

The Epistemology of Islamic Mysticism: A Critical and Constructive Engagement with Sufi Knowledge Traditions

Dr. Yasir Hussain¹, Muhammad Jahangir², Dr Shahid Amin^{*3} Muhammad Saeed Awan⁴, Malik Kamran Ali⁵, Dr Nasir Amin⁶, Muhammad Nadeem⁷

¹Member Rumi Chair of Tasawwuf Mohi-ud-din Islamic University Nehrian Sherif AJK, yasirsatti83@gmail.com

²PhD scholar Government College University Faisalabad.

³Lecturer, Department of Islamic & Religious Studies, Hazara University Manesha, Email: shahidaminn@live.com.

⁴PhD Scholar, Department of Islamic & Religious Studies, Hazara University Manesha

⁵PhD Scholar, Department of Islamic & Religious Studies, Hazara University Manesha

⁶Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, Al-Hamd Islamic University, Islamabad

⁷Lecturer department of Islamic studies, Al-Hamd Islamic university Islamabad.

*Corresponding Author: Dr Shahid Amin Email: shahidaminn@live.com.

Abstract

This paper discusses the epistemology of Islamic Sufism (tasawwuf), that is, what the Sufis say they know, how they say they know it, and whether or not they are correct. The paper does not assume that Sufi epistemology is a doctrine that has been fully established, but rather a contested area of study, one that has been influenced not only by opposition from jurists and philosophers, but by internal differences. It shows the difference between ma'rifah, discursive knowledge, and ma'rifah, experiential knowledge, and the disciplines Sufis used to attain ma'rifah, and traces the evolution of Sufi thought from al-Junayd and al-Hallaj to al-Ghazali and Ibn al-'Arabi and the later controversy between the wahdat al-wujud and the wahdat al-shuhud. After which, it engages in a dialogue with Ash'ari and Mu'tazili kalam, with the falsafa tradition, and with Greek and later European traditions of mystical knowledge, and then in a critical discussion of the recurrent objections: how to validate one's private experience, the accusation of social withdrawal, and the question of whose voice is preserved as authoritative. Finally, the paper reflects on the potential of this tradition beyond itself and what it still has to offer, and on the spaces it must fill in a more comprehensive investigation.

The concept of ma'rifah (knowledge) and its relation to epistemology, Islamic intellectual history, Islamic mysticism, Sufism, and wahdat al-wujud (unity of being) are introduced and discussed in relation to the work of the Islamic mystic Ibn al-'Arabi.

Keywords: Sufi Epistemology, Mystical Experience, Sufism

1. Introduction

Sufism is generally presented to outsiders as the “inner dimension” of Islam, that which has the most to do with the heart rather than the law. All of that is true, but it does make for a very short description of a 14 century argument. Sufism was not a complete system when it was introduced. It developed from the beginnings of ascetic movements in Basra and Kufa, became a clearly defined discipline by the 9th and 10th centuries, and bifurcated several times as to the extent to which mystical statements might be allowed to go beyond orthodoxy, generating by the process some of the most rigorous epistemological texts in the Islamic tradition (Knysh, 2000).

It is this latter issue that is of interest to this paper. Sufi writers were not just asserting a rapport to God; they were making statements on the nature of knowledge, what can be known, how, and how certain. Al-Ghazali differentiated between the knowledge acquired from books and syllogisms, and the knowledge acquired through direct tasting (dhawq), which he says cannot be attained through the former. Ibn al-'Arabi developed an entire cosmology on the assumption that the world is a field of divine self-disclosure, and that it is in principle accessible to a purified heart (Chittick, 1989). These are epistemological claims and as any epistemological claim they beg to be examined: How is this knowledge validated, who is allowed to judge between the mystics, and what happens when two people experience different revelations? So also the Sufi exegetical tradition is plagued by the same question: In a text in which the literal meaning has been established by consensus, what is to be done with the esoteric meaning? Sands (2006) demonstrates how the Sufi Qur'an commentators had to answer this question in miniature.

The paper does not take these questions lightly or limit the study of Sufi epistemology to a devotional tidbit to be summarized and praised. Section 2 provides a summary of the literature pertaining to the topic. The method used in the paper is outlined in Section 3. The theological and historical material, which is presented in sections 4-7, consists of the basic vocabulary of Sufi epistemology, the major principles of devotional practice through which the epistemology manifests itself, the early history of the tradition, and three canonical texts that are read as epistemological texts in themselves. The wahdat al-wujud controversy is the focus of Section 8, which explores the consequences of a Sufi epistemological claim when it comes into conflict with

institutional resistance. In Section 9, Sufism is put into a dialogue with kalam, falsafa, and later with European scholarship on mysticism. The core of the paper is Section 10, which examines the areas of Sufi epistemology that are truly strong, which are weaker, and which areas of the current scholarship are lacking. Section 11 deals with the contemporary relevance and Section 12 concludes.

2. Literature Review

This paper is informed by three main strands of scholarship. The first is the classical Sufi corpus itself, that is, al-Sarraj's *al-Luma'*, al-Qushayri's *Risala*, al-Hujwiri's *Kashf al-Mahjub*, al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, and Ibn al-'Arabi's *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, which serves here as a body of indigenous theory about knowledge, since these authors are themselves attempting to classify and defend the form of knowing they practiced.

The second strand is academic studies of Sufism as a historical and intellectual phenomenon in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Also Robert Franciscani's (1990) magisterial volume on the concept of "shari'ah," Ahmad Baba Umar Makéna's (1992) classic work on "primitive Sufism," and the essays in the *Journal of Sufi Studies* 2 (2018), edited by Tim Barringer and Aaron Cosby, are here, as is the close reconstruction of the formative period of Islamic spirituality by Annemarie Schimmel (1985), the institutional history by Alexander Knysh (2007), the widely used survey by William Chittick (1997/2011), and the close readings by Carl Ernst (1997/2011) of Sufi thinkers such as Ibn al-'Arabi, in addition to the appropriate close readings of the ninth to twelfth century by the author of this book and others. In addition to the appropriate close readings of the ninth to twelfth century by the writer of this book and others, are included Annemarie Schimmel's phenomenological approach to Islamic spirituality, Alexander Knysh's institutional history of the tradition, Ahmet Karamustafa's (2007) close reconstruction of the form

The third strand is the European/North American scholarship that looked at Sufism from a comparative mysticism perspective; this line included Louis Massignon, Henry Corbin, and more recently critics of Massignon and Corbin. This type of literature is useful, but must be used with caution. Corbin's work introduced the concept of serious philosophical dialogue with other thinkers such as Suhrawardi and Ibn al-'Arabi into European scholarly debates, while at the same time it brought a number of assumptions from German phenomenology and from Protestant theology, which are not endemic in the tradition with which it engaged. (Rousse-Lacordaire, 2006; see also the critique by Bandarian-Balooch, 2021, of Corbin's "spiritual sages" approach to reading Islamic philosophers). More recent scholarship, for instance, Liana Saif's genealogical research of the Orientalist usage of 'mysticism' as the term for Sufism, suggests that the term itself carries Orientalist baggage, and that esoteric terms used by the tradition, such as *al-batiniyya* (the esoteric), capture the phenomenon more accurately (Al Mahdi Institute, 2026). In this paper, I attempt to work with the terms "mysticism" and "epistemology" in English, with a watchfulness for the possibility of them passing subliminal messages that the tradition might not have transmitted.

Much of the existing work has not, and this paper does not, attempt to reconstruct Sufi epistemology from the inside, but rather to represent it as the inner dimension of Islam juxtaposed with its outer dimension, the law, instead of in a field where Sufis disagreed sharply with each other about what could be known and how, and where the contestation itself was epistemological arguments, not footnotes or addendum to a consensus.

3. Methodology

It is a qualitative study of text-based analysis, which uses a historical-critical approach to primary Sufi texts coupled with a comparison analysis with the classical Islamic theology (kalam), philosophy (falsafa) and selected strands of Western philosophy of religion. The point of the approach is not to attempt to confirm mystical experience; experience can't be confirmed or denied by textual and historical methods, it can only be analyzed, and Sufi writers' own internal disputes and justificatory strategies were created by them. It has not been critically analyzed from Arabic and Persian manuscripts, but in available translations and critical editions of the *Qur'an* (Akkadah 10). For the selection of secondary sources, the paper does not simply reflect the self-understanding of the tradition it investigates, but rather represents a range of positions: sympathetic (Chittick, Nasr), historically descriptive (Knysh, Schimmel), and critical (Saif, and the Salafi-oriented critique represented by Ibn Taymiyya's premodern arguments as read by later scholars).

4. What is considered knowledge in Sufism

4.1 Ma'rifah versus 'Ilm

These two words are both translated into English as "knowledge" and the Sufi writers were the first to make the distinction between them. 'Ilm is the Arabic word for the knowledge that is known in all the Islamic sciences, including jurisprudence, hadith criticism, theology, grammar. It is acquired, transmissible and in principle checkable against a shared method. However, Sufis use the word *ma'rifah* for an awareness that is direct and unmediated by teaching, which they believed was not to be passed down. A teacher might direct a student to those circumstances that enable *ma'rifah*, moral discipline, remembrance, and withdrawal from distraction, but when it does come, it is said to be like tasting or smelling something — not something that can be told to a student and then given possession of.

This is not trivia words, but the epistemological core of the whole tradition. If *ma'rifah* is truly what Sufi writers have described it to be, a lot of Sufi literature is not a set of doctrines to be critiqued in the same framework as a theological treatise, but rather a set of training manuals for creating a specific kind of experience — and the writing itself is a training manual more than an argument. This has implications for the evaluation of it by outsiders, as discussed in Section 10.

4.2 Kashf, Dhawq, and Ilham

A relatively accurate language of the various forms of extra-rational knowing emerged among the Sufi writers. In Sufi cosmology, the world had always been but was veiled by the ego, and by sensory distraction, and *Kashf* means unveiling, revealing it. *Dhawq* ("tasting") highlights the experiential nature of this knowledge, its first-person perspective; it is not

inferred but experienced. The word "ilham" (inspiration) was a more specific word; it was used for the understanding or guidance received by the advanced practitioner, and was clearly differentiated by most of the Sufi writers from the term "wahy," which was used only for what was given to prophets. In fact, the distinctions between the two are a topic with which al-Hujwiri spends much of *Kashf al-Mahjub*, for to mix the two together was a doctrinal blunder, a blunder that later, some Sufis would be guilty of even if they did not make it at first, as the distinctions were important to al-Hujwiri for theological safety; if he had not understood them correctly, he would have been at risk of theological error.

As stated above, the view that 'ilm and ma'rifah are competing definitions of the same is incorrect; rather, they are two channels that Sufi writers saw as running side by side, but both using their own techniques and their own sense of "satisfaction" (or lack thereof), and, as the bottom of the diagram shows, both ultimately facing the same unanswered verification problem discussed in Section 10.1.

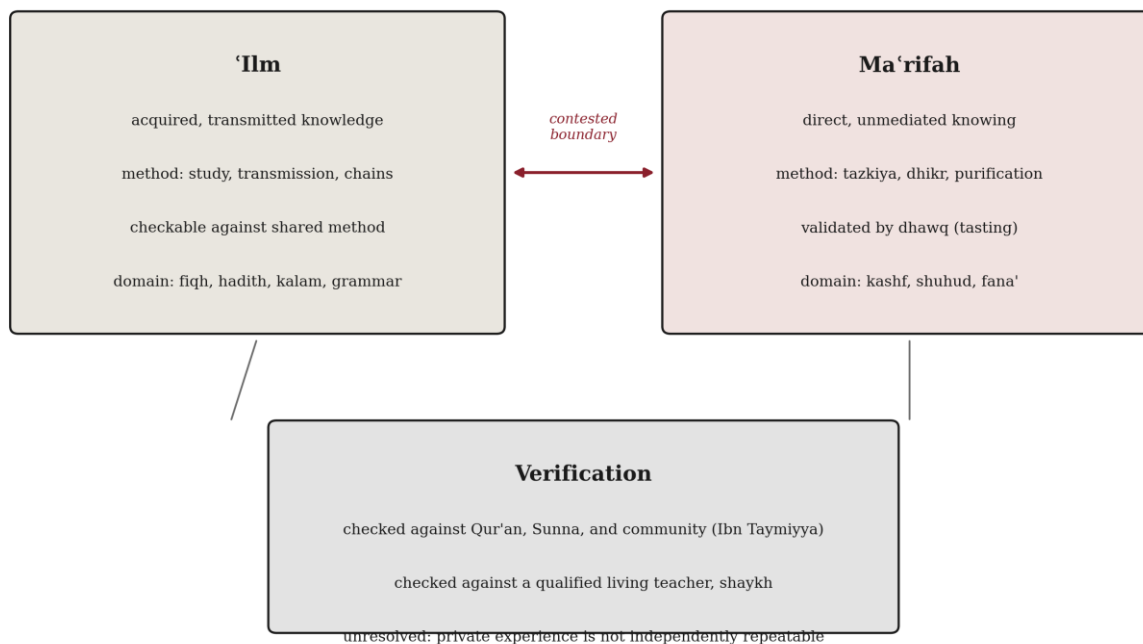


Figure 3. Two channels of knowledge in Sufi epistemology and their shared verification problem

4.3 Tazkiyat al-Nafs as an Epistemic Method

When ma'rifah is not taught as arithmetic is taught, then there still had to be an explanation of why people would reach it and others people would not. They replied with method: it is not the lack of information that obstructs knowledge of this type, but the state of the knower. In Sufi epistemology, purification of the self plays a function similar to that in which a controlled laboratory environment plays in an empirical epistemology: it is not the knowledge itself, but rather the condition under which the kind of knowledge in question becomes possible. In this context, the nafs passes through known phases, from ammara (the self that merely follows impulse) to lawwama (the self that has started to feel about its own shortcomings and acknowledge their existence) to mutma'inna (the settled, at-peace self) and on. Each step is said to be the removal of another obstacle and what is left is one of the cognitive powers of Sufi psychology, the heart (qalb), that can receive experiences which the highlyegoic, appetitive self cannot receive at all.

Sufi psychological literature usually classes this purification into five stages that are easily recognizable from the nafs, which are listed below and will be mentioned again in the following parts of this paper. The beginning condition is nafs al-ammara, the "commanding self," wherein the appetite and the impulse are in control, and the person has little ability to pay attention to or even to feel his or her own bad tendencies. The first actual epistemic improvement is nafs al-lawwama, or "blaming self": the subject identifies some of their mistakes and feels sorry for them, even if they have not learned, but they are aware of it. The most frequent stage is when the heart can sense something more than its own agitation, the "tranquil self," nafs al-mutma'inna. But beyond that, nafs al-radiya is contentment with whatever God wills, and nafs al-kamilah, the "perfected self," is a state where the person is said to act as a perfect container for God's attributes, with no conflict between the individual will and God's will. Authors of the Sufi tradition usually state that none of the people, not even the practitioners for a long time, are seen to attain the final stages, and that the schema isn't really a checklist for the practitioner to go through step by step but rather a map of the practitioner's position, to identify where obstacles are.

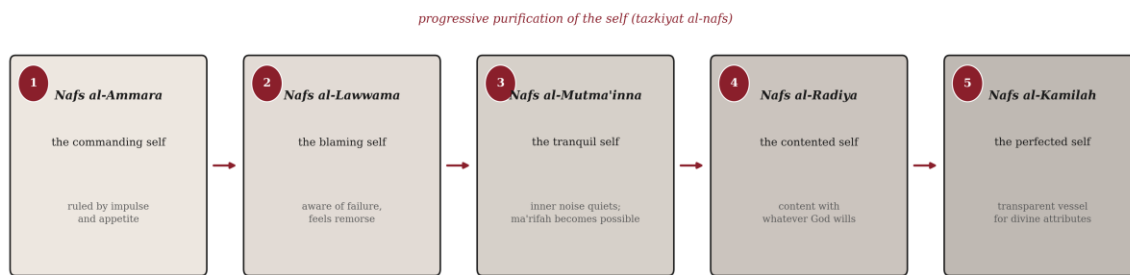


Figure 2. The five stages of the nafs in Sufi psychology

The metaphysics is whatever; this is an epistemological stance: the trustworthiness of the instrument of knowledge (here the purified heart) is contingent on the state of the instrument, and the instrument can be cultivated. It shares some structural similarities with claims found in other contemplative traditions, such as Patanjali's yoga, Christian hesychasm, and Buddhist meditative epistemology, and this family resemblance is one reason why comparative scholars like Massignon and Corbin saw Sufism as a fertile soil for comparative study, while others have criticized comparison as the process of "diminishing" real differences between them (see Section 9).

5. Foundational Devotional Principles

The Sufi epistemology cannot exist without the practice of Sufis; each of the following principles is often stated as an ethics or devotional principle, but is also a part of how Sufis obtains ma'rifah (knowledge).

Tajwid. For Sufis, the unity of God is not just a theological statement to be made, but a direct experience of the unity of God which is most often referred to as fana' the annihilation of the sense of a separate entity in the overwhelming awareness of the one reality that is God. This is not to say that Junayd al-Baghdadi was not a great believer in fana'. Far from it; he was perhaps more of a believer in the sense that he was the most careful and "sober" of the early theorists of the annihilation of the ego and was deeply afraid that some of his contemporaries were treating the annihilation of the ego as an end to it rather than merely a passing state (Knysh, 2000).

To purify the soul, the purification of morals (tazkiyat al-akhlaq). The practical aspect of the epistemic method outlined in Section 4.3: dhikr, repentance, fasting, sincerity, service to others, solitude, to lessen the interference of the self on the perception. These are usually not taught as distinct individual virtues but as a holistic discipline, based on the belief that the combination of arrogance, greed and heedlessness are all symptoms of the same issue.

Love (mahabbah). The most popular expression of this principle is in Rumi's poetry, but it isn't Rumi's; it's already existed in Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya's (d. It is said that 801 AD is the year that the focus of early Sufism changed from fear of punishment for God from wrongdoing to the unconditional love of God for God's sake, a change that was initiated by God's grace. It is said that everything changed in early Sufism two hundred years ago, when the focus shifted from fearing punishment for God due to the wrongdoings of man to unconditional love of God for God's sake, and that was initiated by God's grace in the person of Muhammad Al-Faruq (may God be pleased with him). That her sentence was almost certainly apocryphal in the exact words, and that it was probably written down for many generations later, it is nonetheless accurate enough to convey what later biographers came to agree was distinctive in her teaching that she would quench the fires of hell and set paradise on fire so that people would cease to worship god out of fear or for the fear of reward, and would only worship god for his own sake. This is what love does: it is the motivating power that holds the difficult slow work of purification detailed in Section 4.3, and without it, ascetic discipline becomes a kind of joyless denial which generates resentment instead of clarity, and without love the practitioner is left to control their own appetites rather than to despoil them.

Detachment (tajrid) and asceticism (zuhd). They are two closely related principles which relate to the seeker and material possessions and worldly attachments. Both of them are often misunderstood by outsiders as well as by enthusiastic practitioners as a rejection of normal life. The position of most of the mainstream Sufi authorities including al-Ghazali was different, it was not about the absence of wealth or of the family, but about the absence of the power of wealth or the grip of family in the heart. The 'zuhd' is directed not only at the first set of situations, but at the person who is poor and yearns for what they don't have. In his Risala (al-Qushayri, 1046/2007), al-Qushayri elaborates on this distinction: between the ascetic who has turned his back on the world and yet continues to think of what he has turned his back on, and the ascetic who refuses to think of it either positively or negatively, that is, the second condition, not the first. In fact, some of the mainstream Sufi authorities emphasize that a person can, in principle, achieve Tajrid without leaving the world a point developed a little further by their antinomian counterparts discussed in Section 10.2 who tended to equate renunciation with external withdrawal from the world rather than an internal reordering of attachment and others might distinguish between the two, calling zuhd a more advanced state of renunciation.

6. Faith and Philosophy of Sufism

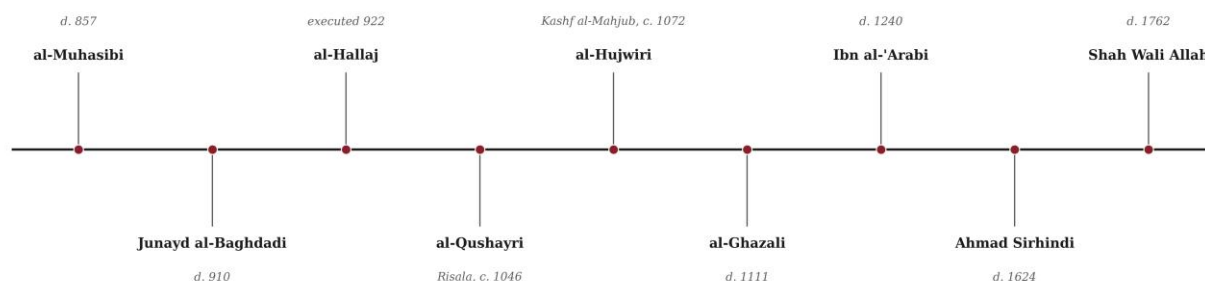
The early history of Sufism is generally presented as a scenario of gradual systematization: the loose collection of ascetic piety of the first two centuries of the Islamic era gradually solidifying, by the ninth and tenth centuries, into a recognizable discipline, having its own technical jargon, its own recognized masters, and its internal conflicts over territorial divisions of acceptable claim-making.

Al-Muhasibi (d. 857) is usually regarded as a bridge between the early asceticism and systematic Sufism, having integrated a deep self-examination with an unusually systematic and even proto-psychological analysis of the states of the heart, which formed the basis for al-Ghazali's own method. Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. The "sober" school, which has been mentioned above (910), is the one that was cautious of ecstatic utterances and insisted on basing mystical experience on the observance of sharia. By contrast, his contemporary and sometime associate al-Hallaj (executed in 922) was ecstatic, ready to make outrageous public statements, even if theological and political, and eventually killed on a charge that merged the two. The clash between Junayd's caution and al-Hallaj's exposure is not peripheral to the history of Sufism, it is part of the main epistemological issue the tradition never succeeded to solve: How does a community differentiate a real unveiling from a delusion, a metaphor, a claim, whatever its inner content, if it is unsafe to be exposed to the public?

The tradition tried to answer this question institutionally in two ways: in a systematic manual that catalogued acceptable states, stations, and terminology, such as Al-Qushayri's *Risala* (mid-eleventh century) and al-Hujwiri's *Kashf al-Mahjub* (eleventh century); in the institutionalization of the terminology of the tradition, as exemplified in the Qur'anic *Qiraat*. The early twelfth century *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Resurrection of the Sciences of Religion) is the tradition's most important synthesis, which argues at length against the philosophers and more legalistic jurists of his time that discursive reasoning cannot guarantee certainty about God, and that only direct spiritual experience can fill this gap, but only when it is disciplined and tested against revelation. The text is also arguably the most influential first-person epistemological narrative in the Islamic tradition, as al-Ghazali recounts his own intellectual crisis and recovery from the initial doubt of sense perception and rational demonstration through his eventual recognition of the necessity of the "prophetic light" opened by spiritual practice for the restoration of certainty.

Ibn al-'Arabi (d. One hundred years after al-Ghazali, the tradition was taken a step further, to a fully developed metaphysics in which all created things are perceived as the expression (*tajalli*) of God's Being (*wujud*), the underlying reality, with all created things as a locus or place in which God's names appear. The doctrine is later developed into the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, and is the most significant and most controversial epistemological statement in the later history of Sufism significant enough to warrant its own section (Section 8) rather than merely a paragraph here.

These figures are put on a single timeline in figure 1. Sober and ecstatic expressed the poles that the tradition never crossed over, but rather remained alive and re-emerging in every later generation experienced by the readers of this collection (most clearly in the *wahdat al-wujud* debate discussed below).



Sequence follows chronological order; horizontal spacing is even and not proportional to elapsed time.

Figure 1. Key figures in the historical development of Sufi epistemology, c. 850–1800 CE

7. Three Sufi Texts Read as Epistemological Documents

7.1 Rumi, *Mathnawi-yi Ma'nawi*

To non-specialist readers, Rumi's *Mathnawi* is frequently presented as a poem of love; it is indeed that, but the six books read together can be considered as an argument about the boundaries of discursive reasoning. Rumi constantly presents situations in which a character who knows why and what, and reasons correctly, ends up getting the wrong answer, because the correct answer was never on offer to the reasoning in the first place. The well-known story of the blind men and the elephant, found in the third book, is often interpreted as a lesson in the narrow-mindedness of any individual perspective, but it is also an epistemological one: Discursive description, no matter how careful, is not an adequate substitute for direct experience of the thing itself. With Rumi, love is not just something that accompanies knowing God, it is the operating principle of that knowing, the thing that breaks the gap between knower and known that mere cognition cannot break.

7.2 Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futuh al-Makkiyya*

It is a very large and exceedingly difficult work - Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, (1989), is perhaps the most precise English-language account of the *Futuh* and a few related works, and it is several hundred pages long. Epistemologically, the

main idea of the Futuhat is that there are two types of knowledge of God, rational knowledge, gained after reflection on the created order as a sign (aya) of its source, and unveiled knowledge (kashf), gained through direct experience after the veils of ego and habitual perception have been removed. Ibn al-'Arabi does not deny reason, but he holds that it is not sufficient; it can prove the existence of God and that the world relies on God, but it cannot give him the kind of certainty that the kashf can give him. He speaks of the progressive levels of this experiential knowing, from kashf (the unveiling) through to shuhud (the witnessing) and their increasing intensities.

7.3 Al-Hujwiri, Kashf al-Mahjub

Thus, while Rumi and Ibn al-'Arabi are usually turned to for their mystical flavor, al-Hujwiri's Kashf al-Mahjub is better read for its methodological prudence. It was written in Persian in the eleventh century, and is generally considered the first systematic Sufi work in that language; it is classificatory in its organization, as it attempts to classify the various schools, terms and claims of his time into what it considers sound and unsound, and this is the reason why he was concerned that the terms of unveiling and witnessing were already being used by those who had not done the disciplined work implicit in their use. Read in this way, Kashf al-Mahjub is not a devotional text, but an early work of epistemic quality control in the tradition, an internal peer-review document, even before the term came into use.

8. Wahdat al-Wujud Controversy: A case Study in Contested Sufi Knowledge

The previous sections have outlined Sufi epistemology more or less from the inside, but this section looks at what has occurred when one of the core elements of Sufi epistemology confronts the rest of the Islamic intellectual tradition and the example is instructive as the resulting argument was almost exclusively epistemological in nature.

In short, in the doctrine of wahdat al-'arabi (the oneness of being), the Being (wujud) is found only in God, and everything else that seems to be is only a place of Being (wujud) for His names and attributes, not standing side by side with God. Although it was later used as a technical term by his interpreters and critics, the claim was most definitely his; Ibn al-'Arabi used the term wahdat al-wujud as a technical label.

This doctrine came into conflict with the most impactful critic, whom was Ibn Taymiyya (d. Whoever was interested in the practical consequences of wahdat al-wujud, like 1328, concluded that the implications of the idea for the relationship between Creator and creation were such that, while not necessarily pantheism in Ibn al-'Arabi's language, they were certainly rejection of it and in the extreme of his formulations, disbelief in it. The epistemological objection was as well as the theological one, because with regard to the system of Ibn Taymiyya, he said that it was based on revelation of experiences that could not be verified from the plain sense of the Qur'an and hadith, and that when a mystical experience, and a scriptural text, are in conflict with each other, the epistemology he proposed gives the text first priority, not the experience. In contrast, while Ibn al-'Arabi's epistemology is based on the idea of kashf as the ability, in principle, to reveal truths that cannot be uncovered through textual-discursive interpretation, Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology is rationalist-textualist and assigns lower status to kashf than revelation and considers that which contradicts revelation, by definition, to be mistaken (Hakim, Ahmad, & Hadi, 2024).

It took another three centuries for the Indian Naqshbandi master Ahmad Sirhindi (d. In 1624, a third alternative was offered which sought to keep the experiential aspect of Ibn al-'Arabi's mysticism, but not the ontological one. Instead, Sirhindi suggested wahdat al-shuhud, the mystic's indelible feeling, in the very moment of contemplative experience, that there is only God; that is, it is a psychological and perceptual event, he admitted, but one that is subjective, not an accurate description of the actual structure of reality. It is not the same thing to be one with God and to be the witness of God than to be one with God and to be the body of God. For Sirhindi, the experience of shuhud was a category mistake, a mistake that involves taking unity to be a fact of metaphysics, rather than the beginning, and treating it as if it was the end of mystical discourse. For him, the highest attainment of mystical experience was only a step on a longer path (suluk), the final point of which was not unity but the relationship of servant to Lord (Ansari, 1986; Firdaus & Sahib, 2021).

A second effort towards reconciliation was made by the Delhi's Shah Wali Allah (d. However, 1762, claimed that wahdat al-wujud and wahdat al-shuhud were both describing the same mystical experience but through two different conceptual lexicons, each influenced by the different temperaments and stages of the mystics reporting it. This move is also a significant epistemological argument, one that sees the apparent paradox between two groups of unveiling not as a sign that one is mistaken, but as evidence that unveiling reports are unavoidably structured by the interpretive frameworks of the individuals who receive them; a stance with clear affinities to later constructivist accounts of mystical experience in the comparative study of religion (see Section 9.3).

What this controversy shows for the purposes of this paper, is that Sufi epistemology was never one agreed upon framework, merely being challenged by outsiders. It was and is a fiercely contested field in which mystics argue with one another about the evidentiary status of their central category of knowledge unveiling arguments that could be used in a contemporary philosophy of religion seminar on scripture, psychology and the reliability of introspective report.

9. Sufism and the European Union

9.1 The Rationalist Theologians: Kalam

The most persistent critics of sufism within the country were not philosophers, but scholars of kalam Ash'ari and, earlier, Mu'tazili theologians who tried to prove theological truths in a structured argument, typically based on a loose adaptation of the dialectical technique of Greek logic. The Ash'ari mainstream theologians generally believed that the knowledge that certain truths about God may be known only through purification and direct experience of Allah is unnecessary and that the revelation, correctly interpreted and arrived at through sound reasoning, is enough; and that the promotion of claims to the knowledge of God through an unregulated and potentially dangerous second channel of knowledge of God, in addition to the Qur'an and the hadith, was unnecessary. Al-Ghazali's career is important because he had been trained as a kalam theologian

and philosopher before he turned to Sufism; his critique, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, is not only directed at the limitations of the *kalam*'s method, but also at the philosophers; far from abandoning rational theology, he argues that it can establish that God exists, without ever reaching the felt certainty (*yaqin*) that only direct experience provides him (as he claims in his account).

9.2 Falsafa and the Greek Inheritance

In introductory texts, as well as in early discussions of Sufism, the continuity of Sufism with the Hellenistic philosophical tradition passed down to Muslim philosophers (*falasifa*) like al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and more recently, Ibn Rushd, is frequently described as a smooth transition from the former to the latter. The impact is significant, but not uniform. The ideas of the soul's ascent to the One and its eventual merger with it, are, of course, reflected in Plotinus's account, and played a significant role in developing the vocabulary used by later Sufi philosophers to describe *fana'* and the return to the source. But the idea that this ascent was possible, if not to a great extent, by demonstrative reasoning such as that of Ibn Sina was generally rejected by the sufis themselves. Later, in his own work, Ibn Sina's gestures towards a "mystical" or intuitive knowledge, such as his late mystical recitals, are subordinate to, and parts of, his longer-term rationalist system, and fail even in these cases to notice the discontinuity between discursive and revealed knowing in sufficient detail for most Sufi authors. Al-Ghazali's *Tahafut al-Falasifa* ("The Incoherence of the Philosophers") is the most explicit expression of the objection held by the Sufis: that the *falasifa* went too far for the capacity of demonstrative reason, especially in matters relating to the eternity of the world, and that in its assertion of the inadequacy of demonstrative reason, its reliance on it was epistemologically unjustified. The philosophers' method itself was defended in a famous work by Ibn Rushd, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (*Tahafut al-Tahafut*) (Ibn Rushd, 1180/1954), and the debate is typically presented as a struggle within the boundaries of *falsafa*. But it also illuminates the stakes for Sufi epistemology specifically: that a third way of knowing was being presented by al-Ghazali, neither side of the *falsafa* debate had given due credit to, namely a non-discursive way of knowing which could resolve questions discursive argument alone could leave contested. It is this verification problem which is addressed in Section 10.1 in order to see if that third option is what it claims to be or simply moves the same disagreements to a place where they are more difficult to be checked.

9.3 Comparative and Phenomenological Approaches

Sufi epistemology had other interlocutors during the twentieth century in Europe. Louis Massignon's philological and biographical study of al-Hallaj (1922/1982) and Henry Corbin's long study of the works of Ibn al-'Arabi and Persian illuminationist philosophy introduced Sufi sources to serious European academic conversation for the first time, and both scholars used the concept of *kashf* and related concepts as live philosophical categories rather than as exotic curiosities. Annemarie Schimmel's *Deciphering the Signs of God* (1994), which expands upon her earlier work and still highly referenced *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975), took this further to a larger extent for Islam as a whole.

That scholarship, that is, has been received with significant criticism since, on points which are germane here. In particular, a tendency to minimize the rational argument, frequently technically complex, in which these writers are involved, and to overlook the fact that they are also thinkers, has led to their being read as "spiritual sages" doing visionary theosophy by the likes of al-Suhrawardi and Ibn al-'Arabi (Bandarian-Balooch, 2021). This isn't a small matter in an epistemology paper: it can make Sufi thought seem more purely intuitive and less argumentatively disciplined than the primary texts themselves are, risking a sympathetic flattening of a view that hostile critics produce from an unsympathetic perspective. More recent scholarship, however, such as Saif's genealogical critique discussed in section 2, extends this analysis further by showing how the concept of "mysticism" itself is the result of an "eclectic" assemblage of European scholars from a wide range of traditions at once, and how the application of it to Sufism can obscure features that are specific to the Islamic intellectual context, including its close connection to jurisprudence, its running argument with *kalam*, and its indebtedness to a specifically Qur'anic vocabulary of signs (*ayat*) that flatten them.

There's a more prudent comparison that shouldn't be overlooked. The classic account of the four qualities of mystical experience by William James (1902/1985) corresponds to a sizeable extent with the descriptions of *kashf* and *fana'* as given by the Sufi writers, which is one reason why Sufism has been a fruitful case for comparative study of religion. However, the overlap is limited not complete: Sufi accounts are much more adamant that the validity of an unveiling must be tested with revealed text and communal transmission, which is exactly Ibn Taymiyya's argument in Section 8. The mystical experience cannot be described in terms of a framework developed for Christian and other traditions and then adapted to suit the purposes of the Muslims; otherwise, one would just have a purely phenomenological account of the phenomenon.

10. Critical Assessment

10.1 The Verification Problem

An enduring criticism, both internal to Islamic teaching (from the perspective of Ibn Taymiyya) and from the broader philosophical field (modern philosophy of religion), is that statements based on private, unrepeatable experience can be very hard to deal with structurally. Within the context of the Sufism itself, there is no impartial means of resolving the conflict of the two mystics reporting the unveiling, except through returning to scripture and the consensus of the community — which is what critics such as Ibn Taymiyya suggested should have been done from the start, not at the end. Consequently, Sufi tradition did not lack awareness of the problem; the elaborate classificatory literature of al-Qushayri and al-Hujwiri, and the later insistence (which is found in almost all serious Sufi manuals) that a would-be mystic must have a qualified teacher, one who is alive, not the solitary one, to confirm him was an attempt to solve the problem of verification. But a check in the institution is not the same as a "guarantee" of the epistemic kind, and the tradition's own history is the clearest proof that the problem of verification was never fully resolved from within, with al-Hallaj's execution and the centuries of controversy over *wahdat al-wujud* being the best examples.

10.2 Social Disengagement Critique

A second, more practical criticism, from both premodern jurists and modern reformist thinkers, is that an epistemology focused on the interior states can, in its less disciplined forms, lead to a retreat from social and political obligation. This criticism is not hyperbole; from Junayd's demand for *baqa'* to al-Ghazali's own extensive studies of law and public affairs, the mainstream Sufi tradition was explicit in its protection against this failure mode, and a number of Sufi orders have historically had major involvement in educational institutions, charitable organizations and even colonial resistance. But the criticism is not entirely without foundation either, as there were antinomian and heterodox elements in the larger Sufi movement, especially some wandering ascetic groups which were abhorring sharia observance altogether, which provided ammunition to the critics who wished to portray the whole Sufi movement as being socially irresponsible, which has lived beyond the actual groups responsible for the damage.

10.3 Gaps in the Historical Record

A gap which cannot be filled by this paper, and which does not, but rather highlights, concerns whose epistemic authority is preserved by the classical record. Although figures such as Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya have been cited in the secondary literature as a foundation for Sufi understandings of disinterested love, the systematic epistemological treatises that define terms, classify states, and adjudicate disputes, the ones treated in detail in Sections 6–8, are overwhelmingly written by men; and the institutional mechanisms of verification described in Section 10.1 (the shaykh-disciple relationship and formal chains of transmission) are historically constructed in ways that make it far more difficult for women to have their mystical claims formally verified, even when their spiritual authority is well established informally. What matters for a complete epistemology of Sufism would be to ask not only what was considered to be a kind of knowledge, but who was institutionally entitled to have their unveilings counted, a question that the present paper raises but is not able to answer for lack of space.

11. limitations.

Three restrictions should be clearly expressed and not implied. Secondly, this paper is based on English translations and secondary scholarship, so it is subject to all the interpretive decisions made by the translators and editors of those Arabic and Persian sources; a study conducted on the primary sources might interpret several of the issues covered in the various disputes presented in the following parts of this paper differently, especially those discussed in Sections 4.2 and 8 where questions of terminology arise. Secondly, the paper is a textual and historical study, and does not purport to answer the question of what is actually happening in contemporary Sufi communities with respect to the practices and verification of these epistemic claims; this is a question that is left for further, sociologically grounded research but is clearly marked in Section 11. Third, and most fundamentally, this paper can only provide a survey of the major lines of the *wahdat al-wujud* debate, of the *kalam* critique, and of the comparative literature, but it cannot adequately do justice to any one of these at the level of depth that a monograph might allow; those sections of the bibliography cited in Sections 8 and 9 are intended as a starting bibliography, not as a final one.

12. Applications and Relevance today

Despite the varying degrees of belief in its metaphysics, in recent decades, the practical psychology contained within Sufi epistemology is drawing renewed interest from scholars and practitioners concerned with contemplative methods for coping with modern stresses, anxieties, and divisions. Those parallels are loose but genuine, as are the descriptions and explanations of the disciplined attention required for *dhikr* (Section 4.3) and the focus on detachment from compulsive material striving, with respect to the development of the secular mindfulness and contemplative psychology literatures. These parallels are loose but genuine, and the description and explanations of the disciplined attention required for *dhikr* (Section 4.3) and the emphasis on detachment from compulsive material striving, with respect to the development of the secular mindfulness and contemplative psychology literatures, are not always recognized as having been Islamic. One modern expression of the idea that Sufi epistemology has something to offer beyond a historical curiosity is that of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who distinguished between the "sacred" and the "secular" by suggesting that the latter was "fragmented and reductive," as opposed to the "unified" and "real" nature of the former, which is what he calls *scientia sacra* (Nasr, 1981/1989). This is a very strongly normative position on what he means by "sacred," not a neutral description, which should be read as such, but a position nonetheless.

Sufi orders and Sufi-inspired movements, more modestly, remain significant in many Muslim-majority societies in social terms, in their teaching in schools, in their charitable and welfare role and, on occasion, in their capacity to provide a religious language for pluralism and living together that has been used explicitly against sectarian and extremist tendencies. How well that role is fulfilling its duties, however, is a sociological and empirical question, and one that is beyond the scope of this paper's textual-historical method, and is one of the several directions for further research below.

13. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to not only summarize devotional aspects of the epistemology of Islamic Sufism, but to consider it as a valid object of critical analysis. What results is a tradition that is much more polemical, fractured, and self-reflexive than a short introduction can do justice to it. Sufi writers were not only asserting feelings, they asserted claims to a unique mode of knowing, they created institutional and textual frameworks to test these claims against one another, and, in the case of the *wahdat al-wujud* controversy, they developed centuries of complex, internal argumentation about the evidentiary status of their central category of experience.

The pros and cons of the tradition are found to be tightly intertwined. It is a serious and still valid epistemological statement that the state of the knower has an impact on the reliability of the knowledge, that has real analogues in other contemplative

traditions and in some lines of current virtue epistemology. The difficulty it encountered the difficulty of knowing if one's claim to knowledge was based upon unrepeatable inner experience, and in such cases, how to test the claim by any means other than scripture, teacher, and community is not a difficulty that the tradition overlooked; it is one that it took up directly to wrestle with for more than a millennium, without coming up with a way to test the claim that would satisfy all its own adherents, let alone its outsiders.

More work needs to be done with primary Arabic and Persian manuscript sources, as well as with more empathy towards the sort of gender-attentive institutional history that is identified in Section 10.3, and with an empirical, sociologically-informed study of the way in which these practices are lived in contemporary communities rather than lived out in the abstract. In a nutshell, the epistemology of Sufism requires the same kind of focused critical study as any other major school of religious thinking in the history of the world – and no more, nor less, since it is devotional.

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