

***Ta'wīl* as Quranic Hermeneutics  
in the Philosophical Thought of Ibn 'Arabī**

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**Abstract**

Ibn 'Arabī's (560/1165-638/1240) two renowned treatises, namely *The Seals of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*) and *The Meccan Revelations* (*Al-Futūḥāt al-makkīyya fī ma'rifat al-asrār al-mālikīyya wa al-mulkīyya*) built on the theory of esoteric commentary (*ta'wīl*). The Andalusian Sufi author argues that *ta'wīl* is an esoteric spiritual interpretation that seeks to understand all material data and facts as symbols in order to transmute and return them to what is symbolized. He believes that every phenomenon implies a noumenon, or, in Islamic terms, every exterior (*ẓāhīr*) must have an interior (*bāṭin*). The process of *ta'wīl*, or of spiritual hermeneutics, means going from the *ẓāhīr* to the *bāṭin*, from the surface to the inner reality. This paper aims to briefly present Ibn 'Arabī's thought on *ta'wīl* as a process of interpretation that involves delving into symbols to uncover spiritual secrets of texts. According to Ibn 'Arabī, symbols portray the sensory world (*mithāl*) within the hierarchy of presence (*ḥaḍara*) and disclose the levels of consciousness that can be obtained by performing the distinguishing feature of humans, *nuṭq*, or intelligence, and its creative imagination.

**Keywords:** Ibn 'Arabī, *ta'wīl*, intellect, creative imagination

## Introduction

Islamic scholars have long developed various forms of interpreting and understanding religious texts. The development of this tradition is closely linked to the need to interpret the holy Qur’an. Verses of the Qur’an have various dimensions (al-Suyūṭī, 2008, pp. 425-493), including those with clear meaning (*muḥkām*) ambiguous meaning (*mutashābih*), of a general (*‘āmm*) or specific (*ḥaṣ*) nature, and being definitive (*qaṭ’ī*) or speculative (*ẓannī*). To resolve these problems, *ta’wīl* is seen as an adequate method of text interpretation.

In Arabic, natural phenomena and Qur’anic verses containing revelations are referred to as *āyāt*, or ‘signs’ with interior meanings that can be grasped by *ta’wīl*. Etymologically, *ta’wīl* is defined as returning to the origin. “The root is spiritual and resides at the center, which is a place where the visible is hidden and the hidden is revealed. More broadly, *ta’wīl* means ‘to rediscover, explain, and interpret’ something (Abdul Hadi WM, 2001, p. 99). *Ta’wīl* is considered a form of the Qur’anic hermeneutics. As a method of text interpretation, *ta’wīl* was pioneered by Ja’far al-Ṣādiq in the 8th century and further developed by subsequent *ta’wīl* figures such as Sulamī, Sahl al-Tustarī, al-Qushairī, al-Ghazālī, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Ruzbihan al-Baqlī. In the Indonesian archipelago, this method was first introduced in the 16th and 17th centuries, and can be found in the Ṣūfī writings of Sunan Bonang, Hamzah Fansuri, and Shams al-Din of Pasai.

*Ta’wīl* is the cornerstone of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought that can be studied through his two influential treatises, *The Seals of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)* and *The Meccan Revelations (al-Futūḥāt al-makkīyya)*. According to Chittick (1989, p. 199), Ibn ‘Arabī views *ta’wīl* as a method for interpreting the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet in a way that will not compromise the principles of rational thought. In this view, the heart (*qalb*), which has the linguistic sense of fluctuation and transformation (*taqallub*), is the locus of knowledge and consciousness. It has two eyes: reason and imagination, and the superiority of one affects vision and mindfulness.

Ibn ‘Arabī defines reason (*‘aql*) as the ability to restrict, define, and analyze. An interpreter (*mu’awwil*) uses his intellect to comprehend divine transcendence and incomparability. Furthermore, *mu’awwil* necessitates another tool: an imagination, or, as Corbin (1969, p. 17) portrays it, a creative imagination with a theophanic function, i.e., an active imagination capable of delving into God’s ever-changing and never-repeating self-disclosure within the scripture, as Ibn ‘Arabi said:

He who stops with the Qur’an inasmuch as it is a *qur’ān* has but a single eye that unifies and brings together. For those who stop with it inasmuch as it is a totality of things brought together, however, it is a *furqān*.... When I tasted the latter..., I said, “This is lawful, that is unlawful, and this is indifferent. The schools have become various and the religions diverse. The levels have been distinguished, the divine names and the engendered traces have become manifest, and the names and the gods have become many in the world” (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya*, 1911 edition, vol. 3, p. 94; Chittick, 2019).

Since the Qur’an is God’s Speech and since God’s knowledge embraces all things, God knows every possible meaning that can be understood from the text. He also intends every one of those meanings, though not necessarily for everyone. Other scriptures also, by being the Speech of God, share in this attribute. In the following passage, Ibn ‘Arabī uses the verbs *ta’awwul* and *ta’wīl*, ‘to interpret’ (Chittick, 1989, p. 243):

Every sense (*wajh*) which is supported (*iḥtimāl*) by any verse in God’s Speech (*kalām*) ---whether it is the Quran, the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, or the Scripture—in the view of anyone who knows that language (*lisān*) is intended (*maqṣūd*) by God in the case of that interpreter (*muta’awwil*). For His knowledge encompasses all senses. ...Hence, every interpreter correctly grasps the intention of

God in that word (*kalima*). This is the Truth, “[a Mighty Book:] to which falsehood comes not from before it nor from behind it; a sending down from One Wise, Praiseworthy” (41:42) upon the heart of him whom He chooses from among His servants. Hence no man of knowledge can declare wrong an interpretation which is supported by the words (*lafẓ*). He who does so is extremely deficient in knowledge. However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation nor to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those who follow his authority (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya* II 119.21; Chittick, 1989: 244).

Ibn ‘Arabī defined *ta’wīl* as a process of interpreting a text by delving into its most profound symbols to discover spiritual truths. *Ta’wīl*, an allusion-based technique, relies on the interpreter’s (*mu’awwīl*) reasoning to uncover the text’s substance.

We say concerning the senses of a verse that all are intended by God. No one forces anything upon God. On the contrary, it is an affair verified by God. The reason for this is as follows: The verse of God’s Speech, of whatever sort it may be—Quran, revealed book, scripture, divine report—is a sign or a mark signifying what the words (*lafẓ*) support in all senses and intended by the One who sent down His Speech in those words, which comprise, in that language, those senses. For He who sent it down knows all those senses without exception. He knows that His servants are disparate in their consideration of those words and that He has only prescribed His address as Law for them to the extent that they understand it. Hence, when someone understands a sense from the verse, that sense is intended by God in this verse in the case of the person who finds it. This situation is not found outside God’s Speech. Even though the words might support a sense, it may be that it was not intended by

the speaker; for we know that he is incapable of encompassing all the senses of the words (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya*, vol. 2, p. 567; Chittick, 1989: 244).

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, God’s self-disclosure appears in two modes, ontological and cognitive, or as existence and as knowledge. He frequently refers to “self-disclosure” using the two terms. However, we must remember that *wujūd* or being/existence, is regarded as an attempt “to find” something and represents both subjective and objective events observed by an interpreter (Chittick, 1989: 212). Ibn ‘Arabī says:

The self-disclosure of the Essence is unanimously declared impossible (*mamnūʾ*) by the People of the Realities. They also agree unanimously that self-disclosure in loci of manifestation, that is, self-disclosure in the form of beliefs, takes place, as does self-disclosure in rational concepts (*maʿqūlāt*). These last two are the self-disclosure through which man “takes heed” (*iʿtibār*), since these loci of manifestation—whether they be the forms of rational concepts or the forms of beliefs—are bridges over which one “crosses” (*ubūr*) through knowledge. In other words, man knows that behind these forms there is Something which cannot be witnessed and cannot be known and that beyond that Object of knowledge which cannot be witnessed or known there is no reality whatsoever to be known (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya*, vol. 2, p. 606; Chittick, 1989: 217).

Correspondingly, *taʾwīl* is more than just a means of interpreting and comprehending texts; it is a comprehensive philosophical method (*manhaj falsafī kāmil*) that investigates the levels of existence and text simultaneously (Abū Zayd, 1983, p. 18).

In Islamic philosophy, *ta’wīl* is regarded as a form of spiritual hermeneutics. In the Shia tradition, *ta’wīl* is regarded as a fundamental written principle in interpreting religious texts, particularly the Qur’an. Shias believe that every exoteric meaning (*ẓāhīr*) has an esoteric counterpart (*bāṭin*). The position that for every apparent, literal, external, and exoteric (*ẓāhīr*) aspect, there is always something hidden, spiritual, internal, and esoteric (*bāṭin*) is a sacred scriptural principle and is foundational to Shia thought as a religious phenomenon. This is the core postulate of esotericism and esoteric hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*) (Corbin, 2002, pp. 51 & 82).

In Corbin’s assessment, *ta’wīl* serves as a meeting point between Shia doctrine and the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī. Corbin sees *ta’wīl* as Ibn ‘Arabī’s central thought (Chittick, 1989, p. 199). Through Ibn ‘Arabī, Islamic “mysticism” presents doctrines that, in themselves, can ensure the preservation of Ṣūfism among those who constantly face the dangers of misguidance due to incorrect methods of seeking evidence (Nasr, 1986, p. 126).

Ibn ‘Arabi views *ta’wīl* as a method of interpreting texts by utilizing the principles of rational thought. The term “*ta’wīl*,” etymologically means to bring back the external meaning to its original essence (Chittick, 1989, p. 199). Interpretation shows the contradiction between existence and essence (*al-haqīqat*). The essence is not inscribed in the outward appearance of the text. However, through the path of *ta’wīl*, the meaning of a text is returned to its original substance, thus achieving the revelation of its true essence. In this case, the relationship between the visible (*ẓāhīr*) and the hidden (*bāṭin*) does not imply that one is identical to the other, but rather that the hidden is the source and the visible is its representation (Abū Zayd, 1983, pp. 230-231).

### **Symbolic language**

The suitability of *ta’wīl*, or the hermeneutic method, is evident in the philosophical principles that underlie it. Hermeneutics scholars, like the Ṣūfis, argue that language, as a means of communication and human expression, is the locus of meaning (Abdul Hadi WM, 2001, p. 96). In

*ta'wīl*, language is a vessel of meaning. This was evident when God created the cosmos and also humanity through the word “Let there be.” Thus, language is at the center of existence (Murata, 2004: 299). This is the fundamental principle of *ta'wīl*. In the process of *ta'wīl*, an interpreter traverses symbols, moving from the outward form (*ẓāhir*) to the inner form (*bāṭin*).

Symbolic language, according to Ibn ‘Arabī and other Sufis, has dynamic urgencies, as the universe invites them to communicate through symbolic languages and as everything possesses symbolic content alongside its external value (Nasr, 1986: 142). In this context, natural phenomena, Qur’anic verses containing revelations, and the state of the human soul are frequently depicted using representative symbols. *Ta'wīl* allows us to understand the symbol’s esoteric significance.

As a form of interpretation of symbolic discourse, *ta'wīl* focuses on the relationship between the apparent and the hidden. According to the Qur’an, God is the manifest and the hidden (57: 3). Ibn ‘Arabī interprets this verse literally without attempting to explain it in a deeper sense. This means that what we see or what appears before our eyes is God. God is visible before our eyes, just as He is invisible. On one hand, as stated in the Qur’an, “Wherever you turn, there is the face of the Lord” (2: 115). This statement illustrates the aspect of *tashbīh* (similarity, resemblance, likeness), which parallels the concept that God is the Visible One. On the other hand, it is stated in the Qur’an that sight cannot perceive God (6: 103). This last statement indicates the aspect of *tanzīh* (incomparability, dissimilarity), which parallels the concept that God is the unseen (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1986: 66). In explaining that God as the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) is both manifest (*ẓāhir*) and unmanifest (*bāṭin*). Ibn ‘Arabī said:

Indeed, the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) has manifestations in every creation; He is the Manifest in everything that can be understood, while He is the Hidden from every understanding except for those who hold that the universe is His form and His “Divinity.” This is the manifest name, while He is also the spirit of what is manifest, which is why

He is hidden. Thus, His relationship with the visible forms of nature is akin to the relationship of the spirit that governs (the universe) with its forms (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 1946, p. 68).

Based on the argument above, Ibn ‘Arabī concludes that humans are the form of God, and He is the spirit of humanity. This relationship has two sides. The first side is that humans are manifestations of God. On this side, God is the Manifest (*ẓāhir*). The second perspective holds that God is the spirit of humanity. On the other side, God is the Unseen (*bāṭin*).

A Ṣūfi penetrates the inner meaning of the outer meaning, which then penetrates the acts of worship and religious beliefs and ultimately reaches the essence of the Divine. Thus, everything is revealed within the soul, the essence (*jawhar*) of the spirit that perceives these external and diverse things as various symbols. Meanwhile, the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī depict the implementation that follows the method of interpreting symbols in relation to the content of revelation (the Holy Qur’an) and the universe. This is his creation, based on the original example of the “macrocosmic Qur’an” (*al-Qur’ān al-kawnī*) and on its essence, which contains a miniature world for every reality of the universe within it (Nasr, 1986: 143).

The levels of existence, as stated in the Qur’an, are connected through the medium of language. To grasp the meaning behind existence in the Qur’an and its words, an interpreter (*mu’awwi*) must explore it through an understanding of the category of ‘mental existence’ (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*). Ibn ‘Arabī divides the levels of existence into four distinctive degrees of existence: (1) the existence of a thing itself (*al-wujūd al-‘aynī*), i.e., in a tangible form; (2) the existence of the thing in the mind (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*), i.e., in an imaginable form; (3) (the existence of the thing in utterance (*al-wujūd al-lafẓī*), i.e., in an oral form; and (4) the existence of the thing in writing (*al-wujūd al-raqmī*), i.e., in a written form (Akkach, 1997, p. 106).



As a symbolic understanding, an interpreter (*mu'awwil*) must transform everything tangible into symbols, an intuition about the essence or persona within an image that does not involve sensory perception or universal logic, and is the only means to signify what is signified. At this point, the fundamental difference between allegory and symbolism must be understood. Allegory, according to Corbin (2002: 13–14), is rational work without any transition to a new state of being or to another consciousness. Allegory is a figuration at one level of consciousness that is identical—a figuration of what can be well recognized through other means. Meanwhile, symbols represent different levels of consciousness from rational proof; they are the “code” of a mystery that serves as the only means to express something that cannot be understood in any other way, a symbol that can never be “decoded” once and for all but must be read continuously. *Ta'wīl* necessitates the expansion of symbols and consequently requires the expansion of creative imagination, which is the soul's faculty that simultaneously produces and comprehends symbols.

### **The Role of Creative Imagination in *Ta'wīl***

Contemplative intellect and creative imagination as forms of spiritual vision serve to guide and direct sensory perception and transform the sensory into symbols (*mithāl*). In the process of *ta'wīl*, creative imagination continuously builds new similarities (*tajdīd al-muthūl*) or creates something that is always new continuously over time (*tajdīd al-khalq*) (Abdul Hadi WM, 2001, p. 100). In *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām* (1946: 78), Ibn 'Arabi states that the exceptional Ṣūfi (*'ārif*) can create something continuously, not in the imagination of himself, but in the external world (*al-'ālam al-khārijī*).

Creation as the “rule of being” is the pre-eternal and continuous movement by which being is manifested at every instant in a new garb. The Creative Being is the pre-eternal and post-eternal essence or substance which is manifested at every instant in the innumerable forms of beings; when He hides in one, He manifests Himself in another. The Created Being is the manifested, diversified, successive, and evanescent form, which has their substance not in their fictitious autonomy but in the

Being that is manifested in them and by them. Thus, creation signifies nothing less than the Manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) of the hidden (*bāṭin*) Divine Being in the forms of beings: first in their eternal haecceity, then—by virtue of a renewal, a recurrence that has been going on from moment to moment since pre-eternity—in their sensuous forms (Corbin, 1969: 237). As stated by Ibn ‘Arabī, God is the essence of all that exists apart from Him; thus, from Him and to Him, all matters are returned (*al-Futūḥat al-makkīyya*, 1: 703). From that expression, it can be understood that the true essence is divided into intellectual power (*al-ẓuhḥn*), theory (*al-naẓar*), and teaching (*al-i’tibār*). Thus, *ta’wīl* allows humans to enter a new realm, ascending to a higher plane of existence, a spiritual birth (*wilāda ruhāniyya*), by climbing from the realm of creation (*al-‘ālam*) to the True existence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhiyya*), through the utilization of intellectual capacities and drawing analogies from exoteric (*ẓāhir*) to esoteric (*bāṭin*) matters.

The manifestation of symbols in a text cannot be captured or proven only through sensory skills, but they can be revealed with active imagination (*ḥaḍarat al-khayyāl*). Corbin (1997: 188) explains that active imagination is the true mirror in the human soul, the place of epiphany (*maẓhar*) of the image of the archetypal world. It is a source for an interpreter to be able to understand its true form. The effort to understand this true form is called symbolic hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*), namely a method of understanding that transforms sensory data and rational concepts into symbols (*maẓāhir*). In the interpreting process, the primordial reality of the being (*haqīqat al-wujūd*) is manifested in various real shadows. When something is manifested before the senses or intellect, it requires hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*) because it contains meaning that goes beyond data. Thus, this symbolic truth indirectly states the existence of perception on the level of active imagination.

The first act of active imagination is to paraphrase (*tamthīl*) immaterial and spiritual reality into external or sensory forms, which serve as the “code” for all manifestations. Following that, imagination continues to be the driving force behind interpretation as the soul ascends indefinitely. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, there are five descents (*tanazzulāt*), which serve as containers and forms of manifestation. First, the core of the essence

appears (*tajallī*) in the eternal latent creatures as objects, pairs (correlata) of divine names. This is the domain of total mystery (*‘ālam al-ghayb al-muṭlāq* or *ḥaḍarat al-dhāt*). Second, the realm of the constant or individuation of the angels that comprise the spirits (*ta‘ayyunat al-rūḥiyya*). Third, *ta‘ayyunat al-naḥsiyya* describes the universe of individuation, which produces souls. Fourth, the realm of ideas and shadows (*‘ālam al-mithāl*), characteristic forms of diverse individuations that have figures and bodies but exist in a state of “fine matter” that is immaterial. Fifth, the sensory and visible universe (*‘ālam al-shahāda*) is composed of solid material bodies (Corbin, 2002: 290-1; Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, 1983: 307-308).

Of these five presences, everything in the world of the senses is a reflection of an example (*mithāl*), of what is in the world of spirits, and so on, following what are the first reflections of the Divine essence itself. Every creative imagination that is directly produced based on a higher realm than the level of being where the imagination occurs or brought about by the earnestness (*himma*) of an interpreter is a new repeated creation (*khalq jadīd*), namely a new theophany with the organ of the heart as the mirror of the Divine being.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics relies heavily on imagination. This necessitates a creative source for manifestation, the initial cause of our existence, and serves as a strong link that allows an interpreter to connect with the infinite and absolute. For Ibn ‘Arabī, imagination is a cognitive tool for interpretation. In Corbin’s research, imagination takes on a diverse role in the fulfillment of Ṣūfī experience, encompassing theogonic and cosmogonic functions, cognitive and creative as theophany, and mediation in the attempt of conversation between God and humanity. In this context, Corbin (1969, p. 212) distinguishes imagination from fantasy. In his perspective, imagination is truth-preserving, while fantasy creates mere fictions.

Based on the foregoing, the ontological hierarchy of Ibn ‘Arabī can be presented in order to aid our comprehension. This ontological hierarchy is divided into three existences: (a) Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlāq*), which is God’s unlimited existence, existing by His own essence (*wājib al-wujūd li-naḥsih*); (b) non-absolute being (*al-‘ādam al-muṭlāq*); and (c) the

mediator. Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the mediator as *barzakh*, which is an intermediate who begins all possible existents (*al-mumkināt*) and serves as a mediator (with) or a distinguisher (from) His creations (Akkach, 1997, pp. 99–100).

Ibn ‘Arabī argues that the manifested world, comes into being in three levels: higher, lower, and intermediary. The higher world is the world of the ‘unseen’ (*‘ālam al-ghayb*), of spiritual beings, of angelic forms, the world of abstract meanings; whereas the lower is the world of the ‘seen’ (*‘ālam al-shahāda*), of corporeal being, of the senses and tangible forms, the world of bodies. In the latter, things are perceived by sight, whereas in the former they are conceived by insight. As is the case with Absolute Being and Absolute non-Being, these two worlds are at once separated and linked by a mediator, a third world, which Ibn ‘Arabī calls the ‘world of imagination’ (*‘ālam al-khayyāl*) (Akkach, 1997, p. 101).

The world of imagination, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, contains the boundaries between two realms, namely the place where the spiritual realm connects with the visible material world, thus giving rise to the intricacies of imagination. This is the ontological degree that allows the soul to manifest within a matrix that can be perceived by common sense, where external meanings transform into inner meanings. Imaginative forms possess a quality of correspondence that can be perceived by the five senses and evoke inner meanings. Here lies the role of creative imagination as a mediator between the pure and the tainted, the spiritual and the physical, as well as the meaningful and the superficial (the tangible).

As described by Ibn ‘Arabī, the realm of imagination acts as a mediator of existence, breaking the world’s dualism into the unseen (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) and visible (*‘ālam al-shahāda*). As an intermediary, imagination facilitates a fusion by refining the apparent meaning and revealing the hidden meaning.

Ontologically, the ‘world of imagination’ is distinguished into three categories: first, transcendental imagination, an unlimited imagination (*khayyāl al-muṭlāq* or Absolute Imagination) that corresponds with the highest level of *barzakh*; second, differentiated imagination (*khayyāl al-*

*munfaṣil* or detached imagination) that is connected to the lowest level of *barzakh*; and third, continuous imagination (*ḥayyāl al-muttaṣil* or attached imagination). In the third imagination, the realm of human imagination is marked by a psychological framework, which serves as a connection (*barzakh*) between the outward aspects of humanity and its spirituality (Akkach, 1997:102).

For Ibn ‘Arabī, the term “imagination” (*khayyāl*) designates a reality of “presence” that becomes manifest in three different loci: In the cosmos as such, where existence is identical to imagination; in the macrocosm, where the intermediate world between the spiritual and corporeal worlds is imaginal; and in the microcosm, where the human soul is considered as a reality distinct from spirit and body pertains to imagination. He also uses the term in a still narrower sense, to designate the “faculty of imagination” considered as one of the several faculties of the soul along with reason, reflection, and memory (Chittick, 1989, pp. 116–17).

Imagination has creative power. It marks a reality or presence that is manifested in the forms of the cosmos, macrocosm, and microcosm. Through the dissolution of imagination from its source of power and creativity, an interpreter merges into an ontological hierarchy that involves two creative faculties of imagination, namely *khayyāl al-muttaṣil* and *khayyāl al-munfaṣil*. The interpreter’s imaginative power over objects demonstrates his ability to understand the inner forms of their outer appearance by maximizing the capacity of *khayyāl al-muttaṣil*.

The power of the interpreter’s imagination is characterized as temporary. From Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective, the realm of human imagination is divided into two: dreams and imagination. Dreams are intermediaries between the real (in the mystic sense, that is) “waking” state, and the waking consciousness in the common, profane sense of the world. And because they are intermediaries, they culminate in the notion of the symbol, for the intermediary “symbolizes with” the worlds it mediates (Corbin, 2008, p. 256). As a deliberate effort, imagination involves the maintenance of perceived images through the memorial ability (*al-quwwa al-ḥāfiẓa*), such as assembling new images through the faculty of shape perception (*al-quwwa al-muṣawwira*). Therefore, imagination is understood as the faculty of the interpreting soul that is capable of receiving objects

resulting from its sensory imaging. Here lies the creative power of the interpreter’s imagination. Through it, interpreters can deconstruct extraneous forms into new shapes that are full of meaning.

Based on the description above, it can be said that the imaginative capacity of the interpreter is only possible in a world that can be sensed. It cannot directly reach the origins of the creation of the world (*creatio ex nihilo*). Sensory forms are arranged within a transcendental imagination that is revealed to the interpreter through the process of manifestation, which includes certainty, specificity, and definable basic forms. The imagination of the interpreter is always connected to reality. Without a connection to reality, projected imagination tends to deviate.

As an all-encompassing, permanent presence, the world of ‘detached imagination’ can then be seen as governing the human ‘attached imagination’ by setting an immutable code for it. Such a code, whose content is made up of the cosmic realities, is considered necessary to prevent the human imagination from degenerating into a kind of fantasy. Participating in this realm of realities, human imagination can become either a valuable source of knowledge when it complies with the realities of that code, or can become corrupt fantasy when it does not. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Arabī teaches that the ignorant person is one who speaks of, or believes in, what he forms in his soul, while that which he has formed has no corresponding form other than itself. Any imaginary form that has no ‘existential presence’ (*ḥaḍra wujūdiyya*) governing its existence is produced by ignorance and the producer is ignorant. ‘And anything that has no form except in the soul of its speaker,’ he adds, ‘vanishes from existence with the vanishing of his saying or the vanishing of his memorizing what he may have fancied from his speech, for there is no existential presence (*ḥaḍra wujūdiyya*) that governs its existence’ (Akkach, 1997: 107). Here Ibn ‘Arabī makes a sharp distinction between knowing and imagining:

The conceiver and that which is conceived—each one is of two kinds: a conceiver that knows and has imaginative power, and a conceiver that knows and has no imaginative

power; and a conceived thing that has form—according to which it can be known but not imagined by the one who has no imaginative power, and known and imagined by the one who has imaginative power—and a conceived thing that has no form and can be known only. Knowledge is not conceiving the form of the known, nor is it the meaning of the known being formalized, because not every known admits form nor is every knower able to conceive of form. Form-conception is related to the knower through the latter's ability to imagine, and form is related to the known through the state in which the latter is accessible to imagination. And since there are knowable matters that are originally inaccessible to imagination, it is certain that they have no form (Akkach, 1997, p. 110).

Moreover, following the distinction between the act of knowing and that of imagining above, Ibn 'Arabī distinguishes clearly between form (*ṣūra*) and meaning (*ma'nā*). Forms embody formless meaning and as such they are accessible to human imagination. 'The forms, in so far they are forms,' he says, referring to the cosmic forms, 'are the imaginable, and the Cloud, in which they are manifested, is the Imagination' (Akkach, 1997, p. 110). In accordance with his differentiation between the Meaning (i.e., Essence or Reality) and the form of a thing, he considers the form of a thing to be its perishable aspect; whereas its Face is its imperishable aspect, that is, its Reality:

Then He became the cause of what exists in the clouds of all forms regarding the world, about what He said (for example, the world): 'everything that is new,' which pertains to its form, 'but this is its surface.' It is meant to say, 'regarding reality, this world will not perish,' for the pronoun *ha'* in the term *wajhihi* refers to 'the object.' Thus, concerning various worldly matters, 'everything is easily swallowed by time,' but regarding absolute reality, the world does not perish, for

example, and there is no trace left of it; this is reality, which is identified by and recognized through human ‘definition’ (*ḥadd*), and it will not perish. We refer to humans as ‘rational beings’ (*ḥayawān nāṭiq*), and we do not refer to their visible or invisible aspects, because this reality has never been their essence; even if there is a form, it does not exist in their existence (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkīyya*, vol. 3, p. 420; Akkach, 1997, p. 112).

Based on the explanation regarding the ontological structure of the world of imagination above, Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the active imagination as guiding, preceding, and shaping sensory perception. That is why it transmuted sensory data into symbols. Symbols are the initial medium of imaginative performance. The first performance of imagination is to symbolize (*tamthīl*) immaterial and spiritual realities into physical or sensory forms, which thereby become the “code” of what they manifest. After that, imagination continues to remain a driving force for interpretation as an endless elevation of the soul (Corbin, 2002: 268). In short, because there is imagination, there is interpretation. Conversely, with the existence of interpretation, there is symbolism.

Accordingly, symbols serve to reveal a dimension of consciousness that differs from the understanding received by rational testimony. A symbol is a hidden means of writing a secret that expresses something that can only be comprehended through the symbol itself. Symbols cannot describe anything because they must be continuously interpreted. Because symbols are created by active imagination (*khayyāl*), *ta’wīl* can only occur if the interpreter can use their active imagination.

### ***Ta’wīl* as esoteric spiritual hermeneutics**

*Ta’wīl* is not merely a symbolic interpretation but rather a set of rules for esoteric and mystical interpretation (Almond, 2004, p. 101). In practice, *ta’wīl* encourages the idea of a text with limitless meanings in its depth (*bāṭin*). When a reader interprets the text, they strive to go beyond the



text and bring it to a level of comprehensive, deeper meaning (a whole new level of higher meanings).

The meaning of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *ta’wīl* as a method of interpreting texts is related more to how to explain the verses of *ishāra* and *laṭā’if*. These show that the Qur’an has layer upon layer of meaning, and attempts to reduce these layers to a definitive interpretation result in intellectual limitation rather than fidelity to the text. Based on the division of verses according to their levels, Sahl al-Tustarī divides the levels of meaning of the verses of the Qur’an into two, namely: (1) the level of literal and moral meaning; and (2) the level of analogical and symbolic meaning. The second level of meaning requires a deep understanding. This second meaning is called the meaning of *bāṭin* (esoteric) and *maṭla’* (ascent to the broad horizon). The opposite of this level of meaning is the meaning of *ẓāhir* (surface) and limited (*ḥadd*) (Abdul Hadi WM., 2001: 101). Therefore, an interpreter (*mu’awwil*) must continuously strive to deeply uncover the inner meanings contained in the Qur’an.

If God is present in all His manifestations, then there is a truth hidden behind all that appears on the surface (*ẓāhir*). Therefore, the Ṣūfī approach to interpretation is not exclusive, but rather open to the text. This is based on the belief that text is not a form of monologue communication that has an end. But it is a means that continuously brings forth new meanings, depending on the situation and moment surrounding the interpreter. Regarding this, Ibn ‘Arabī comments:

We say concerning the senses of a verse that all are intended by God. No one forces anything upon God. On the contrary, it is an affair verified by God. The reason for this is as follows: The verse of God’s Speech, of whatever sort it may be—the Quran, revealed book, scripture, divine report—is a sign or a mark signifying what the words (*lafẓ*) support in all senses and intended by the One who sent down His Speech in those words, which comprise, in that language, those senses. For He who sent it down knows all those senses without exception. He knows that His servants are disparate in their

consideration of those words and that He has only prescribed His address as Law for them to the extent that they understand it. Hence, when someone understands a sense from the verse, that sense is intended by God in this verse in the case of the person who finds it (*Al-Futūhāt al-makkīya*, vol. 2, p. 567; Chittick, 1989, p. 244).

The most basic and significant point is that the Qur’an does not have a single meaning but rather a variety of meanings. The interpreter’s view of this range of meanings is influenced by their perspective, expertise, and situation. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, God has always mirrored the Qur’an as an infinite source of interpretation. He has also consistently been understood and predicted. Thus, the acquisition of inner meaning is completely dependent on how an interpreter with a diverse approach responds to the infinite levels of His word.

The unlimited semantics of the Qur’anic language are conceptualized by Ibn ‘Arabī as transcendence or incomparability (*tanzīh*) and anthropomorphism or comparability (*tashbīh*). *Tanzīh* not only aims to illustrate how the interpreter will never reach the end in interpreting the Qur’an but also always brings to life various meanings that can be approached from different starting points. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* should be combined because the two are a unit that cannot be separated, let alone opposed to one another. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s terminology, *tanzīh* shows the aspect of “absoluteness” (*itlāq*) in God, while *tashbīh* shows the aspect of “limitation” (*taqayyud*) in Him. Seen in terms of His essence, God is *munazzah*, free from and unable to be likened to nature and its imperfections, far from and high above all attributes and all limitations and attachments. In this sense, God is unknown and unknowable, ungraspable, unthinkable and indescribable. He is transcendent. The only attribute that applies to him is “absoluteness” (Kautsar Azhari Noer, 1995: 88).

With the two concepts above, Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that the text, in itself, will never be touched; it is always changing, it will forever produce meaning without ever revealing itself. In other words, the Truth (*al-Haqq*) takes

various manifestations without intending to manifest Himself (Almond, 2004, p. 106). In relation to the interpretation of the Qur'an, everything that can be known by someone, including what he has read, becomes a fact of "a remembrance and renewal (*tajdīd*) of what has been forgotten" (Chittick, 1989, p. 154). Hence, Ibn 'Arabī sees texts as opportunities to be explored more than secret codes: moments of opening up (*futūḥāt*) rather than closing. It is thus no exaggeration when Ibn 'Arabī connects interpretation with metaphor as "devices of transcending the outer form (*ẓāhir*), which the interpreter looks at to find the inner meaning (*bāṭin*) that lies behind it." Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabī sees interpretation as nothing more than a transfer of symbols "from imagination to imagination"—from images to images. To that end, Ibn 'Arabī erases the distinction between expresser and interpreter—between one who produces signs and one who reads them—by locating both their etymologies in the same root, *ubur*, 'crossing over' (Almond, 2004, p. 80).

Ibn 'Arabī and the Sufi community place a high value on symbolism. The universe is capable of 'speaking' to the interpreter in symbolic language. Interpreters must understand that every exterior shape contains symbolic signs (Nasr, 1988, p. 103). In reality, everything that emerges from the universe is an order (*manzilah*) that requires a process of interpretation to the highest degree. Interpretation of various symbolic matters possesses creative power. In other words, *ta'wīl* transmutes everything into symbols and places them on a different level of existence.

Accordingly, symbols serve the purpose of revealing a degree of consciousness that differs from the consciousness attained through rational testimony. Symbols are a hidden way of writing a secret that is intended to express something that cannot be comprehended immediately. Symbols cannot explain anything. As a result, they require continuous interpretation. According to Ibn 'Arabī, *ta'wīl* is a symbolic understanding, a transformation of the apparent situation into symbols, and an intuition about reality through an analogy that differs from universal logic or sensory awareness. The idea is simple: mark what should be marked.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s thoughts on *ta’wīl* are closely tied to the idea of *jam’ bayna al-naqidayn* (*coincidentia oppositorum*), which posits that God cannot be understood except by combining two opposing attributes within Him. In this context, the two opposing attributes are “the One” (*al-wāḥid*) and “the Many” (*al-kāthir*) (Noer, 1995, p. 74). In these two opposing attributes, it is evident that “the One,” in the metaphysical ontological structure, is the source of the diversity of all things, just as “the One,” in the mathematical structure, is the source of all numbers. In both the metaphysical ontological structure and the mathematical structure, “the Many” is the production of “the One;” ultimately, “the Many” can be reduced to “the One.”

Therefore, from Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective, it is stated that true and perfect knowledge is knowledge that integrates two aspects, and this is the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*, which also applies to the relationship between the beginning and the end, between the visible and the invisible.

The confusion experienced by an interpreter in the process of *ta’wīl* will dissipate if the interpreter is able to understand the relationship between “the One” and “the Many,” as explained by this Shaykh al-Akbar, namely, “that the singular reality is what appears in various forms, levels, and loci of manifestation.” In addition, Ibn ‘Arabī says that “the one who has arrived at the proof of the truth” (*ṣāhib al-taḥqīq*) sees diversity in “the One” as follows:

The one who has reached the proof of truth sees diversity in the One, as he knows what is indicated by the names of God; although the realities are diverse and numerous, they are all one entity. This is the intelligible diversity (existing only in the mind) in one entity. So, in the appearance of the self, it is the diversity witnessed in one entity, as the First Matter (*al-hayula*) is accepted within the limits of every form, and it and its diversity and diversity of forms originate in their essence from one substance, namely the First Matter. Whoever knows himself with this knowledge will know his

Lord because He created him according to His form, even though He is his “He-ness” and his reality (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 1946, pp. 124–25).

In consequence, it may be demonstrated that Ibn ‘Arabī’s view on *ta’wīl* converges on the integration between “the One” and “the Many,” as explained in the principle of *jam’ bayna al-naqidayn* (*coincidentia oppositorum*), which states that God cannot be grasped except by reconciling two conflicting aspects within Himself.

## Conclusion

As stated in the beginning of the paper, Ibn ‘Arabī was a renowned Sūfī and philosopher who pioneered the esoteric aspects of Islamic thought. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s lexicon, each exterior form (*ẓāhir*) has an internal form (*bāṭin*). In the process of *ta’wīl* or spiritual hermeneutics, the interpreter (*mu’awwīl*) must be able to transcend all outward issues and move from the outer world to the true substance of something. Language, according to Ibn ‘Arabī’s *ta’wīl*, is a medium of communication and human expression that acts as a vessel for the diversity of meanings, as well as a system of signification (*dilāl*) and representation or symbolism (*mithāl*). Thus, *ta’wīl* can be defined as a journey of self-awareness in interpreting a text by continuously creating new similarities of meaning (*tajdīd al-muthūl*) or something new through the act of interpretation (*tajdīd al-khalq*).

In the process of *ta’wīl*, the interpreter’s creative imagination plays an important role. It serves as a mediator between the divine hidden essence and the manifestation of the plurality of nature, akin to the world of ideas, culminating in the concept of symbols. In this regard, the creative imagination of the interpreter, generated through the ascent to a higher meaning, is a new creation that is repeated (*khalq jadīd*), a divine manifestation (theophany), with the heart as the Divine Presence.

*Ta’wīl*, as Qur’anic hermeneutics, can be performed only by an interpreter (*mu’awwi*) who possesses certain qualifications, including mastery of the Arabic language, broader knowledge, and a keen heart that is reflected in the performance of the mind and creative imagination in discovering the esoteric meanings behind the symbolic language of the scripture. These qualifications are possessed by only a few individuals, not everyone as Ibn ‘Arabī argued.

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