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THE JOURNEY AS DESTINATION: Ibn 'Arabi, Derrida and Charles Taylor's Creative Etymology in Contemporary 'Social Imaginaries'

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Abstract: This article investigates the importance of language as a carrier of meaning in the works of medieval Muslim polymath Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) and contemporary philosophers Jacques Derrida (d. 2004) and Charles Taylor. Rather than focusing on the content of each figure's writings on this topic, the research instead explores the writing style of Ibn 'Arabi, specifically his use of etymology, as a creative endeavor to convey meaning in an indirect performance. After discussing Ibn 'Arabi's creative etymology, the paper concludes with a positioning of this conversation in contemporary discourses on language and society, particularly in Derrida's seminal work *Of Hospitality* and two of Taylor's monographs, *The Language Animal* and *Social Imaginaries*. Despite Taylor's criticism of Derrida's deconstructionist subjectivity, the former's investment in 'stories, images and legends' paves the way for a more nuanced engagement with Derrida's creative etymology and, by extension, Ibn 'Arabi's. The purpose of this excursion is twofold. First, to problematize Taylor's critical view of postmodernism and Derrida's school of deconstruction. Second, and more importantly, to highlight the relevance of Ibn 'Arabi's premodern prism of religion and mysticism for the contemporary – post-secular age.

Keywords: Ibn 'Arabi; Jacques Derrida; Charles Taylor; Social Imaginaries; postmodernism; deconstruction; Sufism.

Introduction

I would like to begin with two anecdotes I heard over the years during my conversations with various Sufi masters. The first is about a wall in a town, beyond which lies a mystery. Countless people have tried to climb and see what is behind the partition, only to run away and never return. One man had the wherewithal to ask the townsfolk to tie a rope around his waist, so when he tries to jump over the wall, they can pull him down and ask what he saw, which the townspeople did. Unfortunately, when they pulled him and tried to coax an answer out of him, they found he had become mute.[1]

The second anecdote was related to me by a Mauritanian Sufi master who belonged to the *Tījāniyya*[2] Sufi order. He stated that his father, a renowned guide in the same Sufi path, used to 'eat' a formula of *ṣalawāt*, well known in his *ṭarīqa* (Sufi path), called *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* (benediction of the opener)[3]. When I inquired: "What do you mean he 'ate' it?" He replied: "He would read a few words then make chewing sounds. When people asked him, 'What does it taste like?' He would respond: 'Sweeter than the sweetest honey'".[4]

These two narratives describe different aspects of the mystical experience in Sufism and a certain conundrum regarding its ineffability. Steven Katz discusses this phenomenon in his essay "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning", highlighting that "contrary to their own sincere declamations regarding ineffability, the structural logic of such theories necessarily tells us more than proponents of apophasis recognize. And this fact should be taken as paradigmatic of mystic systems universally; despite their avowal of *neti neti*, the reality is otherwise. That is, mystics reveal, however unintentionally, more of the 'truth' they have come to know in language than their overt negations of meaning and content would suggest."[5]

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[1] Interview with anonymous, Michigan, United States, January 4, 2016.

[2] Jamil Abun-Nasr, "Tidjānniyya", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (2012). http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7537

[3] A genre of litanies specifically focused on benedictions upon the prophet Muhammad. This particular formula and others of its type will be the focus of a forthcoming article by the author. Ali Hussain, "Practical and Devotional Literature", in *Handbook of Sufi Studies*, ed. Alexander Knysh (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

[4] Interview with anonymous, Michigan, United States, June 19, 2016.

[5] Steven Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning" in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 25.

Based on these two anecdotes and Katz's statement, this paper addresses the question: given the ineffability of the mystical experience, how have mystics, especially Sufi masters, voiced experiences that purportedly reside beyond the boundaries of language? What are the various rhetorical strategies that these mystics rely upon to circumvent the problem of inexpressibility, thereby yielding volumes of tales of miracles and spiritual experiences? How do we analytically describe this *karāma* (miracle) by a Mauritanian Sufi who was able to 'eat' a litany?

My focus will be on the writings of one of the most celebrated medieval Muslim mystics, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240),[6] and his creative repertoire of linguistic tools through which he channeled the *ghayb* (unseen) in ink on paper. Specifically, I investigate the Andalusian mystic's innovative use of etymology and other linguistic structures (e.g., contranyms, homonyms) as a means for voicing spiritual meanings that are otherwise ineffable, residing beyond the limits of language. Building on Katz's insight, I show that records of mystical experiences, at least by Sufi Muslims like Ibn 'Arabi, are not mere recounts of past visions. Rather, they are proverbial shaman dances in ink attempting to 'recapture the rapture' of an original event that, in the 'social imaginary'[7] of both mystics and their communities, took place outside of space and time.

Here, I borrow the Islamic ritual of *ṭawāf* (circumambulation) as an apt description of these linguistic performances by Ibn 'Arabi. I hold this term as a fecund metaphor for what the Andalusian mystic and others like him are hoping to accomplish when they express their mystical experiences. For just as a pilgrim performs a *ṭawāf* around the Ka'ba, the house of God, so do Sufi saints revolve and trace a narrative in ink on paper around an ineffable meaning that likewise resides in the Divine Essence.

But this word, *ṭawāf*, also pays homage to Ibn 'Arabi's etymological concerns. One of its derivative terms is *ṭayf* (apparition) which not only embodies the sea of pilgrims in simple garments but also the subtle ways in which Sufi writings voice the unseen, opting to

[6] A. Ateş, "Ibn al-'Arabī", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (2012). http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0316

[7] I borrow this term from Charles Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries*, a point which I discuss later on in this paper. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

keep it—as much as possible—in its original domain, as part of the unsaid. Serendipitously, the English rendering 'circumambulation' also contains these twin meanings: part of the Latin root *ambulare* (English amble) means "to move easily and gently without hard shocks"[8], almost unnoticed like a *ṭayf* (ghost).

This network of relationships delivers us to the larger contemporary context of this paper. Alongside Ibn 'Arabi, the research in the proceeding paragraphs also engages with continental philosopher and one of the foundational figures in the postmodern school of deconstruction Jacques Derrida (d. 2004), whose use of etymology resembles Ibn 'Arabi's, despite the different epochs and commitments. Derrida's seminal work *Of Hospitality* will be the companion in this study as we compare his and Ibn 'Arabi's rhetorical tools and methodology.

Derrida's works stand as a node that connects Ibn 'Arabi to our third interlocutor in this paper, Charles Taylor and his two monographs, *The Language Animal* and *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Although Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida are separated by centuries in time, they are tethered by geography: Ibn 'Arabi was born in Murcia and Derrida in Algeria. Meanwhile, Derrida and Taylor are contemporaries despite the distance in topography. In this way, Derrida mediates and paves the way for Ibn 'Arabi to converse with Taylor.

Of course, it is not a minor quibble to bring together a medieval mystic like Ibn 'Arabi in conversation with contemporary philosophers like Derrida and Taylor who espouse drastically different intellectual commitments, not the least of which is the indomitable separation between pre-modernity and modernity. Taking this into consideration, it is my objective in this study to problematize this academic tendency to shun any attempt to engage medieval thinkers like Ibn 'Arabi with their modern counterparts.[9]

Specifically, my focus in this essay is on Taylor's delineation, on the one hand, between the 'moral ideal' in the 'Platonic-derived theories', where "the mutual service that classes render to each other

[8] "Circumambulate," Circumambulate, Etymonline, 2001-2024, https://www.etymonline.com/word/circumambulate#etymonline_v_28132

[9] In this regard, I follow in the footsteps of Ian Almond's *Sufism and Deconstruction* that was a first, albeit unfinished, attempt to engage Ibn 'Arabi's thought with Derrida's works.

when they stand in the right relation includes bringing them to the condition of their highest virtue" while in the modern ideal "mutual respect and service is directed toward serving our ordinary goals: life, liberty, sustenance of self and family."[10] Taylor also describes the deluge of modernity as one of 'Great Disembedding' that "disembeds us from the cosmic sacred – altogether, and not just partially and for certain people, as in earlier post-axial moves. It disembeds us from the social sacred and posits a new relation to God as a designer."[11]

Alternatively, in *The Language Animal*, Taylor draws this contrast as being between pre-modern religious transcendence and modern 'immanentization' or the 'immanent frame': "In earlier periods the call was generally understood as emanating from outside or beyond us humans, or even beyond the cosmos (to use a common terminology, it was seen as 'transcendent'). But now there are variants in which this call is 'immanentized'; for instance, the call of consciences is seen as coming from ourselves."[12]

It is precisely this bifurcation that Taylor makes between the premodern and modern moral ethics, religiosities, and language politics that I aim to problematize through the lens of Ibn 'Arabi's writings. I propose that the latter's Sufi Weltanschauung and Iberian milieu behooves us to reevaluate our academic perceptions regarding pre-modern religious sensibility. Whereas Taylor consistently returns to Christianity as his religious reference, whereby the "final phase of the Great Disembedding was largely powered by Christianity",[13] Ibn 'Arabi's creative etymology buttresses a larger conversation and insight into an altogether different mystical outlook.

Charles Taylor and the Secularization of Language

In *Interpreting Charles Taylor's Social Theory on Religion and Secularization*, German McKenzie summarizes Taylor's work as a social theory that "can be characterized by considering both the social and cultural realms of similar importance in the explanation of social and cultural change. There is also a particular stress on both the structural

[10] Taylor, *Modern*, 13.
[11] Ibid., 65.
[12] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 260.
[13] Taylor, *Modern*, 65.

and agential perspectives as intervening in socio-cultural change."[14] Regarding his notion of 'social imaginary' specifically, David Lyon defines it as a "shared sense of how things work, and how they should work, in community life. A social imaginary enables and makes sense of social practices."[15]

Despite both Lyon's and McKenzie's praise of Taylor's work, the former hints at an unspoken issue in his approach, namely that "what Taylor does not focus on, however, is how his own work is situated within what might loosely be called the debate over post-secular society. And he certainly does not explicitly extend his analysis into a discussion of how we think systematically about social relationships or societies of any kind."[16] Others, like Murat Akan, make more specific critiques of Taylor's work, such as that regarding his exploration of French democracy.

Akan laments Taylor's and Jocelyn Maclure's *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, particularly "simplifying concrete historical moments and reducing them to the language of models."[17] In turn, Akan concludes that "Taylor's call for a radical redefinition of secularism rests on weak foundations," because "his historicist differentiation between an old secularist paradigm of institutional separation and a new one of responding to moral diversity fails to hold up in the face of historical evidence on the relations between institutions, goals and principles of secularism."[18] Although Akan situates this squarely within Taylor's discourse on the French Third Republic, as we will see, is also pertinent to our conversation in this essay.

Following Akan, I also contend in this paper that "Taylor's approach … is framed in the language of 'regimes,' 'models,' and

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[14] German McKenzie, "Conclusion," in *Interpreting Charles Taylor's Social Theory on Religion and Secularization*, ed. German McKenzie (Vancouver: Springer, 2017), 197.

[15] David Lyon, and Charles Taylor, "Being Post-Secular in the Social Sciences: Taylor's Social Imaginaries," *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1036, (November 2010): 648-664, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43251449

[16] Ibid., 650.

[17] Murat Akan, "Do We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism? A Critique of Charles Taylor," *Politics and Religion* 17, (2024): 1-21, doi:10.1017/S1755048323000287. In this regard, also see Brenda Lyshaug, "Authenticity and the Politics of Identity: A Critique of Charles Taylor's Politics of Recognition," *Contemporary Political Theory* 3, (2004): 300-320.

[18] Ibid., 18.

'ideal types' and completely ignores its contested nature [in history]."[19] With a similar critique, Christoph Demmerling states that, regarding Taylor's linguistics specifically, "considerations about concepts, and a discussion about language and emotions deserve further elaboration."[20] Specifically, Demmerling asks "What does it mean that meaning is felt?" and "at what point exactly do linguistic affairs come into play [regarding emotions]?"[21] He then answers both questions by proposing that "humans are creatures who live their lives entangled in a web of language … *only through linguistic articulation do states such as thoughts or emotions take shape* [author's emphasis]."[22]

As others have described, Taylor accepts what he describes as the 'constitutive' view of language, which he terms the 'HHH' view, in reference to Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt. Quoting Taylor, David McPherson reiterates that "the key claim of this view is that language makes possible 'new purposes, new levels of behavior, new meanings' and thus it is 'not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language.'"[23] Pertinent to our discussion here also is what McPherson describes as the 'spiritual' or 'religious' implications of Taylor's linguistics. Whereas the opposing 'designative' view of language "aims to provide a 'non-mysterious' account of language when in fact there is something fundamentally mysterious about it."[24]

As can be gleamed from these perspectives, Taylor's views on language and secularism are, despite their erudition, are not without fault. I halt at these reviews and criticisms in favor of more nuanced engagements with his thoughts in the next two sections, on Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida respectively. However, it is worthwhile noting that these consecutive parts reiterate many of the criticisms presented here, specifically in the context of Ibn 'Arabi's Sufi linguistics and its problematization of Taylor's portrayal of premodern religiosity, as

[19] Ibid.
[20] Christoph Demmerling, "Language, Concepts, and Emotions in Charles Taylor's *The Language Animal*," *Dialogue* 56, (2017): 640.
[21] Ibid., 639.
[22] Ibid., 639-640.
[23] David McPherson, "Reviewed Work: *The Language Animal: The Full Range of the Human Linguistic Capacity* by Charles Taylor," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 67, no. 268 (2017): 636-637.
[24] Ibid., 639.

well as Derrida's deconstructive etymology, which emerges as a rebuttal of Taylor's own critique of the French philosopher.

Ibn 'Arabi's Metaphysics of Language

The excerpts I present in this section serve two purposes. First, in terms of rhetoric and style, they highlight Ibn 'Arabi's 'creative etymology' and linguistic *bricolage*[25]. Second, in terms of content, these examples buttress the larger conversation in this paper pertaining to Ibn 'Arabi's thought as a window into pre-modern religiosity and how this problematizes Taylor's bifurcation between the former's milieu as one of transcendence and modernity as an epoch of the immanent frame. The coalescence of content and context here is crucial; it emphasizes that in mystical writings a la Ibn 'Arabi, style and form are themselves vehicles for conveying meaning.

Here, there are two preliminary notes worth mentioning. First, Ibn 'Arabi's perception of language, as well as many other mystics', diverges greatly from modern approaches, most notably Saussure's. Whereas the latter perceives names as "quite arbitrary, or as it is often put 'unmotivated', as are signifiers in general; that is, it doesn't in any way reveal or indicate the nature of what is named"[26], Ibn 'Arabi regards them as metaphysical windows into the named signs, as will become clear shortly.

Secondly, this should not be seen as a corroboration of the aforementioned bifurcation between a premodern and modern understanding of language. Rather, Taylor himself states that "the Saussurean thesis of arbitrariness needs modification … Plainly, what 'dog' says could and is equally well rendered by '*chien*' or '*Hund*'. But it can be misleading when applied to moves within language that involve combination and relations of words."[27] The author of *The Language Animal* is advocating for this modification in our modern

[25] I am using this term intentionally in reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss use of the term in *The Savage Mind*, that the *bricoleur* is someone who works with a limited set of tools to create something entirely new. In the context of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, the Andalusian mystic overloads the Arabic language using his 'creative etymology' and other strategies to excavate from the Qur'an and other Islamic sacred texts meanings beyond the purview of normative exegesis. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 11.
[26] Taylor, *The Language*, 152.
[27] Ibid., 173.

understanding of language, specifically 'metonymic extensions', as Taylor describes.[28]

With this in mind, I would like to begin by discussing two sets of terms that Ibn 'Arabi tethers etymologically in order to weave a metaphysical narrative. The first emerges in chapter 165 of his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Openings), titled "Regarding Knowing the Station of *Taḥqīq* (Self-Realization) and *Muḥaqqiqīn* (Realizers)", where the author states that "*taḥqīq* is *ma'rifa* (gnosis) of what is due of *ḥaqq* (right) to everything, as required by its essence. Whence the *muḥaqqiq* (realizer) fulfills this (right)."[29]

The author begins by emphasizing the social dimension of *taḥqīq*, highlighting that it is inseparable from *ḥaqq* (pl. *ḥuqūq*, rights) due to all things. But who is able to fulfill these rights? Ibn 'Arabi states that "the condition for the person who holds this station is that *al-Ḥaqq* [the Real/God] is their hearing, sight, hand, foot and all their faculties. Whence they do not act save through *ḥaqq* [rightfulness], in *ḥaqq* and for the sake of *ḥaqq*."[30] Ibn 'Arabi tethers another etymological relative in this family of terms, specifically the name of God *al-Ḥaqq*, to the notions of *taḥqīq* (self-realization) and *ḥaqq* (right).

For Ibn 'Arabi, the social imperative of fulfilling the rights of all things is not only dialectical but experiential. In other words, it is not enough for a Muslim to perceive these etymological relationships between *ḥaqq*, *taḥqīq* and *al-Ḥaqq*, but one has to undertake a journey of *taḥqīq* and *sulūk* (self-discipline) whereby their faculties are transformed or unlocked so that they can perceive the *ḥaqīqa* (reality) of the world and fulfill the *ḥuqūq* (rights) due to all things.

However, Ibn 'Arabi takes this experiential dimension further and explains that "whomsoever *al-Ḥaqq* is their hearing, they will not

[28] Ibid., 152. Taylor uses the term 'over' as an example of a 'metonymic extension'; a word that can be used in different non-literal instances (e.g., 'the house over the bridge').

[29] Muḥammad b. al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya II* (Cairo, Egypt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2011), 267.

[30] Ibid., 268. Here, Ibn 'Arabi is specifically referencing a well-known *ḥadīth qudsī* wherein the prophet Muhammad states that God says: "My servant continues to draw nearer to me through voluntary acts of worship until I love them. When I love them, I become the hearing with which they hear, the sight with which they perceive, the hand with which they strike and foot with which they march."

have any doubt regarding what they hear. Rather, they know what, whom, and through whom they hear and what the heard thing requires of them."[31] Likewise, "if *al-Ḥaqq* is their sight, they know through whom and what they perceive, whence no doubt obfuscates their gaze."[32] The identification of God, as *al-Ḥaqq*, with the witnessed and heard things in the world in this excerpt is hardly coincidental.

Before moving to the second set of terms, I would like to offer a reflective pause. Ibn 'Arabi's rooting of *ḥuqūq* (social rights and responsibilities) and *taḥqīq* (self-realization) in *al-Ḥaqq* (God as the Real) might seem like a simplified instance of what Taylor quotes from Francis Oakley as:

> An 'archaic mentality that appears to have been thoroughly monistic, to have perceived no impermeable barrier between the human and divine, to have intuited the divine as immanent in the cyclic rhythms of the natural world and civil society as somehow enmeshed in these natural processes, and to have viewed its primary function, therefore, as a fundamentally religious one, involving the preservation of the cosmic order and the 'harmonious integration' of human beings with the natural world.[33]

However, I propose that there is more at work here in Ibn 'Arabi's writings than mere mythological pantheism.

First, although Ibn 'Arabi does discuss natural phenomena as theophanies elsewhere in his writings, here his focus is on individual 'self-realization' and collective 'rights and responsibilities', an area that Taylor himself renders as part of the modern 'order of mutual benefit' that "holds between individuals (or at least moral agents who are independent of larger hierarchical orders) … the benefits crucially include life and the means to life … the order is meant to secure freedom and easily finds expression in terms of right [*ḥuqūq*]"[34]. What remains to be clarified is the issue of 'hierarchical orders' that Taylor uses as a pivot to separate between premodern and modern moral orders. This will be discussed in the conclusion.

Second, the etymological network between *al-Ḥaqq*, *ḥuqūq* and *taḥqīq* is indispensable and inseparable from the narrative that Ibn

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Taylor, *The Language*, 79.
[34] Taylor, *Modern*, 21.

'Arabi weaves in these excerpts, which roots individual self-realization and collective rights and responsibilities in Divinity. In turn, I propose that we regard this entire linguistic performance as instances of Taylor's 'enactment' and 'rituals'. In the first sense, Ibn 'Arabi's family of terms "enact certain meanings", which has "a certain ontogenetic primacy". "Enacted meaning provides the context within which articulated meanings can arise and be understood."[35]

The main distinction I draw between Taylor's rendering of the term as 'embodiment' and its application here in Ibn 'Arabi's writings is that the latter enacts and performs linguistically, in ink on paper. And yet, there is an implicit embodiment in Ibn 'Arabi's linguistic enactment of meaning here: the person of the *muḥaqqiq* (saint or realizer) who not only appears as a theophany of *al-Ḥaqq* but also necessarily fulfills the *ḥuqūq* (rights and responsibilities) of all things. James Morris eloquently describes these interconnected dimensions of *taḥqīq* by defining the term as "the inseparably moral, spiritual and intellectual tasks of both discovering and investigating—and actually realizing or 'making real'—everything that is demanded of us by the *Ḥaqq* which we are striving to know."[36]

Ibn 'Arabi's narrative here also resembles Taylor's formulation of the 'ritual', which he tethers to enactment since the former "can be both a reenactment of something (the Canon of the Mass in relation to the Last Supper), and also an effecting and enactment of what is represented (the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ). The two modes of access to a higher order come together here."[37] The author also connects ritual to myth, emphasizing that the two "have always been closely linked", "they offer alternative modes of access to the presumed order that is realized in one and portrayed in the other."[38]

Taylor clarifies this ability to 'reenact' by stating that "the actions and words of ritual frequently have an iconic or symbolic relation to what they are trying to effect, or to the order they are meant to repair, but the crucial point about them is that they are

[35] Taylor, *The Language*, 44.
[36] James Morris, "Communication and Spiritual Pedagogy: Exploring the Methods of Investigation (*taḥqiq*) in Classical Islamic Thought," in *Time, Space and Motion in Islam*, ed. H. Ahmed (Washington: Islamic Thought and Science Institute, 2003), 2.
[37] Taylor, *The Language*, 69.
[38] Ibid., 72.

performatives, they help to bring about what they (at least in part) represent."[39] He uses this preliminary discussion to buttress the point that "needless to say, we are still deeply invested in rituals and ceremonies in which the life of our society is made real to us, such as national holidays, funerals of famous people."[40]

Tying this conversation to modernity, Taylor states that "in our disenchanted world, the original sense of ritual as performative within a larger order tends to slide out of public space, giving way to legal procedure on one side, which is performative within a context of positive law; and mere ceremony on the other, which is in a sense ritual without performative force."[41] Unfortunately, the author here retorts to a clear bifurcation between premodernity and modernity, which I will recourse to later.

However, for now, I would like to focus on the ritual's ability to reenact through an 'iconic or symbolic relation to what they are trying to effect', their performativity and power to 'bring about what they represent'. I have elsewhere described the expressive power of mystical writings almost verbatim, stating that "the mystical experience is inseparable from the very language used to describe it."[42] In other words, these very words in which Ibn 'Arabi discusses *taḥqīq* are an opportunity for inexperienced readers to undergo this very experience of 'self-realization': the play of words is a linguistic *ṭawāf* (circumambulation) that resurrects the *ṭayf* (apparition) of prayer.

This active transformative power of religious texts, aside from the Qur'an, is commonly understood among Sufis, even benefiting the author's spirit after death. Indeed, this gives new meaning to Roland Barthes' seminal essay, and formative moment in the school of deconstruction, "The Death of the Author". If Barthes and Derrida hold that the author loses control over the meaning of their work after its completion, Sufi mystics establish a spiritual lineage whereby words return in their abundant meanings as *ḥasanāt* (rewards) to their wordsmith. We will have recourse to Derrida's writings and rhetoric in the following section.

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[39] Ibid., 74.
[40] Ibid., 77.
[41] Ibid., 81.
[42] Ali Hussain, "The Metaphysics of Creativity: Imagination in Sufism, from the Qur'ān into Ibn al-'Arabī," in *Imagination and Art: Explorations in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Keith Moser (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 738.

I would like to continue in this section with two more excerpts from Ibn 'Arabi's *The Meccan Openings*, each of which creates its own etymological network of related terms that bespeak a metaphysical narrative. In the first, the Andalusian mystic explains why the world is called *'ālam* in the Qur'an: "The world is called *'ālam* due to it being an *'alāma* (sign) that points to the *'Alīm* (God as All-Knower)."[43]

Here, he tethers the Islamic notion of *'ilm* (knowledge) to our external perception of the world, whence our knowledge of any given thing or person in the world is to perceive it as a sign of God. As in the above discussion on *al-Ḥaqq*, *ḥuqūq*, *ḥaqīqa* and *taḥqīq*, the author of the *Meccan Openings* relies on etymology to explain his metaphysics. And so, just as *taḥqīq* allows one to perceive *al-Ḥaqq* in 'form and creed', so does having *'ilm* (knowledge) of any specific thing in existence entail perceiving it as an *'alāma* (sign) of the *'Alīm* (All-Knower).

In the second, Ibn 'Arabi explores the Qur'anic term *'ibra* (parable). He tethers this notion to other related words: *'ibāra* (phrase), *ta'bīr* (expression), and *'ubūr* (crossing over). In turn, just as we cross over from the Qur'anic *'ibāra* (phrase) to the *'ibra* (parable) behind it, so do we journey from the *ṣūra* (form) of the physical world to the *ma'nā* (meaning) in the beyond, the spiritual world.[44]

Of course, this is yet another reformulation of our duty of fulfilling the *ḥuqūq* (rights) due to the creation of *al-Ḥaqq* (the Real). *'Ubūr* (crossing over) is merely another term for *taḥqīq* (self-realization) in Ibn 'Arabi's Weltanschauung: to travel from the physical form, *'ibāra* (expression) and *'alāmāt* (signs) of *khalq* (creation) to the *'ibra* (parable or metaphor) and manifestation of *al-Ḥaqq* (God the Real) and *al-'Alīm* (God the All-Knower) therein, which is how we fulfill the *ḥuqūq* (rights and responsibilities) due to everything in *al-'ālam* (existence).

In his groundbreaking trilogy on the premodern appreciation of the Christian sacraments, *God and Mystery in Words*, *God and Enchantment of Place*, and *God and Grace of Body*, author David Brown highlights the significance of the 'metaphor' in traditional Christian understandings of scripture. The author decries "the alteration of existing hymns to conform more closely to what is now seen as acceptable theology", whereby "even conservative denominations

[43] Muḥammad b. al-'Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt*, 443.
[44] Ibid., III, 454.

such as the Baptists have been concerned in revisions to provide inclusive language … seeking to remove all traces of 'sexism' and what were seen as tired or redundant metaphors."[45]

The author also contrasts between metaphors and 'enacted symbols', the latter with which "all of us are familiar … as a way of access to God", "but when it comes to their verbal equivalent in metaphor, the tendency is still to see their role as intellectual rather than as experiential." Brown explains that from this perspective, "metaphor and analogy are there to illumine our understanding of God. It is not that they constitute or create a way of experiencing God." This is the assumption that he wants to rebut, "especially the resultant tendency to think of metaphors as redundant, once we have got the point."[46]

Returning to Taylor's *The Language Animal*, the author associates metaphors with his use of 'figuring', whereby "metaphorical expressions serve not only to designate their referents, but they also characterize them in a certain way … a figuring is not arbitrary; we grasp it, and often approve it because it fits."[47] Taylor also emphasizes that "it is crucial to this kind of attribution that there be something inappropriate in it—only in this case the inappropriateness is more striking than in speaking of a 'key' for the code, which was simply wrong in lexical terms."[48] But this 'inappropriateness' is not a mistake, rather "something initially surprising … we may not get it the right way. Indeed, in some cases, we may never get it. There is a tension between target and source."[49]

What Taylor regards as 'inappropriate' Ibn 'Arabi deems an *'ibra* (metaphor or parable) that still requires an *'ubūr* (crossing over). More importantly, however, is that Ibn 'Arabi behooves us to consider the physical world as a matrix of *'alāmāt* (signs) and *'ibar* (metaphors), ones that David Brown emphasizes are neither arbitrary nor redundant. This is more than simply a portrayal of the physical world as literature, but rather a convergence with Taylor's own critique of Saussure's portrayal of signs as 'unmotivated'. Rather, Ibn 'Arabi

[45] David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 94.
[46] Ibid., 6.
[47] Taylor, *The Language*, 130.
[48] Ibid., 139.
[49] Ibid., 139-140.

regards the physical world as 'metonymic expressions', to borrow Taylor's term.

Moreover, these are material sentences that intentionally yet elusively reveal the meaning behind the form, as Brown states. The question remains however, what is this meaning that resides behind form in Ibn 'Arabi's Weltanschauung? Is it a transcendent hierarchical order as Taylor describes premodern religiosity? Clearly, as a Muslim mystic, Ibn 'Arabi adheres to a strict Qur'anic monotheism that Timothy Winters describes as 'radical', one that "thoroughly sacralized the world as a matrix of 'signs'"[50]. Here, another etymological relationship presents itself: for each *āya* (verse) in the Qur'an there is a corresponding *āya* (sign) in the universe.

In this regard, Ibn 'Arabi's theology is a clear counterexample to Taylor's portrayal of premodern religious dogma and pragma. For example, the latter recurrently refers to 'higher' transcendent dimensions, whereby "in earlier ages, the understanding was that this profane time existed in relation to (surrounded by, penetrated by; it is hard to find the right words here) higher times … Time was transcended and held in place by eternity, whether that of Greek philosophy or of the biblical God."[51] Perhaps the difficulty in finding 'the right words' to describe the relationship between profane and sacred time is precisely that they are not as distinct as Taylor proposes.

In contrast, Ibn 'Arabi views time as "an illusory thing, non-existent … the Arabs define it as and mean by it the night and daytime, and it is our [his] definition in this context. This day makes the existence of the great movement visible. It is not itself existent but the existence of the moved, nothing else; nor is the movement time itself; the upshot of this is that time is an illusory matter with no reality"[52] In essence, since Ibn 'Arabi regards the entire cosmos as a matrix of *tajalliyyāt* (theophanies)—or 'signs' to use Winter's term, time is a necessary illusion of sequence and order that results from these infinite divine manifestations permeating a finite container that is the universe.

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[50] Tim Winter, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.
[51] Taylor, *Modern*, 97.
[52] Eric Winkel, "Time is Not Real: Time in Ibn 'Arabi, and from Parmenides (and Heraclitus) to Julian Barbour", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 51 (2012). https://ibnarabisociety.org/time-is-not-real-eric-winkel/

More importantly, however, is that the Andalusian mystic, as a religious mystic living in premodernity, does not adhere to Taylor's bifurcation between high/sacred and low/profane orders of time. On the contrary, Ibn 'Arabi actually tethers all of the time to the physical—read profane—world. It is significant that he also clarifies that "God attributes it [time] universally to Himself"[53]. Thus, we may ask what is noteworthy between this divine attribution of a time that is essentially non-existent and its threaded connection to the mundane physical realm. The answer to this crucial question reveals just how drastically different is Ibn 'Arabi's Weltanschauung from Taylor's proposed vision of premodern religiosity.

Let us recount that Ibn 'Arabi regards the entire universe and all created things as a matrix of *'alāmāt* (signs) that point to the *'Alīm* (All-Knower, God). Moreover, the process of *taḥqīq* (self-realization) entails fulfilling the *ḥuqūq* (rights) due to all things, thereby deciphering their *ḥaqīqa* (reality) as theophanies of *al-Ḥaqq*. The author of the *Meccan Openings* further emphasizes this by stating that "the highest honor in knowledge is the Real's manifestation in a form that is denied (by creation) followed by His transformation to another image that is affirmed, while it is Him in the first and second."[54] This immanent theology acknowledges that "such visions can only be *muqayyada* (defined) since the essence of the servant is also limited and contingent. Thus, he (the servant) can never witness *al-iṭlāq* (absolution/transcendence)."[55]

Ibn 'Arabi takes this *taqyīd* (definitiveness) due to God to its utmost limit, stating that "the Witnessed (God) manifests bounded by the form as well as bounded by transforming in forms. Indeed, He who accepts to transform from one form to another will undoubtedly accept manifesting in endless forms. In this way, He is free from boundedness through boundedness."[56] The author then concludes by saying that "the highest form of discipline is that one neither rejects Him in any form nor bounds Him by transcendence. Rather, to Him belongs absolute transcendence from being transcendent of forms."[57]

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Muḥammad b. al-'Arabi, *al-Futuḥāt II*, 483
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

Two important points emerge from this rather sophisticated metaphysics. First, Ibn 'Arabi holds that it is impossible for humanity to witness God in absolute transcendence. Second, the claim that God is transcendent from appearing in the myriad of forms in this physical world is itself a limitation that renders the divine incapable of binding Himself to a procession of theophanies. Both of these insights rebut Taylor's portrayal of premodern religiosity and its division between a higher order of sacred existence and a lower profane infrastructure. Rather, Ibn 'Arabi would like us to envision a universe that fluctuates between sacrality and profanity on a gradation. Moreover, no artifact, event, place, or action in the physical world is excluded as a candidate to channel the sacred.

Whereas Taylor holds that "what stands out [in premodern religiosity] is the ubiquity of something like a relation to spirits or forces or powers, which are recognized as being in some sense higher, not the ordinary forces and animals of everyday life"[58], Ibn 'Arabi states that these 'animals of everyday life' are "called *bahā'im* [four-legged animals], which is derived from *ibhām* [obfuscation], since the meanings of their actions and sounds are obfuscated for us"[59] and "for each created thing has a specific speech taught to it by God. It is heard by those whose hearing God has opened up to its perception."[60]

An example of a saint whose 'hearing God has opened up to its perception' is mentioned by the 18th-century Moroccan saint 'Abd al 'Aziz al-Dabbagh (d. 1719).[61] The latter recounts that saints have immense "delight, joy and rapture that they experience during their vision of God's action among His creatures … It even happened to one of them that he saw a cat rubbing its chin with its paw and then he began to weep. His tears gushed forth and he prostrated himself before the cat so that his tears drenched the ground in front of the cat."[62] Al-Dabbagh's student asks him regarding this seeming act of idolatry: "What's the secret behind this?" to which al-Dabbāgh responds: "The spirit beheld *al-Ḥaqq* [the True] doing this movement

[58] Taylor, *Modern*, 51.
[59] William Chittick, "The Wisdom of Animals", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 46 (2009). https://ibnarabisociety.org/the-wisdom-of-animals-william-chittick/
[60] Ibid.
[61] Pierre Lory, "Al-Dabbagh, 'Abd al-'Azīz", *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three* (2019).
[62] Ahmad al-Lamati, *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2022), 678.

and began to prostrate itself before Him … To the people, his prostration appeared as if it was on behalf of the cat. But the Friend of God … only beheld *al-Ḥaqq* [the True]."[63]

This is not Taylor's transcendent religiosity that constrains the supernatural to the otherworldly. On the contrary, Ibn 'Arabi's—and later al-Dabbagh's—mystical inclinations view the physical and material as sacred in its own right. In other words, to quote Brown, these metaphors of bodily images are not 'redundant'. Each artifact in the physical world binds and manifests God in a unique way that does not allow for a complete disregard of form in favor of the spirit. Although Taylor claims that his reference to premodern religiosity is Christianity, even then it is an untenable suggestion, as Brown shows.

Secularism, as Talal Asad eloquently states, "cannot do without the idea of religion."[64] The breadth and depth of Taylor's analysis cannot hide the fact that his portrayal of premodern religious traditions is carefully curated to corroborate a contentious relationship with the secular. In other words, the author of *Modern Social Imaginaries* and *The Language Animal* needs a religious sensibility that devalues everyday life and low-order profane temporality in order to heighten the distinction between modernism's emphasis on the moral order and the mundane. Thus, he constructs the former as an inverted reflection of the latter, as Asad describes. In the next section, we briefly visit the writings of Jacques Derrida, whom Taylor critiqued, to explore another approach to etymology that in some ways resembles Ibn 'Arabi's methodology, albeit with different commitments and objectives.

Jacques Derrida and the Hospitality of Language

In *Sufism and Deconstruction*, Ian Almond clarifies that "it is certainly not the object of this book to claim that Ibn 'Arabi was the existentialist—or post-structuralist—of all time … it is *not* the intention of this study to turn a thirteenth-century Sufi into a postmodern theorist, any more than it is our desire to 'islamicize' Jacques Derrida."[65] Rather, the aim is "to show how a similar deconstructive process can be found in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi—a

[63] Ibid.
[64] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity*, *Islam*, *Modernity* (Stanford: CA, Stanford University Press, 2003), 200.
[65] Almond, *Sufism*, 2.

demonstration, however, which is far from turning the Great Shaykh into a medieval post-structuralist."[66] Taking all of this into consideration, it would seem that there are very few similarities between Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida to merit a comparative study, save the latter's self-description as 'very Arab, little Jew' in *Circumfession*.[67]

Be that as it may, there is more harmony between these two thinkers than meets the eye and animates their use of etymology, which will be discussed shortly. In "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism", Derrida states "I think that the question of language is essential to everything that we are discussing here. At bottom, if there are differences between us, this essentially derives from a question of language."[68] There seems to be a similar motivation here as in Ibn 'Arabi's works; namely, to use linguistic relationships as a foundation from which an intellectual or mystical narrative can be weaved. It might as well be the Andalusian mystic who stated that 'the question of language is essential to everything'. It is also from the well of etymology that Ibn 'Arabi constructs and explains his metaphysics, as does Derrida in his approach to deconstruction.

Taylor has been noted as a critic of Derrida. In *The Language Animal*, the former states in a footnote that the latter's "almost obsessive attempt to deny altogether any special status whatsoever to speech in the human language capacity raises the question of whether he doesn't have more in common with the Cartesian tradition that he would like to admit. '*L'écriture*' and '*la différance*', while embedded in culture (or constitutive of it), is peculiarly disembodied functions."[69] However, a cursory reading of *Of Hospitality* belies Taylor's claim. Derrida's approach to language is thoroughly embedded in society and culture and hardly merits the accusation of 'disembodiment', any more than Taylor's own works.

Anne Dufourmantelle, who not only renders Derrida's original French in exquisite English but also accompanies the original—translated—text with insightful commentary, begins with what seems to be a rebuttal of Taylor's claim that Derrida denies 'any special status whatever to speech'. While also describing it as an 'obsession', Dufourmantelle instead associates this term with the "nocturnal side

[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 3.
[68] Jacques Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (New York: Routledge, 1996), 77.
[69] Taylor, *The Language*, (n40) 31.

of speech … a forger can imitate a painter's brush stroke or a writer's style and make the difference between them imperceptible, but he will never be able to make his own their obsession."[70] In turn, she states that "Derrida's obsession, in this philosophical narrative woven around that fine theme of hospitality, takes its time in drawing the contours of an impossible, illicit geography of proximity."[71]

Already in this first paragraph, the translator provides a much more poetic—and needed—analysis of Derrida's relationship with speech than Taylor. Meanwhile, the former immediately begins his work with an etymological relationship: "Isn't the question of the foreigner [*l'étranger*] a foreigner's question? Coming from the foreigner, from abroad [*l'étranger*]?"[72] The homonymic relationship between 'foreigner' and 'abroad' in French, united in a single term *l'etranger*, yields a much larger series of problems for the author, among which is that "the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc."[73]

The imposition to learn the host's language, which Derrida dubs the first 'act of violence' against the foreigner, delivers the author to another series of etymological relationships. Beginning with the Latin homonym *hostis* (guest and enemy), Derrida deciphers a certain 'hostility' in Western *hospitality*.[74] Here, Dufourmantelle offers an eloquent commentary, "Derrida perceives the resurgence of an 'intimate' violence of the same kind in events like hostage wars or terrorist acts against civilians, but the equally close thing that he interrogates, in this connection, is hospitality turning back into hostility."[75] Unlike Saussure, and more like Ibn 'Arabi, the French philosopher does not regard these signifiers as 'unmotivated'. On the contrary, they are indispensable to understanding the story of the signified.

And so, because the term 'hospitality' is laden with *hostility* and *hostis* (guest and enemy), Derrida finds therein the foundation of violence within Western hospitality towards *l'étranger* (the foreigner

[70] Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: CA, Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., 3.
[73] Ibid., 15.
[74] Ibid., 45.
[75] Ibid., 94.

from abroad). Here, we recount another phonetically related term, the *ghost*, eerily near *host*. Despite the etymological distance, Dufourmantelle remarks that "the hostis responds to hospitality in the way that the ghost recalls himself to the living, not letting them forget."[76] In turn, Derrida himself states that the "foreign guest appears like a ghost."[77] Again, it is through the *ṭayf* (apparition) of language, tethering *guest*, *ghost*, *host*, *hostility*, *hostis*, and *hospitality* that Derrida is able to weave the tapestry of Western hospitality and its inherent violence in this work.

One final linguistic relationship that is worth mentioning here is that pertaining to the *gift*, an indispensable artifact in almost all discourses on hospitality. Embracing both the English and German meanings of the words, 'present' and 'poison' respectively, Derrida reflects on Oedipus' gift to his daughters: "He is going to deprive them of their mourning, thereby obliging them to go through their mourning of mourning. Do we know of a more generous and poisoned form of the gift?"[78] Derrida inundates language, almost beyond its capacity. His self-description as "very Arab, little Jew" manifests here as he—knowingly or otherwise—pays homage to a similar richness of meaning regarding *hadiyya* (gift) in Arabic: *hidāya* (guidance) and more importantly *hadiyy* (sacrifice).

Clearly, unlike Ibn 'Arabi, Derrida does not provide clues to any form or mention of *al-Ḥaqq* (the Real) as the foundation of his discourse on hospitality. Rather, as he himself mentions, all questions return to language, specifically the act of writing albeit with a silent obsession with speech. Here we have yet another pair of terms that in many ways define Derrida's school of deconstruction: *différence* (difference) and *différance* (deference). The meaning of text can never be static, it is always different than what is assumed and constantly defers, sliding under the weight of signifiers. Whereas Derrida himself might view this as a certain chaos inherent in textuality, Ibn 'Arabi regards it as a sign of divine infinitude permeating the finite container of language.

And yet, despite the precursory absence of God from Derrida's writings, both he and Ibn 'Arabi approach language similarly. Both begin by excavating from the well of etymology-related terms that, for

[76] Ibid., 4.
[77] Ibid., 37.
[78] Ibid., 93.

the former, tell the hi*story* of Western hospitality while, for the latter, weave a narrative of *ḥuqūq* (rights and responsibilities) and *'alāmāt* (signs) in the world. We have already described this familiar approach as creative *ṭawāf* around the *ṭayf* of meaning. Both Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi choose to circumambulate on the path of etymology around the sacred precinct of meaning. For the former, this dance always fluctuates between difference and deference whereas the latter holds that it oscillates as such precisely because of the infinitude of the signified, *al-Ḥaqq*.

Concluding Remarks

Our journey thus far has taken us through the works of Ibn 'Arabi, Jacques Derrida, and Charles Taylor. These are three thinkers who are transitively tethered through space (Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida) and time (Derrida and Taylor). Our conversation began and ended with language. But beyond this *ṭayf* (apparition), we intentionally wandered towards the 'everything' to which Derrida states language is essential. Namely, we problematized Taylor's portrayal of premodern and modern religiosities through the prism of language. Even though the author of *The Language Animal* affords words and phrases the same structures of signification that Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida allow, he misses the mark on the metaphysic underlying 'wordsmithing' in premodernity.

Much has been said already about Ibn 'Arabi's immanent theology. Instead, I would like to spend these concluding paragraphs reflecting on the path forward regarding the research at hand. Where does an exposition on the importance of language in the works of Ibn 'Arabi, Derrida, and Taylor bring us? I propose that it delivers us to a serious need to reevaluate our understanding of premodern religious practice and theology. Taylor's problematic portrayal of religious dogma and pragma, prior to the deluge of secularism, is hardly unique in academia, especially pertaining to Islam. Unfortunately, despite his otherwise exquisite exposition on Christianity, even Brown dismisses Islam's rich history of portrait painting[79] by stating that "because of

[79] See Christiane Gruber, "An Academic Is Fired Over a Medieval Painting of the Prophet Muhammad", *New Lines Magazine* (2022). https://newlinesmag.com/argument/academic-is-fired-over-a-medieval-painting-of-the-prophet-muhammad/

their hostility to visual imagery, Judaism and Islam are usually deemed to be anti-sacramental religions."[80]

Lastly, ending with language as we began, it is clear from Derrida's almost Akbarian—a la *Shaykh al-Akbar* (the greatest master) Ibn 'Arabi—linguistics that Saussure's attempt to reformulate and disenchant language was not entirely successful. Neither the French philosopher nor Andalusian mystic regard etymological connections between signifiers as arbitrary or unmotivated. On the contrary, both perceive such relationships as *aṭyāf* (pl. *ṭayf* or ghost) that circumambulate around meaning. However, much research is still needed to decipher how premodern mystics like Ibn 'Arabi present language as a window into a zeitgeist and how their approaches are still relevant today.

In the preceding, I tried to depart from the typical academic interrogation of a premodern subject. Rather, I wanted to host a meeting between three figures connected transitively across time and space. Each has shown us, in their own way, that language and its structures are windows into metaphysics and Weltanschauung, reflecting a set of political, economic, and religious commitments. If as Vermeulen and van den Akker tell us, that postmodernity cannot simply be left behind, then Ibn 'Arabi's premodern religiosity also haunts the present moment, like a hospitable *ṭayf* (ghost), revealing the extent to which our neatly bifurcated epochs of history are always confronted by the messiness of human experience as it encounters transcendence.

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[80] Brown, *God*, 59.

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