

## What is identity/*huwiyya* in Islamic philosophy? Insights from Ibn 'Arabi and al-Qashani

Sunday, April 11, 2021, 6:00 pm (Kuwait), online.

### Speakers:

- **Ismail Lala** is an associate professor of philosophy at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST, Kuwait City). He was professor at the Oriental Institute of Oxford University. He is a specialist in Islamic philosophy and the author of *Knowing God: Ibn 'Arabi and 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani Metaphysics of the Divine* (2019).
- **Jean-Baptiste Brenet** is a professor of Arabic and Latin philosophy at the Panthéon-Sorbonne University (Paris). He has published numerous analyses of Ibn Rushd and his legacy, and is the author of *Ibn Tufayl, Le Philosophe sans maître* (2021).

### Summary of the lecture, led by Ismail Lala and moderated by Jean-Baptiste Brenet :

The term *huwiyya* (identity) - ubiquitous in Islamic philosophy – has a lot of meanings and interpretations. It can be understood as the abstract noun of the personal pronoun *huwa* (he), but it is also possible that it is a loan-word from the Syriac *haywa*. The difficult differentiation between *huwiyya* (identity) and *wujud* (existence) has long been a problem for Arabic translators. *Huwiyya* is also closely associated with the term *anniyya* (abstract noun of the personal pronoun *ana* (I)), since they are both translations of the Greek words *on* (being) and *enai* (to be). The interchangeability of the words, and their similarity, makes them almost synonymous.

In the circle of Al-Kindi, the terms *huwiyya* and *anniya* refer to God, to his existence, and are often used with the term *al-ula* (the first), admitting his unconditional superiority. They also refer to God's simplicity, "*his being and nothing else*", his intellect, his unity. The philosopher Ibn Rushd, known as Averroes, makes an important distinction between the term *mahiyya* and *huwiyya*. The former refers to a conceptual essence, an intrinsic nature, while the latter is the individual manifestation of that essence. In this study, Ismail Lala will focus on understanding the interpretation of the term *huwiyya* by the thinkers Ibn 'Arabi and al-Qashani, in their main works.

First, for Ibn 'Arabi, the term *huwiyya* refers to the absolute essence of God, outside of any categorization, i.e. his unmanifested aspect. Referring to God's quotation ("*I was a hidden treasure (kanz makhfi) and I desired to be known, so I created the Cosmos*"), he admits that all realms of creation are manifestations of divine Names, or attributes of God. This means that for Ibn 'Arabi, "*everything*" (whether it exists or not) has a *huwiyya*. He also analyzes the concept of the Perfect Man, which according to him, combines all the divine names in one place of divine manifestation.

For him, this call of God must be taken in a dimension of transcendence (*tanzih*), and far from any comparability (*tashbih*). The Cosmos, for its part, manifests the *huwiyya*, while being controlled by it. Finally, for the philosopher, the *huwiyya* of God designates both his manifest (*zahir*) and hidden (*batin*) aspects, as well as his word, as a symbol of all the divine Names. The *huwiyya* is present in every name, since it is every name, while it can obscure them.

For his part, al-Qashani defines *huwiyya* as the absoluteness of God (*al-wujud al-mutlaq*), as opposed to the rational existence of creation (*al-wujud al-idafi*), the manifestation. It is a symbol of God's primary differentiation, his own characteristic, "*the reality in the unseen realm*", therefore, "*the source of everything*" and the essence of union (*'ayn al-jam'*). For the latter, Muhammad is an emblem, a detailed form of the divine *huwiyya*. God, in contrast to the perfect Man, thus has an absolute (not contingent) existence, and this perfect Man is precisely the symbol of how God is known to creation. Finally, the *huwiyya* is a means of articulating the unknown (totally existing) God while acknowledging his actual unknowability and insinuating his limited knowability through the contingent creation through the expression of his names.

In conclusion, it can be said that Ibn 'Arabi primarily uses the term *huwiyya* to emphasize God's transcendence, and al-Qashani uses it primarily to show how God is connected to his creation. Despite a chronology that might imply this, al-Qashani is indeed an original thinker of the notion of *huwiyya* and not just a commentator on Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy.

Report by Justine Clément, CEFREPA and SciencesPo Paris