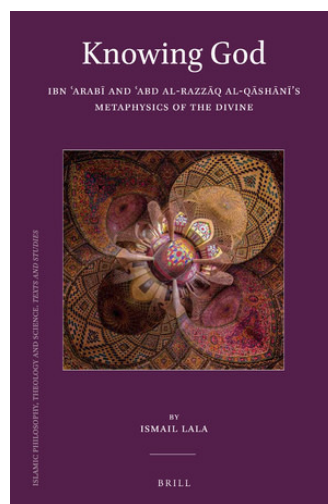


Ismail Lala. *Knowing God: Ibn ‘Arabī and ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī’s Metaphysics of the Divine*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2019. Pp. xiv+227. E-book. ISBN: 9789004401648.

Making an important contribution to the existing literature on Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) and his commentators, Ismail Lala, for the first time in the English Language, examines the teachings of one of Sufism’s great luminaries, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. ca. 730/1330). Like Richard Todd’s *Sufi Doctrine of Man: Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī’s Metaphysical Anthropology*, which investigates Ibn al-‘Arabī’s foremost disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), Lala’s study is a close examination of another pivotal figure of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s earliest circle of students. A disciple of Mu‘ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. ca. 700/1300), who was in turn the disciple of al-Qūnawī, al-Qāshānī is one of the chief disseminators of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ideas and the teacher of the eminent commentator, Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350). These are the founders of the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī or as modern authors refer to, the school of Philosophical Sufism. Ibn al-‘Arabī was one of Islam’s most influential thinkers and prolific writers, often referred to as the Greatest Master, *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*. His writings, for the most part, describe the realities witnessed through his spiritual experiences or unveilings. They are expressed in the language of the Unseen, in the same way that the Qur’ān is expressed in the language of Revelation. Because of the complexity of his work, some modern authors claim that it is not improbable that Ibn al-‘Arabī “made a deliberate effort to complicate the style . . . in order to conceal his ideas from the narrow-minded orthodox and the uninitiated.”¹ While this might be true with respect to Sufism in general, it is not the case that Ibn al-‘Arabī deliberately concealed or insulated his knowledge from the non-specialist. Rather, it is the very nature of esoteric knowledge that makes it difficult to comprehend. Spiritual mysteries are hidden, not deliberately, but by their very nature, since existence embraces both inward and outward dimensions. Thus, his writings appeal to the specialist and non-specialist alike, each



¹ A. E. Affifi, “Ibn ‘Arabi,” in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Kempfen: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 1:403. Affifi attributes this view to E. G. Browne.

according to his receptivity and understanding. They not only require spiritual taste, but also the assistance of commentaries that unpack the expressions, revealing the author's intent therein, and recapitulating spiritual mysteries. Thus, the role of a commentator is paramount.

Besides al-Qūnawī, no author has done more to systematize Ibn al-'Arabī's thought than al-Qāshānī. In his lexicons *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* (Sufi terminologies),² which he later expanded as *Laṭā'if al-A'lām fī Ishārāt Ahl al-Ilhām* (Subtleties of nomenclature in the allusions of the people of inspiration), he outlines the whole system of philosophical Sufism, word for word. James Morris says, "Kāshānī's works in general... are extremely helpful pedagogical tools, for those previously unacquainted with Ibn 'Arabī's outlook and terminology, in bringing out some of his key concepts and technical vocabulary."³ Lala notes that al-Qāshānī's role as a commentator is "to explain the spiritual unveiling of Ibn 'Arabī, not articulate his own" (p. 183) and correctly assumes that his "approach is a rational, philosophical exposition" (p. 183), recasting the Master's works to reconcile the esoteric with the exoteric.

Lala is a very capable writer who tackles the singularly most difficult topic in Sufism, the question of the divine ipseity, or *huwiyyah*. The difficulty of the subject, unfortunately, is further eclipsed by the author's colorful, even bombastic language. Rather than clarification or philosophical precision, the author's expressions are more difficult to comprehend than Ibn al-'Arabī himself. For example, he says, "More sibylline than illuminative, oracular than explicative, Ibn al-'Arabī defines *huwiyya* as, 'The Reality in the realm of the unseen (*ālam al-ghayb*)'" (p. 64). The only thing "sibylline" and "oracular" in this statement is Lala's own framing of the quotation. Otherwise, Ibn al-'Arabī's words are clear. Nevertheless, Lala has proven himself to be an exceptional writer and as such, his translations from the Arabic are clear and accurate.

Lala provides an excellent introduction beginning with some historical notes on the development of Sufism and contextualizing Ibn al-'Arabī's place therein. He outlines important biographical information on al-Qāshānī's early education, his teachers, travels, political life, legal and theological affiliation, influences, and finally his writings, mentioning a list of his most well-known works. He also tackles the thorny issue of al-Qāshānī's sectarian designation. Having studied with a

² 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah*, ed. 'Abd al-'Āl Shāhīn (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1992).

³ James Winston Morris, "Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters Part II (Conclusion): Influences and Interpretations," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, no. 1 (1987): 102.

Sufi master of Twelver-Shī'ī affiliation, 'Abd Allāh al-'Alawī (d. 685/1285) and having exerted great influence on Shi'ite thinkers such as Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, some claim that al-Qāshānī was a Shi'ite. However, reverence for the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*) and extolling the virtues of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib are completely in line with Sunni doctrine and no conclusion can be drawn from this alone, as Lala shows. Furthermore, the Sufi or gnostic (*'ārif*) is concerned with Truth and Reality, not sectarian affiliations, as the fourth caliph, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib says, "Know truth, then you will know its people!"⁴ What we do know is that al-Qāshānī was a follower of Ibn al-'Arabī, his spiritual and philosophical worldview was categorically shaped by the Master.

Given that the central concern of Ibn al-'Arabī's school is existence, Lala has chosen the term *huwiyyah* as the focus of this study. Beginning with a short history of its usage in the Islamic philosophical tradition, the main body of the work consists of two chapters that examine Ibn al-'Arabī's and Qāshānī's views on *huwiyyah*. These two chapters thoroughly explore the term and all of its related concepts, such as entity, essence, spirit, identity, and creational *huwiyyah*. Lala also juxtaposes it to the divine names, form, and belief. The second chapter culminates with an exposition of *huwiyyah* and the knowable God, namely, the emergence of the cosmos and the modalities of existence as they relate to the divine Ipseity.

Building on Ibn al-'Arabī's definitions, the third chapter investigates not only al-Qāshānī's development but also a contextualized survey of al-Qāshānī's works, in particular his famous *Laṭā'if* and *Ta'wīlāt*. This chapter compares the terms *huwiyyah*, entity, identity, and the Perfect Man. It also discusses *huwiyyah* and creation, divine guidance, the last day, forgiveness. One of the author's key arguments is that al-Qāshānī diverges from Ibn al-'Arabī's use of *huwiyyah*, stating that the *huwiyyah* described in the *Ta'wīlāt*, referring to the absolute Reality, is "not the undifferentiated God, but rather God after the first differentiation when there is a prefiguring of existence" (p. 175). Lala further claims that "this necessarily means that al-Qāshānī's treatment of *huwiyya* is already impoverished and narrow—he does not commonly avail himself of the full spectrum of significations, largely overlooking the most important denotation—that of the unknowable God" (p. 176). At the same time, Lala also admits, "Nebulous and pliable, *huwiyya* is employed by al-Qāshānī in many contexts and in many ways. But if *huwiyya* is somewhat

⁴ 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, ed. Ṣubḥī al-Ṣāliḥ (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 2004), saying no. 262.

amorphous, then it is still distinct enough to have a thread that runs through all its various usages in the *Ta'wīlāt*" (p. 173).

While an otherwise exceptionally detailed and demanding textual analysis, I am not convinced with Lala's sweeping claim that al-Qāshānī "represents a significant departure from Ibn al-'Arabī's most basic signification of *huwiyya*" (p. 134). Multivalence of an already abstruse term is not enough to go on to witness a "significant departure" in content, even if stylistically both thinkers were indeed different. Nevertheless, Lala's *Knowing God* is a contemplative piece, full of insights, and a valuable study. One must congratulate Ismail Lala for the courage to grapple the topic of the "unknowable."

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