

UNITED WISDOM

Ibn Arabi: unity of being and diversity of manifestations

Traditions and Worldviews

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Ibn Arabi: unity of being and diversity of manifestations

> *“My heart can receive any form.”*
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> *Ibn Arabi, Tarjumān al-ashwāq, poem 11; English translation by Michael A. Sells. Quotations here are editorial English renderings through the approved Russian version, translated by the article’s author from that English source; they are not presented as Sells’s published wording.*

About this article

Ibn Arabi investigates finite beings’ relation to an unconditional foundation without inviting us to erase differences with “unity.” His texts combine Islamic revelation, metaphysics, and spiritual discipline. We will examine why “wahdat al-wujud” became a name for his thought after the works themselves appeared, and why dependent existence does not make the world fictitious. Divine names, the heart’s receptivity, and love’s poetic language each require particular conditions of reading. Comparisons with Aquinas, Spinoza, and a Buddhist sutta reveal different answers to related questions while preserving disagreement. Contemporary scenes and practical questions are our analytical applications, not instructions reconstructed from his biography. They do not prove his metaphysics. They can, however, test whether words about connection become excuses for inattention to a particular person.

I. A name that followed the thought

A teaching’s name shapes our questions. Wahdat al-wujud, usually translated as unity of being, appears a ready title for Ibn Arabi’s system. The chronology is more complex. Bakri Aladdin’s study of the term and doctrine shows how the designation entered later disputes. It cannot unqualifiedly be called the author’s own name for his teaching. Different thinkers used the expression, and its attachment to a position involved polemic.

“If everything connects, why do you keep correcting my words?” asks one participant in a hypothetical conversation. Connection does not make words interchangeable. Water sustains a tree without being that tree. Love connects people without making them one person. Even the strongest assertion of unity must explain what is united and which differences remain.

Ibn Arabi becomes interesting precisely here. The formula “everything is God” often introduces him, then supposedly makes further study unnecessary. It closes a door instead of opening

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one. Different meanings of being, creation's dependence, manifestation, disciplined knowledge, and the limits human understanding imposes on its subject all disappear.

Distinguish what an author wrote, disciples' systematization, and opponents' labels. They may concern one thought but perform different acts. Authors develop arguments; disciples organize teaching; opponents isolate allegedly dangerous implications. Starting with the last quietly accepts accusation as neutral description.

Consider a modern hypothetical example. A researcher says decisions depend on upbringing and circumstances. Another summarizes, "He thinks responsibility does not exist." A third discusses "the theory of irresponsibility." The original distinction has disappeared. Each subsequent remark merely intensified the previous one, without appearing an obvious invention.

This does not prove Ibn Arabi right. It changes examination's order: first understand what is asserted about God and creation, then which objections follow. Defending thought against an inaccurate label does not make accurate criticism impossible.

Even "unity" leaves choices: one foundation, an inseparable whole, identical nature of parts, or numerical identity. These are different assertions. Giving them one word makes disagreement irresolvable before it begins because participants answer different questions.

Historical care has a simple benefit: quick recognition is not deep understanding. Thought easily placed in a familiar box has not necessarily become clear.

II. Existing does not mean existing independently

The central distinction concerns being's independence. Souad Hakim's study of unity of being in Ibn Arabi explains unconditional being as belonging to God, while creatures' existence is dependent, not possessed of themselves. Stones, trees, and humans do not therefore simply disappear. What it means to possess existence changes.

Dependent existence is not fiction. A hypothetical concert is real despite depending on performers, instruments, a room, and time. It is identical with none of these conditions. Calling it nonindependent does not make music deception; it rejects the event as a closed thing sustaining itself.

This ordinary analogy poses a question without proving theology. A concert has observable conditions. God as all being's foundation belongs to metaphysics and religious thought. Dependence's example cannot jump into a claim that science has confirmed God's necessary existence.

“This exists” differs from “this exists through itself.” Everyday thinking often joins them unnoticed. A successful person really achieved much without creating language, education, health, society, or the possibility of acting. Recognizing conditions preserves labor while clarifying the scope of appropriation.

If everything depends on a foundation, why discuss beings? Because dependence preserves their determinacy. “Whence existence?” differs from “What kind of being exists?” One asks about foundation, the other differences. Answering both in one sentence usually makes unity crude simplification.

Readers can reject the religious answer while recognizing the question’s force. How much independence do we assign ourselves, things, and familiar arrangements? Where is this warranted, and where do supporting connections disappear? Examination can precede agreement about ultimate reality.

Dependence’s acknowledgment does not finish explanation. Name another event as a condition and inquiry continues. Move to an unconditional foundation and explain why the next question changes meaning. This is philosophy, not merely listing causes. Readers may ask whether the foundation was introduced just to stop reasoning. Serious exposition must retain the objection even if one article cannot resolve it. Otherwise “unconditional” conveniently prohibits the next question.

III. Manifestation preserves the question of form

One foundation calls for explaining differences, not eliminating them. William Chittick’s translation and study of Sadr al-Din Qunawi shows Ibn Arabi’s disciple relating one being to beings’ determinations. Historically this develops a school; it is not another chapter supposedly written by Ibn Arabi himself.

“Manifestation” is convenient but dangerous. It can suggest theatrical masks: one actor, with wholly decorative differences. Pain, obligation, and another’s voice become a performance undeserving attention. Such reading requires its own argument; it does not follow automatically from the world’s dependence.

Take our hypothetical common-language example. The same words let two people say wholly different things. A shared language enables conversation without canceling meaning. “We use one language” does not turn requests into promises, threats into care, or consent into refusal. Differences become meaningful within the shared space.

Ibn Arabi’s metaphysics concerns another subject, but the analogy exposes an error. A shared foundation and particular form can matter together. The former cannot make the latter

insignificant without intervening argument. Seeing all existence connected requires explaining what connection does to differences, rather than declaring them overcome.

Distinguish two meanings of limitation. Form is limited because determinate: tree is not sea, request is not order. Form limits understanding differently when treated as an exhaustive picture of reality. The first makes knowledge possible; the second closes knowledge into certainty.

Attention to manifestation therefore need not abandon precise names. Remember that a name selects an aspect. Someone is an employee, friend, parent, or stranger to different people. This proves no metaphysics, but shows how one true description can become a false complete portrait.

Diversity is no inconvenient obstacle to unity. It becomes what unity must explain to remain substantive thought.

IV. Names distinguish without granting possession

Divine names permit speaking of manifestations without turning concepts into exhaustive divine knowledge. Chittick's study of Ibn Arabi distinguishes the divine essence unknown to humans from names describing relations with the world. Mercy, knowledge, and other determinations are no list of pieces from which to assemble God.

What does naming do? Beyond religion, it can indicate, explain, or preserve distinction, but also produce a feeling of completion. "It is just pride" sometimes ends listening; "it is just fear" ends inquiry. A label seems to authorize looking no further.

A hypothetical manager calls an employee unreliable. Agreements may truly have been broken. But predicting every future act through the label gives it work exceeding the facts. Lateness confirms it; a completed task becomes an exception. The person gradually disappears behind the characterization.

This is our application, not Ibn Arabi's supposed organizational theory. It shows the cost of confusing useful concepts with complete possession of their subject. The more significant the subject, the easier serious vocabulary disguises the error.

Silence and rejecting every definition may seem the solution. Yet responsibility's grounds disappear too. Promises, harm, care, and justice cannot be discussed if no word preserves distinctions. A concept's limits do not make it useless.

Recognizing limited description does not forbid definite judgment. In the employee example, name the broken agreement while declining to consider the entire person explained. The first judgment can be checked against deadlines, conditions, and work performed. The second

assigns lasting character far beyond one episode. Objection to the label does not itself cancel the agreement's question. Participants may remove an exhaustive portrait while retaining the need to correct a particular breach. Limited naming then enables more precise accountability rather than escape. This ethical discussion of a modern scene clarifies concept versus complete knowledge; it does not model divine names on workplace relations.

A different discipline is needed: use a name within its explanatory work. What does this term permit saying? Which observation supports it? What remains outside? Can another angle preserve the first while changing the picture?

Religious reading applies this discipline to divinity; everyday reasoning applies it to people and situations. The subjects differ. In either case a word can serve attention or replace it. The difference appears in whether a further question remains possible.

V. A heart able to receive form

Ibn Arabi's heart is not merely emotion. Stephen Hirtenstein's study of heart and Kaaba symbolism considers knowledge and receptivity. Religious discipline accompanies the image, rather than "everything I feel is true." Receptivity requires transforming the recipient.

Readers want to distinguish openness from suggestibility. Hearing another more attentively can instead become abandoning examination because an experience feels profound. An impression's strength supplies no ready criterion of truth.

Place two questions together: can I admit what exceeds my previous picture, and can I examine something new without declaring it true for its novelty? One guards against closure, the other arbitrariness. Keep only one and openness becomes decorative or uncontrolled.

In a hypothetical dispute, someone knows an opponent explains everything through self-interest. Unexpectedly, the opponent mentions duty to a deceased teacher. Translate it immediately back into self-interest—"You only want to look good"—or acknowledge an incomplete account, clarify duty, and examine consequences. The second path need not endorse the position beforehand. It lets it be heard.

Receptivity is difficult because it changes the listener's position. A completed explanation's convenience must be relinquished temporarily. The right to identify contradiction, demand grounds, or disagree remains.

Comparing this example with the mystical heart requires a boundary. Ibn Arabi concerns knowledge in relation to divinity; a human dispute concerns attention. Related tasks do not create identical subjects or establish listeners' spiritual status.

The heart’s image prevents knowledge becoming mere accumulated information. Knowing more can mean less certainty about our right to assign the world its form in advance.

VI. Love does not make religions identical texts

Verses about a heart taking different forms often become a declaration that religions are interchangeable. The poetry page identifies poem eleven of Tarjuman al-ashwaq, translated by Michael Sells. This is a particular literary setting: a poetic voice, not a short comparative chart of doctrines.

The poem can broaden how others’ faith is seen. It does not prove traditions understand God, humanity, salvation, and knowledge alike. That would require studying them and resolving actual contradictions. An image’s beauty cannot perform the reader’s work.

Another error makes respect conditional on a secret coincidence. Others receive dignity only if translated into our view; failed translation removes respect. Such openness hides a demand for submission.

Suppose one person believes in a personal God and another leaves the question unresolved. Both may seriously promise help to a sick neighbor. Their common action matters without removing divergent convictions. They need not first agree metaphysically to fulfill the promise.

Conversely, shared religious words guarantee no shared behavior. Someone speaks of mercy while treating a dependent person cruelly. Another avoids elevated vocabulary while patiently doing hard work. This is our observation about speech and action, not a judgment of their true faith.

Love is better understood as a demand upon relationship than a means of closing every question of knowledge. It can require closer listening and abandoning contempt. Assertions still require grounds; particular acts require assessment of consequences.

Readers have a more demanding possibility: recognize another’s experience without appropriating it. Do not declare sameness where difference remains unclear. Precise distance can be more respectful than hurried fusion.

VII. Unity gives no right to explain another’s suffering

Suffering most seriously tests thought about unity. An all-encompassing foundation tempts claims that pain is necessary or must disclose spiritual meaning. An outsider’s explanation can take the sufferer’s voice away.

James Morris's study of suffering and compassion in Ibn Arabi stresses reading dispersed passages in context. It supplies no brief universal cause for every misfortune. Complex spiritual pedagogy cannot become a formula applied to an unfamiliar life.

Suppose a betrayed person hears, "All is one; stop separating yourself from the offender." Different questions are confused. Human connection can coexist with recognized harm. Refusing revenge can coexist with ending danger. Seeking meaning need not declare the event necessary or right.

Boundaries do not necessarily express hatred. They may distinguish possibilities precisely: I can speak but cannot yet trust; I can hear an apology without restoring the relationship. Unity of being does not decide these responses for someone.

Does caution impoverish spirituality into politeness? Here it protects seriousness. Metaphysics used for pressure ceases inquiry and becomes control over another's experience.

This includes teachers. Claims to deeper vision do not cancel consent, safety, or accountability. Persuasive speech alone cannot establish spiritual authority. Actions inhabit a shared human world involving others.

In his anthology of Ibn Arabi translations on spiritual practice, Morris preserves inner states' connection to behavior and religion. We transfer no particular prescriptions into modern advice. Refusing to separate grand assertions from responsibility itself reveals spiritual shortcuts' danger.

VIII. What other accounts of being clarify

A similar question does not mean the same answer. Compare explanatory methods beyond striking words. Unity's discussions are easily conflated if differences are assigned beforehand to the surface.

Spinoza's Ethics, part I considers finite things through one substance and its modes; proposition 18 calls God an immanent cause. Ibn Arabi's manifestation language concerns divine names and revelation. These are different conceptual constructions. Transferring "mode" requires explaining its suitability; otherwise a familiar European concept replaces what it supposedly clarifies. Rejecting things' absolute independence does not prove a shared theory of God.

Aquinas on divine names offers another path: analogy relates a name to God and creatures. Similarity enables speech without giving finite knowledge possession of divine essence. Beside Ibn Arabi's names, it asks what lets human language indicate beyond humanity. Different theological systems answer. Aquinas's analogy does not explain all Akbarian symbolism.

SN 22.59 examines appropriating bodily form and other aggregates as an unchanging self. This also limits complacent self-possession, but derives no single divine foundation. Reading it as concealed agreement removes precisely what makes Buddhist comparison interesting.

Our opening interlocutor may therefore ask not only what connects us but which argument explains it. A similar experience of dependence may receive theological, substantial, or nonappropriative answers. Distinction gives dialogue its subject instead of destroying it. Foundation, language, and practical implication can be discussed separately, beyond exchanging declarations of predetermined unity.

IX. Diversity need not be canceled in haste

Can one foundation be thought without impoverishing multiplicity? Replacing everything with “the one” cannot answer Ibn Arabi’s difficult question. It saves words while losing thought’s subject.

Creation’s dependence, manifestation, divine names, and heart’s receptivity belong to a particular religious worldview with history, disputes, and reading practices. Similarity to systems and connections makes it no scientific theory. Touching attention and relationships makes it no modern psychology.

Historical distance does not make conversation useless. We continually decide where to see independent things, connections, limited descriptions, or supposedly final truth. Decisions affect whom we hear, credit, and notice in pain.

Return to the opening conversation. Correction can dominate by removing someone’s right to speak, or seek precision by preserving distinctions essential to meaning. Outward resemblance hides divergent consequences: one narrows a voice, another permits clearer hearing.

Reading grants no automatic certificate of precision. It leaves readers an uncomfortable test: does speaking of unity increase attention to a particular being, or make passing by easier because differences supposedly do not matter?

When a large thought demands greater attention, it remains a living question. When it requires only repeating a formula, inquiry ended before understanding. Diversity recalls that something connected to a whole still deserves its own look.

What this means in practice

Practical reading need not accept the whole metaphysics. Start with one claim about a person or situation. This proposed work is not a Sufi exercise and promises no special consciousness.

Suppose someone says, “I did everything myself.” Preserve its real foundation: work, decisions, endurance. Then name conditions without which these were impossible. Finally examine changed relations: should others’ contributions be recognized, a debt repaid, credit shared, or future obligations clarified?

“We are one whole” needs examination by consequences rather than beauty. Can two people have different needs? Can “no” be said without accusations of destroying unity? Who decides permissible differences? If one voice defines both, “whole” conceals power rather than connection.

Choose a frequent label: weak, spiritual, complicated, reasonable. Which observations does it join or erase? Can someone act so the label changes? If not, description may have become a closed defense against new knowledge.

Distinguish openness from agreement. Restate another’s position recognizably, then disagree. Sometimes we dispute such a convenient version that the actual person no longer participates.

Examine analogy’s limit too. One light source and varied reflections imagine connection without automatically explaining reality. Form and foundation help thinking without settling family conflict. Action needs information, agreements, resources, and consequences checked.

Suppose a family discussing relocation repeats, “We need one decision.” Coordinating household life is reasonable, but a common decision has different costs. One gains interesting work, another loses familiar surroundings, another changes education. Unnamed differences make agreement complete only on paper. Unity tests the conversation’s completeness: whose conditions are included, and whose appear only in another’s account?

The next step can be small. Replace “support us” with particular expectations, times, and help. One agrees to move but requests a possibility of returning; another undertakes to find work for their partner. Agreements prove no metaphysics. They show how recognizing separate needs makes shared action more real.

Distinguish intellectual pleasure from changed relationship. Long discussion of unity can miss someone’s discomfort continuing. Someone unfamiliar with mystical texts may attentively ask how they feel. This does not devalue reading; it adds a measure: which differences became visible, and what can change in our speech? Great transformation is unnecessary. Sometimes stop assigning another feelings they never reported.

Reading can change one habit: choosing between crude separation and crude fusion. Connection sometimes becomes clearer when differences are named. Unity sometimes becomes more convincing when it stops demanding silence from individual voices.

Key quotation

> *“I profess the religion of love.”*
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> *Ibn Arabi, Tarjumān al-ashwāq, poem 11; English translation by Michael A. Sells. Editorial English rendering through the author’s approved Russian translation. This poetic profession does not replace differences between teachings and obligations.*

Connections across traditions

These are our analytical comparisons. Historical influence is not asserted without supporting evidence.

Subject	Positions and sources	Basis for comparison	Boundary
Dependent existence	Ibn Arabi as read by Souad Hakim — Aquinas, I q.2 a.3	Finite beings do not provide their own existence.	Aquinas’s Third Way and manifestation language have different structures and theological contexts.
Unity and difference	Ibn Arabi: names and manifestations — Spinoza, Ethics I, 15 and 18	Multiplicity is not absolutely independent things collected together.	Substance and modes do not equal the whole Akbarian system of names and revelation; influence is not asserted.
Names’ limits	Ibn Arabi: names — Aquinas, I q.13 a.5	Divine language must explain human meaning’s relation to divinity.	Aquinas’s analogy neither makes essences identical nor replaces Ibn Arabi’s teaching.
Incomplete representation	Qunawi: one wujud — Pseudo-Dionysius, I.1–2	Familiar representations do not exhaust an ultimate foundation.	Dionysius’s apophatic address is Trinitarian; Qunawi’s Islamic thought is no paraphrase.
Receptivity and nonappropriation	Ibn Arabi: heart — SN 22.59	Changing experience should not hastily be enclosed in one exhaustive form.	This compares tasks of attention: receptive heart differs from Buddhist examination of aggregates, which asserts no single divine substratum.

Subject	Positions and sources	Basis for comparison	Boundary
Action and conditions	Ibn Arabi: dependence — Epictetus, §§1–2	Recognizing conditions may limit complete possession's claims.	Stoic distinction of what depends on us is practical, not unity of being.

Sources

Primary texts, normative documents, and scholarly commentary are distinguished in their descriptions. This heading does not turn reference scholarship into a primary source.

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3. William C. Chittick. Qunawi on the One Wujud. Translation and study of Qunawi; development of the school.

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6. Ibn Arabi. Selected Poems, including Tarjuman al-ashwaq, poem 11, translated by Michael A. Sells. Literary setting of the form-receiving heart.

7. James W. Morris. Suffering, Compassion and Atonement. Reading spiritual themes in context and limits of brief explanations of suffering.

8. Ibn Arabi / James W. Morris. Translations: Spiritual Practice. Selected anthology passages read; not all the author's works.

9. **Spinoza. Ethics I, definitions III–V and propositions 15,18,29; translated by R. H. M. Elwes. Primary text: substance, modes, immanent cause, necessity.** Text and relevant passage.

10. **Thomas Aquinas. Summa Theologiae I q.2 a.3, Third Way. Primary text: possible and necessary; New Advent English edition.** Text and relevant passage.

11. **Thomas Aquinas. Summa Theologiae I q.13 a.5. Primary text: analogical use of names for God and creatures.** Text and relevant passage.

12. **Pseudo-Dionysius. Mystical Theology I.1–2; translated by John Parker,1897. Primary text: apophatic address in a Trinitarian context.** Text and relevant passage.

13. **SN22.59, Pañcavaggi / Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta; translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Primary Buddhist text: impermanence of five aggregates and nonappropriation as self.** Text and relevant passage.

14. **Epictetus. Enchiridion §§1–2; translated by Elizabeth Carter. Primary text: what does and does not depend on us.** Text and relevant passage.

Tags

Ibn Arabi, Islamic philosophy, Sufism, tasawwuf, wahdat al-wujud, wujud, being, existence, unity, diversity, manifestation, divine names, heart, love, revelation, metaphysics, Qunawi, dependence, independence, knowledge, interpretation, poetry, apophasis, analogy, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Buddhism, nonappropriation, responsibility, boundaries

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