Research Paper

Mystical-Ontological Analysis of the Concept of Piety from the Perspective of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi

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Abstract

The significance of taqwā (piety, God-consciousness) in mystical and ethical studies is well-established. Employing a descriptive-analytical method, this article demonstrates how Ibn Arabi redefines the concept of taqwā through a paradoxical, multi-stage process, beginning with a radical return to its etymological root, wiqāyah (shielding). In the primary sense, the pious individual (muttaqī) makes their self a shield for God against blame while making God their shield against praise. At a deeper level, however, this "shielding" evolves from a moral attribute into an ontological stance where the servant is the "outward" (ẓāhir) and God is the "inward" (bāṭin). This process culminates in the dissolution of the pious agent within the unitive vision (shuhūd), wherein the ultimate aim of taqwā becomes "refraining from seeing oneself as the agent." This "abandonment of taqwā" signifies not antinomianism but its very perfection, achieved through the annihilation (fanāʾ) of the "pious self" in the True Agent. By resolving the linguistic paradox of agency, this analysis redefines the role of ethics in Ibn Arabi's mysticism, transforming it from a static "law" into a dynamic progression from "obligation" to "spiritual courtesy" (adab), and from "courtesy" to "theophany" (tajallī).

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Taqwa (piety/God-fearingness), appearing over 220 times in the Holy Quran, is one of the central concepts in Islamic discourse, historically occupying the minds of exegetes and ethicists. In the common reading, *Taqwa* is often defined as abstinence, fear of Divine punishment, and "self-preservation" against prohibitions. This traditional definition rests on a fundamental presupposition: the acceptance of "independent human agency" as a free agent who must decide in the face of commands and prohibitions issued by an external Commander (God).

However, this dualistic understanding encounters a formidable challenge when confronted with the ontological system of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi. Ibn Arabi's ontology is built upon the principles of the "Unity of Being" (*Wahdat al-Wujud*) and the "Unity of Acts" (*Tawhid al-Af'ali*). In a world where true existence and absolute agency belong solely to the Truth (*al-Haqq*), and everything other than God is merely His modes and manifestations, concepts such as *Itteqa* (fearing/shielding) and *Muttaqi* (the pious) face a conceptual paradox. If there is no agent but God, who practices *Taqwa*? And from whom do they abstain?

Recognizing this theoretical tension, this research seeks to answer how the *Shaykh al-Akbar* transforms the concept of *Taqwa* from a "moral obligation" to a "metaphysical necessity"—without negating the exterior of the Sharia—and resolves the paradox of human agency within the shadow of the Unity of Acts.

2. Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. Data was collected through library research, focusing on the content analysis of Ibn Arabi's works, particularly *Fusus al-Hikam* and *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*. To elucidate concepts more precisely, commentaries by prominent figures of the Akbarian school, such as Qaysari, Jandi, and Jami, have also been utilized. The analysis begins with the etymology of the root word "*Waqaya*" and traces its semantic metamorphosis across different levels of spiritual wayfaring (*Suluk*).

3. Findings and Discussion

An analysis of Ibn Arabi's texts reveals that he does not negate the concept of *Taqwa*, but rather reconstructs it through an ascending process involving three stages:

A) Stage One: Return to the Root "*Waqaya*" and Spiritual Etiquette (*Adab*)

Ibn Arabi initially sets aside the common mystical meaning of "fear" and returns to the linguistic root of *Taqwa*, meaning "*Waqaya*" (shielding/protection). At this level (the level of *Adab*), he defines *Taqwa* as a reciprocal relationship between the Servant (*Abd*) and the Lord (*Rabb*):

1. **The Servant shields the Truth:** By attributing defects, evils, and deficiencies to their own non-existent nature and contingent essence, the wayfarer makes themselves a shield for the Truth, keeping the Divine sanctity free from blameworthy attributes.

2. **The Truth shields the Servant:** By returning all perfections, goodness, and existence to their original Source, the wayfarer makes the Truth a shield for themselves to remain safe from

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the peril of egoism (*Ananiyya*) and claims of independent existence. While this stage retains traces of duality, it is a necessary condition for the purification of the self and the observance of servitude.

B) Stage Two: Transition from Ethics to Ontology (Ontological *Taqwa*)

In a deeper layer, Ibn Arabi creates an epistemological rupture. Here, "shielding" is no longer a "voluntary act" performed by the servant, but an "existential reality" that must be witnessed. Based on the Unity of Being, the cosmos is the form of the Truth, and the Truth is the spirit and governor of the cosmos. In this horizon, the servant realizes that their existence and their perceptive and motive powers are, in reality, the locus of the Truth's manifestation (alluding to the *Hadith of Supererogatory Acts*). Therefore, the servant witnesses that they are intrinsically a "*Waqaya*" (shield/veil) in the order of being, within which God has appeared. In this station, the servant is the "Manifest" (*Zahir*) and the Truth is the "Hidden" (*Batin*). *Taqwa* at this level means witnessing the truth that the Real Agent behind the veil of the creation's form is God.

C) Stage Three: Dissolution of the Agent and the Paradox of "Abandoning *Taqwa*"

The pinnacle of Ibn Arabi's theory regarding the agency paradox appears in this stage. If the only True Agent is God, then the ultimate goal of *Taqwa* must be "abstaining from seeing oneself as an agent." Striving to practice *Taqwa* from the standpoint of an independent "I" is itself a form of subtle polytheism (*Shirk*) and a veil. Thus, Ibn Arabi and his commentators speak of the paradoxical term "Abandoning *Taqwa*" (*Tark al-Taqwa*). This does not imply antinomianism or licentiousness, but rather the perfection of *Taqwa* through the annihilation (*Fana*) of the "pious ego." In this station, the gnostic no longer sees with "their own eyes" to attribute actions to themselves, but looks with the "Eye of the Truth," finding that the act of *Taqwa* itself is the act of the Truth within the locus of the servant. The distinction between the ignorant, the pious, and the gnostic becomes clear here: the pious strives to act *for* God, whereas the gnostic sees that it is God who acts.

D) Analytical Implications and Scope of the Concept

This radical redefinition has significant implications in other cognitive domains:

1. **Epistemic *Taqwa***: At the highest level, *Taqwa* means avoiding confinement to a specific belief system that limits God to a particular form. The heart of the gnostic must be "matter for all forms" (*Hayula al-Suwar*), accepting the manifestation of the Truth in all beliefs and phenomena.

2. **Continuity of *Taqwa* in the Afterlife:** Contrary to the common view, Ibn Arabi believes *Taqwa* does not end in Paradise. There, it is not abstinence from sin, but "abstinence from stagnation" and satisfaction with one's current station. The wayfarer must pass through veils of light even in Paradise, remaining in a state of constant ascension.

3. **The Relation between Sharia and *Haqiqah***: This view does not lead to the negation of the

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Sharia's outward forms. Ibn Arabi considers Sharia as the "Exterior of the Truth" and practical rulings as the "Garment of *Taqwa*." For the gnostic, adherence to Sharia is not an imposed duty, but the effortless manifestation of the Divine Will through the human existential channel which has been emptied of egoism.

4. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that by interpreting *Taqwa* ontologically, Ibn Arabi elevates it from a dry moral virtue based on fear to a dynamic, loving journey. He resolves the paradox of agency as follows: Human agency is not negated but is used as a necessary ladder to negate "egoism," ultimately dissolving into the Absolute Agency of the Truth. Ultimately, the perfect *Muttaqi* in Ibn Arabi's view is not merely one who fears sin, but one who has reached the witnessing that "He is worthy of *Taqwa*" (*Huwa Ahl al-Taqwa*); meaning, He is the One to be feared, and He is the One who practices *Taqwa* within the manifestation of the servant. This interpretation, while preserving the Sharia, opens an infinite horizon before the wayfarer, where ethics becomes the manifestation of Divine Beauty and Majesty in the mirror of the Perfect Man.

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