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Unraveling Ibn Sabʿīn's Thought: A Study of Verified and Unverified Texts

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Abstract

Abd al-Haqq Ibn Sabʿīn al-Andalusī (614–669 AH / 1217–1269 CE), also known as "Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī ibn Muhammad ibn Sabʿīn," was a central figure in medieval Islamic Sūfism. Born in the city of Murcia in al-Andalus, Ibn Sabʿīn was renowned for his philosophical-mystical approach, which sparked significant controversy both during his lifetime and in subsequent eras. His thought diverged from mainstream Sūfī traditions, leaving a lasting impact on Islamic philosophical and mystical discourse. While his intellectual contributions remain highly influential, his nonconformist ideas and bold reinterpretations of theological principles positioned him as a figure of both admiration and contention. This study explores Ibn Sabʿīn's verified and unverified manuscripts, shedding light on his unique intellectual contributions, his use of argumentation and intuition, and the authority of textual interpretations in his works. It examines his engagement with Greek philosophy, his critiques of religious orthodoxy, and his doctrine of waḥdat al-muṭlaqah (absolute unity), which went beyond the concept of waḥdat al-wujūd (unity of being). Additionally, the research investigates lost manuscripts attributed to him, assessing their content, authenticity, and historical significance. The study also explores the role of his "Sabʿīnian Additions" in shaping later Sūfī thought, particularly in the Maghreb and Ottoman intellectual traditions. By analyzing his philosophical and theological positions, linguistic complexities, and historical reception, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of his influence on Sūfī metaphysics and epistemology. Through a comparative framework, the study situates Ibn Sabʿīn within the broader intellectual landscape of medieval Islam, positioning him as both a radical innovator and a controversial mystic.

Keywords: *Islamic Sūfism, Sabʿīnian Mystical Thought, Argumentation and Proofs, Primacy of Personal Experience and Intuition, Authority of Texts, Lost Manuscripts, Sabʿīnian Additions.*

Introduction

Ibn Sabʿīn stands as one of the most intriguing figures in the intellectual and mystical history of the Islamic world. His philosophical and Sūfī contributions, which emphasize mystical experience, intuitive knowledge, and rational discourse, continue to spark scholarly debate. This article examines his theological and philosophical legacy, focusing on his mystical doctrine, critical reception, and the linguistic complexity of his writings, particularly in the context of medieval Andalusia and North Africa. By situating Ibn Sabʿīn within the broader tradition of Islamic intellectual history, this study seeks to unravel his impact on Sūfī metaphysics and his engagement with theological discourse.

The goal of this article is to offer a comprehensive examination of Ibn Sabʿīn's unique mystical framework, particularly his concept of the Perfect Human (al-Insān al-Kāmil), his role in interfaith philosophical exchanges, and his approach to linguistic expression in Sūfī discourse.

His engagement with Greek philosophy, *kalām* (Islamic theological debate), and his correspondence with Emperor Frederick II of Sicily exemplify his broad intellectual reach. This study further explores how his ideas challenged orthodox religious structures, positioning him as both a visionary and a controversial figure.

The significance of this article lies in its contribution to the ongoing reassessment of Ibn Sabʿīn's role in Islamic thought. While much of the scholarship has either dismissed him as an eccentric mystic or celebrated him as a groundbreaking philosopher, this study bridges the gap by critically engaging with his texts, their interpretations, and their impact. By analyzing his linguistic style, theological innovations, and philosophical debates, this article provides a nuanced understanding of Ibn Sabʿīn's intellectual legacy. His influence on subsequent Sūfī movements, his controversial reception, and his role in shaping medieval Islamic thought make his work an essential subject of study in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Ibn Sabʿīn's Life and Works

Abd al-Haqq ibn Ibrahim ibn Muhammad ibn Nasr al-Ghafīqī ibn Sabʿīn (614–669 AH / 1217–1269 CE), also known as Ibn Sabʿīn, bore the title Abū Muḥammad and was referred to as "Qutb al-Dīn" during the Andalusian period due to his vast knowledge. Historical sources and biographical accounts note that he referred to himself as "Ibn Dārah," which later became "Ibn Sabʿīn," as the Arabic letter ʿAyn (ع) has a numerical value of seventy, symbolizing his mystical path (al-Taftāzānī, 1973, p. 75). His *Ṣūfī* approach came to be known as "the Sabʿīnian Way," and his disciples were referred to as *Sabʿīniyyūn* (Sabʿīnians) (al-Shaybī, 1982, p. 132).

While historical sources provide limited biographical details, several references suggest that his family had Berber origins, though it fully integrated into the Arab-Islamic civilization. Some scholars argue that this cultural synthesis made Ibn Sabʿīn's thought uniquely eclectic, blending multiple intellectual traditions (al-Shaybī, 1982, p. 132). His family enjoyed a prominent status in society, yet Ibn Sabʿīn renounced material wealth and worldly luxuries, choosing instead to devote himself to Sūfism. This choice was indicative of his philosophical outlook, in which the pursuit of divine knowledge superseded earthly pursuits.

His early education took place in Almería, Spain, where he studied Qurʾanic exegesis, Islamic jurisprudence, rational sciences, and *Ṣūfism*. He was deeply influenced by Abū Ishāq Ibn Dahāq (d. 611 AH / 1214 CE), a mystic whose esoteric teachings further shaped Ibn Sabʿīn's understanding of divine knowledge (al-Taftāzānī, 1973, p. 75). His exceptional intellectual capabilities were evident at an early age, as he authored his seminal work, *Budd al-ʿĀrif*, while still a young man. This work set the foundation for his philosophical mysticism, emphasizing intuitive knowledge, divine proximity, and the rejection of rigid doctrinal constraints.

In the second phase of his life, Ibn Sabʿīn moved from Murcia to various regions of Andalusia and North Africa. He found relative social stability in the Maghreb, particularly in Ceuta, which enabled him to write extensively and engage in intellectual disputes with both philosophers and theologians. His notable work, *al-Kalām ʿalā al-Masāʾil al-Ṣiqilliyah* (*The Discourse on Sicilian Questions*), emerged during this period, representing a philosophical engagement with Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Islamic thought (Goodman, 1979). His presence in Ceuta led to significant intellectual debates, solidifying his reputation as a controversial yet formidable thinker.

Like many other famous Sūfīs—such as Al-Ḥallāj (244–309 AH / 858–922 CE) and al-Suhrawardī *al-Maqtūl* (549–586 AH / 1155–1191 CE)—Ibn Sabʿīn faced persecution, exile, and

accusations of heresy. His writings and philosophical stance were misinterpreted as heretical deviations, particularly during a time when Islamic political and religious authorities sought to suppress heterodox mysticism (Asín Palacios, 1978). Ultimately, this opposition culminated in his expulsion from Ceuta, after which he sought refuge in Mecca, where he spent his final years in solitude and devotion (Goodman, 1979).

Ibn Sabʿīn's intellectual contributions were largely expressed through his mystical and philosophical writings, which integrated Greek thought, *Ṣūfī* metaphysics, and theological speculation (ʿInān, 1980, p. 245). His most significant works include *Budd al-ʿĀrif*, which explores ethical, metaphysical, and cosmological inquiries, culminating in a mystical-philosophical conception of creation (cosmogony). Another key text, *Al-Kalām ʿalā al-Masāʿil al-Ṣiqilliyā*, is a philosophical and theological treatise that engages with Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Islamic thought (Akasoy, 2008, pp. 115–146). *Sharḥ Kitāb Idrīs* examines mystical texts attributed to Prophet Idrīs (Enoch) and explores the esoteric science of letters, while *Kitāb al-Iḥāṭah* provides a metaphysical discourse on existence, divine manifestation, and cosmic reality (Sharaf, 1990, ch. 2; Badawī, 1958). These works reflect Ibn Sabʿīn's commitment to synthesizing *Ṣūfī* experience with philosophical rigor.

A defining feature of Ibn Sabʿīn's philosophical project was his exploration of existence and creation, particularly in *Al-Kalām ʿalā al-Masāʿil al-Ṣiqilliyā*. This text represents his engagement with the complex theological debate on whether the universe is created or eternal, a question that had occupied Islamic philosophers, theologians, and mystics for centuries (Na'amneh, Assadi, & Sindawi, 2024). Unlike earlier Islamic thinkers who adhered to either the Ashʿarī view of temporal creation or the Avicennian model of necessary existence, Ibn Sabʿīn sought to transcend these dichotomies. His argumentation integrates *Ṣūfī* metaphysics with Aristotelian logic, offering a radical redefinition of causality and the nature of divine emanation. In doing so, he reviews both the deterministic structures of theological cosmology and the rigid intellectualism of Peripatetic philosophy, advocating instead for a dynamic, unified field of being that blurs the boundaries between temporal and eternal existence.

Ibn Sabʿīn's ability to navigate multiple intellectual traditions—blending elements of Islamic mysticism, philosophical rationalism, and metaphysical speculation—positions him as an innovative yet contentious figure. His discourse in *Al-Kalām ʿalā al-Masāʿil al-Ṣiqilliyā* became a reference point for later scholars grappling with the intersections of mysticism and rational inquiry, influencing both esoteric *Ṣūfī* traditions and philosophical discussions on divine causality.

While many of Ibn Sabʿīn's manuscripts remain unverified, and several works have been lost over time, his philosophical and theological contributions continue to be studied within both academic and mystical traditions. His ideas, though controversial, shaped the evolution of Islamic metaphysics, *Ṣūfī* hermeneutics, and interfaith philosophical dialogues. His legacy endures not just as a revolutionary thinker, but as a radical mystic who challenged theological orthodoxy, creating a framework for *Ṣūfī* thought that was both expansive and disruptive.

Beyond his intellectual pursuits, Ibn Sabʿīn's life choices and radical mysticism continue to generate debate. His rejection of conventional social norms, his insistence on divine immediacy, and his disregard for established theological structures positioned him at the margins of both *Ṣūfism* and Islamic philosophy. His refusal to submit to religious institutions marked him as an outsider in an era when conformity was often necessary for survival. However, this same defiance is what has made his mystical doctrine enduring, as it continues to resonate with those

who seek a direct, experiential connection with the divine beyond the confines of religious orthodoxy.

Ibn Sabʿīn's contributions were not merely those of a scholar but of a radical visionary, whose thought challenged and redefined the mystical discourse of his time. His works continue to fascinate scholars, inspire seekers, and challenge theologians, ensuring that his intellectual legacy remains an indelible part of the evolving discourse on Ṣūfism, metaphysics, and the nature of divine knowledge.

The Sabʿīnian Additions and the Development of Ṣūfism

Ibn Sabʿīn's impact on Ṣūfī thought was not limited to his philosophical discourse but extended to a fundamental transformation in mystical practices. His emphasis on direct experience and intuition redefined the way Ṣūfīs approached spiritual enlightenment. Unlike traditional Ṣūfī teachings that relied heavily on textual instruction and structured rituals, Ibn Sabʿīn's methodology encouraged a personalized, introspective journey toward divine truth, placing intuition and spiritual experience above formal scholarship (Anṣārī, 1985, pp. 9–12). This shift led to a reorientation of Ṣūfī methodology, where individual seekers (*murīdūn*) pursued enlightenment through inner contemplation and direct mystical encounters, rather than rigid adherence to established doctrines.

Ṣūfism originated as an ascetic movement in early Islam, emphasizing renunciation of the material world and devotion to God. Early figures such as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728 CE) and Rābiʿah al-ʿAdawīyyah (d. 801 CE) focused on piety, divine love, and moral purification. By the 9th and 10th centuries, Ṣūfism became more structured, integrating elements of Islamic theology, Neoplatonism, and Persian spirituality, culminating in mystical orders (*ṭuruq*) that emphasized spiritual lineage (*silsilah*) and initiation into esoteric knowledge.

Ibn Sabʿīn diverged from this institutionalized model by introducing what could be termed "radical immediacy" in the mystical path. Instead of gradual progression through spiritual ranks, he advocated for direct and unmediated experience of the Divine, challenging hierarchical structures within established Ṣūfī orders. His doctrine, often referred to as "Masriyan Ṣūfism", de-emphasized sheikh-disciple dependency, arguing that spiritual enlightenment should not be contingent on external instruction but rather on the seeker's own existential realization (Mawasīm and Balbashīr, 2024).

Compared to al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) and Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240 CE), Ibn Sabʿīn's approach to mystical knowledge was markedly distinct. Al-Ghazālī saw Ṣūfism as a complementary discipline to jurisprudence and theology, arguing that mystical experience must be grounded in Sharia. In contrast, Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) proposed that all existence is an extension of the Divine, yet his system still operated within hierarchical initiatory structures.

Ibn Sabʿīn went further than both. While Ibn ʿArabī described an ontological relationship between God and creation, Ibn Sabʿīn dissolved the distinction entirely, suggesting that the seeker could attain absolute unity with the Divine through self-realization alone, without needing structured initiation or theological validation (Urvoy, 1976, pp. 102–109). This radical stance positioned him outside the mainstream of both philosophical and Ṣūfī traditions, drawing accusations of heresy from both camps.

Traditional *Ṣūfism* viewed spiritual ascent as a progressive purification process, requiring discipline, asceticism, and submission to a spiritual guide. Ibn Sabʿīn dismantled this idea, arguing that divine realization is not linear but rather a sudden, existential awakening (Anṣārī, 1985, pp. 9–12). While earlier *Ṣūfīs* emphasized dhikr (remembrance), *samaʿ* (spiritual music), and collective rituals, Ibn Sabʿīn rejected formalized spiritual exercises in favor of pure introspection. He considered ritual practices potentially limiting, arguing that true mysticism transcends linguistic and performative expressions (Mawasīm and Balbashīr, 2024).

Unlike al-Ghazālī, who sought to reconcile Ṣūfism with Ashʿarī theology, or Ibn ʿArabī, who framed mysticism within Islamic metaphysics, Ibn Sabʿīn's esoteric system was entirely self-contained. He adopted Greek logical structures, Neoplatonic cosmology, and Gnostic epistemology to articulate his vision of mystical self-awareness, placing him closer to heterodox currents of thought (Urvoy, 1976). Ibn Sabʿīn challenged traditional epistemology, proposing that knowledge is not hierarchical or cumulative but inherently intuitive. This starkly contrasted with the structured reasoning of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037 CE) and the theological rationalism of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210 CE). His belief that spiritual knowledge is purely internal and cannot be mediated by external authorities was seen as a threat to religious institutions (Mawasīm and Balbashīr, 2024).

The transformative nature of Ibn Sabʿīn's influence can be observed in the movements that emerged in Andalusia and North Africa following his time. His disciples and later Ṣūfī orders integrated his focus on spiritual immediacy into their practices, emphasizing the direct bond between the seeker and the Divine. This new mystical tradition reduced the role of formal instruction, shifting the emphasis from sheikh-guided enlightenment to self-revelation. While this approach liberated Ṣūfī thought from rigid constraints, it also made it highly controversial, leading to further marginalization of his doctrines in mainstream Islamic scholarship (Mawasīm and Balbashīr, 2024).

Ibn Sabʿīn's additions to Ṣūfism were radical and transformative, positioning him as both an innovator and an outsider within the mystical tradition. His rejection of gradual spiritual ascension, ritual formalism, and institutionalized epistemology placed him in direct opposition to both *Ṣūfī* and philosophical traditions. Unlike his predecessors, who sought to harmonize mysticism with theology, Ibn Sabʿīn envisioned a self-sustaining mystical path, reliant solely on inner experience and existential realization. His ideas, while unorthodox, pushed *Ṣūfī* thought into new dimensions, influencing later mystical currents while remaining one of the most contested figures in Islamic intellectual history.

The Influence of Ibn Sabʿīn from His Time to the Present

In the centuries following his death, Ibn Sabʿīn's teachings continued to influence Islamic philosophy and *Ṣūfism*, positioning him as both a pioneering thinker and a controversial figure within the Islamic intellectual tradition. His unorthodox interpretations, emphasis on personal mystical experience, and insistence on rational argumentation in *Ṣūfī* discourse distinguished his legacy in multiple ways. While some scholars regarded him as a revolutionary philosopher who broadened the scope of Islamic epistemology, others viewed his ideas as problematic, seeing them as diverging from traditional Islamic orthodoxy (Chabbi, 2014).

Ibn Sabʿīn's impact can be traced through several key dimensions. Firstly, his metaphysical and epistemological contributions inspired later Ṣūfī and philosophical movements that sought to integrate rational discourse with mystical experience. His ideas on the Perfect Human (*al-Insān*

al-Kāmil) resonated with later *Ṣūfī* thinkers, influencing figures such as ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1428 CE), who further developed the concept of human divinization through spiritual ascension. Additionally, Ibn Sabʿīn's challenge to sectarian divisions in religion—his assertion that all faiths share a common metaphysical truth—later found echoes in universalist *Ṣūfī* traditions.

His works were preserved and studied in North Africa, Andalusia, and the Ottoman intellectual world, where elements of his thought were either adapted or criticized within Islamic theology and legal discourse. In post-medieval Islamic scholarship, his name frequently surfaced in philosophical and theological disputes, particularly concerning the nature of divine knowledge and the role of intuition in religious understanding. Some Ottoman scholars viewed Ibn Sabʿīn as a mystic whose ideas challenged conventional religious structures, while others saw him as a radical thinker who risked undermining Islamic metaphysics. While his influence waned in mainstream Sunni discourse, esoteric and *Shīʿī* traditions retained an academic engagement with his thought, incorporating his insights into philosophical mysticism.

In the modern era, Ibn Sabʿīn's legacy has been reassessed within the context of Islamic intellectual history. Contemporary scholars have examined his works in relation to existential philosophy, comparative mysticism, and interfaith studies. His integration of Greek philosophy, Islamic theology, and *Ṣūfī* mysticism is now recognized as a precursor to later philosophical syntheses in the Islamic world. Furthermore, his ideas on direct personal experience of the divine have been explored in academic discussions on religious pluralism and mystical epistemology. His rejection of hierarchical religious structures and emphasis on individual enlightenment align with modern discussions on self-realization in spirituality, making his work relevant in contemporary philosophical and religious discourse.

Despite enduring historical marginalization, Ibn Sabʿīn's writings continue to offer valuable insights into the relationship between reason, faith, and spirituality. His thought remains a subject of philosophical and theological inquiry, reflecting the ever-evolving discourse on *Ṣūfī* metaphysics and the broader intellectual heritage of Islam. By reinterpreting the boundaries of mystical knowledge and rational inquiry, his philosophy continues to shape discussions on the intersection between faith, knowledge, and transcendence in Islamic thought.

The Linguistic Complexity of Ibn Sabʿīn's Writings

One of the major challenges in studying Ibn Sabʿīn's texts is the intricacy of his language, which presents a significant barrier to traditional Arabic readers attempting to grasp the philosophical and mystical nuances of his works (Sharaf, 1983, pp. 167–176). *Ṣūfī* literature in the medieval Arab world often conveyed the idea that language itself was insufficient in expressing transcendent spiritual realities. This notion is exemplified by ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī (d. 354 AH / 965 CE), who articulated the concept that "the broader the vision, the narrower the expression" (Pskhu, 2011, pp. 213–237). This belief is particularly evident in his works *Kitāb al-Mawāqif* and *Kitāb al-Mukhāṭabāt*, where he describes the limitations of language in capturing the essence of mystical experience.

For scholars attempting to interpret Ibn Sabʿīn's writings, the difficulty extends beyond hermeneutical complexity to what can be described as an intentional textual closure. His language is highly intricate, laden with *Ṣūfī* symbolism, and often requires multiple readings to decipher the underlying message. This characteristic aligns with *Ṣūfī* traditions that deliberately structured their texts for an elite readership, ensuring that only initiates with profound spiritual insight could fully engage with the teachings. Unlike other *Ṣūfī* thinkers, Ibn Sabʿīn's works not

only employ esoteric vocabulary but also present a self-reflective discourse on language itself, questioning whether linguistic constructs can adequately capture divine knowledge.

Ibn Sabʿīn's *Ṣūfī* thought is structured around three core components: mystical writing, spiritual practice, and ethical terminology. The first, mystical writing, is evident in texts such as *Al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqilliyah* and *Budd al-ʿArif*, where he constructs a philosophical and theological argument for unity with the Divine. The second, spiritual discipline, is reflected in his ascetic practices and the use of physical rituals that enhance mystical realization. The third component, ethical discourse, positions morality as a self-aware construct, integrating *Ṣūfism* with philosophical ethics. Ibn Sabʿīn proposes that philosophy lacks an independent scientific heritage of its own and instead functions as a reflective discipline capable of issuing autonomous moral judgments—a perspective that he extends to the human soul, spirit, and conscious intellect (Belkhaşar, 2018, pp. 147–165).

Understanding Ibn Sabʿīn's texts is further complicated by the historical and intellectual shifts that have distanced modern readers from the linguistic and conceptual frameworks of medieval *Ṣūfism*. His contemporary audience was more immersed in *Ṣūfī* discourse, benefiting from a linguistic and intellectual milieu that facilitated deeper engagement with mystical writings. However, in the present era, his works remain understudied and largely accessible only to specialized scholars. This decline in readership reflects the broader historical shift in intellectual engagement with *Ṣūfī* metaphysics, as modern readers often struggle with the abstract, symbolic, and highly allusive nature of Ibn Sabʿīn's linguistic style (Sharaf, 1990).

Critical Perspectives on Ibn Sabʿīn and His Sicilian Questions

Supporters' Views on Ibn Sabʿīn

Supporters of Ibn Sabʿīn regard him as a pioneer in the renewal of *Ṣūfī* thought, elevating personal experience and intuition as fundamental means of achieving union with God and spiritual perfection. His followers view him as a philosopher-mystic who broadened the understanding of the relationship between the Creator and creation, enabling disciples to move beyond rigid formalism toward an inner existential truth. His influence extended beyond his time, inspiring *Ṣūfī* orders in Andalusia and North Africa, particularly those emphasizing personal mystical experience over strict adherence to textual tradition (Sharaf, 1990, p. 57). His legacy continues to shape contemporary mystical discourse, serving as an intellectual foundation for seekers of spiritual renewal.

Among the defining aspects of Ibn Sabʿīn's thought was his challenge to hierarchical religious structures. Unlike *Ṣūfī* traditions that emphasized the necessity of a spiritual guide (*shaykh*) as a mediator between the disciple and the divine, Ibn Sabʿīn argued that the individual seeker could attain divine knowledge directly through inner realization. This notion dismantled the traditional framework of gradual initiation through *Ṣūfī* orders, making his thought accessible to those outside institutionalized *Ṣūfism*. In this way, he redefined the role of the spiritual aspirant, asserting that mystical enlightenment was not contingent on external instruction, but rather on existential awareness and personal mystical encounters.

Supporters of Ibn Sabʿīn further emphasize that he expanded the epistemological foundations of *Ṣūfism*, incorporating Greek philosophical principles, Islamic theology, and mystical metaphysics into a cohesive framework of self-knowledge and divine unity. He bridged the gap between intellectual speculation and direct mystical experience, allowing for a more profound, introspective approach to divine reality. His concept of "absolute unity" (*wahdat al-muṭlaqah*),

which extended beyond Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), proposed a total collapse of duality between God and the seeker, making his mystical path distinctively radical.

His emphasis on experiential knowledge over textual exegesis positioned him at odds with the religious orthodoxy of his time, but it also earned him admiration from those who viewed institutionalized religion as a limiting factor in spiritual progress. His followers interpreted his teachings as liberating the seeker from the confines of doctrinal formalism, allowing for a fluid, evolving relationship with the divine. The adoption of his mystical methodology in North African and Andalusian circles signaled a departure from structured Ṣūfī practices, giving rise to individual-centered mystical traditions that prioritized spontaneous, intuitive engagement with the divine.

Additionally, Ibn Sabʿīn's universalist approach to religious experience resonated with later spiritual seekers who saw value in interfaith dialogue and comparative religious thought. His assertion that all religions share a singular metaphysical truth, and that differences between them were culturally and historically contingent rather than absolute, laid the groundwork for mystical perspectives that transcended sectarian divisions. This view, while controversial, positioned him as a visionary figure in interfaith philosophical inquiry, allowing later scholars to engage with his works within both Islamic and non-Islamic mystical traditions.

Despite the opposition he faced, Ibn Sabʿīn's intellectual legacy remains profound. His supporters argue that his work redefined Ṣūfī spirituality, introduced a more immediate and dynamic approach to divine knowledge, and broadened the philosophical discourse of mysticism beyond its traditional Islamic frameworks. His writings continue to inspire contemporary discussions on self-realization, divine transcendence, and the integration of reason within spiritual life, cementing his place as one of the most radical yet enduring figures in the history of Islamic mysticism.

Critics' Views on Ibn Sabʿīn

Despite his influence, Ibn Sabʿīn faced intense criticism from scholars and theologians, who accused him of transgressing the boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy by relying excessively on intuition and personal experience. His detractors argue that his emphasis on subjective spiritual knowledge led to a detachment from established doctrinal frameworks, raising concerns about the verification and standardization of mystical knowledge (Mawasīm & Balbashīr, 2024, pp. 126–133). Critics contended that his rejection of structured initiation, hierarchical guidance, and textual exegesis rendered his approach unreliable and potentially dangerous, as it placed personal revelation above communal religious interpretation.

A major point of contention was his concept of divine unity (*waḥdat al-muṭlaqah*), which, according to his opponents, blurred the boundaries between Creator and creation. While Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) maintained that all existence is a manifestation of God, it still allowed for distinctions between divine essence and worldly forms. Ibn Sabʿīn, however, erased these distinctions entirely, leading his critics to argue that his thought veered into pantheistic interpretations that contradicted mainstream Islamic theology (Muḥammad, 2022, pp. 883–890).

His rejection of gradual spiritual progression and *Ṣūfī* hierarchical structures was also seen as problematic, as it implied that any seeker could claim enlightenment without undergoing rigorous discipline. This departure from traditional Ṣūfism not only challenged established

orders but also raised concerns about spiritual anarchy, where individuals could assert mystical authority without validation or accountability. Opponents warned that his emphasis on self-realization could open the door to subjective interpretations of religious truth, undermining the authority of scholars and mystics alike.

Furthermore, his universalist religious approach—arguing that all faiths shared a common metaphysical foundation—was considered heretical by many scholars who insisted on the doctrinal superiority of Islam. His assertion that theological differences were largely historical constructs led to accusations that he diminished the significance of Islamic revelation, placing him in conflict with both jurists and traditional Šūfī scholars. These accusations culminated in his eventual expulsion from Ceuta and marginalization within Sunni orthodoxy, where he was deemed a radical figure whose thought diverged too sharply from established religious paradigms.

Despite these critiques, Ibn Sabʿīn's philosophical boldness has led some modern scholars to re-evaluate his legacy, seeing his approach not as a deviation from Islam, but as an expansion of its mystical and metaphysical dimensions. His thought has gained renewed interest in postmodern discussions on the nature of knowledge, spirituality, and interfaith dialogue, with some viewing his rejection of institutionalized Šūfism as a precursor to contemporary individualistic spirituality. Nonetheless, he remains one of the most contested figures in Islamic history, embodying both the potential and the perils of unorthodox mysticism.

Ibn Sabʿīn's Sicilian Questions

Ibn Sabʿīn's *Al-Kalām ʿalā al-Masāʾil al-Šiqilliyyah* (*The Discourse on Sicilian Questions*) is considered one of his most intellectually rigorous works, addressed to Emperor Frederick II of Sicily (1194–1250 CE). This treatise represents a philosophical engagement with complex gnostic and theological questions, which Ibn Sabʿīn refers to as "*Asʿilat*" (singular: "*Asʿilah*"), a term indicating deep dialectical inquiries into the nature of existence and creation (Fārid, 2017). The emperor posed these inquiries to leading philosophers and Šūfī thinkers of Andalusia, seeking clarifications on fundamental metaphysical dilemmas such as the eternity of the universe, the nature of time, the relationship between the Creator and creation, and the cause-effect principle.

Historical records confirm that Frederick II dispatched letters across the Islamic world, soliciting responses from scholars with diverse philosophical backgrounds (Arvide, 2009; Nasr, 2006, pp. 156–158). Upon learning of Ibn Sabʿīn's reputation as a formidable Šūfī-philosopher, the emperor directed these Sicilian Questions to him, initiating an interfaith and intercultural intellectual exchange (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1941, p. 262). In his response, Ibn Sabʿīn employs a sophisticated synthesis of Šūfī reasoning, Greek philosophy, and Islamic theological discourse, constructing his arguments mathematically and logically, engaging with Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and contemporary Islamic scholarship.

Ibn Sabʿīn's method of argumentation in this work mirrors that of rationalist theologians, blending spiritual insight with structured logical inquiry. His discourse is deliberate and highly systematic, presenting each question followed by a sequential, logically structured response (Akasoy, 2008, pp. 115–146). Throughout the text, he maintains a respectful tone toward the emperor, reflecting the Šūfī tradition of tolerance and interfaith engagement. His approach aligns with the Šūfī notion that divine love transcends religious boundaries, positioning his discourse within the framework of philosophical universalism (Taftāzānī, 1973; Fārid, 2017).

In keeping with *Ṣūfī* ethics, historical sources recount that after Frederick II praised Ibn Sabʿīn's work and offered him a monetary reward, he refused the payment, demonstrating the ascetic ideals of *Ṣūfī* scholars. Few scholars have studied *The Sicilian Questions* in depth, but notable works include Nawfal Jarād's contemporary research into the philosophical and theological dimensions of Ibn Sabʿīn's discourse (Jarād, 2022). This study sheds light on his use of mathematical proofs and his method of integrating Islamic theology with broader intellectual traditions.

Ibn Sabʿīn's *Sicilian Questions* belong to the broader intellectual movement known as Masriyan *Ṣūfism*, a school of thought that sought to validate *Ṣūfī* metaphysics through dialectical reasoning and logical proof. His work is emblematic of the Andalusian school of thought, which engaged in rigorous debates with contemporary philosophers, theologians, and mystics (Bouhlooufa, 2015, pp. 45–69). The structure of his discourse reflects a research-based approach, employing careful argumentation akin to contemporary academic methodologies (Spallino, 1996, pp. 111–130). By juxtaposing Greek philosophy with Islamic *kalām*, Ibn Sabʿīn reinforces the intellectual legacy of the Abbasid era's translation movements, particularly under Caliph al-Ma'mūn, when scholars actively debated cosmological and metaphysical questions (Fārid, 2017, pp. 24–26).

Ultimately, *The Sicilian Questions* represents a seminal work in the history of Islamic philosophical thought, bridging *Ṣūfī* mysticism, Aristotelian logic, and theological dialectics. Ibn Sabʿīn's engagement with Frederick II highlights the intellectual vibrancy of medieval Andalusia, displaying the dynamic exchange between Islamic and Western philosophical traditions.

Conclusion

Ibn Sabʿīn remains one of the most enigmatic and intellectually provocative figures in the history of Islamic mysticism and philosophy. His unorthodox interpretations, emphasis on personal spiritual experience, and reliance on rational argumentation within *Ṣūfī* discourse have secured his place as both a pioneering thinker and a divisive figure in Islamic intellectual traditions. His influence extended beyond his lifetime, shaping later *Ṣūfī* movements, philosophical inquiries, and theological debates, despite the opposition and controversy that surrounded his teachings.

His contributions to Islamic philosophy and *Ṣūfism* reflect a unique synthesis of mystical experience, philosophical rationalism, and linguistic complexity. By promoting the doctrine of the Perfect Human (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*) and advocating for the unity of religious traditions, he challenged the boundaries of traditional theological discourse, positioning himself within a universalist mystical framework. His engagement with Frederick II of Sicily through *The Sicilian Questions* exemplifies his ability to navigate interfaith dialogues, merging Greek philosophy, Islamic thought, and *Ṣūfī* metaphysics in a way that few of his contemporaries could achieve.

Despite the challenges his writings pose due to their linguistic intricacy and hermeneutical depth, Ibn Sabʿīn's works continue to be reexamined in contemporary scholarship, particularly in the fields of existential philosophy, comparative mysticism, and epistemology. His ideas remain relevant in discussions on religious pluralism, metaphysical speculation, and the limits of human knowledge. Though his legacy has been contested, his writings provide invaluable insights into the evolving discourse on faith, reason, and spirituality within the broader framework of Islamic intellectual history.

Studying Ibn Sabʿīn's philosophy reveals not only his profound contributions to Ṣūfī thought, but also the intellectual dynamism of medieval Andalusia, a period marked by cross-cultural exchanges and philosophical debates. His work continues to inspire scholars and mystics alike, ensuring that his influence endures in the ongoing exploration of the intersection between knowledge, divine experience, and human existence. In a world that increasingly seeks to reconcile rational inquiry with spiritual insight, Ibn Sabʿīn's legacy provides a challenging yet enriching perspective—one that refuses to be confined by orthodoxy and continues to shape discussions on the nature of reality and divine consciousness.

Ultimately, Ibn Sabʿīn stands as a visionary whose mystical philosophy remains radical, subversive, and profoundly thought-provoking. His rejection of traditional Ṣūfī hierarchies, his insistence on individual experience as the sole pathway to divine knowledge, and his relentless pursuit of absolute unity with the Divine mark him as a thinker whose ideas were ahead of his time. While his thought may never fully align with mainstream Islamic philosophy, his legacy as a philosopher-mystic who dared to transcend boundaries ensures that his influence will continue to spark intellectual engagement and debate for generations to come.

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