purpose, and the ambivalence of the term seems to serve that intention to perfection, as the term *ḥayra* reflects and summarizes his ever-redefining perspectivism, and the dynamic understanding of reality that is at the heart of his works.

The perplexing experience of *ḥayra* describes nothing else than the encounter with the Divine perspective, which is impossible to be sustained in usual human experience, either by rational or by sensorial faculties. In other words, it describes the very limit of the human point of view when confronted with the *Coincidentia oppositorum*, which is the apogee of Divine reality. Ibn ‘Arabī describes *ḥayra* as the “isthmus” (*barzakh*)<sup>15</sup> that draws the limit between Divine and Human levels in being, and at the same time marks the distinction between reason and senses, reason and imagination, or love and fear.

The notion of *ḥayra* also plays a central role in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Qur’ānic hermeneutics. As we shall see in the two passages analysed below, where the Shaykh al-Akbar relates it to the nature of the Qur’ān and its language, Revelation is precisely the means by which human beings can approach the perplexing perfection brought by *ḥayra*. It is through the perplexing encounter with the Qur’ān that human beings are able to face the limits of their own perspective and to encounter the Divine perspective on reality.

### 3 The Qur’ān as a Never-Ending Journey

The experience of *ḥayra* is profoundly associated in Ibn ‘Arabī’s view with the ever-moving nature of Reality, in all its dimensions. In what is probably one of his earliest works, “The Book of Uncovering the Results of the Journeys” (*K. al-Isfār ‘an natā’ij al-asfār*),<sup>16</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī describes the reality of being as an ongoing voyage, in which the journeys of every reality are woven:

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<sup>14</sup> See *Fut.* I, 420, or III, 329.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the notion of “*barzakh*”, see Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Barzakh. The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> See the aforementioned editions and translations by D. Gril and A. Jaffray. I will refer to the Arabic text provided by A. Jaffray (from now on: *Isfār*), as it is based on D. Gril’s edition, partially collated with the (incomplete) autograph manuscript by Ibn ‘Arabī, Yusuf Aga 4859. The translations are mine.



Since the principle of being (*wujūd*) is movement there cannot be any immobility in it, because if it were immobile it would return to its origin which is non-existence (*‘adam*). Therefore, the journey never stops in the upper or the lower worlds, and the Divine realities never cease to travel, coming and going.<sup>17</sup>

Existence is therefore experienced as a perplexing movement, without any fixed reality to rely on: “There is no immobility at all, movement is rather permanent in this world (*dunyā*).”<sup>18</sup> In Ibn ‘Arabī’s shifting perspectivism, the ongoing movement of existence can be seen from the prospect of different journeys, depending on the point of view which is adopted: “It is a descent (*nuzūl*) from you upon [the Divine realities] through your request (*ṭalb*), and a descent from them upon you through the [Divine] bestowal (*‘aṭā*).”<sup>19</sup>

Depending on their orientation and relationship with God—who is, for Ibn ‘Arabī, nothing other than sheer, unaltered and undelimited being<sup>20</sup>—, these journeys are of three types: (1) From God, (2) Towards God, and (3) In God. The latter type is precisely defined here as: “The travel of wandering (*tīh*) and perplexity (*ḥayra*) (...) which has no end.”<sup>21</sup> The *K. al-Isfār* thus describes different journeys, starting from metaphysical realities, then mentioning Creation, Revelation and the mission of various prophets, to finally address psychological dimensions of the human experience, such as fear and caution. The first travel to be described is “the Lordly journey, from the Cloud (*al-‘amā*) to the Throne of Evenness (*‘arsh al-istiwā*),”<sup>22</sup> which is assumed by the Name ‘The All-Merciful’ (*al-raḥmān*).<sup>23</sup> Then comes “the journey of Creation and [Divine] Order, which is the journey of origination (*ibdā*),”<sup>24</sup> and thirdly the travel that we will examine here, namely “The journey of the glorious<sup>25</sup> Qur’ān (*al-qur’ān al-‘azīz*).”<sup>26</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī’s depiction of the journey of the Qur’ān is founded upon the following verses: “We sent it down in the Night of Value (*laylat al-qadr*)” (Q 97:1), and “We sent it down in the blessed night” (Q 44:3). He also mentions a well-known tradition, according to which this descent occurred in two different times, which represent for him two distinct modalities of the descending journey of Revelation. As

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<sup>17</sup> *Isfār*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> See *Fut.* I, 420, or *Fut.* III, 266. See also my article “L’ontologie corrélative d’Ibn ‘Arabī: métaphysique de l’être et de ses relations” in *La nondualité: Perspectives philosophiques, scientifiques, spirituelles*, ed. Jean-Michel Counet (Leuven: Peeters, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> *Isfār*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> See Qur’ān 7:54 and 32:9.

<sup>23</sup> *Isfār*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>25</sup> The root ‘-z-z carries the polysemic sense of being “tremendous”, “powerful”, “beyond compare” or “glorious”. I have chosen the latter because it carries a theological aspect that combines the previous meanings.

<sup>26</sup> *Isfār*, 58–61.

traditional exegesis relates,<sup>27</sup> the Qur'ān first descended all at once (*jumlatan wāḥidatan*) upon the heaven of this world (*al-samā' al-dunyā*), before descending in a splintered way (*nujūman*)<sup>28</sup> on the heart of Muhammad.<sup>29</sup> For Ibn 'Arabī, this second modality of descent never ceased, and indeed never will, as long as the Qur'ān is “recited by the tongues, secretly or openly.”<sup>30</sup> The Qur'ān is therefore still journeying since its original descent, and the second moment—or modality—of that travel did not stop with Muhammad: “The ‘Night of Value’ is still ongoing for the servant in reality, and it is [nothing other than] his soul (*nafs*) when it has been purified and refined.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, from Ibn 'Arabī's perspective, the process of Revelation is still occurring to everyone who participates in the journey of the Qur'ān:

The Qur'ān never stops to be sent down. Therefore, if a man were to say: ‘The Qur'ān has been sent down on me!’, he would not have lied, for the Qur'ān does not actually cease to travel to the hearts of those who preserve it (*al-ḥāfiẓīna lahu*).<sup>32</sup>

The question remains as to what the distinction between those two modalities of the descending journey of the Qur'ān is, and how these two modalities are intertwined. The Shaykh al-Akbar gives a rather mysterious explanation in the closing section of the chapter.<sup>33</sup> Echoing the words of the aforementioned tradition, he uses a cryptic style—combining theology, cosmology, and psychology—in order to describe how those two distinct journeys are woven in the single—and still ongoing—travel of the Qur'ān.

Ibn 'Arabī first draws parallels between the corresponding realities of Human being, Cosmos, and the Qur'ān: “The Universal Human being (*al-insān al-kullī*)<sup>34</sup> is the glorious Qur'ān in reality, which descended from the Presence (*ḥaḍra*) of Himself (*nafsih*) to the Presence of the one who professes His Unicity

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<sup>27</sup> See the various traditions in Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Medina: Majma' al-malik Fahd li-ṭibā'at al-muṣḥaf al-sharīf, 2005), 268–275.

<sup>28</sup> Or, according to another transmission “*najman najman*,” literally “bits by bits,” or “star by star,” the root *n-j-m* carrying the meaning of “star” or else “blade of grass.” A. Jaffray translates it very poetically by “constellated fragments” (see *The Secrets of Voyaging*, 58), but I prefer to keep the more allusive and polysemic meaning of the Arabic term.

<sup>29</sup> See also Qur'ān 25:32: “The disbelievers say: ‘Why is not the Qur'ān revealed to him all at once?’ It is so, in order for Us to strengthen thereby your heart.”

<sup>30</sup> *Isfār*, 58.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. The word “*al-ḥāfiẓīna*” can also mean “those who memorize” and therefore keep the journey of the Qur'ān in existence.

<sup>33</sup> According to A. Jaffray this section should even be considered as the “focal point” of the whole treatise, see *The Secrets of Voyaging*, 190–191.

<sup>34</sup> For an overview of this notion, see Masataka Takeshita, *Ibn 'Arabī's Theory of the Perfect Man and its Place in the History of Islamic Thought* (Tokyo: Institute for the study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1987).

(*muwaḥḥidih*).<sup>35</sup> This statement is quite enigmatic and can be understood in different ways depending on what we consider the pronouns “himself” and “his” are referring to: the Qur’ān, Human being, or God.

Whatever may be the nature of the similarity between the journeys of the Qur’ān and of the Human being, the modality shift<sup>36</sup> seems to appear when (or where) the travel reaches what Ibn ‘Arabī calls—according to the tradition he relies on—“the heaven of this world” (*al-samā’ al-dunyā*), an expression that could be also literally understood and translated as “the closest” or “the lowest” heaven. Moreover, in a previous passage of the book in which the journey of Creation is described as occurring simultaneously in the macrocosmos of the world and in the microcosmos of the Human being, Ibn ‘Arabī declares that “the heaven of this world” is sensation (*al-ḥiss*).<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, we will see in the passage from the *Futuḥāt* to be analysed in the next section that the articulation between the senses and the intellect plays a central role in the experience of *ḥayra* brought by Revelation.

“The heaven of this world” should therefore be understood as alluding to a dimension that is at the same time cosmological and anthropological, in which the modality of the descending journey of Revelation takes on another form: “There, it became differentiation (*furqān*) and descended in a splintered way (*nujūman*) according to the Divine realities.”<sup>38</sup> The name “*Furqān*”—from the root *f-r-q* that carries the meaning of division and distinction—is another usual name for the “*Qur’ān*”—from the root *q-r-’* that carries the meaning of reading or recitation, but also of collecting and gathering—as for example in the verse: “Blessed is He who sent down the distinguishing-criterion (*furqān*) to His servant” (Q 25:1).<sup>39</sup> Thus, when the synthetic *Qur’ān* reaches “the heaven of this world,” it turns into the distinctive *Furqān*, to assume an analytic function. This echoes another definition of that heaven given by Ibn ‘Arabī in a passage from the *Futūḥāt*, in which he declares that it points to the limit between the levels of simple, non-composite realities, on the one hand, and the levels of assemblage and combination, on the other hand: “The heaven of this world (*al-samā’ al-dunyā*) is the beginning of the world of composition (*awwal ‘ālam al-tarkīb*).”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> D. Gril and A. Jaffray have another understanding of the passage and read: “... descended from the presence of itself to the presence of the One who brought it into existence (*mūjidiḥ*).” See Jaffray, *The Secrets of Voyaging*, 60, and Gril, *Le dévoilement des effets du voyage*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> I use the expression “modality shift” with reference to M. Sells article: “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Polished Mirror: Perspective Shift and Meaning Event,” *Studia Islamica* 67 (1988), 121–149, which also addresses the shifting function of the notion of *ḥayra*, in a literary approach and with a particular attention to Ibn ‘Arabī’s dialectic structure of language.

<sup>37</sup> *Isfār*, 56.

<sup>38</sup> *Isfār*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> See also Qur’ān 2:185 where it is directly associated with the descent of Revelation: “The month of Ramadan is the one in which the Qur’ān was sent down as guidance for mankind (*nās*), the explanation of the guidance, and the distinguishing-criterion (*al-furqān*).”

<sup>40</sup> *Fut. I*, 61.



Ibn ʿArabī remains quite allusive about the precise nature of that heaven from which the modality switch stems. The only definition he gives in our section of the *K. al-Isfār* is the following: “The heaven of this world (*al-samāʿ al-dunyā*) is the veil of Glory (*ḥijāb al-ʿizza*), the most protected (*aḥmā*) and the closest (*al-adnā*)”.<sup>41</sup> This is however exactly where the whole issue is connected to the notion of *ḥayra*. In another short passage from the *Futūḥāt*, in which Ibn ʿArabī defines—or rather comments in very allusive fashion—some technical terms from the classical Sufi vocabulary and from his own register,<sup>42</sup> he describes “the veil of Glory” as follows: “The veil of Glory (*ḥijāb al-ʿizza*) is blindness (*al-ʿamā*) and perplexity (*al-ḥayra*)”.<sup>43</sup>

In order to better understand the link between *ḥayra* and Revelation as well as its role in the shift between the two distinct modalities of the descending journey of the Qurʾān, we must now turn to a decisive section of the *Futūḥāt* that seems to be directly linked with the content of the section of the *K. al-Isfār* we have been analysing so far.

#### 4 Perfection of the Qurʾānic *Ḥayra*

Chapter 177 of the *Futūḥāt*, on “the station of gnosis (*maʿrifā*)”, contains a particularly interesting section addressing the question of the nature of the Qurʾān. This passage deals more precisely with “The knowledge (*ʿilm*) of perfection and deficiency in being (*wujūd*)”.<sup>44</sup> But the definition of the notion of “perfection” (*kamāl*) given here by Ibn ʿArabī defies our usual understanding and starts out with a paradoxical approach, which will bear a direct link to the notion of *ḥayra*, as we will see further: “Know that the existence of deficiency in being (*wujūd*) is [part] of its perfection. If it were not [the case], the perfection of being would be lacking, because of the absence of deficiency in it.”<sup>45</sup>

Being is thus characterised by a perplexing perfection that is not lacking anything, deficiency included. Every deficiency we can consider in existence is nothing but an illusion hiding the perfection of being. In other words, the very fact that we conceive perfection as a lack of deficiency, when it actually transcends the limitation of deficiency, impedes us from experiencing the perfection of being as it is. To some extent, this recalls the ever-moving nature of being mentioned earlier on in the *K. al-Isfār*: every immobility we can consider is nothing but an illusion hiding the

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–61.

<sup>42</sup> See *Fut.* II, 128–134. This glossary has also been copied separately and edited as a treatise in itself. See Ibn ʿArabī, *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiya*, ed. Aḥmed Ṣālah Ḥamdān (Cairo: Maktaba Madbūlī, 1999), and *Rasāʾil Ibn ʿArabī*, ed. Muḥammad Shahāb al-Dīn al-ʿAzālī (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> *Fut.* II, 129.

<sup>44</sup> *Fut.* II, 307.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

actual journey of its apparently immobile reality in the ongoing movement of being, whereas true immobility pertains only to non-existence.

This apophatic characteristic of being is to be related to the notion of “immensity” (*‘iẓma*), an attribute given by the Revelation to God,<sup>46</sup> to the Qur’ān itself,<sup>47</sup> but also to the Cosmos<sup>48</sup> as well as the Perfect Human being.<sup>49</sup> Not surprisingly, Ibn ‘Arabī proceeds to depict the articulation between God, Cosmos and Human being, regarding their respective relationship with perfection and deficiency. He begins by asserting that, since God is sheer being, He alone is perfect by nature, whereas every existent receives its perfection from Him. God’s perfection therefore transcends the perfection of everything that is found in being. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s words, His perfection is “what is suitable for Him.”<sup>50</sup> Perfection of the Cosmos is the Human being, while the latter receives his perfection from God. As for deficiency of the Cosmos, it is its very perfection, according to Ibn ‘Arabī. In other words, what appears to be the perfection of the world is actually lacking in that it does not include deficiency. It is Human being who is the manifestation of deficiency in the Cosmos, because he “gathers all the realities of the Cosmos,”<sup>51</sup> while his own deficiency, in turn, lies in the fact that he is part of the world. This explains why he is the perfection of the Cosmos.

On account of this puzzling equation, Ibn ‘Arabī goes on by saying that perfection of Divinity can obviously not be grasped by reason since: “Whatever the [rational] intellect sees as perfect, is deficiency to God.”<sup>52</sup> Only Revelation can inform us about Divine perfection. Rational proofs can only bring a partial knowledge of God by stating His incomparability (*tanzīh*), i.e., the fact that He is ultimately other than everything that exists. As for Revelation, it gives further information about God that is precisely “what intellect denies by its proofs”, by stating His similitude (*tashbīh*) with everything that exists through His being.<sup>53</sup> By affirming both the transcending incomparability of God—e.g. “Glory to your Lord, the Lord who exceeds what they describe” (Q 37:180)—and His similitude with everything that exists—e.g. “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God” (Q 2:115)—Revelation enlightens us about the perfection of Divinity. But this paradoxical perfection cannot be grasped by reason, and therefore the only real experience we can have of its perfection is precisely the perplexity of *ḥayra* brought by Revelation: “So the intellects are perplexed (*fa-ḥayyara*) and this is the Divine perfection.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>46</sup> “Glorify the name of your Lord the Immense” (Q 69:52).

<sup>47</sup> “We bestowed upon you the seven oft-repeated and the immense (*‘aẓīm*) Qur’ān” (Q 15:87).

<sup>48</sup> “There is no God but He, the Lord of the immense (*‘aẓīm*) Throne” (Q 27:26).

<sup>49</sup> “You are indeed of an immense (*‘aẓīm*) character” (Q 68:4). This Qur’ānic verse addresses Muḥammad, who is the perfect Human being par excellence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought.

<sup>50</sup> *Fut.* II, 307.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Just as we saw previously in the *K. al-Isfār* and its cosmological explanation of the process of Revelation, it appears that *ḥayra* functions also in this passage as a distinctive limit, marking a shift of perspective. Here again, it is the “veil” that radically separates Divine perfection from the Cosmos and Human being. But this “veil of Glory” is not at all a veil of transcendence, because this would be far too comfortable for reason, and would result in the usual distinction between God and the Cosmos to be found in each and every natural theology. In other words, it would consist in affirming the incomparability between the two, whereas the veil of *ḥayra*, on the contrary, is precisely reached through the affirmation of both their incomparability and similitude.

Revelation can therefore also be seen here as a mirroring journey: it is a descent of the Divine reality, which espouses the conditions of the Cosmos and the Human being, in order to reveal itself, while on the other hand, it is an elevation for those conditioning realities, since they turn out to be conditioning the Divine expression. This second aspect of the process of Revelation is precisely what brings about the element of similitude, that necessary to create the experience of *ḥayra*: “Were it not for the bestowing of perplexity (*ḥayra*) by what it recalls, He would not be under the rule (*ḥukm*) of what He created.”<sup>55</sup> In that perspective, both the sender and the receiver of the information brought by Revelation are at the same time active and passive, and they share a clear similitude in this regard. Nevertheless, through Revelation, it is God who reveals Himself *in* the Cosmos *to* the Human being, and not the other way around. In this sense, they ultimately remain incomparable.

This should help us understand why Ibn ‘Arabī states elsewhere in the *Futūḥāt*<sup>56</sup> that the veil of Glory, in which those two conflicting perspectives coincide, marks the distinctive limit between the world of Unity—i.e., the transcending incomparability—and the world of composition—i.e., the dialectical similitude between them. This veil is to be understood here as “the closest heaven”, in that it veils precisely because of its proximity and immanence, and not because of its transcendence. As we saw, it is also characterised as “the blindness,” for its proximity makes it impossible for us to apprehend it properly.<sup>57</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī gives us a more detailed description of the perplexing nature of the Qur’ānic speech in the following narrative. He depicts how it deliberately blends incomparability and similitude by crossing their respective points of view:

[God] addresses the senses and the imagination by His disengagement (*tajrīd*), to which the rational proofs point. The senses listen, so the senses and imagination are perplexed (*fa-ḥārat*), and they say: ‘We have nothing of Him at our disposal!’. And He addresses the [rational] intellects by His similitude, to which the senses and imagination point. The intel-

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Fut. I*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> It is probably no accident that this double characteristic of blinding proximity coincides with the description of the Divine presence in the famous Qur’ānic verse: “We are closer to him than you, but you do not see!” (Q 56:85).

lects listen, so the intellects are perplexed (*fa-ḥārat*), and they say: ‘We have nothing of Him at our disposal!’.<sup>58</sup>

Revelation thus paradoxically draws a veil between Human experience and Divine reality, while bringing to the former the only perfect information on the latter. But, it is not the distant veil of transcending incomparability that a natural theology would easily weave. Rather, it is a blinding veil of proximity and similitude that prevents us from defining Divine reality, even in an apophatic manner. The Qur’ān is thus “glorious” in that it is the only perfect manifestation of the Divine Glory in the Cosmos, precisely because it brings the most perfect experience of *ḥayra*: “[God] surpasses the perception by the intellects, the senses and imagination, and He isolates Himself—Glory to Him!—in perfection by perplexity (*ḥayra*). So, no one knows Him but Himself, and no one witnesses Him but Himself.”<sup>59</sup>

Since it brings to the Human being a knowledge that exceeds the limits of both his rational and sensory faculties, the Qur’ānic *ḥayra* “perfects” him in a way that could not be achieved either through knowledge of the Cosmos or through knowledge of himself. In other words, Revelation connects Human being with the Divine perfection, and it is the only way for him to conceive it. That is probably why the section ends with a reflection on the notion of Caliphate (*khilāfa*)—which is linked for Ibn ‘Arabī with the cosmological and spiritual functions of the Perfect Human being—wherein he states: “[He is] appointed Caliph, and [God] clothes him with the mantle of *ḥayra*.”<sup>60</sup>

## 5 Hermeneutical Outcomes of *Ḥayra*

What would then be a hermeneutical approach to the Qur’ān that would preserve this very perplexing quality? Ibn ‘Arabī’s general approach to that matter could be summarised as consisting in the advocacy of a scrupulous literalism, one that pays attention to the external and immediately apparent—or explicit—(*ẓāhir*) aspect of the text, as opposed to a sophisticated interpretation (*ta’wīl*) pretending to unveil its internal—or implicit—(*bāṭin*) meanings.<sup>61</sup> The literal approach advocated by Ibn ‘Arabī consists in keeping the perplexing balance between the explicit and implicit aspects of the Qur’ānic text: “Know that God addressed the human being in his

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> See chapter 54 of the *Futūḥāt*, dedicated to “the knowledge of allusions (*ishārāt*),” which deals with Qur’ānic exegesis, and openly disapproves the esoteric interpretation (*ta’wīl*), *Fut.* I, 278–281. On the “esoteric” aspect of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, see James W. Morris “Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Esotericism’: The Problem of Spiritual Authority,” *Studia Islamica* 71 (1990), 37–64.

totality, without giving more importance to his exterior (*zāhir*) than to his interior (*bāṭin*) [dimensions], nor to his interiority than to his exteriority”.<sup>62</sup>

For the Shaykh al-Akbar, only such an approach to the text can protect the perplexing Divine perfection of the Qur’ān from our restrictive reading, and prevent us from turning it into a “humanised perfection” through a rational approach.<sup>63</sup>

With reason, we deny what reason denies, since then our present moment is reason, but we do not deny it by unveiling or the Law. With the Law we deny what the Law denies, since our present moment is the Law, but we do not deny it by unveiling or by reason. As for unveiling, it denies nothing. On the contrary, it establishes each thing in its proper level. He whose present moment is unveiling will be denied, but he will deny no one. He whose present moment is reason will deny and be denied, and he whose present moment is the Law will also deny and be denied. Know that!<sup>64</sup>

If Ibn ‘Arabī considers the Qur’ān to be “an ocean without shore,”<sup>65</sup> it is not because he denies the constraints of its delimited external form, nor the heritage of the exegetical and linguistic traditions on which he himself relies abundantly. Rather, it is because those delimitations are the very water of that ocean. In other words, those determinations are precisely what makes the synthetic *Qur’ān* become the distinctive *Furqān*, when it reaches the “closest heaven” of the Cosmos and the Human being. Its shores are therefore only those drawn by the *ḥayra* of the “veil of Glory” that sends us back to the paradoxical waters of its perplexing perfection. It is thus by preserving the integrity of this veil that we can preserve *ḥayra*, which is the only guaranteed access to the Divine perfection of the Qur’ān.

Such an approach to the Qur’ān does not consider the text to be carrying defined meanings, for that would appear as an immobility in what should be precisely considered as an ever-moving reality. Rather, Ibn ‘Arabī’s literal approach implies that our understanding must always be renewed every time we read the text. As we have seen, the Qur’ān never ceases to descend on the hearts of those who welcome it, and this receptivity entails—among other things—that we constantly renew our approach, by getting rid of the rational preconceptions that distance us from the ongoing instant of Revelation (i.e., the continuing process of its descent), and getting back to our immediate experience of the text: “The inspiration is immediacy (*al-waḥy huwa al-sur‘a*).”<sup>66</sup> As Ibn ‘Arabī declares in the *Futūḥāt*:

The servant whose inner vision (*baṣīra*) is illuminated – i.e., the one who is guided by ‘a light from his Lord’ (Q 39:22) – obtains, every time he recites a verse, a new understanding distinct from that of his previous recitation and from that he will obtain in the next recitation (...) The one whose understanding is the same during two successive recitations [of the

<sup>62</sup> *Fut.* I, 334. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 44.

<sup>63</sup> In the last section of the *K. al-Isfār*, Ibn ‘Arabī warns against rationalisation and speculative interpretation of the Qur’ān. See *Isfār*, 124–125.

<sup>64</sup> *Fut.* II, 605.

<sup>65</sup> *Fut.* II, 582. This idiomatic expression is an allusion to Qur’ān 18:109: “Say: ‘If the ocean were ink to [write down] the words of my Lord, the ocean would be exhausted before the words of my Lord, even if we brought a similar [ocean] to aid it.’”

<sup>66</sup> *Fut.* II, 78.



Qur’ān] is a loser. The one whose understanding is renewed at every instant is a winner. As for the one who recites without understanding anything: May God have mercy on him!<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, God thus intends every possible interpretation of the Revelation.<sup>68</sup> However, those interpretations should not be random productions of our rational intellect that would adulterate the perplexing perfection of the text. The only interpretations that preserve its perfection are those emanating from the internal (*bāṭin*) correspondences between the Qur’ān and the Human being. Those can only be discovered through our perplexing experience of the veil of Glory, which comes from our engagement with the external (*ẓāhir*) form of the text. It is through a close attention to the details of the literal formulation of the Qur’ān that we can let those correspondences reveal their meanings in our immediate interiority:

Every reality of the world is a sign orientating us towards a Divine reality (...) Whenever God mentions the world [in the Qur’ān], pay attention to the Divine name which He relates to it, and you will know which world it is. Whenever God designates Himself by the singular and designates you by the plural, then the verse is related to His Unicity and to your multiplicity (...) Whenever He designates Himself by the plural, saying for example “*innā*” or “*nahnu*” [intensive and nominal forms of “We”], this is related to God considered in regard to His Names. Whenever He speaks of you in the singular, He addresses you in regard to one of your aspects (*ma’nā*), and not to your whole. Know what, from yourself, is the receiver, and open your ears to His discourse.<sup>69</sup>

These lines make clear that Ibn ‘Arabī does not reject the articulation between the internal and the external aspects of the text, or what one could call the “esoteric” and “exoteric” dimensions of the Revelation. The caution prescribed by the Shaykh al-Akbar is that one should not mistake one aspect for the other and, by so doing, misleadingly try to explain externally a dimension of the reading that must always remain internal by nature.

## 6 Conclusion

Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutical approach can be summarized as a means to travel *by* the Qur’ān, rather than to travel *in* the Qur’ān. In other words, if we go back to the three fundamental types of journey described in the *K. al-Isfār*—i.e., *from* God, *towards* God, and *in* God—we can now clearly understand why the hermeneutics of Revelation proposed by the Shaykh al-Akbar is of the third kind, the one he defines as: “The journey of *ḥayra*.” Nevertheless, as we just saw, the distinction between the three types of journey does not lie in the vehicle, which is always the same Qur’ānic text. Rather, the modality of the travel is defined by our approach to the text, or the

<sup>67</sup> *Fut.* III, 128–129. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> See *Fut.* I, 278–281.

<sup>69</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-‘Abādila*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad ‘Atā (Cairo: Maktaba al-Qāhira, 1969) 42–43. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 56.

way we ride that vehicle. In this regard, the hermeneutics of *ḥayra* consists in considering oneself as a passenger on the Divine journey of Revelation:

Nobody can accomplish any of the three [types of] journeys without being in danger, unless he is transported, as in the *Isrāʾ*. Whoever is put into travel will be saved, and whoever travels without being put into travel is in danger.<sup>70</sup>

According to Ibn ʿArabī those who enter the journey in God are of two types: (1) philosophers and their likes, who are travelling through the reflection of their intellects, and therefore stray from the path of the Divine journey, since they have no other guide than their rational faculty; (2) messengers, prophets, and the most favoured among the Friends of God (*awliyāʾ*),<sup>71</sup> who have been “put into travel”, and therefore “realised the Real.” These are the ones who have been clothed with the “mantle of *ḥayra*”, a mantle made from the cloth of the “veil of Glory.”

As it appeared throughout this chapter, the hermeneutics of Revelation developed by Ibn ʿArabī involves various philosophical questions, even though, as Chittick puts it: “the extent to which Ibn ʿArabī can be called a ‘philosopher’ depends, of course, on our definition of philosophy”.<sup>72</sup> His approach to the Qurʾānic text is far more speculative than the classical views of the Kalām theological tradition—which dramatically lack for him, among other things, cosmological and psychological dimensions—, yet we saw that he is obviously reluctant to adopt the epistemology of the Aristotelian or Avicennan *falsafa*, because of its fundamental inadequacy for a perfect comprehension of Reality. Ibn ʿArabī considers theologians and philosophers alike as “people of theory” (*ahl al-naẓar*), whereas “those who realise the Real” (*al-muḥaqqiqūn*) uphold an empirical perspective on reality that recognizes the limitations of rational examination and advocate a “spiritual realism”<sup>73</sup> that comprehends every dimension of the human experience.<sup>74</sup> In other words, for Ibn ʿArabī, people of theory fall short of Reality because they apprehend things only through the lens of reason, whereas those who realise the Real “see things as they are in themselves”, that is at the same time in the sensory experience of the phenomenon and in its intellectual and imaginal experience. They see things “with two eyes”,<sup>75</sup> because “they are not able to deny what they are witnessing, nor to negate what they are certain of”.<sup>76</sup>

Ibn ʿArabī’s hermeneutical endeavour is thus first and foremost an attempt to comprehend every aspect of Reality in a unified, dynamic and ever-renewed vision

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<sup>70</sup> *Isfār*, 41.

<sup>71</sup> *Isfār*, 47. Ibn ʿArabī names specifically here various seminal figures of early Sufism, in the following order: Sahl al-Tustarī, Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, Farqad al-Sabkhī, Junayd, and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

<sup>72</sup> Chittick, “Ibn ʿArabī” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London & New-York: Routledge, 2001), 497.

<sup>73</sup> See Morris, “‘Except His Face’: The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ʿArabī’s Legacy,” *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn ʿArabī Society* 23 (1991), 1–13.

<sup>74</sup> Chittick, “Ibn ʿArabī”, 500–501.

<sup>75</sup> See the conclusive chapter in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 356–380.

<sup>76</sup> *Fut.*, III, 267–268.

of being. This is why he tries so hard to blur the limits between the Human, Cosmic and Textual dimensions of existence. We find this approach in embryonic form in the works of his predecessors Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931) and Ibn Barraġān (d. 536/1141), the proponents of a hermeneutical method called “*i’tibār*”, often simply reduced to an Andalusian expression of Sufism, although some consider it to be a distinctive spiritual and intellectual movement.<sup>77</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī quotes them both on several occasions, but his own use of the notion of *i’tibār* (which means “crossing over”, and could be therefore translated as “symbolic transposition”), is clearly distinct in that it emphasises considerably the internal dimension of the experience while relying at the same time on a close attention to the external and immediately apparent aspect of the text.<sup>78</sup> The symbolic transposition advocated by Ibn ‘Arabī does not invite us to cross from one dimension of the experience to another, but rather to unify every dimension of the Human experience in an undifferentiated apprehension of Reality, that is the fundamental condition of our comprehension of any distinct reality:

[Those who realise the Real] cross over, taking the apparent meaning with them. They do not cross over from the external (*ẓāhir*) meaning to the internal (*bāṭin*) meaning, they actually take the letter itself to the meaning, without crossing over from it. For they see things with two eyes, and through the light of their faith, they witness ‘the two clear trails’ (*al-najdayn*) [allusion to Q 90:10].<sup>79</sup>

That is why Ibn ‘Arabī does not just approach the Revelation as a mirror of Reality, but rather as Reality in itself, or more precisely as Reality’s own speech about itself. Therefore, instead of reading the Qur’ān as a text, Ibn ‘Arabī invites us to participate in its reality in a way that cut across the object-subject and the part-hole dialectics that underlies the hermeneutical process. Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutical circle invites us to look beyond the historical, cultural and literary contexts to consider the text and its interpreter as two correlated instances of the subjective experience of Reality. Revelation is not ultimately a discourse that addresses us, but rather the language by which we enter into the conversation of Reality, where everything that is found participates in its subjective experience.

In this regard, the actual interpreting subject is always ahead of the objectivation process. The subject of the hermeneutical process is not what is *interpreting*, but rather what is ultimately *to be interpreted* and to be discovered in the objectivation. Every possible interpretation unfolds the intrinsic possibilities of Reality, which is the ultimate interpreter. However, those interpretations should not be considered as a chaotic burgeoning of random utterances, for Reality is a conversation articulated around the ever-present and never-defined core of the subjective experience of

<sup>77</sup> See Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barraġān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>78</sup> See Denis Gril, “L’interprétation par transposition symbolique (*i’tibār*) selon Ibn Barraġān et Ibn ‘Arabī,” in *Symbolisme et herméneutique dans la pensée d’Ibn ‘Arabī*, ed. Bakri Alladin (Damas: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2007), 147–161.

<sup>79</sup> *Fut.*, III, 267.

being. Its interpretations are thus ordered and laddered according to their universality, that is, their indeterminacy.

Using the well-known symbolism of the “infinite sphere” evoked elsewhere by his disciple ‘Afīf al-Dīn Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291),<sup>80</sup> we could say to conclude that Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutical approach is less a “hermeneutical circle” than a “hermeneutical sphere”, the centre of which is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.

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<sup>80</sup> ‘Afīf al-Dīn Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Tehran: Sakhn, 1382 H.), 198.