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In Spite of Their Thoughts Their Words Require Interpretation: Silence and Ineffability in Medieval Islamic Mysticism

By

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By

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M.A., Brandeis University, 2011
B.A., Western Michigan University, 2009

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Rebecca Makas

Ineffable knowledge presents one of the most important and difficult problems of human consciousness. The insights gained in a state outside of knowledge have been examined in such varied contexts as the testimony of Holocaust survivors, discourse on pain and bodily trauma, and discussions of mystical experience (the direct apprehension of ultimate reality). Such experiences are vexing. They are moments of consciousness in which a person understands something of the utmost importance to communicate to others but is unable to do so. As Plotinus states in *Ennead* VI.9, the direct experience of ultimate reality must be "adjusted to our mental processes" before it can be expressed in speech or writing. Representing an experience outside of language (and often outside of thought itself) leads to a process of "translation" from silence to speech, resulting in writings that are often difficult, paradoxical, or confusing. Ironically, the mysterious gap between consciousness and representation provides the very space for the theologian or religious philosopher to convey new insights about ultimate reality.

This dissertation examines the philosophical implications of the subjects of epistemic silence and ineffability in three strands of medieval Islamic mysticism: Sufi mysticism, philosophic mysticism, and *Ishrāqī* (Illuminationist) mysticism. The writings of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH /1111 CE) represent Sufism, those of Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) represent philosophic mysticism, and those of Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d. ca. 582-7/1187-91) represent Ishrāqī mysticism. The study of the role of silence and ineffability within Islamic mysticism simultaneously addresses two areas in need of critical attention in religious studies. First, silence and the ineffable are foundational features of mystical epistemology in Islam, and detailed analysis of these subjects adds to the overall understanding of mystical knowledge within Islam. This analysis also helps to demarcate the different types of mysticism in Islam, as Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī have profoundly different understandings of ultimate reality and how one can directly apprehend it. Second, by demonstrating these different understandings of mysticism and mystical experience, this dissertation addresses the need for greater engagement with Islamic mysticism within the critical discourse of religious studies.

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Introduction:

The Problem of Expressing the Inexpressible

Samuel Beckett once said, "Every word is an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness." On the other hand, he *said* it.[1]
-Art Spiegalman

The notion that human beings can access a part of consciousness beyond language has long captivated artists, philosophers, theologians, and others interested in the question: "What is the full scope of human experience?" Non-linguistic, or ineffable, knowledge has been examined in a number of contexts, such as the testimony of Holocaust survivors, discourses on pain and bodily trauma, and religious and philosophical discourses on non-dual awareness (experiences that transcend language, subject-object duality, and sensory awareness). Silence and ineffability present some of the most philosophically compelling aspects of mysticism yet claims of ineffability are often the basis for critiques and dismissals of mysticism and mystical philosophy as incoherent. This may be because to accept an ineffable, non-dual experience is to accept a gap within the mind of a mystic between experience and expression. As Plotinus states in *Ennead* VI.9, the direct experience of ultimate reality must be "adjusted to our mental processes" before it can be expressed in speech or writing.[2] Representing an experience outside of language (and often outside of thought itself) leads to a process of "translation" from silence to speech, resulting in writings that are often difficult, paradoxical, or confusing. Attempts to communicate such experiences often seem like Samuel Beckett's "stains on silence and nothingness." However, the paradox as noted by graphic novelist Art Spiegalman is profound: ironically, the

[1] Art Spiegalman, *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 35.
[2] Plotinus, The *Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992), VI.92.

mysterious gap between consciousness and representation can sometimes provide the very space for the theologian or religious philosopher to convey new insights about ultimate reality.

While the bulk of academic discourse on ineffability and non-dual experience in religious studies has taken place in the context of the mystical traditions of Christianity and Buddhism, medieval Islamic mystical philosophers were also concerned with questions of how to accurately represent a reality beyond language. In medieval Islam, mystical philosophers were deeply concerned with the correct means to acquire knowledge, and epistemological questions played a vital role in the development of their metaphysical claims. When examining their epistemological writings, the role of silence and ineffability emerges as an important subject. How does one acquire mystical knowledge, and subsequently, how does one transmit this knowledge accurately and responsibly?

This dissertation examines the philosophical implications of the subjects of epistemic silence and ineffability in three strands of medieval Islamic mysticism: Sufi mysticism, philosophic mysticism, and *Ishrāqī* (Illuminationist) mysticism. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH /1111 CE) will represent Sufism, Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) will represent philosophic mysticism, and Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d. ca. 582-7/1187-91) will represent *Ishrāqī* mysticism. The study of the role of silence and ineffability within Islamic mysticism simultaneously addresses two areas that are in need of critical and scholarly attention in religious studies. First, silence and ineffability are often foundational features of Islamic mystical epistemology. A detailed analysis of these subjects adds to the overall understanding of mystical knowledge within Islam. Second, examining silence and ineffability from a theoretical perspective addresses the need for greater engagement with Islamic mysticism within the critical

discourse of religious studies. In order to examine these issues, I will focus on the following questions:

1) What are the mystical experiences and/or philosophical concepts that cannot or should not be expressed in mystical writings? Is there a difference in how silence and ineffability are used in each type of Islamic mysticism?
2) When Muslim mystical writers claim that an experience or concept is ineffable, what does this mean? Is the experience/concept completely outside the realm of language? Is language inadequate to describe such an experience? Does ineffability make a mystical experience phenomenologically unique? If so, how? What does the claim of ineffability communicate about an experience or a concept? If ineffability is translatable, how can one translate an ineffable experience into language?
3) When writers choose to remain silent about ineffable experiences, why do they do so? Is silence per se considered most appropriate, or is it seen as a more effective way to communicate about an ineffable reality? Does silence have a protective function? Does it have a pedagogical function?
4) Are silence and ineffability essential features of Islamic mysticism? Are ineffable experiences or concepts necessarily non-dual?

Examining the writings of three different mystics facilitates this dissertation's goal of making a more general and comparative statement about the concepts of silence and ineffability in Islamic mysticism. Certainly, this approach will not yield a definitive account of the importance of silence and ineffability in all three types of Islamic mysticism; however, given that all three mystics have been some of the most prominent subjects of major case studies, using their example will allow me to draw preliminary conclusions that will lead to a broader comparative and theoretical perspective on Islamic mysticism in general.

I. The Three Mysticisms and Their Mystics

While Sufism has been the most commonly studied form of Islamic mysticism, I contend that there have been at least three distinct mystical epistemologies in Islamic history: (1) Sufism (the most well-known form of Islamic mysticism); (2) *Ishrāqī* Mysticism (a blend of Sufism,

Aristotelian philosophy, and Hermetic traditions); and (3) Philosophic Mysticism (strict training in Neoaristotelian philosophy that results in mystical experience).[3] I chose Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā, and Suhrawardī to address the major questions of this dissertation because their discussions of ineffability are some of the most cogent in Islamic theology and philosophy. Living within approximately 100 years of each other, these three figures also influenced one another. Most notably, Ibn Sīnā influenced both Ghazālī and Suhrawardī. Ghazālī was highly learned in Avicennian philosophy and offered a major critique of Ibn Sīnā in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*).[4] In addition, Mehdi Aminrazavi and other modern scholars have noted the strong Avicennian influence on Suhrawardī's epistemology.[5] Furthermore, given their overall prominence in medieval Islamic thought, their writings had a profound impact on later discussions of ineffable knowledge and its expression

Because of his mastery of law, the Qurʾān, and Ashʿarite theology, a number of scholars have identified Ghazālī as the most prominent "orthodox mystic" in Islam. Annemarie Schimmel asserts that Ghazālī's works made Sufism more palatable to mainstream theologians.[6] Ignaz Goldziher makes the strong clplanaim that "Before Ghazālī… Sufis had fostered a silent and powerless opposition to rigid formalism and dogmatism."[7] More recently, Nile Green has argued that although Sufism was already gaining mainstream acceptance before Ghazālī, "he does

[3] David R. Blumenthal in *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006), 26.

[4] While Ghazālī claims that he learned Ibn Sīnā's philosophy specifically to disprove it, Alexander Treiger and others argue that he likely began his philosophical education as a child. See: Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought Al-Ghazālī's Theory of Mystical Cognition and its Avicennian Foundation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[5] Mehdi Aminrazavi, "How Ibn Sīnian is Suhrawardī's Theory of Knowledge?" *Philosophy East and West* vol. 53 no. 2 (April 2009): 203-214.

[6] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 96.

[7] Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 161.

exemplify the power that came with connecting the Sufis to new government-sponsored institutions of learning."[8] Although Ghazālī's importance may not lie in his being the first mainstream exponent of Sufi theology and epistemology, his turn toward philosophically inflected discussions of Sufism in his works is undeniably significant. In addition, while he self-identified as a Sufi, Ghazālī may be seen as perhaps less "mystical" than the other figures in this dissertation because he was reluctant to admit the possibility of union with the divine and claimed that humans are not capable of fully knowing the divine nature. In the present work, my analysis of Ghazālī will focus on two of his works that have been considered among his most mystical. These are *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-anwār*) and *The Loftiest Goal in the Explication of the Beautiful Names of God* (*al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*).

Ghazālī is broadly considered the most influential theologian in medieval Islam. He was born in 448/1058 in Ṭūs (near Mashhad in modern-day Iran). During his early life, the pro-Ashʿarite Seljuk sultanate gained control of much of the region. Ghazālī was educated in Nishapur, studying under the famed Ashʿarite theologian ʿAbd al-Malik al-Juwaynī (d. 477/1085).[9] At the age of 30, he entered the service of the Seljuk vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092) and worked in Ishfahān for five years before being sent to Baghdad to head the prestigious Niẓāmiyya madrasa. As the head of the Niẓāmiyya madrasa, Ghazālī was in a prominent public position, benefitting from the power of the Seljuk regime. Omid Safi calls him one of the "foremost proponents and symbols of . . . state-sponsored orthodoxy."[10] After the assassination of Niẓām al-Mulk, Ghazālī aligned himself with the new head of the Seljuk empire

[8] Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global Introduction* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley and Sons, 2002), 55.
[9] Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) xi.
[10] Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), xxv.

and served in Baghdad until the age of 40. After writing *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, he claims that he experienced a crisis of faith and left his position to travel in search of spiritual answers.[11]

Ghazālī discusses his turn to Sufism and the events of his life in *The Deliverer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*). He states that he developed an interest in Sufism through exploring the texts of influential Sufis, including Abū Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 297/910), al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibi (d. 243/857), Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 260/874), and others. Influenced deeply by these traditions, Ghazālī decided to "turn away from fame and riches" and devote himself to a Sufi lifestyle.[12] While he renounced government employment at this time, he did not end his teaching career. In his later years, he spent time teaching small circles of students in Khorasan and remained in the eastern provinces until his death in 505/1111.[13] He was prolific after his turn to Sufism, completing his magnum opus *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*), a massive work divided into four parts of ten books each. The *Revival* covers myriad topics, including ethics, *adab*, and the Islamic sciences. This work was monumental in its effect on Islamic intellectual and spiritual life.

Recently, scholars such as Richard M. Frank, Alexander Treiger, and others have argued that secondary scholarship has relied too heavily on Ghazālī's own account of his life and thus erroneously "expected that al-Ghazālī's 'post-conversion' writings (*Revival, Alchemy, Loftiest Goal, Niche*, and others) would be 'mystical' in spirit and devoid of philosophical influence."[14] In actual fact, one sees much influence of Avicennian Peripatetic philosophy in these works.

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[11] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, xii.
[12] Griffel, 41.
[13] Griffel, 49.
[14] Alexander Treiger, *Al-Ghazālī's Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Aviecnnian Foundation* (London: Routledge, 2012), 2-3.

Treiger argues that Ghazālī began studying Avicennian philosophy much earlier than he claims in *Deliverer from Error*. Furthermore, he asserts that Ghazālī's *Goals of the Philosophers* (*Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*) – a work heretofore seen as a pre-*Incoherence* catalogue of the doctrines of the Peripatetic philosophers – was in fact originally written as a philosophical dissertation (*taʿlīqa*) that Ghazālī later "repackaged" as a critique.[15] Because of this recent scholarship, a more complex Ghazālī emerges: he now appears to have been a Sufi with significant intellectual ties to Peripatetic philosophy.

In his discussions of silence and the ineffable, Ghazālī emphasizes divine control, the epistemological protection of advanced mystical knowledge, and the epistemological aftereffects of mystical experience. He upholds basic Sufi epistemic principles such as "unveiled" knowledge (*kashf*), experiential knowledge (*dhawq*), the experience (*ḥāl*) of annihilation (*fanāʾ*) and the state (*maqām*) of subsistence (*baqāʾ*). After establishing that the truest from of knowledge is Sufi knowledge, Ghazālī asserts a clear hierarchy between those who have had mystical experiences and those who have not. According to Ghazālī, such knowledge should be protected by silence from those who have not received it. Like other "sober" Sufis, he is extremely skeptical of ecstatic utterances. Regarding ineffability, he posits a state beyond language, but he is clear that this is not the "divine union" that many Sufis claim. Rather, he states that following mystical experiences, God prevents elite mystics from speaking, thus underscoring the belief that God is always in control of the scope of human beings' knowledge and behavior.

Whereas the epistemology of Sufis such as Ghazālī relies upon God to grant unveiling, in the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā, one sees much more control in the hands of human beings. He

[15] Treiger, *Al-Ghazālī's Theory*, 3.

constructs a rigorous philosophical system that culminates in a post-cognitive state and has a very different understanding of ineffable experience than Ghazālī. Though a handful of scholars have argued for mystical elements in Ibn Sīnā's works, he is most often recognized for his influence on Peripatetic philosophy. Muslim Peripatetics were heavily indebted to the Greek heritage, drawing primarily from Aristotle; however, the *falāsifa* were also indebted to Plato, and even used Plotinus, whose *Enneads* were erroneously translated as the *Theology of Aristotle*.[16] In the West, Muslim Peripatetics were most often valued for their commentaries on Aristotle, which led to a revival of the classical tradition in medieval Europe when these commentaries were translated into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. However, the Muslim philosophers' debt to the Greek heritage did not imply blind imitation or mere reinterpretation. There were many critiques of the Peripatetic approach in the classical period of Islamic philosophy. The most prominent debate centered around Ghazālī's critique in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* and Ibn Rushd's (Averroës) rebuttal in *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (*Tahāfut al-tahāfut*). Because the majority of Western research on the *falsafa* tradition has been conducted by scholars trained in philosophy or philological studies, most works Islamic philosophy have tended to emphasize the rationalist aspects of the tradition, with less attention paid to the spiritual commitments that Muslim Peripatetic philosophers held.[17] Consequently, they have been portrayed as a bright spot of rationalism within Islam and as unwilling to accept the validity of mystical knowledge.[18]

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[16] Peter Adamson and Richard Taylor, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, edited by Peter Adamson and Richard Taylor, 1-9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

[17] Most prominent, perhaps, is Dimitri Gutas's presentation of Ibn Sīnā in *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, 2nd Edition* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2014).

[18] Seyyed Hossein Nasr attempts to refute this image of the Muslim Peripatetics in *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

Ibn Sīnā's tumultuous life began around 370/980 in Afshana, a village near Bukhārā in modern day Uzbekistan.[19] His family moved to Bukhārā when he was young, and he remained there throughout his childhood. Upon attaining adulthood, he made his living as a physician and constantly moved throughout various courts in Central Asia to avoid both personal and political strife. One of the most dramatic episodes in his life occurred in 411/1020, when he rejected an appointment by the Būyid ruler Tāj al-Mulk and went into hiding under the protection of a private patron. During this chaotic time, Ibn Sīnā claimed that he completed his magnum opus *The Healing* (*Kitāb al-Shifāʾ*) without his collection of books and notes, writing fifty pages per day from memory alone.[20] Ibn Sīnā was also affected by the military struggles of his time and once lost several important manuscripts when he was arrested at the gates of Ishfahān.[21] However, the last seven years of his life were relatively stable and productive. Ibn Sīnā passed away in 428/1037 in Hamadhān.

Ibn Sīnā's discussion of his early life demonstrates that he considered himself to be largely self-taught. He viewed ultimate philosophical knowledge as a domain of the elites and argues that the philosopher must have a natural ability in order to benefit fully from rational training. It appears that his initial introduction to philosophy was through arguing with Ismāʾīlī missionaries; Ibn Sīnā states that he was unmoved by their arguments on the soul and the intellect, and that he would engage in debates with them using tactics learned from ʿAbd Allāh

[19] Robert Wisnovsky, "Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, edited by Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor, 92-136 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 94.

[20] Reisman, "Life and Times," 23. Reisman notes that these pages may be notes or outlines of *al-Shifāʾ*, not its finished content.

[21] Reisman, 24-25. Letter cited from MS Avicenna 1953: 44-5 and MS Cairo Ṭalʿat 197.

al-Nātilī (d. unknown), his earliest teacher.[22] While Ibn Sīnā notes that he studied Porphyry's *Isagoge,* Ptolemy's *Almagest,* and the works of Euclid under al-Nātilī as a child, he claims that he often understood the material better than his teacher and had to explain the text to him.[23] After al-Nātilī left for Gurgānj, Ibn Sīnā dedicated himself to medicine, which he studied alone and claims that he mastered at the age of sixteen, perhaps because "medicine [was] not among the difficult sciences."[24] Finding himself not terribly busy as a physician, he devoted himself to the study of philosophy. He was prolific throughout his lifetime and his most significant work is *The Healing* (*al-Shifāʾ*), a four-part work covering logic, the natural sciences, mathematics, and metaphysics.

While Dimitri Gutas and other historians of Islamic philosophy soundly reject any element of mysticism in Ibn Sīnā's thought, others, notably Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, have argued that Ibn Sīnā had a mystical side.[25] While there are issues with this approach (which will be explored more fully in Chapter Three), the example of Ibn Sīnā serves as a reminder that contemporary intellectual boundaries and analytic categories are often ill-fitting when imposed on medieval Muslim thinkers. When his works are examined closely, a strand of mystical epistemology *does* in fact emerge in Ibn Sīnā's writings, but one that is quite different from Sufi epistemology. As I will argue in this dissertation, Ibn Sīnā presents an epistemology that is closest to the post-cognitive state brought about through strict rational training that Judaic

[22] Ibn Sīnā, *The Life of Ibn Sīnā: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*, translated by William E. Gohlman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 174), 18-20. All citations refer to the Arabic text, and all translations are my own.

[23] Ibn Sīnā, *The Life of Ibn Sīnā*, 24.

[24] Ibn Sīnā, 24.

[25] For the first perspective, see: Dimitri Gutas, "Avicenna's Philosophical Project," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, edited by Peter Adamson, 28-47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). For the second, see: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Ibn ʿArabi, and Suhrawardī* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1964) and Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960).

Studies scholar David R. Blumenthal has identified as "philosophic mysticism."[26] This insight and the application of Blumenthal's theory to Islamic mysticism are unique to the present dissertation and justify the choice of Ibn Sīnā as a "mystical" figure. His understanding of silence and ineffability is distinct from that of the Sufis, in that he posits a post-linguistic state of pure consciousness that is natural to God and the angels but can be reached by human beings if they undergo the correct philosophical training. In this work, I will focus on Ibn Sīnā's masterwork of Peripatetic philosophy, *The Healing* (*Kitāb al-Shifāʾ*), to make my argument for his mysticism. For his discussions concerning silence and the ineffable, I will also consult Ibn Sīnā's *Allusions and Remarks (al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*), *Treatise on the Soul* (*Maqala fī al-nafs*), and *Epistle on the Essence of Prayer* (*Risāla fī māhiyyat al-ṣalāt*).

Ibn Sīnā's mysticism involves contemplating the metaphysical realm and the nature of God as Pure Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-maḥḍ*), until the mind detaches from the body and merges with the divine intellect. He calls for the philosopher to develop his intellect continuously through both rational exercises and inner prayer in order to reach this post-cognitive state. Such an encounter is ineffable, because according to Ibn Sīnā, pure rationality is beyond language. There seems to be some content of knowledge imparted in this experience, however, as Ibn Sīnā argues that the human intellect must be transformed in order to take on the form of the divine intellect. Perhaps because his discussion of these subjects in *The Healing* is not explicitly esoteric, he does not emphasize the necessity of silence or refrain from writing about such topics altogether as Ghazālī does. However, his phenomenological descriptions of divine intellectual union constitute some of the strongest statements on ineffability by the mystics considered in this dissertation.

[26] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 26.

Because he partook of both Peripatetic and Sufi influences, Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī is widely considered one of the most important figures of both Islamic philosophy and Islamic mysticism. For example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr considers Suhrawardī's mysticism to be the "complete harmonization of spirituality and philosophy."[27] Although he does not take Nasr's reverent approach, John Walbridge similarly considers Suhrawardī to be the most important philosopher of the Islamic East in the period between Ibn Sīnā and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1650).[28] However, there is considerable disagreement among Suhrawardī's interpreters on how best to classify his philosophy. As mentioned above, the *Ishrāqī* or "Illuminationist" philosophy associated with him incorporated numerous influences, including Sufism, Peripatetic philosophy as espoused by Ibn Sīnā, and ancient Iranian, Greek, and Egyptian philosophies. According to Mehdi Aminrazavi, there are three primary modes by which Suhrawardī has been classified: (1) as a logician (as argued by Hossein Ziai); (2) as a "neo-Avicennian," (as argued by Mehdi Ḥāʾirī and Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī); and (3) as a "theosophist" (as argued by Nasr, Corbin, and Aminrazavi himself).[29] John Walbridge and Vincent Cornell have suggested that Suhrawardī could also be categorized a part of the Islamic Hermetic tradition, due to his use of advanced intellectual mysticism coupled with theurgical practices and an emphasis on ancient Eastern sources. Hermetic mystics in Islam operate under what Walbridge calls "Platonic Orientalism" and produce what Cornell has described as "an eclectic mystical philosophy, drawing heavily on

[27] Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin*, 158. See also: "Mullā Ṣadrā and the Full Flowering of Prophetic Philosophy," in *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin*, and "Suhrawardī," in *Three Muslim Sages*.

[28] John Walbridge, *Leaven of the Ancients* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 5.

[29] Mehdi Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī and The School of Illumination* (Surrey: Curzon, 1997), xvii-xviii.

Neo-Platonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism, whose main doctrinal focus is on the centrality of the Intellect (Ar. *al-ʿaql*) as the ground of existence."[30]

Relatively little is known about Suhrawardī's early life, as he left no biography and did not attain prominence until his final years and unfortunate demise. While Suhrawardī's introduction to his masterwork, *The Philosophy of Illumination* suggests a close-knit circle of disciples only one is known by name.[31] What is known about Suhrawardī is that he had a relatively short life but wrote prolifically and left a corpus of work that both represents a highly innovative philosophy and begs interpretation. He was born in a village near Zanjan in northern Persia in either 550/1171 or 549/1170. His early education took place in Maragha, with Majd al-Dīn al-Jīlī (d. unknown), and in Isfahan, where he studied with Ẓahir al-Dīn al-Qārī (d. unknown).[32] After leaving Isfahan, Suhrawardī traveled extensively throughout Persia, Anatolia, and Syria "to meet Sufi masters while practicing asceticism and withdrawing for long spiritual retreats. He tells us that he had looked for a companion with spiritual insight equal to his, but he failed to find one."[33] He settled in Aleppo in 579/1183, where he met the Ayyubid prince al-Malik al-Ẓāhir, the son of the famed Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (d. 1193 CE). The young prince was taken with Suhrawardī's philosophy and offered him a position at court. However, this was perhaps the worst time for an eclectic philosopher like Suhrawardī, who prioritized the epistemological value of non-Islamic sources, to gain the attention of the ruling elites.

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[30] Vincent Cornell, "The All-Comprehensive Circle (*al-Iḥāṭa*): Soul, Intellect, and the Oneness of Existence in the Doctrine of Ibn Sab'īn" in *Sufism and Theology*, edited by Ayman Shidadeh, 31-48 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 34.

[31] John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai "Introduction," in Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, translated by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), xxi

[32] Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī*, 1.

[33]Aminrazavi, 1.

During the time of the Second and Third Crusades, there was much pressure to restore "orthodox Islam," and variant forms of Islamic interpretation came under severe pressure. In addition, when Suhrawardī was in Aleppo, Syria was in the process of becoming a center for Sunni orthodoxy. Suhrawardī's mystical philosophy and theurgical practices were in direct violation of the type of Islam that Salah al-Dīn sought to "restore" and establish in his domains. According to Aminrazavi, when Suhrawardī reportedly produced a gem through theurgical methods, the orthodox jurists of al-Malik al-Ẓāhir's court told the prince to put him to death.[34] However, the prince refused, so the jurists appealed to his father, who approved of Suhrawardī's execution. He was killed in Aleppo, but scholars argue over the precise date of his death. In their introduction to *The Philosophy of Illumination,* John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai place Suhrawardī's death in 582/1187. Using the biography of Shams al-Dīn Shahrazūrī (d. 687/1288), one of Suhrawardī's most prominent followers, Aminrazavi and Nasr place his death date in 587/1191.

Suhrawardī's approach to silence and ineffability contrasts sharply with that of both Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā. Unlike these others, Suhrawardī feels relatively confident to freely express even the deepest mystical knowledge; in his mind, there are so few people who will understand his writings that there is no need to conceal his doctrine. In general, his philosophical outlook was based on the explicit hierarchy of knowledge that pervades *Ishrāqī* philosophy. While the Sufis and the Peripatetics rejected each other's methods out of hand, Suhrawardī argues for an eclectic philosophical system that requires mastery of all Islamic traditions of philosophical and mystical thought. Because of the sharp dichotomy between those who understand and those who do not understand, Suhrawardī seems unconcerned about revealing esoteric doctrines and

[34] Aminrazavi, 2-3.

experiences to the uninitiated. Instead of silence, he depends upon the complexity of his philosophy to conceal secrets from those who cannot handle them. He posits the existence of a mystical state beyond language but argues that human vision remains present nonetheless. Because of this, in striking contrast to Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī implies that it is possible to express mystical knowledge directly, without going through any sort of translation process.

II. Note on Terminology and the Islamic Context

The terms *faylasūf* and *sūfī* were widely used in the medieval period, and the divisions that they implied in Islamic intellectual life were rather sharp. Often, self-identification with one group meant exclusion by the other, since each had rather distinct methodologies, vocabularies, and epistemologies. Thus, while these terms are useful for understanding how medieval figures conceived of themselves, their works, and their methods, many contemporary scholars consciously or subconsciously equate another medieval term, *taṣawwūf* ("Sufism"), with "mysticism" in Islam. When combined with the current prejudice against mysticism in modern academic philosophy, the contrast that is drawn between "Sufi mysticism" and rationalist philosophy has led to the dismissal of the possibility of an overlap between mysticism and Peripatetic philosophy.

It has been well documented that the Arabic term *falsafa* does not correspond directly to the English term "philosophy," but rather to a specific philosophical approach— Neo-Aristotelian or Peripatetic philosophy. Many scholars of Islamic thought are well aware of this fact. For example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and others have suggested using the broader term *ḥikma* ("wisdom") to understand medieval Islamic philosophy as encompassing both Peripatetic *falsafa*

and other, more mystically informed philosophies.[35] This more comprehensive approach has been quite successful, and one now sees the label "philosopher" used to describe medieval figures who did not self-identify as *falāsifa*. In addition, histories of Islamic philosophy and edited volumes on the subject now include entries on Sufis, *Ishrāqī* philosophers, and theologians.[36]

However, considerably less attention and clarification has been given to the concept of "Islamic mysticism." There is no term in medieval Arabic that corresponds unequivocally to the modern category of "mysticism," but many scholars have identified Sufism (*taṣawwūf*) with mysticism based on Sufi discussions of union with God, ecstatic poetry, and love of God.[37] Sufism is so frequently taken to be identical with "mysticism," that when scholars encounter forms of Islamic spirituality and philosophy that appear "mystical" (i.e., that involve suggestions of non-dual experience, divine union, ineffability, etc.), they frequently declare these to be Sufi. This occurs even when the proponent of such spirituality did not have any formal connection to Sufism (i.e., initiation with a *shaykh* or Sufi order), or if his ideas were thoroughly at odds with those articulated by the Sufis in his time and location.[38] As I will demonstrate in the following

[35] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The History and Context of Philosophy in Islam" in *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Oliver Leaman and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 21-26 (London: Routledge, 2001), 22.

[36] For example, Majid Fakhry's seminal work, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), includes chapters on Sufism and *Ishrāqī* philosophy, respectively, and *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* includes entries on Ghazālī, Suhrawardī, Ibn al-ʿArabī, and Mullā Ṣadrā.

[37] The term *ʿirfān*, from the root *ʿ-r-f*, is sometimes translated as "mysticism," particularly in Shi'i and Persian contexts. Ibn Sīnā appears to be the first major thinker to use this term. In contemporary Iran, the term has much in common with philosophic mysticism. The term is also translated as "gnosis" by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and others (Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin*, 32). For an overview of this term and its history, see: Ata Anzali, *"Mysticism" in Iran: The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017).

[38] For an excellent discussion of a philosopher who, despite having Sufi ties, expressed a mysticism that was distinct from his context of Sufism of al-Andalus and North Africa, see: Vincent Cornell "Ḥayy in the Land of Absal: Ibn Ṭufayl and Sufism in the Western Maghrib during the Muwahhid Era," in *The World of Ibn Ṭufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, edited by Lawrence I. Conrad, 133-164 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 133-164.

chapters, viewing Islamic mysticism as equivalent to Sufism has had several negative consequences. First, it suggests a unity and consistency of "Islamic mysticism" throughout history and across geographic regions that never actually existed.[39] Second, in the case of a philosophic mystic such as Ibn Sīnā, equating Sufism with mysticism makes scholarly arguments for the mystical side of such figures quite easy to dismiss. As noted above, Ibn Sīnā's mysticism is distinct from Sufism in both form and content; thus, to cast him as a "Sufi" is so inaccurate that scholars who successfully disprove his "Sufism" also feel that they have dismissed *all* mystical content in his writings. I therefore call in this dissertation for a more comprehensive notion of "Islamic mysticism" within Islamic Studies, akin to the more comprehensive understanding of "Islamic philosophy," noted above.

III. The Silence of the Scholars: The Context of the Present Study

From the above discussion, it is clear that silence and ineffability played key roles in medieval Islamic mystical epistemology, yet no previous studies have been dedicated to the subjects of silence and ineffability in Islamic mysticism. Previous works on silence and Islam have tended to focus on social groups (generally women or political minorities) being silenced or on the silence of Muslims on key social issues.[40] Discussions of silence and ineffability in Islamic mysticism have mostly been limited to occasional chapters and articles.[41] With silence and ineffability receiving considerable attention in other mystical traditions, this inattention

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[39] Even within Sufism there is considerable variety in practice, belief, and expression. For an excellent discussion of the variety within Sufi practice and doctrine, see Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History*.

[40] See, for example: Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008) and Najla Hamadeh, "Islamic Family Legislation: The Authoritarian Discourse of Silence," in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, edited by Mai Yamani, 331-350 (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

[41] One of the most well-known exceptions to this trend is Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), which includes two chapters on the Sufi Ibn al-ʿArabī.

within the study of Islam points to a larger issue with the field— a lack of engagement with wider theoretical debates surrounding mysticism in the field of religious studies.

Often, scholars of Islamic Studies take an apologetic approach when discussing the subject of mysticism. As will be explored more fully in Chapter Two, in the wake of studies by Orientalist scholars, many scholars of Islamic mysticism see the rehabilitation of Sufism as part of their academic task. Seeking to undo some of the damage of previous studies that dismissed mysticism as an invalid form of Islamic theology, they have attempted to demonstrate the credibility and importance of the Sufi tradition by glossing over larger theoretical questions. For example, some scholars of Sufism have portrayed the history of Islamic philosophy in a teleological manner that posits mystical philosophy as its culmination.[42] This approach has yielded impressive translations of mystical texts and excellent in-depth case studies of single figures; however, it has failed to produce broader theoretical and comparative works. While some Islamicists, such as Vincent J. Cornell, Scott Kugle, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Shahzad Bashir, Ian Richard Netton, and Ahmet T. Karamustafa have written works on Sufism or Islamic philosophy with theoretical anchoring in religious studies, the majority of studies of Islamic mysticism and mystical philosophy are theoretically unsophisticated in comparison to works on other traditions. This general lack of concern with the broader theoretical paradigms of religious studies has left the impression that Islamic mysticism is somehow alien, when compared with mystical traditions in other religions.[43]

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[42] See, for example, Nasr's *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present* op. cit.

[43] A prime example of this is the lack of comparative attention devoted to Islam in the Mysticism Unit at American Academy of Religion's Annual Meetings. A search of the past three annual meetings (2015-2017) reveals that while the Mysticism Unit sponsored or co-sponsored ten panels, none included a paper related to Islamic mysticism. At the 2015 meeting in Atlanta, GA, Frederick Colby, a scholar of Sufism, participated in the panel discussion, "Mystics and Contemplatives in the Academy Today: Religious Experience from the Outside In and Inside Out," but did not deliver a paper. For the 2015 program, see: https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Annual_Meeting/2015/2015AMProgramBookSessions.pdf. The

Yet while Islamic Studies can sometimes seem at odds with much of the field of religious studies, there has been a similar lack of engagement with Islam from scholars of other religions. Islamic mysticism has received scant theoretical attention within religious studies discourse, resulting in a skewed understanding of "mysticism" that now favored in most of the field. With the notable exceptions of Michael Sells's *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (1994) and Vincent J. Cornell's *Realm of the Saint* (1998), few theoretical works of Islamic mysticism have received attention from scholars of mysticism in other traditions. Furthermore, some of the most influential comparative theoretical works on mysticism do not address Islam at all.[44] As discussed in Chapter One below, the foundational theorists of mysticism studies, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James, attempted to create a paradigm centered on private, internal experience. While some have argued that their theories amount to a covert Protestantism clothed in an overt universalism, this paradigm has remained pervasive in most contemporary studies of mysticism.[45] Indeed, according to Russell McCutcheon, Schleiermacher's concept of religion as a "private affair" is the "dominant position in the field today."[46] This Protestant-leaning notion of mystical experience as private, internal, and universally experienced, has developed in a field of study in which Islam has been almost

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2016 program: https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Annual_Meeting/2016/2016AMProgramBookSessions.pdf, and the 2017 program: https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Annual_Meeting/2017/2017AMProgramBookSessions.pdf. Accessed August 24, 2018.

[44] Robert K.C. Forman's *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), for example, does not include any examples from Islamic mysticism. This is perhaps due to his training as a scholar of Indian religions. However, by ignoring Islam as well as other religious traditions, he creates a rather narrow definition of "mysticism," which arguably would exclude many Muslim mystics.

[45] See, for example: Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2009), Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), and Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[46] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 4.

entirely absent. As a result, most theories of mysticism are rather ill fitting when applied to medieval Islam.

In this religious studies discourse, scholars of mysticism have focused on two main questions regarding silence and ineffability: First: Are truly ineffable experiences possible? Second: What is the best way to analyze discussions of ineffable experience? The issue of ineffability is central to the most pressing debates among theorists of mystical experience. In 1902, William James declared ineffability to be one of four fundamental aspects of mystical experience (along with transience, noetic quality, and passivity).[47] This definition still permeates much of scholarly thought on mysticism more than 100 years later. Indeed, while the importance of ineffable experience has been questioned by theorists of mysticism since the late 1970's the assumption still remains that mystical experiences are ineffable. As discussed in Chapter One, the importance given to the essential nature of mystical experience has resulted in theorists backing themselves into ever-narrowing corners. In so doing, they ignore two key empirical issues regarding mysticism: What do mystics say their experience of the ultimate is like? And what does it imply if their experiences are different from those of other mystics?

Somewhat more productive work has been done with respect to the second of these questions. The philosopher W.T. Stace echoes Art Spiegalman's frustration by noting that mystics "usually say that their experiences are ineffable, incommunicable, and indescribable; after which they quite commonly proceed to describe them."[48] What are scholars to do when a mystic claims an experience beyond the sphere of linguistic representation and then attempts to describe her experience in words? Stace and other foundational theorists of mysticism have

[47] William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 299-301.
[48] W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1960), 55.

suggested that while the *experience* of ultimate reality is ineffable, mystics undergo a sort of translation process, akin to Plotinus's view of how experience must be "adjusted to our mental processes" before it can be discussed.[49] This notion of translation, while compelling, leaves open the question of *how* mystics actually bridge the gap between non-linguistic experience and language. This question, along with other accounts of mystical rhetoric will also be discussed in detail in this dissertation.

IV. Methodology

Among the arguments that I make in this dissertation, I contend that Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā, and Suhrawardī are as much mystical *philosophers* as anything else and should be analyzed as such. The classification of "mystical philosophers" is made in the hope of avoiding a pitfall that David Blumenthal observes in the study of medieval Jewish mysticism and philosophy. Blumenthal argues that the categories of mysticism and philosophy have been reified to the point that historical figures that employ both philosophical and mystical methods are forced analytically into a single box, erasing any divergent elements in their thought.[50] I will show in this dissertation that philosophical interests were central to the mystical doctrines of Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā, and Suhrawardī alike. However, while this dissertation will take a broadly philosophical approach, it is important to note that the decision to treat these figures in this manner does not carry any assumption of the superiority of philosophy over mysticism as a conceptual category. Rather, categorizing these three writers as mystical philosophers is done for pragmatic reasons; to treat them as either mystics or philosophers alone would yield an incomplete analysis of their

[49] Plotinus, The *Enneads*, VI.92.
[50] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 226.

epistemologies. Furthermore, as the three case studies discussed in this dissertation demonstrate, confining these writers within strict categorical boundaries hinders the interpretation of works that reveal eclectic approaches to mysticism and philosophy. In addition, I argue, following Frits Staal, that mystical writings are accessible to non-mystics, that they can be studied rationally, and that they are not "beyond the pale of critical investigation."[51]

When considering the representation and/or translation of mystical experiences as a form of mystical philosophy, an important question becomes how to analyze the rhetoric used in mystical texts. Owing to the lack of scholarly research on the epistemological concepts of silence and ineffability in Islamic Studies, I will utilize much theoretical discourse from studies of Neoplatonism. I use this approach for two major reasons. First, Islamic philosophical and mystical traditions (including Sufism) were highly influenced by Neoplatonic traditions via translations of Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblichus, and other late antique Greek writers. Second, Plotinus's language surrounding the subjects of union with the One and ineffability has been foundational for the scholarly understanding of non-duality and ineffability in the study of mysticism in the West. Thus, the philosophy of Plotinus may be used as a sort of "gold standard" of mystical philosophy, with which the doctrines of Muslim mystics may be compared or contrasted. In this dissertation, I will utilize important works on silence and ineffability in Plotinus by Raoul Mortley, Michael Sells, Kevin Corrigan, Sara Rappe, Carol Poster, and Frederic Schroeder. As noted previously, I will also use David R. Blumenthal's book *Philosophic Mysticism* in the chapter on Ibn Sīnā.

[51] Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) xv.

V. The Plan of This Work

As noted above, in this work I will concentrate primarily on the following Islamic mystical texts:

- For Ghazālī: *Mishkāt al-anwār* (*The Niche of Lights*), *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā* (*The Loftiest Goal in the Explication of the Beautiful Names of God*)
- For Ibn Sīnā: *Maqala fī al-nafs* (*Treatise on the Soul*), *Risāla fī māhiyyat al-ṣalāt* (*Epistle On the Essence of Prayer*), plus selections from the metaphysics section of *al-Shifāʾ* (*The Healing*) and part four of *Allusions and Remarks (al-Ishārat wa-l-Tanbīhāt*)
- For Suhrawardī: *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (*The Philosophy of Illumination*)

All of these texts were studied in critical editions. Critical editions of *Mishkāt al-anwār*, *al-Shifā'*, and *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* are available in Brigham Young University's Islamic Translation Series and feature the full Arabic text alongside English translations. The fourth section of *al-Ishārat wal-Tanbīhāt* is available in a critical edition from Dār al-Maʿārif in Lebanon. Ghazālī's *al-Maqṣad al-asnāʾ* is available from Dar al-Mashriq (Beirut). The manuscript of *Maqala fī al-nafs* is available in the form of a digital scan at Qatar's Digital Library: (http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023677047.0x000014).

While several of these texts have been translated, I have re-translated most of them myself in order to ensure consistency of terminology and to amend any problems with previous translations. I also refer to some Persian texts in translation in order to provide context, but these do not significantly affect my analysis of these texts as a whole. I am aware that focusing on Arabic language materials alone can create an incomplete picture of writers who have significant works in Persian (as all three of these writers do). However, it is my hope that the breadth of the mystics covered in this study will illuminate theoretical issues regarding mystical epistemology

that would not be possible from a single case study, and thus that the merits of my approach will outweigh any possible loss of depth in the study of a single figure.

In broad theoretical terms, by examining the discussions of three Islamic mystics on the subjects of silence and ineffability, this dissertation engages significantly with the question of the limits of language and its impact on forming a coherent mystical epistemology. By exploring Sufism, philosophic mysticism, and *Ishrāqī* mysticism alongside one another, this work calls attention to the diversity of Islamic mystical thought, introduces the category of "philosophic mysticism" to Islamic Studies, and adds to the growing body of current scholarship on *Ishrāqī* philosophy. In addition, since this research suggests that Islamic concepts of ineffability differ somewhat from those that are taken as "standards" or paradigms in mysticism studies, it also contributes to the current interest in finding a more nuanced, less prescriptive understanding of mysticism in the field of religious studies.

This dissertation consists of five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One, "My Reality is Realer than Yours," outlines theories of mystical experience in religious studies and offers a survey of current literature on silence and ineffability. Following this survey, I discuss my own theoretical approaches to mysticism and mystical language. Chapter Two, "Complicating 'Standard' Islamic Mysticism," is a critical examination of the treatment of "mysticism" in Islamic Studies and the scholarship on Sufism specifically. Because there has been significant controversy surrounding Ibn Sīnā's mysticism, Chapter Three, "Between *Faylasūf* and Sufi," is dedicated in significant part to the argument that Ibn Sīnā was in fact a mystic and follows with a discussion of his view of ineffability. Chapter Four, "If One Who Knows God, His Tongue is Dulled," analyzes Ghazālī's understanding of silence and the ineffable, examining the ways in which he differs from other classical Sufis. Chapter Five, "He Spoke of Noble and Hidden

Matters," explores Suhrawardī's divergence from other Muslim mystics in both philosophical content and mystical expression and analyzes the impact of these differences on the overall concept of Islamic mystical philosophy. The dissertation concludes by looking at the larger implications of the treatment of silence and ineffability in medieval Islamic mysticism with respect to the fields of religious studies and mystical studies. Drawing from the findings of these five chapters, I examine broader questions such as: Are ineffable and non-dual experiences necessary features of mysticism? Is it possible to have mystical experiences that contain linguistic content? Given the difficulty of definition and diversity in practice, how useful is "mysticism" as an analytical category? What are the conceptual boundaries of mystical philosophy?

Chapter One:

"My Reality Is Realer Than Yours:"[1]

Theories of Mystical Experience in Religious Studies

One of the most abused words in the English language [mysticism] has been used in different and often mutually exclusive senses by religion, poetry, philosophy: it has been claimed as an excuse for every type of occultism, for dilute transcendentalism, vapid symbolism, religious or aesthetic sentimentality, and bad metaphysics.[2]
-Evelyn Underhill

I. Introduction

In religious studies, the term mysticism has had a curious history, occupying various positions from an embarrassing relic of a superstitious worldview to the very feature that defines religion itself. As an analytic category, one sees considerable variety in how and why figures in different traditions are considered mystics and their broader schools of thought are categorized as mysticism. For example, Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī, Abū ʿAli Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā, and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī may all be classified as mystics, yet they differ significantly in their philosophical worldviews, source materials, vocabularies, and techniques to achieve mystical experience. The vivid and often sensual descriptions of Saint Teresa of Avila are deemed mystical as well as are Plotinus's non-dual experiences that transcended language and even thought itself. Yet despite this diversity of experience, approach, and tradition, mysticism is frequently taken to be a universal category of both religious and human experience. Some even go so far as to argue that

[1] Father John Misty, "I'm Writing a Novel," by Joshua Tillman, in *Fear Fun*, Bella Union, 2012.
[2] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1911), x.

it represents the shared core of human consciousness and reality.[3] However, in recent decades there has been growing dissatisfaction with this approach, with a number of scholars who argue that the category of mysticism is essentialist, constructed, and biased towards Western notions of religion and spirituality.[4] In 1983, Hans Penner went so far as to argue that while the phenomena associated with mysticism were real, the academic category of mysticism was "an illusion, unreal, a false category that has distorted an important aspect of religion."[5]

The theoretical discourse on mysticism in religious studies has largely been framed around the question of defining mystical experience. Scholars have spent over one hundred years debating the character of mystical experience, but they frequently begin with the assumption that experience is what distinguishes mysticism from other forms of spirituality. Tracing the various ways that mystical experience has been defined will demonstrate that definitions of mystical experience carry implicit or explicit biases about the desired content (or lack thereof) of such an experience. Yet ideological assumptions involved in making *any* claim about mystical experience, whether positive or negative, seem pervasive and almost unavoidable. What began as an effort to expand notions of religion to take experience into account has ended up in a quest for proving or disproving a universal, uniform mode of mystical experience. Islamic models of mystical experience have been largely absent from these discourses, leading to definitions of mystical experience that claim universality or do not appear to describe Islamic mystical experience, as later chapters of the dissertation will demonstrate. I argue that focusing on the idea of an inherent quality (or set of qualities) of mystical experience rather than on a mystic's

[3] Such as Aldous Huxley, W.T. Stace, Robert K.C. Forman, René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and others.

[4] See: Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (2009), Russell McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers* (2001), and Roberts Sharf "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998).

[5] Hans Penner, "The Mystical Illusion," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, edited by Steven T. Katz, 89-116 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 89.

own account of his experience and its overall place in his ontology and epistemology leads to a methodological dead-end.

The topic of this dissertation, ineffable knowledge and how it is expressed, sits at the crux of the debate of mystical experience in religious studies. Since William James, ineffability has been taken as a standard aspect of mystical experience. While some scholars have doubted the necessity or even possibility of ineffable experience, ineffability remains at the core of many definitions of mystical experience.[6] As this chapter aims to demonstrate, discussions of ineffability are frequently where the most problematic and protracted statements on mystical experience are made, as ineffability is often used as proof that mystical experiences are universal and unmediated. While later chapters argue for situating ineffable experience within a framework of three distinct medieval Muslim mystical epistemologies, it is essential to first examine how the concept of mystical experience has been discussed in religious studies.

This chapter will provide an overview of the history of the debate over the term mysticism in religious studies. I argue that an overemphasis on identifying the content (or lack thereof) of mystical experience contributes to the perception that mysticism is an essentialist, prescriptive category. Through tracing the history of mystical experience as an analytic category, I demonstrate how scholars of mysticism became stymied in an ultimately unproductive debate. Following an overview of literature on mystical experience, I will offer some remarks on the broader definition of mysticism that will guide the remaining chapters of this dissertation. Moving past the question of the essence of mystical experience allows for a renewed focus on the empirical evidence of mystical texts themselves, and the wider phenomenon of mysticism (i.e. worldview, practice, theology, and philosophy).

[6] Steven T. Katz is a notable critic of the possibility of ineffable experience.

II. Turning Inward in Search of a Universal: Mystical Experience from Schleiermacher To Underhill

Initial articulations of religious and mystical experience were rooted primarily in Protestant religiosity and emerged as part of an effort to rehabilitate religion and mysticism after criticism from Enlightenment thinkers. The Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is often credited with providing the first argument for considering religious experience as the *sui generis* feature of religion. Schleiermacher's basic premise had a profound and lasting impact on the fledging field of religious studies, as well as popular notions of religion. However, it was William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) that cemented the importance of experience as an analytic category for religious studies. James identified mystical experience as the most authentic form of religious experience, and he offered some of the first remarks on the character of mystical experience itself. In the early twentieth century, works on mysticism and mystical experience took James's categories and definitions as givens, but began a subtle shift towards articulating a universalist notion of mystical experience. In spite of their Protestant influence, these early theorists provided broad and tentative definitions of religious and mystical experience that accounted for diversity within religious expression much better than later "universalist" models.

The early theorists' defense of religion began with the premise that its Enlightenment rejecters had a fundamental misunderstanding of the true nature of religion. Schleiermacher was perhaps the most explicit on this point, as his work *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799) was directly aimed at intellectuals who had turned away from religion. He argued that intellectual critics did not dislike *religion* itself, but rather disliked the external doctrines, rules, and dogmas that could easily be dismissed by historical and scientific

discoveries.[7] Schleiermacher's notion of religion called for a radical reassessment of the concept, as he asked readers to "turn away from everything usually reckoned religion, and fix your regard on the inward emotions and dispositions, as all utterances and acts of inspired men direct."[8] This shift was effective for two major reasons. First, it conceded that Enlightenment critics had a point: what was "usually reckoned religion" was, in fact, worthy of criticism. Second, it suggested that true religion was not only fundamentally different from what its critics believed it to be, but it was also beyond the reach of their criticism. Religion, Schleiermacher argued, was primarily about feelings and the experience of piety and that the aspects which could be disproven were merely the outer shell of religion. Though his larger definition of religious experience involved a communal component, the notion of religion as private, internal piety was emphasized most by later theorists of religion. This leads to a reading of Schleiermacher as privileging private piety, often related to larger charges of Protestant notions of privileging the individual's ability to interpret scripture personally and have direct access to the divine without the intermediary of a higher religious authority. While this yields an incomplete picture of Schleiermacher's actual thoughts on religion, it is important to focus on the passages that favor personal religious experience as they are the most important in relation to mysticism. Furthermore, though Schleiermacher himself put forward a broader definition of religion, later theorists focused upon the private and internal, leading to the reification of the category discussed later in the chapter.

Expanding his discussion of inward experience, Schleiermacher argued that religious experience necessarily had a mystical component. According to Schleiermacher, mystical

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[7] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1955), 12.

[8] Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 15.

experience "does not arise from being sated and overladen by external influence, but, on every occasion, some secret power ever drives the man back upon himself, and he finds himself to be the plan and key of the Whole."[9] Mysticism, for Schleiermacher, was thus a relatively open-ended set of phenomena associated with self-contemplation. He argued that "all truly religious characters have a mystical trait," which is the result of turning inward, away from "worldly concerns."[10] Yet Schleiermacher also indicated that mysticism is "great and powerful," and is perhaps only suitable for the extremely devout.[11] His discussion of mysticism asserted the importance of a "mystical trait," but said little about the character of mystical experience itself or indicated explicitly that mysticism is primarily experiential. Schleiermacher emphasized instead the type of the realization that mystical experience bestowed upon deeply religious people, which consisted of a greater understanding of reality.

Schleiermacher advanced a proto-universalist theory of religious experience to explain the way in which true religion became "the rubbish of antiquity" that Enlightenment critics so despised. He claimed that "The sum total of religion is to feel that, in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one; to feel that aught single and particular is only possible by means of this unity; to feel, that is to say, that our being and living is a being and living in through God."[12] While this passage could easily be taken for a definition of mysticism or mystical experience, Schleiermacher used the concept of unity or universalism to advance his argument that one rarely sees *true* religion in the cultural context one lives in. He qualified his statement, saying "The essential oneness of religiousness spreads itself out in a great variety of provinces, and again, in each province contracts itself, and the narrower and smaller the province there is necessarily

[9] Schleiermacher, 94.
[10] Schleiermacher, 93.
[11] Schleiermacher, 94.
[12] Schleiermacher, 41.

more excluded as incompatible and more included as characteristic."[13] Although the abstract notion of religion was a unity, Schleiermacher believed that religion, as practiced, was diffused in multiple forms from this unity. While some traditions retained a more complete vision of the unified, true religion, he suggested that certain religions (Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism) had a "contracted version," and thus were more corrupt and deserving of criticism.[14] His appeal to a universal religion and unitary religious experience thus remained hierarchical and biased in favor of Protestant Christianity.

Schleiermacher's attitude towards religious experience was extremely influential for William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* began with a mission similar to Schleiermacher's: to demonstrate that Enlightenment intellectuals misunderstood the true essence of religion. Like Schleiermacher, James conceded that the scriptural form of religion could easily be disproven; however, if one turned one's attention to the inner experience of religious practitioners, one would be able to see the value of religion.[15] James tentatively defined religion as "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*"[16] He was careful to qualify immediately that "divine" need not be God, and that the concept of divinity is subject to individual interpretation. The divine, for James, was "a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest."[17] Because his definition of "divine" was left to the religious practitioner, it allowed for a great deal of diversity of religious experience. Some aspects of this definition are distinctly Protestant, such as

[13] Schleiermacher, 42.
[14] Schleiermacher, 42.
[15] William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 24.
[16] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 42. Emphasis in original.
[17] James, 43-44.

privileging solitary experience over communal experience and assuming that each practitioner has direct access to the divine. However, in general, James's definition of religion left open a great deal to individual practitioners to define their own experiences and place them in the appropriate context.

While Schleiermacher suggested that all truly religious people had a "mystical trait," James made a much stronger assertion that mystical experience was the core of religious experience. James argued, "personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness."[18] This statement, while novel at the time, was supported by a shifting view of mysticism that occurred in the century between Schleiermacher and James. In the Enlightenment and early post-Enlightenment periods, mysticism was viewed with disdain as the worst form of superstition and irrationality. However, in the nineteenth century, following Schleiermacher's turn toward religious experience, mysticism began to take on the more positive connotation of a universal, inner spirituality.[19] At the time James was writing, mysticism was still viewed with skepticism. He opened his first lecture on mysticism by remarking that one of his primary goals was to "at least convince [listeners] of the reality of the states in question."[20] James did this and more; his centering of mystical experience as the core of religion was broadly accepted by the next generation of scholars.[21]

While previous definitions of mysticism treated it as a form of spirituality or inward-turning, James offered the most concrete and seminal early definition of mystical experience. He

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[18] James, 299.

[19] For an excellent discussion of the history of the development of the term mysticism, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 273–302, 275, accessed October 27, 2017, DOI:10.1093/jaar/71.2.273.

[20] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 299.

[21] In 1912, Evelyn Underhill argued, "no deeply religious man is without a touch of mysticism." (*Mysticism*, 84). Rudolf Otto's 1923 work *The Idea of the Holy* centers religion around the mystical experience of the ineffable "numinous."

argued that there were two necessary characteristics of mystical experience, ineffability and a noetic quality, and two characteristics that were "usually present," transiency and passivity.[22] Many contemporary studies of mysticism still assume, at least implicitly, some of James's categories. Ineffability, as James articulates it, ensures an insider-outsider division between mystics and non-mystical scholars; because mystical experience is beyond words, any description will be meaningless to those who have not experienced it. However, James noted that there are some scholars who could attune themselves to the subtleties of mystical writing and move past the problem of ineffability.[23] Although mystical states are ineffable, James argued that their primary function was to bestow knowledge on the mystic, and that they are full of "insight into the depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect."[24] James also noted that most mystical states are transient and passive, meaning that mystics are ultimately not in control over whether or not they attain a mystical experience, and that they are completely subject to the mystical state when it occurs. Furthermore, he asserted that those who have mystical experiences retain some form of subjective awareness in the experience itself, and that "some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance."[25]

James's analysis of mystical experience seems to indicate that there are diverse kinds of mystical experiences, which are mediated by their content. Perhaps the strongest proof of this point is James's second identifying characteristic of mystical experience, the noetic quality, which would frequently be deemphasized in later theories of mystical experience. James argued that a primary characteristic of mystical experience is that it involves gaining new knowledge

[22] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 299-301.
[23] James, 300.
[24] James, 300.
[25] James, 301.

through "illuminations and revelations," presumably of *something*.[26] Although such an experience is beyond the discursive intellect, it does not appear to be fully unmediated. James' notion that mystical experience is passive also implies that mystical states are controlled by a force external to the mystic's own consciousness. Furthermore, he is clear that one retains a memory of the mystical event, even if it is difficult to explain or articulate later. Later theoretical shifts toward the notion of a universal mystical experience would rely on James's pioneering work. They are more often than not reinterpretations of his categorization of mystical experience, which was relatively open to a diversity of experiences across mystical traditions and practices.

The generation of scholars following James marked the beginning of a shift toward the argument for a *uniform* type of mystical experience across different religions and cultures. In her classic work, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1912), Evelyn Underhill defined mysticism as "the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit toward complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood." Furthermore, "this movement represent[s] the true line of development of the highest form of human consciousness."[27] Underhill's definition is significant for several reasons. First, she concurred with James that mystical experience was an experience of true reality, not a heresy, superstition, or hallucination. However, she also shifted away from James by indicating that the reality experienced by mystics is essentially the same, regardless of how mystics choose to "understand" it by appealing to their religious traditions. Moreover, Underhill framed both mystical and religious experiences as innate tendencies of humanity, echoing Schleiermacher. Finally, she not only discussed mystical experience in terms of consciousness but she also argued that mystical experiences are the apex

[26] James, 300.
[27] Underhill, *Mysticism*, x.

of consciousness. This turn toward consciousness would be influential for a number of later universalist scholars of mysticism, since it characterized mystical experience as innate to humanity and accessible to all human beings, regardless of religion, culture, or time period.

In the earliest scholarly discourses on mysticism, one sees a narrowing trajectory in definitions of mystical experience, shifting from identifying it as a key feature of religion to questioning the very character of the experience. Schleiermacher's interest in religious experience was rooted in the desire to restore credibility to religious belief, while James sought to do the same for mysticism and the reality of mystical states. Perhaps because early theorists of mystical experience were focused on rehabilitating the category of mysticism itself, they were relatively open to the validity of individual mystical experiences. Although early articulations of mystical experience were deeply rooted in Protestant notions of religion and religiosity, ironically, they were considerably *more* inclined to be applicable across religious traditions than later, so-called universalist definitions of mystical experience. Underhill's formulation of mysticism as the experience of ultimate reality through human consciousness leaves open the possibility for each religious tradition to view ultimate reality validly in its own way. Ironically, the move to a more universalistic definition of mystical experience would provide a pathway for narrower and more prescriptive definitions of mysticism in the mid-twentieth century.

III. Phenomenology and Mystical Experience: Otto and Stace

Following Underhill's connection of mysticism to consciousness, phenomenologists sought to expand this insight and explore the nature of this connection. Notably, Rudolf Otto and W.T. Stace sought to refine the categories used to discuss mysticism by examining empirical reports of mystical experience. Each suggested that there was a uniform, unmediated form of mystical

experience. While Otto emphasized the suprarational character of mystical experience, Stace suggested two forms of mystical experience, one with mediated content and the other totally unmediated. This distinction in categories is rather useful; however, Stace implied that the unmediated experience was *superior* to the mediated one, which introduced a value judgment that was difficult to sustain when examining specific mystical traditions.

In his 1923 classic, *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto argued that the most profound articulations of religion were those of a non-rational or "suprarational" nature.[28] This suprarationality was best expressed, according to Otto in terms of the "holy," which carried numerous shades of meaning relating to the ability of human beings to perceive the ineffable, incomprehensible divine reality. Otto termed the experience of this reality the *numen* or the *numinous*. The numinous is a mental state that "issues from the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses."[29] Furthermore, this state is unique and "cannot be strictly defined."[30] However, Otto tentatively remarked that although the numinous is "a moment of deeply-felt religious experience," it is "as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness."[31] Continuing this line of reasoning, Otto argued that the numinous "cannot be 'taught,' it must be 'awakened' from the spirit."[32] In this definition, Otto replicates one of the most frustrating aspects of mystical prose: his definition of mystical experience is so vague it implies that one can only "know" the numinous if one experiences it for herself. Such definitions extend the insider-outsider dilemma of traditional mystical writing to secular scholarship without acknowledging that one is privileging an insider definition.

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[28] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, translated by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 2.
[29] Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 113.
[30] Otto, 113.
[31] Otto, 8.
[32] Otto, 60.

Otto's discussion of mystical states, particularly in his articulation of mysticism as *mysterium*, is framed within a discourse of the origin of religion. By using the term *mysterium,* he places mystical experience at the point of genesis for religion. He discusses its maturation by positing two types of mysterium: *mysterium tremendum*, and *mysterium fascinans*. *Mysterium tremendum* is a characteristic of so-called primitive religion, which involves an overwhelming feeling of terror or a sudden influx of the holy. This type of experience might be likened to the Prophet Muhammad's first experience of revelation, in that Otto views it as frightening. However, the experience of *mysterium tremendum* also leads to "mystical awe," and allows for individual reflection on the direct experience of the divine object.[33] Although this experience leaves the mystic dumbstruck, Otto makes clear that it is in essence an experience of the "wholly other"—an experience of consciousness that "has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one, and when at the same time arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind."[34]

Making sense of these experiences, according to Otto, involves contemplating reality itself, which leads to the *mysterium fascinans*. While he believes that all religious consciousness begins with "awe" or "dread" from the experience of *mysterium tremendum*, reflecting on the content of these experiences eventually gives way to a more complex and complete mystical worldview. This *mysterium fascinans*, in contrast to the frightening *mysterium tremendum*, "is experienced in its essential, positive, and specific character, as something that bestows upon man a beatitude beyond compare, but one whose real nature he can neither proclaim in speech nor conceive in thought, but may know only by a direct and living experience."[35] He adds little about

[33] Otto, 17.
[34] Otto, 29.
[35] Otto, 33.

the characteristics of the experience itself, other than that it is ineffable and non-rational.[36] Furthermore, he argues that although the mystical experience at the heart of religion is not rational, it represents "the ultimate and highest part of our nature."[37] This statement echoes Underhill's assertion that mystical experience represents the height of human consciousness, an idea that would be picked up by the next generation of scholars of mystical experience.

The notion that mysticism and mystical experience was be the apex of human consciousness also interested philosophers of religion, who offered considerably more concrete definitions of what the mystical state itself was like. W.T. Stace argued that mysticism was in serious need of critical investigation. He claimed that "the term 'mystical' is utterly vague," and therefore, it needed an empirical investigation "to determine what types and kinds of experience are called mystical, to specify and classify their main characteristics, to assign boundaries to the class, and to exclude irrelevant types."[38] Stace offers an impressive and comprehensive study of the phenomena associated with mysticism and suggests two major types of mystical experience: *extrovertive experience* and *introvertive experience*. The appeal to two distinct types of mystical experience continues to influence studies of mysticism. While at first glance, such a dichotomy appears to account for both the diversity of mystical content and mysticism's shared core, Stace's formulation is problematic for two reasons: first, it privileges one type of experience as a more authentic mystical experience; second, textual evidence indicates that this more authentic mystical experience for Stace seemed considerably *less* important to many classical mystics.

Stace's first category, extrovertive mystical experience, conforms with previous definitions of mystical experience as union with the divine, but with one notable exception: he

[36] Otto, 36.
[37] Otto, 36.
[38] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 5.

deems these experiences as lower-level mystical experiences because they are neither universal nor non-dual. Stace defines extrovertive mystical experience as union with ultimate reality that "is immediately interpreted by the mystic as having objective reference and not being a mere inner or subjective state of the soul."[39] According to Stace, the key qualities of extrovertive mystical experiences is that they are fundamentality *dualistic* in nature because in them mystics continue to be aware of what they are experiencing. Like Otto's *mysterium fascinans,* Stace notes that extrovertive mystical experiences convey feelings of blessedness, happiness, and paradoxicality.[40] While ineffability is *sometimes* a characteristic of extrovertive mystical experiences, Stace claimed that this is not a pure ineffability because it does not transcend language; rather, it consists merely of the claim that the experience in question is difficult to describe.[41] Because such experiences are mediated they are not truly universal. In many cases, extrovertive mystical experiences appear to be tradition-bound, as they are frequently interpreted as evidence of union with God.

While many classical mystics seem only to have extrovertive mystical experiences, Stace argued that truly universal mystical experience lies only in introvertive experiences. Introvertive mystical experience entails the dissolution of the subject-object distinction, without any discernible content associated with the experience. This experience has been the basis for Perennialist interpretations of mystical experience, as it is more uniform than extrovertive mystical experiences. According to Stace, *"undifferentiated unity is the essence of introvertive mystical experience.*"[42] In introvertive mystical states, mystics do not "know" or "perceive," but are simply *aware* or *conscious.* This experience is characterized as negative, as it involves the

[39] Stace, 67.
[40] Stace, 79.
[41] Stace, 79.
[42] Stace, 87. Emphasis in original.

stripping away of differentiating states of consciousness in order to reach a state of complete unity. There is no perceivable content associated with introvertive mystical experiences. Because Stace conceives of this state as the experience of consciousness itself, he suggests that in it the individual self is sublimated into the "Universal Self," which points to the underlying unity of all introvertive mystical experience.[43]

Although some classical mystics clearly had introvertive experiences, it seems unreasonable to suggest not only that these experiences are universal but also that they are more profound than extrovertive mystical experiences. Such a view ignores the majority of medieval mystics, who did not conceive of ultimate reality in this manner. For example, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Three, Ibn Sīnā argued that his mystical experiences were fully non-dual and ineffable; however, he understood mystical experience as intellectual union with God, not as an experience of his own consciousness. Adding further complication to the picture, Ibn al-ʿArabī and other Sufis implied that their mystical experiences were perhaps not beyond language, but yet again, they conceived of mystical experience as that of contact with ultimate reality.[44] Furthermore, throughout the medieval mystical tradition in both the Islamic world and Europe, there is an understanding that divine knowledge is imparted through mystical encounters. It does not appear that the mystic is simply "conscious" or "aware," in these moments, but receives divine knowledge. Theories such as those offered by Otto and Stace privilege the preconceived notion that mystical experience is universal over what mystics

[43] Stace, 161.

[44] Ibn al-ʿArabī notes that in certain cases, following a non-duel experience, "knowledge bestows silence upon them, not inability. They are the most exalted of those who know God." (*Ringstones of Wisdom*, 26) As will be explored more fully in Chapter Four, this implies that language is present during the encounter, but following the non-dual experience, Ibn al-ʿArabī was *prevented* from speaking. Al-Ghazālī gives a similar discussion in *The Beautiful Names*, when he states, "He who does not know God, the Mighty, the Great, silence (*al-sakūt*) comes over him, and he who knows God, silence (*al-ṣamt*) is made incumbent upon him. As it is said: 'for one who knows God, his tongue is dulled.'" (*al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 12.)

actually say about their experiences. While they claim to root their categories in phenomenological descriptions, their attempt to suggest that one type of mystical experience (i.e., introvertive experience or *mysterium fascinans*) is more profound than the other leads them into the dangerous theological territory of evaluating mystics, and indeed, whole mystical traditions on artificial dichotomies. Against this view, I would argue that it is both more useful and more "phenomenological" to examine the experiences that mystics themselves deem to be most profound.

IV. Mysticism as Universal: Early Perennialism

In the mid-twentieth century, philosophically-minded writers such as Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) became interested in mystical experience, seeing in it the potential to prove that there is a universal reality shared by all human beings. Huxley's approach was called "Perennialism," based on the title of his 1945 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*. The basic premise of the perennial philosophy is that there is a single, underlying reality that humans can directly access through mystical experience. Perennialist approaches to mysticism pervaded religious studies throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and its basic premises continue to inform theories of mystical experience.[45] Ninian Smart and Huston Smith were some of the most influential scholars of religion in the 1960s-1990s, and each was influenced by Perennialism. Perennialism was appealing to academic scholars of mysticism because it seemed to explain the striking similarity of descriptions of mystical experience across different religious traditions. Arguing that all mystics experience more or less the same thing allowed for the hope that humans could

[45] As will be explored more fully in Chapter Two, in Islamic Studies, the term perennialism refers to a related, but distinct scholarly legacy which I term "Traditionalist Perennialism." Recently, Gregory A. Lipton has referred to this as "Schuonian Perennialism." See: Gregory A. Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn ʿArabi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

transcend cultural conditioning and reach their shared epistemological core. Furthermore, according to Huxley and other early Perennialists, accessing this shared core would allow people to shed the dogmatic trappings of organized religion, leaving them to enjoy only positive spirituality. According to Huxley's articulation of perennial philosophy, mystical experiences need not be religious at all: mystical experiences can result from hallucinogenic drugs, spiritual experiences in nature, and other factors.[46] Because, in his view, mysticism as a concept is detached from traditional religion, its universality could serve as a key to transcending organized religion. For Huxley, the perennial philosophy exemplified by mysticism preserved the best features of religion while discarding the negative, unnecessary rigors of doctrine, belief, and practice. While Huxley's methodology and sources have by and large been rejected, his early influence was pervasive, and a number of contemporary scholars continue to hold Huxley's basic premises.

Aligning with Schleiermacher's notion of mysticism as an inward turn, Huxley argued that mystics achieve mystical experience by stripping away cultural accretions to humanity's consciousness.[47] Huxley offers a simple, yet provocative definition of Perennialist philosophy. He explains that Perennialism is a metaphysics "that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of that immanent and transcendent Ground of all being— the thing is immemorial and universal."[48] This view of mysticism continues to influence Perennialist scholars of religious studies, who aim to prove, as Robert Sharf puts it, that "There is…a residue in all conscious

[46] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 15, 71, 343. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 23, 31, 237. See also: Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).
[47] Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), 1-2.
[48] Huxley, vii.

experience that cannot be reduced to the content of consciousness alone."[49] However, while Huxley believed that experience is, in principle, available to all humans, he nonetheless argues, "Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit." Much like Otto's notion that the numinous can never be fully defined, Huxley claimed that his notion of the limited access to ultimate reality is "just one of those facts which we have to accept, whether we like them or not and however implausible and unlikely they may seem."[50]

The perennial philosophy, according to Huxley, operated at three levels. The bottom level was practice, the top level was theology and philosophy, and the middle level was the point of "action," where theory and practice merged.[51] Furthermore, the top level of theology and philosophy concerned an ultimate reality that Huxley asserted must be beyond "God," at least in the "usual" conception of the term. While Huxley does not reject experience of ritual outright, he suggested that it was a lower form of spirituality and "It is in imageless contemplation that the soul comes to the unitive knowledge of Reality"[52]

Throughout *Perennial Philosophy*, Huxley uses imprecise language in a way that is similar to many of the mystics he studies, as he attempts to prove the common core of reality and human consciousness in mystical experience. His imprecise language is perhaps the result of his view that ultimate reality is beyond language and can only be apprehended directly.[53] He argues that because of this situation, paradoxical language is necessary, and that one can assume a correspondence of experience across traditions, regardless of the language employed by

[49] Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark Taylor, 97-113 (Chicago, University of Chicago Press), 97.
[50] Huxley, *Perennial Philosophy*, viii.
[51] Huxley, 1.
[52] Huxley, 264.
[53] Huxley, 21.

individual mystics. For this reason, Huxley both consciously and unconsciously stretches his descriptions of mystical experience in order to "fit" his concept of what mystical experience *ought* to be. As a result, his work is rife with inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and mistranslations of mystical texts. For example, Huxley admits that he interprets Buddhist teachings in his own way in order to show that "…despite their inauspicious vocabulary, the best of the Mahayana sutras contain an authentic formulation of the Perennial Philosophy."[54] Huxley and the Perennialists that followed him believed that the differences in first-hand descriptions of mystical experience were irrelevant and thus interpreted mystical experiences in a way that papered over religious nuances. In their effort to further smooth over such differences, Robert Forman claims that early Perennialists "often misquoted, mistranslated, misrepresented, and misinterpreted their sources in order to make them appear identical."[55]

Huxley's Perennialism laid the groundwork for what would become the standard definition of mystical experience as a universal and unmediated experience of ultimate reality. While his book, *The Perennial Philosophy* is not completely without merit its prescriptive nature and attempt to prove the existence of a transcendent reality beyond religion resulted in the reliance upon faulty translations and interpretations of exemplary texts. Perennialist scholars in general have been sharply criticized for misrepresenting mystical texts and making poor translations of them. However, beyond these faults, several theorists have also rejected the very premise of perennial philosophy— the unmediated experience of ultimate reality.

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[54] Huxley, 10.

[55] Robert K.C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind,* 32. Ironically, Hans Penner argues that Perennialist scholars were not "intentionally dogmatic, biased, or ethnocentric," nor did they "simply misread the same texts we use," but rather that they read the texts in a particular context and were unaware of. (Penner, "The Mystical Illusion, 92-93)

V. *There's no There There: Constructivist Critiques of Mystical and Religious Experience*

In 1978, Steven T. Katz argued that Perennialist scholars (and even mystics) were mistaken about the possibility of unmediated mystical experience. Focusing on the types of training and frameworks of beliefs that led up to mystical experience, he asserted that mystical experience was *constructed* by language rather than being ineffable or free of linguistic mediation. This position came to be known as constructivism. Katz's writings on this subject sparked a fierce debate, in which many scholars still find themselves engaged. Constructivist scholars have leveled important critiques against the Perennialist approach over the past forty years, particularly about its prescriptiveness veiled by universalism and its lack of theoretical rigor. However, the constructivist analysis of mystical experience often falls into the same trap as that of the Perennialists: they also create prescriptive definitions that assume what mystical experience *ought* to be rather than how mystics describes it themselves. This perpetuates an unresolvable debate over the character of mystical experience. However, when constructivists focus on general comparisons between religious experience and mystical experience, their work can be quite useful.

The constructivist critique of Perennialism was first articulated in Steven Katz's controversial article, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism." This article sets out to prove that "There are no pure, unmediated experiences."[56] Not only is true ineffability of experience impossible, Katz argues, if it were possible, it would render reports of mystical experience totally meaningless for scholarly interpretation.[57] Rather than focus on ineffable experiences, Katz advocates the exploration of an important but often overlooked aspect of mystical experience:

[56] Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven T. Katz, 22-74 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 26.
[57] Katz, "Language, Epistemology," 54.

the processes, practices, theologies, and worldviews that mystics espouse prior to achieving mystical experience. Katz asserts that mystics have a preconditioned "ontological schema," which "creates and shapes [their] expectations and experiences."[58] Perennialist scholars have noted that mystics frequently turn to the familiar vocabulary of their religious tradition to describe their supposedly unmediated experiences. Katz responds that this use of religious language is more than an afterthought; rather, mystical epistemologies include specific techniques for achieving certain types of experience. He argues that the experiences of mystics conform to the expectations shaped by their traditions, and that one cannot overlook such differences in search of a universal mystical experience. To prove his point, Katz cites a number of different examples of mystical experience from different traditions. After detailing the ontology, training, and expectations of Buddhist mysticism, he argues that it would be "bizarre" to imply, as Perennialists do, that the ontological and theological schema that lie behind mystical experiences necessarily vanishes once a mystic has achieved "ultimate reality."[59]

Defenders of Perennialism have noted that Katz's article commits the logical fallacy of begging the question because he begins with the assumption that there are no unmediated experiences rather than concluding this from the evidence.[60] This criticism, however, seems relatively weak: while Katz states the thesis that there are no unmediated experiences rather boldly at the outset, he offers ample evidence to support his claim in the remainder of the article. However, Robert Forman argues that Katz fundamentally misunderstands Stace's articulation of "introvertive mystical experience" as universal mystical experience, since all of the examples

[58] Steven T. Katz, "The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, edited by Steven T. Katz, 3-60 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), 35.
[59] Katz, "The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience," 39.
[60] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 44.

that he cites fall under the category of "extrovertive mystical experiences."[61] Even more importantly, one might add that Katz's constructivism still accepts the flawed premise, common to nearly all academic studies of mysticism, that experience is the essence of this phenomenon.

Katz's rejection of the concept of unmediated mystical experience has ultimately proven to be an unproductive line of inquiry for scholars of religious studies. As with the Perennialists, he begins with the assumption that experience defines mysticism, and as such, he is interested in the experience more than the concept itself. While he is right to suggest that scholars should not dismiss the language, imagery, and theology of mystics, to argue that unmediated experience is impossible is to fundamentally ignore the reports of numerous mystics (particularly Buddhist and Hindus). Although it cannot be denied that people often report their experiences inaccurately, to categorically deny the possibility of unitary or non-dual experiences misses some of the most fruitful data for scholars of religion, such as how a person describes her own experiences, whether or not she relates it to a larger mystical or religious tradition, and how she conceives of her experience as a form of contact with ultimate reality.[62]

While a strictly constructivist position is not adopted in the present study, critiques by constructivist scholars of the ideological assumptions of the Perennialist position can be quite useful for students of mysticism. Wayne Proudfoot gives one of the most insightful analyses of the subtle ideology of Perennialism in his book *Religious Experience* (1985). In this work, he argues that while Perennialism appears to be respectful of tradition, it is actually a destructive form of scholarship. According to Proudfoot, Perennialists are guilty of the very charges that they bring against the constructivists— dismissing firsthand reports of mystical experience and

[61] Forman, 44.

[62] This framing is explored more later in the chapter and is inspired by Ann Taves's work on deeming things religious.

engaging in theoretical reductionism. He suggests that there are two forms of reductionism: *explanatory reductionism*, which is valid, and *descriptive reductionism*, which is not valid. Explanatory reductionism is to give reasons for or an analysis of experience, practice, or belief in terms that the subject may not use or recognize but is valid for analytical reasons. For example, a subject may claim to have seen a flash of light from God. A scholar may argue that the flash was in fact a lightning bolt, but the subject believes it to be from God. Even though the scholar would reject the subject's explanation, Proudfoot believes that this stance is essential to scholarship, and perfectly justifiable. This is because the scholarly explanation is subject to evidence, analysis, and judgment by the academic community.[63] In other words, other scholars would be free to reject the lightning bolt explanation if it is unconvincing based on the evidence.

While explanatory reductionism is a common scholarly practice, Proudfoot argues that Perennialists engage in descriptive reductionism, which consists of representing an experience, belief, emotion, or practice in terms that the subject would neither agree with nor accept. To return to the above example, descriptive reductionism would entail a scholar *reducing* the experience to "a flash of lightening" or "a flash of light exposed from inward consciousness," before attending to the subject's explanation. In this approach, the scholar willfully ignores the fact that the subject attributes the light to God. Proudfoot believes that this type of reductionism is unacceptable, since it "misidentifies the experience or…attends to another experience altogether."[64] He claims that the notion of a universal core of mystical experience is an example of descriptive reductionism because it necessitates re-describing experiences in order to fit a

[63] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 197.
[64] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 196.

preconceived notion of mysticism. This revision "results in the loss of the very experience one is trying to analyze."[65]

In addition, Proudfoot argues that the Perennialists' definition of mystical experience uses ineffability as a tool to privilege the views of the Perennialist interpreter over those of the mystics themselves. Departing from Katz, who believes that appeals to paradoxicality and ineffability preclude the empirical study of experience, Proudfoot argues that ineffability is in fact, a precise notion. He asserts that ineffability is "an artifact of the peculiar grammatical rules that govern the use of certain terms in particular religious contexts."[66] In other words, for Proudfoot, the appeal to the ineffable is bound up in specific languages, cultures, religious traditions, and other mediating factors rather than a single abstract notion. That which is ineffable in one linguistic context may be open to articulation in another. At the most basic level, this would apply to words that do not have direct equivalents in other languages but can be understood conceptually, such as *schadenfreude*. However, Proudfoot also argues that the ability to express concepts is bound up in particular contexts, including the insider/technical vocabulary used by specific mystical groups. Thus, while the Arabic term *fanāʾ* may literally mean. "to pass away," "to extinguish," or "to annihilate," in a Sufi context, it also takes on a theological meaning that conveys the experience of "annihilation *within the divine*." The word thus expresses a concept that may be ineffable for those without such a theology yet communicates something quite specific to Sufis and others who know Sufi terminology. Proudfoot claims that through their insistence that a mystical experience must transcend language, the Perennialists "ensure [that] ineffability is a grammatical rule; it is prescriptive rather than descriptive."[67] This

[65] Proudfoot, 123.
[66] Proudfoot, 125.
[67] Proudfoot, 127.

prescription is the result of the ideological pre-commitments endemic to the Perennialist worldview.

The Perennialist approach to mystical experience is not only prescriptive, but as Grace Janzten and other feminist scholars of mysticism have noted, it involves an implicit power dynamic that privileges male spirituality and embodiments. Janzten argues that equating mysticism with inner experience relegates mysticism to the private and, by extension, domestic sphere. In the case of Christian theology, Jantzen argues that calling an approach mystical often kept women's voices out of authoritative or theological roles.[68] Furthermore, she notes that mystical experience is "a constantly shifting social and historical construction," which is inextricably tied to the political, social, and historical interests of those defining it.[69] While truly unmediated experience, if possible, would be ungendered, Jantzen and other feminist scholars of mysticism take a broadly constructivist position on mysticism, arguing that many descriptions of so-called universal experiences are based on male models of embodiment and experience.[70] Their criticisms push scholars of mysticism to move beyond the question of experience alone and to note the broader political, theological, and gendered dimensions of mysticism.

Beyond the rejection of mystical experience as unmediated universal experience, scholars influenced by constructivism have also called into question the usefulness of the category of religious experience itself. Perhaps the simplest yet most provocative criticism of the idea of religious experience as an essential feature of religion is that it is tautological. One cannot call experience "religious" without already having a concept of religion.[71] Ann Taves suggests a

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[68] Grace Janzten, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.
[69] Janzten, *Power, Gender*, 24.
[70] Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), Nancy Caciolia, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).
[71] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 183-184.

subtle shift in terminology from "religious experience" to "experiences deemed religious" in order to account for the process by which people choose to use "religious" as an adjective to describe certain experiences.[72] Perhaps ironically, this position echoes William James' argument that "in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feeling of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion."[73]

Constructivist scholars have also argued that the vagueness and tautological nature of many arguments for experience as the basis of both religion and mysticism is not accidental but a "protective strategy," meant to shield religious beliefs from scientific criticism.[74] This tendency, they argue, goes back to Schleiermacher's mission to defend religion from its "cultured despisers." According to Wayne Proudfoot, "Schleiermacher sought to free religious belief and practice from the requirement that they be justified by reference to nonreligious thought or action to preclude the possibility of conflict between religious doctrine and any new knowledge that might emerge in the course of this secular inquiry."[75] Other contemporary scholars of religion have echoed Proudfoot's argument. For example, Ann Taves argues that an analytical model of religion that privileges experience "tacitly protects [practitioners of religion] from naturalistic explanations."[76] Russell McCutcheon claims that "Schleiermacher defended religion against its so-called cultured despisers by re-conceiving it as a nonquantified individual experience, a deep feeling, or an immediate consciousness," and thus insulated religion from outside criticism.[77] It must be noted that McCutcheon also goes much further than this in his critique, arguing that

[72] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 14-15.
[73] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 74.
[74] McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, 4; Sharf, "Experience," 95; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 3.
[75] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, xiii. Emphasis added.
[76] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 118.
[77] McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, 4.

religion as an analytical category does not deserve *any* special treatment or deferral to the accounts of practitioners.

Moreover, as Taves notes, essentialist approaches to religious experience ignore one of the most interesting questions for scholars of religion: why do people represent certain experiences as religious and others as non-religious? Can one call the experience of liturgy "religious" for all congregants? If two people experience the same thing (say a narrowly-avoided car crash), and one attributes the experience to divine intervention but the other does not, is the experience "religious?" Tave notes that experiences that are deemed religious tend to be unusual or unintended and occur at the boundaries of consciousness; hence, the designation of the experience is as important, if not more so, as the experience itself. [78] This insight can also be applied to mystical experiences; while many classical mystics (particularly in non-Western traditions) do not use the word "mysticism," the practice of noting which experiences are called "union," "unmediated," or "non-dual" can be highly instructive. The fact that these terms are applied to what appear to be disparate experiences opens up a fascinating line of inquiry for scholars of mysticism: what do different visions of ultimate reality say about mystical traditions, mystical practitioners, and their experiences?

The constructivist critiques of mystical experience in the 1970s and 1980s struck a strong blow against Perennialist scholarship. Katz's position that unmediated mystical experience was impossible was met with robust debate in the field of religious studies. Katz and other constructivist scholars have continued to defend the position that mystical experience is constructed by linguistic, religious, and cultural ontological pre-commitments, but their most insightful observations have been on the effect that Perennialist ideology has had on scholarship.

[78]Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 62.

However, their comments on the prescriptiveness that the Perennialist position necessitates and the reductionism that Perennialists employ in their studies could be used against them as well. If constructivist scholars ignore the mystic who describes an introvertive, unmediated mystical experience, are they any less prescriptive or reductive than the Perennialists? A key insight of constructivist theorists is that one cannot dismiss the importance of extrovertive mystical experiences and the language that mystics use to describe them. However, their rejection of the possibility of unmediated experience has led to a protracted debate in scholarship on a question that is ultimately unanswerable and not particularly useful for the study of historical mystical traditions

VI. Mysticism as Pure Consciousness: Neoperennialism and Philosophical Articulations of Mystical Experience

Following the constructivist criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, a movement that has come to be known as "Neoperennialism" has emerged. Neoperennialists acknowledge the methodological errors of the early Perennialists.[79] However, they fiercely defend the basic premises of Perennialism: that there is a single ineffable reality and that the most profound mystical experiences are the same across all religious traditions. Robert K.C. Forman is the chief proponent of Neoperennialism, and a broad range of scholars has taken up his approach in religious studies, psychology, and philosophy.[80] Broadly speaking, Neoperennialists seek to refine Huxley's basic principles, bolstering them by offering more accurate translations of

[79] In both *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, and *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (1997), Forman characterizes his work as responding to constructivist positions. He himself does not use the term "Neoperennialism," favoring the term "perennial psychology." (See: *Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, 1997). Forman and others' attempt to recover the essence of perennial philosophy while acknowledging and correcting the inaccurate scholarship has been termed such by other scholars of msyticism, most notably, Ann Taves.

[80] Such as G. Barnard Williams and Ralph Hood. As will be explored more fully in Chapter Two, Muslim Traditionalist Perennialists, most notably William Chittick, have contributed to volumes edited by Forman. This is a rare example of the two groups "meeting" and is an avenue by which the Traditionalists can venture into "mainstream" religious studies.

mystical writings and including a range of sources beyond classical mystical texts.[81] Forman and his colleagues have worked tirelessly over the past 30 years to demonstrate that unmediated experiences— especially the "Pure Consciousness Event (PCE)"— are foundational for mystical experience in general. However, in their quest to find an ironclad refutation of the constructivist critique, they have articulated a model of mysticism that relies upon a narrow range of experiences that may be uniform for some but are not shared by *all* mystical practitioners and traditions. In what follows, I will argue that there are two major flaws in the works of those who argue for the primacy of the PCE as a defining feature of mysticism. First, such interpretations favor traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, whose theologies and epistemologies support the PCE as being the most profound state of human consciousness. To suggest that it is universal across all mystical traditions is to fundamentally ignore the insights that scholars can gain from exploring the following question: *What does it mean to conceive of ultimate reality in different ways*? Second, and perhaps equally important, Neoperennialist scholars have failed to account in their research how one is able to learn from a Pure Consciousness Event.

In his seminal monograph, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (1999), Forman suggests that mystical experience is the result of"trophotropic states," which are "hypoaroused states, marked by low-level cognitive and physiological activity."[82] These brief states of consciousness are free of sensory, cultural, and linguistic mediation, and are so designated because of their difference from normal states. Forman argues that using such a narrow definition of the mystical experience is "in accord with the original meaning of 'mystical,' i.e., 'to close,' and to the overtones of the term as it was brought into the Christian lexicon by Pseudo-Dionysius, that is, separate from

[81] Forman prefers interview and contemporary first-person reports, arguing that texts privilege a constructivist position, and limit the access to experience. Jones and other Neoperennialists have also cited a number of neurological studies to support their position.

[82] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 4.

sensory ('rapt out by himself')."[83] Forman calls the unmediated mystical experience a "Pure Consciousness Event" (PCE). Forman claims that PCEs are positive experiences, and that they occur during waking consciousness. However, this state is difficult to classify or explain in detail.[84] Forman believes that PCEs represent the universal core of mystical experience but that they are "relatively common" and can occur unprompted; deeper mystical insight requires that one have multiple PCEs and engage in meditative exercises.[85]

Thus, for Forman, the PCE is the starting point in a building-block model of mysticism: one builds a mystical worldview or belief system after having multiple PCEs. From these brief, foundational moments, one begins to contemplate and reflect on these experiences, leading to more advanced mystical insights. However, Forman argues that while PCEs are spontaneous, true mystical transformation "result[s] from a life of regular meditative practice."[86] "Dualistic Mystical States" and other "advanced mystical states" emerge from such meditative practices. These states are, according to Forman, experienced as a form of inner stillness or silence. In contrast to the transitory PCE, dualistic and advanced mystical states result in long-lasting (and in some cases, permanent) changes in consciousness.[87] Furthermore, while advanced mystical states seem to result from insights gained from one or more PCEs, they are not an endpoint or final step in the mystical life, but rather are epistemological shifts that mystics achieve through their transient mystical experiences.[88]

In *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable*, Richard H. Jones tries to strike a sort of balance between Perennialism and constructivistism. However, this claim is somewhat

[83] Forman, 6.
[84] Forman, 27-30.
[85] Forman, 7.
[86] Forman, 28.
[87] Forman, 133.
[88] Forman, 150-151.

disingenuous. Jones states that he is neither a constructivist, nor a Perennialist; however, he believes that what he calls "nonconstructivsts" have a "stronger case" by arguing for a uniform type of basic mystical experience.[89] He expends considerable energy in his book disproving the constructivist position and arguing that it is based on *a priori* assumptions rather than on empirical evidence.[90] Furthermore, he does not grant legitimacy to any major constructivist argument; instead, his so-called "balance" consists in admitting that "one basic problem forecloses any definite resolution [of the problem of mystical experience]: all there can ever be are later accounts of what occurred during a depth-experience. All experiences are private, and mystics can only give us a postexperience description of the depth-mystical experience."[91] While Jones grants the diversity of mystical experiences, he explains this phenomenon by refining Stace's categories of mystical experience and concludes that one particular type of mystical experience (the "depth-mystical experience") is the same for all who experience it.[92] In his endorsement for the book, the Neoperennialist Ralph Hood praises Jones for "critically extend[ing] Stace's universal core and embed[ing] it in a sophisticated discussion of the extent, range, and metaphysical implications of mysticism**."**

Although Jones goes beyond pure experience in his philosophical study of mysticism, his tautological view of mysticism fits rather neatly with that of the Perennialists.[93] According to Jones, mysticism consists of "emptying the mind of conceptualizations, dispositions, emotions, and other differentiated content that distinguishes what is considered here as 'mystical.' The resulting experiences are universally considered mystical."[94] Jones correctly notes that mysticism

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[89] Richard H. Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016), 65.
[90] Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, 68.
[91] Jones, 65-66.
[92] Jones, 69.
[93] Jones, 2.
[94] Jones, 4.

also encompasses life-guiding principles, practices, and rituals, yet he focuses primarily on experience in his text, as he argues that this is the feature that distinguishes mysticism from other worldviews and types of spirituality.[95] In particular, he uses Stace's basic categories of extrovertive and introvertive mystical experience, positing the additional typologies of extrovertive "nature-mystical experiences" and introvertive "depth-mystical experiences." The depth mystical experience is akin to Forman's PCE: it is completely non-dual and free of all sensory, linguistic, and cognitive content. Like Forman, Jones sees the depth-mystical experience as the purest form of unmediated mystical experience.[96] He argues that the depth-mystical experience is largely the same for all who experience it, even if it is expressed through distinct mystical traditions.[97] The depth-mystical experience is totally unmediated and free of all differentiating factors. Jones describes it as "a silence as the normal workings of the mind—including a sense of self and self-will—are stilled."[98] Unlike Forman, Jones sees the depth-mystical experience as the result of consciously "stilling the mind" through meditation and considers it to be the most difficult mystical state to attain. However, this "stilling of the mind," and turning inward also seems to heavily favor Buddhist and Hindu mystical traditions. As will be shown more clearly in Chapters Two and Three, medieval Muslim mystics generally did not view mystical experiences as the result of turning inward or stilling their mental processes, but rather by mastering specific sets of knowledge and practices focused on the divine.

In contrast with Forman's building-block model, Jones suggests that both depth-mystical and nature mystical experiences may occur independently of each another, and that both can lead to a mystical worldview. In fact, while depth-mystical experiences may be universal and thus

[95] Jones, 2.
[96] Jones, 20.
[97] Jones, 69.
[98] Jones, 21.

more profound in Jones's estimation, he astutely notes that in many traditions nature mystical experiences are valued more highly than unmediated experiences.[99] Although noting that not all mystics value depth-mystical experiences is an important insight, Jones does not take this observation further. Instead, he suggests that despite the fact that many mystics *do not value* depth-mystical experiences, it nevertheless is the most profound experience that human beings can have. This assertion fits nicely with the traditions he is most trained in— Indian mystical traditions— but is out of place in many others. This points to the fact that no scholar of mysticism is expert enough in all traditions to make a universalist claim about the inherent character of a mystical experience in general. Even groups of scholars may run into trouble when they try to translate and compare different mystical experiences.

Forman and Jones both put forth a notion of mysticism that is well suited to Indian religious traditions. Jones is trained as a philosopher but reads Sanskrit and is versed in Buddhist philosophy and Advaita Vedanta. While Forman's academic expertise is primarily in Meister Eckhart and mystical theory, he is a practitioner of Advaita Vedanta and extensively cites his own experiences in his works, along with dialogues between him and Buddhist masters to support the uniform nature of mystical experiences.[100] Indeed, a mystical experience of pure consciousness, unmediated by human conditioning is particularly meaningful in these traditions.

As the chapters in this dissertation will discuss, Neoperennialist models of mystical experience do not fit seamlessly with medieval Islamic mysticism. While one might suggest that phenomenologically, the Sufi experience of *fanāʾ* is a PCE, and *baqāʾ* (subsistence) his "dualistic mystical states," Forman and Jones' interpretations of such experiences would be inadequate. For example, *fanāʾ* is not a lower-level experience that Sufis use to construct a

[99] Jones, 13-15.
[100] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 48-51.

mystical worldview, as Forman's theory would expect. With respect to Jones' approach, *fanāʾ* is not reached through "stilling the mind," or looking inward to one's own consciousness. Rather, it is an impermanent or passing state. While one may gain insight from such a state, a more profound mystical experience is *baqāʾ*, or "subsistence." This is more akin to the dualistic mystical state (DMS), in that it is longer lasting than *fanāʾ*. However, some Muslim mystics, such as Suhrawardī, did not place a great deal of emphasis on mystical experiences but rather on mastering mystical texts and scriptures and the skills necessary to interpret them. While the philosophical mystic Ibn Sīnā perhaps came the closest to favoring non-dual experiences (and is direct about the insights imparted to him during these experiences), these did not appear to lead to deeper insights (*pace* Forman). Moreover, his mysticism was the result of strict intellectual training, and can hardly be said to have been the result of "stilling the mind."

VII. The Persistence of Memory

While the previous sections of this chapter examined whether ineffable experience is a necessary foundation for mystical experience, moving past this question still leaves a central theoretical quandary: how can one express mystical knowledge? Two issues are involved in questions about the expression of mystical knowledge, both of which have been given extensive theoretical attention in philosophy and religious studies. First is the question of how the mystic translates ineffable inexperience into language *in his own mind,* and second is the question of how the mystic goes about explaining her experiences to others. Although the second question has been examined in terms of logic and rhetoric, the first has received scant theoretical attention. It cannot be denied that many mystics do indeed claim depth-mystical experiences or PCEs, making the constructivist position rather difficult to maintain if one is to take seriously the claims of their subjects. However, it also cannot be denied that there is a problem in transmitting

the knowledge derived from these experiences, making the Perennialist defense problematic on philosophical grounds as well. This position is not only problematical with respect to the interpretation of the experience, but it also begs the question of *access to the experience itself*. If a mystical experience occurs completely outside the framework of conceptual thought, how does one access such an experience? How can one have a memory of such an experience? Many scholars have noted that the theoretical concerns of mystics and the theoretical concerns of scholars of mysticism are different. Because of this discrepancy, the scholar of mysticism who posits a depth-mystical state or a PCE as the essence of mysticism must account for how one can access such experiences. Jones hints at the problem, but never solves it, nor does he seem to realize the implications of the problem for the depth-mystical experience.

Neoperennialists typically presuppose Stace's model of ineffability: that the mystical experience itself, *while it is occurring*, is fully ineffable and unmediated by language. However, Stace contends that after this ineffable experience, the mystic is able to "contrast the two kinds of consciousness [mystical and non-mystical]" and can use language to speak of her experience.[101] Jones, Forman, and other scholars echo this model— that one has an experience outside of language, and somehow "translates" this experience into meaningful speech. Leaving aside the question of whether ineffable experience is at all possible, I argue there is a major flaw in this line of thinking: it fails to account for how one is able to retain a memory of depth-mystical experiences in the first place. As Plotinus states in *Ennead* VI.9 that the experience of ultimate Reality must be "adjusted to our mental processes" before it can be expressed in speech or writing.[102] The key question is what this "adjustment to our mental processes" consists of.

[101] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 297.
[102] Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.92.

When describing depth-mystical experiences, Jones notes the paradox of arguing that such an experience is free of all differentiated consciousness but that one is able to retain some memory of it afterwards.[103] Although he insists that during the depth-mystical experience, no language is present, he posits a "transitional state from the depth-mystical experience back to the baseline state of consciousness or a state of mindfulness. During this transition, images, prior beliefs, and other dualistic phenomena flood back into the mind."[104] Furthermore, Jones uses the notion of a transitional state to bolster his Perennialist view of the commonality of mystical experience. He argues that within the depth-mystical experience, "depth-mystics from all traditions all experience the same reality but *interpret* the depth-mystical experience differently according to their tradition after they have returned to a dualistic consciousness."[105] This point is is also shared by Forman and other Neoperennialists— that the apparent differences in descriptions are merely different interpretations of the same shared experience. However, while Jones notes the problem of a gap in consciousness, his solution of a transitional state is vague and does little to help one understand how the process of conceptualizing a mystical experience actually occurs.

The notion of a transitional state, while primarily about change, also implies continuity in the process. While Jones and other advocates for the depth-mystical experience often emphasize the privileged status of the mystic's direct experience, if the depth-mystical experience is truly ineffable as they claim it is, then in terms of this experience the mystic herself is comparable to an outsider. If one has an ineffable experience in which there is no cognitive mediation, no conceptual framework, and no sense of self, one would not be able to conceptualize the

[103] Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, 21.
[104] Jones, 24.
[105] Jones, 48.

experience after returning to normal consciousness. In order to both remember the experience and express it to others, there must be *some* point of internal consistency in the depth-mystical experience that can be carried across to the transitional period and the state of normal consciousness. If advocates for the depth-mystical experience wish to posit such a point of continuity, it must be specified, otherwise the concept of the depth-mystical experience remains philosophically slippery and unsatisfying.

This problem will likely remain unresolved for some time, perhaps until some advance in neuroscience can conclusively prove or disprove the existence of a transitional state. Jones himself admits that the question can never be fully resolved because philosophers do not have access to the depth-mystical experience and must rely on descriptions of it by mystics.[106] Forman also notes this difficulty but remains committed to the centrality of the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE).[107] Yet here we must pause to consider the wider question of what the debates outlined above have contributed to the overall study of mysticism. The PCE and the depth-mystical experience may, as Forman argues, present a "*prima facie* counterexample to the constructivist model" of mystical experience, but this apparent victory only serves to highlight the further problem of fixating on mystical experience itself.[108]

In defending their position, Forman and Jones have backed themselves into a theoretical corner. By refusing to give up on the principle that mystical experience is uniform for all those who experience it, they have articulated an extremely narrow and prescriptive vision of mystical experience. The PCE and depth-mystical experiences may indeed seem uniform to those who experience them, but they do not appear to be universally present across all religious traditions,

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[106] Jones, 65-66.

[107] See: Jensine Anderson and Robert K.C. Forman, eds., *Cognitive Models and Spiritual Maps: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Religious Experience* (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 2000).

[108] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 7.

nor do they appear to yield tremendous insight into the theologies, practices, and philosophies associated with the various mystical traditions. Despite great advances in correcting the analytical deficiencies of Huxley and Stace, many of Proudfoot's criticisms of prescriptiveness and misrepresentation in the Perennialist approach to mysticism still stand. While Forman and Jones claim to privilege an empirical perspective, they in fact privilege the preconceived notion of a universal ultimate reality, despite the empirical evidence of mystical experiences that do not conform to their models. Their notions of the Pure Consciousness Event and depth-mystical experience, while applicable to some mystical traditions, appear to be wholly absent from others. This leaves advocates of the Perennialist position with two options: 1) to suggest that a great number of mystics attain a lower-level mediated experience but do not in fact have a "true" experience of ultimate reality; or 2) to suggest that mystics are unable to properly articulate their experiences. Either option seems to violate the stated commitment to privilege empirical descriptions in reporting mystical experiences. This is somewhat less problematic for Jones, given his analytical philosophical methodology. However, for Forman and other scholars of religion, committing to the Neoperennialist position that mystical experience is universal becomes harder to maintain.

VIII. On Mystical Language and Mystical Meaning

As the previous section has demonstrated, the difficulty in expressing mystical knowledge begins in the mind of the mystic herself. Mystical language and its expression is often the very issue that philosophers find the most problematic about mysticism. Indeed, after offering a rather thoughtful and nuanced articulation of mysticism, W.T. Stace argues that because of the difficulty of communicating mystical experience, the mystic shows himself to be "often enough,

a poor logician, a poor philosopher, and a poor analyst."[109] This statement sums up the attitude of many philosophers towards mysticism: upon seeing evidence of apparent analytical "incoherence" in mystical writings, it seems impossible to turn mysticism into a credible philosophy. This attitude is unsurprising because mystics themselves complain that their experiences transcend language. It is equally unsurprising that many mystics offer no account of how mystical experience can be made thinkable in language. Scholars of mysticism who argue that non-cognitive mystical experiences are possible are thus forced to delve into this rhetoric and examine its internal logic. There have been two major trends in studies of mystical rhetoric. The first, advocated by the majority of scholars of mysticism in religious studies, including Michael Sells and Robert Forman, claims that a specialized form of logic and writing are needed to fully express non-dual experiences. The second, presented by a few philosophers of mysticism, such as Frits Staal, argues that in order to be comprehensible, mystical writings still need to be bound to classical logic: the quality of an alleged mystic depends on how well she can make her mystical insights comprehensible to others.

In perhaps the most important contemporary study of mystical writing, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (1994), the scholar of Islamic mysticism Michael Sells argues that although mystics have various rhetorical choices for expressing the inexpressible, they most often express themselves through a specialized form of writing. Sells claims that the mystic is faced with three choices when confronted with the problem of ineffability: silence, negative theology, or unsaying.[110] While silence and negative theology are perhaps the most theologically sound approaches, he argues that is in unsaying or "speaking away," that real mystical insight occurs. This mode of writing, "begins with the refusal to solve the dilemma posed by the attempt

[109] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 306.
[110] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 1-2.

to refer to the transcendent through a distinction between two kinds of names [i.e., negative and positive]. This dilemma is accepted as a genuine *aporia*, that is, as unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse."[111] This new mode of discourse is better able to capture the paradoxical situation that the mystic encounters. By "refusing to solve the dilemma" of language directly, the mystic accepts that the experience is perhaps not compatible with formal logic, and having abandoned such constraints, can say something useful. Sells argues that this discourse of unsaying is the most logically consistent for the subject matter of mysticism, despite the fact that it is evocative, evasive, and contains logical contradictions.[112]

Although Sells's book is unique in the field of Islamic Studies, scholars of Neoplatonism have done extensive research into the question of mystical language and rhetoric, and Plotinus's writings are foundational for both Muslim mystics and secondary scholarship on mysticism. With the recurring theme in Plato's dialogues of admonishing the Sophists for their ability to convince others with rhetoric rather than truth, it is perhaps not surprising that a Neoplatonist might come to the conclusion that speech and language are not always the most effective means of conveying truth. Sara Rappe argues, "Beyond any formal criterion shaping the tradition, Neoplatonists shared the belief that wisdom could not be expressed or transmitted by rational thought or language."[113] According to Frederic Schroeder, it is in fact through silence that one can best understand Plotinus's philosophy. Schroeder claims, "If we abide in silence, we may know the One and return to the condition of our source, a light that itself abides in silence."[114]

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[111] Sells, 1-2.
[112] Sells, 2-4.
[113] Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclous, and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xiii.
[114] Frederic M. Schroeder, *Form and Transformation: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 45.

Scholars of Neoplatonism have observed that through the use of a complex and non-traditional logic, Plotinus was able to 1) describe the One in the most accurate way possible; 2) protect knowledge of the One; and 3) use silence pedagogically to train students to reach knowledge of or union with the One.

Kevin Corrigan challenges the notion that mystical language must be irrational by suggesting that Plotinus's language with respect to the One is actually "the only reasonable way of speaking" about the One.[115] Because ultimate reality was ineffable for Plotinus, Corrigan observes that Plotinus "does not actually break the law of non-contradiction because a genuine power for contraries or for apparently opposite predictions simultaneously can be described in no other way."[116] This echoes Sells's argument on the need for mystical unsaying: if ultimate reality encompasses contradictions, it is logical to use contradictory statements in order to discuss it. Confusion or ambiguity in mystical speech is therefore necessary. Corrigan similarly concludes that "Plotinus' [apophatic] language about the One, curiously enough, is not only reasonable—though not discursively reasonable; it is the *only appropriately thinkable* language for him to develop."[117] This insight is an important step towards considering the issue of "translation" of ineffable experience to language in the mind of the mystic. When expressing insights derived from non-dual experiences, the most logically consistent approach is to use apophasis, oppositional logic, symbolic or mythological discourse, or paradox.

In agreement with the premise of Sells and Corrigan, philosopher Mélanie V. Walton argues that mystical discourse intentionally defies and resists the strictures of formal logic, and in so doing, transforms and expands the reader's own sense of logic. Walton brings insights from

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[115] Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonic Philosophy* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press: 2005), 165. Emphasis in original.

[116] Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus*, 169.

[117] Corrigan, 169.

the Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius and the French post-structuralist Jean-François Lyotard to examine how this process works and why it is essential for expressing knowledge gained from ineffable experiences. Following Lyotard's concept of *Le differénd*, she argues that mystical discourse represents at the same time one of the most compelling and frustrating examples of the limits of language: the mystic seeks to convey something of the utmost importance but finds himself unable to do so using ordinary language. Walton claims that declaring something inexpressible is a "logical judgment," and therefore, expressing it must "[violate] logic's command about the bounds of meaning."[118] Because she argues that the meaning of mystical experience is "not gained by reason and its grasp not logical," one cannot expect its expression to "be by premise and proof or deduction."[119] While silence acts as "a phrase" in mystical language and is a "faithful enactment of mysticism,"[120] Walton notes that people generally prefer to try to express the ineffable because "Reason's frustration compels us."[121] This observation extends Corrigan's comment that following a mystical experience, the mystic must "develop appropriately thinkable language" in order to express it. According to Walton, following a mystical experience, reason seeks to understand the experience in terms of some sort of embodied knowledge; in acting on this compulsion, mystics seek to synthesize their experiences by using reason and require special language and forms of logic to do so.

To explain why mystics feel so compelled to use language in this way, Walton turns to Lyotard's concept of the *différend*, "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something must be put into phrases yet cannot be."[122] Distinct from a paradox, which "leads us to an

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[118] Mélanie V. Walton, *Expressing the Inexpressible in Lyotard and Pseudo-Dionysius: Bearing Witness as Spiritual Exercise* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 283.
[119] Walton, *Expressing the Inexpressible*, 210.
[120] Walton, 175-176.
[121] Walton, 284.
[122] Jean François Lyotard, *The Différend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 13, §22.

inconsistent or impossible conclusion . . . a *différend* leads to the incommensurable, to a state of affairs wherein there is no single rule by which to judge one or more sides."[123] Lyotard developed the concept of the *différend* when discussing the difficulty of testimony by Holocaust survivors; Walton notes that moments of ineffability in mysticism are similarly difficult but are simultaneously the most profound and insightful of experiences.[124] This speaks to one of the most frustrating yet key insights about the knowledge gained from ineffable mystical experiences: if the experience reflects reality in some sense, then it is vitally important to communicate insights that seem to be impossible to convey. In the case of trauma (as Lyotard examined), the consequences are clear: the victim's testimony seemed less "rational," and therefore less reliable than the abuser's. In the case of mystical metaphysics, the stakes are more abstract, but arguably just as high. The mystic claims to have a deep and profound understanding of ultimate reality, yet her testimony on the subject would be deemed less credible than a rational philosopher's explanations. Using the *différend*, Walton argues that mystics must develop a special mode of language and use it in a way that brings about a change in the reader. In this regard, she cites Bernard McGinn to argue that mystical experience "can only be presented indirectly, partially, by a series of verbal strategies in which language is used not so much informationally but transformationally, that is, not to convey a content but to assist the hearer or reader to hope for or to achieve the same consciousness."[125] While he does not use Lyotard in his analysis, Robert Forman offers a similar argument regarding mystical rhetoric, suggesting,

[123] Walton, *Expressing the Inexpressible*, 106.
[124] Walton, 17.
[125] Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to The Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1991), xxvi.

"Mystical language may…be designed to engender an *epistemological shift*, a shift in the way we use language and the way that we understand how language applies to experience."[126]

Although Walton and Corrigan explicitly argue that such transformational writing occurs outside the bounds of formal logic, one does not have to come to the conclusion that such writing is not rational. Richard Jones argues that the key indicators of rationality are consistency and coherence, and that when one takes this metric, "Rationality involves more than logic— it involves the use of factual claims and the relation between beliefs in justifying one's beliefs."[127] However, not all theorists of mysticism believe that mystical writing employs a specialized or distinct logic. In *Mysticism: A Methodological Essay*, Frits Staal argues that mystical writing must conform to standard rules of logic and that there are real contradictions in mystical writings that violate the law of non-contradiction. According to Staal, "In reality, nobody can effectively talk or act without assuming, at least implicitly, the validity of the law of non-contradiction, which asserts that two contradictory statements cannot both be true in the same respect."[128] Staal particularly emphasizes the final part of the rule of non-contradiction ("in the same respect"), allowing that mystics can make statements that appear contradictory at first glance, but when examined further, are only *apparent* contradictions and not *true* contradictions. Furthermore, he notes that often "mystics became entangled in self-contradictions which were due to either the fact that their experiences could not be expressed successfully in ordinary language, or to the fact that they had to twist their statements in order to appear orthodox."[129] Staal also likens mystical discourse to "theory formation," noting that mathematics also employs an "artificial language" to

[126] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 107. Emphasis in the original.
[127] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 67,
[128] Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 6.
[129] Staal, *Exploring Mysticism,* 63.

stand in for concepts that are not easy to express.[130] For Staal and others, recognizing the logic and rationality of mysticism is crucial for understanding it. A.C. Lloyd similarly argues that one must consider "not just how the logical structure requires… mystical support, but how mysticism would lose its philosophical interest were it not for the logical structure."[131]

The key insight from these theorists is that the famous mystics of the past were not Stace's "poor logicians, philosophers, and analysts," but rather struggled with insights that resisted being put into formal logic and required creative thinking and rhetoric to faithfully express their experiences. Working with Muslim mystics such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā, and Suhrawardī also requires delving into their rhetoric of interpreting non-dual experiences and will also require a synthesized approach using the above theorists. As scholars of Neoplatonism have demonstrated, it is essential to consider the nature of the ultimate reality that each mystic seeks to express. It will become clear in the following chapters that each of the above figures saw God as the ultimate reality but conceived of contact with this reality somewhat differently. Consequently, each mystic had different rhetorical needs in producing a coherent account of his experiences, and by extension, a coherent mystical philosophy.

IX. Broadening the Scope: Parameters for the Use of the Term "Mysticism" in this Dissertation

As discussed above, the scholarly fixation on unmediated experience has led to an impasse in the study of mysticism. Furthermore, as the chapters below will demonstrate, ignoring Islamic mysticism in religious studies surveys of mysticism has led to models of mystical experience that do not align with Muslim mystics' own descriptions. The debate between Perennialists and constructivists over the essence of mysticism has continued for over three decades with little

[130] Staal, 63.

[131] A.C. Lloyd, "The Later Neoplatonists," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, edited by A.H. Armstrong, 272-321 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 276.

resolution. While this question remains robust for philosophers, for religious studies scholars the focus on experience as the essence of mysticism has led to essentialist and prescriptive theoretical frameworks. A more flexible approach to mysticism is needed for scholars to make meaningful comparisons and discussions. To make such comparisons, we need a category of mysticism that goes beyond experience alone.

Despite the term's problematic history and shortcomings, "mysticism" is still a useful category for analysis, provided one moves beyond the question of experience towards a more comprehensive notion of mysticism. Mysticism, as I understand it, is an *epistemology or worldview*, which presupposes that human beings are capable of reaching unmediated contact with ultimate reality. The notion of a worldview takes into account both Katz's point that mystical experience is connected to an epistemological schema that affirms the possibility of direct contact with ultimate reality but avoids his conclusion that this schema induces this experience. I also concur with Jones's view that mysticism involves a complex set of practices and beliefs that guide the mystic's daily life. Contact with ultimate reality is thus the essence of mystical experience, but the nature and understanding of this experience are determined by the mystic herself.[132] However, moving beyond the questions that have occupied Perennialists and constructivists for so long, I make no presuppositions about what the contents of this experience must be, what type of experience is more authentic, and whether or not mystical experience is universal.

As Ann Taves notes, experiences are important to mystics themselves, but the most interesting question for the scholar of mysticism is how mystics represent and contextualize their experiences in their wider ontological and epistemological contexts.[133] In the case of medieval

[132] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 42.
[133] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 62.

Islamic mysticism, there are two reasons for emphasizing the "results" of mystical experience. First, as Jones and others have noted, although the experience itself is not accessible, the representation of the experience and its epistemology are accessible.[134] Second, while mystical experience appears to have been quite meaningful for the mystics studied in the following chapters, the epistemology and ontology that are supported by their experiential knowledge offer significant insights into wider questions of ultimate reality, representation, and language. To explore the philosophical implications of a broader epistemology of mysticism is therefore the aim of this dissertation.

Using this approach to mysticism allows for the comparative study of what at first glance appear to be three disparate medieval figures. Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī and Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī have generally been classified as mystics, but there has been an extensive debate about the mysticism (or lack thereof) of Abū ʿAlī Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā.[135] While I argue that all of these figures were mystics, their mystical insights, practices, theologies, and phenomenological descriptions of contact with ultimate reality vary tremendously. An appeal to conventional theories of mysticism would collapse these differences into vague Perennialist notions, which would assert that all three mystics referred to the same core experience, despite clear differences in representation. My approach to mysticism, however, invites closer scrutiny of these differences, viewing mysticism as a guiding epistemology and worldview rather than as a prescriptive notion of a specific type of experience. Through this framework, I will compare three distinct typologies of Islamic mysticism: Sufi, philosophical, and *Ishrāqī* (Illuminationist). This comparison promises to be productive in two ways: first, it deepens our knowledge of

[134] Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, xiii.

[135] Chapter Three will provide a thorough overview and offer an argument for why Ibn Sīnā ought to be considered a mystical philosopher.

medieval Muslim answers to the questions, “What is ultimate reality?” and “How can one write about ultimate reality?” Second, through its demonstration of the diversity of types of mysticism within medieval Islam, it pushes the broader field of mysticism studies to consider more seriously the limitations of prescriptive approaches to mysticism and mystical experience.

Chapter Two:

Complicating "Standard" Islamic Mysticism: Sufism, Orthodoxy, and Modern Scholarship

Indeed, the discourse of one who knows God is different from that of others. Rarely does he concern himself with particulars; rather, he speaks of matters universal in scope.[1]
-Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī

I. Introduction

In the tenth century CE, the early Sufi ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad al-Bushanjī (d. 348/959) famously exclaimed, "Sufism used to be a reality without a name; now it is a name without a reality."[2] This statement, declared only a century after Sufism is thought to have institutionalized, had a profound effect on both Sufis and scholars of Sufism, who are often reticent to be too precise in their definitions of this tradition. There is no medieval Arabic equivalent of the word "mysticism," yet since the earliest Western scholarship on the subject, Sufism has been called "Islamic mysticism."[3] Although most scholars tentatively accept this label, it is frequently adopted from a religious studies model without question or left murkily undefined. As a result, while one may observe much empirical variety in what Islamic Studies scholars refer to when they say "Islamic mysticism," one sees considerably less acknowledgment of the category's complexity among scholars of Islamic Studies than among scholars of religious studies in general.

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[1] Al-Ghazālī. *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, translated by David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 117.

[2] William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 1.

[3] According to Annemarie Schimmel, the "first comprehensive book on Sufism" in a Western language, F.A.D's Tholuck's *Ssufismus sive theosophia persarum pantheistica*, (1821) refers to Sufism as "Muhammad's own mysticism." Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 9.

Therefore, the equation of the terms "Sufism" and "Islamic mysticism" demands critical examination. While the previous chapter highlighted questions connected with the problem of over-theorizing mysticism, this chapter seeks to illustrate the problems that emerge when scholars under-theorize the categories of Sufism and Islamic mysticism. In addition, although insufficient attention has been paid to explicit definitions of mysticism and mystical experience in Islamic Studies, a discernable theoretical focus has nonetheless emerged among Islamic Studies scholars: this is the perception that the scholarly image of the Sufi tradition must be rehabilitated by presenting it as fully acceptable under the norms of Islamic orthodoxy. In the case of another under-theorized concept— that of so-called "philosophical Sufism"— there has been a concomitant emphasis on epistemology and an idealized philosophical *telos* leading toward ultimate truth.[4]

Partly as a result of the colonial legacy in the Islamic world, scholars of Islam have developed a somewhat insular approach to mysticism, which is broadly concerned with correcting past scholarly inaccuracies. This was a much-needed corrective in the 1970's and 1980's, after Sufism was misunderstood as inherently un-Islamic from the perspective of Orientalist studies as well as from the rising tide of anti-Sufi sentiment on the part of Wahhabi and Salafi reformists. Pushing back against this polemic, scholars of Sufism tended to present

[4] Sometimes called "intellectual," or "doctrinal Sufism," this dichotomy between "philosophical" and "practical" Sufis has colored the majority of studies of Sufism (the present included!). While James W. Morris has argued that this distinction was never possible in the medieval period because practice and intellect were inextricably bound, the labels remain almost a "given." (James W. Morris, "Situating Islamic 'Mysticism': Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, Typologies*, edited by R.A. Herrera, 293-334 (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang Publishing, 1993), 307.) Philosophical/intellectual/doctrinal Sufism is generally tied to Ibn al-ʿArabī and imagines a distinct, philosophical lineage. The roots of this distinction could be viewed in connection with the problematic legacy of Orientalist scholarship. As Carl Ernst notes, Orientalist scholars had viewed Sufism, "as an abstract mystical philosophy, …ignor[ing] the social context of Sufism as expressed in the Sufi orders, the intuitions formed around saints' tombs, and the role of Sufism in politics" (Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 16). Curiously, those who attend to Sufi practice tend to be more engaged with contemporary theory from religious studies, anthropology, and other related disciplines, whereas the study of so-called intellectual Sufism has been rather discipline-specific.

Sufism rather conservatively, by emphasizing its origins in ninth-century CE Baghdad, its extensive use of Qurʾān and Ḥadīth texts as source materials, and the hierarchical structure of the *shaykh-murīd* relationship. Scholars of Sufism thus seem to have been in the same defensive crouch that Schleiermacher and James were in with respect to the definition of mysticism. However, rather than responding to Enlightenment skeptics, they had to assure critics that Sufism had merit as a valid approach to Islam. Similar to Schleiermacher, scholars of Sufism responded to Orientalist writers by suggesting that what they disliked about majoritarian versions of Islam (i.e., strict legalism and scriptural literalism) was not *real* Islam, but the empty, external shell of a rich and pluralistic spiritual tradition— i.e., Sufism. Against Salafi critics, they argued that Sufism was in full accord with true Salafi Islam, and in fact, was more "traditional" than the reformist literalism of Wahhabism. These arguments, while necessary, created as an after-effect an apologetic paradigm in Sufi studies that lacked the nuances of the study of mysticism in other religions.

By contrast, with the exception of Steven Katz, who argues that mysticism is a fundamentally conservative phenomenon, the bulk of theorists in the field of religious studies tend to see mysticism as largely unconcerned with questions of orthodoxy.[5] For example, in studies of Christian mysticism, while one commonly sees arguments to take mystical theology seriously, such arguments are made by appealing to the perceived merits and contributions of a tradition that has been ignored, not to the orthodoxy of mystical Christian theology.[6] In the case of Islam, however, scholars of Sufism faced criticisms and questions of legitimacy both from within Islam and from secondary scholarship. Thus, scholars of Sufism have emphasized the Islamic roots of Sufism through the influence and importance of the Qurʾān, Ḥadīth, and Sunna

[5] Katz, "The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience," 35.
[6] See: Grace Janzten, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*.

of the Prophet Muhammad. This has resulted in a rather ad-hoc, non-theoretical, non-comparative, and discipline-specific notion of mysticism.

However, in the case of so-called philosophical Sufism (which Arab scholars refer to as *al-taṣawwuf al-falsafī*), one can find some level of theoretical interpretation. This consists of the notion that mysticism is primarily understood as a form of epistemology. In addition, many scholars of philosophical Sufism belong to the so-called Traditionalist school of interpretation.[7] The Traditionalists' implicit definition of mysticism stems largely from medieval Islamic categories and boundaries, centering on the distinction between *faylasūf* (Peripatetic philosopher) and Sufi. Also echoing medieval points of distinction, these scholars suggest that mysticism entails the epistemological acceptance of supra-rational knowledge.

Examining what "mysticism" has meant to scholars of Islam is instructive because it highlights the theoretical schism between models of mysticism in Islamic Studies and religious studies. This chapter provides a critical account of the category of "mysticism" as used in Islamic Studies. First, it discusses how scholars of Sufism have conceived of mysticism, with particular emphasis on those scholars of philosophical Sufism who define mysticism on the basis of epistemology rather than experience. Next, it offers an account of internal and external critiques of Sufism and their effects on Sufi studies in the post-colonial context. The impulse towards rehabilitative and conservative studies of Sufism has only recently begun to be challenged in this field.

II. Theoretical Articulations of Sufism and Mysticism in Islamic Studies

Scholars of Sufism in the post-colonial era have tended to view Sufism favorably and often from the insider-perspective of practitioners. All too often, scholars have implicitly or explicitly

[7] This approach has also been called Perennial Philosophy, or recently, by Gregory A. Lipton, "Schuonian Perennialism" to refer to scholars following Frithjof Schuon.

support Abū al-Ḥasan Bushanjī's comment about Sufism being a "name without a reality" or otherwise uphold the ineffability of mystical experience. Carl Ernst sums up this viewpoint in the following statement: "Sufism is not a thing that one can point to; it is instead a symbol that occurs in our society, which is used by different groups for different purposes."[8] Related to this imprecise use of terminology, when Islamic Studies scholars speak of "mysticism," they almost always refer to Sufism. Although some scholars distinguish Ishrāqī philosophy from Sufism, it is not uncommon to assert that Sufism is *the* mystical tradition of Islam, not one of several mystical traditions.

Ironically, earlier scholars of Islamic Studies were more inclined to root their understanding of Sufism in the religious studies theory of their time. For example, Reynold A. Nicholson (1868-1945) argued that Islamic mysticism was best understood by tracing its etymology to the classical Greek concept. His student A.J. Arberry (1905-1969) was more tacit about theoretical definitions of mysticism but bristled at the Perennialist concept of a universal mysticism. Though he focused primarily on individual figures such as al-Ḥallāj, the French scholar Louis Massignon (1883-1962) was one of the first European scholars to argue that Sufis were sincere in their interpretation of the Qurʾān. Early scholars of the post-colonial period, such as J. Spencer Trimingham (1904-1987) and Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003) also utilized early religious studies definitions of mysticism but did not challenge them theoretically. Breaking with this tradition, so-called Traditionalist scholars of Sufism, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933-) and his students, accept the label of mysticism for Sufism but have little or no engagement with religious studies discourses on this topic. Instead, Nasr and his students prefer to use Arabic terminology and portray Sufism as an insider category that is elusive and ultimately inaccessible

[8] Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1997), xvi.

for those outside of the tradition. More recently, historians of Islam and Sufism, such as Ahmet T. Karamustafa and Nile Green, have pointed to the communal, political, and social aspects of Sufism to argue that the category of mysticism, as understood in religious studies, should not be the primary analytic category for Sufi studies.

As noted previously, in his seminal survey of Sufism, *The Mystics of Islam* (1912), Reynold A. Nicholson based his understanding of mysticism on classical Greek and Christian sources. He was also informed by the emerging universalistic theories of mysticism espoused by early scholars of religious studies such as Evelyn Underhill and Rudolf Otto. He readily identified Sufism as a form of mysticism, and even argued that the term "Sufi" is representative of (although not a direct translation of) the Greek term for "mystic," which bore the connotation of "lips sealed by holy mysteries."[9] However, although Nicholson acknowledged that mystical experience may arrive at a "single point," he maintained that this point "assumes widely different aspects according to the mystic's religion, race, and temperament, while the converging lines of approach admit almost infinite variety."[10] Unlike later scholars, who firmly rooted Sufism's origins in Islam, Nicholson granted some credence to the theory that Islamic mysticism emerged out of non-Islamic sources. While he ultimately rejected the theory that Sufism was "a reaction of the Aryan mind against a conquering Semitic religion," and that it was influenced by "Indian or Persian thought," this was primarily because he did not find adequate historical support for such claims, not because of their racist implications.[11] However, Nicholson did believe that as a tradition, Sufism was influenced by earlier forms of Christian asceticism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Buddhism (particularly in Central Asia).[12] He further argued that Sufism

[9] Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge, 1914), 3.
[10] Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, 2.
[11] Nicholson, 8-9.
[12] Nicholson, 10-16.

emerged historically out of the Islamic ascetic movement of eighth-century Baghdad and that through philosophical refinement and a change of focus from the fear of God to the love of God, Islamic asceticism was transformed into mysticism as a more sophisticated form of spirituality.[13]

While early Western scholars of Sufism tended not to offer explicit definitions of mysticism, their implicit definitions could be found in how they identified an imagined point of separation between Islamic asceticism and Islamic mysticism. According to A.J. Arberry, this transformation occurred in Baghdad in the ninth century CE, influenced by the confluence of scholarship on law, theology, philosophy, and the translation movement of Greek works that occurred at the height of the Abbasid Empire.[14] Arberry, like other scholars who followed him, had a negative view of ascetic spirituality: "Asceticism for its own sake tends to become a rather joyless and negative attitude to the universe." For this reason, asceticism needed to be "warmed by spiritual emotion," and "subjected to the searching light of speculative reason."[15] Thus, for Arberry and the scholars he influenced, Islamic mysticism was not primarily defined by mystical experiences or the search for non-dual union, but rather was the result of adding a mixture of reason and emotion to the self-denial and pious practices of Islamic asceticism. In addition, he implicitly rejected Perennialist notions of universal religion. For him, "Sufism may be defined as the mystical movement of an uncompromising monotheism" (i.e., Islam), and as such was distinct from other forms of mysticism in other religions.[16] While Arberry did not explicitly reject the "platitude that mysticism is essentially one and the same," he made it clear that he was only interested in the specific figures, doctrines, and practices of Muslim mystics.[17]

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[13] Nicholson, 20.
[14] A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 45-46.
[15] Arberry, *Sufism*, 45.
[16] Arberry, 12.
[17] Arberry, 11.

Similar to Nicholson and Arberry, Louis Massignon suggested that Sufism first emerged out of the perspective of Islamic piety. However, his view of mysticism in general was more universalistic than that of these English scholars. In *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism* (1922), he argued, "Mysticism [in general] is simply inner experimentation upon the proper practice of religion."[18] His understanding of mysticism as a sort of natural inner experimentation corresponds well to Evelyn Underhill's notion of mysticism as the natural extension of human consciousness. Significantly, Underhill's book *Mysticism* (1911) is one of the few theoretical works on the subject cited in Massignon's *Essay.*[19] Through his work on the early history of Sufism, Massignon placed Sufi origins firmly within the fold of Islam and drew significant parallels between Qurʾānic language and Sufi technical terminology. His insistence on both the plausibility and validity of the Sufi method for interpretation sets him apart from his early peers and led to the more sympathetic portrayals of Sufism to come.

In the next generation of Islamic Studies scholarship on Sufism, one sees more direct engagement with and citation of theorists in religious studies. Foundational historians J. Spencer Trimingham's and Annemarie Schimmel's notions of mysticism drew on theorists like Underhill and Otto: they saw mysticism as primarily an emotional and private experience that was based on union with the divine. In *The Sufi Orders of Islam* (1971), Trimingham argues (somewhat like Nicholson) that mysticism is "a reaction against the external rationalization of Islam in law and systematic theology, aiming at spiritual freedom whereby man's intrinsic intuitive spiritual senses could be allowed full scope."[20] This definition also picks up on Schleiermacher's notion of mysticism as an "inward turn." By suggesting that human beings have an "intrinsic" and

[18] Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, translated by Benjamin Clark (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 77.
[19] Massignon, 241.
[20] J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 1-2.

"intuitive" spirituality that best flourishes when freed from the dogmatic obligations of formal religion, Trimingham upheld the image of Sufism as an "alternative" to legalistic Islam and echoed Aldous Huxley's argument that mysticism is achieved through removing the external barriers of tradition to reach an "intuitive" spirituality.[21] Furthermore, he emphasized the importance of experience, namely, the *unio mystica*. He wrote: "I define the word *ṣūfī* in wide terms by applying it to anyone who believes that it is possible to have a direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this."[22] This definition is significant because it argues that, in order to become a mystic, one must believe that it is possible to reach direct contact with ultimate reality and strive toward it. This differs from Robert Forman's theory, discussed in the previous chapter, that spontaneous experience is the foundation of the mystical worldview. Since the time of Trimingham, the notion that one must believe in the possibility of divine union prior to attaining it has been a commonly held belief among scholars of Sufism.[23]

Trimingham, like the early theorists of mysticism in religious studies, placed a strong emphasis on the concepts emotional mysticism and mystical experience, suggesting that "theorizing" about mysticism was a token of its decline. He argued that in its early and most authentic period, Sufism was "primarily contemplative and emotional mysticism," with Sufi masters "more concerned with experiencing than with theosophical theorizing."[24] Furthermore, he noted, "Sufism in practice consists of feeling and unveiling, since *maʿrifia* (gnosis) is reached by passage through ecstatic states."[25] While Trimingham has been sharply criticized for his

[21] Huxley, *Perennial Philosophy*, 1-2.
[22] Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 1.
[23] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 28.
[24] Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 2-3.
[25] Trimingham, 3.

notion of declining "phases" of Sufism, his notion that experience is more authentic than theoretical speculation corresponds well with religious studies theories of mysticism and was shared by Annemarie Schimmel.[26]

Annemarie Schimmel also prioritized emotion in her definition of mysticism and, like Trimingham, was one of the few early theorists of Sufism to directly engage with religious studies theories. In her classic work *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975), she notes the Greek origins of the term "mysticism," but cites Evelyn Underhill for its definition, whom she credits as providing "the best introduction to mysticism."[27] In her works, Schimmel was most influenced by Underhill's notion that the mystic's quest for union is motivated primarily by love of God, and that "pure love" is the most profound and mature expression of religion.[28] In her book she offers a concise definition of mysticism: "Mysticism can be defined as love of the Absolute—for the power that separates true mysticism from mere asceticism is love."[29] Distinct from Nicholson and Arberry, Schimmel identifies love (rather than reason) as the primary faculty that separates mysticism from asceticism. Owing to this understanding of mysticism, throughout her works, Schimmel downplays philosophical Sufism in favor of poetic and other forms of emotional mystical expression.[30] Similar to Trimingham, she also suggests that a decline in the "purity" of Sufi spirituality occurred through its institutionalization. Perhaps connected to the notion that mysticism is a primarily personal and inward form of spirituality, Schimmel argued that through

[26] Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 131-132.
[27] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 4.
[28] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 21.
[29] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 4.
[30] In *Mystical Dimensions* 263, for example, Schimmel argues that Ibn al-ʿArabī's true genius was in "systematization" rather than as an "enraptured mystic." Later (280), she suggests that Ibn al-ʿArabī's development of metaphysical Sufi terminology had the effect of limiting the range of Sufi mystical expression.

the systemization of Sufi orders, "the high ambitions of the classical Sufis were considerably watered down."[31]

In addition to her emphasis on love mysticism, Schimmel echoed Rudolf Otto's notion that mystical experience is ineffable and argued that mystical understanding is non-rational: "[It] cannot be understood or explained by any normal mode of perception; neither philosophy nor reason can reveal it. Only the wisdom of the heart, *gnosis*, may give insight into some of its aspects."[32] Although the notion that mysticism is based on supra-rational experience is not exclusive to Islamic Studies, it has been more heavily emphasized in this field than in others. Schimmel took the non-rational nature of mysticism to mean that Sufism should be understood primarily emotionally, whereas other scholars of Sufism have suggested that mystical insight is part of a larger philosophical system. Schimmel's definition of mysticism and her engagement with religious studies theoretical frameworks remain influential in the field of Sufi studies. However, studies of philosophical Sufism took a rather different direction, relying more upon medieval epistemological distinctions for their notions of mysticism.

The study of metaphysical or philosophical Sufism has been conducted primarily by scholars of the so-called Traditionalist school, such as Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and their many students. This approach is rooted in the philosophy of René Guénon (1886-1951) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), and its interpretive framework is related to the Perennialism discussed in Chapter One. However, it diverges from Perennialism in at least two significant ways. First, rather than advocating the interconfessional abolition of religious boundaries as some Perennialists do, Traditionalists argue for preserving distinct religious paths to reach the knowledge of ultimate reality. Second, Traditionalists seek to revive what they consider to be a

[31] Schimmel, 239.
[32] Schimmel, 4.

superior "Traditional" worldview over the "impoverished" secular-scientific worldview of modernity. While Nasr and other Traditionalist writers hold precise theoretical notions about mysticism and Sufism, they often do so without acknowledging their theoretical commitments. The historian Mark Sedgwick has noted the "subtle penetration" of this group among scholars of Islam and Sufism in North America and Europe, arguing that they present their worldview as "facts" about Islam rather than as a theoretical framework or mode of interpretation.[33] According to Sedgwick, the primary harm of this approach is done to non-specialists, for whom "neither the origin nor the questionable nature of [Traditionalist] interpretations is evident."[34] Recently, however, the Traditionalist school of thought has been challenged by a new generation of students of Sufism.[35]

Seyyed Hossein Nasr's influence on the field of Islamic Studies has been profound through his prolific writings, but his influence as a mentor of new scholars has been equally important for the spread of Traditionalist methodology in the Western academy. Nasr, a disciple of Frithjof Schuon, received his PhD from Harvard in History of Science but has spent his career teaching and writing about Islamic intellectual history. His teaching career began in Iran, and in 1974, he founded what Sedgwick calls "the most important Traditionalist institution of the twentieth century," The Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy.[36] During the Academy's "golden era," the faculty included such major scholars of Islam as Henry Corbin (1903-1978), Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-1992), and Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtīyānī (1925-2005). The Academy's mission

[33] Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 169-170.

[34] Sedgwick, 169.

[35] Sa'diyya Shaikh has recently challenged both Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Sachiko Murata's interpretations of Ibn al-ʿArabī's views on gender in *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn al-ʿArabī, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Gregory A Lipton has also argued for a reassessment of the Traditionalist interpretation of Ibn al-ʿArabī in *Rethinking Ibn ʿArabi*.

[36] Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 155.

statement included a subtle Traditionalist agenda, and, according to Sedgwick, "all the carefully selected graduate students who studied at the academy were exposed to Traditionalism."[37] While not all of the students trained at the Academy would go on to remain Traditionalists, they would become the most prominent translators and scholars of philosophical Sufism. These students included William Chittick, Sachiko Murata, James W. Morris, and Peter Lambourne Wilson (Hakim Bey). Among these four, William Chittick and Sachiko Murata remain the most committed Traditionalists. Because the funding of the Academy came largely from the Imperial Iranian court and Nasr's ties to the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, he and his students found themselves unwelcome in Iran following the 1979 Revolution.[38] They moved to the United States, where they continued the process of training Traditionalist scholars of Sufism and Islamic philosophy. Nasr has taught at George Washington University since 1984, where he has played a major role in training and mentoring a new generation of Islamic scholars, such as Joseph E.B. Lumbard, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Dakkake, Mehdi Aminrazavi, and Muhammad Rustom.

Nasr and his students primarily frame Sufism as an epistemological approach but are tentative and cautious in any definitions that they offer. Nasr will occasionally use "mysticism," to refer to Sufism, but prefers terms such as "gnosis," "esotericism," and "sapiential."[39] These terms explicitly tie Sufism to supra-rational knowledge but also emphasize the philosophical value of such knowledge by linking it to perennial wisdom. While reluctant to give a precise definition of mysticism, Nasr seems to agree with Louis Massignon that "mysticism is simply inner experimentation upon the proper practice of religion."[40] Moreover, Nasr and his students

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[37] Sedgwick, 157.

[38] Sedgwick, 250.

[39] See, for example: *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, The Mystical Tradition of Islam* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), *Sufi Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972), and *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to Present*.

[40] Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins*, 77.

share Arberry's belief that mysticism is fundamentally concerned with reasoning in that mystics attempt to create theosophy. Nasr also connects mysticism to an innate human desire to "transcend the merely human," and reach the realm of the divine, which is ultimate reality.[41] Such transcendence is possible, according to Nasr, through the use of revelation and the guidance of a spiritual master.[42] Furthermore, while Nasr associates mysticism (and, thus, Sufism) with perennial philosophy, his understanding of Perennialism upholds Tradition (as an ideal) rather than undercuts it. For Nasr— following Frithjof Schuon— the mystical path is the culmination of philosophical wisdom (based on the notion of a metaphysical divine unity), which is shared across religious traditions but is only accessible by strict adherence to a single esoteric tradition. He envisions the metaphysical core of all religions as the center of a circle; thus, the best way to reach the center is by adhering to the esoteric path of a particular religion, which is related to the center like a spoke is related to a wheel.[43] The specificity of this concept marks a major divergence between Nasr's Perennialism and that described for Huxley and Forman in the previous chapter. The difference between the two approaches has led to a further division between theoretical discussions in Islamic Studies and religions studies. Because they share a name, scholars in the respective fields often use the term unqualified; however, when a scholar of Islam discusses Perennialism (either as a proponent or critic), she is likely thinking of Nasr's Traditionalist approach, whereas as scholar of religion using the same term would be referring to Huxley or Forman's. Each might be unaware of the other approach by the same name.

[41] Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 27.
[42] Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 28.
[43] Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 77.

Generally, Traditionalist scholars argue that labels such as "Islamic mysticism" do more to obscure than to clarify the meaning of Sufism. In a work intended as a popular introduction to Sufism, William Chittick states,

> We often hear that Sufism is "mysticism" or "esoterism": [*sic*] or "spirituality," usually with the adjective "Islamic" tacked on the front. Such labels can provide an orientation, but… they may be more of a hindrance than a help, because they encourage people to file Sufism away unthinkingly into a convenient category.[44]

Calling mysticism a "convenient category," is evidence of Chittick's lack of engagement with the scholarly literature on the subject, as detailed in the previous chapter. Indeed, using the category of "mysticism" is more often the beginning of a conversation rather than the end of it. Because Chittick seeks to exceptionalize Sufism (while at the same time saying that it is part of a perennial philosophy), he believes that giving Sufism the "more familiar" label of mysticism artificially "domesticates" the tradition. He goes on to argue, "There is something in the Sufi tradition that abhors domestication and definition."[45] Here, Chittick seems to echo al-Bushanjī in arguing that to define Sufism in terms of a more general concept would entail losing some of its essence. While other scholars of Sufism have argued for rejecting Western terminology, Chittick's use of the term "domestication," is revealing. By refusing to give Sufism a "more familiar label," he frames Sufism as exotic, foreign, and, like Schimmel's notion of mysticism, ineffable. Indeed, by suggesting that Sufism must be "domesticated" before Western audiences can understand it implies that it is both unique and alien to Western sensibilities. This is a classically Orientalist move by Edward Said's standards and merely adds to the division between the study of Sufism in Islamic Studies and the study of mysticism in religious studies.

[44] Chittick, *Beginner's Guide*, 1.
[45] Chittick, *Beginner's Guide*, 1.

Perhaps the most cogent discussion of the relationship between Sufism and mysticism by a Traditionalist scholar can be found in Caner K. Dagli's book *Ibn al-ʿArabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture: From Mysticism to Philosophy* (2016). In this work, Dagli argues that the modern categories of "mysticism" and "philosophy" cannot easily be applied to the medieval Islamic concepts of *taṣawwuf* and *falsafa* respectively.[46] First, he points out that there are philosophical elements in Sufism as well as mystical elements in the *falsafa* tradition. Next, to solve this apparent contradiction he frames mysticism as an epistemological category, stating (also rather contradictorily) that mysticism lies in the "acknowledgement of a mode of reality which in its essence remains inexplicable by our powers of rational demonstration, although reason can point to it, and it need not be *contrary* to reason."[47] He then adds to the confusion by echoing Trimingham's assertion that a mystic must first believe in the possibility of mysticism before he can practice it: "A mystical world view asserts that within the human subject…there exists, at least potentially, a power to know and reach truths and realities to which the mind *qua* reasoner-of-premises, has no access."[48]

Medieval Sufi texts are rife with statements like Dagli's, which set up a Sufi epistemology that is in direct contrast with rationalist epistemology.[49] However, it is difficult to draw any useful comparative insights about mysticism and philosophy from Dagli's remarks. This is perhaps unsurprising because with the exception of a reference to Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1987) and William Chittick's aforementioned distinction between Sufism and philosophy, the Introduction to Dagli's book and his definitions of terminology

[46] Caner K. Dagli, *Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Islamic Intellectual Culture: From Mysticism to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2016), 8.
[47] Dagli, *Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Islamic Intellectual Culture*, 14.
[48] Dagli, 14.
[49] For example, a major target of Sufi critique along these lines was *kalām* (systematic theology).

contain no references to theoretical works on mysticism. While his understanding of mysticism fits with that of some theorists, such as Stace and Otto, for the assertion that mysticism involves supra-rational modes of thinking, it is clear that Dagli is writing for other Traditionalists like himself and would prefer not to enter the thorny debate about mysticism too deeply.

While most scholars of Sufism have adopted a model of mysticism as an esoteric and private path, some recent scholars have bristled at this notion, pointing to the fact that for much of the medieval period, Sufism was largely a communal practice and not only a private form of spirituality. For example, Nile Green and Ahmet T. Karamustafa, have responded directly to theorists of mysticism in religious studies by questioning to what extent Sufism could be called "mysticism" according to the common understanding of the term in this field. While they do not deny the private, inner spirituality or many Sufis, Green and Karamustafa have argued that eschewing the more public dimensions of Sufism has led to an inaccurate scholarly understanding.

In *Sufism: A Global History* (2012), Nile Green roots his critique of the religious studies understanding of mysticism in the lasting impact of the reception of Schleiermacher's and James's conception of mysticism as based on private and internal experiences. He argues that while Sufism "encompasses many mystical elements," its social and political role following the earliest period of Baghdad Sufism rendered the movement fundamentally distinct from mysticism as imagined by scholars of religion.[50] Carl Ernst agrees with this position, arguing that identifying Sufism as "mysticism" carries the implicit notion of personal religion and experience and thus ignores the institutional aspects of Sufism.[51] Green also acknowledges that if one accepts a theory of mysticism such as Forman's, which emphasizes "spontaneous and

[50] Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, 1.
[51] Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, xvii.

unrehearsed" experiences, Sufism cannot be considered mysticism because of its emphasis on "the programmatic and political."[52] Furthermore, he argues that by calling Sufism mysticism, the notion emerges that the "essence of Sufism lies in transcendental private experience," and that its historical profile is jettisoned in favor of bolstering the image of Sufism as a form of pure spirituality.[53] Most concerning, as will be explored more fully later in this chapter, is that the emphasis on private, internal spirituality has caused scholars of Sufism to suggest that institutionalized Sufism and the growth of highly ramified Sufi orders represented the "decay" of Sufism rather than its efflorescence. Green's work offers a necessary corrective to the notion that Sufism is an unchanging, esoteric mystical tradition that has somehow been "corrupted" with the passing of time.

In addition to arguing against the notion of mysticism as a private, internal path, Ahmet T. Karamustafa has pushed back against the idea of a universal mystical experience by pointing to the Western roots of this concept. Karamustafa calls attention to the fact that the traits usually invoked as universal (such as privacy, lack of mediation, and ineffability) represent "a modern Euro-American construction with a peculiar history of its own."[54] He suggests that scholars of Islam should refer their studies of mysticism "to the conditioning webs of history, culture and language."[55] However, while Karamustafa rejects a universalistic understanding of mysticism, he is not in favor of dropping the concept entirely. Rather, he notes that "the exact content and meaning of [mystical] dimensions should not be conceived as unchanging essences; instead, the mystical and spiritual need to be discovered, described, and analyzed in particular conditions."[56]

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[52] Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, 3.
[53] Green, 3.
[54] Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), vii.
[55] Karamustafa, *Formative Period*, vii.
[56] Karamustafa, vii.

It is perhaps ironic that the most sustained discussions of mysticism in Sufi studies have come from historians rather than from scholars of religion. While Green and Karamustfa entered these discussions specifically because they believed mysticism to be an ill-fitting label, many scholars of religion have made similar claims, but have offered no substantial critique of the category. Green and Karamustafa are correct to point out the shortcomings of the current religious studies model. They have done extensive work with their historical research to correct the lack of theoretical engagement in studies of Islamic mysticism. While early historians of Sufism such as Schimmel and Trimingham added some theoretical underpinnings to their works, scholars of the Traditionalist school are unwilling to submit their presentation of Sufism to theoretical critique. In reality, however, they too have a theoretical perspective, although it is presented covertly rather than overtly. Although Traditionalists have clear commitments and specific ideas about the concept of mysticism and its practice, they present them as facts rather than as arguments.

However, although strong arguments have been made against categorizing Sufism as mysticism, I would argue that doing so is would be a mistake. Completely abandoning this concept risks further alienating the study of Islamic mysticism from religious studies in general and misses the opportunity to enter in theoretical debates that might suggest a broader, more comprehensive understanding of mysticism. Beyond the category itself, however, it must be recognized that there are a number of trends in scholarship on Sufism that are both conservative and apologetic. These trends are rooted in history of scholarship on Sufism and examining them more deeply can help shed light on some of the most problematic impulses in this field.

III. Muslim Anti-Sufis and Orientalist Critics

The early European assertion that Sufism had to be of foreign origin was rooted in the notion of Islam as a legalistic and traditionalistic religion. In the nineteenth century, Islam was categorized, alongside Judaism, as a "Semitic" religion, which, according to now outdated philological assumptions, carried the implications of rigidity and strict adherence to divine law. As part of this bias, the "Semitic" religions were contrasted directly with the so-called "Aryan" religions, which were considered more complex and intellectually superior.[57] Such assumptions cast Islam as what Carl Ernst has called an "eternal other," and which was characterized as a monolithic bloc of unchanging principles.[58] Early encounters with Sufi works by influential Europeans, such as Sir William Jones (1746-1794) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) cast Sufism in a positive light relative to Islam in general, with Sufis being seen as "cosmopolitan pantheists with a cultivated taste for poetry, music, and wine."[59] Because this image seemed so at odds the "harsh" legalism that was thought to characterize mainstream Islam, early scholars concluded that Sufism must have originated in an "Aryan" culture, such as Persia or India, or from Neoplatonic philosophy.[60] While this theory has been thoroughly debunked by post-colonial scholarship, the legacy of early studies still casts a long shadow over the study of Sufism.[61] To counter the Orientalist claim that Sufism is foreign to "normal" Islam, scholars have sought to demonstrate its thoroughly orthodox basis in normative Islamic tradition.

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[57] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 179-180.

[58] Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, xv.

[59] Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, 188.

[60] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 10-11.

[61] For an excellent account of the historical formation of Sufism, see: Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*.

However, in correcting the biased notions of the initial scholarship, many contemporary scholars of Sufism have become overly conservative in their discussions of Sufism.

Although Sufism was generally viewed positively by Orientalist scholars, to colonial rulers institutionalized Sufi orders were dangerous. As Elizabeth Sirriyeh notes, Sufi orders were often powerful opponents to the colonial project.[62] In other words, Sufism often was not characterized by the private, internal spirituality that would later be called "mysticism" in the field religious studies. However, Sufi participation in anti-colonial movements varied by region, and in some cases, Sufis indeed took a quietist approach.[63] This "Retreat into a privatized Islam, seeking a conscious separation from the state, had already had a long pedigree in Sufi practice."[64] As Nile Green points out, colonial scholars sought to elevate what they saw as "pure" or quietist Sufism by condemning more active expressions of Sufism in favor of "the fashionable new discourse of mysticism" that emphasized an internalized model of spirituality. In part, this project also entailed the development of an orthodox model of Sufism based on "the comparative and universal rather than the contextualized and specific."[65] This quietist form of Sufism fit nicely with the definitions of mysticism described in the previous chapter.

European colonialists were not the first to criticize Sufism or Sufi practices. Throughout Islamic history, and especially after the eighteenth century, Muslim reform movements such as a that led by Muhammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhab (1703-1782) argued that Sufism was an antinomian and even anti-Islamic movement. J. Spencer Trimingham argued that the Wahhabi rejection of Sufism posed a hitherto unseen challenge to the status of Sufism within Muslim communities.[66]

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[62] Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defense, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (London: Curzon Press, 1999), 27.
[63] Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*, 42-45.
[64] Sirriyeh, 45.
[65] Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, 189.
[66] Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 247.

In response, Sufi reformers, such as the Indian Sufi Shah Walī Allah of Delhi (1703-1762), emphasized the conservative character of Sufism and downplayed its more "popular" devotional practices, such as shrine veneration.[67] The Moroccan Sufi reformer Ahmad ibn Idris (1760-1837) emphasized the mastery of exoteric, orthodox Islam prior to delving into esoteric interpretations. For example, Ibn Idris accepted the metaphysical teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabī only when he "was in agreement with the Qurʾān and Sunnah."[68] Though Elizabeth Sirriyeh claims that this shift toward a more orthodox for of Sufism was not entirely "novel," it became much more dramatic in the modern period.[69] Internal Muslim critiques of Sufism coupled with the external European admiration and disparagement of this tradition have had a profound effect on the framing of Sufism by contemporary Sufis and scholars. As Carl Ernst notes, "Modern Sufi leaders who wish to legitimate their own perspective sometimes discredit other versions as 'pseudo-Sufism,' particularly in the case of groups that deemphasize Islamic practices and identity."[70]

Nineteenth and twentieth-century critiques of Sufism were not restricted to Wahhabis and Salafis but also came from more liberal Muslim modernists, who argued that Sufism represented "a medieval superstition and a barrier to modernity."[71] In the early twentieth century, a number of Muslim intellectuals, notably the Egyptian Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905) and his Syrian student Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1934), sought to demonstrate that Islam's true essence was rationalistic and in full accord with European intellectual ideals. Such scholars viewed popular Sufi devotional practices with suspicion and disdain. One of the most prominent of such critiques came from Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938), who argued in *The Reconstruction of*

[67] Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*, 7.
[68] Sirriyeh, 10.
[69] Sirriyeh, 11.
[70] Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, xvi-xvii.
[71] Ernst, 199.

Religious Thought in Islam (1950) that while the "more genuine" Sufis had shaped the Islamic intellectual tradition, the Sufis of his day ignored and rejected the "modern mind" and therefore became a destructive force.[72] Sufism could only be resurrected, stated Iqbal, if its practitioners accepted modern science, technology, and philosophical coherence.[73] Responses to such critiques emphasized the intellectual aspect of Sufism over its popular practices, and even linked it to Western philosophy. For example, Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924), a Turkish nationalist and modernist, suggested that Sufism was in fact a refined philosophical system. In addition, he suggested that the teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabī "anticipated the philosophy of Berkeley, Kant, and Nietzsche."[74]

Because of the legacy of Orientalist studies, eighteenth-century Wahhabi critiques, the modernist criticism of Sufism as superstition, and the current political climate of Salafi activism, some scholars have felt obligated to present Sufism as positively and conservatively as possible. In addition to marshaling historical and textual evidence, to effectively argue that Sufism is Islamically orthodox, they have had to confront two major biases of Orientalist scholarship. First, scholars of Sufism have had to challenge the notion that Islam was excessively legalistic and spiritually impoverished. Second, they had to call attention to the rules and hierarchical organization of Sufism to show that it was not a spiritual "free-for-all." The emphasis by early Sufi reformers on the orthodox character of Sufi doctrines, practices, and theology has been echoed by a number of contemporary scholars of Sufism. This trend was a necessary corrective for political reasons, but it has also been a contributing factor to the largely conservative

[72] Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2012), v.

[73] Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought*, 183. Despite Iqbal's insistence that "true" Islamic intellectual culture is superior to that of Europe, Carl Ernst observes that his critiques of Sufism were "in accord with Orientalist theories." (Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism,* 202).

[74] Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, 209.

character of scholarship on Sufism. Connecting Sufi origins directly to the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth is a theme that cuts across the history of Sufi studies. Because the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth serve as foundational textual sources for normative Islam, scholars of Sufism have been keen to emphasize the importance of these sources for the tradition in order to demonstrate that Sufism is connected to normative Islam.

Although Reynold A. Nicholson viewed the Qurʾān rather unfavorably, he recognized the importance of its role in Sufi theology, practice, and literature. He suggested that in the earliest phase of Sufi history, "there was no great difference between the Sufi and the orthodox Mohammedan zealot, except that Sufis attached extraordinary importance to certain Koranic doctrines and developed them at the expense of others which many Moslems might consider equally essential."[75] Nicholson's approach was based mostly upon his own interpretation of the Qurʾān, which he viewed as illogical, teeming with contradictions, and therefore open to multiple, disparate interpretations.[76] While he argued that the Qurʾān was, "unfavourable to mysticism" overall, he dismissed previous scholars' claims that there was *no* basis for mysticism in the Qurʾān.[77] Rather, he argued that there are "germs of mysticism" in the Qurʾān, particularly the passages in which God is described in loving terms, and the notion that God can be both immanent and transcendent.[78] However, it is clear that Nicholson saw the Sufis as reading what they wanted to in the Qurʾān rather than what was actually there. Tellingly, he compared their hermeneutical approach to Philo's interpretation of the Torah.[79] Furthermore, he suggested that the Sufi method of interpretation came out of a trance-like state rather than thoughtful reflection.

[75] Nicholson, *Mystics of Islam,* 5.
[76] Nicholson, 21.
[77] Nicholson, 22.
[78] Nicholson, 21.
[79] Nicholson, 22.

Referring to the hermeneutical technique of *istinbāṭ* (deep hermeneutics), Nicholson wrote, "As [the Sufi] reads the Koran with studious meditation and rapt attention, lo, the hidden meanings of the Holy Word flash upon his inward eye."[80] Nicholson's understating of this process was akin to Ignaz Goldziher's assertion that Sufi *tafsīr* was "eisegesis," rather than exegesis.[81]

While Arthur J. Arberry did not seem to doubt the rationality of Sufi hermeneutics in the same way that Goldziher and Nicholson did, he similarly implied that Sufi interpretations of Islamic scripture were far-fetched. Regarding the sources of Sufism, Arberry noted that the Qurʾān is "the supreme authority to which the Muslim mystic looks for guidance and justification."[82] Furthermore, "The esoteric exposition of the Koran became a central point in the hard training of a Sufi."[83] His explanation for the "extreme lengths" that Sufis went to in drawing "esoteric meanings into the quite simple language of the Scriptures," was that through repeated recitation of the Qurʾān, they were "in a state of uninterrupted meditation upon the Holy Book," and as a result, passages that would seem clear to others began to stir the heart of the mystic, which led to esoteric interpretation.[84] Arberry's list of the other sources of Sufism are instructive for understanding his notion of mysticism. He notes that after the Qurʾān, Sufis looked to the Prophet Muhammad for inspiration through *sīra* literature, the Sunna, and the Ḥadīth.[85] Apart from these sources, Sufis drew insight from the examples of saints (*awliyāʾ*), followed by their "personal experiences" of states (*aḥwāl*), stations (*maqāmāt*), and "graces" (*karāmāt*) from God.[86] What is most telling is that Arberry places "personal experience," last in this schema. In contrast to the building-block model of mysticism used by Forman, Arberry claims that it is only

[80] Nicholson, 23.
[81] Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*. Leiden: Brill, 1952, 180-262.
[82] Arberry, *Sufism*, 13.
[83] Arberry, 22.
[84] Arberry, 22-23.
[85] Arberry, 13.
[86] Arberry, 13-14.

after mastering the orthodox sources of Qurʾān, Sunna, and the Sufi models that one should turn to personal experience for inspiration.

Unlike Arberry, who seemed to believe that mystical interpretations of the Qurʾān were somewhat self-serving, Louis Massignon was one of the first scholars to take seriously the Sufis' claim that they were not bending the Qurʾān to suit their own interpretations, but that mystical content was present in the text itself. Massignon stated unequivocally that "the Qurʾān, through constant recitation, meditation, and practice, is the source of Islamic mysticism, at its beginning and throughout its growth."[87] He first attributed Sufi interpretations of the Qurʾān to ritual recitations but was clear that, "The Qurʾān is also the source of Islamic mysticism's typical allegories," and "there are mentions of clearly illuminative and even ecstatic phenomena" in the holy text.[88] Massignon rejected the prevailing theory in European Orientalist scholarship that there was no basis for mysticism in the Qurʾān, suggesting that this assumption was based on faulty notions of "Semitic concision" and being "led astray by the *fuqahā's* partisan reasoning, which denies the sincere and lasting vehemence of Muhammad's devotion, indicated by his severe discipline and frequent supererogatory prayers after midnight."[89] Upon giving a number of examples of allegorical and mystical passages in the Qurʾān, Massignon suggests that there is a valid connection between being a good Sufi and adhering to Qurʾānic norms. Moreover, he argued that those who did not accept the plausibility of Sufi interpretations had "haughty and pharisaic minds."[90] Alluding to his masterwork, *The Passion of Al-Ḥallāj* (1922), Massignon wrote, "I have shown elsewhere how the greatest Muslim mystics concentrated their Qurʾān

[87] Massignon, *Essay on the Origins*, 73.
[88] Massignon, 75 and 96, respectively.
[89] Massignon, 95 and 97, respectively.
[90] Massignon, 95.

meditation on these themes, as they tried to find in their own hearts the states of the soul that had been the favors of grace to some of the prophets."[91]

Echoing Massignon, Annemarie Schimmel also argued that mystical themes were present in the Qurʾān. Through this argument, she gave scholarly validation to the Sufis' argument for the right to interpret the Qurʾān. Schimmel linked the roots of Sufism to orthodox scriptural sources: "One should not forget that the *shariʾa*, as proclaimed by the Koran and exemplified by the Prophet, together with a firm belief in the Day of Judgment, was the soil out of which [Sufi] piety grew. They did not abolish the rites but rather interiorized them."[92] In the works of Massignon and Schimmel, one sees a clear shift toward the assertion of orthodoxy for Sufism. Schimmel made it clear that Sufis did not abandon the legal prescriptions of orthodox Islam but rather *deepened* them through their practices. Further legitimizing Sufi hermeneutics, she claimed that not only was the Qurʾān their main source of inspiration, but that:

> The mystics have played a decisive role in the development of the Koranic sciences; their hermeneutical methods range from a simple verbal interpretation to symbolical and allegorical exegesis, without, however, denying the value of the exterior meaning of the Koranic words.[93]

Schimmel shared Massignon's understanding that Sufism, and mysticism generally, involved the "interiorization" of orthodox religion. Today this position is most strenuously argued by Traditionalists but Schimmel used it primarily to combat arguments of Sufi heresy or eisegesis. She suggested that not only were Sufi interpretations valid but also that they were in full accord with more "external" forms of hermeneutics or *tafsīr*. While in some cases, Schimmel seems to suggest that the mystical interpretation of scripture is the best or most natural, by and large, she

[91] Massignon, 97.
[92] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 106.
[93] Schimmel, 25.

presents Sufism as one among many interpretations of Islam, using its Qurʾānic origins as proof of its legitimacy.

Traditionalist scholars of Sufism, however, use its Qurʾānic roots as a means to prove the *superiority* of Sufism over more exoteric interpretations of Islam. For example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr claims that "Revelation is limited in its outer form," and that Sufism "provides the possibility of spiritual realization for the millions of men who… follow the religion of the Qurʾān."[94] He adds that in addition to following the norms of the *Sharīʿa* as laid out in the Qurʾān, "the basis for all authentic practices of Sufism, requires yet another divine gift, which is none other than [Islamic] faith (*imān*)."[95] This insistence that Sufism is in full accord with orthodox Islam is not new. However, Nasr and his students go further and suggest that Sufi interpretations best represent the full scope of Islamic piety. William Chittick asserts, "The Sufi view of reality derives from the Koran and *ḥadīth*, but it has been amplified and adapted by generations of Sufi teachers and sages."[96] To add to this orthodox image, Chittick defines Sufism— like Islam itself— primarily through the Ḥadīth of Gabriel and claims that Sufism represents the inner dimension of Islam: "Sufism has to be judged in terms of adherence to the Koran, the Sunnah, and the consensus of the *ulama'*; or, in terms of its ability to actualize the fullness of *islām*, *imān*, and *iḥsān*."[97] He thus extends Massignon and Schimmel's assertion that Sufism involves the interiorization of mainstream Islam by arguing that Sufism is the means by which one "actualizes the fullness" of Islam.

The argument that Sufi hermeneutics provide the best or most logical interpretations of the Qurʾān is problematic because it suggests that the essential meaning of religion is esoteric.

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[94] Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 30 and 32, respectively.
[95] Nasr, 36.
[96] Chittick, *Beginner's Guide*, 15.
[97] Chittick, 28.

Some scholars, such as Kristin Zahra Sands, have attempted to take a middle path that accepts the validity of Sufi hermeneutics, while suspending judgment on how it compares with other interpretations. In *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qurʾān in Classical Islam* (2006), she rejects Goldziher and Nicholson's claim that Sufi commentary is a form of eisegesis and concurs with Leonard Lewisohn, who suggests that "reading Sufi literature without accepting the reality of the mystical experience results in a distortion of their writings."[98] She links the justification for the esoteric (*baṭin*) reading of the Qurʾān with a *ḥadīth* attributed to ʿAbd Allah b. Masʿūd (d. 652 CE) in which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "The Qurʾān was sent down in seven *aḥruf*. Each *ḥarf* has a back (*ẓahr*) and a belly (*baṭn*). Each *ḥarf* has a border (*ḥadd*) and each border has a looking point (*muṭṭala*)."[99] Sufis, Sands argues, argued that the deepest meaning could be found in the "belly," and in the "looking point." She further notes early Sufis used Qurʾān 3:7, to favor argue for the right to interpret "ambiguous" (*mutashābihāt*) verses.[100]

Not all contemporary scholars accept Sands' attempt to justify Sufi interpretations of the Qurʾān by using medieval justifications. For example, Nile Green argues that Sufis intentionally "adopted the Quran's vocabulary to create a scripturally-sanctioned terminology for the spiritual exercises and forms of experience."[101] In essence, he argues that although Qurʾān plays a key role in the formation of Sufi doctrines, it is less a direct source of Sufism than an after-the-fact justification or interpretive framework that Sufis used to defend their approach to spirituality. Alexander Knysh is also skeptical about the claim that Sufism is rooted primarily in Qurʾān and Ḥadīth. He writes that although Sufis have argued that the origins of Islamic mysticism began with the Prophet Muhammad's asceticism, "they nevertheless did not deny that the 'Sufi science'

[98] Kristin Zahra Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qurʾān in Classical Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2-3.
[99] Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries*, 8.
[100] Sands, 15.
[101] Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, 26.

(*ʿilm al-taṣawwuf*) *per se* emerged among the second and third generations of Muslims."[102] Knysh and Green thus push back against the prevailing notion in contemporary Sufi studies that one can to take Sufi narratives and explanations of their origins at face value.

IV. *Modern Studies of Sufism and the Trope of Lost Purity*

An important historical trope in contemporary Sufi studies is the notion that Sufism had an earlier, purer form that was corrupted and decayed over time. Because the Sufi tradition is so vast, one can easily latch onto a particular aspect of the tradition, such as love poetry, early asceticism, or sainthood and declare it to be the "essence" of Sufism. A.J. Arberry revealed himself to be guilty of this practice when he dedicated the final chapter of his book *Sufism: An Account of The Mystics of Islam* to "The Decay of Sufism." Trimingham, Schimmel, and Chittick also subscribe to this notion. Some historians of Sufism, particularly Nile Green and Alexander Knysh, have been sharply critical of this trend, arguing that such a notion fetishizes origins and equates changes to tradition with decline or atrophy. With respect to the present study, the most important problem with this notion is that those who assert that Sufism has "decayed" imply a core essence of Sufism (and, by extension, of mysticism as well). It is also relevant to the critique made in the previous chapter of scholars of mysticism who portray their subject as what they believe it ought to be rather than what it is. In addition, it assumes that "Sufism" represents a monolithic entity rather than a complex web of doctrines and practices.[103] Unfortunately, with the exception of Carl Ernst's sharp critique of Trimingham for his over-reliance on Protestant-derived notions of mysticism as private experience, and Vincent Cornell's

[102] Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 10.
[103] Knysh, 327.

critique of theories of Islamic sainthood in the Introduction to *Realm of the Saint* (1998), one sees insufficient resistance to this position from scholars of religion working on Islam.[104]

Arberry places the apex of Sufism in the thirteenth century CE with the figures of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Ibn al-ʿArabī, and Rumi, and suggests that through the popularizing influence of the Sufi orders and the cult of saints, Sufism gradually drifted into ever-more heterodox territory. For Arberry, the move from "sober speculation and steadfast piety" to "ignorance and superstition" characterizes the later Middle Ages.[105] He argues that because of a gradual decline in the quality of Islamic education, Orientalist scholars of the period of exploration and the colonial period found Sufis to be antinomian and "free spirited."[106] While Arberry acknowledged that some later Sufi figures were well educated and sufficiently pious, he completely dismissed the intellectual potential of Sufism for the modern era. He concludes his introduction to Sufism by stating, "Sufism has run its course; in the progress of human thought, it is illusory to imagine there can ever be a return to the point of departure. A new journey lies ahead for humanity to travel."[107]

Carl Ernst offers a comprehensive critique of Trimingham's problematic notion of decaying "phases" of Sufism in the *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*.[108] In *The Sufi Orders in Islam,* Trimingham breaks the history of Sufism into three phases— personal religion, *ṭarīqa*, and *ṭāʾifa*. Following a primitivistic model of spirituality, he views the second and third phases as progressively more degenerate than the first. This may also be due in part to the fact that his definition of mysticism revolves around the idea of personal experience, as with Schleiermacher and William James. In Trimingham's view, the communal and institutionalized forms of Sufism

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[104] Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 131-132. Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority In Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).
[105] Arberry, *Sufism*, 119-120.
[106] Arberry, 122.
[107] Arberry, 134.
[108] Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 131-132.

were corruptions of its original personal piety. For example, when discussing nineteenth-century revivalist movements, he states, "All religious organizations flagged in their interior life, and the orders were, as we have seen, very decadent. Within them the true Way of Sufi experience had weakened, though individuals and little circles continued to follow the Sufi Path."[109]

Annemarie Schimmel, although less so than Trimingham, also had an animus toward the institutionalization of Sufism, especially in the later medieval period. She writes, "The mystical fraternities that grew out of a need for spiritualizing Islam became, in the course of time, the very cause contributing to the stagnation of the Islamic religion."[110] While Schimmel did not see the Sufi orders to be problematic in their origins, she upheld Trimingham's argument that they eventually declined. Furthermore, she connected their development to a wider "stagnation" of Islam as a whole. Although this view is rather troubling from a historical perspective, for some reason Schimmel has not been critiqued as sharply as Trimingham and others have been for the notion of Sufism's decay. On somewhat firmer ground, Schimmel also argued that the rise in hereditary authority in Sufi orders "led to the deterioration of the office to an accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of certain *pīr* families, in whom, in the course of time, not too many traces of true spirituality were left."[111] This assertion of the problematic nature of inherited authority in institutional Sufism (sometimes called in Arabic, *al-taṣawwuf al-wirāthī*) has been supported by historical and anthropological studies, particularly in South Asia and North Africa.

The trope of lost purity is so common in the writings of Traditionalist scholars of Sufism that it almost amounts to a defining concept. A central tenet of Traditionalism in general is that

[109] Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 106.
[110] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 238.
[111] Schimmel, 236.

modernity constitutes a period of spiritual decay among *all* world religions.[112] Like Frithjof Schuon before him, Sayyed Hossein Nasr links the loss of spirituality in the modern age to a more general loss of awareness of the sacred. The academic study of Sufism is thus an important part of the rediscovery of the sacred in general:

> The rediscovery of the sacred is ultimately and inextricably related to the revival of tradition, and the resuscitation of tradition and the possibility of living according to its tenets in the West during this century is the complete and final fulfillment of the quest of contemporary man for the rediscovery of the sacred.[113]

Like Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bushanjī, this group of scholars argues that through lack of understanding of "true" Sufism, "Today in the West, the name has become better known, but its reality has become far more obscure than it ever was in the Islamic world."[114] Furthermore, like Trimingham and Schimmel, they assert that whereas there are always a few individuals who practice "real" Sufism, as one moves farther away in time from the origins of Sufism, the original sincerity of this approach to spirituality progressively wanes.

> Even though the great Sufi authorities set down guidelines for keeping Sufism squarely at the heart of the Islamic tradition, popular religious movements sometimes appeared that were aimed at intensifying religious experience with little concern for Islamic norms, and these frequently became associated with Sufism or grew out of certain sorts of Sufi teachings and practices.[115]

This statement by William Chittick not only assumes that Sufi practices have been corrupted from their origins, but also by saying that practices "with little concern for Islamic norms…became *associated* with Sufism," he implies that some later practices should not

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[112] Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues in *Knowledge and the Sacred* that Christian mysticism has "become nearly completely emptied of intellectual and metaphysical content, becoming a passive way of love which, although precious from the general religious point of view, could not stem the tide of the total desacralization of knowledge." (34)

[113] Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 94.

[114] Chittick, *Beginner's Guide*, 1.

[115] Chittick, 27-28.

rightfully be considered Sufism. Unfortunately, he fails to point out what these problematical practices actually *are*, thus making the statement no more than an *ad hominem* cultural polemic.

The traditionalist use of the trope of Sufism's purity and subsequent decline has not gone unnoticed by scholars such as Carl Ernst, Nile Green, and Ahmet Karamustafa. Green's *Sufism: A Global Introduction* explicitly counters the narrative that there was a "golden age" of Sufism that declined as the tradition spread from Baghdad.[116] Moreover, as Karamustafa notes, "As an inward-oriented form of piety, Sufism contained an intensely self-critical strain from the very beginning, and astute Sufi observers who surveyed the Sufi scene [constantly] tackled the task of disentangling the 'questionable and undesirable' elements of their heritage from its 'genuine' solid core."[117] Alexander Knysh argues, "attempts to posit an immutable essence of Sufism can hardly be treated as a serious academic exercise."[118]

V. Conclusion

Tracing the genealogy of the use of "Islamic mysticism" for Sufism in Islamic Studies reveals several important insights. First, this term seems to have been used, as William Chittick argues, as a "convenient label," without sufficient engagement with the rich literature on mysticism from the field of religious studies. This has resulted in a tradition of scholarship that is theoretically unsophisticated, as demonstrated by the ad hoc definitions used by many scholars in the field and the unacknowledged theoretical prejudices of Traditionalist scholars. Whatever its origins, this lack of engagement with religious studies theory has ironically reaffirmed some of the problematic notions of nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholarship on Islam and

[116] Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, ix.
[117] Karamustafa, *Formative Period*, 159.
[118] Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 326.

Sufism. For example, while contemporary scholars have pushed back against the notion that Sufism was a heresy due to Indian or Greek influence, they implicitly confirm the Orientalist trope of Sufism as "good" Islam to be contrasted with the "bad" Islam of scriptural literalism. Furthermore, in their response to Wahhabi and Salafi critiques of Sufism, they demonstrate the validity of Sufi claims of Qurʾānic orthodoxy, but also reinforce the notion that Sufism is only valid if it adheres to exoteric norms.

In many ways, the problems faced by the field of Sufi studies mirror those in the study of mysticism in general. In both cases, scholars have ignored the tradition as it is actually practiced in favor of an idealized notion of what they believe it ought to be. Paradoxically, the diversity of practices, theologies, and spiritual methods employed by Sufis over time has allowed scholars to do what they have done with mysticism more generally— to select one particular feature to stand for the "essence" of Sufism. Conceiving of Sufism in such a way ignores the historical development of Sufism and misses swathes of the tradition that do not conform to a preconceived notion of mysticism. As the next chapter will demonstrate, Sufism is not the only form of Islamic mysticism. If one is to look more comprehensively at *mysticism* in Islam, one must look beyond Sufism alone, and consider carefully what should be included in this category.

Chapter Three:

Between *Faylasūf* and Sufi:

The Case for Ibn Sīnā's Philosophic Mysticism

The philosopher says, "I speak of intellectual truths," but he hasn't caught a whiff of the Lordly Intellect.[1]
-Shams-i Tabrīzī

I. Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, because Sufism has so often been equated with Islamic mysticism, some modern scholars are inclined to "Sufi-ize" their portrayal of Islamic philosophers whose works contain mystical elements. While the previous chapter highlighted some of the limitations of the "standard" account of Sufism as Islam mysticism, this chapter argues that a close examination of the philosophy of Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥuṣayn ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), presents a compelling case for expanding the concept of Islamic mysticism to include the mystical writings of philosophers who were influenced by Hellenistic traditions (i.e., *falsafa*, also known as "Peripatetic philosophy"). Although there has long been a question of whether or not Ibn Sīnā had a "mystical side," the debate over the question of philosophical mysticism in contemporary Islamic Studies scholarship has been somewhat stilted.[2] Those who deny the validity of a mystical approach to Islamic philosophy seem to equate the concept of mysticism

[1] Shams-i Tabrīzī, *Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i* Tabrīzī, translated by William C. Chittick (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2004), 63.

[2] Peter Heath traces the origin of the "question of the nature and extent of [Ibn Sīnā's] mysticism" to A.F. Mehren's 1889-1899 compendium *Traités mystiques d'Abou ʿAli Hosain b. Abdullah b. Sina ou d'Avicenne*. See: Peter Heath, *Allegory and Representation in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā): With a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992). Shams Inati, however, claims that in the medieval period Muslim interpreters of Ibn Sīnā's *Allusions and Remarks* considered the fourth section of this work to be a mystical treatise. See: Idem, "Introduction," to Ibn Sīnā, *Avicenna and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions*, translated by Shams Inati (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996).

with irrationalism; thus, to call Ibn Sīnā a "mystic" would be to call him irrational. No less problematic are those who argue for a mystical element in Ibn Sīnā's philosophy by claiming that this mysticism is "Sufism," when his writings bear little resemblance to Sufism both in content and approach. Ibn Sīnā has also been portrayed as a "bright spot" of rationalism within Islam, or alternatively as a "closet Sufi," who was gifted in using Peripatetic forms of expression.

As this chapter will demonstrate, a single, consistent reading of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy is difficult to sustain. Ibn Sīnā's prolific career covered myriad topics, and he wrote in a number of different genres. Attempting to present him as *strictly* a rationalist or *strictly* a mystic is limiting and ultimately inaccurate. While it is still controversial to suggest that Ibn Sīnā had mystical leanings, I argue that his epistemology can be categorized as "philosophic mysticism," a term coined by David R. Blumenthal to describe philosophers who posited post-cognitive states brought about (ironically) through strict rational training.[3] Exploring Ibn Sīnā's epistemology in this context will contribute to a broader understanding of Islamic mysticism, as well as offer a new argument for a mystical strand of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy. While this mystical strand plays an important role in his epistemology, Ibn Sīnā's philosophic mysticism is, nonetheless, only one part of his overall philosophy, not an all-encompassing categorization. It remains clear that that his philosophy was in fact rationalist at its core, but also that the mystical aspect of his epistemology was the result of this rationalism.

This chapter first explores the mysticism-rationalism divide in scholarly interpretations of Ibn Sīnā and then exposes the shortcomings of the two schools in this debate: philosophical interpreters of Ibn Sīnā and Sufi interpreters of Ibn Sīnā. To overcome the shortcomings of previous interpretations, I offer a new theoretical framework, David R. Blumenthal's concept of

[3] See: David R. Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism,* 29-31. See also, 223-234.

"philosophic mysticism." Using this theory, I argue that a close examination of Ibn Sīnā's *The Healing* (*Kitāb al-Shifā'*) reveals a strain of mystical thought that aligns with Blumenthal's notion of philosophic mysticism as a form of mysticism based on rationalist epistemology. While previous studies that argue for a mystical side of Ibn Sīnā have tended to analyze his allegorical works almost exclusively, this chapter also seeks to demonstrate a mystical strain in Ibn Sīnā's account of his education in the concluding section of his master work of Peripatetic philosophy, the *Metaphysics* section of *The Healing*. Although I will focus on the *Healing* to prove the existence of mystical content in Ibn Sīnā, when discussing the ineffable character of non-dual experience, I will draw on his *Remarks and Admonitions*, *Epistle on the Essence of Prayer*, and other short texts.

II. *Faylasūf or Sufi? The Debate over Ibn Sīnā's Mysticism*

Ibn Sīnā's interpreters typically seek to prove that he was either a *faylasūf* or a Sufi, and whichever interpretation they advocate more often than not reveals the approach that the scholar in question favors. Those who argue against Ibn Sīnā's mysticism tend to presuppose that mysticism is irrational and less rigorous than Aristotelian philosophy. Hence, their insistence that Ibn Sīnā was a strict Aristotelian is meant to defend him against what they view as an insult to his intellect and philosophical project. This view has been held most prominently by Dimitri Gutas, Peter Adamson, David C. Reisman, and Robert Wisnovsky and represents the favored interpretation of Ibn Sīnā in the Western academy. Arguments for a Sufi element in Ibn Sīnā's philosophy have also existed since the medieval period; however, in contemporary scholarship they have been championed by a vocal minority.[4] Among modern scholars, Henry Corbin,

[4] Interestingly, Ibn Sīnā was frequently *dismissed* as being overly mystical by his near contemporaries among the Arabic philosophers. These philosophers favor Ibn Rushd (d. 594/1198) as the upholder of pure rationalism in Islam.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, and Shams Inati embrace Ibn Sīnā as a Sufi, arguing that his rationalist philosophy was merely the external guise of his true worldview, which was expressed in later-in-life works such as *Allusions and Remarks (al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*) and *Logic of the Easterners* (*Manṭiq al-mashriqīyyin*). Unlike the philosophical interpreters, these scholars believe that Sufism is the most profound interpretation of Islam and represents a higher level of knowledge than Peripatetic philosophy. Thus, to call Ibn Sīnā a Sufi is to elevate his philosophical status. As I will demonstrate in the following section, these preferences for Peripatetic philosophy or Sufism tend to color discussions of Ibn Sīnā's works, leading to one-sided and inaccurate interpretations of Ibn Sīnā's thought.

Throughout his career, the historian of Islamic philosophy Dimitri Gutas has sought to demonstrate that Ibn Sīnā was a strict Aristotelian with no mystical leanings whatsoever. Gutas's pioneering work, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (1988), firmly places Ibn Sīnā in the Greek philosophical tradition and presents him as a strictly Peripatetic philosopher. Gutas admits that some aspects of Ibn Sīnā's thought may appear mystical at first glance; however, he argues that such texts represent a difference in pedagogical approach rather than an actual philosophical orientation. In his view, Ibn Sīnā's seemingly mystical passages and texts were intended to help the mystically inclined realize the truth of Aristotelian philosophy. Deeply concerned by what he considers to be numerous false interpretations of Ibn Sīnā, Gutas has sought to firmly and aggressively establish Ibn Sīnā's reputation as the quintessential Muslim Peripatetic. In the Preface to the second edition of *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, he argues, "Avicenna never ceased to be regarded as the unchallenged representative of Arabic Peripateticism."[5] In

For modern discussions of this debate, see: Malik Mufti, "Ibn Rushd's Political Philosophy: A Contemporary Revival?" *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (May 2017): 17-35.

[5] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, xi.

particular, he claims that mystical interpretations of Ibn Sīnā are "spurious," in that they rely on "pseudepigraphs attributed" to Ibn Sīnā from a later period of Persian philosophy, when the latter was recast by Ishrāqī thinkers as "the master of mystical illumination and esoteric 'gnosis' (*ʿirfān*)."[6]

Gutas's impact on the study of Islamic philosophy has been tremendous, and the majority of contemporary scholars of Ibn Sīnā, including Peter Adamson and David C. Reisman, agree with his interpretation of Ibn Sīnā. This can be seen most clearly in the edited volume, *Interpreting Avicenna* (2013), in which editor Peter Adamson describes Ibn Sīnā's philosophy as "thoroughly rational."[7] Furthermore, Adamson asserts in the popular podcast, *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*, that a mystical understanding of Ibn Sīnā is "deeply misguided."[8] He even suggests that the allegedly mystical "Eastern Philosophy," (*al-ḥikma al-mashriqiyya*) was merely Ibn Sīnā's attempt to distinguish his philosophy, which was developed in Central Asia, from the Baghdad school of Peripatetic philosophy.[9] Broadly echoing Gutas and Adamson, David C. Reisman argues that the notion that Ibn Sīnā eventually abandoned Aristotelianism in favor of the "wisdom of the East" is a "legend... inspired by the writings of mystics and illuminationist philosophers."[10] Reisman concludes that Ibn Sīnā's later use of allusive modes of expression was meant to teach students to become better at syllogistic reasoning and suggests that it was a form of training in the use of intuition (*ḥads*).[11]

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[6] Gutas, xi; Gutas was so concerned with dispelling any notion of mysticism in Ibn Sīnā that he amended his previous translation of the term *ḥads* from "intuition" to "guessing correctly," in order to avoid a mystical interpretation because previous scholars had considered "intuitive" philosophy be mystical (xi-xii).

[7] Peter Adamson, "Introduction," *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, edited by Peter Adamson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.

[8] Peter Adamson, "The Self-Made Man: Avicenna's Life and Works," on *The History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* (podcast), accessed September 16, 2016 http://historyofphilosophy.net/avicenna-life-works.

[9] Adamson, "The Self-Made Man."

[10] Reisman, "Life and Times of Avicenna," 22.

[11] Reisman, 22. It seems that Reisman is describing Ibn Sīnā's concept of intuiting the third term of the syllogism.

The above scholars' passionate argument for an unequivocally rationalist Ibn Sīnā was motivated by persistent claims from scholars of Sufism that Ibn Sīnā's true philosophical beliefs aligned more closely with Sufism than with Aristotelianism. For example, Henry Corbin argued that Western scholars had consciously ignored the mystical elements of Ibn Sīnā's thought in order to mold him into their image of a "real" philosopher (i.e., strictly Aristotelian). In *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (1960), Corbin claims that when one considers Ibn Sīnā's Persian cultural context, a mystical Ibn Sīnā emerges. As with his study of other mystical figures such as Suhrawardī, Corbin emphasized what he saw as the Persian cultural content of Ibn Sīnā's works and suggested that this Persian influence was far more important to his thought than Greek Peripatetic philosophy. Because of the rich influence of Sufism in Persia, Corbin concluded that Ibn Sīnā's mystical side is rooted was Persian Sufism. He argued that although this strain could be found throughout Ibn Sīnā's works, Western interpreters focused solely on the rationalist aspects of his philosophy. For this reason, according to Corbin, Ibn Sīnā "appear[s] in the armor in which Latin Scholasticism has clothed him."[12] However, a close examination of three of Ibn Sīnā's "mystical recitals"— *Alive, Son of Awake* (*Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*), *Epistle of the Bird* (*Risālat al-Ṭayr*), and *Salāmān wa Absāl*— reveals a more comprehensive and accurate vision of Ibn Sīnā. If one evaluates Ibn Sīnā's works as "an organic and consistent whole," the mystical Ibn Sīnā emerges.[13] It is important to acknowledge that Corbin's reading of a mystical Ibn Sīnā is more historically nuanced than other approaches to his philosophy. However, his arguments have not swayed the rationalist interpreters. Indeed, the philosophical interpreters of Ibn Sīnā reject the mystical interpretation of Corbin because (in their view) even these three texts— although they are allusive and allegorical— were still meant to express rationalistic Aristotelian ideas.

[12] Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, xi.
[13] Corbin, xi.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr goes even further than Corbin and makes the bold claim that the "Peripatetic" Ibn Sīnā was merely the exoteric face of the philosopher, whereas the "true" Ibn Sīnā was a Sufi. According to Nasr, Ibn Sīnā's Peripatetic works were not the pinnacle of his career. Rather, his later-in-life works, some of which are no longer extant, represent the true acme of Ibn Sīnā's thought, which is mystical philosophy.[14] Nasr considers *Logic of the Easterners, Alive, Son of Awake, The Epistle of the Bird, Salāmān and Absāl*, and the fourth section of *Allusions and Remarks* to be the clearest examples of a mystical Ibn Sīnā. Furthermore, he suggests that that *The Healing* and *The Book of Salvation* (*Kitāb al-Najāt*) were intended primarily for the "masses," whereas Ibn Sīnā's Eastern philosophy represented his "true" esoteric beliefs.[15] Nasr also identifies Ibn Sīnā's mysticism as Sufism, stating, "The last three chapters of *Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*... [are] one of the best formulations of the most cardinal doctrines of Sufism."[16] While Ibn Sīnā never refers to himself as a Sufi in his works, and Nasr presents no evidence of a Sufi initiation, Nasr's view of *Allusions and Remarks* as a Sufi work is shared by Shams Inati, who has spent much of her career translating and interpreting this work.

Among those who argue for a mystical Ibn Sīnā, Shams Inati makes the most nuanced and compelling arguments; however, one of her key arguments seems contradictory. Despite discussing the many ways Ibn Sīnā's philosophy differs from Sufism, she concludes that part four of *Allusions and Remarks* is a "work of Sufism." Inati argues, "as early as the Middle Ages commenters (*sic.*) on the fourth part of *al-Ishārāt* recognized, and correctly so, that this text is a work on sufism."[17] She claims that although Ibn Sīnā does not explicitly state that the work is

[14] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 43.
[15] Nasr, 43.
[16] Nasr, 43.
[17] Shams Inati, "Introduction," in Avicenna, *Avicenna and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions*, translated by Shams Inati (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 4.

mystical, he "describes the journey of the sufi without referring to its traveler by the name 'sufi.'"[18] While she notes that Ibn Sīnā may have only been speculating about mystical experience rather than describing his personal experiences, at the end of her introduction to this work, she concludes that "Even though Ibn Sīnā does not…tell us that he had any mystical experience or that he was a mystic or sufi, one would have to assume that, according to his conception of mysticism, he must have been a mystic."[19] However, despite saying that Ibn Sīnā must have been a Sufi, Inati positions Ibn Sīnā's mysticism in direct contrast to that of prominent Sufis, claiming that his mysticism was "theoretical" rather than practice-based.[20] Such an artificial separation between theory (*ʿilm*) and practice (*ʿamal*) seems to contradict that near-universally-held notion amongst Sufis that these aspects of mysticism were inextricably bound together.[21] Inati goes on to articulate a type of "Sufism" that is roughly equivalent to Blumenthal's "philosophic mysticism" but once again her analysis is tentative and ultimately unpersuasive.[22]

Both the philosophical and the Sufi schools of Ibn Sīnā scholarship are partially correct in their interpretations of Ibn Sīnā, but any one-sided interpretation of his thought is bound to fall short of the mark. On one hand, a close reading of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy demonstrates that he was committed to rationalist epistemology. Throughout his philosophical career, he favored syllogistic reasoning and Aristotelian philosophy and logic and firmly articulated the elevated role of the human and divine intellects. On the other hand, it is difficult to dismiss a significant number of writings that appear to argue for a mystical epistemology. Ibn Sīnā makes statements

[18] Inati, "Introduction," 4.
[19] Inati, 63.
[20] Inati, 63.
[21] See: Morris, "Situating Islamic 'Mysticism,'" 307.
[22] Inati, "Introduction," 63-64.

that seem to refer to a non-dual form of knowledge and that navigate paths that lead to direct contact with the divine intellect. As Inati notes, "Mysticism as understood by Ibn Sīnā seems to be an inevitable result of completing or perfecting the function of being a philosopher. In this sense, once one reaches the end of the path of philosophy, the truth will be uncovered to the theoretical intellect."[23] However, despite astute comments such as this, Inati, along with Corbin, Nasr, and others refuses to distinguish Ibn Sīnā's mysticism from Sufism. Besides obscuring the mystical elements in Ibn Sīnā's works, equating Ibn Sīnā's mysticism with Sufism allows advocates of the philosophical school to believe that they can dismiss *all* mystical content in Ibn Sīnā's philosophy merely by rejecting the theses of Corbin, Nasr, and Inati. In order to resolve this apparent contradiction, it is necessary to view Ibn Sīnā from a different perspective.

Responding to a similar situation in academic scholarship on Moses Maimonides (d. 1204 CE), David R. Blumenthal articulated the concept of *philosophic mysticism*: this is a type of mysticism that results from rationalism itself rather than from the transcendence of rational intellection. In the monograph, *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (2006), Blumenthal argues that Maimonides was neither a strict Aristotelian nor a proto-Kabbalistic Jewish mystic. Instead, he claims that a strain of rationalistic mysticism can be observed in medieval Judeo-Arabic philosophy, and that Maimonides epitomized this form of mysticism. Blumenthal's view of mysticism challenges the universalistic notions of mystical experience critiqued in Chapter One. Instead of a unitary mystical experience, he argues for distinct typologies of mysticism. He asserts that "awareness" is core of mystical experience, which he describes as "an inbreaking of consciousness, a moment of heightened awareness."[24] However, in contrast to religious studies scholars of mysticism such as Robert Forman and Richard Jones,

[23] Inati, 63.
[24] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 22.

this moment of consciousness is not necessarily spontaneous or the result of the inward turning and stilling of the mind. Rather, Blumenthal argues that mystical experience "must flow out of a well-organized hierarchy which the mystic must navigate to arrive at mystical awareness."[25] In addition, Blumenthal argues that mystical experience involves an *influx* of the divine rather than an extension outward of human consciousness. Such experience requires specialized knowledge or gnosis, which "varies from one mystical school to another."[26] However, in accord with other academic scholars of mysticism going back to William James, Blumenthal also asserts that a fundamental characteristic of philosophic mystical experience is ineffability: "The awareness itself almost always has an abstract, non-representational in character."[27]

While Blumenthal's definition of philosophic mysticism is too specialized to be used as a general model for mysticism, it provides a necessary corrective to the approaches of Perennialist scholars and others who claim that certain types of mystical experience are more meaningful than others. In particular, Blumenthal's recognition that medieval philosophic mysticism was an elite phenomenon that required mastery of rational forms of knowledge is a key insight that captures one of the most important ways in which this type of mysticism differs from the theories of mysticism discussed in Chapter One. According to Blumenthal, philosophic mystics viewed mystical experience as the *endpoint* of mystical achievement rather than as a starting point, as in Forman's building-block theory of mysticism. Furthermore, intellectual preparation through the mastery of formally rationalistic texts comes before mystical experience rather than afterwards: rather than such texts being after-the-fact explanations of mystical experiences, the intellectual training they provide is foundational for such experiences.

[25] Blumenthal, 24.
[26] Blumenthal, 24.
[27] Blumenthal, 24.

Blumenthal further argues that different types of mysticism are based on the different types of "specialized knowledge" that need to be cultivated in order to reach contact with ultimate reality. In the case of philosophic mysticism, he asserts that the gnosis required for philosophic mystics to navigate the path is the "neoaristotelian (sometimes, neoplatonic) body of knowledge and praxis of Judeo-Islamic philosophy."[28] One uses this knowledge in order to "ascend from this world and, from there, to the realm of the divine," where the philosopher has a distinct mystical experience. In summary, Blumenthal defines philosophic mysticism as "contact with the divine, whether it be initiated by the divine or by the human," which "requires a strict philosophic, intellectual preparation, but, given that preparation, a flow of intellectual energy from the divine will generate an experience which will be abstract in quality and mystical (or prophetic) in nature."[29]

Applying Blumenthal's concept of philosophic mysticism to the case of Ibn Sīnā allows for a fuller and more precise discussion of his mysticism. First, it allows one to distinguish *mysticism* from Sufism in the study of Islam. Second, Blumenthal's notion of philosophic mysticism provides the framework for a Neo-Aristotelian and rationalistic form of mysticism, which allows scholars to move beyond pre-conceived notions of the rational limits of philosophy and mysticism.[30] While Ibn Sīnā's philosophical interpreters are hesitant to apply the label of "mysticism" because they fear it would suggest an irrational element, Blumenthal makes it clear that philosophic mysticism does not lack logical rigor; on the contrary, philosophic mysticism must be aligned with a coherent and consistently rationalistic philosophy.[31] This stress on philosophical rigor is not surprising, because philosophic mysticism arose in a context where

[28] Blumenthal, 26.
[29] Blumenthal, 26.
[30] Blumenthal, 224-226.
[31] Blumenthal, 230.

philosophers sought to articulate philosophical systems that reconciled their Neo-Aristotelian worldview with their spiritual commitments.

Like Maimonides, Ibn Sīnā worked throughout his career to express and refine a philosophy that could include both Aristotelian rationalism, along with a form of Islamic spirituality that called for a direct encounter with the divine. His philosophy included the seemingly paradoxical notion of using rational training to reach a state of ineffable non-dual awareness, and his full philosophical project involved a complexly rationalistic spirituality. I will argue below that the goal of Ibn Sīnā's philosophic method was the attainment of a post-cognitive state of consciousness that was brought about through advanced training in dialectical methods of reasoning. Ibn Sīnā's formulation of a non-dual, ineffable reality and the philosophical training that one must undergo to reach it challenges the scholarly prejudice that knowledge of this kind must be illogical. It also complicates the traditional Aristotelian notion that all rational knowledge must be communicable. Exploring Ibn Sīnā's concept of "rational non-dual awareness" adds nuance to our understanding of the negative character of non-dual awareness and offers a unique perspective on non-dual knowledge based on Neo-Aristotelian philosophy.

III. The Sources of Ibn Sīnā's Philosophic Mysticism

An argument for Ibn Sīnā's philosophic mysticism can be made using many of his works, including *Remarks and Admonitions*, the "mystical recitals" that Corbin discusses (*Alive, Son of Awake, The Epistle of the Bird, Salāmān and Absāl*), *The Discourse on the Soul* (*Maqāla fi al-nafs*), and the opening section of *The Logic of the Easterners*. One could also look at the sections of *The Healing* that are concerned with psychology, in which Deborah Black and Sari Nusibeh

have pointed out quasi-mystical elements in Ibn Sīnā's concept of intuited principles (*ḥadsiyyāt*).[32] The large number of works of Ibn Sīnā in which scholars have suggested mystical elements is not easy to dismiss. However, as noted above, skeptics have argued the many suggestions of mysticism in Ibn Sīnā's works are cherry-picked from his late-in-life esoteric texts. Therefore, to counteract this criticism, in what follows I will examine an earlier text, the Metaphysics (*al-ilahiyyāt*) section of *The Healing*, for its compelling and original insights about the presence and nature of Ibn Sīnā's mysticism.

The *Healing* is one of Ibn Sīnā's most important works, containing a broad spectrum of philosophical ideas. This work exerted a profound influence on later Islamic philosophy and thought. Broadly considered to be Ibn Sīnā's philosophical masterpiece, the work covers the classical Peripatetic subjects: logic, mathematics, physics, and metaphysics. Because Ibn Sīnā, following Aristotle and other Islamic philosophers, describes metaphysics as the most important type of philosophy (it was called *al-falsafa al-ūlā*, or "The First Philosophy"), I will focus on the *Metaphysics* section of *The Healing* as the most mature articulation of his philosophical project in Peripatetic terms. In his final years, Ibn Sīnā is said to have had his "foremost period of teaching through correspondence on the themes of [*The Healing*]."[33] He also wrote two philosophical books for more general audiences summarizing the themes of this work: *ʿAlāʿī's Textbook of Philosophy* (*Dānishnāmah-yi Alāʿī*) in Persian and *The Book of Salvation* (*Kitāb al-nājāt*) in Arabic.[34] According to David C. Reisman, in *ʿAlāʿī's Textbook of Philosophy*, Ibn Sīnā

[32] See: Deborah Black, "Certitude, Justification, and the Principles of Knowledge in Avicenna's Epistemology," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, 120-142. Black makes the compelling case that Ibn Sīnā's notion of *ḥads* can be read as an interpretation of Aristotle's concept of *anchinoia* (which she translates as "acumen," or "quick-wit"). While Black does not call this concept mystical, she does note that it signifies a break from Ibn Sīnā's usual stress on logical arguments. See also: Sari Nusibeh, "*Al-ʿAql al-Qudsī*: Avicenna's Subjective Theory of Knowledge," *Studia Islamica* No. 69 (1989) 39-54.

[33] Reisman, "Life and Times," 25.

[34] Reisman, 25.

presented *The Healing* as the foundational work of his philosophy.[35] Ibn Sīnā both commented on the work later in life and also refined its contents in order to help others unlock the metaphysical hierarchy it presents through the specialized knowledge acquired through rationalist training.

Because of the importance of *The Healing* to Ibn Sīnā's career and later Islamic philosophy, demonstrating a strain of mystical content in this work will provide a better argument for skeptics than, say, part four of *Allusions and Remarks* or *Epistle of the Bird*. The rhetorical style of *The Healing* is relatively straightforward and logical, unlike the allegorical style of *Epistle of the Bird*, *Alive, Son of Awake* or *Remarks and Allusions*, which Peter Adamson has called "some of the most difficult Arabic [he has] ever encountered."[36] In *The Healing*, Ibn Sīnā's mystical terminology is generally distinct from Sufi vocabulary, with key terms for mystical experience like *fanāʾ*, *baqāʾ*, and *kashf* notably absent. Moreover, his descriptions of non-dual states of knowledge are all rooted firmly in rigorous philosophical discussions of metaphysics. His topics flow logically from one point to another and build on previous arguments. While there are numerous parts of the *Metaphysics* section of *The Healing* that could be described as philosophic mysticism, I will focus on Books One, Eight, and Nine. Book One describes Ibn Sīnā's concept of the role of the philosopher, the importance of logic, and a description of the "gnosis" or specialized knowledge required for mystical experience. Books Eight and Nine describe the end of this path— contact with the divine in the post-cognitive, non-representational state of awareness of philosophic mysticism.[37] Exploring the rationalist training

[35] Reisman, 25.
[36] Adamson, "Self-Made Man."
[37] For an excellent analysis of Ibn Sīnā's overall epistemology in *The Healing*, see Deborah L. Black "Certitude, Justification, and Principles of Knowledge in Avicenna's Epistemology, op. cit."

and non-dual state of philosophic mysticism together allows for a full exploration of Ibn Sīnā's unique mystical epistemology.

IV. The Role of Metaphysics in Ibn Sīnā's Philosophy

In Book One of the *Metaphysics* section of *The Healing*, Ibn Sīnā states that studying metaphysics is the culmination of philosophical education. According to this text, the study of metaphysics and its eventual understanding can also be viewed as the specialized knowledge required in order to reach philosophic mystical awareness in Ibn Sīnā's philosophy. Ibn Sīnā describes metaphysics as ultimate knowledge, calling it "true philosophy," or "philosophy concerned with ultimate truths," (*al-falsafa bi-l-ḥaqīqa*), "The First Philosophy" (*al-falsafa al-ulā*), and also "absolute wisdom" (*al-ḥikma al-mutlaqa*)."[38] The mark of a true philosopher, for Ibn Sīnā, was mastery of metaphysics. According to his autobiography, Ibn Sīnā considered Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to be such an important text that he read it forty times and memorized it in an effort to understand the work thoroughly. When he found himself unable to comprehend its contents, he found Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's (d. 339/950) commentary on the text. Upon reading it, Ibn Sīnā states that he was finally able to understand the work.[39] This episode demonstrates two things: First, for Ibn Sīnā, metaphysics is such an essential part of the philosopher's education that he should do anything necessary – including memorizing a treatise on it – to understand its principles. Second, the two most important thinkers informing Ibn Sīnā's understanding of metaphysics were Aristotle and al-Fārābī, neither of which had Sufi or other mystical ties. After mastering metaphysics, Ibn Sīnā claimed that his philosophical education was complete by the

[38] Ibn Sīnā, *The Metaphysics of* The Healing: *A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, translated by David Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 3. Page numbers refer to the Arabic, and all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[39] Ibn Sīnā, *The Life of Ibn Sīnā*, 32.

age of eighteen. This fact further suggests that he believed in a set philosophical canon that every philosopher ought to master.[40] It also suggests that after mastering this curriculum there was more or less nothing new to learn per se; however, there were myriad ways in which one could reflect on and come to new, more mature conclusions based on the foundation of knowledge that one possessed.[41]

After establishing the science of metaphysics as the zenith of philosophical education, Ibn Sīnā distinguishes between advanced theoretical or dialectical philosophy (*al-naẓariyya*) and practical philosophy (*al-ʿamaliyya*) and specifies the types of knowledge required for navigating each part of the epistemological hierarchy. Practical philosophy, which guides morals and actions, is subordinate to theoretical philosophy, but it is a necessary building block for a proper philosophical education. While the natural sciences offer "glimpses" of knowledge of God, their scope is limited to the natural world and thus cannot truly encompass God. Moreover, Ibn Sīnā argues that knowledge acquired through the natural sciences is "intended to hasten for the human being (*al-insān*) the knowledge of the existence of the First Principle, so that the desire to acquire the other sciences would take hold of him, and [hasten] his being drawn to the level [of mastering these sciences] so as to reach true knowledge of [God] (*li-yatawaṣṣala ilā maʿrifatihi bi-l-haqīqa*)."[42] In other words, Ibn Sīnā posits a hierarchy of knowledge in which practical knowledge is meant to lead to theoretical knowledge, which in turn will lead the philosopher to mystical awareness.

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[40] Ibn Sīnā, *The Life of Ibn Sīnā*, 38.

[41] Dimitri Gutas has noted that one of the main values of Ibn Sīnā's autobiography is that it contains information about his philosophical curriculum. Some of the titles he mentions are those in which Ibn Sīnā describes several texts from his early education, including Porphyry's *Isagoge*, Ptolemy's *Almagest*, as well as books by the "ancients," which likely included works from ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Persian sources. See: Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 18.

[42] Ibn Sīnā, *The Metaphysics of* The Healing, 4. Marmura's translation.

While practical philosophy is a necessary building block for philosophical training, theoretical philosophy is the knowledge that provides the prerequisite for Ibn Sīnā's philosophic mysticism. According to Ibn Sīnā, there are three types of conceptual knowledge or "science" (in the sense of the medieval Latin *scientia*): natural (*ṭabīʿī*) knowledge, mathematical (*taʿlīmī,* "memorized") knowledge, and divine (*ilahī*) knowledge.[43] Of these three types of conceptual knowledge, divine knowledge constitutes the specialized knowledge or gnosis that produces mystical experience. The aim of theoretical philosophy is the search for "the perfection (*istikmāl*) of the theoretical faculty of the soul by attaining to the Active Intellect or Agent-Intellect (*al-ʿaql bi-l-faʿal),* through the attainment of conceptual knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-taṣawwurī)* and confirmable knowledge (*al-taṣdīqī*)."[44] He posits that the goal of philosophy in general is to perfect or make complete the theoretical faculty of the soul, which is done by "attaining to the Active Intellect," or making contact with the Active Intellect. Moreover, Ibn Sīnā specifies that the theoretical part of the soul is perfected by gaining conceptual and confirmable knowledge, both of which are rational in Ibn Sīnā's schema. Through the rational contemplation of metaphysics, the philosopher can ascend to non-dual contact with the Divine Intellect and thus gain ultimate knowledge. This passage of *The Metaphysics* establishes the foundations of Ibn Sīnā's philosophic mysticism as intellectual, setting his system in stark contrast to current notions in religious studies that one must have a mystical experience before articulating a theory of mysticism.

In addition to attaining mastery of theoretical knowledge, Ibn Sīnā also sees a pedagogical dimension to the philosopher's path. He notes that remaining faithful to syllogistic reasoning is crucial when teaching others about metaphysics. Ibn Sīnā argues that philosophers

[43] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 4.
[44] Ibn Sīnā, 2.

must "reproach the sophists, being constantly mindful of [guarding] the perplexed [against logical errors]."[45] To protect the perplexed from the influence of the sophists, he argues that philosophers must be mindful to construct logically sound syllogisms. The importance of syllogistic reasoning is stressed throughout the *Metaphysics* section of *The Healing*. Ibn Sīnā discusses the difficulty of speaking about metaphysics and the limitations of language, which indicates that misguiding someone about philosophy – the ultimate truth – is a major problem for him. He does not, however, say that the philosopher should remain silent, but argues instead that it is essential to master rational argumentation and rational thought processes. Doing so, Ibn Sīnā believes, will ensure that one can impart advanced philosophical knowledge accurately and fully to others.

Furthermore, Ibn Sīnā links the mastery of syllogistic reasoning to the perfection of the rational faculty and implies that failure to employ logic leads to base desires. In a passage that calls to mind Plato's *Phaedrus*, he chastises pseudo-philosophers for their lack of logical rigor. He warns: "Know that many false philosophers (*mutafalsafīn*) study logic and do not apply it. Instead, they revert to their natural disposition in their final statement, riding it as a racer (*al-rākiḍ*) who does not hold back the reins or pull back the halter."[46] By linking those who do not use logic to riders who cannot control their horses, Ibn Sīnā links the natural passions to the corporeal nature of humanity. To attain intellectual perfection, one must overcome one's corporeal and hence baser nature. The importance of taming the passions is stressed in other mystical paths of development such as Sufism as well, but Ibn Sīnā's account of this is strictly tied to perfection of the intellect through rationalism.

[45] Ibn Sīnā, 39.
[46] Ibn Sīnā, 41.

Metaphysics and logic can thus be seen as the foundations upon which Ibn Sīnā builds his arguments for positing mystical experience as the culmination of the path of knowledge. It is clear that not all who learn metaphysics and logic will attain mystical insight, but their mastery is the path to training the mind and perfecting the rational faculty. By linking irrationalism to base desires, Ibn Sīnā provides an interesting counter to Sufi and other mystical arguments that one must transcend rationalism to attain ultimate knowledge. In Ibn Sīnā's framework, those who abandon or eschew Aristotelian logic will be trapped in the corporeal world. With this understanding of reason, Ibn Sīnā articulates a mystical process that involves purifying and transforming the intellect so that the philosopher can reach intellectual union with God. Through this process, the philosopher's mind undergoes a rational transformation, in which the human mind becomes imprinted with the form of the divine mind.

V. The Transformation of the Intellect

To fully understand Ibn Sīnā's concept of mystical union, one must begin with how he understands God's essence. Ibn Sīnā believed that God is "The Necessary Existent" (*wājib al-wujūd*). Furthermore, he argues that God is Pure Intellect (*'aql maḥd*), by which he means, "He is an essence separated from substance in every respect."[47] Through this ontological move, Ibn Sīnā makes it clear that true knowledge of God must be intellectual in nature. He goes on to link the divine intellect to the concept of logical proof, stating, "He is the proof (*al-burhān*) of everything; for Him, there are only evidence and clear proofs."[48] This connection between knowledge of God and syllogistic reasoning is important for Ibn Sīnā's notion of philosophic mysticism. The above statement implies that God is the source of syllogistic reasoning, but also

[47] Ibn Sīnā, 284.
[48] Ibn Sīnā, 282-283.

that God is the essence of logic and rational thought. Echoing Aristotle's notion of God as "thought thinking itself,"[49] Ibn Sīnā describes God as "a pure intellect that intellectually apprehends Himself."[50] Viewing God in this manner allows Ibn Sīnā to argue that through engaging in syllogistic reasoning and logical contemplation, the philosopher contemplates God and comes closer to Him.

While Ibn Sīnā defines God as Pure Intellect, he also uses negative theology to assert that God is beyond all categorization as understood by human beings. This renders God ineffable, although Ibn Sīnā does not employ the techniques of unsaying or mystical paradox. As Michael Sells notes in his study of apophasis, negative theology has been a major theological response to the concept of the ineffable.[51] Ibn Sīnā states that Pure Intellect has "no genus, no quiddity, no quality, no quantity, no where, no when, no equal, no partner, and no opposite." Also, Pure Intellect has "no definition and [there is] no proof for it."[52] In other words, whereas God is the ultimate source of all rational intellection, His intellect is not subject to the limitations of the human intellect. This statement directly contradicts Sufi polemics against the *falāsifa*, which suggest that philosophers limit their conception of God to their own intellects. Viewing God in the manner illustrated above is key to Ibn Sīnā's epistemology because it posits that ultimate reality is intellectual in character, yet beyond all the usual categories of human knowledge.[53]

This understanding also suggests that the divine intellect is beyond language, which aligns with comments in Ibn Sīnā's *Epistle on the Essence of Prayer* (*Risāla fī māhiyyat al-ṣalāt*), which imply that pure reasoning is beyond speech. In a comment about the angels, beings

[49] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by John H. McMahon (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), 12.1075a.
[50] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 327.
[51] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 1.
[52] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 282.
[53] While he occasionally uses erotic metaphors for contact with the divine that are shared by the mystical discourses of other traditions, the majority of Ibn Sīnā's discussions of contact with God are framed in fully intellectual terms.

that Ibn Sīnā argues possess the purest degree of rationality below God, he states, "[Angels] have no speech or utterance; reasoning belongs to them especially, which is perception without sensing and communication without words."[54] For humans, Ibn Sīnā argues that the reasoning capacity also transcends both language and sense perception and is the means by which they are able to apprehend the divine. He states, "Man's relation to the world of Spirit is established by reasoning; speech follows after it. If a man possesses no knowledge of reasoning, he is incapable of expressing truth."[55] In *The Treatise on the Soul*, Ibn Sīnā writes, "The reasoning (speaking) power [*al-quwwa al-nāṭiqa*] is sometimes so fitted out in a few persons through vigils and conjunction with the universal mind as to be quite independent of taking refuge unto syllogistic argument and reflection." Furthermore, "it is sufficiently stored with inspiration and revelation to render it wholly absolved from such ordinary means as mental ratiocination."[56] Hinting at the post-cognitive state brought about through advanced reflection or meditation, he argues, "Its function is to wait for the revelation of truths, and to reflect with perfect intuition and unclouded wit upon the perception of subtle ideas, reading with the eye of inner vision the tablet of Divine Mystery and opposing the strenuous devices the causes of vain fancy."[57] Here, Ibn Sīnā seems to describe the rational faculty as bringing about a state of ineffability outside the scope of language, in direct contact with the divine. However, the word "*al-nātiqa*" implies that knowledge transcends normal language but is still in some sense communicable. Yet is interesting that Ibn Sīnā connects the process of attaining such knowledge to pure reason. Doing so complicates the Aristotelian notion that all rational knowledge must be communicable in

[54] Ibn Sīnā, *Avicenna on Theology*, translated by A.J. Arberry (Dubai: Kazi, 2007) 53.
[55] Ibn Sīnā, *Avicenna on Theology*, 53.
[56] Ibn Sīnā, A *Compendium on the Soul*, translated by Edward Abbot van Dyck (Ann Arbor: Reprints from the Collection of the University of Michigan Library, 1906), 76.
[57] Ibn Sīnā, *Compendium*, 53. The tablet could refer to a Hermetic symbol from the *Emerald Tablet* or perhaps the Islamic concept of *al-Lawh al-Maḥfūz* (the Preserved Tablet).

rational terms. However, if pure rationalism is beyond language, it follows that a rationalist mystical experience must transcend language.

Arguing that God is separate from matter and is fully rational yet indescribable allows Ibn Sīnā to argue that human beings are able to separate their intellects from matter in order to reach union with God. He argues that this process is brought about by cultivating the intellect through contemplation. Ibn Sīnā writes, "If we separated ourselves from the corporeal by studying our essence, we would become an intellectual world (*ṣārat ʿālaman ʿaqlīyan*), concordant with the true existents, true beauties, and true objects of bliss."[58] This passage seems to imply that Ibn Sīnā considers it possible to separate mind from body in the contemplative state, which aligns with David Blumenthal's theory that the philosophic mystic "ascend[s] from this world and, from there, to the realm of the divine."[59] This separation represents the complete perfection of the rational faculty, which is accomplished by means of the contemplation of our intellectual "essence" (*dhāt*). Through this process of contemplation, one comes to understand the divine intellect, which is the "proof" for our existence. It is through "studying our essence" that the philosopher can attain to ultimate perfection, separate himself from the corporeal, and become pure intellect. In other words, rather than stilling the mind, as Richard Jones suggests as the prerequisite for mystical insight, Ibn Sīnā argues that one must rigorously contemplate existence and perfect the powers of the rational intellect. Furthermore, this process of cultivation is not merely the natural extension of human consciousness but the realization of divine consciousness within oneself.

The goal of this intellectual mysticism is the union of the divine and human intellects. In a striking passage, Ibn Sīnā explains that in separating intellect from body, "The [human]

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[58] Ibn Sīnā, 298
[59] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 26.

intellect…conceives and apprehends the permanent, universal thing; it unites (*yuttaḥid*) with it, becoming in some manner identical with it, and comprehends it in its [essential] nature (*bi-kawnihi*), not in its outward aspect (*bi-ẓāhirihi*)."[60] This statement seems to fulfill the most basic criterion for mystical experience offered by theorists of mysticism from Schleiermacher to Forman: mystical experience involves union with the divine, as the "permanent, universal thing."[61] In order to achieve this union, the philosopher must thoroughly understand the divine nature. After reaching this advanced knowledge through contemplation, the philosopher unites with the Pure Intellect and apprehends ultimate reality, receiving the "flow of intellectual energy" of which Blumenthal speaks with respect to philosophic mysticism.[62] This experience allows the philosopher to attain direct awareness of Pure Intellect, such that by joining his intellect to the Pure Intellect, he becomes "in some manner identical with it."

Thus, in Ibn Sīnā's path of philosophic mysticism, the human intellect is transformed, taking on the characteristics of the divine intellect through the experience of intellectual union. The transfer of knowledge from the divine Pure Intellect to the human intellect occurs in a state of non-dual awareness. Echoing the classic Neoplatonic formulation of "Knowledge, the knower and the known are one," Ibn Sīnā states, "The intellect, the one who intellectually apprehends, and the object of intellectual apprehension are one or close to being one [and the same]."[63] This direct encounter with the divine is a post-cognitive, non-linguistic, and non-dual state in which the philosopher unites with the divine intellect. Ibn Sīnā goes on to assert that the rational faculty is the site of such union, being the "most perfect" of all the faculties of the soul. By uniting with the divine intellect, the philosopher gains intimate knowledge of God's nature, including aspects

[60] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 298.
[61] Ibn Sīnā, 298.
[62] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 26.
[63] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 351.

that are beyond the scope of human language. Because one comprehends (*yudrikuhu*) God's "essential nature," not his "outward nature," one can also surmise that the knowledge gained in this state is ineffable, making the experience "abstract and non-representational in character."[64] Linguistically, the verb *yudriku*, the active present Form IV of the Arabic root *d-r-k*, connotes the continuous effort to grasp, arrive at, perceive something, or be aware or conscious of something.[65] Thus, when the philosopher comprehends God's essential nature, he does not do so for just a single moment, but rather gains a lasting and transformative type of knowledge.

Ibn Sīnā describes this lasting transformation as the philosopher becoming "an intellectual world." He states that the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*) is perfected by "becoming an intellectual world that [is imbricated] with the form of the whole."[66] Put another way, the rational soul comes to reflect the whole of existence through an emanation of the Good (*al-khayr*). This emanation, which is also classically Neoplatonic, begins with the "Principle of the Whole" and proceeds through the spiritual and intellectual substances, eventually making its way to the intellect of the philosopher, which is imbued "with life and power, and remain[s] like that until [it] receive[s] the full extent in itself of the [form] of existence in its entirety."[67]

While the above description is somewhat complex, Ibn Sīnā's "intellectual world" seems to imply that knowledge of the whole order of existence is somehow imparted to the perfected rational soul of the philosopher. Following the experience of intellectual union, the philosopher's consciousness is transformed, such that he receives an intense emanation of knowledge. The content of this knowledge includes the most profound and deepest understanding of the existential realm. Significantly, Ibn Sīnā uses the phrase *mutarassiman fīhā ṣūrat al-kūll*

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[64] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 24.
[65] E.W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon, vol. 1* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 873.
[66] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 350.
[67] Ibn Sīnā, 350.

("[imbricated] with the form of the whole") when describing this state. The term "*mutarassim*" calls to mind the concept of an imprint or drawing.[68] This indicates the genuine transformation of the philosopher's mind through an experience of profound mystical perception. Ibn al-ʿArabī and later Sufis describe such an experience as the mirroring of ultimate reality.[69] However, in the case of Ibn Sīnā, it is perhaps more accurate to consider this transformation as the culmination of a process of continuous or living drawing, in which the form of the divine intellect is etched into the mind, leading to a new understanding of reality. The transformed intellect is one that is fully aware of ultimate reality and creation.

These important passages encapsulate both the process and the end result of Ibn Sīnā's philosophic mysticism. Through an advanced form of rational contemplation, the philosopher can transcend his bodily limitations and reach union with the divine intellect. Upon uniting with the Pure Intellect, he is transformed into an intellectual world in and of himself. His mind is reconfigured to become a reflection of the whole of existence. While parts of his description are difficult to comprehend, the passages discussed above seem to be the most concrete explanation that Ibn Sīnā gives of the experience of what Blumenthal calls the "flow of intellectual energy from the divine." Although the changes to the philosopher's mind that result from this experience of union are permanent, the state of pure, intellectual union itself cannot be sustained. Thus, in order to fully integrate the knowledge gained from philosophic mysticism, Ibn Sīnā returns to his original point in Book One— the complementary roles of theoretical and practical philosophy. He states, "Real happiness is not fully complete until it is reconciled with the practical part of the soul."[70] The philosopher must reconcile this experience of intellectual

[68] Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon, vol 1*., 1086

[69] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 178.

[70] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 354.

enlightenment with the conduct and ethics of his daily life before he can fully benefit from it. Ultimately, philosophy is, for Ibn Sīnā, a comprehensive way of life, which encompasses practical knowledge, spirituality, and the direct experience of ultimate reality. As mentioned above, the task of the true philosopher is to teach others, so that they do not go astray under the influence of sophists and other false philosophers. The goal of philosophic mysticism can thus be seen as the integration of the insights of purely intellectual metaphysics into a comprehensive system that includes ethics, practical philosophy, and politics.

VI. Phenomenological Descriptions and Their Role in Mystical Experience

Ibn Sīnā's phenomenological descriptions of mystical experience offer a fascinating avenue of discussion with respect to the theoretical issues raised in Chapter One. In some ways, his phenomenological descriptions of mystical experience seem to correspond closely with these theories. This is perhaps ironic, since Ibn Sīnā is not considered a mystic by most scholars of religion and philosophy. However, despite these apparent similarities, the correspondences between Ibn Sīnā's philosophic mysticism and the theories discussed in Chapter One appear to be limited to experience alone. Ibn Sīnā's descriptions of mystical experience do not correspond to religious studies theorists' accounts for *how* mystical experiences occur and their place in a larger mystical worldview. These differences get to the crux of the problematic of viewing mysticism as rooted in experience, the need to account for mysticisms that rely on hierarchical models rather than spontaneity, and the problem of subordinating so-called "extrovertive" mystical experiences to "introvertive" mystical experiences.

As demonstrated above, Ibn Sīnā is clear that the experience of intellectual union is non-dual. The philosopher loses his sense of subject-object awareness when his human mind attains

union with the divine mind.[71] Although Ibn Sīnā does not address the issue of ineffability theoretically in *The Healing*, it seems clear through both his use of negative theology and in his remarks on the non-dual state in *Allusions and Remarks* that he regards this state as beyond language. In *Allusions*, Ibn Sīnā argues, "Conversation does not capture [non-dual awareness], a phrase does not explicate it, and discourse does not reveal anything about it. No power responsive to language other than the imagination receives even a semblance of it."[72] This statement aligns with Ibn Sīnā's concept of pure rationality being beyond language, as attested to in other sources. Elsewhere he writes, "You must know that these invisible things are in no way the subject of speech. The only testimony for them is possible opinions to which one is led from intellectual considerations only – even though, if this appearance of invisible things occurs, it will be something reliable."[73]

Though he describes mystical experience is non-dual and beyond language, Ibn Sīnā indicates that the state of non-dual awareness is pleasurable. Perhaps paradoxically, he positions this state in direct opposition to the state of a person who is distracted by the pleasures of the body. He first considers the body and its desires, which make the rational soul "forget its essence like sickness makes someone forget corporeal necessities and the bliss of sweets and desire [for sweetness]. Instead, the sick have cravings for things that in truth are repulsive."[74] However, once the rational soul completely transcends the body, it reaches a type of awareness that brings tremendous pleasure. He compares the philosophic mystical experience to "that of the benumbed person made to taste and exposed to the most appetizing state." Such a person suddenly "has the

[71] Ibn Sīnā, 351.
[72] Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions*, translated by Shams Inati (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 89.
[73] Avicenna, 103.
[74] Ibn Sīnā, *The Metaphysics of* The Healing, 352.

numbness removed, experiencing momentous pleasure all at once."[75] These pleasures and benefits occur following the experience of non-dual awareness, and only those who are well trained and able to remain focused on the perfection of their rational soul are able to attain them.

Those who have had the experience of philosophic mysticism enjoy intense, spiritual pleasure, but Ibn Sīnā is clear that this pleasure is intellectual, not bodily. This is implied first by the title of the chapter in which this experience is discussed— "The State of Intellectual Pleasure" (*Ḥāl al-ladhdha al-ʿaqliyya*)— and later made clear through Ibn Sīnā's description of the experience. Ibn Sīnā explains, "This pleasure is not of the same type as sensory and animal pleasure, but a pleasure that is similar to the good state that belongs to the substances that are pure and living. It is higher than every other pleasure, and more exalted."[76] While the word *ladhdha* in the title comes from a verb that means "to enjoy" and thus carries the connotation of sensuous enjoyment, Ibn Sīnā distinguishes this state from other forms of pleasure and indicates that the enjoyment of what is pure and permanent is intellectual.[77] By becoming pure intellect, the philosopher discovers that there is "no beauty (*jamāl*) or magnificence (*bahāʾ*)" above God, and that pure intellect is "pure goodness (*al-khayriyya al-maḥḍa*), minus every negative thing and one in all [of its] aspects."[78] This realization seems to be communicated to the philosopher in a non-dual mystical state, and enjoyment and pleasure are the benefits gained from the experience of intellectual union.

In addition, Ibn Sīnā sometimes uses erotic language when describing mystical experiences, referring to God as the "greatest lover (*ʿāshiq*) and beloved (*maʿshūq*) and the

[75] Ibn Sīnā, 352. Marmura's translation.
[76] Ibn Sīnā, 351.
[77] E.W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon, vol. 2* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 2657.
[78] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 297; I have modified the translation slightly from the original.

greatest epicure and the object of enjoyment."[79] The Arabic root ʿ-*sh*-*q* denotes passionate love (like the Greek term *eros*) and is used in Sufi and Ishrāqī discourses to describe the love of God. Passionate love of the divine is also a key feature in a number of forms of mysticism and the use of this root is a significant indicator of mystical content in the works of Ibn Sīnā. The erotic metaphor emphasizes the union of the human and the divine and also points to the *pleasure* felt in this experience: the philosopher comes to see God as his lover and beloved, but also as an object of enjoyment and enjoyer of pleasurable things. As we shall see in the following chapters, this linking of mystical experience and pleasure will be echoed by Suhrawardī, and Ghazālī also offers erotic metaphors for the experience of "knowing" God. David Blumenthal notes that Maimonides too linked mystical experience to pleasure (*ladhdha*) and passionate love (*ʿishq*). According to Blumenthal, "The evidence is clear: passionate love (*ḥōshēq*/*ʿishq*) is a quantitative increment of intellectual love (*ʿahavā/maḥabba*); i.e., it grows out of rational thought and is an aspect of intellectual-contemplative worship." [80] However, despite this example of overlap with Sufism, Ibn Sīnā rarely uses Sufi terminology in *The Healing* to describe non-dual awareness.

As noted previously, Ibn Sīnā's phenomenological descriptions of mystical experience map onto religious studies theories of mysticism in illuminating ways. First, while Ibn Sīnā strongly asserts the ineffability and non-dualism of philosophical mystical experience, this experience would likely be considered "extrovertive" by W.T. Stace. While Ibn Sīnā's description seems to align for the most part with Stace's view of "introvertive" mystical experience (i.e., completely non-dual and free of all sensory, linguistic, and cognitive content), the fact that he does not view mystical experience as only an "inner subjective state of the soul," but sees it as also "having objective reference," would place his mysticism in the "extrovertive"

[79] Ibn Sīnā, 297.
[80] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 136

category.[81] Ibn Sīnā's descriptions of the intellectual joy or pleasure of the mystical experience would also contribute to this categorization, since Stace argues that only extrovertive experiences carry feelings of blessedness and happiness.[82] This would position Ibn Sīnā's view of philosophic mysticism as somehow dualistic according to Stace, which would be in direct contradiction to his own account of the experience. Further, it would make his experience less meaningful than introvertive mystical experience, which he is disqualified from in the first place because his philosophic mysticism is dependent on training the intellect rather than on "stilling the mind" or emptying it of all content.[83]

Unlike Stace, Robert Forman could perhaps accept Ibn Sīnā's notion that non-dual mystical experience can be pleasurable. In *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness,* Forman states that Pure Consciousness Experiences (PCE's) are "beneficial" for those who experience them.[84] In addition, Ibn Sīnā's description of non-dual experience and the transformation of the intellect appear similar to Forman's notion of the lasting changes to consciousness achieved in advanced mystical states. However, one cannot overlook the lack of correspondence between Forman's theory that one must *build* a mystical worldview from multiple PCEs and Ibn Sīnā's mystical system, in which one must seek union intellectually. Furthermore, while Ibn Sīnā's mystical path is content-driven, Forman's conception of mysticism is based on sudden experiences of pure consciousness without specific content.

Differences such as these indicate that a theory of mysticism for medieval Islam must go beyond experience alone and attend to the concepts of hierarchy, the mastery of skills or

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[81] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy,* 67.
[82] Stace, 79.
[83] Richard Jones also argues that mysticism is the result of "emptying the mind of conceptualizations, dispositions, emotions, and other differentiated content." (Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, 4).
[84] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 27-28.

knowledge, and the elite status of mystical knowledge, as described by figures such as Ibn Sīnā. The example of Ibn Sīnā's philosophic mysticism demonstrates that a phenomenological description of experience alone cannot account for an entire mystical worldview, nor does it precede a coherent mystical epistemology. While Forman suggests that one must have such experiences before articulating a mystical philosophy, Ibn Sīnā does not explain the concept of philosophic mysticism as *ex post facto*. Furthermore, for Ibn Sīnā, non-dual experience is the apex of his mysticism, not a starting point upon which he builds. *Pace* Stace, to suggest that Ibn Sīnā's mystical experience is somehow less profound than Stace's artificial model of introvertive mystical experience is to ignore both Ibn Sīnā's description of the experience and the philosophical and theological worldview to which it belongs. Finally, while the importance of the experience of intellectual union must not be downplayed, it is essential to recognize that Ibn Sīnā values the *insight* gained from this state far more than the experience itself.

VII. *Conclusion*

Ibn Sīnā's prolific and complex philosophical legacy has left him caught in an interpretive game of tug-of-war between those who wish to claim him as a strict rationalist philosopher and those who see him as a Sufi disguised as a Peripatetic philosopher. Both groups are partially correct. However, because of the limitations of their conceptions of "mysticism," they have been unable to see two important things: (1) that Ibn Sīnā's philosophy includes a mystical element, and (2) his mysticism is not Sufism. As Ibn Sīnā demonstrates in the *Metaphysics* section of *The Healing*, one need not abandon rationalism in order to have a non-dual, mystical experience. He argues that through intense philosophical training, the philosopher can separate his mind sufficiently from the material realm to intellectually apprehend the divine, and that this intellectual contact with the divine is experientially real. Moreover, this encounter imparts

fundamental knowledge to the philosopher that is expressed in a space beyond language and other dualisms. This experience is akin to Blumenthal's "flow of intellectual energy." Finally, the philosopher is tasked with sharing his knowledge with others by using syllogistic reasoning in a manner that corresponds to the tenets of Aristotelian philosophy.

While Ibn Sīnā uses erotic metaphors for his phenomenological descriptions of mystical experience, he does not describe divine union as an erotic experience. The passages in which he discusses pleasure and the erotic are unique in his discussions of non-dual experience, and he never abandons the emphasis on God's *intellect* as the ultimate object of apprehension and devotion. Perhaps most important, similarly to Maimonides, for Ibn Sīnā the process of gaining mystical experience is not based on Sufi practices or Sufi theological concepts. While Ibn Sīnā occasionally uses Sufi vocabulary to discuss mystical experiences, one should not confuse his mysticism with Sufism. As Blumenthal demonstrates for Maimonides, the process of reaching mystical experience is significantly different in philosophic mysticism. Using Sufi language to describe mystical experience is merely a way signaling that Ibn Sīnā's philosophic mysticism gave rise to similar experiences described by Sufis and Ishrāqī mystics. This use of comparison provides the necessary conceptual overlap to compare Sufism, philosophic mysticism, and Ishrāqī philosophy as "mystical epistemologies."

Through the foregoing analysis, a new interpretation of Ibn Sīnā emerges: he can now be seen as a rationalist philosopher whose transcendent view of the intellect leads to non-dual and ineffable— i.e., mystical— knowledge. This system of knowledge can be categorized as "philosophic mysticism." Reevaluating Ibn Sīnā's philosophy in light of his hitherto unrecognized mystical epistemology would be immensely beneficial to the study of Islamic philosophy. Moreover, this new framework of mystical epistemology might be extended to later

Muslim Peripatetics with a possible mystical side, such as the Andalusian philosophers Ibn Bajja (Avempace, d. 1138 CE) and Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185 CE). In the context of the current study, understanding Ibn Sīnā as a philosophic mystic yields a richer understanding of medieval Muslim mystical epistemology along with a broader theoretical perspective on the subject of ineffability.

Chapter Four:

"If One Knows God, His Tongue is Dulled"

Al-Ghazālī's Silence of Hierarchy

[Ghazālī] is an Ashʿarite with the Ashʿarites, a Sufi with the Sufis, and a philosopher with the philosophers.[1]
-Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Rushd

I. Introduction

With such lofty titles as "Proof of Islam" (*ḥujjat al-islām*) and "The Renewer of Religion," (*mujaddid al-dīn*) bestowed on him during his lifetime, Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī is one of the most towering figures in Islamic intellectual history. The most influential Sufi of his time, as a jurist and a theologian, Ghazālī had a profound impact on Islam, most notably through his magnum opus, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*). Ghazālī has drawn comparisons to St. Augustine through his influence as a theologian and his candid autobiography, *The Deliverer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*).[2] In *Deliverer*, Ghazālī presents himself as a person who tirelessly sought the truth and, after a long and difficult struggle, finally settled on Sufism as the best path to ultimate truth. Until recently, following the lead of W. Montgomery Watt, most scholars have tended to accept Ghazālī's self-presentation of his intellectual journey. However, as Ibn Rushd (d. 594/1198) quipped in the medieval period, Ghazālī's complex and sometimes contradictory thought lends itself to many competing interpretations.

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[1] Ibn Rushd, quoted in Alexander Trieger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 5.

[2] R.J. McCarthy, "Introduction," in al-Ghazālī. *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography*, al-Munqidh min al-Dalal, translated and annotated by R.J. McCarthy (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 1980), 22.

Although he has been considered by many observes to be a "standard" Sufi and therefore, an ideal representation of Islamic mysticism, Ghazālī's epistemology is rather unusual when considered alongside the epistemologies of his Sufi peers. He deemed Sufism the best path to truth (as compared to *falsafa*, *kalām*, and Ismāʾīlī esotericism), and he is often framed as an "axial" figure between the early phases of Sufism and later phases of advanced Sufi philosophy and theology. However, Ghazālī presents a number of ideas that seem at odds with the foundational Sufism of the so-called Baghdad School and the towering figures of the intellectual and poetic Sufi traditions who followed him. Ghazālī has also been seen as the first person to articulate a Sufi "orthodoxy" by systematizing Sufism in a way that agreed with Ashʿarite theology. However, Nile Green and others have recently challenged this narrative, arguing that Ghazālī was not the first Sufi to set standards for orthodoxy, and that by his time, Sufism had already become mainstream in Islamic practice.[3] A number of Sufis besides Ghazālī had responded to the Seljuk Empire's project to promote political and religious unity through a strict Ashʿarite orthodoxy. However, because Ghazālī was employed by the court of the Seljuk vizier Niẓām al-Mulk he has been seen by many scholars as a leader of this project and spent much of his career presenting theological justifications for it.[4]

By contrast with other Sufis of his period, Ghazālī did more than make Sufism more "palatable" to Ashʿarite orthodoxy; instead, he presented an epistemology that would not strictly be considered mysticism according to the parameters of this dissertation. While Ghazālī accepted ineffable states of knowledge in principle, as well as supra-rational states of knowledge, he made it unequivocally clear that God is ultimately unknowable and that *unio mystica* is impossible. As

[3] Green, *Global Introduction*, 55.

[4] Eric Ormsby, *Ghazālī: The Revival of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 2008), 4-5. See also, Chapter Four, "The Shifting Politics of al-Ghazālī," in Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam.*

outlined in Chapter Two, in Islamic Studies the acceptance of supra-rational knowledge is generally the marker of mysticism rather than "mystical experience." Yet making supra-rational knowledge the sole point of distinction does not allow for the more comprehensive notion of the category this dissertation seeks to advance. Ghazālī's use of silence and ineffability are particularly interesting when considered in light of that fact that he may not have been a mystic. Rather than representing mystical experience or non-dual knowledge by means of silence, Ghazālī's use of silence and ineffability is mostly linked to creating and upholding a Sufi epistemic hierarchy.

In order to demonstrate this aspect of Ghazālī's theology, I will first provide an overview and analysis of his epistemology in two of his classic Sufi works. These are, *The Loftiest Goal in the Explication of the Most Beautiful Names of God* (*al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*) and *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkat al-anwār*). Following this, I will examine Ghazālī's use of silence and ineffability in the context of his epistemic hierarchy. Finally, I will address the question of Ghazālī's relationship to mysticism and provide an argument for why he should not be considered a mystic (despite his avowed Sufism), given his suspicion of *unio mystica*.

II. *Two of Ghazālī's "Mystical" Works: The Dating and Scholarly Presentation of* The Niche of Lights *and* The Beautiful Names of God

Ghazālī wrote both the *Beautiful Names of God* and *The Niche of Lights* following his self-avowed "Sufi conversion" and after completing *The Revival of the Religious Sciences.* Because these works were written post-conversion and have explicitly Sufi themes, many scholars have viewed them as primarily "mystical works," though this stance has recently been challenged by Alexander Trieger, Frank Griffel, and Kenneth Garden. Both the *Niche of Lights* and *Beautiful Names of God* are generally classified as works of Sufi theology, dealing with metaphysics,

ontology, cosmology, epistemology, and spiritual practice. Their focused discussions of God, the possibility of knowing Him, and the nature of Sufi knowledge make them ideal for an analysis of Ghazālī's epistemology, his approach to ineffability, and the question of his mysticism.

A classic work of Sufi theology, the *Beautiful Names of God* focuses on the divine attributes. For each divine name, Ghazālī offers a theological account of how the attribute in question is manifested in God, followed by a practical discussion of how human beings can cultivate the same attribute on their own level. Maurice Bouyges places the work in what he calls Ghazālī's "retirement period (*période de retraite*)," from 1095-1106, and suggests that it was written prior to *The Niche of Lights*.[5] The work is divided into three parts: the first part concerns theoretical issues about names and the act of naming; the second part is a commentary on God's 99 names (based on Abū Hurayra's list from *ḥadīth* literature); and the third part discusses the reason for the given number of divine names. The second section of the book comprises the bulk of the text, wherein Ghazālī glosses the 99 names and describes the ways in which human beings can cultivate God's attributes. In contrast to other mystics and his Sufi predecessors, Ghazālī argues that humans cannot *fully* reflect the divine names; rather, human beings have a limited share of each attribute and ought to cultivate them to the extent possible. David Burrell and Nazih Daher link the theological content of the book to Sufi ritual practice, arguing that Ghazālī's inspiration for the text was likely from his experience reciting the 99 names during sessions of Sufi *dhikr* (ritual contemplation and invocation).[6] They also note the Sufi character of

[5] Maurice Bouyges, *Essai de Chronologie des oeuvres de al-Ghazali (Algazel*) (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1959), 46-47. Alexander Trieger follows Bouyges's dating of both works but calls this period Ghazālī's "middle period." (*Inspired Knowledge*, 10)

[6] David Burell and Nazih Daher, "Preface," in Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, translated by David Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1999), viii.

TheBeautiful Names of God, arguing that "[Ghazālī's debt to Sufism is great, and this work intends to register it explicitly."[7]

The Niche of Lights is a work of commentary on both the Light Verse of the Qurʾān (Q 24:35) and the so-called Ḥadīth of the Veils.[8] It discusses the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological dimensions of these two sources. Ghazālī assumes three epistemological levels of knowledge for his readers and offers a commentary on the verse and the *ḥadīth* for each level. Because of the supposedly more "advanced" (i.e., esoteric) nature of the Sufi teachings in *The Niche of Lights,* Bouyges concludes that it was one of Ghazālī's final works, likely written in 1106 or 1107 CE.[9] In this text, Ghazālī also discusses the theological principle of *tawḥīd* (divine oneness) and the Sufi notion of personally realizing God's unity.

Perhaps forgetting Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd's (d. 910 CE) famed definition of *tawḥīd*, David Buchman suggests that *The Niche of Lights* is "perhaps the earliest attempt to present theological and philosophical discussions of *tawḥīd*" as it relates to divine being, combined with its realization through piety and Sufi practice.[10] In his Introduction to the critical edition and

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[7] Burell and Daher, "Preface," viii.

[8] The Light Verse reads as follows:

> God is the Light of the heavens and earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star) kindled from the Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil wellnigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light; (God Guides to His Light whom He will.) (And God strikes similitudes for men, and God knows everything.
>
> A.J. Arberry, trans. *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Simon and Schuster Press, 1955), 24:35.

The Ḥadīth of the Veils:

> God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were he to lift them, the august glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceived him.
>
> (David Buchman, "Introduction," in al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic texts translated, introduced, and annotated* by David Buchman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), xvii.

[9] Bouyges, *Essai de Chronologie*, 65-66.

[10] Buchman, "Introduction," xxxvi. Junayd's influential definition of *tawḥīd* is, "the isolation of the eternal from the temporal." (Carl Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 30). Junayd also made extensive comments on how humans can experientially realize *tawḥīd*. See ʿAli Hassan Abdel-

translation of *The Niche of Lights*, Buchman writes that Ghazālī wrote the book "from a Sufi perspective" and devotes a full section of the Introduction to contextualizing this work from a Sufi perspective.[11] He argues that the work was written in the late period of Ghazālī's life when he "began following Sufism seriously"; hence, he concludes, all works from this period are Sufi in character, largely following Ghazālī's self-presentation.[12] Likely influenced by the Traditionalist scholarship outlined in Chapter Two, Buchman states that Sufism is not a "secondary 'mystical'" aspect of Islam, but rather the "core or essence of Islamic teachings."[13]

Because *The Niche of Lights* was, as Bouyges argued, an "advanced" work of Sufism, its overt philosophical content presented a problem for earlier Western scholars of Ghazālī, who viewed mysticism as non-philosophical. For example, W. Montgomery Watt argued that the third chapter of the book was a forgery because it contained a number of Neoplatonic philosophical ideas, which Watt considered incompatible with Ghazālī's orthodox Sufism.[14] Others, such as Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, suggested that Ghazālī the Sufi did not abandon *all* principles of Neoplatonism, but only those that directly contradicted orthodox Islamic doctrines.[15] Both Watt and Lazarus-Yafeh viewed Sufism as equivalent to mysticism, using the terms interchangeably at points.[16] In her classic 1975 work, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, Lazarus-Yafeh argues that Ghazālī "experienced authentic mystic ecstasies and cherished deep mystical views about God, man cosmos, gnosis, etc." However, she quickly qualifies her statement by

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Kader, *The Life Personality, and Writings of al-Junayd: A Study of a Third/Ninth Century Mystic* (London: Luzac & Company, 1962).

[11] Buchman, xviii.

[12] Buchman, xv-xvi.

[13] Buchman, xxiii.

[14] W. Montgomery Watt, "A Forgery in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt*?" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1952: 24-45 and *A Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazālī* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1963), 150.

[15] Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 282.

[16] Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 134, Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, 355, respectively.

noting that Ghazālī's mysticism was more "social" than other mystics of his time.[17] Watt considered both Sufism and mysticism epistemologically, arguing that Ghazālī saw Sufis primarily as an elite intellectual class that possessed the best form of Islamic knowledge.[18] Moreover, his biographical account of Ghazālī's life was directly in line with Ghazālī's own in *The Deliverer from Error*: Ghazālī was a sincere, orthodox Sufi who taught himself philosophy, subsequently rejected it, and, following his Sufi conversion, abandoned philosophical content entirely in his works.

Recently, a number of scholars have questioned this reading of Ghazālī. Richard Frank was the first to reassess the image of Ghazālī as a sincere Sufi in *Creation and the Cosmic System: al-Ghazālī and Avicenna* (1992). In this work, Frank asserts that Ghazālī was in much greater debt to Ibn Sīnā's philosophy than previously imagined (or admitted by Ghazālī himself). Ghazālī's use of Avicennian philosophy was overlooked, Frank argues, because of his self-presentation in the *The Deliverer from Error* and his critique of philosophy in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers.*[19] Frank's provocative thesis sparked a spirited debate and was challenged by Michael Marmura and others.[20] More recently, Frank Griffel and Alexander Treiger have offered more sustained arguments for the influence of Avicennian philosophy on Ghazālī's thought.[21] Treiger argues that not only was Ghazālī trained in Peripatetic philosophy from a much earlier age than previously thought, but that he perhaps maintained Peripatetic views and later "repackaged" his works following *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.[22] Further, he argues that

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[17] Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, 388-389.

[18] Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 85.

[19] Richard Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: al-Ghazālī and Avicenna* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992).

[20] Michael E. Marmura, "Al-Ghazālī and Ashʿarism Revisited," in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 12 (2002): 91-110. See also: Michael E. Marmura, "Ghazālian Causes and Intermediaries," in *JAOS* 115 (1995): 89-100.

[21] Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 5.

[22] Treiger, 3.

Ghazālī continued to advance Peripatetic philosophical principles in his later works by changing the technical language but not the philosophical content.[23] In *The First Islamic Reviver* (2014), Kenneth Garden makes the radical claim that the *Revival* is not a work of Sufism.[24] Garden suggests that Ghazālī remained politically aware throughout his life and questions Ghazālī's commitment to Sufi ideals. As a result of this revisionist scholarship, the nature and extent of Ghazālī's Sufism have been questioned perhaps more than any other prominent Sufi. However, such questioning stems primarily from the philosophical logic of Ghazālī's works and his alleged "worldliness." These criticisms assume the "mysticism as private experience" paradigm discussed in Chapter One, and the consequences of this approach will be examined further on in this chapter.

III. Ghazālī's Intellectual Hierarchy

The Beautiful Names of God and *The Niche of Lights* present numerous examples of classical Sufi epistemology, tempered by uneasiness with the concept of union with God. While Ghazālī largely conforms to prior Sufi epistemological principles concerning the hierarchy of knowledge, he diverges from his predecessors in two significant ways. First, he grants rational knowledge a higher status than most Sufis do. Second, and most notably for the present work, he is less willing to commit to the foundational view that human beings are capable of direct contact with the divine. Ghazālī clearly asserts that humans are not capable of fully knowing the divine nature and states that divine union is not possible in a meaningful sense.

Ghazālī's epistemology in *The Niche of Lights* and *The Beautiful Names of God* is first and foremost hierarchical. While W. Montgomery Watt and Marshall G. S. Hodgson have noted

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[23] Treiger, 6.

[24] Kenneth Garden, *First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī and His Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10.

that by and large, *all* Islamic knowledge is hierarchical, Sufi epistemology is framed around the notion that only the most elite Sufi adepts will gain ultimate knowledge. This is because, as Watt puts it, Sufis viewed their path as one that ends in an "insight into the divine truth comparable to the prophets."[25] Indeed, hierarchy is present in the earliest articulations of Sufi knowledge. For example, when discussing mystical insight, Junayd writes, "Such inspiration is granted to few, it is withheld and reined and kept back from most. The most learned [in rational knowledge] are sealed off from this knowledge, the comprehension of the greatest doctors cannot attain it."[26] Junayd's comments on Sufi knowledge as "sealed off" from rational minds demonstrates what would become a standard feature of Sufi epistemology: the assertion of the superiority of supra-rational knowledge sources. This limitation of access to ultimate knowledge is reinforced by a hierarchy that both separates Sufis from non-Sufis and posits a series of levels within the Sufi community itself. Hodgson argues that while Sufism's use of hierarchy was not without precedent, it was different from other Islamic notions of hierarchy and would have "horrified early Muslims," in that it assumed that "religious knowledge itself must be graded."[27]

Similar to Junayd, Ghazālī asserts that God is in control over who is able to attain supra-rational insight and that this insight is limited to a select few. In *The Niche of Lights*, he posits three basic distinctions between seekers. First, he separates his commentary on the Light Verse into three levels: (1) an exegesis for the "common people" (*al-ʿawāmm*); (2) an exegesis for the "elites" (*al-khawāṣṣ*); and (3) an exegesis for the "elites of the elites" (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*).[28] Later on in the work, he adds nuance to these levels, particularly when discussing the Ḥadīth of

[25] Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 85.
[26] Abdel-Kader, *al-Junayd*, 128.
[27] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam II: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 190-191.
[28] Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī. *The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic Text Translated, Introduced, and Annotated* by David Buchman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 13. Page numbers refer to the Arabic pages and all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

the Veils. He suggests that people without religion are veiled by "pure darkness" (*bi-l-mujarrad al-ẓulma,* and elsewhere, (*bi-l-maḥḍ al-ẓulma*); people who are confused about religion are veiled by "light combined with darkness" (*nūr maqrūn bi-ẓulma*); however, the elite are veiled by "pure light" (*bi-l-nūr al-maḥḍ*).[29] While the people of total darkness and the people of light and darkness are below the ranks of the Sufis, the epistemic rank of the people of "pure light" begins with the knowledge of "people who come to know the meaning of the attributes through verification," and progresses through the stations of the Sufi path until one reaches the elite of the elite. [30] Ghazālī argues that prophets inhabit the highest station of knowers, beyond even the "elite of the elite" of the Sufis.

While as an Ashʿarite Ghazālī insists that all Muslims are obliged to strive for knowledge, he argues that God metes out knowledge in a manner that is appropriate for each knower. Those with more knowledge should be cautious when describing their knowledge to others but should not hold back from a person who is prepared for advanced knowledge. To prove his point, in the Introduction to *The Niche of Lights*, Ghazālī cites the *ḥadīth*, "He who bestows knowledge on the ignorant wastes it, whereas he who withholds it from the worthy has done wrong."[31] He goes on to say, "And the keys to hearts (*al-qulūb*) are in the hand of God. He will open them if he wills, in the way he wills, and how he wills."[32] This assertion is in accord with the beliefs of Junayd and other Sufis, who make it clear that one cannot force God to grant knowledge to anyone. It also upholds the notion that the most direct knowledge from God will be supra-rational in form. Because knowledge from God is supra-rational, it is difficult to gain, which further serves to bolster Ghazālī's intellectual hierarchy. In general, Ghazālī describes the

[29] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 45-53.
[30] Ghazālī, 50.
[31] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 2. Buchman's translation.
[32] Ghazālī, 2.

process of acquiring knowledge as a series of stages, which proceeds from sensory knowledge to rational knowledge, ending with experiential knowledge of the sublime levels of being.[33] He describes this experiential knowledge in the following way:

> [Experiential knowledge of the sublime levels of being includes] flashes of the hidden (*lawāʾiḥ al-ghayb*), the principles of the other world, and a portion of the types of knowledge (*maʿārif*) [that encompass] the dominion of the heavens and the earth; indeed, [it is] lordly knowledge (*al-maʿārif al-rubbaniyya*), which is reached neither by the intellectual soul (*al-rūḥ al-ʿaqlī*) nor by the speculative [soul] (*al-fikrī*).[34]

Thus, for Ghazālī, ultimate knowledge is out of reach of the rational intellect but is conveyed in "flashes" to those who are worthy of receiving it. Overall, the description given above seems akin to Blumenthal's concept of a "flow of intellectual energy," or the "noetic quality" of mystical experience referred to by William James.[35] Such experiences are transient yet they impart both the *contents* of knowledge and holistic knowledge. This sublime type of knowledge, though later subject to the rational intellect, is not reached through rational inquiry. These experiences of God, while not direct and unmediated would also be the markers of mysticism according to Caner Dagli and other scholars of Sufism.[36]

In *The Beautiful Names of God*, Ghazālī argues that such knowledge is not only difficult to acquire but it is also difficult to comprehend. This is because advanced knowledge causes the mind to become "bewildered" and "the perception of its reason is lowered."[37] Later on in the text, he states that no created thing can have true knowledge of God's essence, save through "bewilderment (*bi-l-ḥayra*) and astonishment (*bi-l-dahsha*)."[38] Perhaps more importantly, he

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[33] This is likely a reference to *ʿilm ladunī*, a Qurʾānic concept of direct knowledge in the highest stage. See: Q. 18:65, "We had taught him [Khiḍr] knowledge proceeding from Us." (Arberry, translator, *The Koran Interpreted*)

[34] Ghazālī, 37.

[35] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 21. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 300.

[36] Dagli, *Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Islamic Intellectual Culture*, 14.

[37] Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā* (Beirut: Dār al-Mishriq, 1971), 11. All translations are my own.

[38] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 54.

states, "The truth of this matter is almost self-contradictory (*yakādu yukhālifu*) [with respect to] what was [thought] up to this point, [on the part of] the majority."[39] Through his insistence that ultimate knowledge is not only difficult to attain but also potentially damaging, Ghazālī implies that such knowledge is only available to those who have undertaken strict training. As Hava Lazarus-Yafeh has argued, this protective impulse stems from the perceived obligation of the intellectual and spiritual elites to keep their knowledge out of the hands of the "masses," who could easily become confused and, through misunderstanding Sufi teachings, fall into aberrant practices.[40] This view also reinforces the Sufi notion of hierarchy and echoes David Blumenthal's observation that mystical knowledge "must flow out of a well-organized hierarchy which the mystic must navigate to arrive at mystical awareness."[41] Ghazālī's intellectual elitism and emphasis on disciplined training stands in contrast with certain religious studies models of mysticism, such as that of Robert Forman, which assume that the mystical worldview is built directly out of discrete experiences.

Despite arguing that *ultimate* knowledge is supra-rational, Ghazālī holds a more favorable view of rational knowledge than other Sufis.[42] In *The Niche of Lights*, he presents an image of the intellect that is similar to Ibn Sīnā's concept of the ascent of the intellect described in the previous chapter. Ghazālī argues that the human intellect is "modeled from the light of God and similarity is not absent from this model; however, it does not ascend to the peak of

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[39] Ghazālī, 12.

[40] Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, 355.

[41] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 24.

[42] While views on rational knowledge vary among Sufis, by and large the consensus is that regardless of how useful (or not) it is, one must transcend rational knowledge to reach ultimate insight. Recall Junayd's statement that, "The most learned [in rational knowledge] are sealed off from [Sufi] knowledge, the comprehension of the greatest doctors cannot attain it." Later, Shams-i Tabrīzī would dismissively call philosophers "silly" (*Me and Rumi*, 27). Ibn al-ʿArabī claimed that Sufi knowledge was closed off from "the men of reasoning and the masters of thinking," because "mental reasoning will never grant it." (*The Ringstones of Wisdom*, translated by Caner K. Dagli (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2004), 135.

equivalence."[43] Although Ghazālī does not believe that the human intellect fully takes on the characteristics of the divine intellect, he offers an account of the ascent of the intellect that is similar to Ibn Sīnā's. He argues that the intellect can remove itself from "the veils of illusion and imagination (*ghashāwat al-wahm wa-l-khayāl*)," and that if this occurs, "it is not possible for one to be mistaken."[44] However, Ghazālī immediately qualifies this statement by saying that such a removal is extremely difficult to accomplish.[45] Nevertheless, it remains possible for one to have knowledge of realities that are beyond the reach of reason:

> It is not [normally] conceivable to see, in the state of friendship [with God], something that is beyond reason by virtue of its impossibility (*yuqṣī al-ʿaql bi-istiḥālatihi*). However, it is conceivable that one can see something that reason does not reach, meaning that [the intellect alone] will not keep up with it.[46]

Much like a contemporary philosopher of mysticism, Ghazālī seems to imply in the passage above that mystical states can be subject to rational analysis after one returns to normal consciousness. He seems to argue that the rational faculty, after being purified through mystical experience, is *incapable* of making a mistaken judgment. This is a rather unusual position. For example, Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi's (d. 672/1273) teacher, Shams-i Tabrīzī (d. 646/1248) argued (perhaps referring to Ghazālī's view), "It is said, 'Intellect makes no mistakes,' but [the person] was mistaken when saying 'It makes no mistakes.'"[47]

However, despite his apparently high regard for the human intellect and its potential, later on in the same text Ghazālī invokes the classic Sufi polemic against rationalist philosophers. He chastises rationalist thinkers, stating, "Oh you who are obsessed with the world of the intellect!

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[43] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 6.
[44] Ghazālī, 9.
[45] Ghazālī, 9.
[46] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 170.
[47] Shams-i Tabrīzī, *Me and Rūmī*, 636.

There is, beyond the intellect, a greater [state] and in it, [things] are made manifest that are not made manifest in the intellect (*yaẓharu fīhi mā lā yaẓharu fī-l-ʿaql*)."[48] Ghazālī also connects this argument to the Sufi trope of the "arrogance" of the philosophers. He writes, "Do not believe that perfection ends with yourself."[49] With this statement, he not only reestablishes the hierarchy of knowledge (in which Sufis attain the highest level) but he also accuses the philosophers of limiting their understanding of God and His perfection to their own intellects by their belief that rational knowledge leads to ultimate knowledge. While Chapter Three has demonstrated that this criticism is a mischaracterization of Ibn Sīnā's view of the intellect, it was commonly held among Sufis. Invoking this argument perhaps allows Ghazālī to appear in line with Sufi thought, despite holding a more positive view of the intellect than his fellow Sufis. While he generally conforms to Sufi epistemology, there is one major exception: the ability to know God directly and to attain true mystical union with Him.

IV. Ghazālī on the Impossibility of Mystical Union

While Ghazālī's theory of supra-rational knowledge indicates an overall acceptance of the classical Sufi epistemology and worldview, he diverges significantly from his Sufi predecessors and contemporaries on the question of divine union. Early Sufis argued that divine union and direct knowledge of God were possible and used various technical terms to discuss the concept of union with God.[50] In contrast, Ghazālī argued that while perhaps such experiences felt like union, true union was impossible. In Ghazālī's epistemology, the peak of human capacity is to

[48] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 37.
[49] Ghazālī, 37.
[50] Some of the most commonly used Sufi terms for divine union are, *jamʾ* (union/coupling), *wiṣāl* (union/merging), and *ittiṣāl* (uniting/joining). According to John Renard, *jamʾ* was used is used "in juxtaposition to separation and as a development occurring after ecstasy." (*Historical Dictionary of Sufism* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), 244). If one is considering non-dual experience, one could also include the state of *fanāʾ* in this category, as it translates to "annihilation" or "extinction" of the self in the Divine.

reach supra-rational or epistemic contact with God, but that the Sufi and the divine could not fully unite in *unio mystica*. His acceptance of supra-rational knowledge renders him a "mystic" by current theory in Islamic Studies. This has perhaps led scholars to overlook the fact that Ghazālī plainly asserted that union with God was impossible, rejecting the claims of his fellow Sufis and putting him in conflict with broader theories of mysticism.

The possibility of union with God seems to have been a standard feature of Sufi epistemology. However, there was considerable debate among Sufis about how one ought to contextualize, speak, and write about such an experience. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) and Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī are two of the most famous examples of Sufis who claimed to reach divine union and whose words sparked rigorous debate. In a state of ecstasy, Ḥallāj exclaimed "I am the Truth (*anā al-Ḥaqq*)," and Abū Yazīd said "Glory to Me, how great is my station!"[51] Ḥallāj was the more famous of the two because of the immediate consequence of his remarks. By calling himself one of the names of God (*al-Ḥaqq*), he was accused of saying that he was God, and was put to death as a consequence of this statement. The story of Ḥallāj's death and execution was made famous by Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭar (d. ca. 1220 CE). While the most accurate accounts of Ḥallāj's trial indicate that his execution was for political reasons, the story took root in Sufi lore, with Ḥallāj drawing both praise and criticism from his fellow Sufis.[52] According to Louis Massignon, following Ḥallāj's death, "Moderate Sufi writers subsequently began to reserve a chapter of their manuals for the special heretical dangers when one is exposed by mysticism."[53]

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[51] The Ḥallāj quote is preserved in: Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭar, *Kitāb tadkhriāt al-awliyāʾ*, edited by R.A. Nicholson (Tehran: Ishtisharat-i Markazi, n.d.), 2, 122-123. The Bisṭāmī quote can be found in: Rūzbihān Baqlī, *Shahr-i shathiyyāt*, edited by Henry Corbin (Tehran: Departement d'Iranologie de l'Institut Franco-Iranien, 1966), 134-135. For a fuller analysis of these statements, see Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*.

[52] Ernst, *Shambhala Guide*, 71.

[53] Massignon, *Essay on the Origins*, 80-81.

While some Sufis critiqued Ḥallāj and Bāyazīd's expressions, most Sufis generally accepted the validity of their experience. Ghazālī, however, argued that such union was impossible. This idea is explored most fully in the *The Beautiful Names of God*. He opens the work by praising God, "who cuts the wings of reasoning before they reach His greatness." He goes on to say that God "makes the way to knowledge of Him (*sabīl ilā maʿrfatihi*) through the incapacity to know Him (*bi-l-ʿajaz ʿan maʿrfatihi*).[54] This may look like typical mystical rhetoric through the use of paradox, or an assertion that human intellects cannot fully know God but that God can only be known in non-rational ways. This statement also follows Raoul Mortley's assertion that mystical insight "will be found to lie in negative discourse, and language will become a means of its own self-removal."[55] Mortley further argues, "The negative is crucial in the issue of how to express the reality thus nominated by unity."[56] The use of negative theology also adheres to Michael Sells's assertion that apophatic discourse is one of the three main rhetorical strategies employed to deal with describing an ineffable reality.[57] In other words, Ghazālī's use of the language of negative theology serves to emphasize God's unity and his paradoxes suggest that human beings *can* know Him, albeit through the counterintuitive way of

[54] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 11. *Maʿrifa* is often used as a technical term among Sufis for a type of knowledge that is more profound than rational knowledge. It is generally used in contrast to *ʿilm*, for rational or conventional knowledge. The term is rather difficult to translate. Some scholars, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, render it as "gnosis." (Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to Present*, 34) John Renard calls *maʿrifa* "mystical knowledge," and *ʿilm* "discursive knowledge." (Renard, *Historical Dictionary*, 139) Louis Massignon indicates that *maʿrifa* carried the connotation of "experimental wisdom," in Aḥmed ibn 'Āṣim Anṭākī's (d. 220/835) usage, and "wisdom," in Ibn Karrām's (d. 255/ 855) non-mystical school of ascetics in Khorasan. (Massingon, *Essay on the Origins*, 154-155, and 171, respectively) While a distinction should be made between *maʿrifa* and *ʿilm*, the above terms have implications that are not confined to Sufi literature. Related roots, including *ʿirfān*, have also been rendered as "mysticism," especially in Shī'ism. Related specifically to al-Ghazālī, Alexander Treiger renders *maʿrifa* as "cognition," and notes that Ghazālī does not seem to use the term in an exclusively mystical sense. (Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 33-34). In this dissertation, I translate *maʿrifa* simply as "knowledge," and allow the context to determine if it refers to mystical knowledge.

[55] Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence: The Rise and Fall of Logos* (Bonn: Hanstein Verlang GmbH, 1986), 132.

[56] Mortley, *From Word to Silence* 158.

[57] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 2. See his extended discussion of apophatic discourse in chapter 1, "Awakening without Awakener: Apophasis in Plotinus," 14-33 and "Apophasis of Desire and the Burning of Marguerite Porete," 116-145, and "Porete and Eckhart: The Apophasis of Gender," 180-205.

realizing that they cannot know God in any normal way. His paradoxical statements could also have been meant to render the epistemic shift that Robert Forman argues mystical rhetoric intentionally elicits.[58] Indeed, other Sufis have made similar statements about the ultimate unknowability of God, including Ibn al-ʿArabī and ʿAṭṭār.[59] However, Ghazālī makes several statements regarding direct knowledge of God that are considerably less ambiguous.

Throughout the *The Beautiful Names of God*, Ghazālī emphasizes the gulf of difference between human beings and God. When discussing the human "share" of each divine name, he is clear that humans cannot fully take on any divine characteristic, since this would require one of three things: (1) for God to transfer the attribute directly to the person; (2) for the person's essence to assimilate itself into God's essence through "unification" (*ittiḥād*) of the names until the two essences are "identical" (*ḥattā yakūnu huwa huwa*); or (3) for the person to take on the attributes through "ontological inheritance" (*ḥulūl*).[60] Ghazālī dismisses all three of these possibilities, but is most emphatic in his rejection of the second possibility. He argues that a person who claims he has achieved identification with God is spiritually immature, and that such a statement is "not the opinion of those whose are of sound reason."[61] Furthermore, Ghazālī asserts that claiming identification with God is even more unseemly for "those who have received the distinction of unveiling" (*bi-khaṣāʾiṣ al-mukāshfāt*).[62] By using the phrase "unveiling" for direct knowledge of God, Ghazālī directly challenges his fellow Sufis. According

[58] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 107.

[59] Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Meccan Revelations vol 1*, edited Michel Chodkiewicz, translated by William C. Chittick and James Morris, (New York: Pir Press, 2002), 32. Farīḍ al-Dīn Aṭṭār, *The Conference of the Birds*, translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick David (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), 9.

[60] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 163.

[61] Ghazālī, 162.

[62] Ghazālī, 162. In their translation, David Burell and Nazih Daher render *mukāshafāt* as "mystical vision," (*Ninety-Nine Names*, 150).

to Ghazālī, if a person has achieved mystical insight from unveiling, he ought to be even more aware that unification with God is not possible.

Ghazālī not only dismisses the possibility of mystical union or "identification," but he also rejects the famous claims of union by Ḥallāj and Abū Yazīd. He argues that if someone claims that "a servant becomes the Lord, these words are self-contradictory (*mutanāqiḍ*)."[63] In *The Niche of Lights*, Ghazālī asserts that expressions like Ḥallāj's "I am the Truth" or Abū Yazīd's "Glory to me!" are only made in a state of intoxication, and that "the words of lovers in a state of intoxication ought to be kept secret and not spoken of (*yuṭwā wa lā yuḥkā*)."[64] This aligns with prior Sufi critiques that one should conceal ecstatic utterances. In the *The Beautiful Names of God*, Ghazālī suggests that such statements may also be the result of imprecise speech, calling them, "the path of vagueness and license suitable [only] for Sufis and poets."[65] Elsewhere, he suggests that perhaps Ḥallāj really meant, "I exist *through* the Truth (*anā bi-l-ḥaqq*)" rather than, "I am the Truth." Such statements seem to support Marshall Hodgson's claim that Ghazālī's critique of Ḥallāj "lay not in the sentiment itself, which represented a legitimate Sufi *ḥāl* state, but in having uttered it publicly where it could confuse common people."[66] However, this assertion is unsustainable when one takes into account the totality of Ghazālī's comments on Ḥallāj and Abū Yazīd in *The Niche of Lights* and the *The Beautiful Names of God*.

Ghazālī's critiques of Ḥallāj and Abū Yazīd go far beyond rebuking them for a lack of restraint; rather, he asserts that they mischaracterized their mystical experience by calling it "union." Immediately after saying that Ḥallāj really meant "I exist through the Truth," Ghazālī objects that such a reading is in fact implausible, "because the expression does not bespeak [this]

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[63] Ghazālī, 164.
[64] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 18. The literal translation is "folded up."
[65] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 160.
[66] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam II*, 191.

meaning."[67] In *The Niche of Lights*, he argues that when the intoxication of mystical experience subsides those with true knowledge "know (*ʿarafū*) that they did not actually experience unification with Ultimate Reality; rather, it was merely a likeness of unification (*shibh al-ittiḥād*)."[68] In a simile that he repeats in the *The Beautiful Names of God*, Ghazālī suggests that those who feel like they have attained union with God are similar to a person who looks in a mirror and is unable to see the mirror; he is not having an unmediated experience, but merely seeing his own reflection.[69] Such critiques of the statements and interpretations of previous Sufis reinforce Ghazālī's original point: actual union with the divine is not possible. He seems worried that Sufis had idolized ecstatic Sufis like Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī to the extent that they accepted claims of union without questioning the logic of their statements. Ghazālī cautions his readers not to "effuse over men so [as a result] one affirms that which is impossible (*yuṣaddiqu bi-l-muḥāl*)."[70]

Ghazālī's assertion that unification with God is impossible is coupled with a tantalizing paradox: he argues that experiential knowledge is the only way to truly *know* God, but that this path is "closed" to human beings. In the beginning of the *The Beautiful Names of God*, Ghazālī compares the question of "How can human beings know God?" to a young boy or an impotent man asking what sexual intercourse is like. According to Ghazālī, there are two ways to teach the child: first, is to explain it by using comparisons and second, to allow the boy to grow up and experience intercourse for himself. Ghazālī argues that the first method will produce inadequate knowledge because all likely comparisons (such as the pleasure of eating sweets) will fall short

[67] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 139.
[68] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 18.
[69] Ghazālī, 18 and *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 166.
[70] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 168.

of communicating what intercourse is actually like.[71] He argues, "And like this, in knowing God, there are two ways. The first of the two is insufficient (*qāṣir*) and the other is closed off (*masdūd*)."[72] According to Ghazālī, the "insufficient" way would be to compare God's attributes to attributes in humans. However, this would be similar to the comparisons that one might give to a child or an impotent man to describe intercourse. Ghazālī concludes that just as sexual intercourse is actually nothing like eating sweets, God's attributes are nothing like our own.[73] It would seem that Ghazālī is presenting here an articulation of the Sufi concept of experiential knowledge by means of "taste" (*dhawq*). However, he goes on to say, "And the second way [of vainly seeking to know God], *which is closed off,* is by waiting for all the lordly attributes to come to one such that one becomes a "lord" himself (*yantaẓiru an tuḥṣala al-ṣifāt al-rubūbiyya kulluhā ḥattā yaṣīru rabban*)."[74]

Ghazālī clearly asserts that the experiential knowledge of God is superior to knowledge by comparison, but that true unification with God is impossible. Here, he shifts the metaphor to that of the impotent man. Unlike the young boy, the impotent man cannot wait to experience sexual intercourse for himself; thus, he can never truly understand it. Similarly, human beings can never know God intimately. Thus, when Ghazālī says that humans must go through the experience of "the incapacity to know [God] (*bi-l-ʿajaz ʿan maʿrfatihi*)" to attain knowledge of Him, he uses the word *ʿajaz*, which may also be translated as "impotence."[75] Ghazālī states,

> This path [intimate knowledge or true union] is closed, because it is inconceivable for one to be transformed [in this way] for those other than God, Most High in reality. This is the path to indubitable knowledge (*al-maʿrifa al-muḥaqqaqa*), and

[71] Ghazālī, 50.
[72] Ghazlai, 51.
[73] Ghazālī, 51,
[74] Ghazālī, 52. Emphasis added.
[75] Ghazālī, 11.

> there is no other [path]. However, it is completely closed off (*masdūd qaṭʿan*) except for God, Most High and Holy.[76]

What, then, is true knowledge of God? Ghazālī argues, "The knowledge of those who truly know God (*maʿrifa al-ʿārifīn*) is that is that they are incapable of truly knowing (*ʿajazuhum ʿan al-maʿrifa*). And their knowledge of the Truth is that we do not know Him [completely], and we cannot know Him [as such]."[77] By maintaining the Ashʿarite theological concept of a fully transcendent and voluntaristic God, Ghazālī's notion that mystical union is impossible is logically sound. While the *ultimate* knowledge of God would entail unmediated knowledge of Him, His transcendence makes this impossible. Despite this seemingly rigid stance on the knowledge of ultimate reality, Ghazālī allows for some cracks to break through his epistemological framework by hinting that the *potential* of human knowledge is limitless, even if the reality of full knowledge is impossible to attain.

Ghazālī's epistemology leaves the scholar of mysticism with many questions. While it maintains the features of previous Sufi epistemologies in terms of hierarchy, training, and even the experience of ineffable states, Ghazālī dismisses the possibility of true union with God. His unequivocal statements – including the direct rejection of famous Sufis' claims to have achieved union – seem to call into question whether the label "mystic" is appropriate for Ghazālī, despite the fact that he called himself a Sufi. The way that Ghazālī uses rhetorical silence and the role of ineffability in his epistemology will help address these questions.

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[76] Ghazālī, 53.
[77] Ghazālī, 54.

V. Silence in Ghazālī

Throughout the *The Beautiful Names of God* and *The Niche of Lights*, Ghazālī makes use of rhetorical silences and epistemic silences. Rhetorical silences are instances when Ghazālī opts to remain silent about a given topic or indicates that he will not delve deeper into the subject at hand. His use of epistemic silence occurs when he states that human beings are rendered silent by God. Both uses of silence are connected to establishing, maintaining, and upholding a Sufi epistemic hierarchy. Ghazālī's rhetorical silences serve two major functions: First, they can protect knowledge that is for some reason deemed too dangerous to express. Second, such a reluctance to speak can help create and maintain a hierarchy of knowledge. Ghazālī's concept of epistemic silence relates to what I call "weak ineffability." These are instances in which a person has a mystical experience but is unable to speak following this experience because she is *prevented* from speaking, not because language was absent in the experience itself. Ghazālī suggests that such a silence indicates an elite spiritual status, thus reinforcing his hierarchy of knowers of God through silence.

Ghazālī claims to have written *The Niche of Lights* and the *The Beautiful Names of God* following requests. Such claims are rife in medieval Islamic literature and can often be taken as tropes. Suhrawardī also claimed that he composed the *Philosophy of Illumination* after being begged to do so by his disciples.[78] Nonetheless, examining Ghazālī's (perhaps imagined) audience gives the reader insight into whom he felt was worthy of advanced states of knowledge. In *The Niche of Lights*, Ghazālī notes that his requester is] "one whose heart was opened up by God (*mashrūḥ al-ṣadr*) with light and [whose] inner [soul] is free from dark states of deception (*ẓulumāt al-ghurūr*)." By making this comment Ghazālī subtly indicates that he is at a higher

[78] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 1.

station than his requester because he recognizes the worthiness of the requester and his question. He goes on to say:

> I therefore will not be miserly with you in this [work], through allusion to flashes of insight and outward appearances, and to inner realities and their finer points (*al-ramz ilā ḥaqāʾiqin wa-daqāʾiq*), because of the fear of withholding knowledge from the folk [who are ready for it] and of spreading it to those who are not of this kind.[79]

This statement establishes Ghazālī's commitment to revealing what is appropriate to each stage of knowledge and that one should not be "miserly" with knowledge when a person is prepared for it. This notion applies to less advanced knowers as well. Throughout the text, Ghazālī simultaneously writes in multiple registers in order to attend to the three tiers of people described in the epistemology section.

Despite stating that he will not be "miserly" about giving knowledge to his requester, Ghazālī is clear that he cannot fully express the ultimate level of insight. He enjoins his requester,

> Be content with shortened and clipped allusions (*talamuḥāt mujazaʿa*) because the realization of this teaching (*taḥqīq al-qawl*) necessitates preliminary remarks and explicating minutiae. [However,] there is not time [for this] now, [so] one should not pay attention to, concern oneself with, or give thought to this (*laysa yanṣarifu ilayhi hamman wa-fikratan*).[80]

Although Ghazālī pleads the need for brevity in this statement, his statements elsewhere in the work suggest other motivations. For example, after a discussion of Qurʾan 24:40, he states, "And this measure of the mysteries will be enough for you (*fa-yakifīka al-qadru min al-sirār*), so be content with it."[81] Here, Ghazālī alludes to having the proper *adab* related to knowledge, by arguing that one should be content with a level of interpretation that is "enough" for him.

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[79] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 2. The final statement here alludes to the *ḥadīth* that also serves as the title of the present chapter: "He who bestows knowledge on the ignorant wastes it, and he who withholds it from the worthy has done wrong."

[80] Ghazālī, 2.

[81] Ghazālī, 43.

Elsewhere, Ghazālī alludes to a deeper interpretation, suggesting that an elite knower of God would "perhaps be deeply moved to contemplate intellectually the mystery of the Prophet's words, 'Verily, God created Adam upon his own form.'" However, directly after alluding to this "mystery," Ghazālī dismisses the topic, saying, "But I do not see [fit] to delve into it now (*fa-laysat ʿarā al-khawḍ fīhi al'an*)."[82] Connecting silence, *adab*, and being "content" with mere allusions rather than full explanations bolsters the sense of hierarchy because it suggests that the reader is at a specific station in which he is not yet ready for more advanced knowledge but should be content with the share that he is given.

Somewhat surprisingly, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh has interpreted this rhetorical move as *extending* Sufi knowledge to inspired outsiders. She argues that Ghazālī could have remained completely silent on esoteric matters, and indeed had "expressed regret at having related esoteric subjects and at having revealed something of them, since they are of no use to anyone: he who follows the Sufi will discover those things by himself, and he who does not will never understand them."[83] However, Lazarus-Yafeh also suggests that since a true Sufi would not need any hints at all and a common person would not understand them if he saw them, the presence of esoteric hints in the *Revival* and in Ghazālī's other works were intentional. She argues that Ghazālī meant to "raise at least some of his readers towards the light of true knowledge," and that he "willingly, though gradually, enlarged the circle of the 'initiated'… because his aim was to 'heal' many of his contemporaries from their spiritual maladies and not to cultivate a secret truth among the few, as against the so-called truth of the masses."[84] However, in my opinion the

[82] Ghazālī, 6.
[83] Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, 369.
[84] Lazarus-Yafeh, 373.

persistence of such allusions in many Sufi texts and the strong awareness of the need for them does not seem to indicate a proselytizing function, but rather a system of coded insider speech.[85]

Rather than informing interested outsiders of hidden realities, Ghazālī uses silence as a mechanism of power. To maintain his hierarchy of knowledge, he intentionally metes out knowledge in small doses and stops when he feels that it is no longer appropriate to write more. In *From Word to Silence: The Rise and Fall of Logos,* Raoul Mortley discusses the power relations that are implicit in such protective silence. When discussing silence in Philo of Alexandria (d. 50 CE), Mortley argues, "Silence is a power, 'akin to the power of speech' in that it controls words and uses them when the right time approaches."[86] First and foremost, Ghazālī conceals such knowledge from common people and those without Sufi inclinations. Given that he suggests a hierarchy within Sufism, he also believes that knowledge must be protected from less advanced Sufis.[87] Even among those who are well-prepared, Sufi knowledge can "bewilder and astonish" its recipients. As a result, Marshall Hodgson states that Sufi writers worked to keep "the faith of the ordinary person carefully safeguarded."[88] To do so, "much knowledge that was important, even in a way essential to the community, was not accessible to him [the ordinary believer]; nay, it should be kept carefully concealed from him lest, misunderstood, it caused him to stumble."[89] However, the supposed gulf of comprehension between knowers is a self-fulfilling prophecy; the elite determine that a person is incapable of understanding and therefore relegate knowledge of such reality to their private inner circle.

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[85] For a more detailed discussion on this notion, see: Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).
[86] Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 119.
[87] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 2.
[88] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam II*, 191.
[89] Hodgson, 191.

In addition to rhetorical silence, Ghazālī also advances the notion of divinely imposed silence, further bolstering the hierarchy of Sufi knowledge and the power of silence. Ghazālī argues that such silence is imposed on the Sufi by God. In the *The Beautiful Names of God*, he claims, "For one who does not know God, the Mighty, the Great, silence (*al-sukūt*) comes over him, and for one who knows God, silence (*al-ṣamt*) is made incumbent upon him. As it is said: 'For one who knows God, his tongue is dulled.'"[90] With this statement, Ghazālī uses silence to indicate *both* exalted and lower states of knowledge. Using different terms for silence distinguishes them somewhat, with the *s-k-t* root carrying the connotation of muteness and speechlessness, and the *ṣ-m-t* root having the sense of stillness or possibly contemplation.[91] Nevertheless, to say that silence is "made incumbent upon him," indicates that a person could, in theory, speak about the experience of knowledge of God. It is possible that this statement refers to an an experience that words cannot adequately capture. Thus, silence is "imposed." This suggests a weaker ineffability than the phrase typically indicates.

Ghazālī connects the end result of knowledge of God to divine control in the state of *baqāʾ*. Following a discussion of God's seemingly contradictory attributes of manifestation and hiddenness, he writes, "When you "know" (*fa-ithā ʿaraftū*), you know that the masters of divine visions (*arbāb al-baṣāʾir*) never perceive a thing except by seeing God through it."[92] He links this state of perception to fully realizing the meaning of Qurʾan 28:88, "Everything perishes except His face," and the goal of Sufis to transform their intellects into one that is divinely guided. Ghazālī also alludes to the Sufi understanding of the extra-Qurʾanic report of God's speech (*ḥadīth qudsī*): "I become the ears with which he hears, the eyes with which he sees, the

[90] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 12

[91] Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1389, 1725. In the entry on *ṣ-m-t*, Lane relates a story that forbids remaining silent all day because it is a "Christian tradition."

[92] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 23.

hand with which he grasps, the feet with which he walks, and the tongue with which he speaks."[93] His concept of divinely imposed silence follows logically from the implication of this *ḥadīth qudsī*. If one understands that all of one's actions (including speech) are divinely decreed (an implication of Ashʿarite theology), the notion then emerges that speech must be *possible*, for if it were impossible, it would put a limitation on God's ability. This notion would also be echoed by later Sufis, including Ibn al-ʿArabī, who cited the same *ḥadīth qudsī* in support of divinely imposed speech and Shams-i Tabrīzī, who linked silence to wisdom.[94] Sufis were keenly interested in asserting the limitless power and ability of God; recall that one of their chief critiques of the Peripatetic philosophers was that they "limited" God to their own intellects. The notion that God controls both speech and silence also served as a rejoinder to critiques that Sufis were silent because they did not know what to say or how to say it.

VI. Ghazālī and Ineffability

Ghazālī alludes to ineffable experience in both *The Beautiful Names of God* and *The Niche of Lights* but he is exceedingly careful in his descriptions of such experiences in order to avoid the implication of divine union. After establishing a hierarchy of knowledge, he uses the concept of the ineffable to assert an exclusive claim to ultimate truth. Ghazālī argues that the most elite knowers of God can reach a point in which they lose the sense of self, of objectivity, and, it seems, of language. This appears to be a non-dual, unmediated state, but as will be demonstrated below, Ghazālī is reluctant to call it such. Because of his use of intellectual hierarchy and coded speech, his rhetoric concerning this state seems to complicate theoretical accounts of the ineffable in modern studies of mysticism.

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[93] Ghazālī, 21.
[94] Ibn al-ʿArabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, 170 and Shams-i Tabrīzī, *Me and Rumi*, 53 and 292.

In *The Beautiful Names of God,* Ghazālī links ineffability to his previously established hierarchy of knowers. He notes that the peak of the human being's capacity for knowledge is "the kingdom of singularity (*mamlakat al-fardāniyya*)," i.e., a singularity that ensures "the realization of oneness" (*ḥaqqat al-waḥda*), in which relationships are abolished and allusions are cast aside."[95] Later on in the text, Ghazālī is more explicit about what appears to be non-dual experience and the ineffability of such experience for the "elite of the elite," who are veiled in "pure light." This type of knowledge begins with ineffable knowledge but proceeds further in a distinctive hierarchy toward the ultimate knowledge of the prophets.[96] Ghazālī argues that seekers who have attained the fourth stage of sublime knowledge are the intended audience for his work. Such people, Ghazālī argues, realize the incomparability of God. In addition, he uses the phrase from the Veils Ḥadīth, "the august glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceives him," to refer to the fact that God is "holier than and far beyond the categories that we have reflected on before."[97] This instance of negative theology indicates that God is conceptually beyond language. Moreover, it calls to mind Ghazālī's claim (discussed above) that knowledge of God is bewildering, since it is "almost contradictory [to] what was [thought] up to this point by the majority."[98] In other words, those who receive privileged insights from God will realize how incomparable He truly is, because His true nature is completely different from what humans can conceive of using discursive reasoning.

Knowers at this station realize the incomparability of God and Ghazālī indicates that while some can reach this station with some sense of self intact, others pass beyond it and achieve what appears to be non-dual experience. He notes that the first group reaches a point in

[95] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā,* 21.
[96] Ghazal, 44.
[97] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights,* 51.
[98] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā,* 12.

which everything in their sight is "burned up, effaced, and annihilated," but asserts that they are focused on their own essences, not that of God, and therefore "the objects of perception become effaced, but not the perceiver (*inmaḥaqat fīhi al-mubaṣṣarāt dūn al-mubaṣṣir*)."[99] However, two more groups of knowers appear to reach a true state of non-dual experience. According to Ghazālī, the "elite of the elite" ascend past the previous stage and "are obliterated (*talāshū*) in their essences (*fī dhātihim*). At that moment, they perish from themselves, into the annihilation of their selves (*li-fanāʾ ʿan anfusihim*), such that nothing remains except the One, the Real."[100] This would seem to be a classic example of unmediated divine union, which Ghazālī elsewhere denies. This state seems to align with Jones's depth-mystical experience (DME), in which "a silence [occurs] as the normal workings of the mind—including a sense of self and self-will—are stilled."[101] However, while phenomenologically it seems similar to Jones's DME, it is not the result of the "emptying the mind of conceptualizations, dispositions, emotions, and other differentiated content."[102] Rather, such an experience is the result of extensive training and divine grace, making it once again closer to the experience that Blumenthal describes, in which a "flow of intellectual energy from the divine will generates an experience which will be abstract in quality and mystical (or prophetic) in nature."[103] Phenomenologically, it appears that Ghazālī asserts a non-dual experience; however, he also refers to his rejoinder to Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī, indicating that it is not "unification" (*ittiḥād*), but rather something else.

Ghazālī indicates that while such an experience *feels* like unification at the moment it occurs, one should process it rationally afterwards and realize that it is impossible to truly unite

[99] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 52.
[100] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 52.
[101] Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, 21.
[102] Jones, 4.
[103] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 26.

with God. In other words, while one loses the *sense* of self, one does not actually lose the self. It is important to note here that Ghazālī seems to agree with Katz's constructivist position that "there are no pure, unmediated experiences."[104] In his prior critiques of Ḥallāj and Abū Yazīd, along with the qualifications of his own statements, Ghazālī argues that direct experience of God Himself is not possible. It is therefore logically consistent that he qualifies his discourses about mystical knowledge so heavily. In contrast to other Sufis, who suggest that the ecstatic utterances of Ḥallāj and Abū Yazīd should have been restrained, Ghazālī argues that they were *mistaken about their own experiences*—employing rhetorically what Wayne Proudfoot has termed "descriptive reductionism." [105]

While Ghazālī is hesitant to admit the reality of a true *unio mystica*, he is clear that the experience of *fanāʾ* is ineffable. After describing an experience similar to the "effacement of the self" at the end of *The Niche of Lights*, he writes:

> And this is the highest of the goals that are sought. One who knows it knows it, and one who is ignorant of it does not know it. It is among the knowledge that is hidden concealed (*maknūn*), [which] is not known by anyone except those who know through God (*ilā al-ʿulamāʾ bi-llah*). And when they speak through its influence (*naṭaqū bihi*), they do not claim to have no knowledge of it, except for people who are heedless of God (*ahl al-ghirra bi-llah*).[106]

This statement reflects Ghazālī's epistemological principle that Sufi knowledge is "concealed" from those not prepared to receive it. However, if one has advanced far enough, she is obliged to verbalize it to others of her rank in the way that is appropriate. Ghazālī is also clear that such knowledge is non-rational, saying later on in the text that it is "lordly knowledge" that

[104] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26.
[105] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 196.
[106] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 21.

"the rational and reflective spirits cannot reach."[107] This knowledge occurs "through God" and is therefore subject to God *granting* it to a deserving person.

Another important aspect of the above assertation is the circular logic of the statement, "One who knows it knows it and one who is ignorant of it does not know it." This is a prime example of a rhetorical maneuver intended to maintain hierarchy. Ghazālī's reluctance to speak renders Sufi knowledge out of the reach of outsiders. However, the statement is tautological as it appeals to the superiority of Sufi knowledge in order to claim that Sufi knowledge is superior to other forms of knowing. Such statements dismiss other forms of knowledge without adequately addressing them in order to create an esoteric epistemology. This is akin to what constructivist scholars have accused William James and Friedrich Schleiermacher of doing by making "experience" the essence of religion. According to constructivists, vagueness and tautological nature of such arguments were a "protective strategy," which insulated religious beliefs from scientific or empirical criticism.[108] Though Ghazālī dedicated *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* to asserting the inadequacy of the philosophical method and its incompatibility with Islamic belief, he too occasionally lapses into unsubstantiated assertions of the superiority of Sufi epistemology that is similar to the philosophical "arrogance" that he criticizes.

Beyond Sufi knowledge, Ghazālī argues that there is a final stage of knowledge that is only available to the prophets. This stage occurs beyond the annihilation of the self. Other than mentioning its existence, Ghazālī remains silent about the content of this stage. He only says that it is beyond the previous stage and was granted only to Muhammad and possibly to Abraham.[109] Ghazālī's silence in this case is in agreement with his notion that non-prophets cannot truly know

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[107] Ghazālī, 37.

[108] McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, 4; Sharf, "Experience," 95; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 3. This statement reflects much more an accurate reception of Schleiermacher than his own views.

[109] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 52.

the prophets.[110] It also corresponds to his notion that the advanced knower of God allocates his knowledge to those who are prepared to receive it. Here, Ghazālī is a less-advanced knower, and therefore it is not out of knowledge that he does not speak, but rather out of ignorance. Again, Ghazālī makes silence the marker of *both* ignorance and insight.[111]

Sufi epistemology, like all experiential epistemologies, cannot be fully communicated using rational terms. By asserting that ultimate knowledge comes from an ineffable state, this renders one incapable of substantiating one's claims using standard logic and language. This is the very anxiety about communicating mystical knowledge that most theorists of mystical rhetoric seek to explain. Michael Sells suggests that mystics intentionally develop the rhetoric of silence, negative theology, or "unsaying" in response to the *aporia* of mystical knowledge, and that their refusal to solve the logical paradoxes of saying something about their experiences is because it is beyond language.[112] Mélanie V. Walton argues that expressing the inexpressible caused genuine anxiety in both Pseudo-Dionysius and Jean-François Lyotard, as they saw the ineffable as vitally important to communicate, yet it was impossible to do so. However, rather than realizing an "impasse," and feeling "the surge of doubt tinged with despair rising when one's path suddenly seems barred by impossibility," Ghazālī appears at his most confident and certain when he discusses ineffable reality.[113]

The casual way in which Ghazālī approaches the inexpressible suggests that he was not particularly concerned with making his meaning known to non-Sufis. Ghazālī's hierarchy of

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[110] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 55.

[111] This is similar to Maimonides's notion of the highest stage of knowledge. (*Philosophic Mysticism*, 141-142). This may be a reason that some scholars have posited that Maimonides may have read Ghazālī's work (See: Schlomo Pines, "Translator's Introduction: The Philosophical Sources of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Schlomo Pines, lvii-cxxxiv, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963).

[112] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 1-2.

[113] Walton, *Expressing the Inexpressible*, 17.

knowledge ensures that his comments on ultimate reality are quite unlike the testimony of the Holocaust survivors that Lyotard analyzed or the efforts of the philosophers to express an ineffable reality as examined by Sells. Ghazālī does not appear to try to convince the general public of the validity of his experience, the value of its insight, or its reality. While he engages in theological and rational debates on philosophical issues, the doctrines of the Ismāʾīlīs, and other major questions, he does not do so in matters related to Sufism. His circular statements on the ineffable are perhaps all one can say, or perhaps, as Kevin Corrigan puts it, the "*only appropriately thinkable* language for him to develop."[114] However, Ghazālī's general comfort with leaving such statements ambiguous suggests that he was only interested in teaching those whom he felt were already capable and prepared. Ghazālī also does not appear to want to reveal the secrets of knowledge to curious outsiders, as Lazarus-Yafeh has suggested.[115] On the basis of the above investigation into his rhetoric and doctrines, it is clear that Ghazālī's primary motivation for his rhetoric surrounding the ineffable was to keep the experience of ultimate reality exclusive to only the most elite Sufis.

VII. Conclusion: Ghazālī and the Question of Mysticism

Although Ghazālī publicly embraced Sufism and is perhaps the most influential Sufi in Islamic history, his views on the impossibility of divine union necessitate questioning whether he can accurately be classified as a "mystic." Recently, scholars have questioned the sincerity of his Sufi conversion because of his political opportunism and the presence of Avicennian concepts throughout his work. However, such scholarship ignores the question of mysticism altogether. Indeed, the bulk of studies of Ghazālī either call him a mystic without evidence or qualification,

[114] Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus*, 169.
[115] Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, 373.

or claim that he was not a Sufi, without considering the possibility that their issue with Ghazālī may be his lack of *mysticism* rather than his lack of Sufi sincerity. There are two major reasons for this. First, as discussed in Chapter Two, the tendency to conflate Sufism with mysticism has led scholars to commit major methodological errors. Second, also as discussed in Chapter Two, because scholars of Islam tend to view mysticism as an epistemological category alone. In this view, "mysticism," is based on the acceptance of supra-rational knowledge rather than on the direct experience of ultimate reality, which leads to a limited vision of mysticism because it does not account for the acceptance of rationalist mysticism or mysticism rooted in the *unio mystica*.

On the surface, particularly in the *The Beautiful Names of God*, it is clear that while Ghazālī believes that epistemic contact with God, he does not believe that union with ultimate reality is possible. This not only separates him from many of his fellow Sufis, but also from Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī, and mystics from other religious traditions. Ghazālī's rejection of *unio mystica* would render him non-mystical according to Rudolf Otto's definition of mysticism.[116] Marshall Hodgson has argued that Ghazālī "did not have major mystical experiences," whereas Hava Lazarus-Yafeh has asserted, "there should be no doubt of the fact that al-Ghazzālī really experienced authentic mystic ecstasies."[117] However, Lazarus-Yafeh does not cite textual evidence for this assertion. According to his descriptions of *fanāʾ* and other advanced states of knowledge, Ghazālī believed that it could *feel* like one had an unmediated mystical experience. However, after coming out of this experience, one would realize that this feeling of union with God was impossible. The closest theoretical fit to this stance would be Katz and Proudfoot's constructivist position, but this hardly seems befitting to a mystical practitioner since it dismisses the claims of other mystics. Most significantly, Ghazālī's epistemology goes against the basic

[116] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 17.
[117] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam II*, 187. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, 388-389.

definition of mysticism that I put forth in Chapter One— an epistemology or worldview that presupposes that human beings are capable of reaching unmediated contact with ultimate reality.

As Ann Taves has argued, one of the most interesting questions for scholars of religion is how practitioners represent and contextualize their experiences.[118] It seems clear that Ghazālī represents his epistemology, experiences, and worldview as *Sufism*, although several scholars have questioned this label. By questioning Ghazālī's sincerity, scholars such as Kenneth Garden and Alexander Treiger call attention to the philosophical content of Ghazālī's works or his worldly ambitions.[119] While they do not explicitly link these critiques to the subject of mysticism, their uneasiness seems to stem from assumptions about how a mystic ought to behave and what sources he ought to have read. These assumptions (that mysticism is a private, internal experience devoid of philosophical content) are transferred onto the Sufis. Ironically, Treiger, Garden, and others seem to fall prey to the inverse of the problem discussed in Chapter Three. Whereas in the case of Ibn Sīnā, the assumption that Sufism is mysticism led scholars to inaccurately call him a Sufi after noting his mystical tendencies, some scholars of Ghazālī cite ways in which he is not mystical and assume that he cannot therefore be a Sufi.

However, the problem with Ghazālī's mysticism is not the presence of philosophical content or even worldly ambitions. Indeed, as Omid Safi has noted, the Sufism of the Seljuk Empire "was not a marginal discipline being pursued by only world-renouncing ascetics."[120] Because Seljuk-era Sufism did not conform to the notion of mysticism as "private experience" advanced in religious studies, Safi argues that this demonstrates the need to expand the notion of

[118] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 62.
[119] Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, Chapter Five, "Promoting the *Revival*," in particular. Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 104.
[120] Safi, *Politics of Knowledge*, 126.

mysticism.[121] As discussed in Chapter Two, the extensive communal networks and political activities of Sufis have led scholars such as Nile Green and Ahmet T. Karamustafa to conclude that perhaps Sufism should not be considered "mysticism" at all.[122] However, such approaches fail to account for the fact that many Sufis were indeed mystics and that much of classical Sufi epistemology relies upon the acceptance of supra-rational knowledge and direct apprehension of the divine. Ghazālī seemed to adhere to many Sufi norms, both epistemically and in terms of practice. However, his view of non-dual experience should be seen as *non-mystical* rather than non-Sufi. Although J. Spencer Trimingham defined a Sufi as, "anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this," this definition seems more appropriate for a mystic more generally, since it does not take into account Sufi practices and doctrines that extend beyond the concept of divine union.[123]

If one conceptually separates Sufism from mysticism, more nuanced discussions and evaluations can take place. William Chittick writes that it is "best not to waste too much time disputing with those who want to say that 'al-Ghazālī was not a Sufi.'"[124] Implicit in Chittick's statement is that scholars, through equating "Sufism" with "mysticism," have been unable to parse the distinction between Sufi epistemology and mystical epistemology. Hoping to avoid these pitfalls, I do not suggest that Ghazālī's epistemology renders him a non-Sufi, but rather that he was not a *mystic*. Although "mysticism" can, and should, be viewed as more than experience alone, the question of mystical experience is not irrelevant in assessing whether an individual

[121] Safi, 126.
[122] Green, *Global Introduction*, 3. Karamustafa, *Formative Period*, vii.
[123] Trimginham, *Sufi Orders*, 1.
[124] William C. Chittick, "Foreword," in *The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic Text Translated, Introduced, and Annotated* by David Buchman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), xi.

was mystic or not. Crucially, the belief that experiential knowledge of ultimate reality is possible is a cornerstone of the definition of mysticism in this dissertation.

In addition to making Sufism and mysticism equivalent, the notion in Islamic Studies that mysticism is an epistemic category built on belief in supra-rational knowledge alone has contributed to the categorization of Ghazālī as a mystic. As discussed in Chapter Two, Caner K. Dagli and other Traditionalist scholars of Sufism have argued that mysticism entails "acknowledgement of a mode of reality which in its essence remains inexplicable by our powers of rational demonstration, although reason can point to it, and it need not be *contrary* to reason."[125] By this definition, Ghazālī is certainly a mystic. Furthermore, Marshall Hodgson and W. Montgomery Watt have both suggested that the "mysticism" of Sufism lay not in the experience of union, but in direct awareness of prophetic truth.[126] By this definition as well, Ghazālī can indeed be considered a mystic. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, while supra-rational knowledge may be part of a mystical worldview, it cannot be the sole defining feature of the category. To do so would exclude Ibn Sīnā, who clearly asserted that direct knowledge of ultimate reality was possible but did not conceive of such an experience as the complete transcendence of rational knowledge or the acceptance of supra-rational sources of knowledge. While Ghazālī clearly advocates accepting supra-rational sources of knowledge, this is more indicative of a Sufi epistemology rather than a mystical one.

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[125] Dagli, *Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Islamic Intellectual Culture*, 14.

[126] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam II*, 187. Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 85. David Blumenthal makes the same point about Maimonides and Philosophic Mysticism. See: *Philosophic Mysticism*, "Maimonides Intellectualist Mysticism and the Superiority of the Prophecy of Moses," 73-95."

Chapter Five:

"He Spoke of Noble and Hidden Matters"

Suhrawardī Lifts the Veil

[Suhrawardī] began to reform that which had been corrupted, bringing back to light that which had been effaced by centuries, explaining in detail what the Ancients had summarized, commenting on what they had hinted at and told in symbols, unlocking that which had been closed up and made difficult, and reviving what had been dead and forgotten.[1]
-Shams al-Dīn Shahrazūrī

I. Introduction

Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī's mystical philosophy limited membership to a rather exclusive club. To master his version of Ishrāqī philosophy, one first had to master Peripatetic philosophy and what Suhrawardī called "deifying philosophy," (*al-taʾalluh*) an advanced intellectual mysticism that combined Sufi and Hermetic influences. Based on the complexity of his philosophical vision, Suhrawardī viewed the masters of Ishrāqī insight as a much smaller group than even the most elite Sufis or Peripatetic philosophers described by Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā. The select circle of "divine philosophers" with whom Suhrawardī claimed to share wisdom included Plato, Hermes Trismegistos, and Zoroaster. In contrast to Ghazālī in particular, his philosophy was never intended for public consumption. Suhrawardī only taught to a small and devoted circle in his final years in Aleppo. Furthermore, he enjoined his disciples to keep his magnum opus, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, secret. This secrecy, along with the difficulty of mastering his system, render his epistemology the most exclusive of the three figures considered in this dissertation.[2] Distinct from Ghazālī and other mystics, by directing *The Philosophy of*

[1] Shahrazūrī, "Shahrazūrī's Introduction," xli.

[2] Perhaps ironically, following his death, his works became highly influential in Shi'ism, leading to a flourishing school of philosophy ("The School of Isfahan") that synthesized Ishrāqī philosophy with Peripatetic logic, Sufi theology, and Shi'ite esotericism. See: Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present*, 225.

Illumination to an elite inner circle of disciples, Suhrawardī was able to be considerably more candid in expressing his actual views of mystical experience. Furthermore, his frank descriptions of mystical experience include rational mediation, complicating our understanding of mystical experiences and the rhetorical process of writing about them.

Suhrawardī's use of silence and the role of ineffable knowledge in his system differs from that of Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā in both approach and content. He argues that although the sanctity and integrity of the doctrines in *The Philosophy of Illumination* should be respected, anyone who is allowed to access the text should have full access to its contents. Thus, Suhrawardī provides considerably fewer examples of protective silence or allusions within the text than do Ghazālī and other Muslim mystics. Regarding divine union, Suhrawardī offers longer, more sensual, and more personal phenomenological accounts than Ibn Sīnā. Moreover, the training that is necessary to reach mystical union is different, compared with both the Sufis and Ibn Sīnā. For Suhrawardī, ultimate knowledge is reached by ascetic practices combined with philosophical knowledge and theurgical prayers and invocations. His phenomenological descriptions of these experiences are different from those of Ibn Sīnā, which challenges the Perennialist view that mystical experiences are typologically universal. Rather than being an intellectual union with the divine intellect such as Ibn Sīnā presents, Suhrawardī's non-dual experience consists of the soul uniting with the Light of Lights, which is reached only after a harrowing series of illuminations. Finally, in contrast to the epistemologies of Ibn Sīnā and Ghazālī, Suhrawardī claims to have attained ultimate insight through mystical experience prior to discussing them in his philosophy.

In this chapter, I will examine Suhrawardī's lack of silence on mystical experience and how his concept of mystical union complicates the expectation that mystical experiences are

unmediated. First, I will give a brief overview of Suhrawardī's corpus and the scholarly reception of his thought. Next, I will critique the Perennialist interpretation of Suhrawardī by highlighting the elitism and exclusivity of the philosophers with whom he claims to share knowledge. He further bolsters the elite status of his philosophy by describing the intended audience for the work: these are advanced Ishrāqī philosophers who have already received mystical illuminations. This elitism, I argue, empowers Suhrawardī to be more candid than most of his contemporaries in his descriptions of non-dual experience. His descriptions of this experience, which include visions and other forms of sensory experience, challenge the theoretical paradigm that true non-dual experience is unmediated. The chapter concludes by exploring the phenomenological descriptions of Suhrawardī's experience of union with the Light of Lights in dialogue with the theorists discussed in Chapter One.

II. Suhrawardī's Writings and Their Scholarly Reception

Suhrawardī left an impressive literary record in his short life, which fascinated later mystics scholars who have tried to unlock his mysterious system. While little is known about his inner circle of followers, he was extremely influential for later Islamic philosophers, most notably in the Shiʿite world and Turkey.[3] His philosophy invites multiple interpretations, owing to his varied source material. Following a number of small case studies from the early twentieth century, the most significant early works on Suhrawardī were by Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Both Corbin and Nasr interpret Suhrawardī as a reviver of ancient Persian wisdom and Nasr presents Suhrawardī as a Perennialist philosopher.[4] Hossein Ziai reassessed this

[3] The prominent of the later Ishrāqī or Ishrāqī influenced philosophers were Mīr Dāmād (d. 1040/1631), the founder of the School of Ishfahān and his student Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, or Mullā Ṣadrā (d.1050/1640).

[4] See: Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, translated by Nancy Learson (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), Henry Corbin, *Sohravardī et les Platoniciens de Perse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971-72), Henry Corbin, *Les motifs*

interpretation of Suhrawardī in 1990's *Knowledge and Illumination*, arguing that while Suhrawardī's philosophy was certainly mystical, its rigor was lost in previous studies that focused too much on his mysticism.[5] Influenced by Ziai, John Walbridge has done extensive research on Suhrawardī's debt to Greek philosophy and Egyptian Hermetic materials.[6] However, Nasr's approach continues to be influential in studies of Ishrāqī philosophy, most notably for Mehdi Aminrazavi, who upholds the image of Suhrawardī as a "theosophist" in *Suhrawardī and the School of Illumination* (1997).[7]

Suhrawardī was a prolific writer across several genres, which prompted a debate over whether his writings could be seen to represent distinct intellectual phases or were individual elements of a more comprehensive philosophy. He wrote four long texts: *The Book of Intimations* (*Kitāb al-Talwīḥāt*), *The Book of Opposites* (*Kitāb al-Muqāwamāt*), *The Book of Conversations* (*Kitāb al-Muṭārahāt*), and *The Philosophy of Illumination* (*Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*). Along with these, he wrote shorter works, including Peripatetic works and commentaries on Ibn Sīnā's philosophy, as well as a number of shorter Persian texts, which Walbridge and Ziai call "mystical" and Aminrazavi considers "Sufi."[8] He also wrote a number of theurgical prayers, litanies, and invocations, including some that were directed at stars and planets.[9] This diversity of approach has sparked a debate in scholarship over how best to classify these disparate works.

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zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohravardī (Tehran: du Courrier, 1946), Henry Corbin, *Suhrawardī d'Alep: foundateus de la doctrine illuminative* (Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve, 1939). See also: Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*.

[5] Hossein Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination: A Study in Suhrawardī's* Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990),

[6] See in particular, John Walbridge, *Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) and *Leaven of the Ancients*.

[7] Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī*, xviii.

[8] Mehdi Aminrazavi, "The Significance of Suhrawardī's Persian Sufi Writings in the Philosophy of Illumination." In *The Heritage of Persian Sufism. Volume I: Classical Persian Sufism: From Its Origins to Rumi*, edited by Leonard Lewisohn, 259-284 (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 267-268. Walbridge and Ziai, "Introduction," xviii.

[9] For a detailed overview of these works, see: John Walbridge, "The Devotional and Occult Works of Suhrawardī The Illuminationist." *Ishraq* no. 2 (2011): 80-97, 83, accessed June 25, 2018, https://iphras.ru/uplfile/smirnov/ishraq/2/9walbri.pdf.

Following Louis Massignon's classification, Corbin and Nasr argue that Suhrawardī began as a Peripatetic philosopher who later embraced Sufism, and that his philosophy culminated by synthesizing the two systems in his final major work, *The Philosophy of Illumination*.[10] In their introduction to *The Philosophy of Illumination*, Walbridge and Ziai argue that following what they call his "juvenilia," Suhrawardī's Persian and Peripatetic works, and *The Philosophy of Illumination* all formed a single coherent philosophy, which remained consistent throughout his life.[11]

Suhrawardī wrote the *The Philosophy of Illumination* late in life – Mehdi Aminrazavi dates the work to 1182 CE— roughly five to nine years before his death – and it represents one of the most complete articulations of his philosophical system.[12] Suhrawardī divides the text into two major sections, one for logic and one for metaphysics, thus simplifying the standard Peripatetic program of logic, mathematics, physics, and metaphysics.[13] In the logic section, which has two discourses, Suhrawardī gives a simplified account of Aristotelian logic, arguing that the rules of the Peripatetics can be streamlined to bare necessities. This section comprises roughly one third of the Arabic text. Significantly, Corbin omitted the logic section in his French translation of *The Philosophy of Illumination* (*Le Livre de la sagesse* or *Théosophie orientale*).[14] The metaphysics section, which has five discourses, discusses both the ontology of lights and epistemology. In this section, Suhrawardī lays out a complex hierarchy of knowledge and offers direct remarks on ultimate knowledge: this consists of the non-dual experience of merging with

[10]Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī*, 8-9

[11] Walbridge and Ziai, Intro, xviii.

[12] Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī*, 13. Recall that Suhrawardī's death date is disputed; Walbridge and Ziai suggest 1187, and Nasr and Aminrazavi, 1191.

[13] His simplified formula was echoed by later Ishrāqī philosophers.

[14] Walbridge, *Mystic East*, 107. Walbridge argues that these omissions were done in order to emphasize the sections dealing with angelology and Persian mythology.

the Light of Lights. The final two discourses directly address practice, contemplation, and Suhrawardī's eschatology of imagination.

Suhrawardī is almost always referred to as a "mystical philosopher," but scholars vary significantly in what they mean by this label. Corbin, Nasr and Aminrazavi emphasize his connection to Sufism considerably more than do Walbridge and Ziai. Walbridge argues that Suhrawardī is best classified as a mystical philosopher because he "incorporated mystical experience into the realm of the rational."[15] Ziai calls Suhrawardī's work "systematic mystical philosophy," arguing that one cannot ignore "his [systematic] handling of the problems of logic, physics, mathematics, and metaphysics which together constitute his philosophy of illumination."[16] The label "mystical philosopher," as it applies to Suhrawardī, is distinct from David Blumenthal's concept of philosophic mysticism. While Blumenthal argues that philosophic mysticism utilizes Aristotelian rationalist philosophy to reach mystical experience, Suhrawardī weaves supra-rational knowledge into his philosophy more directly.[17] Furthermore, unlike Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī viewed Aristotle himself as a mystical figure.[18] In Suhrawardī's schema, philosophy does not engender mystical experience as Blumenthal argues and Ibn Sīnā demonstrates; rather, the experience is described and "proven" by using philosophy after the fact. If anything, it can be said that Suhrawardī "philosophizes" his mystical experience.

[15] Walbridge, *Mystic East*, 57.
[16] Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination*, 9.
[17] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 26.
[18] As did other Ishrāqī philosophers, though his disciple Shams al-Dīn Shahrazūrī argued that Aristotle had "distracted" philosophers "with speculation and rules, with refutation and rebuttal, questions and answers, and other such matters that keep them from acquiring intuitive philosophy." (Shahrazūrī, "Shahrazūrī's Introduction," xli.)

III. *The Eclectic Nature of Suhrawardī's Epistemology*

Suhrawardī's eclectic use of textual sources rests on the premise that there is a universal, ancient wisdom that was shared by an elite group of philosophers, sages, and kings. Although he pays lip service to orthodox Islamic source material, Suhrawardī is most influenced by pre-Islamic philosophy and Hermetic traditions, believing his work to be a "revival" of the true philosophy given to the ancients by God. In contrast to the Sufis, he argues that Peripatetic philosophy is a necessary aspect of ultimate wisdom. He claims that the greatest philosophers (the "divine philosophers") were masters of *both* Peripatetic and "deifying" philosophy.[19] From the scant biographical sources that are available, it is clear that Suhrawardī studied Peripatetic philosophy in his youth in Maragha and Ishfahān, but left to travel in Anatolia and Syria, reportedly in search of Sufi masters with whom to study.[20] He claims to have received the Ishrāqī method after Aristotle appeared to him in a dream, which he references in *The Book of Intimations*.[21] Following this encounter, he developed a complex intellectual mysticism based on the "Wisdom of the Ancients."[22] While his appeals to non-Muslim thinkers have made him a favorite among Traditionalist interpreters of Islamic thought, a closer examination of his philosophical source material reveals that he viewed his work as devoted to a very exclusive elite, not a widely shared, universal wisdom. This elite source material also serves as a point of distinction between Suhrawardī and both Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā.

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[19] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination,* 2.

[20] Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī,* 1.

[21] Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, *Opera Metaphysica et Mystical* vol 1, translated and edited by Henry Corbin (Tehran: Institut d'Etudes et des Reserches Culturelles, 1993), 70-71.

[22] The exact identity of the "Ancients" that Suhrawardī sought to revive has been a subject of debate. Henry Corbin, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Mehdi Aminrazavi argue that these references reveal that Suhrawardī's philosophy was primarily influenced by pre-Islamic Persian figures. In contrast, John Walbridge argues that Suhrawardī was primarily influenced by ancient Greek and Hermetic philosophers and that his interest in Persia was due to what Walbridge terms "Platonic Orientalism." Modern scholars who emphasize Suhrawardī's Persian roots, Walbridge argues, betray an ideological tendency toward Persian nationalism. See John Walbridge, "Suhrawardī and Iranian Nationalism: The Persian Sages Return to Iran," in *Wisdom of the Mystic East,* 105-110.

Suhrawardī references a wide range of pre-Islamic wisdom figures, but tellingly, no contemporary non-Muslim "sages." He cites Plato and Hermes Trismegistos most often, calling Plato the "Master of Confirmation and Light (*ṣāḥib al-ʿiyād wa-l-nūr*)," and Hermes "Father of the Philosophers (*wālid al-ḥukamāʾ*)."[23] He also places a good deal of emphasis on Socrates and the pre-Socratics, calling them the "The Greats Among the Philosophers (*ʿuẓamāʾ al-ḥukamāʾ*)."[24] In addition to the Platonic and pre-Socratic Greek philosophers that he mentions, Suhrawardī also mentions Aristotle. He also refers to a number of Persian philosophers and kings, both legendary and Sassanian-era figures including Jamasp, Frashotar, Bozorgmehr, Ordibehesht, Kay-Khusraw, and Zoroaster.[25] Although his knowledge of Buddhism appears quite limited, he also occasionally refers to the Buddha and unnamed "Eastern sages."[26] Suhrawardī he also references the Prophet Muhammad. Typical of medieval Islamic writers, he opens and closes *The Philosophy of Illumination* with praise of the Prophet. He closes the text with a devotional poem for Muhammad, his family, and companions.[27] His references to other Muslims figures are scant in the *The Philosophy of Illumination*, and though he was clearly influenced by Ibn Sīnā, he does not cite him by name, nor does he reference Ghazālī.

The epistemology that results from this group is, in many ways, a tautological system, which is based on the wholesale acceptance of "ancient wisdom." The wisdom of the ancients (whom he also refers to as *al-awālīn*), Suhrawardī argues, is "symbolic" (*murmūza*) and thus cannot be refuted (*mā radda ʿalayhim*).[28] He argues that any criticism of their teachings would have to be based on the "outward meaning" of their words and thus would not attend to their real

[23] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 2. Note that here and throughout the text, Suhrawardī uses the *ḥ-k-m* root for philosophy as wisdom as opposed to *falsafa*, which connotes Peripateticism.
[24] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 2, 108.
[25] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 2 and 142, respectively.
[26] Suhrawardī, 142. See also, John Walbridge, *Mystic East*, 65-83.
[27] Suhrawardī, 163.
[28] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 2.

meaning, stating once again that "a symbol cannot be refuted" (*fa-lā radda ʿalā al-ramz*).[29] This defense is similar to Ghazālī's assertion that "the path of vagueness and tolerance [is only] suitable for Sufis and poets," which renders supra-rational knowledge beyond criticism from the standpoint of formal logic.[30] Furthermore, similarly to Ghazālī as well, it cements the elite status of the knowledge possessed by these sages by placing it beyond criticism. It also places both Ghazālī and Suhrawardī in tacit opposition to Peripatetic logic, which is open and accessible to any intelligent person. This appeal to symbolic language could be criticized as a "protective strategy," but it could also be what Michael Sells refers to as "a distinctive literary mode with its own rules, conventions, and fields of meaning."[31] Suhrawardī's defense of the imprecise language of the ancients is in many ways an assertion of their special, advanced mode of knowledge. However, it also creates a closed epistemology, with a nearly insurmountable insider-outsider division of knowledge.

Suhrawardī does, however, provide some justification for the authority of the ancients, referencing the Qurʾān to indicate that the pre-Islamic philosophers were guided by the same divine authority as the Islamic prophets. He writes, "Knowledge (*ʿilm*) does not stop with one people." "Rather, the Giver of knowledge, who stands at the 'clear horizon,' is not niggardly of the Unseen [Qurʾān 81:23-24]."[32] Citing this Qurʾānic passage suggests that Suhrawardī intended to root his somewhat radical methodology in Islamic orthodoxy, but it also calls to mind Ghazālī's notion that one ought not to be "miserly" with knowledge if a recipient is ready for it.[33] He further attempts to link pre-Islamic wisdom to orthodoxy by stating:

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[29] Suhrawardī, 2.
[30] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 160.
[31] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 10.
[32] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination* 1. Qurʾān 81: 23-24, *The Koran Interpreted*, translated by Arberry.
[33] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 2.

> The difference of opinion between the ancient philosophers (*mutqaddamay al-ḥukamāʾ*) and the later philosophers (*al-mutaʾakhirīn*) is in their languages and the differences in their customs of frankness (*taṣrīḥ*) or reticence (*taʿrīḍ*). [However], all of them say that there are three worlds [i.e., heaven, earth, and the underworld], and [they agree on] God's oneness (*tawḥīd*). There is no controversy between them about the basic questions.[34]

While such an interpretation may seem odd, Suhrawardī was hardly the first to view the ancient Greek philosophers as monotheists. In early Arabic biographies of Plato and Socrates, these two great philosophers are cast as monotheists who tried to teach the truth to those around them.[35] Furthermore, through Christian translations that recast Greek gods as humans, angels, or even prophets, and the fact that Muslims did not encounter living Greek polytheists but rather "literary allusions" to them, it is perhaps unsurprising that, for some medieval Muslims, the Greek gods seemed to be, as John Walbridge states, "little more than names and certainly nothing to take alarm at."[36] However, although he follows this precedent in seeing the Greek philosophers as monotheists, Suhrawardī also uses the Qurʾān to validate their mystical experiences.[37] By claiming that the wisdom of the Greeks predates the Qurʾān, he simultaneously uses the Qurʾān to justify his appeal to Greek epistemology, and subtly suggests that Greek epistemology validates the Qurʾān itself.

The assertion that the ancient philosophers essentially agreed with the Qurʾān has made Suhrawardī an appealing figure for Traditionalist scholars. Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that Suhrawardī's term *al-ḥikma al-ʿatīqa* ("ancient philosophy") could be rendered as *philosophia*

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[34] Suhrawardī, 2-3.

[35] See: Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, translated by Emile and Jenny Marmorstein (London: Routledge, 1975), 28-36.

[36] Walbridge, *Mystic East*, 25-26. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see: John Walbridge, "Explaining Away the Greek Gods in Islam," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 59, no. 3 (July 1998): 389-403, accessed June 7, 2018, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3653893.

[37] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 110.

priscorium ("perennial philosophy").[38] He believes that through the use of non-Islamic epistemologies, Suhrawardī "sought to establish, or rather, to reestablish" perennial wisdom, which is "an important element of that Universe which Islam shared with its neighboring traditions….[and] the transcendent unity underlying the different revelations of the truth."[39] Nasr views Suhrawardī and the Ishrāqī philosophers who followed him as the most successful espousers of "traditional wisdom," which he considers to have been "blend of rational philosophy, illumination, gnosis, and the tenets of revelations," which is summarized by the umbrella term, "transcendent theosophy" (*al-hikma al-ilāhiyya*).[40] Nasr praises Suhrawardī's Ishrāqī philosophy as the "complete harmonization of spirituality and philosophy in Islam."[41] He further claims (teleologically) that Ishrāqī philosophy allowed "true philosophy" – which for Nasr is perennialism – to flourish in the Islamic East while it languished in the Islamic West.[42] More recently, a new generation of scholars, most notably Mehdi Aminrazavi and Mehdi Haʾiri, have supported Nasr's Perennialist approach. Aminrazavi argues that "mysticism in general as reflected in the perennial tradition, *Sophia perennis*," and frames Suhrawardī as "a mystic who tried to demonstrate that at the heart of all the divinely revealed religions there is one universal truth."[43]

While it is tempting to interpret Suhrawardī's appeal to non-Muslim philosophers and religious figures as perennialism, or medieval interfaith tolerance, such an interpretation ignores the staggering elitism of his group of "sages." As the above list demonstrates, Suhrawardī refers to some of the most elite philosophers and religious figures in the ancient world in *The*

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[38] Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin*, 158. The Andalusian Hermetist Ibn Sab'īn (d. 669/1270) used a similar phrase, *al-ḥikma al-qadīma*. See: Cornell, "The All-Comprehensive Circle," 32.
[39] Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 82.
[40] Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin*, 49.
[41] Nasr, 158.
[42] Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 56.
[43] Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī*, 103 and 3, respectively.

Philosophy of Illumination. As Ziai notes, Suhrawardī viewed philosophy in historical terms and saw himself as linked to historically significant philosophers through a philosophical approach that "combined intuitive knowledge with discursive methodology."[44] As Suhrawardī states, "The world has never been empty of philosophy (*ḥikma*) nor a person who stands up for it (*qāʿim bihā*) with proofs (*ḥujaj*) and clear arguments (*bayyināt*)."[45] Although he argues that he has attained the same level of wisdom as these other figures, he states that only a handful of people throughout history have received ultimate knowledge. Furthermore, Suhrawardī specifically states, "Do not think that these great ones who had visions (*al-abṣār*) for humanity had different intellects for themselves. [There was] a single version for all of them, which exists in its essence within the many."[46] Although Suhrawardī implies that there is an essential Intellect, whose knowledge is shared among the foremost philosophers and sages of all periods, in this statement he is primarily asserting the privileged status of this knowledge, not the implication that it leads to a universally available or uniform mystical experience as suggested by Forman and Huxley. The notion that the essence of Intellect is shared does not necessarily mean that all mystical or intellectual experiences are the same. Moreover, Suhrawardī does not cite any Christian or Jewish philosophers or sages, making Nasr and Aminrazavi's interfaith reading difficult to sustain. Rather, he asserts that illuminative knowledge may transcend religious boundaries but only for a handful of people throughout history.

This elite approach to ancient or primordial wisdom also distinguishes Suhrawardī from both the Sufis of his day and Ibn Sīnā. However, Suhrawardī does not try to argue that Sufi or Peripatetic methodologies are invalid, but rather that their rejection of one another's methods and

[44] Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination*, 37.
[45] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 2.
[46] Suhrawardī, 108.

exclusive claims to the truth render them incomplete. Although the "wisdom of the ancients" plays a key role in Ishrāqī philosophy, Suhrawardī believed that Sufi ascetic practices, including retreat, fasting, and ritual contemplation, were necessary elements of the Ishrāqī way.[47] In fact, Mehdi Aminrazavi argues that the experience of illumination "can only be induced following a non-rational methodology, that is, by ascetic practices."[48] Suhrawardī also never fully rejects Peripatetic methodology; throughout the *The Philosophy of Illumination*, he argues for a simplified version of Peripatetic logic and in the final section he states that the book should be given only to a person "who is well grounded in the path of the Peripatetics (*istaḥkama ṭarīq al-mashāʾīn*)."[49]

IV. The Intended Audience of The Philosophy of Illumination *and Its Impact on Suhrawardī's Use of Silence*

Suhrawardī was extremely clear that *The Philosophy of Illumination* was intended only for very advanced students of Ishrāqī philosophy. This allowed him to be considerably more open about his actual doctrines in the text than Ghazālī or Ibn Sīnā, many of whose works were intended for public dissemination. Because he assumed a high level of doctrinal sophistication as a prerequisite to reading the text, it appears that Suhrawardī viewed *The Philosophy of Illumination* as a sort of guidebook for advanced Ishrāqī disciples. He is explicitly clear in the Introduction and Conclusion of the work regarding the type of training and knowledge that must be attained before reading the book. Perhaps because of this more exclusive audience, Suhrawardī uses rhetorical silence less frequently than Ghazālī does, using it most often in the section on logic. In addition, his rhetorical silences seldom seem to serve a protective function

[47] Suhrawardī, 162.
[48] Aminrazavi, "Suhrawardī's Persian Sufi Writings," 270.
[49] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination,* 162.

(except generically) or maintain a hierarchy. Instead, they serve a pedagogical function: they signal to the reader that there is much more to learn on the topic but the information that is presented is sufficient for the purpose of mastering the subject at hand. In addition, Suhrawardī's epistemic silences serve as a rejoinder to others to not discuss experiences that they have not yet had. However, he seems to believe that a person with true knowledge should be free to express what he knows.

Similar to Ghazālī with the *Revival* and the *Niche of Lights*, Suhrawardī claims that he wrote *The Philosophy of Illumination* at the request of a disciple and also like Ghazālī, he depicts this disciple as an advanced knower of God. In the following passage, he makes this point with a dramatic flourish:

> If not for true necessity or the precedent of words or a command… I would not have been motivated to step [forward] and make this disclosure (*al-iqdām ʿalā iẓhārihi*), for you know how difficult it is to do so (*fa-anna fīhi min al-ṣuʿūba mā taʿlumūn*).[50]

According to this statement, Suhrawardī wrote *The Philosophy of Illumination* somewhat reluctantly. This is a standard trope in Islamic literature that serves the purpose of negating the impression of arrogance when writing on esoteric subjects. He goes on to say that his disciples asked him to write about the wisdom that he "arrived at through experience (*ḥaṣala lī bi-l-dhawq*) as a result of my retreats (*khalawātī*) and my spiritual stations (*manāzilātī*)."[51] This statement suggests that while it is difficult to express directly the insights gained in supra-rational states, it is possible to explain them rationally. Note that Suhrawardī uses a word derived from the *ẓ-h-r* root, which implies a manifest, exterior, or visible quality. In Sufi usage, the *ẓ-h-r* root is frequently used in opposition to the *b-ṭ-n* root, meaning hidden or inner.[52] Furthermore,

[50] Suhrawardī, 1.
[51] Suhrawardī, 1.
[52] Sands, *Sūfī Commentaries*, 8.

the statement, "You know how difficult it is to do so," assumes that the reader is advanced enough to take up Suhrawardī's challenge in revealing his knowledge. Unlike Ghazālī's purported student, who, although advanced, is told to "be content through shortened allusions and clipped glances," Suhrawardī's text is clearly meant to reveal the full secrets of his philosophy for a specific audience.[53] For Suhrawardī, this means that the reader should be well versed in both rationalist philosophy (*al-baḥth*) and in what he refers to as the philosophy of "deification" (*al-taʾalluh*).

Suhrawardī makes it clear in the text that ultimate mystical insight only comes about through mastery of both types of philosophy. He first lays out a detailed account of the types of philosophers, ranking them according to their "proficient," "weak," or "middling" abilities. The most advanced philosophers, which Suhrawardī calls "divine philosophers," have mastered both rationalist philosophy and the philosophy of deification. The most learned philosopher of the time, Suhrawardī states, is the "Axis" (*quṭb*). Distinct from the Sufi use of this term, Suhrawardī's "Axis" is a philosopher-ruler, which calls to mind Plato's philosopher-king of the *Republic*. He states, "If politics are in his hands, it will be a time of illumination. But if it the time is empty of divine management, then darkness will predominate."[54] Given the relatively small number of truly divine philosophers in history, it is perhaps unsurprising that Suhrawardī grants the Axis such a high status. His comment is also striking because it appears to reflect his own involvement with the Ayyubid court through teaching al-Malik al-Ẓāhir, the son of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī. However, this statement could also be read as a utopian vision of the best possible state rather than something that Suhrawardī strove towards personally. He goes on to say that regardless of whether the "Divine" Philosopher is the actual ruler of a state, he will

[53] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 2.
[54] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 3.

nevertheless exert his influence on its society.[55] Indeed, this notion of the behind-the-scenes influence of an elite philosopher-tutor is more in line with Suhrawardī's actual career and personal example. It also highlights his appreciation for the esoteric and theurgical dimensions of philosophical power exerting influence over the world at large.

As stated previously, it is clear that *The Philosophy of Illumination* was intended only for those who occupied the advanced ranks of the philosophical hierarchy as Suhrawardī envisioned it. The ideal reader of the work is a person who is knowledgeable of Peripatetic philosophy but also has "perceived the divine spark" (*al-bāriq al-ilāhī*), which allows him to arrive at the Divine Kingdom of profound mystical knowledge.[56] Indeed, "no one else [could] benefit from it at all" (*ghayruhu lā yantafiʿu bihi aṣlan*).[57] The select nature of Suhrawardī's audience stands in sharp contrast to Ghazālī's and Ibn Sīnā's educated but more general audiences. Ghazālī directed *The Niche of Lights* and the *The Beautiful Names of God* at multiple audiences and wrote simultaneously for both the common people and the elites.[58] Ibn Sīnā does not give any explicit indication of the desired audience for *The Healing*, and although he likely intended it for a person with advanced philosophical knowledge, there is no indication that it would somehow be harmful if such a person was not prepared to receive it. By contrast, *The Philosophy of Illumination* is clearly a guidebook for advanced Ishrāqī philosophers.

However, while Suhrawardī does not use the technique of silence to protect the teachings in his work, he enjoins his disciples to protect the integrity of the text as a whole. This indicates that he was invested in keeping the material out of the wrong hands, either for the purpose of protecting the initiated or protecting himself and his disciples from persecution. Akin to Ghazālī

[55] Suhrawardī, 3.
[56] Suhrawardī, 4.
[57] Suhrawardī, 4.
[58] Ghazālī, *Niche of Lights*, 2.

and other Sufis' protective silences, Suhrawardī suggests in this case that the knowledge contained in *The Philosophy of Illumination* would somehow be harmful to those who are not ready for it. Suhrawardī writes, "My brothers, I charge you to protect this book and be careful with it. Preserve it from those who are not its people (*ṣūnhu ʿan ghayr ahlihi*)."[59] He goes on to state, "And do not encourage the mysteries of this book to become visible to a person without checking with a person who is a successor [to me] (*khalīfa*) and who has the knowledge of this book."[60] Here, Suhrawardī assumes the hierarchical pedagogy of a guide (in this case one of his disciples), who can lead the reader through the work. He specifies again the training necessary before reading the text. However, given the tense circumstances of the end of Suhrawardī's life, and the reasons for his execution, it is also possible that he was protective of the text to avoid future persecution for his disciples.

In my opinion, Suhrawardī's rhetorical silences indicate more of a concern for concision than for protection or concealment. Significantly, one of the most prominent rhetorical silences in *The Philosophy of Illumination* regards logic and asserts the superiority of Ishrāqī philosophical methods. In the introduction to the section on logic, he notes:

> This famous tool [i.e., logic] protects cognition from errors in [its practice]; here, we have abridged it and kept only a small number of the many [possible] rules. This is enough for the intelligent person and the seeker of illumination (*al-dhakī wa-li-ṭālib al-ishrāq*). Whoever wants a more detailed statement on this aspect of knowledge— which is [only] a tool— can go and check the books wherein it is detailed more elaborately.[61]

As this passage indicates, while Suhrawardī intentionally withholds information, it is not because the information is inherently invalid or because it is somehow dangerous for the untrained reader. Rather, in the above passage, Suhrawardī describes Peripatetic logic as a useful

[59] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 162.
[60] Suhrawardī, 162.
[61] Suhrawardī, 4.

"tool" for achieving and affirming more advanced knowledge, which is ultimately gained through supra-rational means. As such, his silence indicates that he has presented sufficient information but also that an interested seeker of Illumination could find lengthier accounts of logic elsewhere, if he so desired. However, elsewhere Suhrawardī makes assertations that downplay the importance of such a search by maintaining that his explanations convey the gist of the matter, rendering the Peripatetics' more "elaborate" accounts unnecessary.[62] While the Peripatetics are not wrong, he argues, his own method is superior, for Ishrāqī philosophy "is a shorter path than that path [of Peripatetic logic] because it is more precise and systematic (*aḍbaṭ wa-anẓam*)."[63] These latter statements serve to reinforce the hierarchical status of Suhrawardī's epistemology and by implication, those who follow it. While Ghazālī creates a sense of hierarchy through allusions and by withholding advanced Sufi knowledge, Suhrawardī does so by claiming his method is so advanced that he is able to cull out the most essential aspects, thus making further study unnecessary.

With regard to epistemic silence, Suhrawardī is free with his language but cautions his readers to remain silent about the content of experiences if they have not yet had them. When dicussing advanced illuminations, he writes, "One who has not witnessed this station himself should not discuss the foundations of this wisdom, for [this demonstrates] inadequacy (*naqs*), ignorance (*jahl*), and insufficiency (*quṣūr*)."[64] This position is quite unlike the notion of epistemic silence presented by Ghazālī in the previous chapter. While Ghazālī treats silence as an imposed state, which acts as a marker of ignorance on one hand and elite knowledge on the other, Suhrawardī argues that one should only remain silent on matters that one has not

[62] Suhrawardī, 19. See also: 25, 39, 75.
[63] Suhrawardī, 2.
[64] Suhrawardī, 161.

personally experienced. For Suhrawardī, silence is not inevitable; while it is possible for a person to speak about a station he has not achieved, doing so would be "insufficient" and inaccurate. Indeed, as will be explored more fully later on in this chapter, Suhrawardī believed that a person who has experienced such states is allowed to represent them accurately in both writing and speech. Unlike with Ghazālī, the knowledgeable person does not have a "dulled tongue," but rather a sharpened pencil.

V. *Navigating Suhrawardī's Ontology*

As is well known, Suhrawardī's metaphysics are distinct from both Ghazālī's and Ibn Sīnā's; he posits a complex series of lights, all of which are rays of the Light of Lights that illuminates all existence in a monistic manner. In his epistemology, one "knows" by means of a series of proximate lights and strives for the illumination and knowledge of a direct experience of the Light of Lights. The Light of Lights is ultimate reality in Suhrawardī's metaphysics, and through its illuminations one can leave behind the physical body and unite with the Light of Lights. These illuminations vary in degree, duration, and intensity. Suhrawardī gives two accounts of leaving the body and achieving union with the Light of Lights in the fifth discourse of *The Philosophy of Illumination*. First, he describes this union using the metaphor of sexual intercourse. Second, he connects the experience of uniting with the Light of Lights with the "Station of Death," as the final and most powerful of an extensive series of illuminations. This occurs, according to Suhrawardī, only after one has undergone intense training in the methods of Ishrāqī philosophy.

The Light of Lights is the ultimate source of knowledge and creation, in both the material and the immaterial domains. Like the ontology expressed by Ghazālī in *The Niche of Lights*, Suhrawardī's ontology of Light is heavily influenced by the Light Verse of the Qur'ān (Q 24:35)

and the "Ḥadīth of the Veils." However, when examined in detail Suhrawardī's ontology of Light is thoroughly unlike Ghazālī's. Suhrawardī argues that the Light of Lights is "self-evident without exception; nothing is after it."[65] Because the Light of Lights is self-evident, it is the basis for all understanding. The Light of Lights, along with other high-level lights, is incorporeal. Using an emanationist ontology, Suhrawardī argues that the Light of Lights is self-aware and makes itself known through a series of lesser, "proximate" lights. Through the metaphor of domination (*qahr*) and love (*maḥabba*), the lower lights incline toward the higher lights, and through their dominance, the higher lights illuminate the lower lights. Suhrawardī writes, "The proximate light witnesses (*mushāhada*) the Light of Lights and [the Light of Lights] illuminates [the proximate lights]."[66] Light thus has both an epistemic and an ontological function in Suhrawardī's philosophy. As the "most evident" of things, it is the basis of all knowledge; at the same time, it is the ultimate reality toward which one strives.[67] Because human beings are composed of light *in essentia*, navigating the path to the Light of Lights as the ultimate source of the self requires mastery of logic, contemplative practices, and mystical illuminations. For the soul that attains mastery of Suhrawardī's philosophy, it can transcend the body and reach union with the Light of Lights.

For the soul to rise beyond the body, it must rely upon both innate knowledge and self-knowledge through disciplined training. Suhrawardī's epistemology is tautological. He argues that before one can know something, the essence of that knowledge must first be present within the self: "If you have a trace of [something] that does not correspond to [itself], then you do not know it as it [truly] is. Therefore, there must be some correspondence in what you know. That

[65] Suhrawardī, 87.
[66] Suhrawardī, 98.
[67] Suhrawardī, 76.

trace in you is the image [of knowledge]."[68] This trace or image which enables human knowledge. Suhrawardī notes elsewhere that all things known to humans have two forms: the form in the mind, and the form that exists outside of the mind: a thing cannot exist outside of the mind without having a corresponding existence within the mind.[69] This concept seems to be related Ibn Sīnā's notion that the human intellect can detach from the body "by studying our essence."[70] Suhrawardī's concept of innate knowledge goes beyond logic; Mehdi Aminrazavi argues that such knowledge is "the only plausible explanation as to how the self can know itself," because knowing ourselves requires a "pre-cognitive" form of knowledge.[71] While such knowledge can be cultivated, one cannot acquire it through external means.

To cultivate innate knowledge, Suhrawardī argues, one must engage in focused contemplation. As such, his position is similar to that of Ibn Sīnā described in Chapter Three; through contemplating one's own intellectual essence, one can ascend beyond the body and know ultimate reality.[72] To know something, Suhrawardī writes, "You must direct your gaze upon Reality alone (*yanẓur ilā al-ḥaqīqata waḥdahā*), and cut off your gaze from any attachment other than it (*mā alladhī yulaḥiqu min ghayrihā*)."[73] Such intense, focused contemplation would likely take place during the retreats and other ascetic practices that Suhrawardī advocates. In the conclusion of *The Philosophy of Illumination* he instructs the reader to begin with fasting and contemplation: "Before beginning [the path], [the disciple] must train himself for forty days, refraining from the meat of animals, with poor food, cut off from others, uninterrupted, in the hope of [receiving] the Light of God, the mighty and powerful."[74] Here, Suhrawardī seems to be

[68] Suhrawardī, 6, Walbridge and Ziai's translation.
[69] Suhrawardī, 50.
[70] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 298
[71] Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī*, 102, 107.
[72] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 298.
[73] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 7.
[74] Suhrawardī, 162.

describing a Sufi retreat, which is followed by close study of *The Philosophy of Illumination* with a guide. In addition to this Sufi-inspired ascetic practice, Suhrawardī also advocated theurgical practices, including what John Walbridge has termed "occult prayers."[75] Suhrawardī argues that union with the Light of Lights occurs when the soul leaves the body following extensive contemplation and continual "divine trances." Through these methods, the seeker transcends the body by allowing the soul to ascend out of it:

> [The seeker] will not return [to his body] until he ascends from stratum to stratum of pleasing forms (*al-ṣuwar al-malīḥa*). The more complete his ascent is, the more perfect will be his witnessing of the forms and more pleasurable (*aldhdhā*). After this, he will emerge in the World of Light and then to the Light of Lights.[76]

By using the language of pleasure, Suhrawardī links knowledge to desire, with true knowers having an erotic longing to unite with the Light of Lights. He argues that such desire occurs both on the ontological level and on the human level. Regarding the Proximate Lights, Suhrawardī writes, "[The Proximate Light] feels love (*maḥabba*) for the Light of Lights and itself, but its love for itself is overcome by its love for the Light of Lights."[77] In anthropomorphic terms, Suhrawardī indicates that the Proximate Light effaces itself (i.e., experiences *fanāʾ*) in the Light of Lights, and all of creation inclines towards knowledge of the Light of Lights. Regarding the desire of human beings to know the Light of Lights, Suhrawardī states:

> Through their passionate love the essences become known to the Light of Lights; those with more perfect desire have a more perfect attachment and rises [closer] to the world of the All-High Light. As you all know (*ʿalamtu*), [the experience of] bliss signifies the attainment of knowledge of a thing.[78]

According to Suhrawardī, "pure souls" can attain a theoretically infinite number of illuminations of the Dominating Lights. If one reaches this state, one will "experience infinite

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[75] John Walbridge, "The Devotional and Occult Works."
[76] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 155.
[77] Suhrawardī, 98.
[78] Suhrawardī, 145-146.

bliss."[79] Akin to Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī uses the words *ʿishq* ("desire") and *ladhdha* ("bliss*"* or "pleasure") to denote passion and the pleasure associated with intimate knowledge. For both Ibn Sīnā and Suhrawardī, this pleasure is attained through the experience of union, but Suhrawardī emphasizes the erotic longing *for* knowledge more than Ibn Sīnā and links the amount of knowledge one receives to the extent to which one desires it. Suhrawardī also relates the concept of desire to union, thus providing support for Mélanie V. Walton's observation, "The relationship that is founded by *eros* is … a knowing that is a radical conjoining with the other."[80] However, both love and desire must be directed toward their goal "properly." According to Suhrawardī, both *maḥabba* and *ʿishq* should not be directed toward worldly objects. Rather, they should be directed toward "the World of Light, [only] then is it proper."[81]

Further connecting knowledge with erotic desire, Suhrawardī's initial description of union with the Light of Lights is a vivid sexual metaphor. He argues that one must desire union with the Light of Lights as a man "wishes to dominate women" (*yurīdu al-dhakar an yaqhara al-nisāʾ*). The word Suhrawardī chooses for "male," *dhakar* is from the root *dh-k-r*, which is related to the Sufi term *dhikr*.[82] This could symbolically link men and (what Suhrawardī views as) male desire to active ritual activity and knowing. Suhrawardī goes on to relate both the hierarchical relations of ontological reality and the hierarchical process of knowing to intercourse. In so doing, he argues that male sexuality is essentially related to "love [combined] with dominance (*al-maḥabba maʿa al-qahr*)." *Qahr*, which is a term that Suhrawardī often uses when describing his ontology of Light, may alternatively be translated as "subjugation" or even "compulsion."[83]

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[79] Suhrawardī, 147.
[80] Walton, *Expressing the Inexpressible*, 237.
[81] Suhrawardī, 146.
[82] Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 968.
[83] Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2569.

He completes his sexual metaphor and cements the gendered foundation of his hierarchical view of reality by describing female sexuality as "love [combined] with lowliness or abasement (*al-maḥabba maʿa al-dhull*)." After using this remarkably embodied metaphor, Suhrawardī covers himself by insisting that true unification with the Light of Lights is "intellectual, not bodily."[84] To say the least, this is a vivid example of the male embodiment of mystical experience, similar to the versions critiqued by Grace Jantzen and Beverly Lanzetta.[85]

Suhrawardī's sexual metaphor for divine union calls to mind Ghazālī's sexual metaphor for divine knowledge. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ghazālī framed the question of knowing God as akin to a young boy or an impotent man asking what sexual intercourse was like. Because all comparisons are insufficient, Ghazālī argues, it is best to allow the boy to wait and experience intercourse for himself; similarly, it is better to know God experientially than through the inadequate use of metaphor and comparison. However, Ghazālī's sexual metaphor of experiential knowledge breaks down when applied to the theological question of the divine reality— just as the impotent man cannot know what real sex is like, human beings can never know God directly.[86] By contrast, Suhrawardī fully embraces the erotic metaphor of a blissful union with the Light of Lights.[87] He also uses the virile language of male dominance to make his point, and even argues (somewhat like Ghazālī) that the person who lacks mystical inclination is like an impotent man.[88] However, for Suhrawardī, true impotence is lack of desire (*'ishq*), not lack of ability (*qadr*).

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[84] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination,* 147.
[85] Janzten, *Power, Gender,* 24. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom.*
[86] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā,* 50-53.
[87] Though Ghazālī did not, many Sufis use erotic metaphors for divine union. Recall that a number of the words Sufis used for union carry sexual connotations.
[88] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination,* 146.

In the final section of *The Philosophy of Illumination*, Suhrawardī moves away from erotic imagery and discusses the soul's ascent from the the body in terms of vision and death.[89] He describes a series of illuminations that occur prior to reaching direct union with the Light of Lights, using evocative terms related to both light and sensation. To describe the early stages of illumination, Suhrawardī uses the metaphor of seeing and hearing thunderbolts, experiences that are both "pleasurable" and "terrifying."[90] He says, "As for the Brothers of Self-Transcendence (*ikhwān al-tajrīd*), various lights illuminate them. A flash of light comes upon these people at the beginning. Then it vanishes like a flash— a glittering, pleasurable flash of lightning (*bāriq ladhīdh*)."[91] Note that once again Suhrawardī uses the sensual language of pleasure to describe the experience of illumination. From this transitory flash of light, he then moves on to describe "a mightier lightning bolt…similar to a large, frightening flash of lightning (*bāriq hāʿil*)."[92] After these strong flashes, Suhrawardī writes, a "pleasant light arrives, similar to the arrival of water [when it is] poured over the head. [This is followed by] a light that is established for a long time, which is powerful and dominant, and accompanied by insensibility in the mind (*khadar fī-l-damāgh*)."[93] These stages of light continue throughout the mystical experience, varying from intense descriptions such as "burning light," to "sweet and subtle" light.

The feelings evoked by these illuminations – terror and sustained pleasure – appear similar to Rudolf Otto's concepts of *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*. The terrifying experiences, like the *mysterium tremendum*, bring the person to the state of mystical awe, whereas more sustained pleasure accompanies the *mysterium fascinans*, which "bestows

[89] Suhrawardī, 160.
[90] Suhrawardī, 159.
[91] Suhrawardī, 159.
[92] Suhrawardī, 159.
[93] Suhrawardī, 159-160.

upon man a beatitude beyond compare, but one whose real nature he can neither proclaim in speech nor conceive in thought but may know only by direct and living experience."[94]

Suhrawardī's vivid sensory descriptions of mystical experience demonstrate the intensity of such experiences and the need for sustained preparation before seeking illumination. The powerful sensations associated with Suhrawardī's descriptions of mystical ascent emphasize further the elite status of those who reach the final station of "death." One can imagine the negative effects on a person's psychology after undergoing illuminations that vacillate between terrifying and pleasant experiences, varying in duration, if one is not sufficiently prepared. To reach Otto's *mysterium fascinans* and Suhrawardī's station of "death," one must be emotionally strong in order to overcome the terror of the experience.

After describing the complex series of illuminations, Suhrawardī states that the "mightiest station" is death. Here, Suhrawardī is referring to a metaphorical death, not a physical death.[95] This station is only achieved by the most advanced knowers; according to Suhrawardī, Plato and Hermes discussed this station.[96] Of this station, Suhrawardī writes:

> When there is no residue left of attachment to the body (*baqiyyat ʿalāqa maʿa al-badan*), [the soul] emerges into the world of light and becomes attached to the dominating lights. [The visionary] will see all the veils of light connected to the majestic light, comprehensive and eternal, the Light of Lights.[97]

However, this description of mystical experience does not appear to be union with the Light of Lights, but rather direct apprehension of the Light of Lights. While the soul clearly ascends from the body, it attaches itself to the dominating lights rather than the Light of Lights. However, the soul is not the only means by which a knower can make contact with the Light of

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[94] Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 33.

[95] This notion is perhaps linked to the Sufi interpretations of the *ḥadīths* "Die before you die," and "People are asleep. When they die, they awaken."

[96] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 160-161.

[97] Suhrawardī, 160.

Lights. Vision is also central to Suhrawardī's ontology and epistemology. According to Mehdi Aminrazvi, it is though such vision that the "existence (*wujūd*) of an object has a presence that the 'rational self' (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*) realizes once it is within the domain of its presence." Furthermore, for "this interaction to take place, there has to be the absence of a veil (*ḥijāb*) between the knower and the known."[98] Hence, through the unveiled vision of the Light of Lights, Suhrawardī's "station of death" is the place of direct contact with ultimate reality.

In contrast to Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī indicates that he experienced this station before composing *The Philosophy of Illumination* or describing the experience. While it is clear that one must navigate a hierarchy to reach union with the Light of Lights and that only the most elite philosophers reach this union, by Suhrawardī's own account, he arrived at mystical insight spontaneously and then developed his system to explain it. He claims that at first Aristotle visited him in a dream and revealed the concept of knowledge by presence, along with the insight that ancient wisdom was superior to that of the Sufis and the Peripatetics.[99] Suhrawardī explains, "First of all, I did not arrive at [the knowledge contained in *The Philosophy of Illumination*] through cognition; instead, I arrived at it another way (*bi-amr ākhar*). Next, I searched for [empirical] proof of my station, such that if I was interrupted in contemplating the proof, I would have no doubt or uncertainty about it."[100] Here Suhrawardī connects mystical experience to intense contemplation or meditation, but also suggests that one must have had the experience first before meditating on it. He implies that it is through contemplation that one becomes able to contextualize and offer more sustained "proofs" of his experiential knowledge. Suhrawardī's description of this process fits well with the experience-based models of mysticism outlined in

[98] Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī*, 89.
[99] Suhrawardī, *Opera Metaphysica et Mystical* vol 1, 70-71.
[100] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 2.

Chapter One. He appears to use his philosophy as a means to reflect upon mystical experience and to put it into rational terms so that a rational proof for it is established. Because mystical experience is transient, Suhrawardī's subsequent philosophizing allows him to streamline his experiences into a single coherent system.[101] In addition, he posits that the seeker undergoes an extended series of low-level illuminations before reaching ultimate insight. This process is much like Robert Forman's building-block theory of mysticism, in which that one arrives at a mystical worldview only after having multiple mystical experiences and attempting to make sense of them.[102]

In addition to putting mystical experience before explanation, Suhrawardī differs from Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā in the assertion that he personally experienced the illuminations and unions about which he writes. When discussing one of Plato's experiences, he states, "I too, in my soul (*fī nafsī*), have had experiences which prove that there are four worlds: the world of the dominating lights, [the world] of the managing lights, [the world] of the barriers, and [the world] of the dark and illumined suspended forms."[103] Recall also that Suhrawardī uses the first person when saying that he gained the experiences described in *The Philosophy of Illumination* in "my retreats (*khalawātī*) and my revelatory visions (*manāzilātī*)."[104] Furthermore, he writes that the book is "what God confided to my tongue," saying, "The breath of the Holy Spirit [brought it] into my soul (*ruḥī*), on a wonderful day... But writing it took several months because of the hinderance of travel."[105] Suhrawardī's bold accounts of his mystical experiences are unique among the figures considered in this dissertation. In addition, as we shall see below, his open and

[101] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 300.
[102] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind*, 24.
[103] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 149.
[104] Suhrawardī, 1.
[105] Suhrawardī, 162. This assertion is similar to Ibn al-ʿArabī's claim that he received the entire text of the *Ringsettings of Wisdom* from Muhammad in a dream. (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Ringstones of Wisdom*, 1-2).

frank phenomenological discussions of experience allow for a sustained analysis of ineffability and how it relates to the concept of unmediated experience.

VI. *Ineffability, Mediation, and Vision in Non-Dual Experience*

Through his candid and vivid discussions of mystical experience, Suhrawardī gives some of the clearest insights on the subject of ineffability in Islamic mysticism. His descriptions of non-dual experience are beyond language, but not beyond sight. In addition, these experiences are not unmediated, as argued by the theorists in Chapter One. Given this fact, how does vision, which has generally been regarded as a mediating factor by theorists of mystical experience, remain present during a direct encounter with the Light of Lights? Suhrawardī tells us that vision is not a "side effect," or a lingering factor; rather, it is a "sight beyond seeing" that facilitates the experience of ultimate reality. Suhrawardī's mystical philosophy does not present a constructivist position, in which prior expectations shape the mystical experience; rather, he argues that the experience of sight is so fundamental to ultimate reality that the very concept of union entails sight. He also uses sight to address the recollection of mystical experience.

As Suhrawardī describes the soul's ascent from the body, he moves away from emotional language but continues to refer to sensory experience. He makes it clear, however, that the senses involved in mystical experience are incorporeal. For Suhrawardī, the heavens themselves possess sensibility, but they hear with a "hearing not conditioned on ears, a sight not conditioned on eyes, [and] an olfactory ability not conditioned on the nose."[106] In other words, the five senses also exist in purer form, outside the body. When the soul transcends the body through mystical union, one connects directly with these incorporeal senses. Thus, the sensual description that

[106] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 154. Walbridge and Ziai's translation.

Suhrawardī gives them is a direct reflection of reality, not a mediation of it. Suhrawardī writes that when a person's soul ascends from the body, it "reduces" the corporeal senses and thereby is no longer restricted by the imagination; in this way, it is able to perceive directly what is normally reserved for dreams.[107] The transcendence of the corporeal senses "weakens" the internal senses of the body, which frees "the soul (*al-nafs*) to join with the Commanding Lights [by passing] through the celestial barriers (*barāzikh*), such that it comes to comprehend the patterns (*ḥatta iṭalaʿa ʿalā al-nuqūsh*) [of the forms of things] that are preserved on the celestial barriers."[108]

Because the soul merges with the heavenly archetypes of the senses, Suhrawardī is able to argue that the direct encounter with ultimate reality has visual content, though this content is utterly unlike normal vision. This seems similar to what Sara Rappe argues that Plotinus believes to occur during union with the One. Rappe writes, "Plotinus seems to think that human beings develop a viewpoint that transcends the subjective when those same human beings fully apprehend the nature of the subject."[109] Somewhat like Ibn Sīnā, who argues that the mind takes on the map of creation and becomes an "intellectual world" after union with the divine intellect, Suhrawardī argues that one appropriates the celestial senses through mystical union and subsequently sees through the "eyes" of the heavens.[110] As he puts it, those who ascend from the body "witness pure, unadulterated sights more perfect than the vision of the body."[111] If one can "read" these heavenly patterns, one attains knowledge of eternal reality, for "the patterns of the

[107] Suhrawardī, 151.
[108] Suhrawardī, 151.
[109] Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 47.
[110] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 350. He writes that following a mystical experience, the philosopher "becom[es] an intellectual world that follows with the form of the whole."
[111] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 139.

heavens are known eternally in the celestial barrier as forms from the beginning [of time]. They will be present there forever."[112]

Suhrawardī also connects mystical experience to the text of the Qurʾān and uses Qurʾānic references to lend credibility to his description. For example, he refers to the state of mystical union as "the station of 'Be (*maqam kun*)," referring to Qurʾānic description of creation as "'Be,' and it is (*kun fa-yakūn*)" (Q 2:117 and 3:47). In this station, there is also auditory content, for Suhrawardī refers to "amazing sounds/voices (*aṣwāt ajība*)," which confound the imagination.[113] This paradoxical station is one of the most difficult aspects of Suhrawardī's philosophy to parse. He seems to indicate that the mystic beholds directly the forms of pure existence (the station of "Be") and that the experience is so unusual and out of the normal bounds of consciousness that the imagination cannot understand it, despite "seeing" and "hearing" something while there.

Suhrawardī's account of mystical experience directly counters W.T. Stace, Robert Forman, and Richard Jones's assertion that true mystical experience cannot include sensory content. Stace strongly argues that visions are not mystical experience, saying (apparently incorrectly), "Not only is this the opinion of most competent scholars, but it has also been the opinion which the great mystics themselves generally had."[114] Jones concurs with this view, arguing that while mystics may have visions, these are not mystical experiences per se.[115] While Suhrawardī refers to visions and auditory experiences in dreams and waking life, he makes it clear that non-corporeal sensory experience of the Light of Lights constitutes the most exalted state of non-dual experience. These experiences are distinct from typical dreams and visions. However, according to Stace, such experiences would be non-mystical, even if they came from

[112] Suhrawardī, 152.
[113] Suhrawardī, 155.
[114] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 47.
[115] Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, 4.

the heavenly realm. Stace claims, "the most important type of mystical experience is nonsensuous, whereas visions and voices have the character of sensuous imagery. An introvertive kind of mystical experience is…entirely devoid of all imagery."[116] Although Stace would call the experiences described by Suhrawardī "extrovertive," they are no less important or profound than "introvertive" experiences. One could say that his view of mystical experience lies between the extrovertive and the introvertive. Despite describing sensory experiences of light and sound, the visionary experiences that Suhrawardī describes as clearly non-corporeal and reflect the true nature of existence. In fact, he argues that such experiences constitute the most effective means by which human beings can know true reality: by seeing the Light of Lights, one experiences the most self-evident manifestation of reality itself. This to is an experience direct and unmediated consciousness, albeit a different understanding of consciousness than that of Stace.

Perhaps because Suhrawardī's view of mystical experience includes perception of the archetypal patterns or forms of reality, he addresses the question of "translating" what one perceives at the station beyond the body and beyond language. Here there is an important contrast between Suhrawardī's views and those of other mystics. He writes, "If some trace of [the patterns] remains in the memory (*dhikr*), it is as if it was witnessed purely in the celestial tablets, and thus it does not require [either] interpretation (*taʾwīl*) or explanation (*taʾbīr*)."[117] This statement is fascinating, as it grants the possibility of remembering the experience directly and thereby giving an empirical account of non-dual union with ultimate reality. Suhrawardī argues that if one does not remember the experience fully, it may have been changed by the imaginative

[116] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 49.
[117] Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 151.

faculty and would thus require interpretation.[118] Unlike Plotinus, Suhrawardī believes that non-dual experience must be "adjusted to our mental processes" only if one's memory of the event is not strong enough.

Suhrawardī's notion of the direct remembrance of mystical experience does not support Richard Jones' notion of a "transitional state" between non-dual experience and its interpretation. Jones argues that when reflecting on non-dual experiences, mystics "have no memories of any differentiated content—there is no sense of any object;" rather, such reflections are the result of a transitional state wherein "images, prior beliefs, and other dualistic phenomena flood back into the mind."[119] Although this explanation does not adequately account for how one retains any memory of the non-dual state at all, it seems reasonable enough on the surface and explains why a mystic might attach specific imagery to the description of a non-dual state. However, this is not the process that Suhrawardī describes. Instead, he aligns more closely with William James' assertion that "some memory of [mystical states'] content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance."[120] For Suhrawardī, it is clear that he, Plato, and other mystics have witnessed a pattern, an image, or some sort of "written" words that can be remembered, and if it is remembered well enough, one can directly communicate the experience of beholding these images.

VII. *Conclusion*

Suhrawardī's mystical philosophy defies both the boundaries of orthodoxy in the medieval Islamic tradition and challenges contemporary categorizations of the concepts of "mysticism"

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[118] Suhrawardī, 151.
[119] Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, 22, 24, respectively.
[120] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 301.

and “philosophy.” Neither strictly Sufi nor Peripatetic, Suhrawardī advocates an eclectic blend of epistemic approaches that results in the most exclusive and elitist form of mysticism examined in this dissertation. Although he chastises both Sufis and Peripatetics for limiting access to knowledge, it is clear that his system is meant only for the most proficient mystics of the age. However, because he is speaking to such a select circle adepts, Suhrawardī does not veil his language; unlike Ghazālī, he appears to have little anxiety that he will be misunderstood, although in the end he was executed for exactly this reason. Similar to Ibn Sīnā in his openness toward relating phenomenological descriptions of mystical experience and in using erotic metaphors for the experience itself, Suhrawardī nonetheless does not describe the same experience as Ibn Sīnā, nor does his epistemology and method for reaching mystical union correspond with Ibn Sīnā’s. Furthermore, his notion of incorporeal senses and the process of direct transmission of mystical knowledge stand in opposition to a number of scholarly presuppositions about the nature of mystical experience.

By arguing that mystical experience involves both visual auditory content, Suhrawardī would be considered either non-mystical or less profound by modern theorists of mysticism such as W.T. Stace and Richard Jones. However, in other ways, Suhrawardī is perhaps the easiest of the three figures in this dissertation to classify as mystical, given his descriptions of personal experience, which he claims inspired him to formulate his philosophical system. He is clear that the soul actually ascends from the body and unites with ultimate reality in direct apprehension of the Truth. Although this experience can be expressed after the fact through vision and language, his model presents a different interpretation of what mediates human consciousness. For Suhrawardī, vision is not a mediating factor, but rather is the most profound way in which human beings can know and perceive ultimate reality. To ascend from the body and merge with the

celestial senses is described as an experience of unmediated consciousness. Though Suhrawardī's description of this experience does not align with Stace and Jones' models of introvertive and depth-mystical experiences, it would be inaccurate and overly prescriptive to claim that his experience was less profound than those of other mystics, given his worldview and philosophical system.

Suhrawardī's philosophy thus serves as a powerful example of the insights that can be gained when one takes seriously the notion of mystical difference. Even though both he and Ibn Sīnā claimed to unite with ultimate reality, they clearly held different views of the experience. The way in which Suhrawardī conceived of mystical experience provides a convenient opening to addresses the concluding questions of this dissertation: given the diversity of mystical experience, the use of rhetoric, and the concept of ineffability presented by Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī, what are broader theoretical issues emerge? What new insights can their approaches to mysticism add to the understanding of mysticism as an analytic category? How does the notion of ineffability relate to mysticism?

Conclusion:

"Where Do We Go from Here? The Words Are Coming Out All Weird"[1]

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.[2]
-Ludwig Wittgenstein

[Soul] herself too sees quietly what she utters; for what she has uttered well, she no longer continues to utter, but what she utters, she utters by deficiency in order to examine it and learn completely what she has.[3]
-Plotinus

The above quotations represent the great frustration of writing a dissertation about ineffable experience. As mentioned in the Introduction, in ineffable states, mystics perceive something of the utmost importance and struggle to express these insights. I too shared this anxiety; by reading the works of mystics, working through their problems, and contemplating silence and the act of writing, I have come closer to understanding the realities of which Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī wrote. Despite this understanding, I have also experienced the near impossibility of expressing these realities in writing. It seems prudent either to not write at all or to write endlessly, hoping that at some point, I will convey enough of this reality so that the reader catches its meaning. Making sense of what occurs beyond language requires engaging with multiple academic disciplines and theoretical discourses. Also— and ironically— it involves writing in order to make sense of what appears to be understood only through experience. This has been a rich process, and in this conclusion, I will reflect on some of the most pressing

[1] Radiohead, "The Bends," by Thom Yorke, *The Bends*, Parlophone, 1995.
[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Humanities Press, 1961), 54.
[3] Plotinus, *Ennead* III.8, translated by Kevin Corrigan, in *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonic Philosophy* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press: 2005), 90.

questions that this study has brought up for me. For some issues, I can offer remarks, whereas others will be raised and then must be "passed over in silence."

I. *Where Have We Been?*

One of the major questions that began this project was "What is mystical epistemology?" This seemed too big a question to tackle, so I addressed only one aspect of it: ineffable knowledge and how mystics represent this knowledge. The study of Islamic mysticism occurs at the intersection of religious studies, Islamic Studies, and the philosophy of mysticism. In this imagined Venn Diagram, scholarly works rarely emerge from all three fields. Instead, one sees works that address only two of the three fields at most. There is significant engagement with the conceptual category of mysticism in religious studies (generally from Christianity and Indian traditions) but few such studies discuss Islam. Conversely, there is a rich study of primary source materials in Islamic Studies, but this occurs in a discipline-specific manner that is often unaware of the research in religious studies. My desire to locate this project firmly within both of these fields forced me to consider the perspectives, contributions, and shortcomings of both fields, along with recent works in the philosophy of mysticism. Islamic Studies and religious studies yielded insights about the essential features of mystical epistemology and the process of examining silence and the ineffable using these theoretical lenses significantly clarified my approach to the initial question.

As Chapters One and Two demonstrate, the divergences in how mysticism is conceived and discussed across these fields must be addressed. In religious studies and the philosophy of mysticism, the quest for an experience that is universal across time periods, regions, and cultures has resulted in an overly narrow, prescriptive notion of mysticism that leaves many historical mystics behind. For scholars of Islam, mysticism is often viewed as equivalent to Sufism and the

concept is thus approached without engaging in the rich theoretical debate outlined in the first chapter. These assumptions have led to faulty scholarship on all three figures examined in this dissertation. Ibn Sīnā's mysticism has long been miscategorized as "Sufism." Ghazālī is presumed to be a mystic because of his association with Sufism and because of his acceptance of supra-rational knowledge. Finally, philosophical theorists of mysticism, such as W.T. Stace and Richard Jones, would likely consider Suhrawardī's mysticism to be "low-level" quasi-mystical phenomena because of its visual and auditory contents. This forces us to ask whether the category of mysticism itself has clouded our understanding of medieval writers such as Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī. I argue in this dissertation that mysticism is still a useful category; that is, if one takes a broader understanding the term, akin to Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James's more open-ended definitions.

Taking this broader perspective, I have argued that three questions best illustrate the overlaps and distinctions between Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī's epistemologies. First, **to what extent is direct contact with ultimate reality possible and how does a human being make contact with it?** I argue that the answer to this question is a key factor in determining whether an epistemology is mystical. In answering this question, one sees that while many mystics may feel that it is possible to have direct experience of ultimate reality, there are often significant differences in how this reality is conceived and how human beings make contact with it. Second, **what is the process or training that the mystic must undergo to reach union or contact with ultimate realtiy?** Despite the obvious importance of this question, it has been overlooked or downplayed by Perennialist scholars of mysticism in particular. This question is especially important for medieval Muslim mystics, given that their epistemologies were hierarchical in nature. Finally, **how are the experiences of union or contact with ultimate**

reality described? While I do not believe, as constructivists argue, that training and expectations *predetermine* the nature of mystical experiences, they can *inform* them; thus one should not dismiss the importance of phenomenological descriptions of mystical experiences when they include references to the training the mystic underwent prior to them.

Ironically, the Peripatetic philosopher Abū ʿAlī Ibn Sīnā presents what is perhaps the most straightforward phenomenological description of mystical experience. Ibn Sīnā argues that union with the divine is indeed possible, and that union occurs when the philosopher separates his intellect from his body in order to merge with the divine intellect. In so doing, the philosopher's mind becomes an "intellectual world," which takes on the imprint of the divine intellect.[4] The philosopher attains this state by perfecting his intellect through mastering metaphysics and engaging in deep philosophical contemplation. If he is successful in this endeavor, his intellect will detach from the body and ascend to merge with the divine intellect. Although Ibn Sīnā describes this event as non-dual and unmediated by language or sense-input, he also accepts that there is "intellectual pleasure" in the experience.[5] Ibn Sīnā's phenomenological descriptions of non-dual mystical experience are the closest to those described by Forman and Stace in Chapter One. However, the way he understands how one reaches this knowledge – through strict Aristotelian training – can only be accounted for by using David Blumenthal's concept of philosophic mysticism. Although Ibn Sīnā's later works include descriptions of supra-rational knowledge, his account of mystical union in *The Healing* does not deal with this subject, thus problematizing the notion that mystical experience is necessarily non-rational.

[4] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 298.
[5] Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, 352.

Although he rejected Peripatetic philosophy and embraced Sufism, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's approach to Sufism was rather distinct from that of other Sufis, most notably in his belief that divine union is impossible. In *The Beautiful Names* and *The Niche of Lights*, Ghazālī claims that while a person may have an experience that *feels* like union, it is not true union. He argues that the best Sufis knew of this fact. Moreover, he directly criticizes Ḥallāj and Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī for failing to understand that they cannot, in fact, experience a true *unio mystica*. Because of his rejection of divine union, if one can call Ghazālī's epistemology "mystical" at all, it would be in the sense true mystical union is an ideal that can never be realized. Although he accepts supra-rational knowledge, he argues that experiential knowledge of God is "closed" to human beings.[6] However, one can have an illusory experience that in the moment feels like unification, and one can reach this experience through Sufi training. Although Ghazālī's descriptions of this event are ineffable and non-dual, he states that the insights gained in them cannot be contrary to what is rationally demonstrable. Therefore, the truly learned person – for Ghazālī, a Sufi in line with Ashʿarite orthodoxy – will understand that the experience is not truly union. Ghazālī distinguishes himself from the Sufis of his time by subjecting mystical experience to the rational intellect and through his subsequent rejection of mystical union. These positions, I argue, make calling him a mystic inaccurate.

Although Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī accepts the notion of union with the ultimate source of reality, his description is distinct from Ibn Sīnā's schema and challenges the notion of mediation discussed in Chapter One. Suhrawardī argues that one reaches ultimate insight when the soul ascends from the body and directly beholds ultimate reality – the Light of Lights. This too is not conceived as divine union in the typical sense; rather, it is the non-corporeal witnessing

[6] Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 51.

of ultimate reality. One reaches this state by means of an eclectic training process involving Peripatetic philosophy, Sufi asceticism, Hermetic prayers, and the experience of illumination. This union, which occurs by the soul separating from the body, is reserved for a very small and elite group of people. Phenomenologically, the experience appears to be fully non-dual and ineffable but contains visual and auditory content. This vision is non-corporeal and is the result of union; in union, one "sees" through celestial vision.

Figure: Epistemologies of Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī

	Union	**Ultimate reality**	**Process**	**Phenomenology of Experience**
Ibn Sīnā	Intellect merges with divine intellect	Divine Intellect/pure intellect (*al-ʿaql al-maḥḍ*)	Philosophical contemplation	Non-dual, ineffable, unmediated
Ghazālī	Not possible	God	Sufi practices	Ineffable, *seemingly* non-dual, unmediated
Suhrawardī	Soul beholds the Light of Lights	Light of Lights (*nūr al-nūr*)	Peripatetic philosophy, Sufi asceticism, theurgical exercises, and illuminations	Non-dual, ineffable but with vision and sound (incorporeal)

There are substantial differences in the epistemologies of Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī. These differences include the possibility of uniting with ultimate reality, what ultimate reality is, the point of union, the phenomenological descriptions of the experience itself, and the process by which one reaches this unity. Moreover, these differences are specific and mutually exclusive. What links mystics together, however, are not the experiences themselves, but their attitudes on the *capacity of human beings to reach this knowledge*. Why, then, does the universalist reading of mysticism in religious studies and the philosophy of mysticism persist

despite plain evidence that all mystics do not consider their experiences to be the same? One possible explanation is that each approach to mysticism claims universalism for itself. The exclusive claims of their epistemologies and the ambitious notion that they can reach direct contact with ultimate reality may be what has led Perennialist scholars to collapse the differences among approaches and traditions into a single "reality." Using a similar logic, contemporary universalist scholars have demarcated a non-dual mystical experience that is universal for everyone who shares it. This experience, they argue, is the essential feature of mysticism and its most profound manifestation. However, doing so erases the substantial differences among traditions and limits the analysis that emerges from attending to the experiences actually described by mystics.

On the other hand, while their ontological and phenomenological discussions of reaching ultimate reality are different, reality itself is ineffable for all three writers discussed in this dissertation. Ibn Sīnā's pure rationality demands the transcendence of language; in his ontology, God is pure rationality, with angels as the next most rational beings, "who have no speech utterance."[7] Thus, the mystical experience of the intellect uniting with the divine intellect is ineffable according to Ibn Sīnā's understanding. While Ghazālī dismisses the possibility of true non-dual experience and unification with God, his epistemology includes supra-rational knowledge and ineffable states. When referring to experiences that feel like union, Ghazālī similarly claims that the experience is non-linguistic because the mystic is prevented from speaking by God. However, while Suhrawardī is also clear that non-dual experience is beyond language, it is not beyond sight or sound. These sights and sounds, however, are incorporeal.

[7] Ibn Sīnā, *Avicenna on Theology*, 53.

Because one "sees" and "hears," he argues that the most advanced mystics remember the experience of witnessing the Light of Lights and thus can directly communicate this experience.

The descriptions of mystical experience discussed in this dissertation complicate the notion that mystical experiences must be unmediated. While philosophers of mysticism such as Stace, Jones, and Forman posit a non-dual state of consciousness that our sensory experience, language, and concepts of space and time mediate in an after-the-fact fashion, this is not the view held by the medieval Muslims studied here. Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī all express the transcendence of mediation, but with a profoundly different understanding of what this means. For these writers, mediating factors are the non-divine aspects of human experience; shedding mediation means shedding the aspects of oneself that are not necessary for divine union. For Ibn Sīnā, this includes the body and sensual desires, which are abandoned in order to cultivate the intellect. Sight is so central to Suhrawardī's ontology that it is an aspect of ultimate reality itself, not an external factor that has to be transcended. By our current understanding of human consciousness and how it is mediated, his ontology would be considered non-mystical; however, if one avoids cultural anachronism, Suhrawardī can be seen to express an unmediated, non-dual experience— as he understands these ideas.

The three mystics do differ in how best to express ineffable knowledge and who should have access to it. In *The Healing*, Ibn Sīnā addresses myriad topics in addition to mystical insight, and he rarely makes use of rhetorical or epistemic silences. The use of silence by Ghazālī and Suhrawardī can best be compared to discussing a secret. Ghazālī's works explicitly address three audiences – the common people, elites, and ethe lite of the elite – his approach is thus akin to discussing a secret among a group of people in which some people know the secret and others do not. The result is a form of coded speech that depends on allusions, hints, and the ability to

refer to something secret in general terms. If one is successful in this endeavor, one can convey new information to those who know the secret while not informing those who do not. Suhrawardī addresses only an elite audience in *The Philosophy of Illumination*; thus, his approach to silence is more like discussing a secret in a group in which everyone knows it. Once the identity of the group has been established, there is no need for allusions or codes; one can speak freely. However, just as such a group would have to keep a watchful eye for people who do not know the secret and avoid speaking too loudly, Suhrawardī is clear that his disciples must keep the text amongst themselves because its candor is directed *only* at those who have already received extensive Ishrāqī training and insights.

II. *Where Are We Going?*

The insights that I have gained on silence and the ineffable in this dissertation are not exclusive to Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī. Reflecting upon them will allow for a richer dialogue and illuminate more points of intersection between religious studies, Islamic Studies, the philosophy of mysticism, and primary mystical sources. In the following remarks, I explore the implications of this study, my hopes for how these insights may be more broadly applied, and the questions that I am left with. These remarks remain tentative; as Plotinus correctly notes, one must "utter in deficiency, in order to examine it and learn completely what she has."

When I began work on this project, I knew that I would challenge the notion that Sufism is equivalent to mysticism, having already observed a non-Sufi form of mysticism in Ibn Sīnā. However, through more thought and close reading of Ghazālī, I realized that the issue was more complex than I had initially imagined. Rather than simply saying "Sufism is a type of mysticism, and Ibn Sīnā's mysticism is another type," I have begun to question whether Sufism itself can

accurately be called mysticism. My objections are not those of Nile Green or Ahmet T. Karamustafa, who argue that mysticism implies an inner, personal spirituality that is at odds with institutional and political Sufism.[8] Rather, I believe that scholars have also conflated extreme piety with mysticism, leading to the confusion of the two concepts.[9] While many Sufis are indeed mystics, I believe that separating Sufism from mysticism – or at least beginning studies of Sufis without assuming that they must be mystics – would yield more precise results and force scholars of Sufism to engage more thoroughly with the scholarly literature on mysticism in religious studies. In doing so, scholars of Sufism must avoid relying on mysticism as a "convenient category," as William Chittick has called it.[10]

Challenging my original assumptions on the nature of Sufism and mysticism has led me to consider the distinction between mystical philosophy (as best demonstrated by Suhrawardī) and philosophic mysticism (as best demonstrated by Ibn Sīnā). The distinction lies in the role of mystical insight within the larger philosophical system. For Suhrawardī, mysticism is deeply intertwined with his philosophical project; it is not possible to separate out the concept of illumination and still have a coherent philosophy. On the other hand, Ibn Sīnā's mysticism appears to be merely one aspect of a larger system. One might (as Dimitri Gutas and others have done) ignore the mystical passages in *The Healing* and still have a coherent philosophy. Thus, while Ibn Sīnā's mysticism is philosophic, his philosophy as a whole can hardly be categorized as "mystical" in character. This distinction adds another layer of nuance to the discussion of mysticism, philosophy, and their relationship to one another. It can help avoid the pitfalls of assuming that "mystic" or "philosopher" are mutually exclusive labels (which Blumenthal has

[8] Green, *Global Introduction*, 3. Karamustafa, *Formative Period*, vii.
[9] My thinking on this subject is indebted to conversations with Rose Deighton.
[10] Chittick, *Beginner's Guide*, 1.

highlighted), or that mysticism is such a powerful ideological force that it overtakes all other aspects of an individual's thought.[11] Such a distinction also opens many new questions regarding the role of supra-rational knowledge in mystical philosophy.

Related to the concept of mystical philosophy, I recently began to consider the possibility that premodern writers might have been theorizing about mysticism rather than reporting their own personal experiences. This question is most pressing in the cases of Ibn Sīnā and Ghazālī. Although Ghazālī did not believe mystical union with God to be possible, he does consider, and even approves of the idea that one may know God experientially. In addition, he offers a compelling philosophical account of this type of knowledge. Similarly, Ibn Sīnā believes that union with the divine intellect is possible but does not describe the experience in first-person terms. This has led Shams Inati to briefly consider the possibility that Ibn Sīnā was offering a speculative account of what such an experience might be like rather than describing his own experience.[12] The experience-based models described in Chapter One would likely dismiss as inauthentic a supposed mystic who only imagined mystical experience. Moreover, the practitioners of Sufism and Ishrāqī philosophy would argue that mystical epistemology is necessarily experiential. However, I wonder if this assumes a too narrow notion of mysticism. While the general sentiment in mysticism studies is that mystics are not concerned with theoretical issues and justifications for their experiences and insights, the writers examined in this dissertation suggest otherwise.[13] Taking premodern figures seriously and examining their theories of mysticism on their own terms can deepen our understanding of mysticism and offer

[11] Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 225-226.

[12] Inati, "Introduction," 4. Inati determines that Ibn Sīnā must have been referring to his own experience. I cannot offer any conclusive remarks about if Ibn Sīnā was presenting a theoretical account of mystical experience or a personal account, but I find the question itself compelling.

[13] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 7. Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, xv.

more appropriate mechanisms for understanding those aspects of mysticism that are specific to each tradition and historical context.

Turning to my own theorizing about mysticism, as I started to write this conclusion, I realized that much of my own process to understand the ineffable could be called "creative empathy." Creative empathy involves accepting that one never has full access to another's subjective experiences. However, through close attention to the person's descriptions of her experiences, one can gain significant understanding and insight about the experiences and their implications. This involves taking a mystic's descriptions of experience seriously and attempting to understand what the mystic meant to the best of one's ability. Importantly, this does not apply only to "outsider" scholars; it is essential to engage in this process regardless of whether or not a scholar has had experiences similar to those that she studies.[14] This is, of course, true of all academic discourses, but it is particularly important when one discusses so-called universal experiences such as mysticism. Developing a stronger account of this method could be a boon to mysticism studies.

Looking to the future, it is my hope that this work will open up and inspire further dialogues between theorists of mysticism and experts in Islamic Studies. Although I disagree with the Perennialist position, the field of Islamic Studies would benefit from the rich debate between Perennialists and non-Perennialists as seen in religious studies; such a debate may also bring more non-Perennialists to the study of Islamic mysticism. I welcome the Perennialist response to my challenge. I am especially eager for a discussion of how the transition from ineffability back to speech occurs. It is also my hope that scholars of religion will respond to the call to consider aspects of mysticism beyond experience. When analyzing experience, I ask that

[14] This process is akin to R.G. Collingwood's "historical imagination." See: R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 231-249.

scholars move beyond their notions of what a "mystical experience" ought to be and attend to the actual experience as described by each individual mystic.

Upon finishing this dissertation, I am left with a number of questions about the limits of human consciousness, memories, and language. First, and foremost, how does one remember a fully unmediated experience? Is the intention of mystical rhetoric always to inspire the student to seek experiential knowledge? Is there some value in mystical contemplation that is not oriented towards non-dual experience? What is the relationship between supra-rational knowledge and rational knowledge in mysticism? How does hierarchy and intellectual elitism affect mysticism? Ending with such difficult questions is thrilling. Happily, in exploring the ineffable, one never runs out of things to talk about.

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