
FROM PRACTICE TO METAPHYSICS: The Evolution of Spiritual Stations in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Thought

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Abstract: Classical Sufi manuals present the spiritual stages achieved through disciplined Sufi practice. This article argues that the seventh/thirteenth-century mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī reimagined the spiritual stations as ontological realities rather than behavioral achievements. Through a systematic reading of the twenty-second chapter of his *Meccan Revelations* in dialogue with his fellow Sufi gnostics, it shows that Ibn ‘Arabī recast sequential progress into metaphysical loci of divine self-disclosure. The analysis identifies a triadic architecture of cosmic, spiritual, and ontological stations, where the stations function as a holographically interlinked field rather than a linear ladder. This reframing marks the transition from a “first mystical tradition” centered on ethical discipline to a “second mystical tradition” oriented by ontological insight. The conclusion sketches implications for Islamic metaphysics, including the Sadrian synthesis, and suggests how the Akbarian model offers transferable tools for comparative work on mystical experience across traditions.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī; Spiritual Stations; Meccan Revelations; Islamic Metaphysics; Mystical Hermeneutics.

Introduction

In contemporary Islamic studies and comparative mysticism, the concept of spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*) represents a crucial intersection between ethical practice and metaphysical theory. The concept of spiritual stations has long been recognized as a cornerstone of Sufi thought, describing the stages through which the spiritual seeker advances toward divine realization. Yet despite extensive scholarship on Sufism, the radical transformation of this concept by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (560-638/1165-1240) has received insufficient critical attention.

Classical handbooks describe *maqāmāt* as stable attainments acquired through spiritual discipline, in contrast to the spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) which manifest as unbidden gifts. Al-Qushayrī formalized this distinction in his *Risāla* [Epistle on Sufism], while Abū Ismā‘īl al-Harawī presented it in the form of a graded itinerary of one hundred stations in his *Manāzil al-Sā‘irīn* [Stations of the Travelers].¹ In contrast, Ibn ‘Arabī understood this term differently, designating *maqām* as a locus of disclosure rather than a rung on a ladder. He measured the spiritual path not only by steadiness of character but by the seeker’s capacity to receive and bear divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*), a move that shifts the grammar of *maqām* from ethics to ontology.²

This study argues that Ibn ‘Arabī’s reframing can be considered a change in basic assumptions. He relocated *maqāmāt* inside an ontology of the Divine Names and an epistemology of unveiling, yielding a triadic architecture in which cosmic, spiritual, and ontological stations interlock like a hologram rather than line up as a sequence. This resituating of the *maqām* has been described by later authors as a transition from the “first mystical tradition” centered on ethical discipline to the “second mystical tradition” oriented by ontological insight.³

¹ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Qushayrī’s Al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya* [Epistle on Sufism], trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading: Garnet, 2007), 111-210.

² William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 47-57, 103-104. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 103.

³ For the post-classical diffusion and systematization of Akbarian categories, see Alexander D. Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 300-305.

This study combined close textual reading with comparative analysis, focusing on the twenty-second chapter of Ibn 'Arabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* [Meccan Revelations], read alongside al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Luma' fī al-Taṣawwuf* [Book of Gleams on Sufism], al-Qushayrī's *Risāla* [Epistle on Sufism], and al-Harawī's *Manāẓil al-Sā'irīn* [Stations of the Travelers]. For textual control, reliable contents lists and modern editorial work were correlated with standard Arabic editions. Chapter Twenty-Two appears in these lists as "On knowledge of the *manẓil* and the *manāẓil* ... and the arrangement of the whole of the cosmic sciences," which clearly signals a cosmological frame rather than a ladder of virtues.⁴ Also considered were the state of *Futūḥāt* printings and the established bibliographic controls for Ibn 'Arabī's corpus.⁵

First, this study provides a structured comparison between the classical ethical paradigm and the Akbarian re-reading of *maqāmāt*. Second, it proposes an interpretive model for Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutical approach of turning spiritual practice into theophanic participation, clarifying the linkage between ritual, character formation, and disclosure. Third, it sketches downstream implications for post-classical Islamic philosophy, especially Mullā Ṣadrā's doctrines of the primacy and modulation of existence and substantial motion, where Akbarian themes are taken up into a systematic metaphysics.⁶

Historical Survey of Spiritual Stations in Sufi Thought

The earliest Sufi manuals present *maqāmāt* as ethically earned, stable attainments that mark progress along a graded path of self-discipline. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Luma'* is emblematic of this perspective. Drawing on sayings of the early masters, he treats the stations as settled acquisitions reached through strenuous effort (*mujābada*) and exercise (*riyāḍa*), thus distinguishing them from the passing states (*aḥwāl*) that visit the heart. Modern scholarship

⁴ Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 156-189.

⁵ Claude Addas and Julian Cook, "Six Printed Editions of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*- A Brief Survey," Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society, cite p. 1 of the online article (<https://ibnarabisociety.org/futuh-at-al-makkiyya-printed-editions-claude-addas/>); 'Uthmān (Osman) Yaḥyā, *Histoire et Classification de l'œuvre d'Ibn 'Arabī* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1964), 11-14.

⁶ Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 1-50 and 156-189.

summarizes Sarrāj's standard list as repentance, scrupulousness, renunciation, poverty, patience, trust, and contentment, a sequence intended to be both educative and broadly normative.⁷ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī then provides the most cited classical formulation, "States are gifts, whereas stations are earnings," adding that one does not advance from a station until its obligations are fulfilled.⁸ In his chapter on the [mystical] station (*maqām*), Qushayrī defines a station as a rank that the servant reaches by effort and "in which he becomes firmly established," clearly set apart from his chapter on the [mystical] state (*ḥāl*) which he describes as a spontaneous and unbidden arrival of emotions like joy, contraction, or awe.⁹

‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī's *Kashf al-Mahjūb* [Revelation of the Veiled] restates the same pedagogy with a memorable image commonly attributed to the early mystic Junayd of Baghdad, "States are like flashes of lightning," meaning that they cannot be sustained through technique.¹⁰ The top of this classical, ethical-practical paradigm appears in Abū Ismā‘īl al-Harawī's *Manāẓil al-Sā‘irīn* [Stations of the Travelers], a program of one hundred stations arranged into ten sections as a complete itinerary of training. This is followed by Ibn al-Qayyim's *Madārij al-Sālikīn* [Ranks of the Divine Seekers], providing a massive commentary on the hierarchy of stations and attesting to its enduring authority in Sufi thought.¹¹ Five

⁷ For Sarrāj's place among the early systematizers and the standard seven-station sequence (repentance, *tawba*; scrupulousness, *wara'*; renunciation, *zuhd*; poverty, *faqr*; patience, *ṣabr*; trust, *tawakkul*; contentment, *ridā*), see: Abū Naṣr ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Alī al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Luma' fi al-Taṣawwuf*, ed. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1914), 13-20.

⁸ For Qushayrī's explanation distinguishing mystical states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*)-notably, "States are gifts, whereas stations are earnings"-see Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Qushayrī, *al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism: Al-Risāla al-Qushayrīyya fi ‘Ilm al-Taṣawwuf*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2007), 105-6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 105. Al-Qushayrī defines a *maqām* (station) as an achieved, stabilized rank in spiritual development that presupposes fulfillment of its sequential preconditions; a *ḥāl* (state) is described as an unacquired, fleeting descent of divine grace upon the seeker.

¹⁰ ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1911), 47.

¹¹ Abū Ismā‘īl al-Harawī, *Manāẓil al-Sā‘irīn* [Stations of the Travelers], ed. Mas‘ūd Anṣārī (Tehran: Kitābfurūshī-yi ‘Ilmī, 1980), introduction, 1-8; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārij al-Sālikīn bayna Manāẓil Iyyāka Na‘budu wa-Iyyāka Nasta‘in* [Ranks of the Divine Seekers between the Stations of "You Alone We Worship and You Alone We Ask

features thus characterize the classical view: sequential progression, emphasis on moral effort, acquisition by disciplined practice, focus on psychological transformation, and a practical orientation with identifiable benchmarks. This is the framework that Ibn 'Arabī would later recast in strictly ontological terms.

The rethinking of stations into a more explicitly metaphysical grammar unfolded against the backdrop of major political and intellectual shifts in the seventh/thirteenth and eighth/fourteenth centuries. In 1258, invading Mongol armies sacked the city of Baghdad, destroying the 'Abbāsīd capital, which resulted in a broader realignment of Sufi institutions and patronage under Mongol rule.¹² In the subsequent centuries, Sufi learning, philosophical speculation, and Shi'ī thought interacted in new constellations across Iran, Iraq, Anatolia, and Central Asia.¹³ Histories of Sufism note the expanded diffusion of Akbarian categories in precisely this period, as readers and commentators systematized Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysical proposals and reinterpreted earlier Sufi manuals accordingly.¹⁴

Within that larger restructuring, the rapprochement of Sufism and Imāmī Shi'ism became a key conduit for Akbarian ideas. The Sufi mystic and philosopher Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (720/1319-787/1385) argued that authentic Sufism and Shi'ism are two faces of a single truth, reading Ibn 'Arabī through the doctrine of spiritual guardianship and authority (*wilāya*) and articulating a shared esoteric core. His *Jāmi' al-Asrār wa-Manba' al-Anwār* [Inner Secrets of the Path] has long functioned as a bridge text in this respect, and the modern critical edition by Henry Corbin and 'Uthmān Yahyā helped cement

for Help"] (commentary on *Manāẓil al-Sā'irīn*), ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Nāṣir al-Jalīl and Muḥammad al-Muṣṭafā al-Farrā' (Riyadh: Dār Ṭībā, 1996), vol. 1, 1-25.

¹² Tayeb El-Hibri, *The Abbasid Caliphate: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), esp. 320-350; Andrew Petersen, "The Mongols' Baghdad," *Medieval Worlds* 16 (2022): 119-140; Allen J. Frank, "The Relationship between Sufis and Inner Asian Ruling Elites," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 4 (2007): 287-321.

¹³ Beatrice Manz, "The Rule of the Infidels: the Mongols and the Islamic World," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 3, ed. David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 128-168.

¹⁴ Alexander Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 64.

its place in the Sufi canon.¹⁵ Scholars of Shi‘i intellectual history have since traced how this synthesis carried Akbarian notions into Iranian philosophy and devotional culture.¹⁶ In short, the “second” or post-classical mystical tradition did not simply follow the manuals chronologically; it reframed their ethical ladder as a set of ontological disclosures, preparing the ground for Ibn ‘Arabī’s reconceptualization of stations as dimensions of divine self-manifestation rather than merely human achievements.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s Reconceptualization of Stations in Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Two of the *Futūḥāt* is titled “On knowing the *manzīl* and the *manāzīl*, and on arranging all the cosmic sciences.” The title already hints that *maqāmāt* are being framed as features of the cosmos rather than the mere waymarks of personal ethics.¹⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī drafted the early Meccan portions of the *Futūḥāt* from 598/1201 to 601/1204, a period he himself described as a time of intense spiritual opening (*fath*). Modern editors and historians date this Meccan phase to his first extended stay after arriving in Mecca to perform his pilgrimage.¹⁸ Michel Chodkiewicz showed how this Meccan architecture is deliberate: the section on *manāzīl* stands in a carefully plotted relationship to the Qur’ān. He maps a reverse itinerary from Sūrat al-Nās back to Sūrat al-Fātiḥa, thus signaling that the spiritual stations are part of a Qur’ānic cosmology as much as the practices detailed in Sufi manuals.¹⁹

In this chapter, Ibn ‘Arabī starts with the traditional Sufi contrast between *maqām* (stabilized acquisition) and *ḥāl* (gifted,

¹⁵ Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Jāmi‘ al-Asrār wa-Manba‘ al-Anwār*, ed. Henry Corbin and ‘Uthmān Yaḥyā (Tehran: Bibliothèque Iranienne 16, 1969), 15-21.

¹⁶ Farhad Daftary, *A History of Shi‘i Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 67-75.

¹⁷ Eric Winkler, “List of Contents,” *The Futūḥāt Foundation*, Chapter 22: “On knowing the *manzīl* and the *manāzīl*, and on arranging all the cosmic sciences,” <https://www.thefutuh.com/listofcontents> (accessed November 24, 2025); see also Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 156-189.

¹⁸ Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, ed. ‘Uthmān Yaḥyā (Cairo: al-Hay‘ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah li-l-Kitāb, 1972), vol. 1, 4-25.

¹⁹ Michel Chodkiewicz, “The *Futūḥāt Makkiyya* and Its Commentators: Some Unresolved Enigmas,” in *The Heritage of Sufism. Volume 2: The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 219-232.

passing state) but quickly pivots to offer his own unique understanding of the terms. A true *maqām* is, as he explains, where one “stands firm in divine matters,” whereas anything unstable is a *ḥāl*. This reframing of both concepts appears throughout the *Futūḥāt*; for example, “Every station on the path to God is earned and stabilized; every state is a gift, not earned and not stabilized,” and “The station is that place where someone with a firm stance in divine things is anchored.”²⁰ The point is not to deny ethical practice but to relocate the stations within the wider economy of divine self-disclosures (*tajalliyāt*). That is also why he can say there is “no repetition in self-disclosure” (*lā takrār fī l-tajallī*): stations are not a ladder climbed once but ever-fresh facets of disclosure that ground practice.²¹

Putting the pieces together, readers can reconstruct a three horizons system that runs through Chapter Twenty-Two and its surrounding chapters: (a) cosmic stations as loci where Divine Names rule the order of the world; (b) spiritual stations as microcosmic participations in the Divine Names within consciousness; and (c) ontological stations as modes of existence (*wujūd*) that structure reality itself. Ibn 'Arabī does not provide a nominal list of the triad, but it follows logically from his doctrine of the Divine Names and from his “He/not He” (*huwa/lā huwa*) analysis of things as simultaneously Real/unreal, Being/non-existence.²² The conceptual move is from sequential ethics to a simultaneity of mirrors: multiple stations reflect each other, manifesting the same reality under different names.²³

²⁰ Eric Winkel, “The *Futūḥāt* Project: Quotations,” in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya*, Book 13, chs. 91, 100, trans. Eric Winkel (Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society).

²¹ W. Qureshi, “Contours of Ambivalence: Iqbal and Ibn Arabi-Historical Perspective,” *Iqbal Review* 35, no. 3 (October 1994): 57-60.

²² Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyyah*, vol. 2, 501–520 (on “He/not He”); vol. 3, 162-180. See also: William C. Chittick, “Ibn 'Arabī,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, substantive revision August 2, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>, Section 3.1-3.2,

²³ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press/Bollingen Series, 1969), 66-72, 181-186, 188-196; see also William C. Chittick, “Ibn 'Arabī,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/> (see Section 3, “Ontology”).

Detailed Textual Analysis of Key Moves

When Ibn ‘Arabī integrates *manāzil* into the Divine Names, he subordinates human acquisition to theophany. The *maqām* becomes less a badge earned and more a site where a name of God appears according to preparedness. This is why, for him, knowledge of a station is inadequate unless it “traces an effect” in the person; the value of each station is equal to its realized manifestation.²⁴

His ontological grammar is captured in the celebrated formula that each thing is “He/not He.” William C. Chittick glosses this as a “nondelimited delimitation”: inasmuch as a thing *is*, it is nothing but the Real (*al-Haqq*); inasmuch as it is *other*, it is not the Real. The pair Being/non-existence is thus held together without collapse. This move underwrites why *maqāmāt* can be cosmic and ontological without erasing ethical responsibility.²⁵

The axiom *lā takrār fī l-tajallī* functions as a hermeneutic for stations: God’s disclosures never repeat, so a station is not a static rung in the ladder but the site of a new appearing. Studies of Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology repeatedly cite this principle in connection with his “renewal of creation at each instant.”²⁶

Commentators often use convenient labels when expounding Ibn ‘Arabī’s discussions of non-existence (*‘adam*) and the “gathering of opposites” (*jam‘ al-aḍḍād*). Here, he does not offer a tidy chapter suitably titled “Station of Non-Existence” but treats *‘adam* as a face of the Real’s appearing, where darkness is not a mere absence of light but a different form of disclosure. Read alongside “He/not He,” this means that a station can manifest as the insight that contingent things are both present and not-present: they appear only by the will of God and cannot stand on their own.²⁷ On the other hand, *jam‘ al-aḍḍād* names what happens at the summit of realization: pairs of opposites

²⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Book 13, ch. 74, in Eric Winkel, “Futūḥāt Project: Quotations,” Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/futuh-at-al-makkiyya-quotations/>.

²⁵ William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, August 2, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>, Sections 3.2-3.3.

²⁶ Qureshi, “Contours of Ambivalence”: 46-62, esp. 57-60.

²⁷ William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/> (see Section 3, “Ontology”).

meet in the Real without violating reason's canons, since the meeting is ontological, not a syllogistic contradiction.²⁸

Ibn 'Arabī also extends this logic to ritual. Prayer is not merely a sequence of movements and utterances; it is a cosmic event in which body and heart participate in stations. Modern expositors of the *Futūḥāt* trace how bowing and prostration correspond to distinct presences and how the "prostration of the heart" marks an irreversible stabilization: "If the prostration of the heart occurs, it never raises its head from its prostration."²⁹ Ralph Austin's study shows how every element of the rite communicates a divine attribute, so that each performance is already a participation in theophany.³⁰

Conceptual Transformation in Ibn 'Arabī's Theory of Stations

In the classical Sufi manuals, *maqāmāt* are defined as stable attainments achieved through disciplined practice, in contradistinction to the unbidden *aḥwāl*. Al-Qushayrī's *Risāla* codifies this distinction, and al-Harawī's *Manāẓil al-Sā'irīn* systematizes it into a graded itinerary of one hundred stations.³¹ Read against this background, Ibn 'Arabī's usage represents a categorical shift from *maqām* as a rung on a ladder of virtues to a locus where reality discloses itself. Further, what the handbooks treat as psychological milestones are, in the Akbarian register, features of being that the seeker uncovers rather than acquires.³² In this sense, spiritual progress is re-described as increasing receptivity to theophany (*tajallī*), not the accumulation of moral capital.

Two clarifications follow Ibn 'Arabī's reframing of the concept. First, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's account of vertical metaphysics helps

²⁸ William C. Chittick, "Two Chapters from the *Futūḥāt*," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* 41 (2007): 39-53, esp. 43-47.

²⁹ Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (Cairo: Bulāq, 1911), vol. 1, 515; see also "Futūḥāt Project: Quotations," Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society, Book 13, Chapter 91, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/futuhāt-al-makkiyya-quotations/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

³⁰ Ralph Austin, "Aspects of Mystical Prayer in Ibn 'Arabī's Thought," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* 14 (1993): 43-60; also available online at the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/mystical-prayer-ralph-austin/>.

³¹ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism (al-Risāla al-Qushayrīyya)*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading: Garnet, 2007), 77-79, 111-170; Abū Ismā'īl al-Harawī, *Manāẓil al-Sā'irīn*, [see section titles]; Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madarij al-Sālikīn*, trans. Ovamir Anjum (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1:1-54.

³² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 158-163.

situate this shift, interpreting practice upward into principial realities, so advancement is a deepening of vision rather than a succession of habits.³³ Second, James W. Morris emphasizes that Ibn ‘Arabī integrates rather than abolishes the ethical syllabus. The classical virtues remain operative as dispositions that enable a person to bear disclosure without distortion.³⁴

Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology binds the stations to the Divine Names. God’s Names are the roots of all manifestation; each existent is a site where a Divine Name becomes operative.³⁵ On this reading, a station functions as the concrete mode of a Divine Name’s self-disclosure rather than a private achievement. To enter a *maqām* is to become a receptacle for a Divine Name’s working in the world. Chittick’s analysis of the Divine Names and the *maqām/ḥāl* dichotomy shows why genuine stability is not the result of sheer willpower but of the successful mirroring of a Divine Name.³⁶ Because the Divine Names are without limit, possible modalities of station are in principle open-ended; and because each person’s fixed entity (*al-‘ayn al-thabita*) is unique, no two itineraries coincide point for point.³⁷

This mapping of the universal to the particular also clarifies comparative perspectives. Toshihiko Izutsu, for example, notes a family resemblance between Ibn ‘Arabī’s logic of “the One and the many” and East Asian metaphysical grammars that distinguish universal principle and concrete configuration. The intent is not equation but illumination: the *maqām* denotes a node where the universal articulates itself as the particular.³⁸

The theoretical scaffolding is the doctrine of self-disclosure. The Real discloses itself ceaselessly, so there is no repetition in disclosure (*lā takrār fī l-tajallī*), and creation is renewed at every instant.³⁹ Later Akbarian exposition usefully distinguishes three

³³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 198-210.

³⁴ James W. Morris, “Ibn ‘Arabī and His Interpreters, Part I,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (1986): 539-551.

³⁵ Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 118.

³⁶ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 118-124, 161-163.

³⁷ Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 58-60.

³⁸ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 8-14, 478-485.

³⁹ William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/> (see Section 2, “Methodology”).

analytic registers: essential disclosure (*dhātī*), unknowable to creatures; attributive disclosure (*tajallī ṣifātī*), in which the Names are cosmologically operative; and active disclosure (*tajallī af'ālī*), which appears as events in the world.⁴⁰ Within this framework, stations are the loci where these disclosures are apprehended and borne. Spiritual travel becomes a circulation through modes of disclosure rather than a one-way ascent.

Two implications are salient. First, the link between ethics and ontology is clarified: virtues are the soul's fit to receive a given Name's disclosure. Second, the Akbarian dialectic "He/not He" (*huwa/lā huwa*) becomes legible: every manifested form is Real insofar as it exists, yet other than Real insofar as it is delimited, so each station is simultaneously disclosure and veiling.⁴¹ Sachiko Murata's account of the Names of majesty (*Jalāl*) and beauty (*Jamāl*) renders the same point in anthropological terms: the realized human acts as a barrier (*barẓakh*) harmonizing opposed attributes.⁴²

Post-classical critics like the proto-Salafist and theologian Ibn Taymīya (661/1263-728/1328) objected that such metaphysical language threatens the Creator-creation distinction and erodes moral accountability. He opposed Ibn Arabī's school of unity (*madhhab al-wahda*), attributing to its proponents the claim that the existence of creatures is none other than the existence of God, and he rejects this as unbelief.⁴³ Recent scholarship helped locate these objections within Ibn Taymiyya's broader theological project.⁴⁴ Akbarian readers, for their part, argued that *tajallī* safeguards the Creator-creation

⁴⁰ Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 119-120.

⁴¹ Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 2, 501; William C. Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/> (see Section 2, "Methodology," on *huwa/lā huwa*).

⁴² Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 69-74, 283-286.

⁴³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*, vol. 2, 90-102, 153, 289-291; see also Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya* (London: Oneworld, 2019), 41-42, 117-120.

⁴⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' Ta'arūḍ al-'Aql wa-l-Naql* [*Refutation of the Contradiction Between Reason and Revelation*], ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim (Cairo: Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabiyah, 1979), vol. 1, 145-189; see also: Jon Hoover, "Ibn Taymiyya," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-taymiyya/>; Yahya Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, eds., *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8-42

distinction by insisting on perpetual renewal and on the non-identity of Essence with any delimiting form. For instance, in Mohamed Haj Yousef's study of time and cosmology, *tajalli* entails this ontological distinction together with relational intimacy.⁴⁵

In summary, the spiritual path cannot be reduced to a behavioral checklist. The seeker has to outwardly conform to refined conduct (*adab*); however, his station is measured by the capacity to bear the Divine Names, to hold contraries without collapse, and to recognize renewal without clinging to past disclosures. The same *maqam*, therefore, manifests each time differently, reflecting the same Divine Name, and is newly disclosed each time and never repeated.

Epistemological Dimensions of Ibn 'Arabī's Theory of Stations

For Ibn 'Arabī, reducing the spiritual stations to fixed, rule-like stages does not accurately reflect how spiritual knowledge is known. In the chapter in his *Futūḥāt*, he repeatedly privileges unveiling (*kashf*) and tasting (*dhawq*) over discursive inference. In a programmatic statement, he writes, "The aim of our book is not to speak about reflective relationships; its subject is only the sciences of unveiling given by God."⁴⁶ Elsewhere, he contrasts the prophets and gnostics with "those who rely on reflection," insisting that knowledge of God (*'irfān*) does not come from syllogism but from "the opening of unveiling."⁴⁷ Read this way, his critique is not anti-rational so much as a re-centering of epistemology on gifted experience, a stance that reshapes how spiritual stations should be understood.

That same epistemology drives Ibn 'Arabī's suspicion that straightforward, literal language can ever truly capture a station. He distinguishes direct expression (*'ibāra*) from allusion (*ishāra*) and treats the latter as more adequate to realities disclosed in illuminating flashes. Modern translators point out that he often comments by allusion rather than by linear exposition to avoid confining his meaning.⁴⁸ In his *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, he endorses a classic apophatic insight: "The incapacity to attain comprehension is comprehension,"

⁴⁵ Mohamed Haj Yousef, *Ibn 'Arabī: Time and Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 2007), chs. 1-3.

⁴⁶ Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, quoted and trans. in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 168.

⁴⁷ Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, cited in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 147-148.

⁴⁸ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 244-246.

thereby alluding to the fact that conceptual speech falters before the Real.⁴⁹ Michael Sells showed how Ibn 'Arabī's poetics of paradox and overflow allow many meanings to radiate at once, which is why symbols rather than formulas are used to describe a station.⁵⁰

Three hermeneutic habits drawn from Ibn 'Arabī's own formulations help readers approach stations without flattening and reducing them: First, Unitive (seeing unity in multiplicity). Ibn 'Arabī's *huwa lā huwa* ("He/not He") dichotomy gathers opposites: the Real is present in every locus of manifestation and yet never identical with any of them.⁵¹ Each station is framed as a facet of Reality, not like a rung on a ladder. Second, Circular (understanding return). He describes existence as a closed circle whose end joins its beginning; the human microcosm completes the arc by reflecting all the levels of being.⁵² Approached this way, movement through stations is not a straight line but a recurring deepening, returning to the same truths with new sight. Third, testimonial (each state bears witness). Because "there is no repetition in [divine] self-disclosure" (*lā takrār fī l-tajallī*), each moment and each station singularly "testifies" to a Name of God.⁵³ Ibn 'Arabī glosses this by linking the cosmos to the Divine Names. The universe as a whole manifests them, while particulars serve as distinct loci of manifestation.⁵⁴

Ibn 'Arabī reframes annihilation (*fanā'*) from mere ethical effacement into ontological transparency. Rather than erasing the self as an end in itself, he pictures the perfected human as a *mirror* through which the Divine Names shine. In his *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam* [Bezels of Wisdom], he states: "God is your mirror in which you see yourself,

⁴⁹ Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 66.

⁵⁰ Michael A. Sells, "Ibn 'Arabī's Polished Mirror: Perspective Shift and Meaning Event," *Studia Islamica* 67 (1988): 121-149.

⁵¹ See William C. Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "*huwa lā huwa*," with references to *Futūḥāt* II:501. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>

⁵² Ibn 'Arabī, *The Openings Revealed in Makkah* [Selections from the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*], trans. Eric Winkel (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2019), 38-39.

⁵³ William C. Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/> (see Section 2, "Methodology," on "no repetition in self-disclosure"); "*Futūḥāt* Project: Quotations," Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/futuh-at-almakkiyya-quotations/> (Book 13, chapters 91, 100).

⁵⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 38-39.

and you are His mirror in which He sees His Names.”⁵⁵ In this reading, *fanā'* becomes the clearing away of opacity so that disclosure (*tajallī*) can occur, followed by subsistence (*baqā'*) as the stable bearing of that disclosure. Carl Ernst and Annemarie Schimmel noted how this shift helped later Sufis and poets translate metaphysics into lived and literary images, like the beloved drop returning to the ocean, not to abolish personhood but to bear witness more truthfully.⁵⁶

Alternative Perspectives and Critical Responses

Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī set the classical baseline: “States are [divine] gifts, whereas stations are earnings.”⁵⁷ This aphorism framed later debates, because some readers thought that Ibn ‘Arabī’s expansive metaphysics moved the *maqāmāt* from the domain of practiced virtues into ontology. Ibn Taymiyya warned that certain mystical claims “roll up the carpet of command and prohibition,” thus undermining moral responsibility. He also rejected any wording that collapses Creator and creation: “As for saying that the existence of the Creator is the existence of the creature-this is plain unbelief.”⁵⁸ Other Hanbalī commentators tied the discussion to the early community’s ethos. For instance, Ibn Rajab argued that talk of *fanā'* among Sufis must be read as “vanishing of all besides God in witnessing, not in existence,” a guardrail meant to protect practical piety and preserve the Creator-creation distinction.⁵⁹ Within Sufism, ‘Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī championed unity of witnessing (*waḥdat al-shubūd*) over unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), insisting on sharper lines

⁵⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣṣayl al-Ḥikam* [Bezels of Wisdom], trans. Ralph Austin, *Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 67.

⁵⁶ Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 12-16; Annemarie Schimmel, *Rumi’s World: The Life and Work of the Great Sufi Poet* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 63-64; and Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 136-147.

⁵⁷ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, trans. Alexander Knysch, ch. “The State (*al-Ḥāl*),” 106-107.

⁵⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā*, vol. 10, s.v. “*Fī ḍarīrat mukhalafat al-bawā’*”; vol. 2, 153, 289–291.

⁵⁹ Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Dhayl Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, 1:150, on Abū Ismā’īl al-Harawī and *fanā'* “in witnessing, not in existence”; see also Racha el Omari, “Hanbali Sufism: Sober and Antinomian,” in *Sufism and Theology*, ed. Ayman Shihadeh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 86.

between Creator and creation and describing the summit of the path as renewed servitude (*‘ubūdīya*).⁶⁰

The defenders of Ibn ‘Arabī responded to this criticism by arguing that his system holds transcendence and immanence together while keeping the legal obligations intact. Therefore, ontology widens the frame of ethics rather than erasing it.⁶¹

Recent scholarship still ponders whether Ibn ‘Arabī’s reframing of the *maqāmāt* represents development or rupture. Their views are summarized in the table below.

Scholar	Position	One-line view
William C. Chittick; Michel Chodkiewicz	Continuity	Ibn ‘Arabī deepens earlier Sufi teachings rather than discarding them. ⁶²
Alexander Knysh	Rupture	A shift that privileges cosmology/metaphysics and provokes enduring polemics. ⁶³
James W. Morris	Integration	Ethical practice remains, now nested within an ontological horizon. ⁶⁴
Mohammed Rustom	Synthesis	Onto-hermeneutics transcends the ethics/metaphysics binary. ⁶⁵

The disagreements center on the core purpose of Sufism: moral perfection through praxis or realized knowledge of Being. This live tension is one of the reasons why Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought has continued to animate discussions of religion and moral life today.

Across the aisle, comparative and philosophical readers have used Ibn ‘Arabī to open cross-tradition conversations. Henry Corbin famously read him as a guide to the creative imagination, making Sufi metaphysics legible to philosophers of religion.⁶⁶ Huston Smith popularized Ibn ‘Arabī for general audiences to illustrate a generous,

⁶⁰ Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur’anic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sabī al-Tustarī* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 210-245.

⁶¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 380-400.

⁶² Ibid., 8-10, 16-17. Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 12-13, 34, 58.

⁶³ Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 1-8, 23-28, 268-273.

⁶⁴ Morris, “Ibn ‘Arabī and His Interpreters”: 734-735.

⁶⁵ Mohammed Rustom, “Is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Ontology Pantheistic?” *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 2 (2006), 85-101.

⁶⁶ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 66-72.

expansive theism (“My heart has become capable of every form”).⁶⁷ In psychology, Robert Frager drew on Akbarian themes to model “self beyond ego,” importing Sufi ideas into transpersonal studies.⁶⁸ These receptions sometimes over-translate the doctrine, but they also show its portability across disciplines.

Influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Theory of Stations on Later Sufi Tradition

Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontological reading of the *maqāmāt* moved quickly into Persian Sufism. Even where direct borrowing is debated, the overlap is hard to miss: the mystic and poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (604/1207-672/1273) treated stations less as rungs of ethical achievement and more as cosmic states that disclose how the ultimate Reality (*al-Ḥaqq*) manifests in this world. The Sufi circle established by the Persian philosopher Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (604/1207-673/1274) in Konya offered Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī a welcome opportunity to exchange ideas. Jane Clark’s overview of Qūnawī’s life sketches the shared milieu in which Rūmī and Qūnawī moved and occasionally interacted.⁶⁹

A good test case is spiritual bewilderment (*Ḥayra*). In his *Mathnawī Ma‘navī* [The Spiritual Couplets], Rūmī calls reason “a house of bewilderment,” praising the state not as a defect to be outgrown but as the sign that one has approached the Real.⁷⁰ Read against Akbarian metaphysics, Rūmī’s verse treats *Ḥayra* as a positive, ontological station that marks proximity, not confusion. Annemarie Schimmel captures this dynamic, explaining that Rūmī turns severe metaphysical themes into vivid symbols and stories, letting difficult ideas be felt rather than described.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991), 236.

⁶⁸ Robert Frager, *Heart, Self & Soul: The Sufi Psychology of Growth, Balance, and Harmony* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1999), 44-46.

⁶⁹ Jane Clark, “Towards a Biography of Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 49 (2011): 1-32.

⁷⁰ Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Mathnawī*, trans. R. A. Nicholson, Book V, lines 3420-3422 (London: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial, 1926), 182.

⁷¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 211-215, 223-224; see also her *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 355-357; and William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 77-81, 218-219.

Ibn 'Arabī's closest heirs hammered his scattered remarks on stations into a system. Qūnawī, his stepson and senior student, clarified the ontological ground: "Know that the Real is sheer Being [*wujūd*], and Being in the case of the Real is identical with His Essence; for everything else it is something 'added' [to quiddity]. Hence, no individual among existents is independent of what is true of the Real: Being."⁷² This frames the stations as disclosures of the Divine Names across levels of being, not just as moral mileposts.

One generation later, the Persian mystic and scholar 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d.735/1335) supplied the standard terminology which would be used thereafter. In his *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyya* [Sufi Terminology], he defined *maqām* as "fulfilling one's prescribed tasks until a trait becomes one's very description," adding that "It is called a Stage because it is the halting place of the seeker on the Way."⁷³ This complete definition bridged ethics and ontology and became a standard point of reference.

Two centuries later, the influential Egyptian scholar and Sufi 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (898/1492-973/1565) worked to reconcile Akbarian readings with madrasa orthodoxy. In his *al-Yawāqūt wa-l-Jawābir* [The Gems and Jewels], he consistently reads Ibn 'Arabī "through the lens of allusion," arguing that, when properly understood-Akbarian metaphysics does not cancel the Law but illuminates it.⁷⁴ The result was a durable, orthodox path for Akbarian ideas in Arabic-speaking circles.

The ripple widened beyond Sufism proper. The Persian mystic and scholar Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (980/1572-c.1050/1641), widely known as Mullā Ṣadrā, rebuilt Islamic philosophy around the primacy and gradation of existence and his famous doctrine of substantial motion (*al-Ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*), where all things are in ceaseless inner

⁷² Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb*, translated excerpt in William C. Chittick, "Qūnawī on the One Wujūd," *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* website (2011), accessed August 24, 2025, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/qunawi-on-the-one-wujud-william-chittick/>.

⁷³ 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī, *A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms*, trans. Nabil Safwat, rev. David Pendlebury (London: Octagon, 1991), entry 221, "The Stage (*al-Maqām*)," 66-67.

⁷⁴ 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī, *al-Yawāqūt wa-l-Jawābir fī Bayān 'Aqā'id al-Akābir* [The Gems and Jewels in Elucidating the Doctrines of the Mighty Masters] (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1959), preface, 3-6.

transformation.⁷⁵ Read alongside Akbarian stations, Ṣadrā's move universalizes the itinerary: the whole cosmos travels, not only the human seeker. In Seyyed Hossein Nasr's terms, the synthesis of philosophical demonstration with insights drawn from unveiling (*kashf*) yields a transcendent theosophy (*al-Ḥikma al-Muta'aliya*) in which mystical insight and philosophical rigor meet.⁷⁶ The long afterlife of this tradition, especially in Iran, shows how Ibn 'Arabi's reframing of the stations seeded questions that later philosophers could develop at full scale.⁷⁷

Concluding Remarks

Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of the *maqāmāt* in the twenty-second chapter of his *Futuḥāt* amounts to more than a revision of inherited terminology. It repositions the station from a behavioral rung of an ethical ladder to an ontological locus of divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*). In his understanding, stations are not temporary waypoints along a linear ascent but interlinked, ever-present realities through which the seeker perceives God across cosmos, soul, and being. The measure of progress shifts from what one acquires to what one can receive and bear.

This reframing has clear theoretical payoffs. First, it reflects the question of agency and sovereignty through an ontology of reception. Ethical dispositions matter because they render the heart fit to receive the Divine Names, not because they accumulate merit. Second, it gives a principled account of unity and multiplicity. The dialectic *huwa/lā huwa* explains how every station is simultaneously theophany and veiling, Real in its existence yet other-than-Real in its delimitation. Third, it provides a hermeneutic for religious language, where allusion (*ishāra*) and symbolic discourse are not ornaments but necessary

⁷⁵ Sajjad H. Rizvi, "Mullā Ṣadrā," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, first published June 9, 2009; substantive revision February 5, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mulla-sadra/>, Section 3.2, "Monism and Pluralism" (on substantial motion); see also "Mullā Ṣadrā," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed August 22, 2025, citing Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Asfār al-'Aqlīyah* [*The Four Journeys of the Intellect*], vol. 6, 11.

⁷⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and His Transcendent Theosophy* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997), 1-108.

⁷⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 215-275.

vehicles for speaking about non-repeated disclosure (*lā takrār fī l-tajallī*).

The reception of this theory was productively dialectical. External critiques sharpened its boundaries and forced clarifications about the Creator-creation relation and moral responsibility. Internal developments within Sufism and post-classical philosophy extended the framework, showing how the triadic field of cosmic, spiritual, and ontological stations could be systematized, lexically refined, and reconciled with juridical-theological discourse. Read across these layers, Ibn 'Arabī's proposal functions as both metaphysics and pedagogy.

The contemporary significance follows from the same logic. A spirituality oriented by disclosure integrates action and contemplation, ethics, and ontology. Growth is not counted by stations left behind but by a deepening capacity to witness the one Reality manifesting in unending forms, hold together contraries without collapse, and retain the beauty and majesty of the Divine Names. Ultimately, the same station appears differently in different circumstances, manifesting the same Divine Name in ever new disclosures.

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