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Ma'rifah as an Epistemology of Transformation: A Philosophical Reading of Sufism in al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi	
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ABSTRACT SNAPSHOT

This article offers a philosophical reading of Sufism by positioning *ma'rifah* as a form of transformative knowledge that integrates epistemic, ethical, and ontological dimensions. Sufi knowledge is often criticised as subjective, unverifiable, or anti-intellectual because of its close association with inner experience. Against this reduction, this article argues that the Sufi tradition contains an epistemic architecture that can be analysed philosophically. It develops a distinctive relationship between rationality, religious experience, moral virtue, and disciplined self-practice. Using a conceptual-hermeneutic method and a comparative reading of selected works by al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi, this study employs three philosophical lenses: virtue epistemology, philosophy as a way of life, and the epistemology of religious experience. The analysis shows that, in al-Ghazali, *ma'rifah* moves from '*ilm* towards *dhawq* through *tazkiyah* and disciplined practice. In Ibn 'Arabi, *ma'rifah* is grounded in the ontology of *tajallī*, in which the imaginal realm mediates knowledge as a domain of meaning. In both thinkers, knowledge does not stand as a neutral proposition, but functions as an orientation of life that forms the knowing subject. This article concludes that Sufism can be read as a philosophy of knowledge that links truth, virtue, and the restoration of the self, without reducing spiritual experience to psychologism or negating the demands of rationality.

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Ma'rifah as an Epistemology of Transformation: A Philosophical Reading of Sufism in al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi

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Abstract

This article offers a philosophical reading of Sufism by positioning *ma'rifah* as a form of transformative knowledge that integrates epistemic, ethical, and ontological dimensions. Sufi knowledge is often criticised as subjective, unverifiable, or anti-intellectual because of its close association with inner experience. Against this reduction, this article argues that the Sufi tradition contains an epistemic architecture that can be analysed philosophically. It develops a distinctive relationship between rationality, religious experience, moral virtue, and disciplined self-practice. Using a conceptual-hermeneutic method and a comparative reading of selected works by al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi, this study employs three philosophical lenses: virtue epistemology, philosophy as a way of life, and the epistemology of religious experience. The analysis shows that, in al-Ghazali, *ma'rifah* moves from *'ilm* towards *dhawq* through *tazkiyah* and disciplined practice. In Ibn 'Arabi, *ma'rifah* is grounded in the ontology of *tajalli*, in which the imaginal realm mediates knowledge as a domain of meaning. In both thinkers, knowledge does not stand as a neutral proposition, but functions as an orientation of life that forms the knowing subject. This article concludes that Sufism can be read as a philosophy of knowledge that links truth, virtue, and the restoration of the self, without reducing spiritual experience to psychologism or negating the demands of rationality.

Keywords: Sufism; *ma'rifah*; epistemology of transformation; al-Ghazali; Ibn 'Arabi.

INTRODUCTION

The encounter between Sufism and philosophy often unfolds in two equally problematic directions. On the one hand, Sufism is reduced to a “psychology of devotion”: it is read as a set of techniques for inner tranquillity, emotional therapy, or spiritual self-help that can be extracted from its intellectual and ethical conditions. On the other hand, Sufism is placed within the domain of the “purely inward” and assumed to be immune to rational critique. Philosophy is then allowed only to stand outside as a sceptical observer, while mystical experience is treated as a private claim that cannot be discussed argumentatively. These two tendencies obscure an important

historical fact: in the classical Islamic tradition, the boundaries between Sufism, *kalām*, *fiqh*, and *falsafah* were never entirely sealed. Debates over the authority of knowledge—between rational demonstration, textual proof, and spiritual experience—became one of the main intellectual energies that shaped the formation of these traditions (Knysh, 2017; Schimmel, 1975).

This article advances the thesis that *maʿrifah*, or gnosis, in Sufism can be understood as an epistemology of transformation: a theory of knowledge that requires the transformation of the knowing subject. Within this framework, knowledge does not end in neutral “propositional justification,” but requires *tazkiyah* or purification, *muhāsabah* or self-reflection, and *adab* as conditions of possibility for truth. This does not mean that Sufism rejects rationality. Rather, it suggests that rationality itself must be situated within a broader formation of the self, in which the knower’s moral, spiritual, and intellectual condition becomes part of the process of knowing.

This thesis is elaborated through two axes of thought often associated with “intellectual Sufism”: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240). In al-Ghazali, *maʿrifah* emerges from an epistemic crisis that forces a re-evaluation of the senses, reason, authority, and inner certainty. His movement from *‘ilm* towards *dhawq* does not abolish rational inquiry, but places it within a disciplined process of purification and existential verification. In Ibn ‘Arabi, *maʿrifah* is rooted in the ontology of *tajallī*, or disclosure, and in the theory of the imaginal realm (*khayāl*) as a medium of meaning. These two axes make possible a simultaneous philosophical analysis of Sufi knowledge as epistemological, ontological, and ethical (Chittick, 1989, 1994; Griffel, 2009; Schimmel, 1975).

Theoretically, this article draws upon three resources from contemporary philosophy. The first is virtue epistemology, which evaluates knowledge through intellectual character—such as honesty, perseverance, humility, and epistemic carefulness—and rejects the assumption that knowledge is purely a matter of inferential procedure. The second is the idea of philosophy as a way of life, which affirms that philosophy, especially in ancient traditions, is not merely a system of theory, but also a set of spiritual exercises that form the subject. The third is the epistemology of religious experience, which asks how experience, including mystical experience, can provide a rational ground for belief without erasing the problems of pluralism, interpretive disagreement, and the possibility of illusion (Alston, 1991; Hadot, 1995; Zagzebski, 1996).

The combination of these three resources is not intended to “import” Western frameworks as a single standard for judging Sufism. Rather, these frameworks are used as tools for conceptual dialogue. They help make explicit the philosophical structure already operating within Sufi thought: the relation between truth and virtue, the role of practice in forming the knower, and the possibility of evaluating religious

experience without reducing it either to subjective feeling or to clinical psychology. In this sense, contemporary philosophy does not replace the internal vocabulary of Sufism, but helps clarify how *ma'rifah* can be discussed as a rigorous theory of knowledge.

The research questions guiding this article are: (1) how can the epistemic structure of *ma'rifah* in al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi be reconstructed philosophically?; (2) how does Sufism construct the relation between truth, virtue, and experience?; and (3) how can this philosophical reading contribute to contemporary discourse on knowledge as a practice of self-restoration without reducing Sufism to psychologism? The aim of this article is not to provide a theological proof of Sufi claims, but to assess philosophically the internal coherence, explanatory power, and normative consequences of Sufism's epistemic architecture. These questions allow the article to move beyond a descriptive account of Sufi concepts towards a philosophical reconstruction of *ma'rifah* as a disciplined and transformative mode of knowing.

METHOD

This article employs a conceptual-hermeneutic method in three steps. First, it conducts a close reading of representative works by al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi through established editions and translations. For al-Ghazali, the analysis focuses on the narrative of epistemic crisis and recovery in *Deliverance from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*), as well as his critique of excessive claims to rational certainty in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-Falasifah*) (al-Ghazali, 1999, 2002). For Ibn 'Arabi, the reading centres on *Fusus al-Hikam*, particularly through Austin's translation, and is supported by secondary studies that examine the doctrine of *tajallī*, the ontological status of disclosure, and the role of the imaginal realm (*khayāl*) in his thought (Chittick, 1989, 1994; Corbin, 1969; Ibn al-'Arabi, 1980).

Second, the article reconstructs key concepts in philosophical language, especially those related to epistemology (*'ilm*, *burhān*, *yaqīn*, *dhawq*), ontology (*wujūd*, *tajallī*, *khayāl* or the imaginal realm), and ethics (*tazkiyah*, *adab*, *muhasabah*). This reconstruction is carried out by situating these concepts within the historical-intellectual context of Sufism and classical Islamic debates over the authority of knowledge. Historical literature and modern studies of Sufism are used to maintain historical discipline and to avoid interpretative anachronism. In this regard, the article does not treat Sufi concepts as isolated mystical vocabulary, but as part of a broader intellectual tradition in which questions of knowledge, practice, authority, and spiritual transformation are closely intertwined (Ernst, 2017; Karamustafa, 2007; Knysh, 2017; Schimmel, 1975).

Third, the article undertakes a comparative philosophical reading. Sufi concepts are placed in dialogue with virtue epistemology, philosophy as a way of life,

and the epistemology of religious experience. This comparison is not intended to subordinate Sufism to modern philosophical categories, but to examine whether Sufi resources can address recurring philosophical problems: the reliability of religious experience, the relation between knowledge and character, the role of self-discipline in the formation of rationality, and the possibility of self-restoration through practice. In this sense, comparison functions as an explanatory tool that clarifies the philosophical structure of *ma'rifah* without detaching it from its theological and spiritual identity (Alston, 1991; Hadot, 1995; MacIntyre, 2007; Zagzebski, 1996).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Al-Ghazali: Epistemic Crisis, *Burhān*, and *Dhawq*

Al-Ghazali is often positioned as the figure who “defeated” philosophy. Such a reading, however, overlooks the epistemological dimension of his works. In *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazali begins with a deeply philosophical problem: what makes a belief worthy of being called knowledge? He examines the sources of knowledge—the senses, reason, the authority of tradition, and inner experience—and finds that the mechanisms of certainty on which he had relied become fragile when tested against the possibility of error. The senses may deceive; reason may construct inferences that appear necessary, yet depend on premises that are not fully guaranteed. This crisis is not scepticism as an end in itself, but scepticism as a procedure of purification: removing false certainties so that a stronger form of certainty may be found. In this sense, al-Ghazali’s epistemic crisis should not be read merely as a biographical episode, but as a philosophical method for distinguishing inherited belief, rational inference, and genuine certainty (al-Ghazali, 1999; Griffel, 2009).

At the next stage, al-Ghazali does not discard discursive *‘ilm* or demonstrative *burhān*. In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, he shows sensitivity to standards of argumentation by distinguishing criticism of the method of *burhān*—which he recognises as a valid tool within certain domains—from criticism of metaphysical claims that, in his view, exceed what can be demonstrated. In other words, al-Ghazali rejects the moment when argumentative probability is transformed into ontological certainty. This stance can be read as a form of epistemic caution: an intellectual virtue that avoids over-claiming and demands proportionality between evidence and conclusion. His critique of the philosophers is therefore not a rejection of rationality as such, but a critique of the inflation of rational claims beyond their proper limits (al-Ghazali, 2002; Griffel, 2009).

Yet al-Ghazali also rejects total scepticism. He proposes that certainty (*yaqīn*) can be attained through *dhawq*—a “tasting” or direct experience that is not identical with spontaneous emotion. Within al-Ghazali’s framework, *dhawq* is the result of the

transformation of the subject through *tazkiyah* and disciplined practice, not the product of momentary suggestion. Philosophically, this means that certain truths do not depend only on the quality of argument, but also on the inner condition that enables the subject to “receive” or “witness” a reality that had previously been veiled. This is not anti-intellectualism, but an expansion of epistemology: beyond discursive knowledge, there is a presence-like knowledge that appears only when the subject undergoes moral formation and disciplined attention. Thus, *dhawq* does not cancel ‘ilm; rather, it completes the path of knowing by involving the whole structure of the person (al-Ghazali, 1999; Griffel, 2009).

Read through virtue epistemology, al-Ghazali suggests that knowledge cannot be separated from character. Intellectual virtues such as honesty towards evidence, willingness to acknowledge limitation, and perseverance in verification are intertwined with moral virtues such as the control of desire, humility, and earnestness. Therefore, the difference between knowing and merely holding an opinion is not only a matter of inferential structure, but also a matter of “who” is making the inference. A subject dominated by desire, arrogance, or the need for self-justification may use argument not as a path to truth, but as a means of defending the ego. Within this framework, al-Ghazali’s Sufism can be read as an epistemic programme that transforms the internal condition of the subject so that they may judge evidence and meaning more clearly, while also preventing knowledge from becoming an instrument of egoic self-justification (Griffel, 2009; Zagzebski, 1996).

Two philosophical consequences may be drawn. First, al-Ghazali places rationality in its proper position. Rationality is important, but it is not the only mode of access to reality. Reason functions as a necessary instrument of criticism, clarification, and protection against error, yet it does not exhaust the whole field of truth. Second, he rejects a sharp separation between epistemology and ethics. *Tazkiyah* is not a “moral accessory,” but an epistemic condition. Thus, *ma'rifah* cannot be understood merely as a theory of knowledge, but as a theory of knowledge with an ethical face: it evaluates truth through its traces in the formation of the self and the orientation of life. In al-Ghazali, to know more deeply is also to become more properly formed as a knower.

3.2 Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tajallī* and the Ontology of the Imaginal Realm

If al-Ghazali emphasises an epistemic architecture that moves from ‘ilm towards *dhawq*, Ibn ‘Arabi adds a more radical ontological dimension: *tajallī*, or the disclosure of being. Within Ibn ‘Arabi’s horizon, reality is not understood as a collection of static objects standing “outside” the subject, but as the continuous and dynamic manifestation of meaning. Knowledge, therefore, is not merely

correspondence between proposition and fact, but the subject's participation in disclosure. In Chittick's reading, *ma'rifah* in Ibn 'Arabi is closely related to how God "discloses Himself" in forms that human beings are able to receive. This ontology shapes epistemology: truth is not only sought, but also "bestowed" in the form of *tajallī* according to the preparedness (*isti'dād*) of the receiver. Thus, knowing is not simply the act of grasping an object, but the event in which reality becomes manifest to a subject whose capacity for reception has been spiritually formed (Chittick, 1989, 1994; Ibn al-'Arabi, 1980).

The key concept for understanding this dynamic is *khayāl*, or the imaginal realm. The imaginal realm is not subjective "fantasy," but an ontological domain in which meaning appears in form, and form carries meaning. Corbin proposes the term *mundus imaginalis* to mark an intermediate realm distinct from both the empirical-material and the abstract-intellectual. In this realm, symbols, dreams, and visions are not automatically considered illusions; they possess structures and rules that can be studied. Spiritual experience in Ibn 'Arabi therefore has an ontological "space" that explains why experience can be concrete yet non-material, personal yet not merely private. The imaginal realm becomes the bridge through which metaphysical meaning enters symbolic form without being reduced either to physical objectivity or to psychological projection (Chittick, 1989, 1994; Corbin, 1969; Ibn al-'Arabi, 1980).

From the perspective of the philosophy of language and meaning, the imaginal realm provides a semantic-ontological model for religious experience. Experience is not understood as "private data" that cannot be communicated, but as an event of meaning that can be transmitted through symbol, narrative, and interpretation. This is why Ibn 'Arabi's language is not merely decorative or poetic, but philosophically necessary: symbolic language becomes the medium through which disclosure can be expressed without being flattened into literal proposition. Its validity is not tested by laboratory standards, yet neither is it left unchecked. It is tested through symbolic coherence, correspondence with the theological framework, consistency with *adab*, and the ethical fruits it produces. Thus, Ibn 'Arabi offers a framework for evaluating spiritual experience without falling into two extremes: the absolutism of experience—"whatever I see must be true"—and psychological reductionism—"all visions are hallucinations."

The next implication concerns the problem of pluralism. If *tajallī* is diverse, then religious symbolic forms are also diverse. Chittick, in his reading of Ibn 'Arabi, interprets the diversity of forms not as a failure of truth, but as a consequence of the limited capacities of human receptivity before a Reality that exceeds representation. This framework requires a distinction between the Absolute and human representations, while also giving rise to an epistemic virtue: humility before the limits

of language and concept. Pluralism here is not relativism that abolishes truth, but the recognition that the one truth may radiate through many forms of manifestation. The diversity of symbolic forms therefore does not eliminate the question of truth; rather, it requires a more disciplined hermeneutics of receptivity, limitation, and spiritual preparedness (Chittick, 1989, 1994; Corbin, 1969).

From the perspective of the philosophy of knowledge, Ibn 'Arabi expands the epistemic question from "how do we know?" to "how does reality disclose itself?" This shift requires *ma'rifah* to be read as relation, not merely as the acquisition of information. The knowing subject does not stand as the master of concepts, but as a receiver formed by *adab* and spiritual preparedness. Therefore, *ma'rifah* cannot be separated from practices that form perception: refining attention, ordering the imagination, and subduing the ego so that the manifestation of meaning is not distorted into a project of the self. In this sense, Ibn 'Arabi's epistemology is inseparable from spiritual discipline: the subject must be transformed so that disclosure is not misread as fantasy, self-projection, or personal authority (Chittick, 1989, 1994; Corbin, 1969; Ibn al-'Arabi, 1980).

The philosophical contribution of Ibn 'Arabi, then, lies in showing that knowledge is not only an ethical-epistemic problem, as in al-Ghazali, but also an ontological-symbolic event. The world is meaningful because it is a field of disclosure; the imagination is epistemically significant because it mediates form and meaning; and the subject must be disciplined because disclosure can be distorted by ego, desire, and unprepared perception. Through this framework, *ma'rifah* becomes an ontology of transformation: it transforms not only what the subject knows, but also how the subject inhabits reality.

3.3 *Ma'rifah*, Virtue, and Philosophy as a Way of Life

At this stage, *ma'rifah* appears as a form of knowledge that cannot be separated from virtue. The preceding analyses of al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi show that Sufi knowledge is neither merely propositional nor merely experiential. It is a mode of knowing that requires the formation of the subject. In al-Ghazali, the subject must be purified so that certainty is not corrupted by illusion, desire, or intellectual pride. In Ibn 'Arabi, the subject must be prepared so that disclosure is not distorted by egoic projection or an undisciplined imagination. Thus, *ma'rifah* is not simply knowledge about reality, but knowledge that transforms the one who knows.

Virtue epistemology affirms that knowledge depends on good intellectual dispositions, such as caution, openness to correction, humility, and integrity. Zagzebski, for instance, formulates the project of virtue epistemology by tracing the

analogy between moral virtues and intellectual virtues: both are good habits that orient the subject towards a valuable end, namely truth. Sufism, through the vocabulary of *tazkiyah*, *muhasabah*, and *adab*, has long advanced a similar claim: the quality of the heart determines the quality of knowledge, because the heart is not merely the seat of “feeling,” but the centre of orientation and attention. In this sense, the Sufi path can be read as a discipline of epistemic virtue, in which the purification of the self becomes inseparable from the clarification of knowledge (MacIntyre, 2007; Zagzebski, 1996).

Yet Sufism also goes beyond a minimal version of virtue epistemology. In Sufism, virtue is not merely an instrumental prerequisite for knowledge, but part of the content of knowledge itself. To know God is not to master propositions about God, but to experience the directedness of life towards Him. Al-Ghazali’s crisis can therefore be read as a crisis between knowledge that accumulates and knowledge that gives life. Here, Sufism rejects the reduction of “truth” to “propositional accuracy”; truth is understood as an existential correspondence between the self, action, and orientation towards the Real. Knowledge becomes true not only when it is logically defensible, but also when it reorders the subject’s desire, perception, and ethical life.

The idea of philosophy as a way of life helps clarify this practical aspect. Hadot shows that in the ancient philosophical tradition, “spiritual exercises” functioned as methods for forming the philosophical subject: exercises of attention, meditation on death, inner examination, the control of desire, and habituation to a universal perspective. Sufism works through an analogous pattern: *dhikr*, *murāqabah*, directed *khalwah*, and the discipline of *adab* function as exercises that form attention, correct desire, and order perception. Contemporary discussions of Islamic psychotherapy have also examined practices such as *murāqabah*, although such discussions still require a careful distinction between spiritual formation and clinical intervention (Isgandarova, 2019). In the framework of this article, however, these practices are read primarily as disciplines of knowledge and self-formation. The difference is that Sufism links these exercises to a theology of disclosure, so that practice is not merely autonomous ethics, but a disposition to receive the *tajallī* of truth. Practice therefore does not stand outside knowledge; it becomes the path through which the knowing subject is made capable of receiving and embodying truth (Hadot, 1995).

The communal and traditional dimension of virtue is also relevant. MacIntyre affirms that virtues arise within traditions and practices that possess a *telos*; virtue cannot be understood as an individual choice isolated from communal narrative. Sufism, as a tradition of practice, has a clear *telos*: the formation of a human being who is clear-sighted, humble, and marked by *adab*—not only for oneself, but also for one’s social relations. This is important as a correction to modern spiritual individualism. Self-discipline in Sufism is not a narcissistic project aimed merely at “feeling

peaceful,” but a formation of the self that bears fruit in responsibility, relational justice, and public good. The Sufi subject is therefore not formed for private serenity alone, but for a transformed mode of being in relation to God, the self, and others (Hadot, 1995; MacIntyre, 2007).

Thus, *ma'rifah* can be formulated as knowledge that has three layers at once: (1) an epistemic layer, because it produces belief that has a basis; (2) an ethical layer, because it requires virtue as its condition of possibility; and (3) a practical layer, because it is produced and sustained through discipline. This three-layered structure also explains why Sufism has conceptual proximity to the discourse of self-restoration. Restoration is not merely “reducing symptoms,” but transforming the subject so that one is able to see, judge, and act more truthfully. However, this proximity should not be misunderstood as a simple reduction of Sufism to psychotherapy. The language of restoration here refers first to an ethical-spiritual reordering of the self, from egoic fragmentation towards a more truthful orientation of life.

In this sense, *ma'rifah* may be understood as a philosophy of knowledge that is simultaneously a philosophy of practice. It links truth with virtue, experience with discipline, and self-knowledge with self-transformation. The knowing subject is not merely one who possesses information, but one whose way of seeing, desiring, and acting has been re-formed. This is precisely where Sufism contributes to contemporary discussions of knowledge: it reminds modern epistemology that the question of truth cannot be fully separated from the question of what kind of person one becomes through the pursuit of truth.

3.4 Sharia, *Adab*, and the Governance of the Authority of Knowledge

One vulnerable point in a philosophical reading of Sufism is the relation between inner experience and the norms of sharia. Popular critiques of Sufism often accuse mystical experience of opening the way to antinomianism, as if “once I have arrived, the law is no longer relevant.” This critique is not entirely without historical basis, since claims of spiritual arrival may become dangerous when detached from ethical discipline, communal accountability, and the grammar of revelation. However, in the traditions represented by al-Ghazali and Ibn ‘Arabi, inner experience is not treated as an autonomous authority that can cancel sharia. Rather, sharia and *adab* function as the horizon within which spiritual experience is interpreted, tested, and disciplined.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, this problem becomes a site of affirmation: experience must not sever itself from the law, because the law is part of the grammar of disclosure. In *An Ocean Without Shore*, Chodkiewicz shows how Ibn ‘Arabi views sharia as a horizon that safeguards the validity of disclosure, rather than as an obstacle to inward depth. This means that *tajallī* does not abolish normativity. Disclosure may

open the subject to deeper meanings, but those meanings must still be received through the order of revelation, prophetic inheritance, and ethical discipline. In this sense, sharia does not merely regulate outward conduct; it also governs the interpretive space in which spiritual experience becomes intelligible (Chodkiewicz, 1993a, 1993b).

From an epistemological perspective, sharia and *adab* can be read as “negative constraints.” They do not directly determine the content of experience, but they mark the boundaries that protect experience from destructive deviation. These boundaries operate through two mechanisms. The first is normative: an experience that encourages moral violation, contempt towards others, or violence cannot be maintained as valid *maʿrifah* because it contradicts the *telos* of virtue. The second is hermeneutic: experience is read through the grammar of revelation and the tradition of interpretation, so that symbols are not detached from the horizon of collective meaning. Through these mechanisms, Sufism avoids the absolutism of private experience while also refusing to reduce spiritual experience to mere psychological states.

In al-Ghazali, this constraint appears in his emphasis on scholarly *adab* and caution towards claims. Within the traditions of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *kalām*, al-Ghazali was accustomed to distinguishing degrees of evidence and their epistemic consequences. This inheritance carries over into his Sufism: *dhawq* does not invalidate *burhān*; it surpasses *burhān* within certain domains, but it does not permit a person to claim absolute authority above the community, revelation, or ethical accountability. Thus, al-Ghazali’s Sufism provides an example of how inner experience can be placed within both rational and ethical discipline. The “tasting” of truth must be accompanied by humility, caution, and purification; otherwise, it risks becoming an instrument of spiritual self-justification rather than a path to certainty (al-Ghazali, 1999; Griffel, 2009).

Sufism therefore provides a layered model of the authority of knowledge: the authority of the text, namely the Qurʾan and hadith; the authority of the interpretive tradition, namely scholars and teachers; and the authority of experience, namely *kashf* and *dhawq*, which is always situated within the discipline of *adab*. These layers should not be understood as mutually exclusive, but as mutually corrective. Text without inward transformation may become formalism; experience without text and tradition may become self-legitimation; and interpretation without *adab* may become domination. The governance of knowledge in Sufism therefore requires a balance between revelation, reason, discipline, and experience.

This layered model offers a lesson for contemporary spirituality: inner experience requires epistemic governance. Without such governance, experience can easily turn into self-legitimation, symbolic violence, or an uncorrected claim to truth.

With such governance, however, experience becomes part of a disciplined path of transformation. In this sense, sharia and *adab* do not weaken *ma'rifah*; they protect it from distortion. They ensure that the transformation of the subject remains oriented towards truth, virtue, and responsibility, rather than towards spiritual narcissism or private authority.

3.5. The Epistemic Reliability of Sufi Experience

The preceding analysis shows that *ma'rifah* in al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi cannot be reduced either to private mystical feeling or to abstract rational demonstration. It is a structured form of knowledge that requires ethical formation, spiritual discipline, and interpretive governance. The philosophical objection most frequently directed at Sufism concerns the reliability of experience. If *ma'rifah* rests upon *dhawq* or *tajalli*, how can one distinguish a valid experience from a misleading one? How can one distinguish *kashf*, or disclosure, from illusion? This question cannot be answered by rejecting the standards of rationality, but neither can it be answered by turning experience into a laboratory experiment. What is needed are evaluative categories appropriate to the kind of experience being assessed. In this regard, the problem is not whether mystical experience can be reduced to scientific verification, but whether it has internal criteria of correction, discipline, and accountability (Alston, 1991; Chittick, 1994).

Alston's framework of doxastic practice offers an important entry point. In *Perceiving God*, Alston argues that human beliefs are formed through belief-forming practices that possess internal rules, standards of correction, and certain social habits. The clearest example is sensory perception: human beings do not need to "prove" every act of seeing, but they do have mechanisms of correction, such as rechecking, comparing with others, and testing under different conditions. Alston argues that religious experience can be analysed in a similar way: it forms belief through a particular practice, and that practice has internal criteria of reliability, even if it is not identical with the method of science. Using this framework, Sufism can be understood as a structured doxastic practice: it involves discipline, guidance, *adab*, stages of formation, and evaluation through ethical fruits. Therefore, the rationality of Sufism is not found in isolating mystical experience from practice, but in the disciplined structure that makes such experience intelligible and open to correction (Alston, 1991; Chittick, 1994).

Sufism provides its own distinctive mechanisms of correction. First, there is ethical verification: an experience that produces arrogance, violence, contempt for others, or moral disorder is regarded as a sign of disturbance, not progress. Second, there is verification through tradition: symbols and visions are read within the horizon of the Qur'an, hadith, and the interpretive heritage, so that experience does not stand

as a single authority that severs itself from tradition. Third, there is verification through virtue: the higher the claim of experience, the higher the demand for *adab*, humility, and caution. This model does not “prove” experience externally in the manner of empirical science, but it provides an internal rationality that prevents experience from becoming an instrument of egoic self-justification. In this sense, Sufism treats experience neither as infallible private certainty nor as meaningless psychological noise, but as a claim that must be disciplined by ethical, textual, and communal criteria (Alston, 1991; Chittick, 1994).

The next problem is the pluralism of experience: different traditions, even within Islam, report different experiences. Ibn ‘Arabi offers a conceptual response through *isti’dād*: human capacities for reception differ, and therefore *tajallī* takes diverse forms. This response provides room for understanding difference without erasing truth. Alston, on the other hand, acknowledges pluralism as a challenge, but still argues that experience may provide *prima facie* justification—an initial justification that can later be strengthened or weakened by further correction. The combination of these two approaches produces a balanced position: spiritual experience may provide an initial epistemic ground, but it must be tested through ethical, traditional, and rational correction. This position also restrains relativism: not every experience is automatically equally valid, because there are criteria of correction that can be discussed. Pluralism, therefore, does not abolish the question of truth; it demands a more careful account of receptivity, interpretation, and verification (Alston, 1991; Chittick, 1994).

Thus, the reliability of Sufi experience should not be measured only by the standards of detached propositional proof. Its reliability lies in a disciplined ecology of knowledge: purification of the subject, guidance of tradition, symbolic interpretation, moral fruit, and communal correction. This does not mean that Sufi experience is immune from error. On the contrary, it acknowledges the possibility of error and therefore requires governance. The strength of Sufism as an epistemology of transformation lies precisely in its refusal to leave experience unexamined. Experience becomes meaningful only when it is formed, interpreted, and tested within the horizon of *adab*, sharia, and virtue.

3.6. Sufism, Self-Restoration, and the Limits of Psychotherapeutic Reduction

The epistemic structure of Sufi experience also opens a contemporary question: how can Sufism contribute to current discourses on self-restoration without being reduced to psychotherapy? At this point, Sufism’s contribution to contemporary discussions of spiritual psychotherapy must be formulated with caution. Sufism does not need to be promoted as “therapy” in the clinical sense, because clinical claims require specific research designs, empirical evidence, and professional boundaries. This caution is

important because contemporary studies on religion, spirituality, and psychotherapy show that spiritual resources may contribute to therapeutic processes, but their integration requires methodological care, ethical sensitivity, and professional boundaries (Captari et al., 2018; Pargament, 2001). However, Sufism can be understood as an ethical-epistemic framework for self-restoration: it provides a language of attention (*murāqabah*), regulation of desire (*mujāhadah*), restructuring of meaning through symbolic *ta'wīl*, and the formation of habit through *adab*. Thus, Sufism contributes to psychotherapy not primarily as a “prescription for symptoms,” but as a philosophy of practice that reorders the subject’s relation to the self, to others, and to God.

This distinction is important because the language of healing is often used too quickly in contemporary spiritual discourse. If Sufism is treated merely as a tool for emotional calm or symptom reduction, its epistemological and ontological depth disappears. The practices of *dhikr*, *muhasabah*, *murāqabah*, and *tazkiyah* are not simply techniques for producing inner tranquillity. They are disciplines that reshape attention, desire, memory, imagination, and moral orientation. In this sense, self-restoration in Sufism is not merely the recovery of psychological balance, but the reordering of the self towards truth. The restored self is not only a self that becomes calmer, but a self gradually formed to see, judge, and act more truthfully.

Here, it is important to avoid two reductions. The first is psychologism: turning *tajallī* into merely a “product of the unconscious,” so that Sufism loses its ontological claim. The second is anti-empirical spiritualism: turning every psychological problem into a problem of faith alone, thereby ignoring the complexity of the human condition. A philosophical reading makes possible a middle path: recognising the structure of Sufi practice as the formation of virtue and meaning, while remaining open to dialogue with other disciplines, including the psychology of religion and psychotherapy, without negating the metaphysical depth of Sufism. This middle path allows Sufism to speak meaningfully to contemporary concerns of self-restoration while resisting the temptation to reduce spiritual transformation either to clinical technique or to unexamined mystical authority.

The broader implication is that *ma'rifah* may serve as a model of knowledge that joins rationality, reliability, and transformation. Its reliability is not grounded in private certainty alone, but in practices of correction; its rationality is not limited to formal inference, but includes disciplined interpretation; and its transformative power does not negate critical reflection, but requires it. In this way, the philosophical reading of Sufism proposed in this article offers a framework in which religious experience can be taken seriously without being absolutised, evaluated without being reduced, and

brought into dialogue with contemporary discourses of self-restoration without losing its theological and ontological depth.

Therefore, Sufism's relevance to psychotherapy should be understood in a philosophical rather than clinical sense. It offers an account of how the self is transformed through knowledge, virtue, and practice. It provides a grammar for understanding suffering, desire, attention, and moral disorder, while still requiring careful dialogue with empirical psychology when clinical claims are involved. The aim is not to replace clinical practice with Sufi metaphysics, but to show that Sufism may offer a philosophical anthropology for understanding self-restoration, meaning, and the ethical formation of the human subject.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Sufism can be read philosophically as an epistemology of transformation. In al-Ghazali, *ma'rifah* emerges through a rational critique of excessive claims to certainty and moves towards the recovery of *yaqīn* through *dhawq*, *tazkiyah*, and disciplined practice. In Ibn 'Arabi, *ma'rifah* is rooted in the ontology of *tajallī*, where the imaginal realm functions as the medium through which meaning and reality are disclosed. In both thinkers, knowledge cannot be separated from virtue: the knowing subject must be formed in order to see, receive, and judge rightly. Thus, *ma'rifah* is not merely an alternative source of knowledge, but a mode of knowing that transforms the one who knows.

Conceptually, this reading offers three contributions. First, it rejects the false dichotomy between rationality and spirituality by showing that Sufism possesses a layered account of rationality: reason is important, but it does not monopolise access to truth. Second, it offers a non-reductionist model for evaluating religious experience: experience is assessed through internal mechanisms of correction, namely *adab*, the interpretive tradition, ethical fruits, and the discipline of the self. Third, it opens a more careful space for dialogue between Sufism and contemporary discourses of self-restoration by positioning Sufism as a philosophy of practice, not merely as a technique for inner tranquillity or as a clinical claim.

The comparison between al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi also shows that Sufi epistemology has both ethical and ontological depth. From al-Ghazali, this article draws the insight that certainty requires purification, humility, and caution before claims to knowledge. From Ibn 'Arabi, it draws the insight that knowledge is possible because reality discloses itself through forms of meaning received according to the preparedness of the subject. These two trajectories meet at the same central point: knowledge is never detached from the condition of the knower. To know truthfully is not only to possess correct propositions, but to undergo a formation of perception, desire, imagination, and moral orientation.

Future research may deepen this discussion in two directions. First, it may provide a more detailed mapping of categories of error in spiritual experience and their mechanisms of correction across different *tariqah* traditions, including the relation between the authority of the teacher, the community, and the epistemic freedom of the disciple. Second, it may develop an interdisciplinary framework that brings together hermeneutics, philosophy of practice, and empirical research in the psychology of religion in order to examine more specifically how Sufi exercises affect attention, character, and mental health, without sacrificing the metaphysical integrity of Sufism.

In this sense, the philosophical reading of *ma'rifah* offered in this article does not aim to prove mystical experience in a narrow apologetic way. Rather, it seeks to show that Sufism contains a serious epistemic architecture: one that links truth with virtue, experience with discipline, and knowledge with the restoration of the self. Its relevance today lies precisely in this integration, because modern discussions of knowledge often separate truth from transformation, while Sufism reminds us that the question of what one knows cannot be separated from the question of what kind of person one becomes through knowing.

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