



## ‘ABD AL-KARĪM AL-JĪLĪ, WAḤDAT AL-WUJŪD, AND RECONFIGURING EPISTEMOLOGY

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**Abstract:** This study introduces some new ideas into the study of ideas in Sufism. Taking al-Jīlī and, esp., his *al-Insān al-kāmil* as a starting point this study argues a holistic worldview following the concepts of the oneness of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) will be able to integrate – and to be integrated – into contemporary scientific concepts like chemical fluctuation, the new synthesis, and holobionts. This will lead to creating a general philosophy of being beyond the Western biases.

**Keywords:** al-Jīlī, *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*, Rhizome, New Synthesis, Holobionts, Symbiosis

### Introduction

METHODOLOGICALLY SPEAKING, this article is written in a rhizomatic style intentionally using longer citations as nodes sending out roots and sprouts of ideas to describe the network of the development of our ideas. As such the text follows a non-hierarchical allowing for a multiplicity of thought, interconnected and diverse, an all-encompassing diversity in unity.<sup>1</sup> A conventional, linear academic narrative would cut up the rhizome of ideas unfolded here and close up the flow of ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Talking about Sufism and writings of Sufis several distinctions have to be made:

- a) textual situated in the intertextual web of relations of the history of Sufi literature through many centuries

<sup>1</sup> Evidently, thus, we are following an approach inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, but more inclusive since we are integrating Islamic ideas.

<sup>2</sup> Another aspect of this rhizomatic methodology is a pedagogical one. Due to the actual compartmentalization of knowledge, we do not expect every reader to have the necessary research literature at hand.

- b) Sufi experience as located at specific places, i. e., graves, shrines, etc., connected with
- c) Sufi experience, as a collective experience, i. e., in *dhikr* and other forms of practice, connected with
- d) Sufi experience, as an individual existential and transformative experience, confronting a reality beyond everyday reality.

These three dimensions and the textual one are part of

- e) the epistemological and reflective dimensions, also part of Sufism understood as an all-encompassing practice.

Our aim in this paper is to look into the epistemological and dimensions of Sufism of the *wahdat al-wujūd* way of thought as systematized by al-Jīlī and to build upon this analysis a new epistemological approach consonant with recent insights from sciences, esp., microbiology that emphasize the need to develop a holistic epistemology moving beyond the confines of modern, Western binary thought.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, this paper is to be understood as an exercise in the critique of modern epistemology, *not* as a reinstalment of New Age-inspired ideas about the relations of 'Eastern' traditions and sciences.<sup>4</sup> We intend to combine the rigorous study of texts with the study of cutting edge biology and conceptual work.

Our remarks are to be understood as epistemological and not as scientific. Thus, these remarks are to be understood as philosophical in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari saying that the attitude toward chaos marks the first difference between science and philosophy. A long citation may be allowed to clarify the

<sup>3</sup> Due to the limits of space we have to leave out the individual and collective experience and its relation to *wahdat al-wujūd* and *al-insān al-kāmil*. For the sake of brevity, we refer to articles like Seán McLoughlin and Muzamil Khan, "Ambiguous Traditions and Modern Transformations of Islam: The Waxing and Waning of an 'Intoxicated' Sufi Cult in Mirpur," *Contemporary South Asia* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 289–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584930601098042>, esp., 292 for a comprehensive contextualization.

<sup>4</sup> The approach of William C. Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: One world, 2007) is a different one although referring to epistemological alternatives to Western modernity.

ideas of these two authors and not to distort their ideas by putting them in another framework and to present some of the ideas we present in this article:

“Chaos is defined not so much by its disorder as by the infinite speed with which every form taking shape in it vanishes. It is a void that is not a nothingness but a virtual, containing all possible particles and drawing out all possible forms, which spring up only to disappear immediately, without consistency or reference, without consequence. Chaos is an infinite speed of birth and disappearance. Now philosophy wants to know how to retain infinite speeds while gaining consistency, by giving the virtual a consistency specific to it. The philosophical sieve, as plane of immanence that cuts through the chaos, selects infinite movements of thought and is filled with concepts formed like consistent particles going as fast as thought. Science approaches chaos in a completely different, almost opposite way: it relinquishes the infinite, infinite speed, in order to gain a referenceable to actualize the virtual. By retaining the infinite, philosophy gives consistency to the virtual through concepts; by relinquishing the infinite, science gives a reference to the virtual, which actualizes it through functions. Philosophy proceeds with a plane of immanence or consistency; science with a plane of reference. In the case of science, it is like a freeze-frame. It is a fantastic slowing down, and it is by slowing down that matter, as well as the scientific thought able to penetrate it with propositions, is actualized. A function is a Slow-motion. Of course, science constantly advances accelerations, not only in catalysis but in particle accelerators and expansions that move galaxies apart. However, the primordial slowing down is not for these phenomena a zero-instant with which they break but rather a condition coextensive with their whole development. To slow down is to set a limit in chaos to which all speeds are subject, so that they form a variable determined as abscissa, at the same time as the limit forms a universal constant that cannot be gone beyond (for example, a maximum degree of contraction). The first functives are therefore the limit and the variable, and reference is a relationship between values of the variable or, more profoundly, the relationship of the variable, as abscissa of speeds, with the limit.”<sup>5</sup>

Taking the limit as a first functive<sup>6</sup> of science makes al-Jīlī and *wahdat al-wujūd* a tremendously important tool to stop over to the plane of immanence, “retaining the infinite”. Leaving the

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 117–119.

<sup>6</sup> Not a function nor a functional. It is a more basic functional entity: “The object of science is not concepts but rather functions that are presented as propositions in discursive systems. The elements of functions are called *functives*.” *Ibid.*, 117.

dominant power of science aside, we will be able to show that there are approaches in the history of Islamic thought enabling us to offset limits. But, at first, let us turn to the author we will discuss here!

### **Al-Jīlī: Biographical Remarks**

The author we are talking about is 'Abd al-Karīm Qutb al-Dīn bin Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī was born according to one of his works, the long poem *al-Nādirat al-‘ayniyya*<sup>7</sup>, in 767/1365 in present-day Iraq.

There are several attempts to attribute his name to geographical regions or the Qadiriyya and its eponym al-Jīlānī, shortened to al-Jīlī. The problem is the lack of information about al-Jīlī leading to many speculations

He was, however, a disciple of Shaykh Sharaf al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn Ismā‘il bin Ibrāhīm bin 'Abd al-Şamad al-Jabartī (d. 806/1403-4), from Zabīd, in present-day Yemen. Al-Jabartī was al-Jīlī's true master, the object by him of much praise.<sup>8</sup> The majority of the Akbarian circle around al-Jabartī came from Persia.<sup>9</sup> Thus, al-Jīlī was part of a larger group of Persian origin. Al-Jabartī, for his part, had been a follower of the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī and a disciple of Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Haqqāq, himself a member of the Qadiriyya. There are further speculations about links of al-Jīlī to Southeast Asia.

There is information about some other contemporary Sufi masters who influenced al-Jīlī, namely Jamāl al-Dīn bin Muḥammad al-Makdash, Ibn Jamīl, most importantly the aforementioned al-Jabartī and Aḥmad Al-Radād. This was one of the main disciples of al-Jabartī, who, being also Yemen's Chief Justice in 802/1399, when al-Jabartī was still alive, took the leadership of the local Sufi tariqa in Zabīd, where al-Jīlī was

<sup>7</sup> 'Abd al-Karīm bin Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī, *Marātib al-Wujūd wa-Haqīqat Kull Mawjūd* (Cairo: Muntadāh Sūr al-Azba'iyya, 1999), 328–330.

<sup>8</sup> See, e. g., 'Abd al-Karīm bin Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī, *al-Asfār al-Gharīb*, *Natījat al-Safar al-Qarīb* (Cairo: al-Risāla, s.d.), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Chodkiewicz and Leonard Lewisohn, "The Futūhāt Makkiya and Its Commentators: Some Unresolved Enigmas," *The Heritage of Sufism Vol. 2: Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)* (Oxford: One world, 1999), 219–232.

residing. Al-Jīlī has been associated with some other Persian masters, but there are no conclusive proofs yet.

In 803/1400-1 he traveled to Cairo, then to Gaza in Palestine and to Yemen again in 805/1402-3. There he gathered al-Jabartī's disciples founded a school and finished *al-Insān al-kāmil*. He was then in Mecca and Medina in 812/1409, and finally back to Yemen, where he died.<sup>10</sup>

The date of his death has been discussed as has been his name. In a footnote to an article Valerie J. Hoffman refers to a letter from Michel Chodkiewicz that there is a manuscript saying that al-Jīlī died in Jumāda II 811 (November 1408 A.D.). She mentions further evidence that the tomb of al-Jīlī is to be located in Zabīd.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Jīlī is credited with having written around thirty works, but still, there is no comprehensive list and due to publishing activity during the last decades the existing lists have to be reworked. Lo Polito<sup>12</sup> gives an overview of the situation but is already outdated.

As mentioned before the best-known work of al-Jīlī is *al-Insān al-kāmil*, a systematic presentation of the ideas of *wahdat al-wujūd*, the oneness of being.<sup>13</sup> A prime example is his "Commentary on the Problematic Passages in the Meccan Openings" (*Sharh mushkilāt al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*) of Ibn al-‘Arabī.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I am following the biographical remarks in Nicholas Lo Polito, “‘Abd Al-Karīm Al-Jīlī: Tawhīd, Transcendence and Immanence” (Dissertation Phil, University of Birmingham, 2010) without discussing the details and speculations of the secondary literature. Angelika Al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit Und Die Stellung Des Menschen: Die Sichtweise ‘Abd Al-Karīm Al-‘Gīlīs Auf Der Grundlage Des ‘Sharh Muškilāt Al-Futuhāt Al-Makkiyya*. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner i. Komm., 1998) is repeating the standard, outdated view on the biography of al-Jīlī.

<sup>11</sup> Valerie J. Hoffman, “Annihilation in the Messenger of God: The Development of a Sufi Practice,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): 366.

<sup>12</sup> Lo Polito, “Abd Al-Karim Al-Jili,” 25–26.

<sup>13</sup> See Martin van Bruinessen, “Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning,” in *Texts from the Islands. Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World*, ed. Wolfgang Marschall (Berne: University of Berne, 1994), 121–145 for situating the work in the context of the tradition of learning in Indonesia. For an overview of al-Jīlī’s thought see Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm bin Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī, *Sharh Mushkilāt al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*,

## The total (hu)man (al-*insān* al-*kāmil*)

Still, there is no complete translation of al-Jīlī's *al-Insān al-kāmil* in Western European languages. The most prominent translation of an extract of the work has been presented by Titus Burckhardt.<sup>15</sup> A complete translation of a work of al-Jīlī, *al-Kahf al-raqīm*<sup>16</sup>, has been part of the doctoral thesis of Nicholas Lo Polito<sup>17</sup>; Ernst Bannerth published a translation of *Marātib al-wujūd*.<sup>18</sup>

There are many ways to render the Arabic expression *al-*insān* al-*kāmil** in other languages. We will find in English, e. g., the perfect man, the perfect individual, complete man, universal man, etc. Taking into account the idea of Ibn al-‘Arabi that *al-*insān* al-*kāmil** denotes man/human in his/her totality, we will opt in this article for the "total (hu)man". A similar point of view may be found in Ali: "The operative concept among the Sufis is Divine effusion and the ontological comprehensiveness of the Human-Divine Reality, i.e. *al-*insān* al-*kāmil** ."<sup>19</sup>

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ed. Yūsuf Zaydān (Cairo: Dār al-Amīn, 1998). For one of the few translations and interpretations in the research literature on this work of al-Jīlī see Al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit*. Chodkiewicz and Lewisohn, "The *Futūhāt* Makkiya," 222 notes that al-Jīlī shares the silence on the *bāb al-asrār* of the *Futūhāt* with other commentators. For an adaptation of the methodology of al-Jīlī see Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau Des Saints: Prophétie et Sainteté Dans La Doctrine d'Ibn Arabī* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 184.

<sup>15</sup> 'Abd al-Karīm bin Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī, *Universal Man*, trans. Titus Burckhardt (Cheltenham: Beshara Publications, 1995). A thorough study by the author of this article of al-Jīlī is in preparation.

<sup>16</sup> See now the edition 'Abd al-Karīm bin Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī, *al-Kahf wa al-Raqīm fi al-Sharḥ bi'smillāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm*, ed. 'Āsim bin Ibrāhīm al-Kayālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Lo Polito, "Abd Al-Karim Al-Jili."

<sup>18</sup> Ernst Bannerth, *Das Buch Der Vierzig Stufen von 'Abd Al-Karīm Al-ṣīlī* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1956). A lesser-known translation of another Work of al-Jīlī is Dagmar Mann, "Die *Risāla Arba'īn Mawā'īn* Des ẒAbdālkarīm Al-ṣīlī" (Dissertation Phil. Saarbrücken, 1970) Dagmar Mann, *Die Risāla arba'īn mawā'īn des ẒAbdālkarīm al-Ǧīlī* (Diss. Phil. Saarbrücken, 1970) having the very true word that "there is a great difference of opinion among the Sufis on the definition of the situation (*ḥāl*) and station (*maqām*)."*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Mukhtar H. Ali, "The Concept of Spiritual Perfection according to Ibn Sina and Sadr Al-Din Al-Qunawi," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 142.

Talking about al-Jīlī and focussing on his seminal work *al-Insān al-kāmil* it will be apt for a thorough understanding to discuss the literary genre of the works using the concept *al-insān al-kāmil*.<sup>20</sup> Broadly speaking, this concept is to be situated at the intersection of Sufism, *kalām*, and *falsafa* in post-formative/early modern<sup>21</sup> Islam (Dagli 2016).<sup>22</sup> So it is part of the field of speculative Sufism, to use the category of Toby Mayer.<sup>23</sup>

Following the thought of Hamid Dabashi saints and spiritual sages can be understood as a living embodiment of the highest standards of a given society. These sages are the personification of the highest forms of spiritual perfection. Their status in the hierarchical order is measured according to their ethical perfection. The core concept is *al-insān al-kāmil*.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Dabashi we will claim that *wahdat al-wujūd* in the synthesis and conceptualization of al-Jīlī's *al-Insān al-kāmil* will help to overcome hierarchical orders inside and outside the Islamic community.<sup>25</sup>

Following Dabashi again<sup>26</sup>, we may identify the first traces of the concept of *al-insān al-kāmil* at the time of Bāyazīd al-Bistāmī (d. 874 CE).<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, we will easily find further traces of the

<sup>20</sup> Referring to dimension a), mentioned in the beginning.

<sup>21</sup> The first category refers to the inner-Islamic history of Islamic thought, the second one to the timeline dominated by European thought.

<sup>22</sup> For debates between philosophers and Sufis of the *wahdat al-wujūd* see William C. Chittick, "Mysticism versus Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History: The Al-‘ūsī, Al-Qūnawī Correspondence," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 87–104.

<sup>23</sup> Toby Mayer, "Theology and Sufism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 258–287.

<sup>24</sup> Hamid Dabashi, "The Sufi Doctrine of 'The Perfect Man' and a View of the Hierarchical Structure of Islamic Culture," *Islamic Quarterly* 30 (1986): 118.

<sup>25</sup> These few remarks do not intend to discuss the concept of *al-insān al-kāmil* in its totality, just to give some insights into the ideas we are following here.

<sup>26</sup> Dabashi, "The Sufi Doctrine."

<sup>27</sup> A slightly different chronology may be found in Mohammad Fanaei Eshkevari, "The Perfect Man in Islamic Mysticism," in *On Being Human*, ed. Harry J. Hubner and Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen (Winnipeg: CMU, 2013), 60–73.

concept of *al-insān al-kāmil* in the history of *falsafa*.<sup>28</sup> On al-Fārābī's thought me may say:

"The perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*), thought Al-Fārābī<sup>29</sup>, is the one who has obtained theoretical virtue – thus completing his intellectual knowledge – and has acquired practical moral virtues – thus becoming perfect in his moral behaviour."<sup>30</sup>

This perfection is not only personal but also social perfection the cornerstone of the 'virtuous city', al-Fārābī's philosophical project. We are, however, in a more fundamental dimension of this concept: the ontological one. Following Ibn al-'Arabī, we may distinguish in Islamic literature between several levels of *al-insān*. The most relevant for our discussion is *insān* as an all-comprehensive (*majmū'*) concept.<sup>31</sup>

Another feature of Ibn al-'Arabī's hermeneutics is important for our discussion. Almond remarks that the way Ibn al-'Arabī in the *Fusūṣ* and the *Futūhāt* talks about God, *al-insān al-kāmil*, and the Qur'an in a way beyond the distinction of author, text, and reader, thus, talking about the three separate ideas of God, *al-insān al-kāmil*, and the Qur'an with similar terms and attitudes. Almond describes as a parallel to the modern collapsing of author, text, and reader.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> And in other disciplines of Islamic thought. See for al-Birūnī, e.g., A. L. Samiān, "Pluralism and the Study of Religion: A Comparative Perspective," *Agathos: An International Review of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 1 (2010): 39–52.

<sup>29</sup> The transcription is adopted as in all other citations to the rest of the text.

<sup>30</sup> Anar Tanabayeva et al., "Al-Farabi's Humanistic Principles and 'Virtuous City,'" in *The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Sciences*, 2015, 126.

<sup>31</sup> Muṣyī' al-Dīn Ibn al-῾Arabī, *Rāṣīma Min Al-Rāṣīmāt: Fī Tafsīr Wa Al-Isharāt Al-Qur'ān Min Kalām Al-Shaykh Al-Akbar Muhyī Al-Dīn Ibn Al-῾Arabī*, ed. Ma'mūd Ghurāb (Damascus: Maktabah al-Nadr, 1989), 94.

<sup>32</sup> Ian Almond, "The Meaning of Infinity in Sufi and Deconstructive Hermeneutics: When Is an Empty Text an Infinite One?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004): 106. For the immanent modernity of the structure of non-modern Islamic thought see Rüdiger Lohlker, "Islamische Texte – Bewegungen der Deterritorialisierung und Umordnung der Dinge," in *Religion in Europa Heute: Sozialwissenschaftliche, Rechtswissenschaftliche, Hermeneutisch-Religionsphilosophische Perspektiven*, ed. Kurt Appel et al. (Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2012), 193–208.

We make take the idea of Almond as the first indicator of a possibility to rethink Ibn al-'Arabī and *wahdat al-wujūd* in (post-)modern terms. We will follow this idea later.

The concept of 'The Perfect Man' can be found in many works of the Islamic intellectual tradition. We will restrict ourselves to a small sample. The first one – a modern one – are the ideas of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'irī (d. 1883 CE), famous as an anti-colonial fighter, but also a luminary of the Islamic intellectual world of his time.<sup>33</sup>

"The Perfect Man holds a unique position within the general framework of the quasi-mutual relationship between God and His creation, as both an intermediary and a comprehensive being. The perfection of man among all creatures, 'Abd al-Qādir writes, lies in his integration of the Divine names *al-zāhir* (the outward) and *al-bātin* (the inward). Thus, at the cosmic level, *al-insān al-kāmil* is the microcosm (*al-kawn al-jāmi'*) of the Divine and the worldly realities. His situation is elucidated through the Qur'anic verse, *laysia ka-mithlihi shay'* (Q. 42:11), which is generally interpreted as "There is nothing which is His similar". Following in the footsteps of Ibn 'Arabī, 'Abd al-Qādir points out that in view of the seemingly superfluous "ka" it may also be interpreted as "There is nothing like His similar", which admits the existence of a being similar to God, to which no other creature resembles. This being is the Perfect Man, who faces, and mirrors, God the eternal but not created, on the one hand, and the world, the created but not eternal, on the other. Man alone is both eternal and created, both Lord and servant. He was created as God's vicegerent (*khalīfa*) on earth while the entire world is a particularization of what exists in him. The world was thus created through man and for man, even though in the visible world man appeared the last. The Perfect Man is *mithl*, similar to God, and *mathal*, the example in whose form God was determined."<sup>34</sup>

A similar concept of viceregency is to be found in Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardi<sup>35</sup> to point to a non-akbarian tradition. There are many traces of al-Jīlī to be found in the history of Islamic intellectual discussions, but for the moment being we will have to

<sup>33</sup> For his writings cf. Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Spiritual Writings of Amir al-Kāder* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Itzchak Weismann, "God and the Perfect Man in the Experience of 'Abd al-Qādir Al-Jazā'irī," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 30 (2001): 63–64, accessed August 28, 2019, <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/weismann.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Cf., e.g., Ernita Dewi, "Konsep Manusia Ideal Dalam Perspektif Suhrawardi Al-Maqṭul," *Substantia* 17 (2015): 41–54, <http://substantiajurnal.org/index.php/subs/article/view/128>.

turn to a broader perspective to understand the potential of al-Jīlī's work for (post-)modern thought.

To trace some other rhizomatic connections we may refer to *al-haqīqa al-muhammadiyya* complementary to *al-insān al-kāmil* as used by Ibn al-‘Arabī in his *Fuṣūṣ*<sup>36</sup> saying that the properly meaning of this term is "the human having effectively realized his original theomorphism", being the "confluence of the two seas" (*majma‘ al-bahrayn*), uniting the "higher and lower realities."<sup>37</sup> Thus, we find another trace leading to an annihilation of the distinction between transcendence and immanence or the binaries of modern, Western-style thought overcome by recent developments in the sciences.

## Sciences

Generally speaking, discussions in the humanities or social sciences tend to be based on an understanding of the natural sciences going back to the 19th century CE. Losing all the insights from former research in the fields of natural philosophy and not acquiring a decent knowledge of the sciences of the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century CE is the crucial problem of modern humanities or social sciences. The clear-cut boundaries dominant, esp., in contemporary politico-theological thought are a pertinent case for the gaps opening up if we do not overcome our gap of knowledge in the sciences.

## Fluid Systems

One set of ideas in sciences important for our reflections has been called fluctuation. Developed by the Nobel Prize winner for Chemistry, Ilya Prigogine, it is still virtually unknown outside the sciences. Thus, it may be allowed to present it in a summarized form in a lengthy quotation:

"Once again, only a statistical description is possible. The existence of an instability may be viewed as the result of a fluctuation that is first localized in a small part of the system and then spreads and leads to a new macroscopic state. This situation alters the traditional view of the relation between the microscopic level as described by molecules or atoms and the

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<sup>36</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau Des Saints*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 91.

macroscopic level described in terms of global variables such as concentration. In many situations fluctuations correspond only to small corrections. [...] However, in nonequilibrium processes we may find just the opposite situation. Fluctuations determine the global outcome. We could say that instead of being corrections in the average values, fluctuations now modify those averages. This is a new situation. For this reason we would like to introduce a neologism and call situations resulting from fluctuation "order through fluctuation. [...] Randomness remains essential on the macroscopic level as well. It is interesting to note another analogy with quantum theory, which assigns a wave behavior to all elementary particles. As we have seen, chemical systems far from equilibrium may also lead to coherent wave behavior."<sup>38</sup>

Contrary to the dominant Western scientific views originating in the 19th century struggling with the integration of micro- and macrocosmic levels, a new epistemology laying the foundations for a new approach to an understanding of uncertainty, fluctuation and the possible creation of order through a process of bifurcations. These bifurcations may lead through a complex process of fluctuations to a new synthesis, a new "order through fluctuation."

Although Prigogine/Stengers may be read as a description of the world falling into chaos, for them, there is also hope, since the fluctuations mentioned above – even small ones – may lead to a change of the overall structure. The radical uncertainty has been conceptualized recently as living in "capitalist ruins"<sup>39</sup> or on a "damaged planet."<sup>40</sup> The persistence of living may be thought of as a sign of hope. This kind of living is possible if we accept being (*wujūd*) as an all-encompassing concept including every in-being (*ma-wujūdat*) as significant as any aspect of being, uncertain or not, being dynamic.

This is the moment we should be reminded of al-Jīlī's ideas commented upon before. In another of his treatises he defines the

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<sup>38</sup> Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 177–179.

<sup>39</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Scott F. Gilbert, "Holobiont by Birth: Multilineage Individuals as the Concretion of Cooperative Processes," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. (Minneapolis/London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2017), M74–M89.

way to true knowledge as dynamically passing through different dimensions:

"He [man] is travelling from the mineral dimension (*ma'dan*) to the vegetal (*nabat*) to the animal (*hayawaniyya*) to the human (*insāniyya*) to the carnal soul (*nafs*) to reason (*'aql*) to spirit (*rūh*) to the inner secret (*sirr*) to the truth of truth (*haqīqat al-haqqā*) and to the absolute totality (*kulliyya muṭlaqa*)."<sup>41</sup>

The next station on this travel is the annihilation of the self (*fanā'*) (ibid.: 10). The travel described is to be understood as an inner travel (ibid.: 7). This means the ultimate transgression of borders achieved by fluctuations leading from one dimension to the other. But let us turn to al-Jīlī and his *al-Insān al-kāmil* and his other important work on Ibn 'Arabī, called *Marātib al-wujūd*!

### **Al-Jīlī, al-Insān al-Kāmil and Marātib al-Wujūd**

To understand the worldview of al-Jīlī we have to bear in mind his complex way of thinking.<sup>42</sup> As al-Jīlī wrote in his last treatise on *Marātib al-wujūd* we read: "Know, that this being consists of elements of the inner truth (*haqqī*) and elements of created things (*khalqī*) and it consists of elements all-encompassing (*kullī*)" (al-Jīlī 1999: 14-15). Al-Jīlī states that the levels of existence can be divided into 40 stages (*marātib*) allowing him to develop a creative view of being.<sup>43</sup>

We will start our reflections on al-Jīlī with his well-known work *Marātib al-wujūd*, stages of being. There are several editions. For our purpose, we will try to present the worldview of al-Jīlī as to be found in this work. Then we will turn to *al-Insān al-kāmil*.

Turning to *Marātib al-wujūd* we will follow the stages al-Jīlī unfolds. The first stage<sup>44</sup> is called "the absolute concealment" (*al-ghayb al-muṭlaq*) or the "concealment of concealment" (*ghayb al-ghayb*) set apart from being (*wujūd*). The second stage is called "the absolute being" (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*).<sup>45</sup> This is the first emanation

<sup>41</sup> al-Jīlī, *al-Asfār al-Gharīb*, 9–10.

<sup>42</sup> Ernst Bannerth is wrong when he attributes *waḥdat al-shuhūd* to al-Jīlī even when he refers to an eminent authority like Bannerth, *Das Buch*, 96.

<sup>43</sup> See the translation in Bannerth, *Das Buch*.

<sup>44</sup> al-Jīlī, *Marātib al-Wujūd*, 16–17.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 17–18.

(*tajallī*) springing up from the original oneness (*ahadiyya*).<sup>46</sup> This stage is to be understood as the barrier between the inner part of being (*buṭūn*) and the outer part (*zuhūr*).<sup>47</sup>

The third stage is called unity (*wāhidīyya*), the stage where the names (*asmā’*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*) appear. This stage is also called the stage of the immutable entity (*‘ayn thābit*).<sup>48</sup>

For the sake of brevity, we are leaving some stages out. The thirteenth stage is the first intellect (*al-‘aql al-awwal*).<sup>49</sup> This includes the speech (*hadīth*), the highest pen (*al-qalam al-aṭlā*), i. e., the Muhammadan spirit (*rūḥ muḥammadi*). The fourteenth stage is the highest spirit (*rūḥ a’zam*).<sup>50</sup> It is also called the all-encompassing spirit (*al-nafs al-kullī*), i. e., the preserved tablet (*lawḥ maḥfūz*). The fifteenth stage is called the throne (*‘arsh*), i. e., the total body (*jism kullī*).<sup>51</sup>

The twenty-third stage – we have skipped some other stages – is the starless heaven (*falak aṭlaṣī*),<sup>52</sup> the sphere below the throne (*‘arsh*) and above all other celestial spheres. Then al-Jīlī moves through other celestial and planetary spheres until moving to the plants. The thirty-eighth stage is called the plants (*al-nabāt*).<sup>53</sup> This stage is defined as the stage of the growing body (*jism nāmī*) emerging from the mineral sphere (*ma’dan*). The thirty-ninth stage is called the animals (*hayawān*).<sup>54</sup> This is defined as the stage of the growing body moved by the will (*irāda*). The last stage, the fortieth one, is the stage of the human.

We see a sequence of stages including every aspect of being down<sup>55</sup> to the mineral sphere and up to the stage of absolute concealment. This sequence of stages in *Marātib al-wujūd* demonstrates the progression from what is usually called

<sup>46</sup> al-Jīlī mentioned one book he wrote about this concept Ibid., 17.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Jīlī is referring to the *barzakh*, a concept we can not discuss here.

<sup>48</sup> al-Jīlī, *Marātib al-Wujūd*, 18–19.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 27–28. In this paragraph al-Jīlī refers to a parallel in his *al-Insān al-kāmil*, see page 28.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 28–29.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 29–30.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 42–43.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 50–51.

<sup>54</sup> al-Jīlī, *Marātib al-Wujūd*, 51–53.

<sup>55</sup> If this is an adequate denotation of direction in this context.

transcendent stages to immanent stages, in fact, annihilating the distinction between transcendence and immanence. We may read this movement from one stage to the other

Looking into *al-Insān al-kāmil*, we will easily stumble upon many of the stages already mentioned. The book starts from the absolute essence (*muṭlaq al-dhāt*)<sup>56</sup> moving to the name (*ism*) in its absolute form, several emanations (*tajallī*). Following the groundbreaking presentation of Nicholson<sup>57</sup> we can analyze these emanations:

Jīlī distinguishes three phases of mystical illumination or revelation (*tajallī*), which run parallel, as it were, to the three stages – Oneness, He-ness, and I-ness – traversed by the Absolute in its descent to consciousness. In the first phase, called the Illumination of the Names, the Perfect Man receives the mystery that is conveyed by each of the names of God, and he becomes one with the name in such sort that he answers the prayer of any person who invokes God by the name in question. Similarly, in the second phase he receives the Illumination of the Attributes and becomes one with them, i.e., with the Divine Essence as qualified by its various attributes: life, knowledge, power, will, and so forth. For example, God reveals Himself to some mystics through the attribute of life. Such a man, says Jīlī, is the life of the whole universe; he feels that his life permeates all things sensible and ideal, that all words, deeds, bodies, and spirits derive their existence from him. If he be endued with the attribute of knowledge, he knows the entire content of past, present, and future existence, how everything came to be or is coming or will come to be, and why the non-existent does not exist: all this he knows both synthetically and analytically. The Divine attributes are classified by the author under four heads: (1) attributes of the Essence, (2) attributes of Beauty, (3) attributes of Majesty, (4) attributes of Perfection. He says that all created things are mirrors in which Absolute Beauty is reflected. What is ugly has its due place in the order of existence no less than what is beautiful, and equally belongs to the Divine perfection: evil, therefore, is only relative. As was stated above, the Perfect Man reflects all the Divine attributes, including even the Essential ones, such as unity and eternity, which he shares with no other being in this world or the next.

The third and last phase is the Illumination of the Essence. Here the Perfect Man becomes absolutely perfect. Every attribute has vanished, the Absolute has returned into itself. In the theory thus outlined we can recognize a monistic form of the myth which represents the Primal Man, the first-born of

<sup>56</sup> ○Abd al-Karīm bin Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī, *Al-Insān al-Kāmil fi Maṣrūfat al-Awākhir wa al-Awā'il*, ed. ○Āsim bin Ibrāhīm al-Kayālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-○Ilmiyya, 2016), 48.

<sup>57</sup> Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 63.

God, as sinking into matter, working there as a creative principle, longing for deliverance, and, at last finding the way back to his source. Jīlī calls the Perfect Man the preserver of the universe, the Qutb or Pole on which all the spheres of existence revolve. He is the final cause of creation, i.e., the means by which God sees Himself, for the Divine names and attributes cannot be seen, as a whole, except in the Perfect Man.”

We will not discuss certain problems of the interpretation of Nicholson, esp., his acceptance for the binary transcendence and immanence divide. We may stress the part of his interpretation focussing on the ides of the Perfect Man allowing to think creation as a whole. In other words, a holistic worldview is an essential part of al-Jīlī’s concept. We will follow our analysis of the *Marātib* by turning to the last chapter of *al-Insān al-kāmil*. It is chapter 63 “On the other religions and ways of worshipping [god].”<sup>58</sup> This chapter begins with the lines

“Know that Allah, he is the most exalted, created all beings to worship him. They are naturally attracted to it and from its origin dedicated to it. There is nothing in being not revering God [...] Everything in being (*wujūd*) is obedient towards God.”<sup>59</sup>

Al-Jīlī ends his discussion of religious difference and the divine spark in any practice of worship

“With the following statement: Ten sects are the sources for all of the religious differences (which are too numerous to count), and all differences revolve around these ten. They are: Polytheists, Naturalists, Philosophers, Dualists, Magians, Materialists, “Barhamites”, Jews, Christians, and Muslims. For every one of these sects, God has created people whose destiny is Heaven and people whose destiny is the Fire. Have you not seen how the polytheists of past ages who lived in regions not reached by the prophet of that time are divided into those who do good, whom God rewards, and those who do evil, whom God recompenses with fire? Each of these sects worships God, as God desires to be worshipped, for He created them for Himself, not for themselves. Thus, they exist just as they were fashioned. [God] may He be glorified and exalted, manifests His names and attributes to these sects by means of His essence and all of the sects worship Him [in their own way].”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> al-Jīlī, *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, 321–335.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>60</sup> Vincent Cornell, “Practical Sufism: An Akbarian Foundation for a Liberal Theology of Difference,” *The Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, last modified 2004,

The hermeneutics al-Jīlī seems to deny religious differences, but it is a justifiable interpretation of Qur'anic verses according to the method of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's *qānūn al-ta'wil*.<sup>61</sup>

"Although Jīlī's exegesis of the Qur'an was innovative, it was fully valid according to the rules of hermeneutics proposed by Ghazālī. Jīlī began his analysis by taking the sacred text at its literal word. Starting from the literal meaning (*zāhir*) of the Qur'anic verses, he employed the method of *qānūn al-ta'wil* on the conceptual and intellectual levels of meaning, without resorting to metaphor. Then he took another Qur'anic verse, 'God does whatever He wishes'" (2: 253), and applied the theological notion of divine voluntarism to the empirical fact of religious diversity. The conclusions that Jīlī draws in *al-Insān al-kāmil* – that the existence of religious differences is God's will, and that all human beings, even unbelievers, practice religion as God intended them to do – follow logically from this process of interpretation. However, this is not to say that Jīlī's interpretation is the 'true' meaning of these Qur'anic verses. It is only to say that his interpretation is as valid as any other interpretation derived from the literal meaning of these three verses. Even more, Jīlī affirms that Islam is the quintessential religion of God. Later on in the text, when he discusses how 'each sect finds pleasure in its tenets' (Qur'an, 30: 32) he does not absolve the unbelievers of their errors. For Jīlī, religions are not equal in value. However, when the Qur'an commands, 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2: 256), this means that even false religions should be respected by Muslims because all religions, including those that are in error, exist by God's will."<sup>62</sup>

Thus, al-Jīlī is – seemingly – inserting again the transcendent position, but at the same time subverting the renewed binary of transcendence and immanence by introducing the divine essence even in circumstances far away from conventional Islamic contexts. According to his holistic worldview. But at the same time, he is upholding his Islamic identity. To take up our former remarks: Upholding his stability in a situation of fluctuation and uncertainty.

At the end of our analysis, we see that for al-Jīlī being is to be called ontologically an expression of univocity.<sup>63</sup> Thus, moving

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accessed April 25, 2019,  
<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/cornellpracticalsufism.html>.

<sup>61</sup> For al-Ghazālī's *qānūn al-ta'wil* see Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 111sqq.

<sup>62</sup> Cornell, "Practical Sufism."

<sup>63</sup> We are not referring to the distinction of univocity and equivocity to be found, e.g., in the sense of Nāṣir al-dīn al-Tūṣī see Gudrun Schubert,

along the fluctuating stages this univocity is annihilating the distinction between transcendence and immanence.<sup>64</sup> Leaving this distinction – annihilating the borders – allows for another excursus into (post)modern thought.

## Symbiosis and the Annihilation of Borders

Let me introduce now a concept not often heard about in studies on Sufism! This concept is the holobiont (and the cow).

“When you think of a cow, you probably envision an animal grazing, eating grass, and perhaps producing methane at her other end. However, cows cannot do this. Their bovine genome does not encode proteins with the enzymatic activity needed to digest cellulose. What the cow does is chew the grass and maintain a symbiotic community of microorganisms in her gut. It is this population of gut symbionts that digest the grass and makes the cow possible. The cow is an obvious example of what is called a holobiont, an organism plus its persistent communities of symbionts. The notion of the holobiont is important both within and beyond biology because it shows a radically new way of conceptualizing “individuals.” Recognizing the holobiont as a critical unit of life highlights process and reciprocal interactions, while challenging notions of genomic purity.”<sup>65</sup>

The concept of holobiont has emerged in the study symbiosis in the life of plants and other non-animal beings in the last decades of the 20th century CE. Esp., the study of the microbial world and the discovery of horizontal gene transfer<sup>66</sup> helped to formulate the postmodern synthesis in biology. If we see plants as composite

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*Annäherungen: Der Mystisch-Philosophische Briefwechsel Zwischen ʿadr Al-Dīn-I Qūnawī Naṣīr Al-Dīn-I Al-Ṭūsī* (Beirut: Franz Steiner i. Komm., 1995), 24–25.

<sup>64</sup> So it is not about “the transcendent unity of existence” as printed mistakenly in Rüdiger Lohlker, “Naturrecht – Islamische Perspektive,” *Ancilla Iuris* (*anci.ch*) (2017): 61, accessed August 28, 2019, <https://www.anci.ch/articles/461>. For this contextualization of Duns Scotus, Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, and al-Jīlī cf. in a comparative view Christoph Dittrich, *Weder Herr Noch Knecht: Deleuzes Spinoza-Lektüren* (Wien/Berlin: Turia+Kant, 2012), 37–42. For another approach to univocity and Duns Scotus see Philipp Tonner, *Heidegger, Metaphysics, and the Univocity of Being* (London: Continuum, 2010).

<sup>65</sup> Gilbert, “Holobiont by Birth,” M73.

<sup>66</sup> Margaret McFall-Ngai, “Noticing Microbial Worlds: The Postmodern Synthesis in Biology,” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. (Minneapolis/London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2017), M52–M72.

organisms like any other organism, we may be able to generalize the idea of symbiosis. Following studies on the critical role of symbionts for the host, we may stress the obligatory nature of symbiosis for the life of all organisms. This may be indicated by the term holobiont<sup>67</sup>, an ecological unit formed by assemblages of different species.<sup>68</sup> To give another example in this very shortened exposition of a new idea for religious studies:

“Symbioses are equally important for the termite *Mastotermes darwiniensis*, one of the poster organisms for holobionts. The termite eats wood. It eats trees. It eats houses. It is a major agricultural pest. Only, it cannot eat wood. It does not have a genome that allows it to eat wood. What it has inside its gut is a symbiotic protist, *Mixotricha paradoxica*, that eats the wood. Only, it doesn’t. *Mixotricha* is a composite organism containing a protist and at least four different types of bacteria. Termites are thus composite organisms all the way down. Bacteria and protists act together to make *M. paradoxica*, which is essential to the functioning of the gut of a termite, which itself lives in a termite community. So what is the individual? A so-called individual worker termite cannot live without its symbionts or its colony. Clearly individuality is being questioned here at many levels.”<sup>69</sup>

If we are able to add to these new findings at a microbiological level and at the macro-level of systems the idea of man and woman as composite beings stretching from the mineral level to absolute totality and being dynamic all the time, problems of Western binary worldviews vanish. Thinking individuals as non-delimited beings is possible, being individual and collective at the same time, having limits and borders and transgressing or annihilating them, leaving the idea of a monad-individual behind.

Some people may argue that the old ideas of microcosm and macrocosm<sup>70</sup> do not lend itself to this kind of approach, but we may answer that we are not talking about a short-cut to identifying the findings of (post-)modern sciences and religion *tafsīr-‘ilmī*-style. If we are arguing for a symbiotic view, a holistic view

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<sup>67</sup> Gilbert, “Holobiont by Birth,” M74.

<sup>68</sup> The term holobiont was first coined by Lynn Margulis, *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis*, ed. Lynn Margulis and René Fester (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>69</sup> Gilbert, “Holobiont by Birth,” M75.

<sup>70</sup> Even assuming the possibility of different views of al-Jīlī and Ibn al-‘Arabi, see Al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit*.

starting from the concept of holobionts we can integrate (post)modern thoughts in biology with the immanent view developed by al-Jīlī and moving beyond the binaries of Western-dominated modernity.

As a closing remark, we may remind our readers that our thoughts present a proposal for a new style of thinking not raising the claim to be absolutely true following once again al-Jīlī application of al-Ghazali’s *qānūn al-ta’wīl*.

## Conclusion

A thorough analysis of *wahdat al-wujūd* as presented by al-Jīlī demonstrates the possibility to integrate a holistic world view and new approaches in the sciences. This paves the way for an integrated theory avoiding the pitfalls of Western thought.

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