

Language and Existence in the Thought of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi

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Abstract. *The concept of language and letters in Ibn Arabi's thought encompasses the entirety of existence from its highest to its lowest levels ranging from the realm of divinity and absolute imagination to the realm of creation and transformation. All levels of existence emanate from the 'amā' (the Divine Cloud), which represents the Divine Self and constitutes one of the degrees of absolute imagination. There exists, therefore, a parallelism between the degrees of existence and the Divine Names on the one hand, and the letters of language on the other. In this way, the twenty-eight Divine Names correspond to twenty-eight ontological degrees, which in turn correspond to the twenty-eight letters of language. Ibn Arabi also attributes to the long vowels a symbolic relation to these degrees a relation that both affirms separation and implies interpenetration. These vowels belong to a realm analogous to ours yet are neither within it nor outside it. This conception aligns with Ibn Arabi's analogy between the movements (vowels) and the realm of absolute imagination or divinity.*

Key words: *Language – Existence – Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi.*

Introduction:

In this study, the degrees of existence represent the simple levels that correspond to the letters of language. The composite beings, on the other hand, are the Divine Words formed from these letters or simple levels. If each degree of existence corresponds to one of the letters of language, then...

Introduction (continued):

The Divine Word “*Kun*” (“Be”) represents the Divine Command through which the essences of all possible beings were brought into existence. In other words, all created beings are the Words of God, whose origin lies in the Divine Command “*Be.*” Know that the possible entities are God's inexhaustible Words, through which His enduring sovereignty is manifested. These entities are composite, for they came into being to convey meaning, and thus arose from a synthesis expressed in the Arabic language by the word “*Kun.*” From it, only that which is composite of spirit and form can emerge. The forms unite with one another due to their intrinsic affinities, while the substance in which the Divine Words namely, the cosmos appear is the *Breath of the All-Merciful*. For this reason, it is described as “Words.”

In this study, we will discuss the meaning of letters and their symbolic significance, as well as the phonetic dimension of consonants and the relationship between letters and the degrees of existence in the first section. The second section will address the letters and the celestial degrees of beings, the correspondence between letters and the spiritual ranks of the gnostics, and the notions of voicedness and voicelessness (*jahr* and *hams*) as they relate to existence. Accordingly, our focus will center on the meaning of letters and the phonetic dimension in the thought of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi.

Section One

The Significance of Letters and the Phonetic Dimension

The Meaning of Letters and Their Symbolic Significance:

The letters of language hold a significant place in Sufi thought and are endowed with numerous symbolic meanings. Undoubtedly, the mystery surrounding the interpretation of the disjointed letters that appear at the beginnings of certain chapters in the Qur'an has opened a vast and profound space for contemplation, inviting reflection on the inner significance and symbolism of these letters. The Sufis did not confine themselves merely to seeking the meanings of these letters; rather, they aspired to uncover the secrets of existence and creation by contemplating the intricate relationships between the Divine Speech embodied in the command "*Kun*" ("Be") and the Divine Act, which brings the essences of possible beings into existence. They thus established connections between the Divine Names and the letters of language on the one hand, and between these letters and the levels of existence on the other.

The interest in language was not limited to the Sufis; it was also shared by the Shi'a, who regarded the letters as symbols representing the lineage of the Imams and divine proofs (*hujaj*). Massignon points out that the letter *sīn*, for instance, became a symbol of Salman al-Farisi, whose persona was assimilated since the early second century AH into the supreme divine archetype. Similarly, the letter *ʿayn* came to symbolize ʿAli (peace be upon him), while the letter *mīm* symbolized Muhammad (peace be upon him). In this symbolic schema, Salman (*sīn*) came to serve as the connecting link or the indispensable intermediary between Muhammad and ʿAli (peace be upon them), that is, between *mīm* and *ʿayn*. Based on this conception, the Shi'a were categorized into *Sīniyya*, *ʿAyniyya*, and *Mīmiyya*, according to their respective interpretations of the relationship among these three spiritual and historical archetypes.

There is no doubt that the Sufis in general and Ibn Arabi in particular benefited from the works of those whom Ibn Khaldun refers to as "the practitioners of magic and talismans," especially with regard to their understanding of the influence of letters upon the natural world and the celestial spheres. This influence was believed to derive from the specific numerical power of the letters and from their intrinsic natures, which correspond to the four known natural elements. Such sciences can be traced in the writings of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, Maslama al-Majrīṭī, Shams al-Dīn al-Būnī, and others.

The difference, as Ibn Khaldun observes, lies in the aim and method: "The manipulation performed by the practitioners of talismans consists in invoking the spiritual forces of the celestial spheres and binding them to certain images or numerical ratios, until a kind of temperament is produced which, by its nature, effects transformation and transmutation much like the action of leaven upon that into which it is introduced."

The manipulation by the bearers of the Divine Names that is, the Sufis derives from their attainment of manifestation and unveiling through the Divine Light and the divine support, enabling them to command nature so that it becomes obedient rather than resistant, without the need for assistance from celestial or other powers.

The Divine Names, in their various forms including proper names, pronouns, and relative names extend this conceptual framework to encompass linguistic phenomena such as grammatical inflection (*iʿrāb*), sentence structure, plural and singular forms, gender distinctions, and phonetic elongation (*tarkhīm*).

The Phonetic Dimension:

1. Consonants in the Phonetic Dimension:

As previously mentioned, all levels of existence emanated from the Divine Essence (*al-ʿamāʾ al-dhāt*), which is the Divine Self and constitutes one of the degrees of Absolute Imagination. Each of these existential levels emanated from a specific Divine Name and was associated with a corresponding letter of language, which in turn derives from that Divine Name. This signifies that

there is a parallelism between the degrees of existence and the Divine Names on the one hand, and between them and the letters of language on the other.

When we trace the levels of existence from their numerical designations and the First Intellect or the Pen to their lowest degrees we find that they transition from purity and luminosity to density and darkness. This progression mirrors the arrangement of the letters of language within the human vocal apparatus, beginning with the complete liberation of air, which produces sound without any obstruction or constriction in the respiratory passage, and ending with the labial letters, which represent the final articulation points.

Indeed, the issue of language and letters in Islamic thought in general, and Sufi thought in particular, requires extensive studies to uncover their origins and diverse orientations, especially regarding the matter of interpretation (*ta'wil*).

Letters are the fundamental elements of words in language; they are the sounds that combine to form a word, and words in turn combine to form a sentence. Similarly, the levels of existence that originated from the '*amā*', which is the Divine Self, correspond to letters from this perspective.

If the composite beings came into existence through the Divine Command "*Kun*" ("Be"), they in turn emerged from a combination within the letters of the Divine Self, specifically the connection of two letters, *kāf* and *nūn*. From this standpoint, language parallels the entirety of existence.

Indeed, Ibn Arabi's concept of language and letters encompasses the entirety of existence, from its highest to its lowest levels from the realm of divinity and absolute imagination to the realm of creation and transformation. Moreover, the letters of language correspond, on another level, to the spiritual ranks of the gnostics, beginning with the prophets and extending to the ordinary believers. Thus, Ibn Arabi's conception of letters encompasses the entire cosmos, both ontologically and epistemologically, simultaneously.

Ibn Arabi does not limit himself to letters alone; his ontological and epistemological conception extends to long and short vowels, as well as grammatical vowel markings (*ḥarakāt al-i'rāb*). In this framework, the Divine Names correspond to the levels of existence and to the letters of language: twenty-eight Names correspond to twenty-eight degrees of existence, which in turn correspond to twenty-eight letters of the alphabet. All of these are also aligned with the twenty-eight lunar mansions.

He created the world according to the number of letters for the sake of the Self, in twenty-eight neither more nor less. The first of these is the Intellect, which is the Pen, followed by the Self, which is the Tablet, then Nature, then the Mist, then the Body, then Form, then the Throne, then the Chair, then the Atlas, then the sphere of the fixed stars, followed by the first heaven, the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh, then the sphere of Fire, the sphere of Air, the sphere of Water, the sphere of Earth, then Minerals, then Plants, then Animals, then Angels, then Jinn, then Humans, and finally the Degree. The Degree is the ultimate purpose in every existent, just as the letter *wāw* is the ultimate point among the letters of the Self.

However, these letters that correspond to the levels of existence and the Divine Names are not the letters of our human language; rather, they are spirits and angels, each named after the letters we recognize. These angelic-spiritual letters preserve the Divine Names and the levels of existence associated with them. Within this framework, the letters of our human language are merely visible, sensory representations of the letters of the Divine. The Divine Names, which correspond to the levels of existence, mediate between the spiritual inner reality and the Divine Language on one hand, and the sensory outward manifestation and human language on the other. Ibn Arabi states: "And all the Names..."

The Divine Names specific to this human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), described by this attribute, descend through these stations, states, and ranks, which correspond to the lunar mansions and the levels of existence based on the analogy between the Perfect Human and the Moon. These Names are precise and enumerated: the Exalted in Rank, the Gatherer, the Subtle, the Strong, the Humiliator, the Provider, the Mighty, the Causer of Death, the Giver of Life, the Living, the Withholder, the Clarifier, the Enumerator, the Shaper, the Light, the Conqueror, the All-Knowing, the Lord, the Determiner,

the Rich, the Grateful, the Encompassing, the Wise, the Manifest, and the Apparent. Each of these Names has an angelic-spiritual entity that preserves and enacts it.

These angels have forms within the human self, which are called letters at the points of articulation in speech and in written form. Their visual representation in writing may vary, but their enumeration does not. These angels spiritual entities in the world of spirits bear the names of these letters. Arranged according to their points of articulation to clarify their order, they are: the Angel of *hā'*, then *hamza*, the Angel of *'ayn* (unemphatic), the Angel of *ḥā'* (unemphatic), the Angel of *ghayn* (emphatic), the Angel of *khā'* (emphatic), the Angel of *qāf* a mighty angel whose presence I have witnessed then the Angel of *kāf*, the Angel of *jīm*, the Angel of *shīn* (emphatic), the Angel of *yā'*, the Angel of *dād* (emphatic), the Angel of *lām*, the Angel of *nūn*, the Angel of *rā'*, the Angel of *ṭā'* (unemphatic), the Angel of *dāl* (unemphatic), the Angel of *tā'* (emphatic with two dots above), the Angel of *zāy*, the Angel of *sīn* (unemphatic), the Angel of *ṣād* (unemphatic), the Angel of *zā'* (emphatic), the Angel of *thā'* (emphatic with three dots), the Angel of *dhāl* (emphatic), the Angel of *fā'*, the Angel of *yā'*, the Angel of *mīm*, and the Angel of *wāw*.

These letters are the bodies of those angels, spanning the worlds of creation, dominion, and witnessing. Ibn Arabi assigns to the First World the world of Absolute Imagination the vowel movements (*ḥarakāt*) rather than the consonantal letters. Between each pair of these three worlds, corresponding to the letters, there exist intermixed letters that connect the two worlds both ontologically and phonetically. Thus, there are letters in the intermediate world between the World of Witnessing (*'ālam al-shahāda*) and the World of Power (*'ālam al-jabarūt*), as well as letters in the intermediate world between the World of Power and the World of Dominion (*'ālam al-malakūt*).

To maintain the quaternary structure of this hierarchy, Ibn Arabi divides the letters of the World of Command (*'ālam al-amr*) into two groups, each containing two letters, arranged as follows:

1. **The World of Grandeur:** This is what Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī calls the World of Power (*'ālam al-jabarūt*). It comprises the letters *hā'* and *hamza*, which correspond respectively to the Universal Self and the First Intellect. They are also aligned with the Divine Names *al-Bā'ith* (the Raiser) and *al-Badī'* (the Originator).
2. **The Higher World or the World of Dominion (*'ālam al-malakūt*):** This world includes the letters *'ayn*, *ḥā'*, *ghayn*, and *khā'*. They correspond to the Universal Nature, the Mist, the Body in its entirety, and Form. These letters are also associated with the Divine Names *al-Bāṭin* (the Hidden), *al-Ākhir* (the Last), *al-Zāhir* (the Manifest), and *al-Hakīm* (the Wise).

The letter *ḥā'*, which corresponds to the Mist (*al-habā'*), represents the intermixed letter between the World of Grandeur and the World of Dominion. This intermediate position of *ḥā'* parallels the ontological position of *al-habā'*, which is the shadow of the Universal Self that extends from it to form Nature. Thus, like *al-habā'*, *ḥā'* belongs inwardly to the World of Grandeur and outwardly to the World of Dominion.

3. **The Intermediate World or the World of Power (*'ālam al-jabarūt*):** This world comprises the letters *tā'*, *thā'*, *jīm*, *dāl*, *dhāl*, *rā'*, *zāy*, *ṭā'*, *kāf*, *lām*, and *fā'* both in speech and in writing, regardless of the pen used. The letters operate through these spirits rather than through their own forms; that is, through their perceptible forms to hearing and vision, or their imagined forms in the intellect. One must not imagine that the letters act through their physical forms; rather, they act through their spirits. Each letter engages in glorification, praise, declaration of God's greatness, magnification, and commendation, thereby exalting its Creator and Manifestation with a spirituality that never leaves it. Through these Names, these angels are designated in the heavens, and there is no angel among them who has not conferred upon me [their influence].

Accordingly, if the consonantal letters of language correspond to the Divine Names, just as they correspond to the levels of existence, they can be divided into four ranks according to different criteria. The first criterion is their division according to points of articulation, which is the clear division in Ibn Arabi's system and does not conflict with his conception of the levels of existence. The second criterion is their division according to their celestial ranks, placing them into four groups

corresponding to God, humans, jinn, and angels a division in which the significance of some aspects is difficult to comprehend. The third criterion is Ibn Arabi's division of letters according to their cognitive ranks, viewing them as a responsible (*mukallaf*) world parallel to the human world.

Letters and the Levels of Existence:

In this division, Ibn Arabi arranges the letters according to their points of articulation, which correspond to the four levels of existence. These include the World of Dominion (*'ālam al-malakūt*), which parallels the levels of the World of Command (*'ālam al-amr*), and the World of Power (*'ālam al-jabarūt*), which corresponds to the letters *ṣād*, *dād*, *qāf*, *shīn*, and the plain *yā'*. According to their points of articulation, these letters correspond to the levels of existence, beginning with the Throne (*al-'arsh*) and ending with the rank of the Angel (*al-malik*), along with their corresponding Divine Names.

It is natural, then, that the letter *fā'*, which corresponds to the rank of the Angel (*al-malik*), serves as the intermixed or intermediary letter between the World of Power (*'ālam al-jabarūt*) and the subsequent World of Witnessing (*'ālam al-shahāda*). We observe that Ibn Arabi's approach is based on his conception of the nature of the Angel: it belongs to the Barzakh and Power worlds, yet it is capable of manifesting and assuming form in the World of Dominion and the World of Witnessing, just as Gabriel appeared to the Prophet (peace be upon him) in multiple forms. Notably, Ibn Arabi does not posit any intermixed world or intermediary letter between the World of Dominion (*'ālam al-malakūt*) and the World of Power (*'ālam al-jabarūt*).

4. As for the letters of the World of Dominion and Witnessing, they are *yā'*, *mīm*, and *wāw*. These letters correspond to the ranks of the jinn, humans, and the final degree (*al-martaba*), which is the last of the levels of existence.

Ibn Arabi also assigns a relation between the long vowel movements and these ranks within this framework. However, this relation emphasizes separation while indicating interpenetration: these movements belong to a world analogous to ours, yet they are neither fully within it nor entirely outside it. This conception aligns with Ibn Arabi's analogy between the vowel movements and the World of Absolute Imagination or Divinity.

Section Two

The Ranks of Letters in the Thought of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi

Letters and the Celestial Ranks of Beings

This division is not without ambiguity, which researchers have been unable to fully resolve, particularly regarding the significance of the numerical value assigned to each celestial rank. Ibn Arabi divides the letters into four ranks:

1. **The First Rank – The Rank of the Mukallaf (Responsible Being), which is God Almighty:** Each letter in this rank corresponds to seven celestial spheres.
2. **The Second Rank – The Rank of Humans:** Each letter corresponds to eight celestial spheres.
3. **The Third Rank – The Rank of the Jinn:** Each letter corresponds to nine celestial spheres.
4. **The Fourth and Final Rank – The Rank of Angels:** Each letter corresponds to ten celestial spheres.

Based on this celestial division, Ibn Arabi establishes a correspondence between the number of spheres and the ranks of letters on one hand, and the natural elements and the four classical elements on the other. The division exhibits a subtle interpenetration, with ambiguities that may produce inconsistencies in five places in the text details that were overlooked by the editor of the recently printed volumes, despite indications in one of the manuscripts used for verification, the Bayzid manuscript, denoted by the letter (B).

What is significant in this division is its ontological implication and its foundation in a quaternary structure, as well as Ibn Arabi's reliance on the written forms of the letters. The natural and celestial significance, while important in itself, is not the focus in this context. The ranks are:

1. **The Septenary Rank:** This rank is specific to the Divine Presence (*al-Ḥaḍra al-Ilāhiyya*), and its letters are *hamza*, *zāy*, and *lām*. Ibn Arabi justifies the correspondence between these letters and the Divine Presence on two foundations:

First foundation: The Divine Presence consists of three aspects: the Essence (*al-dhāt*), the Attribute (*al-ṣifa*), and the Relation or Link (*al-rābiṭa*) that unites the Essence and the Attribute.

Second foundation: If these three letters are pronounced as a single word "*Azal*" they indicate the negation of primordially. Ibn Arabi explains:

"From these three letters, certain realities pertaining to the Divine Presence arise as well, namely the Essence, the Attribute, and the Link between the Essence and the Attribute, which is Acceptance (al-qabūl). Acceptance occurs through them, for an attribute is connected to that which it describes and to its true object for example, knowledge connects itself to the knower and to the known; will connects itself to the one willed and to the object willed; power connects itself to the Powerful and to the possible. Likewise, all attributes and Names, even if relational, function in this manner."

The letters designated for this rank *alif*, *zāy*, and *lām* thus signify the negation of primordially, that is, *Azal*.

We will see how Ibn Arabi analyzes *zāy* and *lām* from a written perspective to reveal their relationship with *alif* on one hand, and the role of *zāy* as an intermediary between *alif* and *lām* on the other, particularly in his discussion of the second rank among these ranks.

2. If the Human Presence (*al-Ḥaḍra al-Insāniyya*) corresponds to the Divine Presence in that it also consists of an Essence, an Attribute, and a Link between the Essence and the Attribute, it is natural that it would correspond to three letters as well. However, since the correspondence between God and humanity is not an essential correspondence but one of form, the letters of the Human Presence differ from those of the Divine Presence.

Ibn Arabi states: "From these letters, three also pertain to the Human Presence, just as they do for the Divine Presence, so they coincide in number. Yet they are the letters *nūn*, *ṣād*, and *qād*, differing from the Divine Presence in their substance. Servanthood does not partake in divinity in the realities by which one is God, just as the realities of the Divine make the servant an object of devotion. In terms of form, it is assigned three letters. If there were a shared participation in these realities if God and the servant were identical in essence, meaning one and the same this would be impossible. Therefore, the realities must be distinct, even if they are attributed to one essence. Thus, God distinguished Himself from them by His Eternity, as they distinguished themselves from Him by their temporal origination. He did not say they are distinguished by His knowledge, as they distinguished themselves by theirs, for the sphere of knowledge is one eternal in the Eternal, originated in the originated.

The two Presences converge in that each is intelligible through three realities: Essence, Attribute, and the Link between the Attribute and that which is described. In the very digital *nūn*, which represents half of the sphere, there exist marvels perceptible only to one who has firmly adhered to the belt of submission and realized through the spirit of death, which cannot be imagined or opposed by anyone acting within it. Likewise, in the very point of the *nūn* lies the initial indication of its spiritual intelligible meaning above the lower form of the *nūn*, which is half of the circle. The point connected to the numbered *nūn*, placed at the beginning of the form, is the center of the intelligible *alif*, by which the diameter of the circle is distinguished. The final point, where the form of the *nūn* is interrupted and ends, is the apex of this imagined intelligible *alif*, whose existence can be realized from its latent state. It rests upon the *nūn*, from which emerges the letter *lām*, while half of it is *zāy*, alongside the mentioned *alif*.

In this regard, the *nūn* gives the Human Azal, just as *alif*, *zāy*, and *lām* in the Divine correspond to the realities of *nūn*, *ṣād*, and *ḍād* pertaining to the servant.

Thus, Ibn Arabi relies on the written form of the *nūn* to deduce that it corresponds to half of existence the manifest half corresponding to its hidden half since the *nūn*, in writing, is half a circle, and existence, in Ibn Arabi's conception, is a full circle. Between the two ends of the *nūn*, or its beginning and ending points, there are imagined *alifs* representing the radius of the circle of existence. If these *alifs* were actualized from their latent state, they would combine with the *nūn* to form a *lām* in the shape ۞.

What remains is the *zāy*, which represents half of the *nūn* in terms of writing. In this way, the *nūn* encompasses the *alif*, *zāy*, and *lām*, making the Human Azal manifest in God and hidden in humanity. As for *ṣād* and *ḍād*, the circle is more complete and perfect in them than in the *nūn*, and they can, in turn, indicate the same realities.

3. If Ibn Arabi relied on the written form of the letters to establish this correspondence between God and humanity, then in his explanation of the four letters corresponding to the World of the Jinn *‘ayn*, *ghayn*, *sīn*, and *shīn* he refers solely to the Qur'an. This confirms our view that *ta'wil* in Ibn Arabi's thought is a broad and profound methodology, and that the Qur'anic text maintains a continuous presence in his thinking.

The Jinn have four letters because the directions from which Satan approaches humans are four: front, back, right, and left. Ibn Arabi bases this on the Qur'anic verse:

"Then I will come to them from before them and from behind them, and from their right and from their left; and You will not find most of them grateful" [Qur'an 7:17].

Thus, the four letters pertain to the fiery Jinn according to the realities that apply to them, and their realities are completed leaving them with no fifth reality through which they could seek a higher rank.

4. Finally, there remains the tenth rank of letters, which corresponds to the angels. This rank consists of eighteen letters: *yā'*, *jīm*, *dāl*, *hā'*, *wāw*, *ḥā'*, *ṭā'*, *yā'*, *kāf*, *mīm*, *qāf*, *fā'*, *rā'*, *tā'*, *thā'*, *khā'*, *dhāl*, and *zā'*.

The reason the angels have eighteen letters is that they represent the intermediate world between God and humanity. Therefore, Ibn Arabi considers the tenth rank of letters as "the second of the four ranks," that is, without taking into account the celestial rank of the letters.

If the Divine Presence consists of three aspects Essence, Attribute, and Link and the Human Presence corresponds to three aspects as well, then each of these three aspects is further divided into Angel, Dominion, and Power, or Manifest, Hidden, and Barzakh. Accordingly, the two Presences together comprise eighteen aspects, which correspond to the number of letters of the angels.

These eighteen aspects are divided into nine on the side of the Divine and nine on the side of humanity, in accordance with the intermediary nature of the angelic world. The nine aspects on the Divine side are the subtle emanations (*raqā'iq*) of bestowal from the Divine to creation, while the nine on the human side are the subtle emanations of reception. The intermediary between these two sides is Gabriel, who delivers revelation to the Prophet on earth. Ibn Arabi expresses this by saying:

"The Human Presence is like the Divine Presence indeed, it is the same in three ranks: Angel, Dominion, and Power, and each of these ranks is divided into three..."

The ranks are nine in number, so if we take three for the World of Witnessing and multiply them by six the total of the Divine and Human Presences, or by the six ordained days in which the three divine realities and three created realities were brought into existence we arrive at eighteen, which constitutes the existence of the Angel. Similarly, they function on the Divine side in the same way. The Divine has nine spheres for bestowal, and humanity has nine spheres for reception. Subtle emanations (*raqā'iq*) extend from each of the nine Divine realities to the nine created realities, and in turn, from the nine created realities back to the nine Divine realities. Wherever these meet, that constitutes the Angel, for that arising excess is the Angel.

If one intends to incline entirely toward one set of nine, it is drawn back by the other, so it oscillates between them. Gabriel descends from the Divine Presence to the Prophet (peace be upon him). If we consider it from the Divine side, we speak of the spheres of bestowal; if from the human side, the spheres of reception. Regardless, if we designate one set of nine for bestowal and the other for reception, their conjunction produces the Angel. For this reason, the Divine established nine spheres: the seven heavens, the Chair (*al-Kursī*), and the Throne (*al-‘Arsh*); or, if preferred, the spheres of the planets and the Atlas sphere, which is the correct understanding.

Letters and the Ranks of the Gnostics:

If we leave aside the existential divisions of the letters and turn to their division on a cognitive basis, we notice that Ibn Arabi regards this division as a real one, similar to the previous divisions. Just as the ranks of the gnostics correspond to the levels of existence according to the spiritual horizons (*al-afāq*) reached by the gnostic in their ascensional journey, so too do the letters, in their spiritual reality, constitute communities that reason, perceive, and comprehend.

He states: “*Know that our division of these letters is not a division by mere reasoning or abstraction; rather, it is true in reality. For the letters, according to us and according to those of unveiling and faith, are the letters of speech, the letters of number, and the letters of imagination. They are communities, among other communities, whose forms are governed by living, speaking spirits that glorify God with His praise, obedient to their Lord. Thus, the letters for us are not as they are for those veiled ones whom God has blinded and placed a veil over their sight.*”

Cognitively, the letters are divided into ranks corresponding to the ranks of gnostics among humans. These include: the general (*al-‘amma*), the special (*al-khāṣṣa*), the especially special (*al-khāṣṣa al-khāṣṣa*), and the purity of the especially special (*ṣafā’ al-khāṣṣa al-khāṣṣa*). Then there is the “sent world” (*al-‘ālam al-mursal*), and the world that is attached to God and to which creation is attached, which Ibn Arabi calls “the world of sanctification of the letters of the cherubim” (*‘ālam al-taqdīs min al-ḥurūf al-karūbiyyīn*).

Following this are the world predominated by embodiment in the Attributes of the Truth, the world predominated by actualization (*taḥaqquq*), and the world in which realization is attained through the station of union (*maqām al-ittiḥād*). Ibn Arabi further divides these last into two ranks: the higher (*‘ālī*) and the highest (*a’lā*).

As for the *special* (*al-khāṣṣa*), these are the letters of the fourteen opening verses (*ḥurūf a’wāl al-suwar*) of the Qur’an. The letters of the “purity of the especially special” (*ṣafā’ al-khāṣṣa al-khāṣṣa*) are limited to *yā’* alone, without any other letters.

Ibn Arabi then places it together with *fā’* and *jīm* in the world predominated by actualization (*al-‘ālam al-mughallab ‘alayhi bi-l-taḥaqquq*). In reality, it is difficult to interpret this division of the letters on a phonetic or written basis. Ibn Arabi himself does not provide any explanation, justifying it by his desire for brevity to avoid lengthiness, and therefore he confines himself to referencing his work *Al-Mabādī’ wa-l-Gḥāyāt* (Principles and Objectives).

The “World of Sanctification from the Letters of the Cherubim” (*‘ālam al-taqdīs min al-ḥurūf al-karūbiyyīn*) brings to mind the world of the cherubic angels, whom God created in the *‘amā’* (Primordial Darkness) and from whom He selected the governing spirits of this world. These letters are *alif*, *dāl*, *dhāl*, *rā’*, *zāy*, and *wāw*. All of these letters accept initial connection in writing but do not accept medial or final connection. From this perspective, they correspond to the cherubic angels who wander in the beauty of the Divine Presence, knowing nothing of the world, as they are immersed in the ocean of Divine Oneness (*baḥr al-aḥadiyya*).

These letters correspond, from another perspective, to the gnostics among the people of annihilation (*ahl al-fanā’*) such as al-Bustāmī, al-Ḥallāj, and others. They are the gnostics who immersed themselves entirely in the beauty of Divine Majesty and were completely absorbed in it. While Ibn Arabi prefers the gnostic who returns to creation without diminishing the status of the people of annihilation, he distinguishes between two types of worship: the worship of the Essence in so far as it deserves the attribute of divinity, and the worship of divinity, which encompasses all relations and

attributes. He maintains that worship must integrate both considerations, according to the composition of the worshipper or their existence in the world of composition.

Ibn Arabi expresses these two aspects of worship in terms of “meaning and letter”: *“The letter is for the letter, and the meaning is for the meaning. Therefore, we do not worship the Essence stripped of its divine attributes, nor do we worship divinity without relating it to a subject. Worship is thus established according to the reality of the servant which is composition not according to the reality of the Truth, which is Oneness. The reality is the Oneness that is neither dependent nor related. This is why, in the divine configuration of the Arabic script, the alif, when it occurs at the beginning of a word, does not connect to other letters, and when it occurs later, only certain letters five, no more connect to it: dāl, dhāl, rā’, zāy, and wāw. These five states are characteristic of those who have realized Oneness; their worship is of the Essence itself and is unassociated with any other matter. This is worship of meaning for the sake of meaning, whereas the letter is worship of the letter for the letter. For the worshipper of meaning, there is no distinction between Essence and divinity, nor multiplicity; they perceive a single Reality deserving of what the gnostic perceives in terms of meaning, not in terms of letters. This is the station of Majesty and Grandeur the Oneness of the servant which grants knowledge of essential Oneness, transcendence, and sufficiency.”*

Intonation and Whisper between Letters and Being

What we observe here is that Ibn Arabi relied, in his interpretation of the phenomena of whisper (*hamas*) and intonation (*jahr*) in particular, on Qur’anic texts that he conceived as symbolically referring to these letters. The letters pronounced with intonation (*hurūf al-jahr*) correspond to the world of *al-Mulk* (Sovereignty) and *al-Shahāda* (Manifestation), while the whispered letters (*hurūf al-hamas*) correspond to the world of the unseen (*al-Ghayb*) and *al-Malakūt* (Kingdom).

These two worlds of letters correspond to types of humans upon whom Qur’anic verses were revealed. Ibn Arabi states: *“Know that the world, in some of its divisions, is divided into two sections according to a reality known to us, and a section called the world of the unseen,”* which encompasses everything hidden from the senses and not ordinarily perceivable by them. The letters of this unseen world are: *sīn, ṣād, kāf, khā’* (voiced), *tā’* (with two dots above), *fā’, shīn, hā’, thā’* (with three dots), *ḥā’*.

These are letters of mercy, gentleness, compassion, tranquility, dignity, humility, and descent. Qur’anic verses were revealed upon such people, including:

- *“And the servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth easily; and when the ignorant address them, they say [words of] peace”* (25:63).
- *“Those who restrain anger and pardon people”* (3:134).
- *“And their hearts are fearful”* (23:60).
- *“Those who are humble in their prayers”* (23:2).
- *“And the voices are humbled to the Most Merciful”* (17:110).

This category of letters is also described as conveying gentleness, as mentioned above. This represents a set of meanings associated with the world of the unseen and divine gentleness (*al-ghayb wa-l-lutf*).

Whispered and Intoned Letters

These are the whispered (*hamūs*) letters. Ibn Arabi included *khā’* and *hā’*, which are normally intoned (*majhūr*), within this group. Conversely, he placed *tā’* and *qāf*, which are normally whispered, among the intoned (*majhūr*) letters. The intoned letters correspond to the world of power (*al-qahr*) and manifestation (*al-shahāda*), which is the part of the letters perceivable by the senses according to convention the remainder of the letters.

Relevant Qur’anic references include:

- *“So proclaim what you are commanded”* (Al-Hijr 15:94),
- *“And be harsh against them”* (Al-Muzzammil 73:5),

- “*And bring upon them your cavalry and infantry*” (Al-Anfal 8:60).

This world of letters corresponds to kingship, authority, power, severity, struggle, confrontation, and combat. From the spirituality of these letters, those receiving revelation may experience the physical effects of divine presence, such as coughing, clamor of the bell, or sweating of the forehead.

They are also referenced in Qur’anic verses such as:

- “*O you who is wrapped [in garments]*” (Al-Muzzammil 73:1),
- “*O you who are covered [with a cloak]*” (Al-Muddaththir 74:1).

Similarly, in the world of the unseen (‘*ālam al-ghayb*), the letters appear in verses such as:

- “*So the trustworthy spirit descended upon your heart*” (Ash-Shu‘arā’ 26:193),
- “*Do not move your tongue with it to hasten it*” (Ta-Ha 20:114),
- “*And do not hasten with the Qur’an before its revelation is completed to you, and say, ‘My Lord, increase me in knowledge’*” (Ta-Ha 20:114).

Intonation and Whisper as Existential Symbols

- My principles of intonation (*jahr*) and whisper (*hams*) here transform into existential symbols. Whisper symbolizes the world of the unseen (‘*ālam al-ghayb*) existentially, and it signifies mercy, gentleness, humility, and restraint of anger in human terms. Intonation, on the other hand, symbolizes the world of manifestation (‘*ālam al-shahāda*) and power (*al-qahr*), referring to severity, confrontation, and force. The Qur’anic verses that Ibn Arabi cites for these two phenomena or attributes reflect the complementary relationship between them.
- The basis for Ibn Arabi’s citation is that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was granted *jawāmi‘ al-kalim* the comprehensive words which is the Qur’an, capable of indicating everything: existence, humanity, and knowledge. Revelation itself can reflect both conditions: it can be severe and intense, or gentle and easy. These two states came through revelation to the Prophet. On the other hand, the Prophet was sent as a mercy to the worlds, yet he was commanded to fight the disbelievers with the sword and to act sternly toward them. The Qur’an encompasses all of these realities in describing the Prophet. The severity brought by the Prophet is, in essence, a manifestation of mercy, albeit veiled in the appearance of sternness and rigor. Similarly, the world of manifestation and power (*al-shahāda* and *al-qahr*) is merely the apparent form of the unseen and the kingdom (*al-ghayb* and *al-malakūt*).
- If these existential, epistemological, and human meanings are indicated by the phenomena of whisper and intonation, this confirms what has been stated previously: for Ibn Arabi, language and the Qur’an become a special code whose full significance is understood only by the Sufis those who have reached the summit of the ascension (*mi‘rāj*) and attained complete knowledge.
- Thus, all the letters of the language ultimately return in their essence to the *Alif*, both phonetically and in writing. They represent different and varied gradations of the breath of the soul, with the *Alif* embodying its complete freedom from a phonetic perspective. From a written perspective, the *Alif* is a line, and from this angle, all letters are considered different manifestations of this original line. The *Alif* corresponds to the Divine Essence, which is the origin of the names, letters, and all manifestations of existence.

Conclusion

We conclude that language is a divine gift from God to humanity, granted through the reality of the Divine Soul, which is the human spirit and the breath that flows through the outlets of the self, forming letters and words. Therefore, God endowed human speech with the most complete existence, creating twenty-eight articulations of the soul, with each articulation producing a specific letter that reflects the essence of the others. Each articulation is distinguished by its being part of the soul, for the essence is one in itself yet multiple in its articulations. God made them twenty-eight because the world

revolves through twenty-eight stations and zodiacal signs, which correspond to the circular orbits and the articulatory points of the soul used to generate the world and determine what is suitable for it.

Thus, human language, in its essence and inner reality, is nothing other than divine language. If a human being acts as God's representative in speech and derives the breath that produces letters and words from God or the Divine Soul, then the perfect gnostic (*al-'arif al-kamil*) is the one who comprehends the inner meaning of these divine words in both existence and language. In contrast, the ordinary person, whose perception and knowledge do not transcend the apparent level, understands language only in its conventional, outward sense and perceives almost nothing of the words of existence.

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