

Caner K. Dagli. *Ibn al-‘Arabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture: From Mysticism to Philosophy*. Londra: Routledge, 2016. 158 pages. ISBN: 9781138780019.

*Atif Khalil**

While scholarship on Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) has grown by leaps and bounds in the last few decades, relatively little attention has been given to the development of the school of *al-shaykh al-akbar*. Aside from a few articles and chapters by some of the leading figures in the field, among them William Chittick and the late Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993), this pioneering study represents, along with Richard Todd’s recent book¹, one of the first in-depth forays into the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s successors. In this respect, the monograph contributes to opening a new vista in Akbarian studies. No future scholar intending to explore the transmission of his thought to later tradition will be able to ignore it.

Dagli restricts himself to analysing the development of the school from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s most prominent disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunawī (d. 673/1274), to Mu‘ayyad al-Dīn ibn Maḥmūd al-Jandī (d. 691/1292), ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 736/1335), and finally Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350). Practical considerations prevent him from integrating the literary output of other key Akbarians, such as ‘Afif al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) or Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d. 688/1289), into his analysis. Since separate volumes could easily be authored on each of these figures alone, it was only reasonable to set parameters around the scope of his study. Why he chose to set them where he did, however, might have been more fully explained. One of Dagli’s central arguments is that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysical vision remains consistent throughout his school. To quote our author, “in a certain sense, there is no ‘development’ because the fundamental insights are not changing” (2). The development he does focus on – the analysis

* Assoc. Prof., University of Lethbridge, Department of Religious Studies.

1 Richard Todd, *The Sufi Doctrine of Man: Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī’s Metaphysical Anthropology* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

of “development” being one of the central aims of the book – centers largely on transformations in the school’s language and its increasing use of the lexicon of theology and philosophy to systematically articulate its own worldview. In Dagli’s words, the goal of the monograph is to “follow a trend and gradual process of synthesis whereby Sufis, who always possessed a technical vocabulary and style of their own, increasingly adapted the expression of their view of the world to be more easily understandable and relatable to the broader Islamic culture, especially *falsafa* and *kalām*” (1). He reiterates this point in his conclusion when he states that in “*taṣawwuf* it was the Akbarian strand of metaphysical exposition that, over time, added a discourse that was ‘analytical’ to a literature that was predominantly ‘poetic’ and didactic” (144).

Since much of the work explores the encounter between *falsafa*, *kalām* and *taṣawwuf* within the context of the growth and formation of the *akbariyya*, Dagli opens the study by outlining the central features of these disciplines in order to clarify, from the outset, his use of terms. Part of his intention is also to shed light on some of the errors that have plagued Western scholarship in its taxonomization of classical Islamic thought, particularly with respect to how it has gone about classifying thinkers. For Dagli, each of the above disciplines (1) espouses a distinct metaphysical doctrine, (2) relies on a method of inquiry through which it obtains the doctrine (an epistemology), (3) has a goal in mind in both its pursuit and exposition of truth, whether it be social or private, and finally, (4) relies on specific modes of expression that include an evolving and overlapping vocabulary. By grasping where the disciplines stand on these and closely related questions, not only do we form a more accurate conception of *falsafa*, *kalām* and *taṣawwuf*, we are also better situated to avoid some of the pitfalls created by the use of their commonly accepted English equivalents of “philosophy,” “theology,” and “mysticism.” In fact, one of the book’s most illuminating sections centers on Dagli’s analysis of the misconceptions that arise from imposing ideas associated with the English terms onto their Arabic counterparts. After all, if *taṣawwuf* is to be thought of as what usually goes by the name “mysticism,” then how do we account for the fact that most of its literature dealt not with flights into the unseen, encounters with the supernatural, or even oceanic feelings of oneness but rather straightforward virtue ethics? And if *falsafa* is the same as “philosophy,” then how are we to explain that many of the *faylasūfs* described the act of intellection not simply as a mental process, but also as the conjunction of the rational soul with the Agent Intellect, that is to say, in manifestly “mystical” terms? Dagli provides numerous such examples to illustrate the inherent problems in carelessly using

English terms without sufficient reflection to describe the Islamic intellectual tradition's multifaceted complexity. His own suggestion, and one for which he presents convincing reasons, is not to discard the terms altogether in favor of Arabic ones or even to create new ones, but to be more conscious of what precisely we mean when we use such words.

While Dagli is correct to assume that it was within the three broad communities of *kalām*, *falsafa* and *taṣawwuf* that Muslims in the past sought answers to questions of ultimate truth and meaning, his analysis would have been enriched by a greater attention to how these sub-traditions viewed each other, given that they did not, strictly speaking, see each other as embodying competing or irreconcilable conceptions of truth. In many ways *falsafa* and *taṣawwuf* accepted both the social and private value of *kalām*, whereas the latter did not always return the favor. For an early philosopher such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), the theologians held to symbols of truth that were mediated through the highly developed imaginative faculty of prophets (this being one of the defining characteristics of prophecy). Since the *mutakallimūn* were responsible for conveying philosophical ideas in a form that was intelligible to non-philosophers, they fulfilled an indispensable communal and religious function. Their only error lay in failing to recognise symbols as symbols – an error for which they were not entirely responsible because they lacked neither the aptitude nor vocation to discern truths directly. The implications of such a perspective would be elaborated in greater detail by Avicenna (d. 428/1037), Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185), Averroes (d. 595/1198) and others in the domains of psychology and political theory. Likewise, Sufi theoreticians also accepted *kalām*'s relative importance, especially insofar as it played a role in formulating the basic creeds of faith. This is why for the Sufis the aspirant's journey did not begin with acquainting oneself with the subtleties of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, but rather with elementary creedal texts often authored by *kalām* authorities. While *'aqīda* primers presented the relation between God and the human being as a relation between ontologically separate realities, distinct in every way, many of the Sufis argued that such a distinction would be recognized as fundamentally illusory once one had crossed a certain threshold of consciousness. The ontological distinction pressed by the *mutakallimūn* was nevertheless a necessary *upaya* in the preliminary stages of the path. This is why an early Sufi could declare, "Lordship has a secret. If that secret were revealed, lordship would become obsolete [...] That secret is you!"

While Dagli may well agree with the reviewer on this particular point, a more explicit recognition that the philosophers and the Sufis held to a belief in the poly-

vocality of truth, in its multiple levels, while the theologians did not, might have allowed for a slightly more nuanced treatment of the subject. It might also have led the author to reconsider statements suggesting that the *akbariyya* were writing at least in part for spiritual travellers, as when he states, “*waḥdat al-wujūd* could be nothing more to him [Ibn al-‘Arabī] than an intellectual key that might assist someone who was treading the spiritual path” (2), or that al-Qayṣarī’s aim was “to provide a teaching that serves as a support for the spiritual way of life so that false or confusing ideas and thoughts will not be a hindrance to spiritual progress” (142). When we consider that the perspective they expressed on questions of ontology was the result of what al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) would have described as the fruits of *al-‘ilm al-mukāshāfa* or the “science of unveiling,” it would seem that such concepts were meant not for an audience of simple wayfarers but rather for those who had advanced beyond a certain terminal point so as to warrant such honorific titles as *‘arifūn* (gnostics), *muḥaqqiqūn* (verifiers) or *arbāb al-tawḥīd* (lords of *tawḥīd*). If, however, the culture of later Sufism had been transformed to such an extent that aspirants were now more openly discussing ideas that in previous periods had been left aside, then Dagli might have addressed the subject due to its bearing on the intended audience of the Akbarians (a question that he does touch upon with respect to their engagement with the philosophers and theologians).

In the following chapter Dagli turns to a superb analysis of the ideas of Avicenna, al-Ghazālī, al-Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl (d. 587/1191) and Ibn al-‘Arabī, paying particular attention to the relation between *falsafa* and *taṣawwuf* in their literary *oeuvre*, as well as their contributions to the development of the vocabulary of the intellectual culture of which they were a part. He also engages a wide range of scholarly research, from that of Dimitri Gutas to Alexander Treiger, by pointing out many of the weaknesses that have riddled previous assessments of these central figures. For Dagli, what made Avicenna important to the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī was not the extent to which he espoused mystical doctrines, but the lexicon he bequeathed to later Sufis and philosophers, one which had the kind of “precision, scope and flexibility” to allow it to be easily assimilated by later generations (48). Avicenna, as Dagli notes, would begin to introduce Sufi terminology in his own thought near the end of his life – a foreshadowing, in some ways, of the integration of his ideas into later mystical discourses. We also learn that before Avicenna, the main concepts used to discuss God’s essence and qualities were *qidam* (eternality) and *ḥudūth* (temporality). After him, a shift was introduced that transformed the meta-attribute from eternality to existence (*wujūd*) – a move followed by al-Juwaynī (for whom eternality and existence were co-implied) and made complete by al-Ghazālī (for whom exist-

ence became prior) – thereby demonstrating how the philosophy-weary theologians felt increasingly comfortable with the science of their interlocutors. Dagli’s discussion of al-Ghazālī, al-Suhrawardī and Ibn al-‘Arabī is equally insightful, particularly in how he both challenges and builds upon the findings of earlier scholars.

He then addresses some “metaphysical preliminaries” to clarify the precise meaning and history of two key terms, the relevance of which for the Akbarian school is brought out in greater detail in the book’s second half. The first of these is *‘ayn*, which he translates as “identity” because it signifies the essence, quiddity, or what-it-is-ness of a thing. Its importance in the Akbarian school is underscored by the fact that the *‘ayn thābita* or “immutable/fixed” *‘ayn* signifies the reality of a thing in God’s knowledge before it is brought into existence. As for the second term, *tashkīk*, which would come to the forefront of Islamic metaphysics, Dagli retraces its origins to logic and early philosophical discussions surrounding predication. He identifies the emergence of its use in an attempt to qualify or describe an object neither through simple homonymy (*ishtirāk lafẓī*) nor univocality (*ishtirāk ma’nawī*). An example of the former would be “bank,” said of the edge of a river or a place where money is held, and of the latter, “man,” said of both Socrates and Aristotle. *Tashkīk*, as Dagli explains, would emerge as an intermediate kind of predication between homonymity and univocality, an example of which would be to describe both snow and ivory as white, even though the intensity of their whiteness may vary. The importance of the use of *tashkīk* would allow thinkers such as Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) to employ the idea in metaphysics to differentiate between the *wujūd* of God and the world, otherwise (within an Avicennan context) the *wujūd* of things would either become necessary in and of itself (as in the case of God) or the divinity’s *wujūd* would itself be brought down to the level of things, thereby stripped of its own necessity. By qualifying both God and things through a *tashkīk* of *wujūd*, that is to say, through a *wujūd* that is predicated differently of both, al-Ṭūsī attempted to safeguard the Avicennian position on the difference between necessary and contingent existence.

On the whole, Dagli does a fine job of demonstrating how the use of *tashkīk* was gradually brought into metaphysics from logic, going back in Islamic philosophy all the way to al-Fārābī. Had he similarly retraced the use of *‘ayn* to early *kalām* literature, particularly among the Mu‘tazilites, his otherwise fine analysis might have been rendered slightly more even. One might also question his use of “identity” instead of Chittick’s “entity” for *‘ayn* while retaining “entification” for *ta‘ayyun* because of the linguistic inconsistencies the move creates.

Following an engaging treatment of the views of al-Qunawī and al-Jandī, Dagli explores some of the conceptual and categorical differences between the Pahlavi philosophers and the Akbarians through a critical engagement of Izutsu's scholarship. He then examines al-Kāshānī's notion of existence-as-such, or *wujūd min ḥaythu huwa al-wujūd*, the reality of which (if proven) leads us to a kind of ontological argument for God through a cosmological one. For al-Kāshānī, existence-as-such is that reality the non-existence of which cannot be conceived, since the function of such a reality is by definition to exist, being *mawjūd bi dhātihi*, or "existent by virtue of itself." Such a reality cannot be a substance (*jawhar*) because a substance, for al-Kāshānī, "has a quiddity other than existence, by which it is distinct from other existents." Nor can it be an accident (*araḍ*) because accidents need existent subjects in which to dwell. However, we are led to postulate such a reality because of the existence of substances and accidents, as well as every other modulation of being. In other words, the *mawjūdāt* or existent things lead us, by necessity, to existence-as-such, a reality that runs through every possible entification of existence and through which each thing obtains its own being to begin with. The argument is not, strictly speaking, a cosmological one, since it does not rely on a chain of cause and effect to take us back to a primary cause. Nor is it exclusively ontological, since it does not rest strictly on a fleshing out of the logic of terms and concepts related to God. Instead, it forces one to move from an encounter with modulations of existence to the concept and reality of existence-as-such, a retracing made necessary by the presence of the range of existent things that make up our experience of reality. After all, what is this 'existence' that lies behind every existent thing? For al-Kāshānī as well as other Akbarians, this elusive reality is not only the foundation on which all *mawjūdāt* rest and out of which they emerge in an infinite array of possibilities, but the divine Self itself.

Now if one were to contend that since existence-as-such cannot become nothingness, being, as noted, that which exists by virtue of itself and by its very definition, then how do we explain the appearance and disappearance of phenomena, that is to say, the emergence and dissolution of the world's components? For al-Kāshānī, the answer rests in grasping the illusory nature of a thing's appearance. Nothing exists on its own, through self-subsistence. It is instead a self-disclosure of *wujūd*. In other words, the "thing" is an appearance or manifestation of underlying existence, or existence-as-such, whereas this *wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa* remains in its own reality, from its own side, ultimately immutable and unchanged (116).

Another aspect of pure existence or existence-as-such for al-Kāshānī is that insofar as it is the divine Self or Essence (*dhāt*), it transcends entification to such an extent that its nature remains entirely unknown and ineffable. In line with the general view for which Ibn al-‘Arabī has become famous, the God of religion or personal belief – including that of the philosophers – is itself an entification of *wujūd*, one that stands at the summit of reality as we know it within the parameters of cosmic imagination understood in the broadest sense. The imaginal world or *al-‘ālam al-mithāl*, insofar as it is conventionally conceived of as a rung between the world of senses and pure spirits in the ladder of being, and to which we have access to through our own faculty of imagination, forms a part of this broader imagination. In other words, *al-‘ālam al-mithāl* is really a “qualified imagination” or *al-khayāl al-muqayyad* within an absolute or unqualified imagination, namely, *al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*. The divine essence, which occupies a position outside the realm of absolute imagination, imagines or dreams reality as we know it into existence. While al-Kashānī’s position and that of the Akbarian school in general seems to mark a departure from the Pahlavi philosophers, who seem to include God-quahimself or the divine ipseity within what the Akbarians would consider the realm of absolute imagination, their own position, as Dagli notes, is not as different as it may seem on the surface from that of the Akbarians because of the distinction they draw between the concept (*mafḥūm*) and reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of existence (110). That is to say, the discontinuity between the two may very well correspond to the discontinuity the Akbarians identify between the divine Self and absolute imagination.

In the final chapter, Dagli examines the idea of *wujūd* in greater detail in the Akbarian school, this time with a focus on the thought of al-Kāshānī’s student Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī, a figure who exercised a defining influence on such prominent thinkers as Molla Fanārī (d. 834/1431), Ismā‘īl Ḥaḳḳī Bursevī (d. 1137/1724) and the broader scholarly climate of the region. At least part of the reason for his wide-ranging influence was due to his appointment as professor of the first Ottoman madrasa in 1336 by Sultan Orhan Gāzī, a position he held until his death fourteen years later. As far as specific developments within the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī are concerned, al-Qayṣarī is to be credited with promoting “‘existence’ to a place of centrality and ubiquity in his expression” and in adopting “modes of expounding metaphysics in which later devices displace Akbarian terminology” (125). In al-Qayṣarī we find a development in the use of the conceptual lexicon of the philosophers and theologians to outline features of a uniquely Akbarian ontology. For example, the relation between the quiddity and existence of a contingent or possible thing is described as a relation between a receptacle and its content, with the content being exist-

ence. The content itself does not go out of existence, since existence cannot become non-existent. Rather, it assumes a form determined by an essence, generating a specific manifestation in the world, after which it then returns to its origin in existence-as-such through a self-concealing. The language of *māhiyya*, *mumkin*, and *wujūd*, familiar to those versed in Islamic philosophy and theology, is recast to articulate a competing vision of reality centered on notions of divine self-revelation and concealment. To give another example, the impossible-to-exist (*mumtani' al-wujūd*) was ordinarily thought of as the “logically absurd,” as in the idea of a square circle. Al-Qayṣarī, following Ibn al-‘Arabī’s lead, broadens its scope to include those realities for which “qualification by concrete existence is impossible,” but which nevertheless abide in the knowledge of God. What he has in mind is a class of divine Names that remain forever concealed (133).

One aspect of his treatment that might have been explored in greater detail involves the larger ontological implications of the view that the divine Self remains unconditioned by both entification and non-entification (*lā ta‘ayyun*) (106, 126). While the rationale behind such an argument is to make it clear that pure *wujūd* remains unaffected both by its disclosure in things as well by its essential freedom from them, the principle appears to have as its logical corollary – given that it underscores the infinite nature of the Godhead – the idea that the divine Self is not only unlimited but *unlimited by unlimitation*. If this is indeed the case, then we are led to the view that each particular entification of *wujūd* actually contains, paradoxically, all of pure *wujūd* and not just an aspect, facet or dimension of it – a position found in certain formulations of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy according to which the “part contains the whole.” Hua-yen Buddhism and Kashmir Shaivism, for example, both of which bear an uncanny resemblance in their ontologies to the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī, contend that the ultimate reality is mysteriously present *in its totality* in every single particle of existence. In the case of Hua-yen, this doctrine is illustrated through the metaphor of the jeweled net of Indra, each mesh of which contains a diamond that reflects not only every other diamond but also the reflection in every other jewel, *ad infinitum*, i.e., all of reality. Unsurprisingly, this idea seems to be present in the poetry of some medieval Sufis as well. To take but one example, in the writings of the Persian poet Mahmūd Shāhbistārī (d. 1340) we read, “In each atom are found a hundred blazing suns. If you split the center of a single drop of water, A hundred oceans spring forth [...] everything is brought together at the point of the present.” Keeping in mind the caution that must be exercised in drawing out metaphysical doctrines from poetic locutions, the question nevertheless remains whether al-Qunawī, al-Jandī, al-Qa-

yşarī or al-Kāshānī, who systematically meditated on these questions, would have gone so far.

Aside from the numerous typos that plague the text, Dagli's study is well-written, comprehensive in its scope, and philosophically engaging. He brings together a close reading of daunting primary sources with the findings of a wide range of specialists, demonstrating in the process his own impressive analytic and synthetic talents. With remarkable lucidity, he chisels away long, drawn out metaphysical arguments and gets to their heart in a few sentences. While the study is likely to elicit consternation from at least some quarters for overturning many prevailing orthodoxies – whether they involve the nature of Islamic philosophy and theology or the relation between reason and revelation – Dagli is to be commended for pushing the field forward in bold and creative ways, all the while remaining closely rooted in the texts.